CHARLESTON BUDDHIST FELLOWSHIP

# Tranquility And Insight

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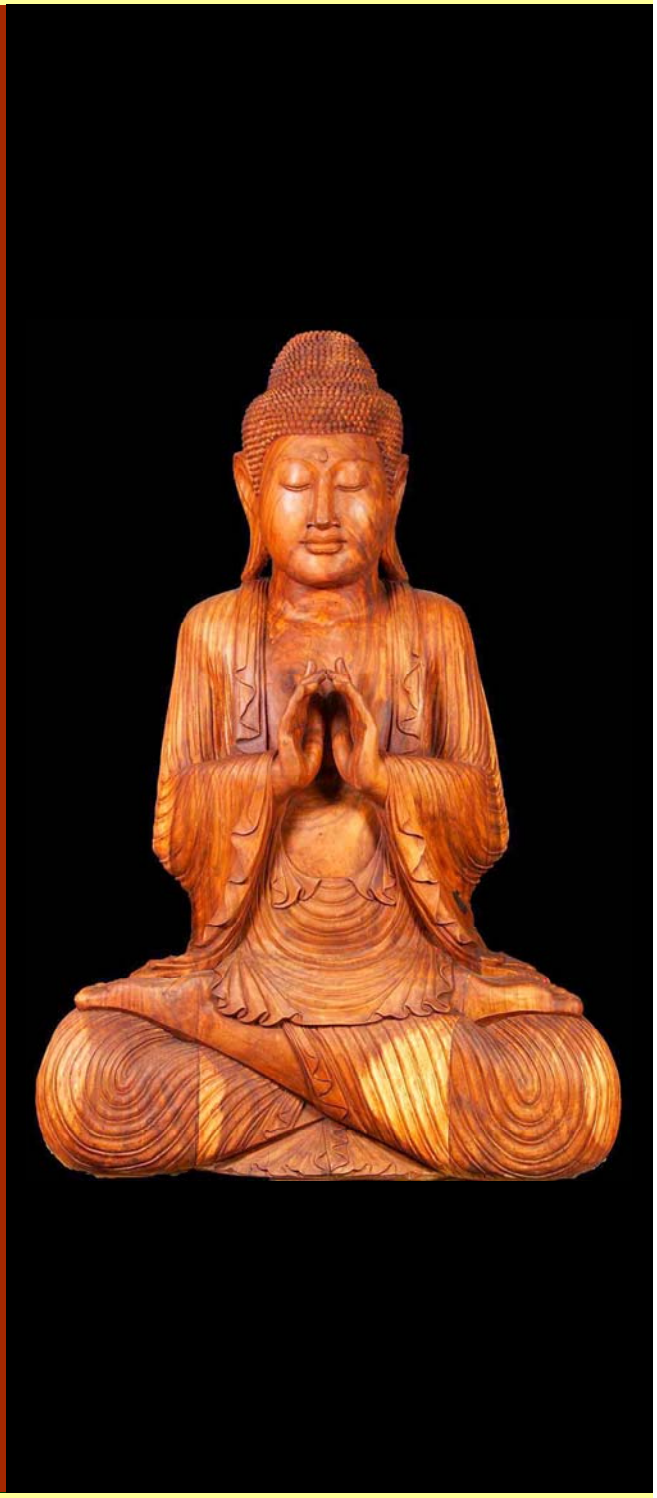

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Intermediate Series

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The doctrinal positions expressed in this book are based upon the original teachings (*aggavāda*) of the Buddha.

# Table of Contents

# Preface

The practice of meditation is the heart of the *Buddha's* teaching. This book aims, therefore, to achieve two things:

1. First, to describe the basics of Buddhist meditation according to the oldest tradition and as a living practice in our time. This is intended to serve as a general introduction to the subject.
2. The second purpose is to offer a survey of the meditational techniques involved. This survey, while very condensed, goes into sufficient detail to serve as a simple manual which can be used as a starting point for further study and practice.

Those who are interested in a more comprehensive exposition of Buddhist meditation techniques should consult *Buddhist Meditation in Theory and Practice* by Paravahera Vajirañāṇa Mahāthera (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Buddhist Missionary Society [third edition 1987; CBF edition 2010]), while advanced practitioners should consult the *Visuddhimagga [The Path of Purification]* by Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa (translated from the Pāḷi by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli; Seattle, WA: BPS/Pariyatti Editions [1999]). ■

# 1

# Introduction

All meditative traditions, whatever the differences in underlying belief systems and in specific techniques, agree in one essential respect: the cause of the dissatisfaction, anxiety, and suffering which seem to be inseparable from our lives lies in a basic misinterpretation of the true nature of existence, a misinterpretation which clouds our perception of the actual facts, in consequence of which we persist in futile attempts to pursue and secure things (such as health, fortune, fame, happiness, and so on) which are, by their very nature, ephemeral or unattainable. We seem to be swimming constantly against the current.

Meditative traditions also agree that, to overcome this state of affairs, neither intellectual understanding nor religious faith are, in themselves, enough. Something must be *done*. Not only outwardly, by performing acts of charity and devotion (however beneficial these may be in helping others and in improving the mental attitude of the doer), but inwardly: each person needs to work on him or herself to correct the fundamentally distorted perception of reality. This working on oneself, this internal reorganization of the psyche, is meditation.

The purpose of the present study of meditation is to offer a general view — albeit rather abbreviated, but complete in essentials — of the methods of meditation which were tried out, perfected, and taught by the *Buddha* some 2600 years ago, as they have been preserved in the most ancient tradition of His Teaching. We know those meditative techniques in detail thanks to the texts of the Pāḷi Canon,[1] in which the words of the *Buddha* have been preserved, and also through the living transmission of meditation practice, handed down from generation to generation in the oldest unbroken tradition of Buddhism, known as Theravāda,[2] which lives on today in the countries of southeast Asia

[1] Pāḷi is the name given to the language in which the original Teachings of the *Buddha* were preserved and transmitted in the early centuries after the death of the *Buddha*, first orally, and then in writing from the first century BCE. Pāḷi belongs to the Middle Indo-Aryan group of dialects spoken in various parts of north and central India at the time of the *Buddha* (sixth and fifth centuries BCE) and related to Sanskrit. Pāḷi itself seems to be a kind of *lingua franca* developed for the easy dissemination of the *Buddha's* Teachings, a mixed dialect based on the common characteristics of the others, and especially on the language of the Kingdom of Māgadha, which was one of the most important areas of the *Buddha's* activities.

[2] In Pāḷi, *Theravāda* means "the doctrine (*vāda*), or teaching, of the Elders (*thera*)". The Sanskrit form is *Sthaviravāda*.

(Śri Lanka [Ceylon], the Chittagong region of Bangladesh, Myanmar [Burma], Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos).[3]

Over the centuries, as Buddhism developed and spread, both in India, its homeland, and in many other parts of Asia, various branches of what is known as Mahāyāna Buddhism evolved and flourished. These forms of Buddhism are characterized by complex elaborations and accretions of a religious, philosophical, and cultural nature, which are also reflected in their own meditation techniques.

These cannot be dealt with in this study, and so we must leave aside, for example, the rich and varied visualizations and mentations of Tibetan Buddhism (also known as Vajrayāna), the deliberate paradoxes of koans, or the "just sitting" practice of the Soto School of Zen. However, anyone who is familiar at all with these other techniques will immediately realize, on reading the following pages, that they all have, to a greater or lesser extent, their roots in the methods of mental concentration described in Chapter 4 of this book, and that they are related to one or the other of the two main types of Buddhist meditation defined in Chapter 3 and discussed at length in Chapters 5, 6, and 9: *samatha*, tranquility meditation, also known as "calm-abiding", and *vipassanā*, insight meditation.

There are two reasons why this study deliberately focuses on the earliest forms of Buddhist meditation. The first is the desire to foster a better understanding of the sources of the varied range of later Buddhist meditation practices (some of which, such as Zen, have aroused considerable interest in the West). The second, and much more important, reason is the firm conviction that Buddhist meditation in its most unvarnished, original form is of particular relevance to our times and can prove especially useful and beneficial in coping with the turmoil of the modern world. The thoroughly pragmatic nature of the *Buddha's* Teaching, with its absence of dogma, makes a particularly potent appeal in this day and age to those, and there are many, who are tired and suspicious of the conflicting claims of so many different religious, philosophical, and doctrinal systems.

To start with, it should be made clear that Buddhism is not, strictly speaking, a religion. The word "Buddhism" itself is a term coined, and originally used, by non-Buddhists as a convenient label. "Buddhists" themselves speak, more accurately, of following and practicing the "*Buddhadhamma*", the doctrine, or Teaching (*dhamma*), of the Enlightened One (*Buddha*), a Teaching which has, at its heart, the practice of meditation (*bhāvanā*). This is so because of the concrete and practical nature of this Teaching, which deliberately sets aside metaphysical and theological speculations to concentrate on what each one of us can and must do him or herself (since no human or superhuman power can do it for another), here and now, to clarify and reorganize his or her mental processes in order to gain the full and accurate experience of the true nature of things, that is, of what philosophers like to call "reality".

[3] This school is sometimes also (incorrectly) referred to as Hīnayāna ("smaller vehicle") to distinguish it from the later Mahāyāna ("greater vehicle"), a subsequent development of Buddhist doctrine and practice, which, starting from northern India, spread over the centuries to Tibet, Central Asia, China, Mongolia, Indonesia, Korea, and Japan. For a variety of historical and cultural reasons, Mahāyāna, as it spread, developed many philosophical and ritual elaborations of, and accretions to, the straightforward simplicity and practicality of the original Teachings.

"Buddhist" meditation (to continue using the label for the sake of convenience) does not mean, therefore, that one has to start by blindly accepting certain beliefs before one may practice it or that one must perform specific rituals or ceremonies on which the effectiveness of their progress might depend.[4] It means, quite simply, to practice the techniques of mental training tried out and taught by the *Buddha* Himself, which do not demand a preliminary commitment to an organized religion, though they do require that the *Buddha's* instructions be strictly followed. To illustrate this fundamental aspect, we may quote from the *Code of Discipline* which is placed in the hands of each new student attending a modern teaching center of *vipassanā* meditation:

> *The entire Path (Dhamma) is a universal remedy for universal problems, and has nothing to do with any organized religion or sectarianism. For this reason, it can be practiced by all, without conflict with race, caste, or religion, in any place, at any time and will prove equally beneficial to one and all.*[5]

The essential characteristic of this Teaching and this tradition is to place every person squarely face to face with his or her own responsibilities. Of course, anyone who wishes to practice these meditation techniques as taught by the *Buddha* needs guidance and instruction. The prospective meditator, like anyone wishing to learn any technique or discipline in any field of human activity, needs a teacher to guide him or her and explain the proper methods. But the teacher is just that: someone who, having him or herself acquired specific knowledge and skills, is now concerned with passing them on to others. What a Buddhist teacher most certainly is not is an intercessor, a middleman between the uninitiated and some divine power; nor is he or she a wonderworker, or a human manifestation of some kind of divinity. There is no salvation through grace, no salvation through faith, nor are there any intermediaries of any kind. The *Buddha's* instructions — in this as in everything else — were perfectly simple and clear:

> *"That which I have proclaimed and made known as the Dhamma [the Teaching] and the Disciplinary Rules, that shall be your Master when I am gone …"*
>
> *"Therefore, Ānanda, you should live as islands unto yourselves, being your own refuge, with no one else as your refuge, with the Dhamma as an island, with the Dhamma as your refuge, with no other refuge."*[6]

This is how the *Buddha* exhorted His followers shortly before His final passing away. And His rightly famous last words were:

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[4] Recourse to ritual and ceremonial elements (though they are extraneous to the *Buddha's* Teaching itself) is common in Mahāyāna Buddhism, especially in its Tibetan varieties.

[5] *Code of Discipline for Vipassanā Meditation*, Vipassanā International Academy, "Dhammagiri", Igatpuri 422403, Maharashtra, India, p. 1.

[6] *Dīgha Nikāya*, Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (The *Buddha's* Last Days), no. 16.

> *"Now, Monks, I declare to you: Transient are all conditioned things. Strive on with diligence."*[7]

These few words may at first appear cryptic, but, in fact, they summarize with admirable conciseness the essence of the *Buddha's* Teaching.

First of all, one has to face up to the real dilemma without the usual equivocations and procrastinations: the transient nature of all elements of being. That is to say, one has to come to grips with the fact that absolutely everything that makes up this unfolding, multifarious universe that we experience with our senses and our minds is transient, ephemeral. Sooner or later, everything decays, changes, and disappears, including ourselves. And it is because of our deeply ingrained reluctance to face the full implications of this all too obvious fact that we persist in wanting to hold onto things we value — pleasure, health, wealth, happiness, youth, fame, life itself —, while they slip inevitably through our fingers. We yearn for a stability and permanence which cannot be found anywhere in our world, and it is this unsatisfied yearning that generates the characteristic anxiety of the unenlightened human condition.

Obviously, once one has recognized this fact intellectually, the next step is to see how to get out of this impossible situation. The *Buddha's* solution does not consist in consoling oneself with hopes of a blissful and eternal hereafter (which does not do away with desire and yearning but simply replaces present objects in this life with hypothetical objects later on)), but in doing something specific here and now, by working on ourselves by means of the mental training techniques which He Himself perfected, that is, by practicing meditation. This is the task at which we have to "strive on with diligence". This is the concrete, active nature of the Buddha's message, which He stressed again and again, for instance, in the simple yet moving closing words of the last discourse in the *Majjhima Nikāya*:

> *"See here these trees; see here these empty huts. Meditate, Ānanda, and do not delay, or else you will regret it later. This is my advice to you".*[8] ■

[7] *Dīgha Nikāya*, Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (The *Buddha's* Last Days), no. 16.
[8] *Majjhima Nikāya*, Indriyabhāvanā Sutta (The Development of the Faculties), no. 152.

# 2

# Buddhadhamma: The Buddha's Teaching

## Introduction

The first point to bear in mind is that the heart of the *Buddha's* Teaching is the practice of meditation. In other words, this is a *practical* Teaching about what one can do to improve matters in concrete terms: it is not an exercise in metaphysical speculation or theological construction. The *Buddha* made the point forcefully in His famous parable of the poisoned arrow.

On one occasion, a certain Bhikkhu named Mālunkyāputta approached the *Buddha* and impatiently demanded an immediate answer to some speculative problems and threatened to leave the Order if they were not resolved:

> *"Lord, while I was alone in meditation, the following thought arose in my mind: 'These theories have not been elucidated, have been set aside, and have been rejected by the Exalted One ... If He does not explain these to me, then, I will abandon the Holy Life and return to the life of a lay person.' If the Blessed One knows whether the world is eternal or not eternal; whether the world is finite or infinite; whether the life-principle is the same as the body or whether the life-principle is one thing and the body is another; whether the Tathāgata exists or does not exist after death; whether the Tathāgata both exists and does not exist after death; whether the Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist after death — in that case, let the Blessed One explain these to me*
>
> *"If the Blessed One does not know whether the world is eternal or not eternal; whether the world is finite or infinite; whether the life-principle is the same as the body or whether the life-principle is one thing and the body is another; whether the Tathāgata exists or does not exist after death; whether the Tathāgata both exists and does not exist after death; whether the Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist after death — in that case, certainly, for one who does not know and lacks the insight, the only proper thing is to say: 'I do not know, I do not have the insight'."*

The *Buddha* advised Mālunkyāputta not to waste his time and energy on such speculation, which was detrimental to moral progress:

> *"Now then, Mālunkyāputta, did I ever say to you: 'Come, Mālunkyāputta, lead the Holy Life under me, and I will declare to you whether the world is eternal or not eternal; whether the world is finite or infinite; whether the life-principle is the same as the body or the life-principle is one thing and the body is another; whether the Tathāgata exists or does not exist after death; whether the Tathāgata both exists and does not exist after death; whether the Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist after death?'"*
>
> *"No, Venerable Sir."*
>
> *"Did you ever say to me: 'I will lead the Holy Life under the Blessed One if the Blessed One will declare to me whether this world is eternal or not eternal ... or whether, after death, the Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist?'"*
>
> *"No, Venerable Sir."*
>
> *"That being so, misguided man, who are you, and what are you abandoning?"*
>
> *"If anyone should say thus: 'I will not lead the Holy Life under the Blessed One until the Blessed One declares to me whether this world is eternal or not eternal ... or whether, after death, the Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist,' that would still remain undeclared by the Tathāgata, and, meanwhile, that person would die.*
>
> *"It is as if, Mālunkyāputta, a person were wounded by an arrow thickly smeared with poison and his friends and companions, his kinsman and relatives brought a doctor to treat him and he should say to the doctor: 'I shall not allow this arrow to be extracted until I know the name and caste of the man who wounded me; ... until I know whether the man who wounded me was tall or short or of medium height; ... until I know whether the man who wounded me was dark or brown or golden-skinned; ... until I know whether the man who wounded me lives in such a village or town or city; ... until I know whether the bow that wounded me was a long bow or a crossbow; ... until I know whether the bowstring that wounded me was fiber or reed or sinew or hemp or bark; ... until I know whether the shaft that wounded me was wild or cultivated; ... until I know with what kind of feathers the shaft that wounded me was fitted — whether those of a vulture or a crow or a hawk or a peacock or a stork; ... until I know with what kind of sinew the shaft that wounded me was bound — whether that of an ox or a buffalo or a lion or a monkey; ... until I know what kind of arrow it was that wounded me — whether it was hoof-tipped or curved or barbed or calf-toothed or oleander.' That person would die before this would ever be known by him. In the same way, Mālunkyāputta, if anyone should say thus: 'I will not lead the Holy Life under the Blessed One until the Blessed One declares to me wether this world is eternal or not eternal ... or whether, after death, the Tathāgata neither exists*

*nor does not exist,' that person would die before these questions had ever been elucidated by the Tathāgata."*[9]

The solving of these metaphysical questions does not lead to aversion (*nibbidā*), elimination of delusion (*moha*), enlightenment (*bodhi*), or *nibbāna*.

One has to be practical. But, of course, even while avoiding becoming entangled in theories and unnecessary speculations, communication between human beings cannot take place without a minimum of conceptual and verbal activity. To teach someone to do something, we have to start by giving them at least a general idea of what it is all about, of what we will be trying to do, and of how to do it. The *Buddha*, too, had to develop instructions, verbal Teachings in which He formulated, in the simplest possible terms, the understanding He had achieved of the human condition and of the way to overcome its shortcomings by means of determined effort, which commits all the resources of the human mind to the task of achieving the total cessation of suffering, that is, *nibbāna*.[10]

In order to place the meditative techniques, which are discussed later, in their proper context, it is, therefore, necessary to have in one's mind a clear outline of the *Buddha's* Teaching, the *Buddhadhamma*, which He summarized in His first discourse on the "Four Noble Truths", delivered at Isipatana (modern Sarnath, near Vārāṇasī) some two months after His own enlightenment. Even though these Four Noble Truths might be taken as generally known, since they have been quoted, explained, and commented upon on innumerable occasions, it will be helpful to recapitulate them before proceeding further.

## The Four Noble Truths

The *Dhamma*, or universal moral law, discovered by the *Buddha*, is summed up in the Four Noble Truths (*Ariya-Sacca*): (1) the truth about the universal sway of suffering (*dukkha*); (2) about its origin (*samudaya*); (3) its cessation (*nirodha*); and (4) the path (*magga*) leading to its cessation.

1. The first truth, about the universality of suffering, teaches, in short, that all forms of existence are uncertain, transient, contingent, and devoid of intrinsic self-identity and are, therefore, by their very nature subject to suffering.

   *"Now, Monks, this is the Noble Truth as to suffering: Birth (earthly existence) indeed is suffering; old age is suffering; sickness is suffering; death is suffering;*

[9] *Majjhima Nikāya*, Cūḷamālunkya Sutta (The Shorter Discourse to Mālunkyāputta), no. 63.

[10] Sanskrit *nirvāṇa* — *nibbāna* is the Pāḷi equivalent. It is the Sanskrit form which has gained currency in English and other Western languages. The actual meaning of *nirvāṇa*, however, has long been clouded by misunderstandings and misconceptions in the West (for example, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, includes in its definition the idea of "absorption into the supreme spirit", which runs counter to everything that the *Buddha* taught). It is, therefore, preferable to abandon the word "nirvāṇa", with its now inevitable load of erroneous connotations, and to use the Pāḷi term instead.

> *likewise sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair. Contact with the unpleasant is suffering, separation from the pleasant is suffering; not to get what one wants is also suffering. In brief, the five aggregates of clinging (bodily form, feeling, perception, predisposing mental formations, and consciousness) are suffering."*[11]

It is important to bear in mind that the Pāḷi term *dukkha*, which is usually translated as "suffering", has a much broader range of connotation in the original. It includes not only acute or manifest states of mental or physical suffering, but also any degree of unpleasantness, discomfort, dissatisfaction, anxiety, or unease. It may be noted in this connection that, according to Venerable Nyanatiloka,[12] *dukkha* "refers to the unsatisfactory nature and the general insecurity of all conditioned phenomena". Nyanatiloka further notes that, were it not for stylistic reasons, "unsatisfactoriness" or "liability to suffering" would be better translations.

It must be made clear that this first truth does not deny the existence of pleasurable experiences, but simply draws attention to the fact that, even in the midst of pleasure and happiness, we are never free from some discomfort or unease for any length of time. Pleasures are fleeting, happiness is ephemeral, and their enjoyment if at all clear-headed, is tinged with this knowledge. What is more, if we pay close attention, how often can we say in the course of ordinary, everyday existence that we are enjoying a moment of perfect, unalloyed happiness or comfort? How often can we say that we are entirely free from everything we dislike, that we have everything we like, that the constant, complex weaving of our desires is entirely stilled? And how often does it happen (to take banal, but for all that, significant examples) that one feels an itch in one's nose, or that one's foot has gone to sleep, or that the sun gets in one's eyes, or that one remembers the unpaid electricity bill, just in the middle of an otherwise rapturous experience?

Unease, in the full sense of the word, is universal: we are not, in any lasting sense, at ease in the world as we experience it; we are not at ease in ourselves. It is, therefore, true to say that, looked at without illusions, *to live is to suffer*. All philosophies and religions agree on the condition. Disagreement begins when it comes to analyzing the causes of this unease and to finding remedies for it. Here, the *Buddha's* answer is remarkable for its simplicity and directness: *to suffer is to want*, that is, to need and, therefore, to desire, something one does not have.

2. The second truth, about the origin of suffering, teaches that all suffering is rooted in selfish craving (*taṇhā*) and ignorance (*avijjā*). It further explains the cause of this seeming injustice in nature by teaching that nothing in the world can come into existence without a reason or a cause and that, not only all our latent tendencies, but

[11] *Dīgha Nikāya*, Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta (The Greater Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness), no. 22.

[12] Nyanatiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary: Manual of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines* (4th revised edition; Kandy, Śri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society [1980]), pp. 64—65.

our whole destiny, all weal and woe, results from causes that can be traced partly in this life and partly in former states of existence.

The second truth further teaches us that the future life, with all its weal and woe, must result from the seeds sown in this life and in former lives.

> *"And again, Monks, this is the Noble Truth as to the origin of suffering: It is that craving, associated with enjoyment and desire and seeking pleasure everywhere, which produces separate existence and leads to future births, and which keeps lingering on and on, that is the cause of suffering. In other words, it is craving for sense-pleasure, the desire for birth in a world of separateness, and the desire for existence to end."*[13]

Thus, the cause of all of this suffering, discomfort, and unease is "craving, associated with enjoyment and desire and seeking pleasure everywhere."

The full meaning of this statement, oversimplified though it may seem at first, becomes clear as soon as one considers that the pursuit of pleasure is, in fact, a very wide-ranging activity. It is motivated not only by desire for what one likes but also by aversion for what one dislikes, since aversion is only a "desire to avoid" whatever is perceived as unpleasant and undesirable. A moment's reflection will show how much of our time and energy we spend throughout our lives in seeking what we consider desirable and avoiding what we consider undesirable.

The *Buddha* put it this way:

> *"Here, one sees a visual object; if it is pleasant, one is attracted, if it is unpleasant, one is repelled. Similarly with sounds, smells, tastes, bodily contacts, and mental objects [that is, thoughts, volitions, emotions, etc.]; if they are pleasant, one is attracted, if they are unpleasant, one is repelled…. One who lives thus swayed by likes and dislikes, whenever he experiences a sensation*[14] *— pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral — he reacts by welcoming and enjoying the pleasure, and grows attached to it … and so desire for enjoyment arises in him. And desire causes clinging."*[15]

But, as noted above, the ephemeral nature of everything around us is only too obvious. And it is equally obvious that to cling to something that is irremediably transient, and to persist in wanting its preservation, is simply asking for trouble.

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[13] *Dīgha Nikāya*, Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta (The Greater Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness), no. 22.

[14] Buddhist psychology distinguishes six kinds of "sensations": those perceived through the five bodily senses (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body) plus "mental sensations" (that is, perceptions of purely mental objects, without any immediate physical base).

[15] *Majjhima Nikāya,* Mahātaṇhāsankhaya Sutta (The Greater Discourse on the Destruction of Craving), no. 38.

The *Buddha*, working always on the basis of personal experience, not on theory or tradition, taught that the only thing that can be said to *exist* is the flow of countless mutually conditioning processes.[16]

What we call the world, material objects, the soul, life itself, is a complex web of transient, ever-changing phenomena, entirely devoid of any lasting essence of permanent identity. This is why the *Buddha* said that the three basic characteristics of existence are impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and not-self, or absence of any permanent self-entity (*anattā*). Suffering is the corollary of the other two; as long as, in our ignorance (*avijjā*) of the impermanent nature of things, we persist in clinging to them, frustration is inevitable. It is like pouring water into a sieve and expecting it to stay there. The incorrect perception of what is impermanent as permanent is the root of clinging; we cling because we want. What we want is immaterial; whether we want to obtain or to keep something we like, or to avoid something we fear, or to reject something we dislike, it is all wanting. Literally, *we suffer because we want*. Thus, to reiterate what was said above, the cause of all of this suffering, discomfort, and unease is "craving, associated with enjoyment and desire and seeking pleasure everywhere."

3. The third truth, or the truth about the cessation of suffering, shows how, through the abandoning of craving and ignorance, all suffering will vanish, and liberation from *saṁsāra* will be attained.

> *"And this, Monks, is the Noble Truth as to the cessation of suffering: It is the complete cessation, giving up, abandoning of craving; it is release and detachment from craving."*[17]

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[16] According to the law of dependent origination (*paṭīcca-samuppāda*), usually formulated as a series of twelve links, each of which is the condition of the next, the root of the series being *ignorance* (*avijjā* — that is, the failure to understand the radical impermanence of all that exists). Briefly, "it expresses the doctrine that all physical and psychical phenomena are conditioned by antecedent physical or psychical factors, and that the whole of existence can be shown to be an uninterrupted flux of phenomena. The doctrine also implies rejection of the idea of any permanently existing entity or ego, human or animal." (Trevor Ling, *A Dictionary of Buddhism* [New York, NY: Scribner (1972)]). There is an excellent study of this by the Swedish psychologist and Pāḷi scholar Rune E. A. Johansson (*The Dynamic Psychology of Early Buddhism* [London: Curzon Press (1979)]). A parallelism is worth noting between the view that everything that exists is part of a dynamic web of interrelated events (*not* entities) and the conception of the physical world in modern high-energy physics. According to the latter, the atoms composing the molecules of what we perceive as solid matter are made up of subatomic particles which themselves are to be seen, not as having any degree of solidity, but as "dynamic patterns, or processes, which involve a certain amount of energy appearing to us as their mass… Matter has appeared in [high-energy particle-scattering] experiments as completely mutable… In this world, classical concepts like 'elementary particle', 'material substance', or 'isolated object', have lost their meaning; the whole universe appears as a dynamic web of inseparable energy patterns." (Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics* [Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications (2nd edition, 1981)], pp. 78 and 80).

[17] *Dīgha Nikāya*, Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta (The Greater Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness), no. 22.

Now, if we suffer because we want, it is obvious that *if we do not want, we will not suffer*. Of course, this is much more easily said than done. Simply to make a resolution "I do not want to suffer" is worse than useless. In fact, such an attitude is a glaring example of the very desire and attachment that one should try to do away with, since it is simply an expression of the *desire* not to suffer and of *attachment* to comfort and happiness.

That is why the *Buddha* said: "And this, Monks, is the Noble Truth as to the cessation of suffering: It is the complete cessation, giving up, abandoning of craving; it is release and detachment from craving." In saying this, He emphasized the need to uproot craving and desire completely, to ensure that it stops and vanishes altogether. But, this involves a complete change in our mental attitude. The question is, "how can such a change be brought about?" And the answer is, again, very simply stated, although, again, far from easy to carry out. It is to cultivate the mindful, non-reactive observation of bodily and mental processes — the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*) — so as to develop an increasingly thorough awareness (undistorted by our usual desires, fears, views, etc.) of their true nature: impermanent, without self, and, therefore, involving suffering on our part until we learn to let go.[18] It is through mindful observation of what is actually there that the delusion which makes us perceive that which is impermanent and transient as permanent and lasting is gradually dispelled. Liberation consists in experiencing and understanding fully and clearly that everything, without exception, is impermanent, and in realizing that there is, quite literally, *nothing* to worry about.

This *mindful observation* is meditation. But, of course, it is no good just to sit down somewhere and say to oneself out of the blue, "Now I am going to meditate", without training or preparation. For one thing, meditation requires a certain skill in using our mental capacities in a specific way and, like other skills, has to be learned. Secondly, and even more importantly, meditation is an integral part of a whole way of life and, unless it is developed as part of such a way of life, it will remain at best a mere game or a form of escapism, and, at worst, may become a dangerous aberration of the powers of the mind. Hence, the *Buddha's* fourth truth, in which He spelled out the appropriate way of life.

4. The fourth truth shows the way leading to the cessation of suffering (*dukkha nirodha gāminī paṭipadā*). It is the Noble Eightfold Path of Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.

> *"And this once again, Monks, is the Noble Truth as to the path to the cessation of suffering: It is indeed that Noble Eightfold Path: Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right*

[18] The two basic texts here are: (1) *Dīgha Nikāya*, Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta (The Greater Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness), no. 22; and (2) *Majjhima Nikāya,* Mahātaṇhāsankhaya Sutta (The Greater Discourse on the Destruction of Craving), no. 38.

*Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. The Middle Path, Monks, leads to Nibbāna."*[19]

The analysis of the problem and what causes it is now followed, in this the fourth and last truth, by the remedy: a way of life purified by a reasonable moral discipline (*sīla*) and devoted to the achievement of wisdom (*paññā*) through the methodical cultivation of concentration (*samādhi*)[20] applied to mindful observation, that is to say, the practice of meditation.

It cannot be sufficiently emphasized that all three components are equally essential. If there is no moral discipline, that is to say, if one does not strive to maintain the purity of one's behavior, speech, and thought, there can be no progress in the cultivation of the mind. And without that mental cultivation, which is the practice of meditation, there can be no achieving the living wisdom which permeates and transforms the practitioner's experience and behavior, but only, at the most, a purely intellectual understanding which — although it may be quite subtle and penetrating — cannot transform the deeper levels of the human psyche, which is precisely what needs to be done.

Regarding the need for moral discipline, the *Buddha's* injunctions exemplify the sober approach which is His distinguishing characteristic. The *Buddha's* way is the Middle Way, which avoids excess and exaggeration and requires good sense and moderation in everything. Certainly, there must be discipline and self-control, but there is no question of excessive asceticism or self-mortification:

*"There are these two extremes, O Monks, which should be avoided by one who has renounced the world: indulgence in sensory pleasures — this is base, vulgar, worldly, ignoble, and profitless — and addiction to self-mortification — this is painful, ignoble, and profitless.*

*"Abandoning both these extremes, the Tathāgata has comprehended the Middle Path, which promotes seeing and knowledge and which tends to peace, higher wisdom, enlightenment, and nibbāna."*[21]

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[19] *Dīgha Nikāya*, Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta (The Greater Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness), no. 22.

[20] A careful distinction needs to be made between the meaning of *samādhi* in Buddhism and in orthodox Hindu Yoga. In Yoga, *samādhi* denotes the culmination of the meditative process, often referred to as a state of "superconsciousness", in which — in the words of a leading contemporary Yoga master — "the sādhaka loses consciousness of his body, breath, mind, intelligence and ego. He lives in infinite peace." (B. K. S. Iyengar, *Light on Prāṇāyāma* [London: Allen & Unwin (1981)], p. 11). According to Buddhism, this state is not the culmination or goal of meditation but, rather, merely corresponds to the higher levels of mental absorption (*jhāna*) which can be achieved through tranquility meditation (*samatha*) and which — in the *Buddha's* own experience — were not found to lead, in themselves, to the definitive insight of enlightenment (see Chapters 3 and 5). Thus, in Buddhism, *samādhi* means simply "mental concentration". This is, of course, an essential precondition for the practice of meditation, but no more than that. "Right Concentration" (*sammā samādhi*), that is, "rightly practiced concentration", is one of the factors of the Noble Eightfold Path which leads to the cessation of suffering.

[21] *Saṁyutta Nikāya* 56.11.

Each truth requires that it be acted upon in its own particular way — *understanding* suffering (anguish), *letting go of* its origin, *realizing* its cessation, and *cultivating* the path. In describing to the five ascetics what His awakening meant, the *Buddha* spoke of having discovered complete freedom of heart and mind from the compulsions of craving. He called such freedom the "taste of *Dhamma*".

**The Noble Eightfold Path**

The *Buddha's* Middle Way is the way of balance and moderation. For practical purposes, it is expounded in the formula of the Noble Eightfold Path (*Ariya-Aṭṭhangika-Magga*), so called because it is subdivided into eight factors:

1. The first stage of the Eightfold Path is Right Understanding (Right View), that is, to view in accordance with reality suffering (*dukkha*), its origin (*samudaya*), its cessation (*nirodha*), and the way (*magga*) leading to the cessation of suffering. This leads to an understanding of the true nature of existence and of the moral laws governing the same. In other words, it is the right understanding of the *Dhamma*, of the Four Noble Truths.

2. The second stage of the Eightfold Path is Right Thought (Right Intention), that is, thoughts of renunciation, free from craving, of good will, free from aversion, and of compassion, free from cruelty. This leads to a pure and balanced state of mind, free from sensual lust, ill will, and cruelty.

These two constitute wisdom (*paññā*).

3. The third stage is Right Speech. It consists in abstinence from false speech, malicious speech, harsh speech, and useless speech. In other words, right speech is speech that is not false, not harsh, not scandalous, not frivolous, that is, it consists of speech that is truthful, mild, pacifying, gentle, and wise.

4. The fourth stage is Right Action, that is, abstaining from intentional killing or harming any living creature, abstaining from taking what is not freely given, abstaining from sexual misconduct (adultery, rape, and seduction), and abstaining from intoxicating drinks and drugs causing heedlessness.

5. The fifth stage is Right Livelihood: giving up wrong livelihood, one earns one's living by a right form of livelihood, that is, from a livelihood that does not bring harm and suffering to other beings (avoiding soothsaying, trickery, dishonesty, usury, and trading in weapons, meat, living beings, intoxicants, or poison).

These three constitute virtue, or morality (*sīla*).

6. The sixth stage is Right Effort. It is the fourfold effort to put forth the energy, to prod the mind, and to struggle:

   a. To prevent unarisen unwholesome mental states from arising;
   b. To abandon unwholesome mental states that have already arisen;
   c. To develop wholesome mental states that have not yet arisen;
   d. To maintain and perfect wholesome mental states that have already arisen.

   In other words, it is the fourfold effort that we make to overcome and avoid fresh bad actions by body, speech, and mind; and the effort that we make in developing fresh actions of righteousness, inner peace, and wisdom, and in cultivating them to perfection.

7. The seventh stage is Right Mindfulness, or alertness of mind. It consists of abiding self-possessed and attentive, contemplating according to reality:

   a. The body;
   b. Feelings;
   c. The state of the mind;
   d. The contents of the mind;

   seeing all as composite, ever-becoming, impermanent, and subject to decay. It is maintaining ever-ready mental clarity no matter what we are doing, speaking, or thinking and in keeping before our mind the realities of existence, that is, the impermanence (*anicca*), unsatisfactory nature (*dukkha*), and egolessness (*anattā*) of all forms of existence.

8. The eighth stage is Right Concentration of mind. It consists of gaining one-pointedness of mind and entering into and abiding in the four fine-material absorptions (*rūpajjhānas*) and the four immaterial absorptions (*arūpajjhānas*). Such a kind of mental concentration is one that is directed towards a morally wholesome object and always bound up with Right Thought, Right Effort, and Right Mindfulness.

These three constitute meditative concentration (*samādhi*).

It must be clearly understood that, although the eight factors of the path are enumerated one after the other for purposes of explanation, the idea is not that they should be cultivated successively. As previously pointed out, the three main sections of the path — morality, concentration, and wisdom — are indissolubly linked together and operate simultaneously. Wisdom cannot be achieved without meditation, but meditation is ineffective (and sometimes downright harmful) if it is not built on moral discipline. In fact, they are simply three aspects of the same thing: for an Enlightened One, morality, meditation, and wisdom are all one and the same — different aspects of an integrated, conflict-free consciousness.

At the same time, however, one has to start somewhere, and, for this purpose, the order in which the eight factors are presented reflects the process normally undergone by someone who undertakes the arduous but extremely rewarding task. One begins by gaining some intellectual understanding of the true nature of the human condition (this is the first stirring of Right Understanding or Right View, the first Path factor). One then decides to do something about it (Right Thought or Right Intention); this is the beginning of wisdom. One then proceeds to put into practice this new, and still very rudimentary, understanding and resolution in one's behavior and the way in which one earns a living (morality — that is, Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood), and, at the same time, one devotes time and energy to developing the mental concentration required for mindful observation, which is the practice of meditation (the Path factors Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration).

Progress takes place through the mutual interaction of all factors: meditation, correctly practiced, improves understanding or wisdom — one grows increasingly aware of the impermanent and impersonal nature of all things. This greater awareness has, quite naturally, beneficial effects on one's behavior. In its turn, the greater purity of behavior in whatever one does, says, and thinks provides a better foundation for meditation. Thus, a rising spiral is established in which morality, meditation, and wisdom grow ever more complete and better integrated, until the full integration of enlightenment is achieved.

Since the present study is intended to focus on the meditative aspect, we will not have much more to say about the other two aspects of the Path in the following pages, but, to avoid misunderstandings, it is important never to lose sight of the point that has just been made: meditation is not something that happens, or that one does, in a watertight compartment during brief periods of time specially set aside for the purpose. Rather, it is an integral part of a whole way of life and loses its meaning if cut out of its proper context. ■

# 3

# The Two Types of Buddhist Meditation: Samatha and Vipassanā

## Preliminary Remarks

In the *Buddha's* Teaching, meditation is presented in characteristically sober and pragmatic terms, avoiding all highflown rhetoric. Meditation is described simply as *bhāvanā*, which means "cultivation" or "development", terms which, at the same time, accurately define its purpose; to cultivate and develop the vast potential of the mind in order to overcome the unsatisfactory nature of the internal and external circumstances in which we find ourselves. In this context, it must be clearly understood that the Pāḷi term *citta*, which is translated as "mind", denotes not only the whole area of conscious awareness but embraces also what in modern Western psychological terminology would be referred to as the "subconscious" and "unconscious" levels of the human psyche.

As was previously pointed out, the unsatisfactory nature of existence (*dukkha*) is the consequence of unrealistic expectations based upon an incorrect perception of the nature of things. The cultivation and development of the mind is the means by which this erroneous perception is corrected, and its practice comprises two distinct types of meditative techniques, known respectively as *samatha* and *vipassanā*.

## Samatha

*Samatha* means "tranquility", "calm-abiding", or "serenity". *Samatha* meditation, or tranquility meditation, aims to achieve states of consciousness characterized by increasingly higher levels of mental tranquility and stillness. It comprises two elements: (1) the achievement of the highest possible degree of mental concentration and, along with it, (2) the progressive calming of all mental processes. This is achieved through an increasingly concentrated focusing of attention, in which the mind withdraws more and more from all physical and mental stimuli. In this manner, there is a progressive calming of the meditator's mental activities. Highly rarefied states of pure, undistracted consciousness can thus be achieved, which are, at the same time, experiences of a supremely peaceful nature.

The procedure begins by concentrating the mind on certain specific meditation subjects (*kammaṭṭhāna*), which can be physical or mental (as will be seen in Chapter 4), and going systematically through a series of states of mental absorption (*jhāna*). These states, which will be described in Chapter 5, entail a progressive cutting off of sensory inputs and an increasingly complete suspension of the mind's verbal, intellectual mode. In the process, the meditator attains, for the duration of the exercises, very highly integrated states of consciousness.

This type of Buddhist meditation, which can conveniently be described as *abstractive meditation* because it works through the progressive discarding of sensory and mental stimuli, is, as will readily be seen, comparable to meditative techniques used in other traditions. It provides access to states of consciousness characterized by experiences of a holistic nature, which have, of course, great intrinsic value. These experiences, however, are subject to the same law of impermanence as all other things, and their validity is essentially limited to the duration of the state of absorption achieved. This does not, of course, mean that *samatha* meditation is an activity which takes place in an entirely closed circuit, with no significant impact on the meditator's everyday life. On the contrary, it is obvious that experiences of this order, in which extremely all-encompassing states of bliss, tranquility, and meaningfulness are achieved, cannot but have a generally positive influence on the meditator's mentality, with correspondingly beneficial effects on his or her everyday behavior, attitudes, or states of mind.

What the absorptions cannot produce, however, is that *permanent* transcendence of the ingrained patterns of the human psyche which is the only condition that can properly be called enlightenment (*bodhi*) — the achievement of the freedom of *nibbāna*. This was the crucial insight in the *Buddha's* Teaching and has often been blurred in later times in spite of the precision with which He formulated it.

Adopting the terminology of modern Western psychologists who are currently studying these aspects of human experience,[22] one can say that *samatha* produces "altered states of consciousness",[23] which vary in intensity and duration but do not change the fundamental character — the distinctive qualities and characteristics — of consciousness. That is to say, the states of absorption do not produce what one of the leading Western researches in this field, Daniel Goleman, has called the "kind of transmutation of awareness [which] is an altered *trait* of consciousness, an enduring

[22] They call themselves "transpersonal psychologists" because they pursue the scientific study of human experiences and states of consciousness which transcend the boundaries of the "self" or "personality" as defined in traditional Western psychology.

[23] Terminology proposed by the American psychologist Charles T. Tart in his article "Scientific Foundations for the Study of Altered States of Consciousness", *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1971. See also the important anthology *Transpersonal Psychologies* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul [1975]) edited by the same author, who himself contributed the Introduction and three chapters. This anthology includes contributions by various authorities on Zen, Theravādin Buddhism, Sufism, Christian mysticism, and others. Another noteworthy authority is Stanislav Grof, who, together with his wife Christina, has published a number of books touching on this subject, including: Stanislav Grof and Christina Grof, *Holotropic Breathwork: A New Approach to Self-Exploration and Therapy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press [2010]); Stanislav Grof, *Healing Our Deepest Wounds: The Holotropic Paradigm Shift* (Newcastle, WA: Stream of Experience Productions [2012]); Stanislav Grof, *When the Impossible Happens: Adventures in Non-Ordinary Realities* (Boulder, CO: SoundsTrue [2006]).

change transforming the meditator's every moment".[24] To obtain this "enduring change", which is precisely what is traditionally recognized as enlightenment or liberation, it is necessary to turn to *vipassanā*, the characteristically Buddhist type of meditation.

## Vipassanā

*Vipassanā* means, literally, "clear vision" (from the Pāḷi verb *vipassati*, "to see clearly"), that is, seeing things as they actually are. The English term "insight" provides a suitable rendering of the idea, and, in fact, "insight meditation" has become, in recent years, the established term for this type of meditation.

*Vipassanā*, or insight meditation, also begins with concentration exercises, just like *samatha*, using the appropriate meditation subjects (*kammaṭṭhāna*). The difference lies in the fact that, in *vipassanā*, one does not go on to progressively higher degrees of concentration and absorption (*jhāna*). Here, once sufficient concentration has been achieved to ensure that undistracted mindfulness can be maintained (the degree is known as "access concentration", *upacāra samādhi*, or "momentary concentration", *khaṇika samādhi*), the meditator proceeds to examine with steady, careful attention and in the utmost possible detail precisely all those sensory and mental processes which are discarded in tranquility meditation (*samatha*), including those that normally occur at subconscious and unconscious levels. The purpose here is to achieve complete, direct, and immediate awareness of all phenomena, which reveals their basic impermanence (*anicca*) and impersonality (*anattā*), that is to say, the absence of any lasting essence or self-entity in them.[25] It is a matter of achieving full and clear perception of the radical impermanence of all existing phenomena. This includes realizing that what we normally call the "experiencer" is as impermanent and impersonal, and in exactly the same way, as the object experienced or the experiential process itself. It is this realization, not just accepted as an intellectual postulate but actually directly and personally experienced at a very deep level in the process of meditation, which constitutes the insight of *vipassanā*.

## Bare Insight

These are — briefly outlined by way of introduction — the two types of Buddhist meditation. In the old tradition, meditators would normally practice both: *samatha* in order to develop a high degree of concentration and tranquility, and *vipassanā* in order to achieve liberation through insight. This combined approach offers clear advantages, since it is obvious that the greater the ability of a meditator to concentrate, and the calmer and more balanced his or her mental state, the more easily and swiftly he or she will be able to develop insight.

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[24] Daniel Goleman, *The Varieties of Meditative Experience* (New York, NY: Irvington Publishers [1977]), p. 116. This was later republished as *The Meditative Mind: The Varieties of Meditative Experience* (Los Angeles, CA: Tarcher Publishers [1988]).

[25] For details, see the section dealing with the second Noble Truth, the origin of suffering, in Chapter 2.

However, it is very important to bear in mind that tranquility meditation (*samatha*) cannot, by itself, as has already been pointed out, produce enlightenment. This can only be achieved through the development of insight (*vipassanā*), which can be adequately practiced on the basis of a reasonable minimum level of concentration (access or momentary concentration), without the need for going through the various stages of absorption (*jhāna*).

It is worth noting that the absorptions may entail their own kind of risk in that — precisely because of the achievement of temporary but highly rewarding altered states of consciousness — the meditator may come to view the absorptions as ends in themselves, in which case they will hinder rather than help the progress of insight.

It is for this reason that, depending on character and circumstances, certain meditators soon started practicing bare insight (*sukkha vipassanā*), that is, pursuing the development of insight without the parallel development of the advanced stages (*jhāna*) of tranquility. Increasing numbers of meditators have been turning to the practice of bare insight in recent years. This is not surprising considering the stresses and constraints of modern life, which make it more difficult than in the past to find both the time and the appropriate environment to practice the advanced stages of tranquility meditation, which generally requires more leisure and seclusion. This is especially true in the case of meditators who are neither Monks nor recluses, but who, like many people today in the West as in the East, are trying to combine the practice of meditation with the multiple personal, social, and professional demands of the life of a lay person.

## Summary

The fact that both types of meditation — tranquility and insight — begin with the same kinds of concentration exercises, as well as the similarity between the tranquility meditation of Buddhism and the meditative practices of other traditions, have been the cause of many confusions and misunderstandings (even among allegedly knowledgeable students of the subject) concerning the true nature of Buddhist meditation and its distinguishing characteristics. This is why it may be helpful, even at the cost of some repetition, to recapitulate the essential features of the two types of Buddhist meditation — tranquility and insight — before going into the details of the two techniques in the following chapters.

What the two types of meditation have in common is that they are both *attention-training methods*.[26] The basic difference between the two lies in their aims and, beyond a certain point, in their methods. *Samatha* (tranquility meditation) pursues the utmost degree of mental concentration, progressively discarding all sensory and mental inputs which normally occupy the mind, to concentrate exclusively on a single percept, image, or idea as the subject of meditation. It is rather like narrowing down a light beam to the sharpest possible focus on a single, intensely bright point. The high levels of mental concentration and absorption thus achieved represent altered states of consciousness, which have well-defined differential characteristics, such as a suspension of sense

[26] This is something that all meditative techniques, of whatever tradition, have in common.

perception, interruption of the verbal, intellectual activities, and feelings of bliss, happiness, serenity, and one-pointed attention. These states of consciousness are clearly distinct from the three main states of ordinary consciousness, as defined in psychology, namely, waking, sleeping, and dreaming, and they are incompatible with them. When we are in one of the states of absorption (*jhāna*), we are neither awake, nor asleep, nor dreaming; instead, we are operating in an entirely different mode.

In *vipassanā* (insight meditation), on the other hand, mental concentration is cultivated only to the degree which is sufficient to ensure a steady, undistracted mindfulness. The resulting alert and receptive state of mind is then used to develop an uninterrupted and finely perceptive awareness of whatever arises before consciousness (whether from internal or external sources), involving the full, continuous, and fully conscious exercise of all mental faculties. In terms of the previous comparison, we could say here that the beam of light is not narrowed down to an infinitesimal point, but only to a size which will provide a powerful and finely focused but rather broader light field, which follows and illuminates whatever is happening at any given moment. This exercise, assiduously practiced and refined, becomes an increasingly intense and characteristic manner of experiencing, which is not a state of consciousness intrinsically different from the ordinary states, but which is a modification which opens them up to a new dimension. One is then operating not outside the ordinary states of consciousness, but within them in a new way. Their normal functions remain fully available (working, in fact, more efficiently) and, in addition, some new functions of a positive value emerge that are not otherwise present in them. This is best described as a thoroughgoing reorganization of the human psyche. The person who experiences the insight of *vipassanā* lives differently, whether waking, dreaming, or even sleeping. The new manner is distinguished by, among others, a sense of detachment, psychological and mental balance, openness and availability to others, and exceptional relevance and functionality of thought and action. This is what one of the most authoritative exponents of the modern school of transpersonal psychology has defined as a *higher state of consciousness*.[27] It is a true transmutation which produces new, indelible traits of consciousness. This transmutation is what is traditionally called "enlightenment" or "liberation" and, in its highest degree, *nibbāna*.[28]

A word of warning: Do not expect instant enlightenment; this transmutation is not something that happens all at once, but, rather, in progressive stages (even though the transition from one stage to the next is, in itself, the sudden culmination of a prior process). This is a gradual restructuring of the human psyche, demanding much time and perseverance, which is hardly surprising considering how much there is that needs improving and reshaping in most of us. ■

[27] Charles T. Tart, "Scientific Foundations for the Study of Altered States of Consciousness", *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1971. On this whole issue, which is of capital importance, the excellent study by Goleman (see footnote 24 above) is essential reading.

[28] For more information, see Chapters 6 and 7 of this book.

# 4

# Concentration: The Basis for Meditation

## The Three Degrees of Concentration

Before discussing tranquility and insight meditation individually, it is necessary to consider the basic element they have in common — mental concentration (*samādhi*) — and how it is developed.

For the purpose of meditative practice, three different degrees of intensity may be distinguished: preliminary, access, and attainment concentration.

1. Preliminary concentration (*parikamma samādhi*), also known as "preparatory concentration", is simply the initial effort that one makes to concentrate when beginning the meditation session. It is the kind of concentration one normally exercises in daily life when paying conscious attention to a specific object. Naturally, the degree of attentiveness varies depending upon each person's natural — untrained — ability to concentrate, and, in this, there are very considerable differences. Some people have the ability to concentrate quite easily and powerfully, while others have difficulty in keeping their minds on any one thing for any length of time. However, even in the case of someone who concentrates easily but who has not specially trained to do so, this preliminary concentration is not sufficient to practice meditation. It is therefore necessary to stabilize and strengthen it, and this is done by focusing on an appropriate "meditation subject" (*kammaṭṭhāna*) (such as described later in this chapter), until access concentration is achieved.

2. Access concentration (*upacāra samādhi*), also known as "neighborhood concentration", is so called because it gives access both to the practice of tranquility (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*). When used for insight meditation, it is traditionally referred to as "momentary concentration" (*khaṇika samādhi*). The distinguishing characteristic of this level of concentration is a steady and intense focusing of mental attention on the meditation subject, taken either in its original form or (in certain categories of this exercise) in the form of the so-called "counterpart sign" (*paṭibhāga nimitta*), as will be seen later in this chapter. During

the access concentration stage, there is no inhibition as yet in the reception of sensory and mental inputs. The meditator is fully aware of what is happening both within and around him, but it *no longer distracts him*. His attention remains centered on the meditation subject.

From this point on, the two types of meditation go their separate ways. For the purposes of insight (*vipassanā*), this level of access concentration (that is, momentary concentration) is enough to practice the mindful observation of all phenomena and processes, and thus develop an even finer and more complete, direct awareness of their transient, unstable nature. For the pursuit of tranquility (*samatha*), on the other hand, it is necessary to continue strengthening and refining the concentration of the mind in order to achieve so-called "attainment concentration".

3. In the highest degree of concentration, the mind becomes fully absorbed in the meditation subject (or its counterpart sign) to the exclusion of all other thoughts or percepts. This is known as attainment concentration (*appanā samādhi*), also called "fixed concentration", because it is through this level of concentration that the various stages of absorption (*jhāna*) are attained. As the meditator deepens and refines this mental state (moving progressively through the successive stages of absorption), he passes through experiences of an increasingly unitive, or holistic, character. The experiential factors of multiplicity and diversity are progressively replaced by a flow of pure consciousness, in which there is a melting away of any distinction between the observer, what is observed, and the process of observation.

**Concentration Exercises: Perceptual and Reflective**

Basically, there are two ways of practicing mental concentration, which may be broadly distinguished as *perceptual* and *reflective*, depending on the mental functions involved.

In the case of the *perceptual* exercises, attention is directed entirely to the bare perception of the object or process selected as the meditation subject, exactly as it is found at any given moment, without going into any kind of reflection, reasoning, or imagining about it. The immediate, direct perception, moment by moment, of the meditation subject, excluding any and all distractions, whether sensory (other percepts), intellectual (pursuing trains of thought about the object or started off by it), or emotional (dwelling on any emotional responses) fixes the mind on each particular moment of perception as it occurs. This fixing of the mind on the here and now is what the old texts call "unification of the mind".[29]

For this type of practice, any type of sensory input may be selected (for example, visual objects, sounds, touch sensations, even smells or tastes). However, since it is clearly desirable to work with a sensory input which is as steady and continuous as possible, traditional Buddhist meditation gives preference to the senses of sight (the perception of colors, shapes, etc.) and touch (sensation in the meditator's own body). In

[29] *Ekaggatā* in Pāḷi, literally, "one-pointedness".

certain exercises, use is also made of what may be called "indirect" or "derived" visual perception. This consists in the detailed mental visualization of objects which are not available for direct visual inspection, either because they are not normally visible (such as, for instance, the internal organs in the exercise consisting in the contemplation of the parts of the body), or because they are no longer available at the time of the exercise (such as the contemplation of the progressive stages of body decay after death). These visualizations are based on circumstantial descriptions which have been memorized beforehand and, where possible, on earlier inspection of the objects when available (as in the case of bodies seen on charnel grounds).

Reflective exercises, on the other hand, leave sensory perceptions aside, using purely mental materials as meditation subjects. In typical exercises of this kind, the meditator begins by reflecting on the nature and significance of certain entities (such as the *Buddha*, the *Dhamma*, etc.) or fundamental truths (impermanence, death). Here, it is the sustained application of the mind, with deliberate exclusion of distracting inputs (such as sense data or the constant haze of extraneous mental activity which usually surrounds our "normal" thinking), which brings about the increasing concentration of the mind.

**The Three Signs of Concentration**

In the case of perceptual exercises, the first two levels of concentration — that is, preliminary concentration and access (or momentary) concentration — are correlated with three "signs" (*nimitta*); (1) the preliminary sign, (2) the acquired sign, and (3) the counterpart sign. These are distinctive perceptual experiences which mark the progress of concentration.

1. The "preliminary sign" (*parikamma nimitta*) is simply the initial, normal sense perception of the meditation subject as one begins to focus one's attention continuously and exclusively on it.

2. As the focus of attention grows steadier and more intense, the meditator develops a continuous and detailed perception of the subject, which remains clear even in the intervals when there is no direct observation (for instance, when closing one's eyes for a few moments during the contemplation of a visual subject). This continuity of the image at the neural level is what is called the "acquired sign" (*uggaha nimitta*). It is an indication of the fact that the mind is beginning to hold on to the perception of the subject in an assured, undistracted manner.

   It is worth quoting the traditional description of this condition. For this purpose, the best source is the *Visuddhimagga* (*The Path of Purification*), a classic of Buddhist literature composed in Śri Lanka by the Monk Buddhaghosa in the fifth century CE. This book is a comprehensive and minutely detailed handbook of Buddhist meditation, based upon the *Buddha's* discourses and the early commentaries, which has served as an invaluable guide to practitioners down the centuries. We shall often have occasion to refer to it from now on when discussing

specific aspects of meditative practice. According to the *Visuddhimagga*, when concentrating of a visual subject,

> *It should be adverted to now with eyes open, now with eyes shut. And he [the meditator] should go on developing it in this way a hundred times, a thousand times, and even more than that, until the acquired sign (uggaha nimitta) arises. When, while he is developing it in this way, it comes into focus as he adverts with his eyes shut exactly as it does with his eyes open, then the acquired sign is said to have been produced.*[30]

3. As the meditator continues practicing with the acquired sign (*uggaha nimitta*) as a base, he eventually reaches a higher degree of concentration — access concentration (*upacāra samādhi*) — as indicated by the appearance of the *counterpart sign* (*paṭibhāga nimitta*). This is no longer the mirror image of the initial subject but a percept with its own characteristics, which vary, as will be seen, depending on the nature of the original subject, but which are no longer in any way representational of it. The counterpart sign is an experience in its own right which, essentially, indicates the coming into awareness of the perceptual act itself — the conscious perception of perception. It is described as follows in the *Visuddhimagga* (IV, 126 [130]):

> *The difference between the earlier acquired sign and the counterpart sign is this: In the acquired sign, any fault in the kasiṇa is apparent [that is, any irregularity in the visual object taken as a meditation subject; the acquired sign or image which one "sees" with one's eyes closed, being an exact duplicate, naturally shows the same characteristic features, including any faults or blemishes, of the original material object]. But the counterpart sign appears as if it were breaking out from the acquired sign, and a hundred times, a thousand times more purified, like a looking-glass disk drawn from its case, like a mother-of-pearl disk well washed, like the moon's disk coming out from behind a cloud, like cranes against a thunder-cloud. But it has neither color nor shape; for if it had, it would be cognizable by the eye, gross, susceptible to comprehension and stamped with three characteristics*[31] *[that is, it would be a material thing that could be known*

[30] *Visuddhimagga*, Chapter IV, p. 125 of the Pāḷi text, and p. 130 of the English translation by Venerable Ñāṇamoli. Frequent further references to this text will be abbreviated by giving the page of the original Pāḷi followed by the page of the English translation in parentheses. The present reference would thus read *Visuddhimagga* IV, 125 (130). The terminology of the passages quoted has occasionally been modified to agree with what is used in the present work, for the sake of consistency. [Note: In the Charleston Buddhist Fellowship edition of this book, English translations of Pāḷi terms conform with those given by Nyanatiloka Mahāthera (1878—1957) in *Buddhist Dictionary: Manual of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines* (4th revised edition edited by Ven. Nyanaponika; Kandy, Śri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society [1980]).]

[31] The three characteristics of all compound things, which are in a state of continual flux: (1) arising (*uppāda*); (2) presence (*ṭhiti*); and (3) passing away (*bhanga*), where "presence" refers to the infinitesimal moment of poise between "arising" and "passing away". It is also referred to as "stability", "duration", or "peaking".

*as such]. But it is not like that, for it is born only of perception to one who has achieved concentration, being a mere mode of appearance.*

At this point, it can be appreciated that we are moving into an area of experience which is difficult to describe adequately and without being misleading. This is one of the reasons why meditation teachers usually refrain from explaining or describing to their students in advance the kinds of experiences that may result. The other, and more important, reason for such caution is that a prior description is more likely to hinder than to help progress by generating expectations. In fact, if the meditator is hoping and wishing for a certain sensation or experience which he has been told is a sign of progress, he runs a double risk. First, his thinking about "getting the sign" may interfere with his concentration, which is the only way of actually developing the sign. Secondly, and more dangerously, the meditator may start imagining the sign along the description that has been furnished to him and may, through a process of auto-suggestion, convince himself that he is perceiving it, when all he is doing is indulging in willful constructs of the imagination — which is precisely the opposite of true concentration.

To make progress, the meditator must hold fast to one thing only: the absolute need to keep his attention steady on the meditation object. The signs, when they occur, will do so unbidden, of their own accord, as correlates of the degree of concentration achieved. In addition, it must be kept in mind that this correlation is not a mathematical kind of correspondence, with strictly defined ratios between degree of concentration and clarity or intensity of the sign. As is always the case when dealing with living realities rather than theoretical abstractions, there is a very wide margin of individual variation. Depending upon the person, his capabilities, and the circumstances of the case, the development of the signs may be easy or difficult, swift or long-delayed, intense or weak, and there are even people who achieve access concentration (*upacāra samādhi*) with barely perceptible acquired signs and counterpart signs.

## Meditation Subjects

Broadly speaking, almost any physical or mental data may be used as a subject on which to concentrate one's attention. Experience, however, has shown that certain kinds of subjects, because of their own inherent characteristics, are more favorable than others for the beginning and further development of mental concentration. Using visual subjects as an example, it can readily be appreciated that it is better if they are simple and homogeneous in appearance, thus providing less opportunity for the mind — which loves diversity — to start all sorts of thought processes (comparisons, reflections, associations, etc.) which are the primary hindrances to concentration. Some reflective meditation exercises, on the other hand, in which the meditator is invited to reflect, following certain specific patterns, on the nature of, for instance, the *Buddha*, the *Dhamma*, or the *Sangha*, or on qualities such as loving-kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*), or equanimity (*upekkhā*), are based on fairly complex intellectual activity but can be very beneficial by generating strong motivation. In selecting the meditation subject (*kammaṭṭhāna*) for each student at any given time, the meditation teacher is

guided by two basic considerations: (1) the character and mentality of the student and (2) the type of meditation which is to be practiced (tranquility or insight).

In the old tradition of Buddhist meditation, forty specific meditation subjects are recommended. These are: ten *kasiṇas*,[32] ten kinds of bodily decomposition or decay, ten recollections, one perception, one analysis, four sublime states (or divine abidings), and four immaterial states. For the practice of formal meditation sessions with any of these subjects, it is recommended that a spot which is cool, clean, and quiet, free from external distractions, be selected in which to sit down in a comfortable position. The traditional posture is, of course, cross-legged (either in lotus, half-lotus, or simply tailor-fashion), but one may also sit on a chair. The important point is to assume a position in which the back is kept perfectly straight (perpendicular) and which can be maintained comfortably without moving for the longest possible period of time. One exception to this is the so-called "walking meditation" (*cankamana*) exercise, which, as the name indicates, consists in focusing attention on the movements involved in walking. This is a variant of the contemplation of the body (see below and Chapter 6).

1. The Ten *Kasiṇas*: The ten *kasiṇas* are: earth, water, fire, air (the four elements); blue, yellow, red, white (the four basic colors); light; and limited space.

   The meditation subjects "earth", "water", and "fire", as well as the four colors, can be contemplated directly from nature by an experienced meditator by looking, for instance, at a recently plowed field, a lake or pond, the flames of a fire, and the colors as they appear in nature (flowers, trees, etc.). "Light" and "limited space" may also be taken as they appear in the frame of an open door or windows.

   A beginner, on the other hand, will need to construct a *kasiṇa* — a simple display device to be used as an aid in meditation. This should consist of a circular surface (*maṇḍala*) (a convenient size is about 1 foot, or 30 cm, in diameter[33]) made entirely of the material or color required. It is essential that the visible surface should be as uniform as possible. In the case of the colors, a disk of any suitable material (wood, cardboard, etc.) can be covered with the appropriate paint, or else one may fill a tray with objects of the right color (flowers or a cloth, for instance). If flowers are used, one should ensure that only the colored petals are visible, without stalks, leaves, or twigs, which could distract one's attention from the color. To make an earth or water *kasiṇa*, a quantity of either may be placed in a circular container (tray, shallow dish, etc.). In the case of the colors and of "earth", care should be taken to ensure that the resulting surface is as smooth and even as possible, both in color and texture. As for "fire", this may be observed through a round opening cut in a screen of cloth or other material placed between the meditator and the flames. The "light" *kasiṇa* may be obtained by projecting a light beam onto a wall or any other smooth surface, and "limited space" is displayed by cutting a round opening in a wall, a partition, or any

[32] *Kasiṇa* is a term of uncertain derivation, but is probably related to Sanskrit *kṛtsna* "whole, complete, entire". It is used as a technical term for certain types of Buddhist meditation and is best left untranslated. It denotes a material object or element used as perceptual input to develop mental concentration for meditation, being in many cases a specially constructed device.

[33] The *Visuddhimaga* IV, 123 (127), specifies "the size of a bushel or the size of a saucer".

other suitable vertical surface. As for the contemplation of "air", there is no difference in method between beginners and experience practitioners. There is no device or artifact, but air should be contemplated by either noticing the movement of plants, trees, or shrubs swaying in the breeze, or by focusing on the touch of air on one's skin.

Except in this latter case, for all other *kasiṇas*, the beginner, after placing the device in a convenient spot, should sit down on one's stool, or a low chair, about 3—4 feet (1 meter) from the device and focus his attention on it. The *Visuddhimagga* IV, 124 (128) gives the following instructions in this regard:

> *He should seat himself on a well-covered chair, with legs a span of four fingers high, prepared in a place that is two and a half cubits [that is, two and a half times the distance from elbow to finger] from the kasiṇa disk. The kasiṇa does not appear plainly to him if he sits further off than that, and if he sits nearer, faults in the kasiṇa appear. If he sits higher up, he has to look at it with his neck bent, and if he sits lower down, his knees ache.*

These are all purely perceptual exercises, and the mind should be concentrated exclusively on the perception of the selected subject without starting or pursuing any trains of thought or mental associations related to it. Moreover, the perception itself must concentrate increasingly on the essential aspect of the subject, leaving aside any accidental or subsidiary elements. For instance, when contemplating the color "blue", one begins with a *kasiṇa* as it is, noting whatever irregularities in color or texture may be present (for example, uneven distribution of the paint in the case of a painted disk, folds or wrinkles in the cloth, or remains of leaves or stems if flowers are used). Then, the irregularities should be ignored and the mind concentrated as powerfully as possible on the pure blue color. At the beginning, it often helps to repeat mentally, at the same time, the word "blue, blue" until a good perception has been established. Or, in the case of the earth *kasiṇa*, the color of the earth should be ignored, as well as any unevenness of the surface, and there should be only the thought and perception of "earth, earth" ("*paṭhavī*, *paṭhavī*").

These ten *kasiṇa* exercises, being of the perceptual type, have the corresponding acquired (*uggaha nimitta*) and counterpart signs (*paṭibhāga nimitta*). Briefly, according to the *Visuddhimagga*, these are as follows:

A. The four colors (*vaṇṇa-kasiṇa*): The signs are the same for all four colors — blue (*nīla*), yellow (*pīta* or *pītaka*), red (*lohita* or *lohitaka*), and white (*odāta*). In the acquired sign, "any fault in the *kasiṇa* is evident …; the stamen and stalks [when flowers are used] and the gaps between the petals, etc., are apparent. The counterpart sign appears like a crystal fan in space,[34] free from the *kasiṇa* disk".[35]

[34] This is intended to convey a sense of brightness and transparency, *not* to suggest that one should try to imagine a fanlike shape.

[35] This means that the meditator has achieved the *counterpart sign* of access concentration, which is no longer tied to direct sense perception (preliminary sign) or to perceptual memory (acquired sign).

B. Earth (*paṭhavī-kasiṇa*): Here, too, "in the acquired sign, any fault in the *kasiṇa* is apparent"[36] (any irregularities in the color or texture of the earth with which the container has been filled), while the counterpart sign has its own characteristics, which have already been summarized above, and which are formulated in terms of brightness, clarity, and purity (mirror, mother-of-pearl, moon, etc.).
C. Water (*āpo-kasiṇa*): The acquired sign has the appearance of moving or motion. If the water has bubbles of froth mixed with it, the acquired sign has the same appearance, and it is evident as a fault in the *kasiṇa*. But the counterpart sign appears inactive, like a crystal fan set in space, like the disk of a looking-glass made of crystal.[37]
D. Fire (*tejo-kasiṇa*): Here, the acquired sign appears like a sinking down, as the flame keeps detaching itself. But, when someone apprehends it in a *kasiṇa* that is not made up,[38] any fault in the *kasiṇa* is evident (in the acquired sign), and any firebrand, or pile of embers or ashes, or smoke appears in it. The counterpart sign appears motionless, like a piece of red cloth in space, like a gold fan, like a gold column.[39]
E. Air (*vāyo-kasiṇa*): Here, the acquired sign appears to move like the swirl of hot steam on rice gruel just withdrawn from the oven. The counterpart sign is quiet and motionless.[40]
F. Light (*āloka-kasiṇa*): Here, the acquired sign is like the circle of light thrown on the wall or the ground. The counterpart sign is like a compact bright cluster of lights.[41]
G. Limited space (*paricchinna-ākāsa-kasiṇa*): Here, the acquired sign resembles the hole together with the wall, etc., that surrounds it. The counterpart sign appears only as a circle of space.[42]

2. The Ten Kinds of Bodily Decomposition or Decay: The ten kinds of bodily decomposition or decay[43] are also perceptual exercises. Here, the meditator contemplates dead bodies in different stages of decay: a swollen corpse; a discolored corpse; a festering corpse; a dissected corpse; a corpse gnawed to pieces; a corpse scattered in pieces; a corpse mutilated and scattered in pieces; a bloody corpse; a worm-infested corpse; and a skeleton. The exercises begin with the direct inspection of a corpse and continue with detailed mental visualizations, which must keep vividly present in the mind, in all its details, the condition of decay which has been physically perceived to begin with.

[36] *Visuddhimagga* IV, 125 (130).
[37] *Visuddhimagga* V, 170—171 (178).
[38] By looking directly at any available flame, without interposing the screen with a round opening described previously.
[39] *Visuddhimagga* V, 171—172 (178).
[40] *Visuddhimagga* V, 172 (179).
[41] *Visuddhimagga* V, 175 (181).
[42] That is, disregarding the surrounding material. *Visuddhimagga* V, 175 (181—182).
[43] These are also known as the "cemetery contemplations", which are one of the forms of the contemplation of the body.

The prerequisite for these exercises is, therefore, the availability of a corpse. This was not at all difficult to find in ancient India (where the dead were normally not buried but placed in the charnel grounds outside villages, there to decay or be devoured by scavengers), but it is rather difficult today, especially in Western countries. Moreover, strict supervision by a qualified teacher is even more essential in these exercises than in others because of the more immediate psychological and emotional repercussions which they may have. In spite of the fact, therefore, that this category of meditation subjects is very useful in correcting excessive attachment to the appearance and well-being of one's own body, and to sensual pleasures in general, there is little point in discussing them in detail in a book such as this.

3. The Ten Recollections: With two important exceptions, these are meditations of the reflective kind and differ in this respect from the ones we have been considering so far. In these reflective exercises, sometimes also called "recollections", the starting point is, in each case, a traditional verbal formula which summarizes the essential points or characteristics of the meditation subject, to be reviewed in the course of the exercise. The meditator begins by mentally reciting the appropriate formula and then concentrates his attention successively on each one of the elements of which it is composed, reflecting carefully upon it. One generally begins by considering the semantic aspect — the meaning and connotations of the word — subsequently moving on to their deeper significance as an expression, manifestation, or sign of the truths explained and demonstrated by the *Buddha*. This reflective concentration sharpens the awareness of these liberating truths, and the progressive strengthening and focusing of awareness, in its turn, strengthens concentration. Let us briefly consider the eight reflective meditations, with their traditional formulations. First of all, there are the so-called "Three Jewels" (*ti-ratana*), which are the same as the "Three Refuges" (*ti-saraṇa*): (1) the *Buddha* (the Enlightened One); (2) the *Dhamma* (the Teaching); and (3) the *Sangha* (the Community).

A. The *Buddha*:

> *Iti'pi so bhagavā arahaṁ sammāsambuddho vijjā-caraṇa-sampanno sugato lokavidū anuttaro purisadamma-sārathī satthā deva-manussānaṁ buddho bhagavā'ti.*
>
> *Such, indeed, is the Exalted One: worthy, perfectly enlightened, endowed with knowledge and conduct, supremely good, Knower of the worlds, incomparable Master of persons to be tamed, Teacher of gods and men, enlightened and exalted.*[44]

[44] *Visuddhimagga* VII, 198 (206). *Bhagavā* (literally, "exalted", often translated as "blessed") is one of the basic epithets of the *Buddha*; *arahant* (literally, "deserving" or "worthy", sometimes also translated as "holy") is the specific term for the person who has achieved the deliverance of *nibbāna* and is best left untranslated in most contexts. This formula, like the next two (on the *Dhamma* and the *Sangha*), is very ancient, going back to the time of the *Buddha* Himself.

The meditator now takes up each one of the elements of the formula — Exalted One, worthy, perfectly enlightened, etc. — and reflects on them in the manner just outlined. The *Visuddhimagga* offers detailed instructions on how to reflect on each one of the terms, including a great variety of alternatives. There are too many variations to discuss all of them here, but just to illustrate, here are a few of the ways in which the first term of the formula may be reflected upon. One may begin by considering that "Exalted One" is a term signifying the respect and veneration given to the *Buddha* as the highest of all beings and distinguished by His special qualities. One may then go on to reflect on these qualities in various ways. For example, the *Buddha* is "exalted" by virtue of what He has attained, what He has abolished, what He possesses, and what He understands, that is to say, He has attained the highest possible degree of morality, universal loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity, and the supreme bliss of *nibbāna*; He has entirely abolished greed, hatred, and delusion, together with other mental defilements (*kilesa*), as well as any blemishes or shortcomings in mindfulness and awareness, and all anger, ill will, conceit, etc.; He possesses full control of the mind, full realization of truth, perfection and the fruit of pure endeavor, etc.; He understands and teaches the Four Noble Truths (suffering, its cause or origin, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation). In this and similar ways, the meditator reflects deeply and repeatedly on each of the terms that make up the formula.

B. The *Dhamma*:

> *Svākkhāto bhagavatā dhammo sandiṭṭhiko akāliko ehipassiko opanayiko paccattaṁ veditabbo viññūhī'ti.*
>
> *Well expounded is the Dhamma of the Exalted One, to be seen here and now, immediately effective, inviting one to come and see, leading inwards, to be realized by the wise, each for himself.*[45]

The *Dhamma* is "well expounded" because it announces and describes the way of life that leads to enlightenment (*bodhi*), and because it is good in the beginning, good in the middle, and good in the end. It is good in the beginning because it starts by promoting morality (virtue) and, with it, one's own physical and mental wellbeing; it is good in the middle (that is, as one progresses in the practice of the Teaching) because it leads to tranquility (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*); and it is good in the end because it culminates in the achievement of *nibbāna*. The Teaching is "seen here and now" because one who practices it properly and does away with craving, clinging, attachment, etc., soon experiences

[45] *Visuddhimagga* VII, 213 (230).

its benefits in and by himself, without having to place blind faith in what someone else claims for it. And so on with each of the other terms.

C. The *Sangha*:

> *Supaṭipanno bhagavato sāvakasaṅgho; ujupaṭipanno bhagavato sāvakasaṅgho; ñāyapaṭipanno bhagavato sāvakasaṅgho; sāmīcipaṭipanno bhagavato sāvakasaṅgho; yadidaṁ cattāri purisayugāni aṭṭha purisapuggalā esa bhagavato sāvakasaṅgho; āhuneyyo pāhuṇeyyo dakkhiṇeyyo añjali-karaṇīyo anuttaraṁ puññakkhettaṁ lokassā'ti.*
>
> *The Order of the Exalted One's disciples who have practiced well; the Order of the Exalted One's disciples who have practiced rightly; the Order of the Exalted One's disciples who have practiced correctly; the Order of the Exalted One's disciples who have practiced properly — the four pairs of persons, the eight types of persons*[46] *—;* that *is the Order of the Exalted One's disciples, worthy of offerings and hospitality, worthy of gifts and respect, incomparable field of merit*[47] *for the world.*[48]

"The Order of the Exalted One's disciples" consists of those who listen attentively to the Exalted One's instructions and are guided by them. All of them together form a community (*Sangha*) because they possess in common the *right view* of things and the *right intention* in dealing with them (the first two factors of the Noble Eightfold Path), as well as the practice of virtue (*sīla*) (that is, *right speech*, *right action*, and *right livelihood* — the next three factors of the Noble Eightfold Path). In addition, by engaging in meditation (*bhāvanā*), they practice the last three factors of the Noble Eightfold Path (*right effort*, *right mindfulness*, and *right concentration*), so that they practice the Noble Eightfold Path in its entirety. This is why it is said that they "have practiced correctly". Finally, they "have practiced properly", which means that they have practiced the way regulated by the Teachings, which leads straight to liberation, straight to *nibbāna*.

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[46] In the progress of insight, there are four stages or levels (see Chapter 6), and each one of these stages has two aspects: (1) the moment of entry into the stage or level and (2) the establishment of consciousness at that level. In traditional terminology, entry is known as *path* (*magga*) and establishment as *fruit* or *fruition* (*phala*). The *Visuddhimagga* (VII, 219 [237—238]) explains that "four pairs of persons" and "eight types of persons" are simply alternative ways of referring to these levels "to suit differing susceptibility to teaching" on the part of hearers. The "four pairs" takes them as pairs, "the one who stands on the first path and the one who stands in the first fruition [count] as one pair", and so on, while the "eight persons" takes them individually, "the one who stands on the first path [counts] as one, and the one who stands in the first fruition [counts] as one".

[47] The concept of "merit" (*puñña*) in Buddhism must not be misunderstood. It is not a matter of rewards or prizes granted by some sort of divine judge, but of good deeds (mental, verbal, or physical) producing good consequences (in terms of spiritual growth and maturity, and sometimes also of physical and material wellbeing) through the natural operation of the law of cause and effect.

[48] *Visuddhimagga* VII, 218 (237).

The next three recollections on the traditional list concern various aspects of virtue (*sīla*). The first one of these refers to the general practice of virtuous living, that is, the moral discipline of thought, speech, and action, which represents virtue, or morality, as one of the three main subdivisions of the Noble Eightfold Path (see Chapter 2).

D. Virtue (Morality): The recollection should concentrate on the various kinds of virtues to be practiced, which are "untorn, unrent, unblotched, and unmottled, liberating, praised by the wise, not adhered to, and conducive to concentration".[49]

The point here is to develop, to the fullest possible, awareness of the importance of leading a scrupulously virtuous life, without equivocation or compromise, and to promote the sense of integrity inherent in such living as a powerful means of developing mental concentration. As in the previous exercises in this group, "recollection" takes place by reflecting in detail on the full meaning and connotations of each one of the terms. For instance, virtues are "untorn" and "unrent" when one manages to maintain an unbroken, stable continuity of pure and virtuous thought and volition, without breaking it with immoral or improper words, thoughts, or actions. Here, one contemplates unbroken integrity of virtue. "Unblotched" and "unmottled": without any impairment in the intensity and purity, that is, contemplating the highest degree of the state of virtue. Similarly with the other terms. The reference to "not adhered to" is important; here, the meditator must recollect the need not to become attached to his or her own virtue, to avoid any self-satisfaction or self-righteousness, which are serious contaminations of virtue.

E. Generosity: The recollection on generosity goes together with the practice "of giving and sharing … according to one's means and one's ability" (as the *Visuddhimagga* rightly stresses). Recollection, which takes place term by term in the usual manner, is based on the following formula:

> *It is a gain for me, it is a great gain indeed, that, in a generation obsessed by the stain of avarice, I abide with my heart free from the stain of avarice and am freely generous and open-hearted, and I delight in relinquishing; I expect to be asked, and I rejoice in giving and sharing.*[50]

F. Divinities: The recollection on divinities (*deva*) (also called "deities", "gods", or "celestial beings") is performed by taking one's own qualities of faith (*saddhā*),[51]

[49] *Visuddhimagga* VII, 221 (240).
[50] *Visuddhimagga* VII, 223 (242).
[51] It should be clearly understood that "faith" in Buddhism is something rather different from what is usually meant by "religious faith". In fact, the Pāḷi word *saddhā*, frequently translated by "faith", would be more properly rendered by "confidence" or "trust". In Buddhism, there is no question of blind belief in "truths" allegedly revealed by some supreme being (either directly or through prophets) or of belief based on an unquestioning acceptance of authority. Rather, what is involved is a reliance, trust, or confidence in the efficacy, intrinsic value, and good sense of what the *Buddha* taught, but subject always, as the *Buddha*

goodness, and so on, developed by means of the Noble Eightfold Path, and by taking the figures of divinities as examples, paragons, and witnesses of these virtues. Here, the traditional formula evokes a whole range of divinities who form the pantheon of popular Buddhism in Asia, as adapted from Hinduism. This recollection on divinities may seem odd in view of the *Buddha's* own insistence on the uselessness of metaphysical and theological speculation, to the extent that Buddhism has sometimes been quite properly called "a religion without a god". The contradiction, however, is more apparent than real. The main point to bear in mind is that the *Buddha* did not fail to recognize the reality of planes of existence outside and beyond the material sphere with which we are familiar in everyday life. As we are told, He had, in fact, direct knowledge of such other planes of existence, thanks to the extraordinary development of His faculties, which opened up to Him a much broader and subtler range of perception and understanding than the "normal" one. He was, therefore, aware of the existence of beings living outside the range of ordinary human awareness and endowed with powers and faculties different from, and sometimes higher than, those of human beings. More or less obscurely aware of such beings at different times, humankind has variously called them, down the ages, "gods", "angels", "demons", "spirits", etc. The *Buddha* had, therefore, no difficulty in utilizing the popular beliefs of those to whom His Teaching was addressed, and even the names and mythologies which accompanied those beliefs, since He knew full well that these beliefs reflected an awareness — even though it was a confused and distorted one — of such beings. He always stressed quite firmly, however — and this is the essential point —, that all these beings and powers are no more real or permanent than we ourselves and that, although sometimes living for much longer periods of time than human beings, they are in no sense eternal and in no sense omnipotent. Like all that exists, the so-called "divinities", too, are subject to the law of *kamma*, to the complex, unbroken interaction of causes and effects. Thus, the *Buddha* taught that "deities", like all other beings, are equally subject to the consequences of their actions, and that their existence is equally subject to change, dissolution, and rebirth, again and again until and unless *nibbāna* is achieved, which is the only definitive liberation. We are all on the same continuum, although at different points. This may help to explain the purpose of this recollection, which appears at first to be different from the others.

The purpose of this exercise is definitely *not* to send prayers to any such deities or to beg for their assistance, but to take them as examples of other levels of existence and awareness (still subject to change and transience, even if on different timescales) and especially as witnesses to our efforts to perfect positive qualities in ourselves.

Here, there is no point in reproducing the traditional formula for recollection since the deities mentioned therein are not familiar to Western readers. Moreover, it would be inappropriate to refer to the divine or spiritual

Himself forcefully insisted, to verification by one's own experience. Thus, Buddhist belief is anything but blind faith.

entities most familiar to Westerners based upon their own religious, cultural, and ethnic background. Therefore, anyone wishing to practice this recollection should substitute the recollections on the *Buddha*, the *Dhamma*, and the *Sangha* instead.

G. Mindfulness of Death: For this recollection, the most universally relevant and, to the unprepared mind, perhaps the most harrowing, the shortest formula consists simply in considering that:

*Death will take place; the life faculty will end.*

Or, even more simply "death, death". However, for those who do not find these simple considerations sufficient, the *Visuddhimagga* suggests eight different ways of recollecting death. Each one of these recollections is given in full in the *Visuddhimagga* with one or more formulas, which would take too long to reproduce here. For now, it will suffice to list them briefly.

a. Death as a murderer: Death stalks us as a murderer stalks his victim — it begins moving towards us as we are born, and, when it reaches us, it kills us.
b. Death as the ruin of success: No achievement is eternal; all greatness and success will end, sooner or later, in ruin. All health ends in sickness, all youth in aging, all life in death.
c. By comparing ourselves with others: Since the beginning of time, all men have been subject to death, even the most powerful, the strongest, the wisest, the holiest. None have been spared. Even the *Buddha* Himself, "who was without equal, without peer, accomplished, and fully enlightened — even He was suddenly quenched by the downpour of death's rain, as a great mass of fire is quenched by the downpour of a rain of water."[52] Death will come to me just as it did to all those outstanding beings.
d. Recollection as to sharing the body with many: One should clearly recognize that the body is a community composed of innumerable individual cells, constantly decaying and being replaced, and shared by many different bacteria, microbes, and other micro-organisms which live and die within us; and also that the organism is constantly exposed to internal and external attacks, such as diseases, accidents, etc., and that this community always falls apart in the end.[53]
e. The frailty of life: Consider the extent to which not only the wellbeing but the very existence of one's life depend upon just a few factors: air for breathing, food, water, quite a narrow range of environmental temperatures, and the delicate balance of the elements making up one's physical organism. When one of these factors is disturbed or lacking (in some cases, such as air, even just for a very short time), death ensues.

[52] *Visuddimagga* VII, 234 (252).
[53] This conception of an organism is strikingly close to the observations of modern biology and medicine, though the terminology, of course, is different.

f. The unpredictability of death: Recollect that nothing is predictable about death. One does not know when or how it will occur, nor where one's body will be laid down, nor where a future existence will arise.[54] The only thing that is certain beyond doubt is that death will occur.

g. The brevity of life: One who lives long may live to be a hundred years old, but one may also drop down dead before reaching the bottom of this page. Death is just around the corner. One should therefore live each moment as if it were the last, with full awareness.

h. The shortness of the present moment: If one thinks about it carefully, one will realize that, properly speaking, the real experience of actual living pertains only to the present moment, to "now". Everything else is already past (even if it was only a moment ago), and thus belongs to the realm of memory, or has not yet happened and belongs to the realm of expectation, anticipation, hope, or fear, etc. But the succession of "nows" is infinitely swift: by the time one has read the word "now", it is already in the past, and so has the "person" who has read it. The next "now" is another moment, with another reader. The present moment is a mere flash, an infinitesimal instant, a matter of less than micorseconds. As the *Visuddhimagga* says:

> *Just as a chariot wheel, when it is rolling, rolls only on one point of its tire [that is, it touches the ground only with one point of its circumference at any given moment] and, when it is at rest, rests only on one point, so too the life of living beings lasts only for a single conscious moment.*[55]

What we call "life" is the swift unbroken succession of such moments, each of which has its own distinct and (even if only infinitesimally) different character from the one before and the one after. Each moment of "life" is a rebirth following upon the death of the preceding one.

H. Recollection of Peace: The last of the purely reflective, or recollective, meditations concerns the qualities of *nibbāna*, in other words, the stilling of all suffering. The formula is as follows:

> *To whatever extent that there are phenomena (dhamma), whether conditioned or unconditioned, dispassion is declared foremost among them, that is to say, the crushing of pride, the removal of thirst, the uprooting of attachment, the*

[54] Future existence, in its turn, will have its own specific characteristics and a certain duration, at the end of which it will be followed by yet further lives in the endless round of rebirths (*saṁsāra*) which can only be broken by the deliverance of *nibbāna*. It should be clearly understood, however, that there is no question here of a soul which moves from one mortal physical form to another while keeping its own essence or identity, since — as the *Buddha* taught — there is no such thing as a self-identity anywhere at any level. What is reborn in the next life is the fruit of the actions performed in previous existences (*kamma vipāka*) (see Chapter 6).

[55] *Visuddhimagga* VIII, 238 (256).

*termination of the round [of rebirths] (saṁsāra), the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbāna.*[56]

This recollection is practiced, as in the other recollections, by considering each of the terms individually.

We must now turn to the only two exercises in the group of the ten so-called "recollections" which are based not on mental reflection but on direct perception. As such, they are extremely important because, by the very fact that they constitute exercises in the clarity of perception, they are particularly suited to the development of insight (*vipassanā*), being, in fact, the two exercises most commonly used for this purpose. These are "mindfulness of the body" and "mindfulness of breathing" (the latter being, in effect, a special case of the former, since breathing is, of course, one of the most fundamental bodily processes). In Chapter 6, which is devoted entirely to *vipassanā*, we shall see how mindfulness of the body, in its various applications, constitutes the first of the four "foundations of mindfulness" (*satipaṭṭhāna*) for the development of insight. At this point, only the variants of mindfulness of the body which can be used to develop concentration will be considered.

I. Mindfulness of the Body: Of all the mediation subjects (*kammaṭṭhāna*), the perception of one's own body (*kāyagatāsati*) is the most important for the practice of Buddhist meditation. In fact, the *Visuddhimagga* (VIII, 239 [259]) maintains that it is the characteristically Buddhist kind of meditation, stating that it "is never promulgated except after the arising of an Enlightened One, and is outside the provenance of any sectarians".

Mindfulness of the body may be practiced in different ways, focusing on different aspects. The traditional exercises are as follows:

a. Mindfulness of the bodily postures: Going, standing, sitting, or lying down.
b. The four kinds of full awareness (or clear comprehension): This exercise consists in performing every action — eating, drinking, speaking, keeping silent, fetching, and carrying — with full awareness of what is being done and how, and with a clear understanding of (a) the purpose, (b) the suitability of the means employed, (c) the appropriate sphere of action, and (d) the real nature of the situation.
c. The body as composed of the four primary elements: The body is considered as the composite result of the four primary elements or conditions of matter: (a) solid, (b) liquid, (c) gaseous, and (d) radiant, which correspond to increasing degrees of molecular motion and are traditionally referred to as the four primordial elements of (a) earth, (b) water, (c) air, and (d) fire.
d. The parts of the body: Here, one contemplates the manifold parts of the body, as hair, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, etc.

[56] *Visuddhimagga* VIII, 293 (317); *Aṅguttara Nikāya* II 34 (4)(3).

e. The cemetery contemplations (*sīvathikā*) (also called "meditation subjects of impurity" [*asubha-kammaṭṭhāna*]): The ten kinds of bodily decomposition or decay.
f. Mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpānasati*): In this exercise, the meditator attentively watches in-and-out breathing and attains, thereby, mental concentration (*samādhi*).

The first two of these different ways of contemplating the body are especially suited to the practice of insight (*vipassanā*) and, therefore, will be discussed in Chapter 6. As for the remaining four, two are simply variants of two main meditation subjects that are considered under separate headings: (1) the cemetery contemplations (see above) and (2) the body as composed of the four primary elements (see below). Mindfulness of breathing, due to its considerable importance in the practice of insight, is taken as a separate meditation subject with its own discipline and characteristics and will be discussed in detail below. This leaves the exercise for the parts of the body.

In this exercise, the meditator concentrates attention successively (following a specific order) on thirty-two different parts of the body, defined for this purpose in the following formula:

> *[The meditator] reviews his body, up from the soles of the feet and down from the top of the hair, and contained in the skin, as full of many kinds of filth, and thinks: "In this body, there are head hairs, body hairs, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, bone marrow, brain, kidneys, heart, liver, pleura, spleen, lungs, bowels, mesentery, gorge, feces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, solid fat, tears, liquid fat, spittle, snot, synovial fluid, urine…"*[57]

There are detailed descriptions of the composition, location, and appearance of each part.

The exercise begins with the list of the thirty-two parts being recited, first aloud and then mentally. Attention is then focused successively on each part, giving close consideration (following the corresponding standard description) to its color, shape, position, and relation to neighboring organs. This is an exercise which combines visualizations with the direct perception of body sensations. Its purpose is to develop awareness of the perishable and often repulsive nature of the materials of which it is composed.

J. Mindfulness of Breathing: Mindfulness applied to the body is, as has just been pointed out, one of the most fruitful areas of meditation practice. Mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpānasati*) is generally considered as the most important of body

[57] *Visuddimagga* VIII, 240 (260). There is an alternative traditional formula which comprises only thirty-one terms. In this, the brain is not mentioned separately but is included in the category of "bone marrow" as "the lumps of marrow to be found inside the skull".

mindfulness exercises, being particularly suitable as a subject of meditation both for the development of tranquility (*samatha*) and of insight (*vipassanā*).

The reason for this lies in the fact that the process of breathing is simple, easily perceived, and constantly available, which makes it an ideal meditation subject. Breathing, in addition to providing — like other bodily sensations — an immediately available sensory input, has the obvious advantages of being very easily perceived (the touch of air in the nostrils on breathing in and out) and of being available at all times and in any situation. Moreover, perception through the bodily sense of touch is more direct and immediate than that obtained through visual observation (as in the *kasiṇas* and the contemplation of body decay) and, of course, much more so than the purely mental perceptions of reflective exercises, which consist in observing mental constructs.

It is therefore no accident that this is precisely the exercise which the *Buddha* Himself used to develop concentration on the night He attained enlightenment, and it explains why He repeatedly recommended it as being particularly suitable for all kinds of individuals in all kinds of circumstances.

> *"The concentration through mindfulness of breathing, assiduously developed and practiced, is both peaceful and sublime; it is an unadulterated blissful abiding, and it banishes at once, and stills, evil and unprofitable thoughts as soon as they arise."*[58]

The exercise consists in focusing one's attention on the tip of the nose and the upper lip immediately beneath the nostrils, paying attention to the touch sensation of the air as one breathes in and out. *There must be no attempt at controlling the breathing*. This is not a Yoga breathing exercise, but an exercise in focusing mindfulness. The breath must be allowed to come and go naturally. The only thing that has to be done is to observe with the closest possible attention the exact sensation produced by the air as it moves in and out through the nostrils, following with uninterrupted attention the full course of each in-breath and each out-breath. It is very important to ensure that one's attention remains focused on the nose only. There must be no attempt to follow the movement of the air inside the body (throat, lungs, etc.). The acquired sign (*uggaha nimitta*) consists in the clear, steady awareness of the place where the air strikes:

> *These in-breaths and out-breaths occur striking the tip of the nose in a long-nosed person and the upper lip in a short-nosed person. So one should fix the sign thus: "This is the place where they strike." [The counterpart sign, on the other hand] is not the same for all; on the contrary, some say that, when it appears, it appears to certain people as a light touch, like cotton or silk or a draft of air. But this is the exposition given in the Commentaries: it appears to some like a star or a cluster of gems or a cluster of pearls, to others with a rough touch like that of cotton seeds or a peg made of heartwood, to others*

[58] *Saṁyutta Nikāya* 54.1.9.

*like a long braided string or a wreath of flowers or a puff of smoke, to others like a stretched-out cobweb or a film of cloud or a lotus flower or a chariot wheel or the disk of the moon or the sun.*[59]

4. Perception of the Repulsiveness of Nutriment: This exercise can be regarded as complementary to the contemplation of the ten kinds of body decay and the parts of the body. Like them, it aims at correcting blind complacency in relation to material things and attachment to the satisfaction of physical needs and desires.

*When a Monk devotes himself to this perception of repulsiveness of nutriment, his mind retreats, retracts, and recoils from craving for flavors. He nourishes himself with nutriment without vanity.*[60]

This exercise combines both the perceptual and reflective methods to focus attention on the disagreeable and repulsive aspects of nutriment. It includes the clear perception, followed by appropriate reflection, of the trouble and effort involved in getting one's food, and sometimes even the hardship and abuse (as in the case of a *bhikkhu*, or Buddhist Monk, who may be met with harsh words while on his alms-round, such as: "go away, you bald-head"[61]), how easily food spoils and becomes unappealing; and how repugnant, as soon as we start thinking about them in detail, are the processes of chewing, swallowing, digesting, moving one's bowels, etc.

*As he reviews repulsiveness in this way, the repulsive aspect of physical nutriment becomes evident to him. He cultivates that sign*[62] *again and again, develops and repeatedly practices it. As he does so, the hindrances*[63] *are suppressed, and his mind is concentrated in access concentration.*[64]

5. Analysis of the Four Elements: This is also known as the "reflection on the material elements", or, according to the *Visuddhimagga*, "the definition of the four elements". This exercise addresses the analysis of the four primordial elements earth (*paṭhavī*), water (*āpo*), fire (*tejo*), and air (*vāyo*). Here, the elements are not inspected individually in their own characteristic form (as is done in the corresponding *kasiṇas*), but rather by contemplating the various parts of the body and developing awareness of the fact that they are composed of the primordial elements in various proportions. It should be recalled, of course, that, in the philosophies of antiquity, both Western and Eastern, "earth", "water", "fire", and "air" did not merely denote

[59] *Visuddimagga* VIII, 284—285 (306—307).
[60] *Visuddimagga* XI, 347 (379).
[61] *Visuddimagga* XI, 343 (376).
[62] Here, the established awareness is the acquired sign. As this awareness becomes more penetrating and intense, it constitutes the counterpart sign.
[63] The hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*) are five states of mind which are obstacles to the development of insight: (1) desire for gratification of the senses; (2) hatred, anger, ill will; (3) sloth and torpor; (4) worry and agitation; and (5) skeptical doubts, indecisiveness, wavering.
[64] *Visuddimagga* XI, 347 (379).

earth, water, fire, and air as perceived in everyday life, but that these terms stood for the basic modes in which matter is manifested, that is, "earth" = solidity, "water" = fluidity, "fire" = radiation or heat (that is, both hot and cold), and "air" = vibration or motion. According to molecular physics, these four states of matter are simply four points on a continuous scale which goes from the highest degree of molecular cohesion, the solid state ("earth"), to the minimum degree, radiation ("fire"). This is a reflective type of exercise, or recollection, which aims to achieve the mental experience of matter at the molecular level.

In passing, it may be noted that some of the other exercises of body contemplation that have been mentioned, in particular the mindfulness of the body and mindfulness of breathing (which, it will be recalled, are of fundamental importance in the development of insight), go even further, in that their aim is to develop direct perception of material processes (and of accompanying mental processes), not only at the molecular level, but down to the play of fleeting, but highly energized, atomic and subatomic events. It is in this manner that there is a gradual revelation of *anicca*, that is, of the impermanent, constantly changing nature of all that appears solid and lasting to the untrained mind.

But, to return to the analysis of the four elements, the basic instructions are taken from the famous "Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness" (the basic text for the practice of *vipassanā*, which is considered in detail in Chapter 6) and explain that the meditator should reflect in the following manner:

> *"Again, a Monk reflects upon this very body, however it is placed or disposed, with regard to the primary elements: 'there are in this body the earth element, the water element, the fire element, and the air element'. Just as if a skillful butcher or his apprentice, having slaughtered a cow, were to sit at the junction of four high-roads with the carcass divided into portions, so too a Monk reflects upon this very body, however it is placed or disposed, with regard to the primary elements: 'there are in this body the earth element, the water element, the fire element, and the air element'."*[65]

The *Visuddhimagga* (XI, 348 [381]) explains this comparison with a butcher as follows:

> *Just as the butcher, while feeding the cow, bringing it to the slaughterhouse, keeping it tied up after bringing it there, slaughtering it, and seeing it slaughtered and dead, does not lose the perception "cow" so long as he has not carved it up and divided it into parts; but when he has divided it up and is sitting there, he loses the perception "cow" and the perception "meat" occurs, he does not think "I am selling a cow" or "they are carrying a cow away", but rather he thinks "I am selling meat" or "they are carrying meat away"; so too, this Monk, while still an ordinary foolish person ... does not lose the perception "living being" or*

[65] *Dīgha Nikāya*, Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta (The Greater Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness), no. 22; *Majjhima Nikāya*, Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (The Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness), no. 10.

*"man" or "person" so long as he does not, by resolution of the compact into elements, review this body, however placed, however disposed, as consisting of elements. But when he does review it as consisting of elements, the loses the perception "living being", and his mind establishes itself upon elements.*

The methodical approach to this exercise (especially recommended for, as the *Visuddhimagga* puts it, "one of not over-quick understanding") consists in considering the various parts and organic processes of one's body from the point of view of the element which is predominant in them; for instance, earth element (solidity) — nails, teeth, bones, sinews, etc.; water element (fluidity) — blood, vile, spittle, urine, etc.; fire element (radiation) — "whatever there is internally in oneself that is fire, fiery, clung to, that is to say, that whereby one is warmed, ages, and burns up, and whereby what is eaten, drunk, chewed, and tasted gets completely digested …";[66] air element (vibration) — the air in one's lungs, wind in the stomach and bowels, etc. In addition, there is a whole range of variants in which, while starting always from the concrete fact of the parts of the body and processes which take place in it, reflective meditation is addressed more particularly to the conditions, characteristics, functions, and manifestations of the elements, or states, as impersonal events. By practicing this contemplation with clear comprehension (*sampajañña*), the meditator finds that the "elements become evident to him under each [impersonal] heading. As he again and again adverts and gives attention to them, access concentration (*upacāra samādhi*) arises", and the meditator "who is devoted to the identification of the four elements immerses himself in voidness (*suññatā*) and eliminates the perception of 'living beings'. Since he does not entertain false notions about wild beasts, spirits, ogres, etc., because he has abolished the perception of living beings, he conquers fear and dread and conquers delight and aversion (boredom); he is not exhilarated or depressed by agreeable and disagreeable things; and as one of great understanding, he either ends in the deathless or he is bound for a happy destiny... This is the description of the development of the defining of the four elements."[67]

6. The Four Sublime States: The four "sublime states" of mind (literally, "divine abidings" — *brahmavihāra*) are recollections which, like all other exercises, can be profitably practiced to achieve concentration. Their main significance, however, lies in the development of the meditator's moral and spiritual qualities, since they consist in the cultivation of what might be called the four cardinal virtues of Buddhism: (1) loving-kindness (or universal love) (*mettā*); (2) compassion (*karuṇā*); (3) sympathetic joy (*muditā*); and (4) equanimity (*upekkhā*). Of course, the other meditative exercises, correctly performed, also have positive effects on the mentality and character of the meditator and, to that extent, they can all be said to help in developing these virtues. The difference lies in the fact that, in these particular exercises, it is the specific virtues themselves which constitute the subjects for

[66] *Visuddhimagga* XI, 349 (382).
[67] *Visuddhimagga* XI, 370 (405).

reflective contemplation. These recollections are therefore particularly useful in maintaining and perfecting the moral discipline (*sīla*) which, as has been repeatedly stressed, is indispensable for the practice of meditation. In addition, these exercises fit in with the practice of both tranquility and insight meditation for a better balance in the meditator (both internally and in his interactions with others) and are thus a very important element of progress.

These are then essentially reflective exercises, based on the recollection of the positive qualities and advantages inherent in the virtues and of the dangers and harm to oneself and others resulting from their absence. It is characteristic of these exercises that the reflective realization of these points is accompanied by a positive volition, that is, by a sustained effort of the will to develop attitudes and states of mind impregnated with the particular virtue which is the meditation subject.

The first three exercises are very similar. This is not surprising, bearing in mind that, in fact, they represent three aspects or modes of the same kind of mentality, whose essential characteristic is an out-going warm-hearted attitude towards others, without distinctions between "yours" and "mine". *Mettā* (central to Buddhism, both as concept and experience), which is usually translated "loving-kindness", is "charity" in the original sense of the word, that is to say, the disinterested love of one's fellow beings which moves one to seek their good and happiness without desiring anything for oneself; compassion (*karuṇā*) and sympathetic joy (*muditā*) are the evident and mutually complementary manifestations of loving-kindness: the ever present readiness to share the sufferings and joys of others.

A. Loving-kindness (*mettā*): This meditation begins with a consideration intended to strengthen one's motivation. One starts by considering the harmfulness of hate and the benefits of tolerance and understanding. After this preliminary consideration, the exercise proper consists in cultivating loving-kindness towards all beings, following a specific order which is based on sound psychological considerations.

   First of all, there are four categories of persons which, at the beginning, should not be taken as subjects for the exercise of loving-kindness, and this for obvious psychological reasons. The categories to be avoided are: (1) a very dear friend (because of the excessive emotional attachment that the relationship with such a person implies); (2) a person to whom one is entirely indifferent (because of the difficulty of developing sufficient interest in such a person); (3) a person whom one dislikes (because of the difficulty, for a beginner, in overcoming one's instinctive antipathy for such a person); and (4) and a hostile person or an enemy (because of the excessive negative emotional aversion toward such a person). One should also refrain from developing loving-kindness towards a person of the opposite sex (to avoid the craving and clinging inherent in sexual involvement) and towards a dead person (since no truly mutual relationship can be developed with someone who is no longer living).

But, one may well ask at this point, who is left once one has excluded all those one likes, all those one dislikes, and all those one does not care about either way?

> *First of all, loving-kindness should be developed towards oneself, doing it repeatedly thus: "May I be happy and free from suffering" or "May I keep myself free from enmity, affliction, and anxiety, and live happily".*[68]

Similar formulas may be substituted here, such as:

> *May I be happy; may I be well. May all my thoughts be positive and all my experiences good. May I be free of problems, sickness, and sadness. May my lives be long and peaceful, and may I quickly reach enlightenment.*

Or:

> *May I be happy and peaceful. May no harm come to me, may no difficulty come to me, may no problems come to me, may I always meet with success. May I always have patience, courage, understanding, and determination to meet and overcome inevitable difficulties, problems, and failures in life.*

At first sight, starting with oneself may seem a strange way of developing love for others. However, in order to develop love for others, one must first have love for oneself. The *Visuddhimagga* takes care to specify that, in this initial exercise, the meditator must be clear that one is taking oneself as an example of a sentient being. Here, one represents not only a specific being, but also *any* and *all* beings. Using oneself as an example of a sentient being makes it easier to identify with other beings, thus:

> *If one develops it in this way: "Just as I want to be happy and dread pain, just as I want to live and not die, so do other beings as well." Making oneself the example, then the desire for the welfare and happiness of other beings will arise.*[69]

A moment's reflection will show that this way of beginning the exercise is based on two excellent psychological principles. The first is that happiness or unhappiness is a state of mind, that is to say, that it is something which depends essentially on oneself. It should be carefully noted that the formula used for the exercise does not speak in terms of getting something or getting rid of something in order to be happy, but in terms of keeping oneself free, internally, from enmity, affliction, and anxiety (which, it must be noted, are *not* things outside ourselves as part of the environment, but simply our own reactions to the environment), and

[68] *Visuddhimagga* IX, 296 (322).
[69] *Visuddhimagga* IX, 297 (323).

thus be happy because one is at peace with oneself, whatever the circumstances. Secondly, and equally self-evident, to be at peace with others, one has to be at peace with, and in, oneself. This is a principle well recognized and used in modern psychotherapy: "Make friends with yourself." Indeed, if one is upset by feelings of anger, hate, or anxiety, one is simply not in a position to show genuine benevolence towards others. True loving-kindness is not a matter of benevolent outward behavior (while keeping internal negativities more or less successfully under control), but of the spontaneous caring outflow of a tranquil mind. It is therefore obvious that one must begin by being loving to oneself before one can be loving to others. "He who loves himself will never harm another" — that is the crucial point.

It must be quite clearly understood that loving-kindness has nothing to do with facile indulgence or emotional wallowing. Genuine loving-kindness is perfectly clear-sighted and does not ignore or overlook the faults and defects in its subjects. It is fully conscious acceptance, not ignorance — an acceptance which is the outward manifestation of an internal state of peace and balance, and which is thus not motivated by desire, selfishness, clinging, or delusion.

Once mental concentration has first been achieved with loving-kindness directed at the meditator himself, the loving-kindness thus developed should be redirected to pervade other subjects. The next step, "in order to proceed easily", says the *Visuddhimagga* (IX, 297 [323]), should be:

> *such gifts, kind words, etc., as inspire love and endearment; such virtue, learning, etc., as inspire respect and reverence, met with in a teacher or his equivalent, or a preceptor or his equivalent, developing loving-kindness towards him in the way beginning: "May this good man be happy and free from suffering."*

Again, similar formulas may be substituted here, such as:

> *May my teacher be happy; may he be well. May all his thoughts be positive and all his experiences good. May he be free of problems, sickness, and sadness. May his lives be long and peaceful, and may he quickly reach enlightenment.*

Or:

> *May my teacher be happy and peaceful. May no harm come to him, may no difficulty come to him, may no problems come to him, may he always meet with success. May he always have patience, courage, understanding, and determination to meet and overcome inevitable difficulties, problems, and failures in life.*

Thereafter, one may proceed to more difficult subjects (those which had been avoided at the beginning), in this order: (1) a very dear friend; (2) a neutral person; (3) a person whom one dislikes; and (4) a hostile person or an enemy.[70]

Practicing assiduously in this manner, going regularly through the sequence as indicated, sooner or later, the mental state may be attained which is known as "breaking down the barriers". This is a state of total, balanced openness, in which the meditator accomplishes mental impartiality towards each person, including himself. The breaking down of the barriers is the equivalent of the counterpart sign in perceptual exercises and denotes the achievement of access concentration. Loving-kindness, developed on the basis of specific individuals, may be extended until it encompasses all beings, without exception.

B. Compassion (*karuṇā*): Since the next two "sublime states" — compassion and sympathetic joy — are, in effect, special aspects of loving-kindness, the exercises are similar in nature, the only differences springing from the specific character of each. One important difference is that one starts at once with someone else, not with oneself — naturally enough, since compassion and sympathetic joy, being aspects of loving-kindness, might easily slip into self-pity and self-congratulation.

In the exercise of compassion, one should begin with some obvious case of suffering and misfortune (provided it is not a close friend — which might upset us too much — or someone who we definitely dislike — in which case it might be difficult to generate genuine compassion). The attitude to be developed is: "This person has indeed been reduced to misery; if only he could be freed from suffering." If one does not know of such a person among one's acquaintances, co-workers, relatives, or neighbors, or in one's community, one may use someone one has read about or seen on television, or one may take the case of someone who appears to be happy and well off but whose character and behavior are manifestly undesirable. In the latter case, compassion should be aroused by thinking that, although apparently happy and successful, that person is really unfortunate because, by his failure to perform any good deeds in body, speech, or mind, he is preparing untold misery for himself at a later date, either in this life or some future life. Having thus aroused compassion for the first subject, one should then proceed — as in the exercise on loving-kindness — by turning successively to a dear person, a neutral person, and a hostile person.

As in the exercise of loving-kindness, one should persevere until access concentration is achieved by "breaking down the barriers"; compassion may then be extended until it encompasses all beings, without exception.

[70] For the practice of loving-kindness towards a hostile person — clearly the most difficult to achieve —, the *Visuddhimagga* suggests a whole range of mental strategies to do away with one's negative attitudes towards the "enemy", such as mentally reviewing his or her good qualities; reminding oneself that he or she, too, is subject to sorrow and suffering; giving the person a gift, or accepting one from him or her, because "in one who does this, the annoyance with that person entirely subsides"; reminding oneself that one should follow the *Buddha's* own example of boundless compassion and loving-kindness, and so on.

C. Sympathetic joy (*muditā*): The exercise of sympathetic joy should begin with someone one knows and likes but with whom one is not too closely involved. The important thing is that the person should be of a happy and cheerful disposition, whose demonstrative gladness and good humor can easily be shared. Then, as in the preceding exercises, one can turn successively to a dear person, a neutral person, and a hostile person.

As in the preceding two exercises, one should persevere until access concentration is achieved by "breaking down the barriers"; sympathetic joy may then be extended until it encompasses all beings, without exception.

D. Equanimity (*upekkhā*): The procedure for the exercise of equanimity is similar to the prior three, but beginning with a neutral person and then moving successively to a dear person and to a hostile one. There is, however, an important difference which sets this exercise apart not only from the three previous sublime states but also from all those we have discussed so far in this chapter. The difference lies in the fact that this is a very advanced concentration exercise which presupposes the prior achievement — by means of one of the other three sublime states as meditation subjects — of the level of concentration and tranquility known as the third absorption (or the third *jhāna*), but which cannot itself be used to attain any of the first three absorptions. In other words, it can only be used to achieve the fourth absorption, as will be shown in Chapter 5. Both equanimity and loving-kindness, however, are of particular relevance to the progress of insight, being part both of the means to liberation and of its end manifestation.

**The Four Immaterial States**

These are the experiential states of (1) boundless space (*ākāsānañcāyatana*), (2) boundless consciousness (*viññāṇañcāyatana*), (3) nothingness (*ākiñaññcāyatana*), and (4) neither perception nor non-perception (*n'eva-saññā-n'āsaññāyatana*). They require the most advanced levels of concentration (*samādhi*) and belong exclusively to the practice of tranquility meditation (*samatha*), representing the achievement of the highest possible degrees of mental absorption (*jhāna*), or what is known as "the formless absorptions" (*arūpajjhāna*), sometimes also called "the immaterial absorptions". They will therefore be considered in Chapter 5, being mentioned at this point only for the sake of completing the overview of traditional meditation subjects in this chapter.

Before attempting these exercises, it is necessary to have attained the first four degrees of mental absorption, that is, the "fine-material absorptions" (*rūpajjhāna*), using for this purpose any one of the *kasiṇas* with the exception of "limited space". After the fourth fine-material absorption has been achieved with a *kasiṇa*, the meditator goes on refining and intensifying concentration even further by discarding the *kasiṇa* and its sign (*nimitta*) and focusing only on the space which was occupied by the *kasiṇa*. In this manner, access concentration is established with space (which is, in itself, unbounded) as the *counterpart sign* (*paṭibhāga nimitta*), which represents a higher degree of abstraction than that of the fourth absorption.

The procedure is similar for each of the other "formless" or "immaterial" absorptions, each of them starting with the previous one as its basis. Thus, after achieving the contemplation of *boundless space*, one proceeds by discarding it and concentrating attention on the existing awareness of that space, developing, in this manner, the contemplation of *boundless consciousness*. Proceeding to an even more rarefied stage, the awareness itself can be discarded, and the basis for contemplation is then the nonexistence of the previous consciousness. As the awareness of *nothingness* (which sounds paradoxical, but is an experiential fact) is established, the degree of withdrawal from perception and of mental abstraction becomes such that the resulting state can no longer be said to involve any perception or awareness in the ordinary sense of the terms. At the same time, however, the mental condition is *not* one of simple unconsciousness. This is what is described as the state of *neither perception nor non-perception*, which is the fourth and final immaterial state.

## Conclusion

This ends the brief survey of the forty meditation subjects used to develop mental concentration in the Theravādin Buddhist tradition. From among these, an experienced teacher will select, in each case, the subject best suited to the character, ability, and circumstances of a given student, as well as to the intended course of training, that is, whether the aim is to develop tranquility (*samatha*) or insight (*vipassanā*), or a combination of both. ■

# 5

# Samatha:
# The Development of Tranquility

## The Purpose of Samatha

As explained in Chapter 3, the purpose of *samatha* meditation is the achievement of altered states of consciousness characterized by a high degree of tranquility and mental peace. In that same chapter, it is also explained that this purpose can be achieved by developing progressively higher levels of mental concentration, gradually discarding all sensory and ratiocinative inputs. This is why it is said that this is an *abstractive* kind of meditation which goes systematically through successive stages of mental absorption (*jhāna*) which are increasingly devoid of sense percepts and mental discourse.

The successive practice of *samatha* exercises requires (even more than that of *vipassanā*, which will be considered in the next chapter) the regular personal supervision of a qualified teacher, if frustrations, errors, and confusion are to be avoided. There is, therefore, not much that can be said about *samatha* practice in a written introduction such as this, except to give a general, and purely theoretical, idea of what it is about and of how the various stages fit together with one another. This is what the following pages attempt to do.

## The Absorptions

Tranquility meditation (*samatha bhāvanā*) is traditionally regarded as comprising eight progressive stages[71] of mental absorption, known as "*jhānas*".[72]

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[71] There is also a classification into nine stages, which, however, differs only formally from the common eightfold one. It simply subdivides the first absorption of the eightfold classification into two stages, with consequent renumbering of the rest. The ninefold classification is sometimes called the "*Abhidhamma* method" (of classification), while the eightfold classification is sometimes called the "*suttanta* method".

[72] In Pāḷi, *jhāna* refers specifically to the "absorbed state of mind brought about through concentration". In a more general sense, it means "meditation" or "concentration". The Sanskrit equivalent is *dhyāna* "thought, reflection, meditation", from the verb *dhyai-* "to think of, to imagine, to contemplate, to meditate on, to call to mind, to recollect".

As already outlined when discussing the immaterial states at the end of the previous chapter, these eight absorptions are divided into two main groups: (1) the four basic degrees of mental absorption, often referred to in English as the "form" or "fine-material" absorptions (*rūpajjhāna*), and (2) the four additional degrees, known as the "immaterial" or "formless" absorptions (*arūpajjhāna*).

The starting point for the fine-material absorptions is the achievement of *access concentration* (*upacāra samādhi*), established on the basis of a given meditation subject (*kammaṭṭhāna*) and developed subsequently until *attainment concentration* (*appanā samādhi*) is reached, as discussed in Chapter 4. In the latter, it will be remembered, attention becomes fully absorbed in the counterpart sign (*paṭibhāga nimitta*), developed on the basis of the initial subject, and it is at this point that the attainment of the first fine-material absorption begins. Then, by relinquishing the various *jhāna* factors (*jhānanga*) in turn, one progressively attains the second, third, and fourth fine-material absorptions.

The immaterial absorptions are developed in a similar manner, also going through the stages of access and attainment concentration, but their starting point is the fourth fine-material absorption, attained, for example, by means of a *kasiṇa* as the meditation subject, as also discussed in Chapter 4. In this connection, it should be remembered that not all of the forty meditation subjects are suitable for all purposes; some of them may be used to develop both access and attainment concentration, while others can only go as far as the access level.

Ten of the meditation subjects lead only to access concentration: the eight reflective recollection exercises, plus the perception of the repulsiveness of nutriment and the analysis of the four elements. These can be used as beneficial mental exercises (since access concentration is already, in itself, a very positive experience of heightened consciousness) or, of course, for the practice of insight meditation.

The remaining thirty meditation subjects are all suitable for the establishment of attainment concentration and may, therefore, be used for the practice of both tranquility (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*). It may be mentioned in passing that two of them — mindfulness of the body and mindfulness of breathing — are particularly useful for the practice of insight (see Chapter 6). At this point, however, we are concerned with the development of tranquility, and here, it should be noted that not all of the remaining subjects of meditation can lead to the attainment of all levels of absorption. The ten kinds of body decay, as well as mindfulness of the body, lead only to the first fine-material absorption. The first three (loving-kindness, compassion, and sympathetic joy) of the four sublime states can be used to attain levels up to the third fine-material absorption. The ten *kasiṇas* and mindfulness of breathing produce all four fine-material absorptions. The fourth sublime state (equanimity) is suitable for the fourth absorption and, as will be recalled from Chapter 4, cannot be used to establish access concentration, which must be previously achieved by means of one of the other sublime states. Finally, the four immaterial absorptions, starting from the fourth fine-material absorption as their basis (achieved by means of any one of the ten *kasiṇas*, with the exception of "limited space"), lead to the successive attainment of the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth absorptions, that is, the four immaterial states.

Each of the eight absorptions will now be briefly outlined in order to give an idea of the kinds of states involved and how one works towards their attainment. For this

purpose, the standard definitions of the absorptions as found in many passages of the Pāḷi scriptures will be given, together will additional comments based upon the elucidations found in the *Visuddhimagga*.

## The Fine-Material (Form) Absorptions

The initial meditative procedure is always the same: attention must first be focused on the meditation subject (*preliminary* or *preparatory concentration*), then steadied and intensified (developing, in turn, the *preliminary sign*, the *acquired sign*, and the *counterpart sign*), until *access concentration* is achieved. Then, for the development of *samatha*, the meditator goes on strengthening and refining mental concentration on the basis of the *counterpart sign* until *attainment concentration* has been achieved.

1. The first fine-material absorption: Working in this manner, the meditator "quite secluded from sense desires, secluded from unprofitable things, enters upon and dwells in the first absorption, which is accompanied by applied and sustained thought, with rapture and happiness born of seclusion".[73]

   The definition specifies that the meditator is "quite secluded from sense desires" because the mind is concentrating exclusively on the counterpart sign established on the basis of the initial meditation subject. "Secluded from unprofitable things" means that the meditator, at that time, is free from the five hindrances, which, when present, confuse the mind and hinder progress. The five hindrances are: (1) desire for gratification of the senses; (2) ill will; (3) sloth and torpor; (4) agitation and worry; and (5) skeptical doubt. There can be no progress as long as the meditator is not free from these hindrances. This is why it is stated that the first absorption is "born of seclusion". To the extent that there is successful progress in concentration, from the preliminary focusing of the mind to the level of access concentration, the mind is, quite naturally, freed from these hindrances (if one is *really* concentrating on the meditation subject, there is no room at the same time for feelings of desire, ill will, sloth, and so on).[74] Conversely, the more often and more completely the mind is cleared from hindrances, the better and more effectively it concentrates. It is a process of continuous positive feedback.

   The distinctive characteristics of the first absorption (which are the same both in a beginner's first momentary attainment and in the more lasting states achieved by experienced meditators) are "rapture and happiness" and the fact that it "is accompanied by applied and sustained thought". The latter qualification makes it clear that the first level of absorption still comprises elements of reflection and mental discourse: thoughts arise (applied thought) and are pursued (sustained thought). However, these reflective activities are strictly integrated in the meditative process

[73] *Dīgha Nikāya*, Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta (The Greater Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness), no. 22.

[74] Obviously, if one is truly concentrating on the breath, for instance, there is no room in the mind for anything outside the meditation subject, as long as concentration lasts.

and serve to strengthen it. *Applied thought* (*vitakka*) consists of applying or focusing the thinking capacity of the mind exclusively on the meditation subject (and the counterpart sign, once this has arisen), while *sustained thought* (*vicāra*) means maintaining the reflective activity steady on the subject, without distractions. The *Visuddhimagga* illustrates this with the simile of a bell. *Applied thought* is like the first striking of a bell; *sustained thought* is like the continued ringing of the bell.

The reference to "rapture and happiness" is of particular importance as characterizing the positive nature of the state of consciousness attained in the first absorption (as well as the next one, as we shall see shortly). These terms, too, are used in highly specific, technical senses in Buddhist meditation: *rapture*[75] (*pīti*) is "the contentedness of getting a desirable object", and *happiness*[76] (*sukha*) is "the actual experiencing of [the desirable object] when gotten". To clarify this, the *Visuddhimagga* (IV, 145 [151]) explains that, if a thirsty man who was wandering across a desert saw or learned about a pond in an oasis, he would have rapture; but if he went into the shade of the oasis and drank the water, he would have happiness.

Rapture (*pīti*) already plays a very important part in the preliminary stages, while approaching and attaining the level of access concentration (*upacāra samādhi*). In fact, when the meditator is endeavoring to develop concentration, rapture is both the positive fruit of his first deliberate, well-disciplined efforts and a motivation to further effort and progress. The manifestations of rapture vary in kind, degree, and duration. Traditional terminology[77] distinguishes the following: (1) *minor rapture*, which is "like a shiver raising the hairs on the body"; (2) *momentary rapture*, which is "like flashes of lightning at different moments"; (3) *showering rapture*, which "breaks over the body again and again, like waves on the seashore"; (4) *uplifting rapture*, which is manifested not only as a mental uplift, but also as producing a sensation of extreme lightness, as if one were floating on air; and (5) *all-pervading rapture* is when "the whole body is completely pervaded, like a filled bladder, or like a cave inundated by a huge amount of water".

At this point, it is worth quoting a whole passage from the *Visuddhimagga* (IV, 144 [150—151]) which briefly describes the sequence of psychological states which characterize progress from the initial focus on the meditation subject to the attainment of absorption:

> *Now, this fivefold rapture,*[78] *when conceived and matured, perfects the twofold tranquility, that is, bodily and mental tranquility. When tranquility is conceived and matured, it perfects the twofold rapture, that is, bodily and mental rapture.*

[75] This is also called "ecstasy" or "bliss". Although certain stages of rapture are accompanied by bodily sensations, it is exclusively a *mental* factor, which may be described psychologically as "joyful interest".

[76] *Sukha* denotes any kind of pleasurable, positive experience, either physical or mental. Thus, it stand for "whatever is pleasant" and is the opposite of *dukkha*, "whatever is unpleasant". It is a specific *jhāna* factor (*jhānanga*) in the first three absorptions.

[77] *Visuddhimagga* IV, 143—144 (149—150).

[78] That is, the five kinds of rapture (*pīti*) just described. They are not all necessarily experienced by every meditator and not always in the sequence given. There is a wide range of individual variation in meditation experiences, depending on each person's character, mentality, and circumstances.

*When rapture is conceived and matured, it perfects the threefold concentration, that is, momentary concentration,*[79] *access concentration, and attainment concentration. Of these, the root of attainment concentration is pervading rapture, which, as it grows, is associated with concentration.*

The characteristics of the first absorption can best be summed up in the *Buddha's* own words:

*"The first absorption is free from five things and possesses five things. Indeed, Monks, in him who has attained the first absorption, there is no sense desire, no ill will, no sloth and torpor, no agitation and worry, and no doubt.*[80] *He dwells concentrated, rapturous, and happy, exercising applied and sustained thought.*[81]

Let us now turn to the phrase in the formula which specifies that the meditator "enters and dwells in the first absorption". Here, it should be noted that, when attaining this state for the first time, a meditator usually does not manage to remain in it for more than a few moments (this is the momentary attainment) and returns almost at once to the level of access concentration. With practice, however, one develops an increasing facility for entering into full absorption and for remaining, or dwelling, in it for longer and longer periods of time. In this manner, full control is eventually achieved, which consists in the ability to enter upon the first absorption at any time and to remain in it for as long as one wishes (this is the stable attainment). It is rather like learning to ride a bicycle. At the beginning, one keeps on falling off, but, with practice, keeping one's balance on two wheels becomes second nature. This learning process is the same for all the absorptions, that is to say, normally attainment is momentary in the beginning and is gradually perfected until full mastery is achieved.[82]

Extending the sign: The process of stabilizing and intensifying abstractive concentration can be greatly aided by an exercise known as "extending the sign". This is useful both for this first level of absorption that is now being considered, as well as for the remaining three fine-material absorptions (*rūpajjhāna*), and a variant thereof is — as will be seen later — essential for the attainment of the first absorption of the immaterial sphere (*arūpajjhāna*), that is, the sphere of infinite space.

This exercise is practiced on the basis of any one of the *kasiṇas* (with the exception of "limited space") and consists in mentally extending, by successive stages, the counterpart sign (*paṭibhāga nimitta*) that was originally developed, so that it is mentally expanded to comprise larger and larger areas. This is how the *Visuddhimagga* illustrates the extension exercise on the basis of the earth *kasiṇa* (whose counterpart sign, it will be recalled, is characterized by images of brightness

[79] On the first few occasions when access concentration is achieved, it usually lasts only for a short time.
[80] That is, free from the five hindrances.
[81] *Majjhima Nikāya*, Mahāvedalla Sutta (The Greater Series of Questions and Answers), no. 43.
[82] Although particularly gifted individuals may be able to stabilize attainment almost at once.

and purity: "like a looking-glass disk" … "like a mother-of-pearl disk" … "like the moon's disk"). According to the *Visuddhimagga* (IV, 152—153 [158—159]), the meditator should proceed as follows:

> *He should first delimit with his mind successive sizes for the sign, as acquired, that is to say, one finger, two fingers, three fingers, four fingers, and then extend it by the amount delimited, just as a plowman delimits with the plow the area to be plowed and then plows within the area delimited… He should not extend it without having delimited [the area to be covered]. After that has been done, he can further extend it, doing so by delimiting successive boundaries of, say, one span, two spans, the verandah, the surrounding space, the monastery, and the boundaries of the village, the town, the district, the kingdom, and the ocean, or making the extreme limit the world sphere or even beyond.*

Reviewing: In the practice of *samatha*, the passage from one absorption to the next is not an uninterrupted process. There are breaks between each absorption. When a meditator has entered upon the first absorption,[83] before proceeding to the second, he needs to emerge from the first and mentally review and assess the experience he has just gone through. The same applies to the transition from the second to the third absorptions, from the third to the fourth, and so on. This is called "reviewing" in traditional terminology, since what the meditator has to do is review with scrupulous care and deliberation the distinguishing characteristics of the level of absorption he has just experienced in order to ascertain its precise quality. This review reveals what is still in need of improvement at each level and strengthens the motivation to work towards the next absorption.

In the case of the first absorption, the *Visuddhimagga* says that, once the meditator has mastered it,

> *on emerging from the now familiar first absorption, he can regard the flaws in it in this way: "This attainment is threatened by the nearness of the hindrances, and its factors are weakened by the grossness of applied and sustained thought."*[84] *He can bring the second absorption to mind, as quieter, and so end his attachment to the first absorption and set about doing what is needed for attaining the second. When he has emerged from the first, applied and sustained thought appear gross to him as he reviews the absorption factors with mindfulness and full awareness, while rapture and happiness and unification of mind [that is, concentration] appear peaceful.*

[83] One usually speaks about "entering upon" and "rising from" a state of absorption.

[84] That is to say, the intellectual activities of applied thought (*vitakka*) ("ideation" or "thought formation") and sustained thought (*vicāra*) ("reflection") are not fine enough tools to apprehend the subtle states of meditative absorption. "Gross" (*oḷārika*) is a term frequently used in Buddhist psychology to denote the relative lack of subtlety and stability of a given mental state. Within the broad gamut of states that go from the total confusion and "grossness" of a mind entirely dominated by greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*) to the total clarity and "fineness" of *nibbāna*, each stage is "gross" as compared to the higher ones and "fine" as compared to the lower.

Then, the meditator concentrates the mind once again, using either the same meditation subject as for the first absorption or another suitable one, goes through the usual states of acquired sign ~ counterpart sign, access concentration ~ attainment concentration (a process which can take place very quickly as one's skill develops), and enters upon the second absorption. The technique for achieving concentration is, of course, the same as before, but the difference lies in the meditator's motivation, which is now different from the previous one because it is based on the actual experience of the first absorption, the possibilities which it has revealed, and the resulting motivation to advance to the second absorption. As the *Visuddhimagga* (IV, 155 [161]) goes on to explain:

> *Then, as he brings the same sign to mind ... again and again, with the purpose of abandoning the gross factors [applied and sustained thought] and obtaining the peaceful factors [rapture, happiness, and one-pointedness of mind], he knows: "Now the second absorption will arise."*

2. The second fine-material absorption:

> *With the stilling of applied and sustained thought, he enters upon and dwells in the second absorption, which has internal confidence and one-pointedness of mind, without applied thought, without sustained thought, with rapture and happiness born of concentration.*[85]

Of this absorption, it is said that "it abandons two factors and possesses three factors.[86] The two factors abandoned are, of course, the reflective functions of applied and sustained thought. The three factors which are present are rapture, happiness, and one-pointedness of mind, that is, concentration. Internal confidence is not considered to be an additional factor since it is simply the consequence of the other three.

One difference to be noted between the first and second absorptions is that the latter is said to be "born of concentration", while the former is "born of seclusion". What this means is that, as already mentioned in connection with the first absorption, the process of concentrating the mind has to begin by removing the negative states of mind known as hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*); this is the meaning of "seclusion", that is, the mind is isolated from the hindrances. When working towards the second absorption, on the other hand, the meditator already enjoys the advantages resulting from the degree of concentration attained in the first absorption. That is why it is said that the second absorption is "born of concentration".

Once the second absorption has been mastered, the procedure for emerging from it and entering upon the third is, as already indicated, similar to that which was

[85] *Dīgha Nikāya*, Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta (The Greater Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness), no. 22.
[86] *Visuddhimagga* IV, 158 (164).

described for the transition from the first to the second. The next factor to be shed at this point is that of "rapture" (*pīti*).

> *On emerging from the now familiar second absorption, he can regard the flaws in it in this way: "This attainment is threatened by the nearness of applied and sustained thought, whatever there is in it of rapture, of mental excitement, proclaims its grossness, and its factors are weakened by the grossness of the rapture so expressed."*[87] *He can bring the third absorption to mind, as quieter, and so end his attachment to the second absorption and set about doing what is needed for attaining the third. When he has emerged from the second absorption, rapture appears gross to him, as he reviews the absorption factors with mindfulness and full awareness, while happiness and one-pointedness of mind appear peaceful.*[88]

The meditator then proceeds to concentrate the mind once again, "with the purpose of abandoning the gross factor [rapture] and obtaining the peaceful factors [happiness and one-pointedness of mind]" and perseveres thus until the third absorption is attained.

3. The third fine-material absorption:

> *With the fading away of rapture as well, he dwells equanimous, mindful, and fully aware, experiencing bodily happiness, and enters upon and dwells in the third absorption, wherefore the Noble Ones declare: "He dwells in happiness, who has equanimity and is mindful."*[89]

This absorption "abandons one factor and possesses two factors".[90] The factor abandoned is, as has just been seen, that of rapture (*pīti*), because it is something which, though pleasant, causes mental excitement and thus has an unsettling effect. The two remaining factors which characterize this level of absorption are happiness (*sukha*) and one-pointedness of mind (*ekaggatā*). At first sight, the wording of the traditional formula may seem to include other elements as well, but closer inspection reveals that this is not the case. In fact, in the formula, there is reference not only to happiness, but also to equanimity, mindfulness, and full awareness. Regarding the last two, however, it can readily be appreciated that the terms "mindful" and "fully aware" (as well as the phrase "is mindful" later on) are simply ways of describing concentration. Concentration, or one-pointedness of mind, is precisely this: to be entirely mindful (successively, of the meditation subject, the acquired sign, and the

[87] That is, the state still involves elements of agitation and mental confusion.
[88] *Visuddhimagga* IV, 158—159 (165).
[89] *Dīgha Nikāya*, Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta (The Greater Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness), no. 22.
[90] *Visuddhimagga* IV, 164 (170).

counterpart sign) with full awareness and comprehension of what is being done. In order to stress this, the *Visuddhimagga* (IV, 163 [169]) says that

> *the subtlety of this absorption, which is due to the abandoning of the gross factors,*[91] *requires that the mind's going should always include the functions of mindfulness and full awareness, like that of a man on a razor's edge.*

As for equanimity (*upekkhā*), what emerges at this level of absorption is a beginning of equanimity, which is considered as an integral part of the experience of happiness. It is obvious, of course, that equanimity, as a state of emotional and mental balance, is a blissful kind of experience. In fact, well-developed equanimity, characterized by an even, serene state of mind, is a higher form of happiness (*sukha*). As will be seen in a moment, when a highly developed level of equanimity is attained in the fourth fine-material absorption, the experience is then no longer describable in terms of happiness or pleasure,[92] and this is, therefore, said to be the factor that is abandoned there.

In this third fine-material absorption, however, happiness, together with concentration, is still of fundamental importance, and its presence at the mental level is accompanied by an extremely pleasant feeling of wellbeing and ease at the physical level. This is why it is said that, in the third absorption, the meditator "experiences bodily happiness".

But, in the dialectics of existence, every coin has two sides: happiness and suffering, pleasure and pain, are inevitable counterparts. Hence, a state of happiness, no matter how intensely pleasant and how prolonged, does not transcend the duality and is still very far from a state of perfection. In the traditional terminology, it is still "gross".[93] Thus, the meditator,

> *on emerging from the now familiar third absorption, can regard the flaws in it in this way: "This attainment is threatened by the nearness of rapture, whatever there is in it of mental concern about rapture proclaims its grossness, and its factors are weakened by the grossness of the happiness so expressed." He can bring the fourth absorption to mind, as quieter, and so end his attachment to the third absorption and set about doing what is needed for attaining the fourth. When he has emerged from the third absorption, the happiness, in other words, the mental joy, appears gross to him as he reviews the absorption factors with mindfulness and full awareness, while the equanimity as feeling and the unification of mind appear peaceful.*

On this basis, the meditator starts working towards the fourth absorption,

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[91] Applied and sustained thought (already absent from the second absorption) and now rapture, eliminated in the third.

[92] See footnote 76 above.

[93] See footnote 84 above.

> *with the purpose of abandoning the gross factor [specifically, happiness as mental joy and also the pleasant bodily sensations associated with it] and obtaining the peaceful factors [equanimity and one-pointedness of mind].*[94]

Suitability of the fourth sublime state (equanimity) for the attainment of the fourth fine-material absorption: As in the previous transitions (from the first to the second absorption, from the second to the third absorption), concentration can again be developed either with the same meditation subject that was used previously or with any other suitable one, always taking into account the fact that not all subjects are suitable for the attainment of all levels of absorption, as noted above.

In the particular case of working towards the fourth absorption, however, there is one meditation subject which, by its very nature, is particularly suitable, in view of the fact that equanimity is one of the two essential factors in this absorption. The subject is, of course, the fourth sublime state which is, precisely, equanimity. It will also be recalled that this meditation subject can be used only for the attainment of the fourth absorption and not for the previous absorptions. The advantages of using, as meditation subject, one of the two factors which distinguish the state one wishes to attain are obvious. It must be remembered, however, that the use of equanimity as a meditation subject to attain the fourth absorption must be led up to by the use of one of the other three sublime states (rather than, for instance, a *kasiṇa*) for the attainment of the three preceding levels.

In fact, to be able to enter upon the fourth absorption using equanimity itself as the meditation subject, it is necessary that the third absorption should have been attained on the basis of loving-kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), or sympathetic joy (*muditā*) as meditation subjects. In this case, the consideration of the flaws in the third absorption is done by seeing "danger in the former three sublime states, because they are linked with attention given to beings' enjoyment in the way beginning, 'May they be happy', because resentment and approval are near, and because their association with happiness is gross."[95]

4. The fourth fine-material absorption:

> *With the abandoning of pleasure and pain and with the previous disappearance of joy and grief, he enters upon and dwells in the fourth absorption, which has neither pain nor pleasure and has purity of mindfulness due to equanimity.*[96]

The last factor which had to be left behind for the purpose of attaining this absorption was, as we just saw, happiness (*sukha*). It should not be surprising, however, that this "abandoning" should now be expressed in terms of pleasure and pain, joy and grief. The point is that the state now being entered upon is one of well-

[94] *Visuddhimagga* IV, 164 (170—171).
[95] *Visuddhimagga* IX, 317 (342—343).
[96] *Dīgha Nikāya*, Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta (The Greater Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness), no. 22.

established equanimity (*upekkhā*) and, as such, is free from *all* valuation, either positive or negative, of *both* physical and mental data. As the *Visuddhimagga* (IV, 165 [171]) explains, "pleasure and pain" means bodily pleasure and bodily pain, "joy and grief" means mental pleasure and mental pain. Thus, the whole range is covered. Regarding the last two, the *Visuddhimagga* further explains that they are referred to as having "previously" disappeared because, in fact, they vanish already before the fourth absorption is actually entered upon. The disappearance of these mental factors precedes the establishment of the concentration of attainment of the fourth absorption. The physical factors, on the other hand, are relinquished as the absorption is entered upon, which is then said to have neither "pain nor pleasure" (either mental or physical) and comprises only pure mindfulness due to equanimity. The *Visuddhimagga* specifies that this important quality, though emerging fully only now, in the fourth absorption, is an essential part of the whole process of tranquility development. The *Visuddhimagga* notes: "This equanimity exists in the three lower absorptions too."

But, just as the moon is hardly visible during the day, even when riding high in the sky, because it is outshone by the sun's greater radiance, so too, the equanimity which exists in the three lower absorptions is "outshone by the glare" of the gross factors — it is present to some extent, but not powerful enough not to be obscured by them.

It will be recalled that applied (*vitakka*) and sustained thought (*vicāra*) are the gross factors associated with the first absorption, rapture (*pīti*) with the second, and happiness (*sukha*) with the third. At each higher level, the factor is correspondingly less "gross" (rapture tends to occupy the mind less than the exercise of applied and sustained thought, and happiness tends to involve less excitement than rapture). Returning to the imagery used in the *Visuddhimagga*, one can say that the third absorption is like the moment of sundown, when the soft radiance of the moon begins to be discernible. This is why equanimity is, in fact, mentioned there for the first time ("he dwells in happiness, who has equanimity and is mindful"), even though it is not yet a main factor. With the fourth absorption, night has fallen; since the obscuring factors have disappeared, equanimity shines like the moon in its full purity, which is the purity of mindfulness. The *Visuddhimagga* (IV, 168 [175]) concludes: "This is why only this absorption is said to have purity of mindfulness due to equanimity."

This fourth and final fine-material absorption (*rūpajjhāna*) is distinguished, as can be seen, by a high degree of concentration (*samādhi*) and tranquility (*samatha*). It constitutes the starting point for the four formless absorptions (*arūpajjhāna*), which represent highly rarefied states of consciousness far removed from those we are familiar with in any kind of everyday experience.

## The Immaterial (Formless) Absorptions

The practice of the four fine-material absorptions, even though it goes quite far in discarding sense percepts and mental stimuli, still involves a certain amount of material and form elements — partly due to the material nature of the subjects used for perceptual

exercises (such as the *kasiṇas*, the body, its organs and component elements, the breath, etc.), partly due to the essentially concrete nature of reflective exercises (such as the contemplation of the qualities of the *Buddha*, the *Dhamma*, and the *Sangha*, or the nature and effects of certain virtues, or the mental generation of sublime states [loving-kindness, compassion, and sympathetic joy] with specific individuals as objects), and, in any case, due to the mental activities and the states of mind and body which occur at those levels (applied and sustained thought, the various kinds of rapture, physical and mental happiness). This is why they are called "form" or "fine-material" absorptions.

The four additional levels of absorption, on the other hand, move forward to extremely subtle states of consciousness, leaving behind all the component elements, mental and physical, internal and external, of our accustomed human environment. This is why they are referred to as "formless" or "immaterial" absorptions.

The necessary precondition for their development is, as already pointed out, the prior attainment of the fine-material absorptions (*rūpajjhāna*) up to the fourth, using as a meditation subject (*kammaṭṭhāna*) any one of the nine possible *kasiṇas*. Neither the tenth *kasiṇa* (limited space) nor any of the other thirty meditation subjects is suitable as a basis for proceeding towards the immaterial absorptions (*arūpajjhāna*). The reason for this is that, since the aim here is to transcend even the subtlest aspects of the material world, it is necessary to begin precisely with a material subject, which is suitable for perceptual meditation, and then progressively discard all elements of materiality, each of which, in fact, correlates with one of the fine-material absorptions and is the only suitable base for entering upon it.

Put more simply, only the nine *kasiṇas* (excluding "limited space") can be used to develop the fine-material absorptions, and only these states provide access to the formless absorptions. Now, let us return once again to the *Visuddhimagga* for an explanation.

1. Fifth absorption: the first formless base (infinite space): The meditator who wants to develop this absorption considers the precarious and unsatisfactory nature of physical matter in all its forms, and all the perceptions relating to it, and, in order to transcend this situation,

> *he enters upon the fourth absorption in any one of the nine kasiṇas ... omitting the limited-space kasiṇa. Now, although he has already surmounted gross physical matter by means of the fourth absorption of the fine-material sphere, nevertheless, he still wants to surmount the material aspect of the kasiṇa, which is the counter-part [of the material sphere]. How does he do this? ... On emerging from the now familiar fourth absorption ... he sees the danger in it in this way: "This makes its object the materiality with which I have become dissatisfied" and "It has joy as its near enemy", and "It is grosser than the peaceful liberations" [which is another name for the immaterial states] ... When he has seen the danger in that fourth absorption in this way and has ended his attachment to it, he gives his attention to the base consisting of infinite space as peaceful.*[97]

[97] *Visuddhimagga* X, 327 (355).

At this point, the meditator starts working on whatever *kasiṇa* he has selected and proceeds to "extend the *kasiṇa*" in the same manner as described above for extending the counterpart sign, except that, in this case, the extension exercise is applied directly to the initial *kasiṇa*, that is, the actual object itself. The extension of the *kasiṇa* is followed by its elimination:

> *When he has spread out the kasiṇa to the limit of the world-sphere, or as far as he likes, he removes the kasiṇa [materiality] by giving his attention to the space touched by it as "space" or "infinite space".*

The explanation adds that

> *removing the kasiṇa ... is simply that the meditator does not advert to it, or give attention to it, or review it; it is when he neither adverts to it, nor gives attention to it, nor reviews it, but give his attention exclusively to the space touched by it, as "space, space" that he is said to have "removed the kasiṇa".*[98]

The meditator then proceeds to develop concentration, using as a sign the space left by the removal of the *kasiṇa*, until he attains access concentration and then the concentration of attainment of "infinite space". Thus, he enters upon the first formless base (which is the fifth in the overall series of absorptions).

> *With the complete surmounting of perceptions of matter, with the disappearance of perceptions of sense-reaction, and no attention given to perceptions of variety, [aware of] "infinite space", he enters upon and dwells in the base consisting of infinite space.*[99]

2. Sixth absorption: the second formless base (infinite consciousness): Once the first formless base has been well developed, the meditator, on emerging from it, reviews it in the usual manner and considers its flaws, in the sense that it suffers from the proximity of the preceding absorption (that is, the fourth fine-material absorption) and that it is not as peaceful as the next higher absorption, which has "infinite consciousness" as its base. Then, turning away from the contemplation of space (infinite space), he proceeds to the contemplation of the state of consciousness itself, which had arisen with space as its base. This is a process of becoming aware of awareness, in which the meditator takes as his subject "the consciousness that occurred pervading that space [that is, the first formless base], adverting again and again as 'consciousness, consciousness'."[100] Persevering in this way, the meditator successively achieves access concentration and the concentration of attainment of "infinite consciousness": "By completely surmounting the base consisting of infinite space,

[98] *Visuddhimagga* X, 327 (355).
[99] *Dīgha Nikāya*, Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (The Great Passing [The *Buddha's* Last Days]), no. 16.
[100] *Visuddhimagga* X, 331 (360).

[aware of] 'infinite consciousness', he enters upon and dwells in the base consisting of infinite consciousness."[101]

3. Seventh absorption: the third formless base (nothingness):[102] Concentration reaches a very high degree of abstractness here. First, the material object (the *kasiṇa*) was discarded in order to focus on the space it occupied (sphere of infinite space). Then, the space was discarded in order to focus exclusively on the state of awareness based on it (sphere of infinite consciousness); now, consciousness is left behind in order to contemplate what remains when everything has been removed, that is to say, nothing (the sphere of nothingness).

   This, of course, is more easily said than done or even conceived. In fact, we are quite accustomed, intellectually, to handling the mathematical and philosophical concept of "zero" and "nothing". Experientially, however, we do *not* know what it is to "experience nothingness". Nor can we come to know it, except by practicing this seventh absorption. The *Visuddhimagga* (X, 333—334 [363]) gives a good idea of what is involved:

   > *Suppose a man sees a community of Monks gathered together in a meeting hall, or some such place, and then goes away. Then, after the Monks have risen at the conclusion of business for which they had met, and have departed, the man comes back, and, as he stands in the doorway looking at that place again, he sees it only as void, he sees it only as secluded, he does not think "so many Monks [of those who were originally present] have died, so many have left the district", but, rather, he sees only the absence thus: "this is void, this is secluded"; so too, having formerly dwelt seeing — with the eye of the absorption belonging to the base of infinite consciousness — the consciousness that had occurred with the space as its object, now when that consciousness has disappeared owing to his giving attention ... in the way beginning: "there is nothing, there is nothing", he dwells seeing only its absence, in other words, its having departed.*

   The procedure for moving on to this next stage is always the same: upon emerging from the sixth absorption, the meditator considers its flaws and sees that it

[101] *Dīgha Nikāya*, Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (The Great Passing [The *Buddha's* Last Days]), no. 16.

[102] *Ākiñcaññā* means, literally, "no-thing". In translating it as "nothing", it must be borne in mind that, as a term in the series of absorptions now being considered, it has a purely descriptive, psychological value, and must *not* be taken as a metaphorical concept. In other words, it does not denote an absolute "nothingness" and is thus not to be equated with the concept of "emptiness" (Sanskrit *śūnyatā*) (that is, the integral and definitive void understood as ultimate reality) which has been current in Mahāyāna Buddhism since the time of Nāgārjuna (second century CE). Pragmatically, the "sphere of nothingness" (or "no-thingness", as some authors prefer to leave it, to forestall misunderstandings) which is reached in the seventh absorption is a state of awareness in which there is not even the "consciousness of consciousness" which characterizes the sixth absorption. It is worth noting that the great German scholar Paul Dahlke, in translating the Ariyapariyesana Sutta (The Noble Quest) (*Majjhima Nikāya*, no. 26), felt it necessary to coin a special term "*nichtet-washeit*" ("not-something-ness") and to explain in a footnote that it was "in no way identical to *nothingness*".

suffers from the proximity of the fifth absorption (infinite space), which is less subtle, and that it is itself less peaceful than the seventh absorption, which is based on nothingness. Then, the meditator "should give his attention to the non-existence, voidness, and secluded aspect" resulting from the cessation of the consciousness of space (which was itself the subject for the contemplation of the "consciousness of consciousness", which is the sixth absorption). With this voidness and non-existence as the subject, the meditator "adverts again and again in this way: 'there is nothing, there is nothing' or 'void, void' or 'secluded, secluded'." Persevering in this manner, he achieves access concentration (*upacāra samādhi*) and then the concentration of attainment of nothingness, and, with it, the seventh absorption (the third formless base) "by completely surmounting the base consisting of infinite consciousness, [aware that] 'there is nothing', he enters upon and dwells in the base consisting of nothingness."[103]

3. Eighth absorption: the fourth formless base (neither perception nor non-perception): If the seventh absorption was difficult to conceive, how much more so this last one, which represents an altered state of consciousness that cannot be grasped, however one may try, by means of logical discourse. In strict logic, how can a state be understood which involves, simultaneously, the absence of both perception and non-perception? At this stage, all that can be said is that such things have to be experienced for oneself, that great perseverance is required, and that the guidance of an experienced teacher is required.

   To complete this overview, however, let us consult the corresponding section of the *Visuddhimagga* (X, 335 [364—365]) on the procedure to be followed, which is always similar to that of the previous stages. Here again, the basic step consists in leaving behind the state that has been attained and to move on to an even more advanced one:

   > *Then, he should see the danger in the base consisting of nothingness and the advantage in what is superior to it, in this way: "This attainment has the base consisting of infinite consciousness as its near enemy, and it is not as peaceful as the base consisting of neither perception nor non-perception", or in this way: "Perception is a disease, perception is a boil, perception is a dart, ... this is peaceful, this is sublime, that is to say, neither perception nor non-perception."*[104] *So, having ended his attachment to the base consisting of nothingness, he should give attention to the base consisting of neither perception nor non-perception, as peaceful. He should advert again and again to that attainment of the base consisting of nothingness that has occurred, making non-existence its object, adverting to it as "peaceful, peaceful" ... As he directs his mind again and again to that sign*[105] *in this way, the hindrances are suppressed, mindfulness is*

[103] *Dīgha Nikāya*, Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (The Great Passing [The *Buddha's* Last Days]), no. 16.
[104] This is a quotation from one of the *Buddha's* discourses (*Majjhima Nikāya*, Pañcattaya Sutta [The Five and Three], no. 102).
[105] The "sign" for this meditation is "peacefulness".

*established, and his mind becomes concentrated in access. He cultivates that sign again and again, develops and repeatedly practices it. As he does so, consciousness belonging to the base consisting of neither perception nor non-perception arises in absorption.*

Thus, the meditator attains the eighth absorption (fourth formless absorption), which is defined as follows: "By completely surmounting the base consisting of nothingness, he enters upon and dwells in the base consisting of neither perception nor non-perception."[106]

**Note on the Attainment of Cessation**

In the practice of pure tranquility meditation, the eighth absorption is the highest attainment. However, there is, beyond this, a very uncommon state, which can only be attained by a meditator who has fully mastered not only all the stages of tranquility but also the practice of insight (which will be the subject of the next chapter). This is a state of supreme absorption, in which physiological functions are almost entirely suspended. It is known as the "cessation of perception and sensation" (*saññā vedayita nirodha*) or the "attainment of cessation" (*nirodha samāpatti*).

To attain this state, it is essential both to have mastered all eight absorptions of tranquility meditation and also to have reached one of the last two levels of "sainthood" (that is, either Non-Return or Arahatship). Obviously, such full mastery of both these disciplines (tranquility and insight) is extremely rare. Moreover, the practice of the absorptions as such, even at the most advanced levels, is of no great interest to one who, through insight, has attained or is close to attaining, the fullness of *nibbāna*. Such a one has already left far behind, as if they were childish games, all concerns with particular states of consciousness or ecstatic experiences, no matter how satisfactory, unless there is a functional justification for them in specific circumstances. (The *Buddha*, for instance, resorted to entering upon and dwelling in the absorptions in order to control ill health and physical pain during the last months of His life, in order to be able to complete the final journey He had set for Himself.) Nevertheless, this presentation would not be complete without some brief account of the attainment of cessation, and, for this purpose, we turn once again to the *Visuddhimagga* (XXIII, 702 [824]).

As a preliminary, the meditator should go through all the stages of absorption up to the seventh, and should, in each case, exercise the "two powers", that is to say, the "power of tranquility" to enter upon and dwell in each absorption, and the "power of insight" in reviewing each one of them, in order to see and fully experience the impermanence, lack of essence (that is, non-self), and consequent unsatisfactoriness of even such subtle and serene experiences.

On emerging from the seventh absorption, the meditator intending to reach attainment of cessation prepares himself mentally in certain ways, including, among other points, deciding in advance how long he will remain in the state of cessation (something

[106] *Dīgha Nikāya*, Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (The Great Passing [The *Buddha's* Last Days]), no. 16.

like mentally "setting the alarm"). Then, he enters upon the eighth absorption and goes directly from this into cessation. While he is in the state of cessation (which may not last beyond a maximum of seven days), the suspension of vital functions is so complete that the meditator appears to be dead. The difference, of course, lies in the fact that the cessation is only temporary, not permanent. As it is written in one of the canonical discourses,[107] in which Sāriputta, one of the two leading disciples of the *Buddha*, instructs another Monk, the difference is that

> *when a Monk is dead, he has completed his term, his bodily, verbal, and mental formations have ceased and are quite still, his life is exhausted, his [internal] heat has subsided, and his faculties are broken up. When a Monk, however, has entered upon the cessation of perception and sensations, his bodily, verbal, and mental formations also have ceased and are quite still, but his life is not exhausted, his [internal] heat has not subsided, and his faculties are quite whole.*

## Conclusion

In closing this brief discussion of Buddhist tranquility meditation (*samatha*), it is worth recalling the point made at the beginning of Chapter 3: this is an abstractive type of meditation, which is not essentially different from the techniques used in other meditative traditions (especially in Hinduism, but in several other cultures as well — for instance, Kabbalah and Sufi meditations are also of this type[108]).

These were the techniques (except, of course, for the attainment of cessation) to which Gotama the ascetic turned after abandoning His royal home. He tried them out and found them incapable of producing the definitive enlightenment He sought. In modern terms, we might say that He found that they produced altered *states* of consciousness, but did not result in a definitive transmutation of consciousness with its own characteristic *traits*. This is why He left the two great Yoga teachers with whom He had been studying and practicing and struck out on his own. The result of His endeavors was *vipassanā*, insight meditation, which, as previously noted (Chapter 3), is the distinctively Buddhist meditation. The next two chapters are devoted to its practice and ultimate results. ■

[107] *Majjhima Nikāya*, Mahāvedalla Sutta (The Greater Series of Questions and Answers), no. 43.

[108] In this connection, see Daniel Goleman's excellent study *The Varieties of Meditative Experience* (New York, NY: Irvington Publishers [1977]). This was later republished as *The Meditative Mind: The Varieties of Meditative Experience* (Los Angeles, CA: Tarcher Publishers [1988]).

# 6

# Vipassanā:
# The Development of Insight

**The Nature of Vipassanā**

All meditation practice, as has been stressed all along, begins by concentrating the mind. For the development of insight (*vipassanā*), it will be recalled that it is enough to achieve access, or momentary, concentration, without attempting to achieve the higher degree of fixed, or attainment, concentration.[109] Attainment concentration is, of course, essential for the full development of tranquility (*samatha*). The abstractive nature of the states of absorption (*jhāna*) attained in tranquility practice, however, is not suitable for the development of insight. In fact, what is needed for the purpose of insight, as has been previously pointed out, is precisely the opposite of abstraction — it is not an increasingly radical turning away from sensory and mental inputs, but, rather, an unbroken and mindful awareness, within the area of selected attention, of all such inputs as they arise, in order to discern, through direct experience, free from distortions or delusions, their true nature, that is, their impermanent (*anicca*), unsatisfactory (*dukkha*), and selfless (*anattā*) nature. The choice of meditation subject (*kammaṭṭhāna*) is, therefore, particularly important for the development of insight, in order to ensure that it is well suited to the practice of mindfulness unclouded by mental constructs.

Over half of the forty basic meditation subjects (twenty-six to be exact) are not suitable for *vipassanā* practice, either because they are of the reflective type, such as eight of the ten recollections and the four sublime states,[110] or because they involve the abstractive approach, which, by excluding all phenomena and eventually even the initial subject itself, does not allow for the open receptiveness which is essential for *vipassanā*. This is the case for the ten *kasiṇas* or, even more so, with the four immaterial *jhānas*.

Of the remaining fourteen meditation subjects, two have already been mentioned as especially suitable for the practice of *vipassanā*: (1) mindfulness of the body and (2) mindfulness of breathing. To these may be added the analysis of the four elements, the ten kinds of body decay, and the perception of the repulsiveness of food.

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[109] See Chapter 4.

[110] Once a degree of insight has been achieved, these sublime states, especially loving-kindness (*mettā*), are also frequently cultivated as a specific exercise to benefit both oneself and others.

In spite of their traditional grouping under different headings, these various exercise can be seen, at once, to be all related in some way to the contemplation of the body from various points of view, such as, for example, the functioning of the body (breathing, postures, movements, activities), its parts, the substances and processes of nutrition, the basic elements of which it is composed, and the dead body in various stages of decay.

This focusing on the body is far from accidental. It cannot be sufficiently emphasized that the practice of *vipassanā* consists in the painstaking observation of the world of phenomena, that is, paying precise and penetrating attention to whatever is happening *as it is happening*. There could not be a better field of observation than the body, which is always present, always available, and which is, at one and the same time, both the object and subject of the process of perception, both the experiencer and the experience, both the seer and the seen.

In the ultimate analysis, our only source of information, our only working tool for coming to grips with the world is, precisely, our body, with its five senses and the mind which operates in and through it. This is why the *Buddha* said: "It is in this fathom-long body, with its perceptions and its mind, that I make known the world, the arising of the world, the extinction of the world, and the path leading to the extinction of the world".[111]

Hence, in the *Buddha's* teaching, insight meditation exercises are centered on the body, beginning with the most obvious bodily perceptions, and moving on, through the mindful observation of all kinds of sensory and mental processes, to comprehend both the physical and the mental aspects of our total organism, to achieve the liberating insight into the radically impermanent and impersonal nature of the processes that make up what we ordinarily think of as our "self" and the world of desires centered around the "self".

## The Foundations of Mindfulness

The *Buddha's* systematic instructions to His disciples for the practice of insight (*vipassanā*) meditation are found in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness), which has been preserved in two virtually identical texts: the tenth discourse of the *Majjhima Nikāya* and the twenty-second discourse of the *Dīgha Nikāya*. The latter reproduces the exact text of the former, but with an additional section at the end containing an exposition of the Four Noble Truths. There are excellent translations of both discourses in English,[112] which can be consulted by those who would like to read them in full. Here, extracts from the *Majjhima Nikāya* version will be used as required for analysis and discussion, but without reproducing the discourse in its entirety.

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[111] *Saṁyutta Nikāya* 1.2.3.6.

[112] These include: *The Way of Mindfulness: The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta and Commentary* by Soma Thera (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society [4th edition 1975]); *The Four Foundations of Mindfulness* by U Sīlānanda (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications [1990]); *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* by Nyanaponika Thera (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser [1965]); *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha. A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* translated by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications [1995]); *The Long Discourses of the Buddha* translated by Maurice Walshe (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications [1995]).

The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta is one of the most famous of all the *Buddha's* discourses, and rightly so, since it contains the primary source for the practice of insight meditation as taught by the *Buddha* Himself. The measured solemnity of the opening words clearly shows the importance which He attached to the instructions contained in this discourse:

> *"This is the only way, Monks, for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the destruction of pain and grief, for reaching the right path, for the realization of nibbāna, namely, the four foundations of mindfulness."*

The discourse explains the exercise of mindfulness (*sati*) directed towards four areas of attention, which together comprise the whole range of processes that make up the total psychophysical organism. Insight is developed and perfected through the mindful, non-reactive observation of physical and mental processes and events as they occur — this is the Right Mindfulness factor of the Noble Eightfold Path:

Right Mindfulness consists of abiding self-possessed and attentive, contemplating according to reality:

1. The body;
2. Feelings (sensations);
3. The state of the mind (mental states);
4. The contents of the mind (mental objects).

Seeing all as composite, ever-becoming, impermanent, and subject to decay.

The purpose of mindfulness directed towards these four foundations is then described in individual sections of the discourse, one section for each foundation, but, before that, the *Buddha* makes a point of carefully defining *how* mindfulness is to be practiced for the purpose of insight:

> *"Herein, Monks, a Monk dwells contemplating the body as the body, ardent, clearly comprehending, and mindful, having overcome covetousness and grief concerning the world;*
>
> *"He dwells contemplating the feelings (sensations) as the feelings, ardent, clearly comprehending, and mindful, having overcome covetousness and grief concerning the world;*
>
> *"He dwells contemplating the [state of the] mind as the mind, ardent, clearly comprehending, and mindful, having overcome covetousness and grief concerning the world;*
>
> *"He dwells contemplating mental objects as mental objects, ardent, clearly comprehending, and mindful, having overcome covetousness and grief concerning the world."*

The repeated reference to "contemplating the body *as the body* … the feelings *as the feelings* … the mind *as the mind* … mental objects *as mental objects*" may seem somewhat odd at first, but its proper understanding is essential for correct practice. The point of this particular phrasing is to stress what has to be practiced is *pure*, *non-reactive mindfulness*, that is, as clear and full an awareness as possible of whatever is present *now* in the area selected for observation, without immediately going off on a tangent — as the undisciplined mind tends to do — into other more or less relevant mental associations, thoughts, feelings, judgments, imaginings, etc.). Two quotations from other discourses of the *Buddha* make this extremely clear:

> *"Come, Monk, fare along contemplating the body as the body, but do not be distracted by any train of thought connected with the body; fare along contemplating the feelings as the feelings, but do not be distracted by any train of thought connected with the feelings; fare along contemplating the mind as the mind, but do not be distracted by any train of thought connected with the mind; fare along contemplating mental objects as mental objects, but do not be distracted by any train of thought connected with mental objects."*[113]

> *"Thus must you train yourself: 'In the seen, there will be merely what is seen; in the heard, there will be merely what is heard; in the sensed, there will be merely what is sensed; in the cognized, there will be merely what is cognized.' That is how you must train yourself."*[114]

The reason is obvious enough: the moment one starts indulging in thoughts, feelings, judgments, imaginings, etc., *about* the observation, one is no longer *observing*. It is this constant shift *away* from what is actually there that mindfulness is designed to correct.

Let us now return to the discourse and consider each one of the four foundations of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*), in the order in which they occur.

## Contemplation of the Body

As already mentioned in Chapter 4, there are different kinds of contemplation of the body (*kāyānupassanā*), which may be suitable at various times for different purposes, depending upon circumstances and on the character and disposition of the meditator. One of them, however, is of fundamental importance and universal application, suitable at all times and for everyone. This is the mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpānasati*), which the *Buddha* recommended most particularly for the practice of *vipassanā* and which was the method He Himself used on the occasion of His enlightenment.

Mindfulness of breathing is not only an excellent means of concentrating the mind in order to proceed with *vipassanā* or *samatha* practice, but it is also a complete exercise in itself which "developed and repeatedly practiced" leads to the highest attainments. It

[113] *Majjhima Nikāya*, Dantabhūmi Sutta (The Grade of the Tamed), no. 125.
[114] The *Buddha's* discourse to Bāhiya: *Khuddaka Nikāya*, *Udāna* (Paeans of Joy), Bodhivagga chapter.

is therefore not surprising that the discussion of the contemplation of the body as one of the foundations of mindfulness should begin with mindfulness of breathing.

**Mindfulness of Breathing**

1. General instructions: First comes the physical and mental preparation:

> *"And how, Monks, does a Monk dwell contemplating the body as the body. Herein, Monks, a Monk, having gone to the forest, to the foot of a tree, or to an empty place, sits down cross-legged, keeps his body erect, and establishes mindfulness at the tip of the nose."*

The cross-legged posture (in full lotus or half-lotus) with the body erect, the hands resting upward, right hand on top of the left, thumbs touching, in the meditator's lap, and the head tilted ever so slightly downward is, of course, the traditional meditation posture. There are excellent reasons for adopting it, since it is a very stable position, which (provided that the spine is kept straight, but not tense, and well balanced on the pelvis) can be maintained comfortably for very long periods, and also because a calm and collected body posture helps to induce a calm and collected state of mind. However, if one has difficulty with it, any comfortable seated position, such as in a chair, may be adopted, so long as the body remains upright. The important thing is to be able to remain motionless, alert but not tense, for an extended period of time. The following illustrates the recommended postures:

Figure 1: Full-lotus

Figure 2: Half-lotus

Figure 3: Quarter-lotus

Figure 4: Uncrossed

Figure 5: Proper positioning on the cushion

Figure 6: Proper positioning on a chair

The instruction concerning the establishing of mindfulness "at the tip of the nose" indicates that the area to which attention must directed for successful mindful contemplation of the breath. It includes not only the tip of the nose (which is the obvious spot), but also the upper lip just below the nostrils, which is where one may most easily perceive the touch of the breath as it enters and leaves the nostrils.

Once comfortably seated in one of the recommended postures, the meditator begins the mindful contemplation of in-breathing and out-breathing.

> *"Mindfully, he breathes in, and mindfully, he breathes out. Breathing in a long breath, he knows 'I breathe in a long breath'; breathing out a long breath, he knows, 'I breathe out a long breath'. Breathing in a short breath, he knows 'I breathe in a short breath'; breathing out short breath, he knows 'I breathe out a short breath'. 'Experiencing the whole body, I shall breathe in', thus, he trains himself. 'Experiencing the whole body, I shall breathe out', thus, he trains himself. 'Calming bodily processes, I shall breathe in', thus, he trains himself. 'Calming bodily processes, I shall breathe out', thus, he trains himself."*

Note that the practice falls into three parts, each one of which comprises the complete breathing-in/breathing-out cycle:

1. Awareness of the act of breathing as such, including both long and short in-breaths and out-breaths.
2. Awareness of the body while breathing: "Experiencing the whole body, I shall breathe in" … "Experiencing the whole body, I shall breathe out".
3. Calming the bodily processes while breathing: "Calming the bodily processes, I shall breathe in" … "Calming the bodily processes, I shall breathe out".

2. Awareness of breathing: This is developed by concentrating one's attention on the nostrils and the upper lip just below them. It is essential *not* to attempt any kind of breath control (unlike in certain yoga exercises), but simply to let the breath come naturally, sometimes slower and deeper (long in-breath, long out-breath), sometimes shallower and faster (short in-breath, short out-breath). The meditator must do nothing other than pay the closest possible attention to the contact of the ingoing and outgoing airflow at any point or points in the area of observation, staying strictly within it and disregarding any other points connected with the action of breathing (such as the throat, chest, or diaphragm). It is also very important to follow each in-breath and out-breath uninterruptedly from beginning to end, with full awareness of its duration, intensity, location, and the character of the touch sensations it generates.

3. Awareness of the body while breathing: In this instruction and also in the following one, "body" may be understood in two ways. According to the old commentaries, "body", in this context, means "the whole body of air involved in a complete in-breath or out-breath". The *Visuddhimagga* (VIII, 273 [294—295]), for instance, says:

> *He trains thus: "I shall breathe in … I shall breathe out, making known, making plain, the beginning, middle, and end of the entire in-breath body, of the entire out-breath body." Making them known, making them plain in this way, he both breathes in and breathes out with consciousness associated with knowledge. That is why it is said: "He trains thus: 'I shall breathe in … I shall breathe out, experiencing the whole body'."*

Therefore, according to this tradition of textual interpretation (which has also been followed by certain modern authors[115]), "experiencing the whole body" refers to the mindful, deliberate experiencing of each whole breath, and, accordingly, this second instruction simply reinforces the first by stressing the importance of mindfully following the course of each breath in its entirety.

This is unexceptionable as far as it goes, but in light of practical experience, it does not do justice to the full meaning of the instruction. According to the empirical tradition, especially as preserved in Myanmar (Burma) (a country which, together with Śri Lanka [Ceylon], Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, is the repository of the oldest tradition of the *Buddha's* teaching), the requirement to train "experiencing the whole body" should be taken literally, and refers to what is, in fact, a further stage in the practice. Here, the mindfulness developed by devoting concentrated attention to the in-breaths and out-breaths is now applied to the contemplation of other processes and phenomena which are constantly taking place in one's body, or rather, to put it more accurately, to the contemplation of the interplay of multiple phenomena, which, at the physical level, constitute what we call "body" in common parlance. This is the typical *vipassanā* exercise, the concrete practice for the development of insight.

4. Calming the bodily processes while breathing: Here, too, two interpretations are possible. According to the textual tradition, "calming bodily processes" means "calming the bodily functions (of breathing)". This is how it is translated in the influential modern manual *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, with the explanation that "implicit in that observation there will be the wish and effort to bring still greater calmness to the respiratory and mental process involved." Seen thus, it is rather a *samatha* exercise, conducive to the development of tranquility.

   According to the empirical translation, on the other hand, what is involved is the calming not only of the respiratory (and related mental) process, but of bodily processes in general. However, the calming is the result of the wish and effort, not to achieve calmness as such, but to develop mindfulness. The calming of bodily processes is something that occurs naturally when they are subjected to mindful, non-reactive contemplation. In fact, the close, mindful inspection of these processes sharpens the meditator's awareness, and he becomes increasingly conscious of the processes and events which are normally subliminal, that is, below the threshold of

[115] In *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, for instance, the word "breath" is added: "Conscious of the whole (breath-)body, etc." (p. 118), following the old Commentary, with the explanation that the meditator "will endeavor to keep his mindfulness at an even level throughout all three phases of a breath's duration" (p. 110).

conscious perception of the unconcentrated mind. It is a fact of experience that the progressive conscious grasp of ever subtler processes has a calming effect both on the mind (observing process) and on the body (observed process). In this view, therefore, this is a further stage of *vipassanā*, in which insight is developed and deepened through the direct, undistracted contemplation of the body, and the calming is, as it were, a by-product.

5. Compendium of practice: The first section on the contemplation of the body ends with a passage (which is also repeated at the end of all the other sections) that needs to be examined very carefully, because it sums up the essence of the exercises and of the mental attitude necessary for successful practice:

> *"He dwells contemplating the body as the body internally, or externally, or both internally and externally. He dwells contemplating the arising of phenomena in the body, or contemplating the passing away of phenomena in the body, or both the arising and passing away of phenomena in the body. Or the mindfulness that 'there is a body' is established in him to the extent necessary for knowledge and mindfulness. He dwells independent, clinging to nothing in the world. Thus, indeed, Monks, a Monk dwells contemplating the body as the body."*

The reference to contemplating the body "internally or externally, or both internally and externally" has also been the subject of various interpretations. The text says, quite literally, "internally" and "externally".[116] In the empirical tradition, this is understood as an explanation of the specific method used to develop mindfulness with the whole body as its subject. In fact, in *vipassanā* practice, the meditator scans the physical body methodically, with concentrated attention, without neglecting any part of it, to become aware of whatever sensations occur from moment to moment. This scanning takes place, to begin with, on the surface of the body (to observe surface sensations) and is then also carried out in depth (that is, inside the mass of the body, to observe internal sensations). Both variants are then practiced from time to time, alternating surface scanning ("externally", since it is on the outside of the body) and in-depth scanning ("internally"). As the meditator's skill develops, improving the clarity and fineness of perception, the exercise of whole-body awareness may be practiced, which involves the simultaneous perception of surface and depth sensations ("both internally and externally").

The commentarial tradition, on the other hand, maintains that "internally" refers to the contemplation of one's own breathing, and "externally" to the contemplation of someone else's breathing: "According to the first part of the 'Instructions', each single exercise has to be applied first to oneself, then to others (in general or to a definite person just observed) and finally to both."[117]

In actual fact, the two views need not be regarded as contradictory, but, rather, as complementary, in that both are practicable and useful for the development of

[116] The Pāḷi terms are *ajjhataṁ* and *bahiddhā*, respectively, and mean exactly this.
[117] *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, p. 58.

insight. The basic exercise, of course, is the one carried out on one's own body, in order to develop the mindful, clear comprehension of phenomena in oneself, both on the surface and in depth. It is a fact, however, that, when the fineness of perception has been sufficiently developed, the practitioner is able to perceive the arising and passing away of phenomena not only in himself but also in others. He can "tune in", as it were, to what is going on in them.

After telling us *how* to contemplate, the instructions specify *what* is, in fact, contemplated, and this is very important. It is the *arising* and *passing away* of phenomena. That is to say that the purpose is to develop the fullest and sharpest possible awareness of the unceasing fluctuation of the phenomena observed, which reveals their unstable and impermanent nature:

> *"Now, Monks, I declare to you: Transient are all conditioned things. Strive on with diligence."*[118]

Each moment of what we think of as "our" existence, "our life", is a swirl of instantaneous events, continually arising and passing away. At the physical level, which is the one with which we are concerned at the moment, it is a well-known fact that millions of the cells that make up the living tissue of our bodies decay or are destroyed every day, and are replaced by new, equally transient ones, so that, at every instant, there are literally millions of "deaths" and "births" occurring in our bodies, and none of the cellular components of the present body were there a few years ago, or will be there a few years (or, in some cases, a few moments) in the future. This is at the physical level. But at the mental level, too, how many thoughts flash through our minds every moment? How many times a day do our intentions, expectations, and states of mind fluctuate and change, not infrequently with staggering rapidity?

The meditator, then, through close observation of the body, experiences the rising and passing away of phenomena and establishes the awareness that "there is a body" *to the extent necessary for knowledge and mindfulness*. Now, what is the precise meaning of this last phrase? Simply that the conscious experiencing of the multiple processes that we call "body" is developed for the exclusive purpose of mindful contemplation, without allowing oneself to be tempted into any kind of reflection, speculation, imagination, desires, hopes, fears, or any other mental constructs or emotional impulses related to this "body", its identity, durability, past or future, in hypothetical relationship with a soul, self, or personality, etc. This is what is meant by "contemplating the body as the body". And the knowledge thus attained is the comprehension, through direct personal experience, of the unstable and impermanent nature of the phenomena of which it is composed. As Venerable Nyāṇaponika says:[119]

[118] These were the last words of the *Buddha*, preciously quoted in Chapter 1.
[119] *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, p. 60.

> *... "The body exists", "feeling exists", etc., but no separate self, no abiding personality or soul. These words of the text indicate the results in terms of insight, i.e. the realistic view of things as they actually are.*

The exact wording of this passage has been dealt with here at some length because of its great importance as a compendium of the purpose and meaning of the foundations of mindfulness. This is made very clear in the discourse itself by the fact that the compendium is repeated in its entirety not only at the end of each of the body-contemplation exercises, but also in the sections on the other three foundations of mindfulness (only with the necessary changes to introduce the appropriate references to "feelings", "state of mind", and "contents of mind"). Naturally enough, inasmuch as it is the nature of *all* phenomena, whether physical or mental, to be impermanent, and what is sought is, precisely, full insight into this fact.

As has been repeatedly pointed out, the mindfulness of breathing exercise (*ānāpānasati*) is the most essential one and is the most commonly used exercise for the purpose of insight (*vipassanā*). This is why it comes first in the discourse and why more time has been spent on it than will be devoted to the remaining body-contemplation exercises to which the discourse now turns. It must be stressed, however, that these other exercises are also highly effective and beneficial, either for use in conjunction with the mindfulness of breathing, or as alternatives to it, depending on the person and circumstances.

**Awareness of Body Postures and Movements**

> *"And again, Monks, a Monk when going knows 'I am going'; when standing, he knows 'I am standing'; when sitting, he knows 'I am sitting'; when lying down, he knows 'I am lying down'. Whatever position the body is in, he knows it."*

The point here, as in all these exercises, is to achieve full awareness of every action or experience as it is occurring, and not, as is usually the case, doing something more or less automatically while thinking or half thinking about various other things. Nothing should happen "automatically", nothing should go unnoticed. Unremitting mindfulness must be maintained. In this exercise, mindfulness is directed at the basic postures of the body and at the action of walking, which are, of course, among the most common and unreflectingly performed activities of our daily life.

1. The main exercise: As the main exercise, this consists in observing with scrupulous attention the changing positions of the body, its movements and the accompanying sensations (from the most obvious to the most subtle), which are continually arising and passing away throughout the body. The procedure is similar to that of "experiencing the whole body" while breathing in the previous exercise, but with the difference that, in this case, one does not start from breathing but proceeds directly to the observation of the body.

2. Walking meditation (*cankamana*): Mindful walking is frequently used as a main exercise in *vipassanā* meditation (and also very often alternating with periods of sitting meditation). In Buddhist monasteries or meditation centers, especially in Southeast Asia, "meditation walkways" or "meditation terraces" are often to be found, specifically laid out for the purpose of walking meditation. These walkways are straight, level, and even, so that meditators are not distracted by changes of direction or irregularities of the surface as they walk back and forth, concentrating on the walking movement. The meditation walkway should not be too short (not less than some twenty paces at a minimum), since turning around too frequently can be distracting; but it should also not be too long because, especially for beginners, it is difficult to maintain mindfulness during too long a stretch. The normal length is some thirty to forty paces, although, in exceptional cases, some walkways may go up to as much as sixty.

   There are different schools of thought regarding the manner of walking. Some teachers recommend a slow walk, dividing each step into as many as six stages: (1) lifting the foot; (2) moving it forward; (3) moving it farther forward; (4) lowering it; (5) touching the ground; and (6) taking the weight. Other teachers use three stages: (1) lifting the foot; (2) moving it forward; and (3) lowering and putting it down. Still other teachers use only two stages: (1) lifting the foot and moving it forward; and (2) lowering the foot and putting it down. Finally, there are teachers who recommend moving at a speed which, although measured, approaches that of a normal, unhurried walk, pointing out that it is easier to learn to apply mindfulness while walking in everyday life, that is, when not engaged in formal meditation practice. These same teachers also allow considerably more latitude regarding the stage of the movement that should be noticed in particular, leaving it to the students to discover the aspects to which their attention turns more naturally.

> *Some notice the contact of the feet on the earth, others the movements of the legs, and so on. At first, just be generally mindful of the whole walking process, later the mind will single out something interesting which should be investigated.*[120]

Whatever the details of the method used, the basic procedure consists always in walking back and forth along the whole length of the meditation walkway, stopping for a moment at each end to check the mind's concentration before turning around. The hands are normally clasped in front of the body, and the eyes are cast downward, looking at the ground not more than four or five feet ahead, just enough to see where one is going, without being distracted by extraneous sights (as illustrated on the following page). The purpose of the walking meditation exercise is always the same mindful observation of bodily processes and phenomena, in order to perceive their continual fluctuations with increasing clarity and penetration.

[120] Bhikkhu Khantipalo, *Calm and Insight* (London: Curzon Press [1981]), p. 95.

Figure 7

Figure 8

Figure 9

Figure 10

Figure 11

Figure 12

Figure 13

Figure 14

3. As subsidiary exercise: Walking meditation (*cankamana*) is sometimes used as a subsidiary exercise in intensive meditation courses (where participants spend up to fifteen hours a day meditating), alternating with sessions of sitting meditation devoted to mindfulness of breathing or mindfulness of the body in general. This makes it possible to introduce some variation and to allow for some physical exercise without a break in the continuity of mindfulness.

   Mindfulness of the different body postures (standing, sitting, lying down) can also be used as a subsidiary exercise, alternating with whatever main exercise has been selected (most commonly, mindfulness of breathing or else one of the other body-contemplation exercises), always with the purpose of allowing for some variety without interrupting the continuity of mindfulness.

But, of course, mindfulness is not something that should be practiced only in formal meditation training. It should, on the contrary, increasingly permeate one's whole existence. It is, therefore, always recommended that, as one goes about one's daily business, one should be as mindful as possible of the body's postures and movements, to the extent compatible with the degree of specific concentration required by the task at hand. Clearly, when one is engaged in some demanding intellectual activity (mathematical, verbal-logical, etc.), mindfulness of the body will have to take second place for the duration. Even then, however, one can learn to maintain awareness, for instance, of the touch sensations of one's buttocks on the chair, one's feet on the ground, the touch of one's fingers on the keyboard or the pen between one's fingers, while working out a mathematical formula or writing an essay. The maintenance of a generalized level of mindfulness during everyday activities, apart from its immediate benefits in terms of alertness, makes it easier for the practitioner, when the moment comes for formal practice, to return to it smoothly and efficiently, and improve the quality of practice.

**Clear Comprehension of Every Action**

This exercise is an expansion of the one that had just been described:

*"And again, Monks, a Monk in going forward and in going back exercises clear comprehension; in looking straight on and in looking elsewhere ..., in bending and in stretching ..., in wearing the robes and carrying the alms bowl*[121] *..., in eating, drinking, chewing, and savoring ..., in defecating and urinating ..., in walking, standing, sitting, going to sleep, waking up, in speaking and in keeping silent, he exercises clear comprehension."*

As can be seen, this exercise involves paying deliberate attention not only to bodily postures and movements, but also to the routine acts of everyday living, such as eating, drinking, relieving oneself, going out to get one's food (whether this is done by taking up an alms bowl to go begging or a shopping bag to go shopping is, from this point of view, immaterial), going to sleep at night, waking up in the morning, and all the other innumerable things we do every day without paying special attention to them. In addition to broadening the scope for mindfulness, this exercise introduces a further element, described as "clear comprehension" (*sampajaññā*). This is the complement, at the intellectual level, of the mindful observation at the perceptual level. When meditation is carried out as an exclusive exercise in a motionless posture, whether seated upright on a meditation cushion or on a chair, it is, in fact, possible to develop and maintain pure perceptual mindfulness. This is also possible, for all practical purposes, in the course of a period of formal walking meditation. But this is no longer the case when more complex activities are concerned, involving not only a variety of perceptual and motor acts but also elements of intention, judgment, decision making, etc. Think, for example, of all

[121] When going out to beg for food.

that is involved in the simple act of putting a morsel of food in one's mouth: picking up fork and knife, cutting the food, bringing it up to one's mouth, opening the mouth, putting the food into one's mouth, removing the fork, etc. The performance of even the simplest task necessarily involves the will and the intellect (the task has to be identified, the appropriate means for its performance have to be selected, then comes the carrying out of the various stages of the task, verifying that the desired result has been achieved, and so on). By devoting the same kind of deliberate attention to these mental elements as was paid to the bare sense data in the exercises just described, a clear comprehension is developed of the purpose of every action, of the best way of achieving that purpose — as regards both means and their application — and of the exact nature of each act. One can now more easily appreciate why the initial instructions concerning the practice specify that the meditator dwells "ardent,[122] clearly comprehending, and mindful".

**Repulsiveness of the Body, the Four Elements, and Cemetery Contemplations**

The discourse continues on with three variants of body contemplation, which have already been mentioned in Chapter 4: (1) repulsiveness of the body, (2) the four elements, and (3) the cemetery contemplations. In view of what was said in Chapter 4, there is no need to discuss them further at this time, except to recall that, apart from their usefulness as subjects for concentration, these contemplations are particularly suited to counteract excessive attachment to physical appearance and sensory enjoyment, since they focus attention on the most striking aspects of the precarious and often enough even repulsive character of bodily processes and functions, and on the thoroughly impersonal nature of the elements that make up the body. As in the preceding exercises, each one of these three, which complete the range of the body contemplation practices described in this discourse, closes with the summary of practice, recalling that the meditator always

> *"... dwells contemplating the body as the body internally, or externally, or both internally and externally. He dwells contemplating the arising ..., the passing away ..., or the arising and passing away of phenomena in the body. Or the mindfulness that 'there is a body' is established in him to the extent necessary for the knowledge of mindfulness."*

**Contemplation of Feelings (Sensations)**

> *"And how, Monks, does a Monk dwell contemplating feelings as feelings? Here, when experiencing a pleasant feeling, he knows: 'I am experiencing a pleasant feeling'; when experiencing a painful feeling, he knows: 'I am experiencing a painful feeling'; when experiencing a feeling which is neither pleasant nor painful (that is, a neutral feeling), he knows: 'I am experiencing a neutral feeling'."*

[122] That is to say, practicing with all necessary enthusiasm and application.

It must be clearly understood that traditional Buddhist psychology identifies six senses in human beings, that is, the five physical senses plus the mind. The mind, in fact, in addition to being the faculty which receives and identifies data supplied by the physical senses, may well be regarded as one more sense, with its own specific data. It perceives and observes directly (that is to say, without the mediation of the physical senses) all that happens at the strictly mental and affective level — ideas, volitions, emotions, etc. Therefore, since the mind is considered as one more sense, it must be understood that, in Buddhist tradition, "feelings" or "sensations" (*vedanā*) include the whole range of inputs, both from physical sources (as perceived by the five physical senses) and from mental sources (perceived directly by the mind), which are identified and evaluated by the discriminative function of the mind itself.

Of course, the contemplation of the body is, in fact, a contemplation of bodily feelings since, as has just been seen, body contemplation is carried out through the mindful observation of feelings as they occur. The difference lies in the fact that, in the contemplation of the body pure and simple, attention is focused strictly on the recognition of the data without any value judgments. In the specific exercise of contemplation of feelings, on the other hand, the area of observation is broadened to include mental "feelings" (as just defined), and the subject for contemplation is precisely the evaluating activity of the mind.

The process of evaluation, that is to say, the mental classification of a physical feeling or of a thought (a "mental feeling") as "pleasant", "painful", or "neutral" is something which we do all the time, automatically and instantaneously, at every moment of our waking lives (and also in dreams). Normally, we act or, rather, react accordingly in an equally automatic manner — especially at the physical level — to avoid or get rid of whatever is painful or unpleasant and to obtain or retain whatever is pleasant, while neutral data tend to be regarded with indifference.[123] Now, the aim of meditative contemplation, here as in other exercises, is to do away with automatic reactions and to develop mindfulness. The meditator focuses attention on the process of evaluation, in order to be as fully aware of the quality of the feeling as perceived (pleasant, painful, or neutral), that is, of the precise value judgment that has taken place, *without reacting*. Reaction is always due to desire (*wanting* what seems, that is, perceived and evaluated as, good, and *not wanting* what seems bad), to attachment arising from an incorrect understanding of the true nature of the experience.[124] Let us again quote from Venerable Nyāṇaponika's authoritative handbook:

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[123] A truly neutral input leaves us indifferent. However, a moment of reflection will show that genuinely neutral feelings are very rare. There are very few experiences which are entirely free from positive or negative aspects, that is, which do not involve any degree of evaluation on the part of the experiencer. This is why, especially in the beginning, one concentrates on the exact identification of the pleasant or unpleasant response.

[124] Of course, even a fully enlightened Arahat will quickly withdraw his hand from a fire in order to avoid getting it burned. The fundamental difference lies in the fact that the Arahat will not remove his hand out of fear or ignorance but, rather, purposefully, because the reasonable thing to do is obviously to preserve the safety and integrity of the physical body as long as it is required to function. However, if there is a valid reason to keep the hand in the fire (for example, to save another person's life), he will leave his hand there and (if he truly is an Arahat) will do so calmly and equanimously, because he no longer experiences

> *If, in receiving a sense-impression, one is able to pause and stop at the phase of Feeling, and make it, in its very first stage of manifestation, the object of Bare Attention, Feeling will not be able to originate Craving or other passions. It will stop at the bare statements of "pleasant", "unpleasant" or "indifferent", giving Clear Comprehension time to enter and decide about the attitude or action to be taken. Furthermore, if one notices, in Bare Attention, the conditioned arising of feeling [that is, the passing away of phenomena], one will find from one's own experience that there is no necessity at all for being carried away by passionate reaction, which will start a new concatenation of suffering.*[125]

This is how the meditator contemplates "feelings as feelings", exactly in the same manner as the body is contemplated as the body, without any kind of additions or elaborations, always exclusively concerned with the exact experiencing of each moment and gaining thus an increasingly clear and full understanding of the impermanent and impersonal nature of all phenomena.

The reference to "worldly" and "unworldly" feelings requires some elucidation. "Worldly feelings" are those which arise in connection with the events and experiences of ordinary life — the satisfactions and pleasures, annoyances and pains, or states of mental and physical indifference which we experience every day. "Unworldly feelings" are those which relate to the efforts, satisfactions, and dissatisfactions involved in the pursuit of understanding through meditative development; for instance, the rapture (*pīti*) and happiness (*sukha*) which arise in the first absorption (*jhāna*), the phases of inertia, discouragement or anxiety, or elation that may sometimes occur, etc.

The section on the contemplation of feelings closes with the important "Compendium of Practice", which has already been discussed in some detail on its first appearance in connection with mindfulness of breathing.

## Contemplation of Mental States

> *"And how, Monks, does a Monk dwell contemplating the mind as the mind? Here, a Monk knows the mind with greed as greedy; the mind without greed as not greedy; the mind with hate as hating; the mind without hate as not hating; the mind with delusion as deluded; the mind without delusion as not deluded; the shrunken mind as shrunken; the distracted mind as distracted; the developed mind as developed; the undeveloped mind as undeveloped; the surpassable mind as surpassable; the unsurpassable mind as unsurpassable; the concentrated mind as concentrated; the unconcentrated mind as unconcentrated; the freed mind as freed; the mind not freed as not freed."*[126]

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what is going on as "*my* hand is being burnt" but, rather, as an impersonal process in which a number of elements are undergoing certain changes.

[125] *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, p. 69.

[126] All of the terms in this passage denoting different mental states are technical terms in Buddhist psychology. Some of them are near enough in meaning to contemporary usage and need no special

In this contemplation, attention is directed to mental states (*citta*). Just as in the contemplation of the body, bodily processes were subjected to mindful, non-reactive scrutiny in order to develop an increasingly penetrating perception of very subtle, normally subliminal, events, the same kind of scrutiny is now applied to mental states. The purpose is to see quite clearly, moment by moment, the exact state and condition of the mind at that particular point in time.

This can be practiced as a main exercise for the development of insight. However, it is also very useful as an auxiliary in the contemplation of the body and of feelings. It is, in fact, essential in the early stages of these contemplations as a means of avoiding breaks in the continuity of conscious, deliberate attention. In fact, while practicing the contemplation of the body or of feelings, every time that the mind wanders from the strict concentration on the body or the feelings (that is, as thoughts, associations of ideas, emotions, etc. arise), the meditator should at once devote full momentary attention to the arising mental state, not in order to pursue it any further but, on the contrary, simply to note it with full awareness, dismiss it, and then immediately go back, quite deliberately, to the contemplation of the body. This "noting" is a momentary contemplation of the mind, and the point of noting is to prevent the break in continuity of attention which would otherwise occur if the mind wandered unnoticed (as so often happens in everyday life, when one suddenly notices that one has for some time been thinking, dreaming, or reacting emotionally about something more or less unconnected with the matter at hand). By turning the wandering mind, that is, the arising mental state, into the momentary object of mindful awareness, the integrity of mindfulness is maintained, which consists always in being fully aware of what is there at any given moment.

Apart from its usefulness in formal meditation, contemplation of the mind or mental states also has obvious advantages as a means of developing self-knowledge through calm, dispassionate introspection. Moreover, the habit of immediately "noting" thoughts, etc., arising during the meditation exercise, once well established, can also be used to considerable advantage in many situations of daily life, in which all too often we tend to react unreflectingly. For instance, the usual angry reaction to someone's taunt can be neutralized by quickly noting "angry mind" as the first reaction flares up in oneself. This mindful, detached "noting", by preventing an unthinking identification with the emotional impulse, helps to maintain mental balance, thus making it possible to respond to the originally perceived aggression in an objectively more adequate manner, which may tend to improve, rather than worsen, the situation.

This section, too, closes with the "Compendium of Practice", and what was said on this subject above is equally valid here, except that, of course, the primary subject of

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explanation. The others may be understood as explained in the old Commentaries as follows: (1) *shrunken*: indolent, lethargic, unenterprising; under the description of "sloth and torpor", this is counted as one of the five hindrances to mental development in the traditional classification; (2) *distracted*: agitated, restless; this is another one of the five hindrances, under the name of "agitation and worry"; (3) *developed*: having attained both the fine-material and immaterial absorptions; (4) *undeveloped*: the ordinary state of consciousness, operating on physical sense data; (5) *surpassable*: basically, "undeveloped" in the sense given above; as such, it is surpassed by the state of consciousness attained in the absorptions; and (6) *unsurpassable*: states of consciousness attained in the absorptions.

practice now (both in this exercise and in the next one) is the mind and its workings, rather than the body and its feelings. The two are, however, closely interrelated. Thus, the instruction to contemplate "internally, externally, or both internally and externally" has both mental and physical implications. At the physical level, it refers to the awareness of feelings arising in conjunction with mental states, thoughts, etc. (for example, when mental excitement occurs, one should also be clearly aware of any concurrent speeding up of the heartbeat, or changes in breathing, etc.). At the strictly mental level, it should be understood that mental states (or, in the next exercise, mental contents) are, in one way, to be perceived by oneself (internally), in others (externally), and in both oneself and others simultaneously, and, in another way, that they can be experienced at a subjective, an objective, and a unified level (which transcends the subject/object distinction).

**Contemplation of Mental Objects**

The contents of the mind, the objects of mental activity, or, simply, mental objects (*dhammā*), are, of course, innumerable. All the subjects of contemplation which have been discussed so far are mental contents to the extent that the mind deals with them — the perceptions of physical processes; the positive, negative, or neutral evaluation of feelings; mental states taken as the objects of mental awareness. To these are now added other categories which are strictly mental in nature, such as the concepts we use in trying to build up a coherent picture of the world, the logical-verbal mechanisms with which we handle the inflow of mental data, the ideals of conduct and knowledge which we develop intellectually on the basis of our perception of what constitutes reality, and so on.

From this vast field, the *Buddha*, for the purposes of this discourse, selected five groups which are of particular importance for the development of insight (*vipassanā*). They are:

1. The five hindrances;
2. The five aggregates of clinging;
3. The six senses, with their respective objects (known as "the six internal and the six external sense bases"), and the mental fetters which arise as a result;
4. The seven factors of enlightenment;
5. The Four Noble Truths.

The first and fourth of these groups belong, in fact, rather to the contemplation of the state of the mind, but they are, nevertheless, included in this last section of the discourse because, as will be seen, at this point, the exercise goes beyond pure mindful observation and invokes deliberate mental activity to eliminate those factors which hinder insight and to promote those which are favorable to its development.

The second and fifth groups belong entirely to mental objects proper, representing different aspects of the Buddhist analysis of reality, always with the specific purpose of developing and perfecting insight. The third group has a dual aspect: on the one hand, it shares that analytical approach in that it deals with the mechanism of sense perception

(involving the six "senses" of Buddhist psychology, that is, the five physical senses plus the mind) through which we receive and interpret the data of what we will call "reality"; on the other hand, it involves both observing and dealing with mental states in that it also refers to the consequences of perception in the human psyche (the "fetters", in traditional terms) which flow from the operation of the perceptual mechanisms.

We will now discuss these various factors, not in the order in which they appear in the discourse, but, rather, grouping them into two categories: (1) that of positive and negative mental states and (2) that of reality and analysis. The positive and negative states include the five hindrances, the six sense bases and their consequent fetters, and the seven factors of enlightenment, while reality and analysis include the five aggregates of clinging and the Four Noble Truths. The six sense bases and their consequent fetters are being placed in the first category because, for the development of insight, what is most important is the practical impact at the mental level of perception, that is, the "fetters" of the mind.

1. The five hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*):

    1. Desire for gratification of the senses (*kāmacchanda*);
    2. Ill will (*vyāpāda*);
    3. Sloth and torpor (*thīna-middha*);
    4. Agitation and worry (*uddhacca-kukkucca*);
    5. Skeptical doubts (*vicikicchā*).

    > *"Here, Monks, a Monk dwells contemplating mental objects as mental objects [that are] the five hindrances. And how does he contemplate? Here, Monks, when desire for gratification of the senses is present in him, the Monk knows: 'There is desire for gratification of the senses in me'; or, when desire for gratification of the sense is absent, he knows: 'There is no desire for gratification of the senses in me'; He knows how the arising of [previously] unarisen desire for gratification of the senses comes to be; he knows how the abandoning of arisen desire for gratification of the senses comes to be; and he knows how the non-arising in the future of the abandoned desire for gratification of the senses comes to be. When ill will is present in him ...; when sloth and torpor is present in him ...; when agitation and worry is present in him ...; when skeptical doubt is present in him, the Monk knows: 'There is ill will ...; sloth and torpor ...; agitation and worry ...; skeptical doubt in me'; or when ill will ...; sloth and torpor ...; agitation and worry ...; skeptical doubt are absent in him, the Monk knows; 'There is no ill will ...; no sloth and torpor ...; no agitation and worry ...; no skeptical doubt in me'. He knows how the arising of the [previously] unarisen ill will ...; sloth and torpor ...; agitation and worry; skeptical doubt comes to be; he knows how the abandoning [of these arisen hindrances] comes to be; and he knows how the non-arising in the future [of the abandoned hindrances] comes to be."*

The five hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*) are so-called because they are mental states which, by confusing the mind with desires and hates, by rendering it sluggish or overexcited, make it impossible for it to see and understand things clearly. In another discourse,[127] the *Buddha* illustrated this with the simile of a pond: If the water is polluted with impurities of different colors (sense desires), if it is all churned up (ill will), if it is choked with weeds and grasses (sloth and torpor), if its surface is ruffled by the wind (agitation and worry), or if it is full of mud (skeptical doubt), anyone looking into the pond will not be able to see his own image reflected in the water. Similarly, the mind polluted by the hindrances will not be able to discern what is true and good either for itself or for others.

The first stage of this contemplation consists in the mindful observation of the contents of the mind in order to be clearly aware of which specific hindrance is arising or is present in the mind at any given moment ("he knows how the arising of non-arisen desire for the gratification of the senses, etc., comes to be"). The second stage (and this is where the difference lies between the exercise of this fourth foundation of mindfulness and the previous three) consists in moving over from pure mindful observation to action — acting with full awareness and clear comprehension of the purpose sought and the best means to achieve it, one now endeavors to overcome and remove, to the extent possible, the hindrance that has been identified ("he knows how the abandoning of arisen desire for gratification of the senses, etc., comes to be"). "To the extent possible" means that, until a very high level of insight has been achieved, the removal or abandonment of the hindrances is only temporary, and they reappear again sooner or later. Naturally enough, since, like all conditioned things, they are subject to the "arising and passing away of phenomena". This need not be cause for discouragement, provided one always bears in mind that what is essential for the development of insight in this and all other exercises is to remain alert to whatever is going on in the moment. This is, it must be remembered, the point of the instructions contained in the "Compendium of Practice", repeated so many times in the discourse and again here, as well as at the end of each one of the following sections of the contemplation of the mind.

> *"He dwells contemplating the arising of phenomena in mental objects, or contemplating the passing away of phenomena in mental objects, or both the arising and passing away of phenomena in mental objects. Or the mindfulness that 'there are mental objects' is established in him to the extent necessary for knowledge and mindfulness. He dwells independent, clinging to nothing in the world. Thus, indeed, Monks, a Monk dwells contemplating mental objects as the mental objects [that are] the five hindrances."*

Thus, whenever desire for gratification of the senses (or any other hindrance) is present, one notes "there is desire for gratification of the senses" (or whatever). As one strives to abandon, or turn away from, the existing hindrance, one notes "effort to abandon". When one has succeeded in doing so, one notes "absence of desire for

[127] *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 5.193.

gratification of the senses", etc., noting also any sense of satisfaction or achievement which has arisen on account of the successful endeavor (which is a contemplation of a mental state). When, sooner or later, the hindrance reappears, one again takes note of its presence and perseveres as before.

As one gains experience, one notices that dispassionate observation is, in fact, the best means of disposing of undesirable mental states or contents. Repression or inhibition of negative thoughts or emotions through violent exertions of will, even when momentarily successful, simply generates equally strong contrary reactions and is thus ultimately self-defeating. The pathological consequences, both psychic and psychosomatic, of repressions and inhibitions have long been recognized in Western psychology and are only too familiar a part of our modern world. Effort *is*, of course, needed, but should be focused exclusively on the development of stable, undistracted mindfulness. This is the task to which the maximum possible degree of energy must be devoted, in order to ensure an attitude of clear-sighted awareness, free from impulsive reactions. In this way, the increasingly penetrating perception of the transitory and impersonal nature of all phenomena gradually weakens and dissolves the ingrained tendency to attachment (based upon the delusion that there is a lasting "self" whose wants have to be met) which is the root cause of the hindrances themselves. The experience of centuries has shown that progress in this connection takes place in several distinct stages, which will be discussed later (the four "paths" and their respective "fruits", in the traditional terminology), and the various negative elements are eliminated one after another ("He knows how the non-arising in the future of the abandoned desire for gratification of the senses comes to be").

2. The six sense bases (*saḷāyatana*) and the fetters (*saṁyojana*) that arise as a result:

> *"And again, Monks, a Monk dwells contemplating mental objects as mental objects [that are] the six internal and external sense bases. And how does he contemplate? Here, Monks, a Monk knows the eye, knows visible objects, and knows the fetter that arises dependent upon both [the eye and visible objects] ...; he knows the ear and sounds ...; the nose and smells ...; the tongue and flavors ...; the body and tactile objects ...; the mind and mental objects, and knows the fetter that arises dependent upon both. He knows how the arising of the [previously] non-arisen fetter comes to be. He knows how the abandoning of the arisen fetter comes to be; and he knows how the non-arising in the future of the abandoned fetter comes to be."*

This is a brief statement of how perception takes place. For perception to occur, there has to be an organ (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body), which is the "internal sense base", an object (visible form, sound, smell, flavor, tactile sensation), which is the "external sense base", and the contact or connection between the two (the eye looking at the physical object, the ear hearing a sound, etc.). But the *Buddha's* analysis, practical as always, does not stop at the mechanism of perception, but proceeds at once to consider its consequences, that is, the "fetters", which result from the act of perception because of our incorrect understanding, which interprets what is

impermanent as lasting, what is empty as substantive, what is woe as pleasurable, and what is impersonal as having a self.

In the *Buddha's* terminology, the "fetters" (*saṁyojana*) are so called because they are the attitudes and states of mind which bind us to the unsatisfactory existence of an unenlightened person, dominated by attachment and by suffering. Here, too (as in the case of the hindrances), what is needed is to get to know the negative factors and to work towards their elimination ("He knows how the arising of the non-arisen fetter comes to be; and he knows how the non-arising in the future of the abandoned fetter comes to be"). The fetters are ten in number:

1. Personality belief (the delusion of "selfhood");
2. Skeptical doubt (about the correctness of the teaching, the effectiveness of the practice, etc.);
3. Attachment to rites and rituals (in the mistaken belief that rituals and external observances, in themselves, can help the progress of insight);
4. Desire for gratification of the senses (that is, the desire for pleasant objects as perceived by the five physical senses);
5. Ill will (that is, aversion to whatever, at the physical or mental level, is perceived to be disagreeable or threatening);
6. Craving for fine-material existence (desire for life at the levels of pure form);
7. Craving for immaterial existence (desire for life at the formless levels);
8. Conceit;
9. Restlessness;
10. Ignorance.

The sixth and seventh fetters arise in connection with states of rapture (*pīti*), happiness (*sukha*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*) which can be achieved with tranquility (*samatha*) meditation — the "fine-material" states relate to the form, while the "immaterial" states to the formless absorptions (*jhāna*).[128] The attachment to those states is more difficult to overcome than the attachment to ordinary material, sensory satisfactions, precisely because those states represent, in themselves, qualitatively very subtle and intensely satisfying experiences. This is why, as will be seen later, the definitive elimination of these two fetters (as well as the three following ones) takes place only in the last stage of the progress of insight, when the meditator achieves the total realization of enlightenment.

3. The seven factors of enlightenment (*sambojjhaṅga*): They are so called because they lead to enlightenment. They are:

   1. Mindfulness (*sati*);
   2. Investigation of the truth (*dhamma*);
   3. Energy (*viriya*);

[128] The absorptions are discussed in Chapter 5.

4. Rapture (*pīti*);
5. Tranquility (*passaddhi*);
6. Concentration (*samādhi*);
7. Equanimity (*upekkhā*).

> *"And again, Monks, a Monk dwells contemplating mental objects as mental objects [that are] the seven factors of enlightenment. And how does he contemplate? Here, Monks, when the enlightenment factor of mindfulness is present in him, a Monk knows: 'The enlightenment factor of mindfulness is [present] in me'; or when the enlightenment factor of mindfulness is not present, he knows: 'The enlightenment factor of enlightenment is not [present] in me'. And he knows how the arising of the [previously] non-arisen enlightenment factor of mindfulness comes to be; and he knows how perfection in the development of the arisen enlightenment factor comes to be."* [The same formula is repeated for the remaining factors.]

As in the previous exercise, there are two stages involved. The first stage involves the awareness of what is going on (when the enlightenment factor is present: "He knows: 'The enlightenment factor of mindfulness is [present] in me'"; or, when the enlightenment factor is not present: "He knows: 'The enlightenment factor of mindfulness is not [present] in me'"). The second stage involves doing something about it; in the case of the hindrances, the task was to get rid of them; here, since the factors are positive, leading to enlightenment, one has to try to preserve and develop them ("he knows how the arising of the [previously] non-arisen enlightenment factor of mindfulness comes to be; and he knows how perfection in the development of the arisen enlightenment factor comes to be").

The order in which the arisen enlightenment factors are enumerated is not haphazard, but reflects their mutual interrelationships. In fact, in the development of insight, each one of them follows from the preceding factors and contributes to the following ones. This sequence is explained in very clear and simple terms in the Ānāpānasati Sutta (Discourse on the Mindfulness of Breathing):

> *"And how, Monks, do the four foundations of mindfulness, developed and assiduously practiced, perfect the seven factors of enlightenment?*
>
> *"Now, when a Monk dwells contemplating the body as the body ..., feelings as the feelings ..., the mind as the mind ..., mental objects as mental objects, ardent, clearly comprehending, and mindful, having overcome covetousness and grief concerning the world, then unremitting mindfulness is established in him. And when unremitting mindfulness is established in a Monk, then the enlightenment factor of mindfulness is aroused in him, and he develops it, and, through development, it comes to perfection in him.*
>
> *"Dwelling thus mindful, he investigates and examines that state with understanding and embarks upon a scrutiny [of it]. When, dwelling thus mindful, a Monk investigates and examines that state with understanding and embarks upon a scrutiny of it, then the enlightenment factor of investigation of reality is*

*aroused in him, and he develops it, and, through development, it comes to perfection in him.*

*"In him who investigates and examines the state with understanding and embarks upon a scrutiny of it, tireless energy is aroused. When tireless energy is aroused in a Monk, who investigates and examines that state with understanding and embarks upon a scrutiny of it, then the enlightenment factor of energy is aroused in him, and he develops it, and, through development, it comes to perfection in him.*

*"In him who has aroused energy, rapture arises. When rapture arises in a Monk who has aroused energy, then the enlightenment factor of rapture is aroused in him, and he develops it, and, through development, it comes to perfection in him.*

*"The body and mind of one whose mind is rapturous becomes tranquil. When the body and mind of a monk whose mind is rapturous become tranquil, then the enlightenment factor of tranquility is aroused in him, and he develops it, and, through development, it come to perfection in him.*

*"The mind of one who is tranquil in body and who is blissful becomes concentrated. When the mind of a Monk who is tranquil in body and who is blissful becomes concentrated, then the enlightenment factor of concentration is aroused in him, and he develops it, and, through development, it comes to perfection in him.*

*"He becomes one who looks with complete equanimity on the mind thus concentrated. When a Monk becomes one who looks with complete equanimity on the mind thus concentrated, then the enlightenment factor of equanimity is aroused in him, and he develops it, and, through development, it comes to perfection in him.*

*"Thus developed, Monks, thus assiduously practiced, the four foundations of mindfulness perfect the seven factors of enlightenment."*

In the same discourse, the *Buddha* stresses the enormous importance of the factors of enlightenment, saying that "the seven factors of enlightenment, developed and assiduously practiced, produce the perfection of knowledge and deliverance".

**Analysis of Reality**

1. The five aggregates of clinging (*upādānakkhandha*): They are:

    1. Bodily form (*rūpa*);
    2. Feeling (*vedanā*);
    3. Perception (*saññā*);
    4. (Predisposing) mental formations (*saṁkhāra*);
    5. Discriminative consciousness (*viññāṇa*).

*"And again, Monks, a Monk dwells contemplating mental objects as mental objects [that are] the five aggregates of clinging. And how does he contemplate? Here, Monks, a Monk considers: 'Thus is material form, thus is the arising of material form, thus is the passing away of material form; thus is feeling, thus is the arising of feeling, thus is the passing away of feeling; thus is perception, thus is the arising of perception, thus is the passing away of perception; thus is [predisposing] mental formations, thus is the arising of [predisposing] mental formations, thus is the passing away of [predisposing] mental formations; thus is consciousness, thus is the arising of consciousness, thus is the passing away of consciousness'."*

These five "aggregates" (*khandha*), or groups of phenomena, comprise, in the *Buddha's* teaching, everything that makes up an individual.

*"All material phenomena, whether past, present, or future, one's own or external, gross or subtle, lofty or low, far or near, all belong to the aggregate of material form. All feelings ... belong to the aggregate of feeling. All perceptions ... belong to the aggregate of perception. All mental formations ... belong to the aggregate of mental formations. All consciousness ... belongs to the aggregate of consciousness."*

The five aggregates of clinging include, therefore, by definition, all those physical and mental phenomena which, to the untrained person, appear to constitute his or her "self" or "personality" and to which he or she clings in an effort to preserve the essentially illusory configuration which he or she calls "myself". This is why they are called "aggregates of *clinging*".

Now, as we have seen, the purpose of insight (*vipassanā*) meditation is precisely to develop insight into the actual nature of these phenomena, and so to see and understand that they are all transient, unstable events, without lasting identity. In this exercise, the meditator maintains a mental attitude of mindful receptivity, a truly "open mind", and contemplates whatever arises in the field of perception from moment to moment, endeavoring to be clearly aware of the aggregate to which each phenomenon belongs. When he becomes aware of a material phenomenon, he simply makes a mental note of "material form"; when a feeling arises, he notes whether it is "pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral"; when a perception occurs (that is, when there is an awareness of the kind of phenomenon), he notes both its general characteristic (that is, whether it is visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, or mental) and its specificity (for example, a photograph, a shout, a fragrant flower, etc.); when contemplating mental formations, he notes their source or origin and their character (reactions or associations of ideas arising in connection with different material or mental objects); and when contemplating consciousness itself, he notes the particular state of consciousness obtaining at the moment.

What is absolutely essential, as in all *vipassanā* exercises, is to proceed without attachment, dispassionately, without either desiring or rejecting, remaining

always aware of the fact that what is being inspected are configurations of changing phenomena, always arising and passing away:

> *"Here, Monks, a Monk considers: 'Thus is material form, thus is the arising of material form, thus is the passing away of material form; thus is feeling, thus is the arising of feeling, thus is the passing away of feeling; thus is perception, thus is the arising of perception, thus is the passing away of perception; thus are [predisposing] mental formations, thus is the arising of [predisposing] mental formations, thus is the passing away of [predisposing] mental formations; thus is consciousness, thus is the arising of consciousness, thus is the passing away of consciousness'."*

In this way, the meditator is putting into practice the exact injunctions of the oft-repeated "Compendium of Practice".

This exercise, concluding the practice of non-reactive awareness with the dispassionate discrimination of phenomena, is particularly helpful for developing a thorough understanding of the fundamental truth that

> *"material form is transient, feeling is transient, perception is transient, [predisposing] mental formations are transient, consciousness is transient. And that which is transient is subject to suffering [as long as we persist in clinging to things and wanting to hold back their ceaseless flow], and of that which is transient and subject to suffering and change, one cannot rightly say: 'This belongs to me, this am I, this is my self'."*[129]

2. The Four Noble Truths: The *Dhamma*, or universal moral law, discovered by the *Buddha*, is summed up in the Four Noble Truths (*ariya-sacca*): (1) the truth about the universal sway of suffering (*dukkha*), (2) about its origin (*samudaya*), (3) its cessation (*nirodha*), and (4) the path (*magga*) leading to its cessation.

> *"And again, Monks, a Monk dwells contemplating mental objects as mental objects [that are] the Four Noble Truths. And how does he contemplate? Here, Monks, a Monk knows according to reality: 'This is suffering'; he knows according to reality: 'This is the origin of suffering'; he knows according to reality: 'This is the cessation of suffering'; he knows according to reality: 'This is the path leading to the cessation of suffering'."*

These are the Four Noble Truths which sum up the essence of the *Buddha's* teaching. The present exercise consists in taking as subjects for contemplation the Four Noble Truths as manifested in the workings and contents of our minds. This contemplation, which can be carried out at different levels, depending upon the meditator's mentality and degree of proficiency, can produce extraordinarily deep and subtle insights.

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[129] *Saṁyutta Nikāya* 22:59.

Whatever unpleasant mental phenomenon arises in the course of meditation (either in connection with physical pain or discomfort, or as a mental occurrence on its own) is, obviously, *suffering* (the first truth) and needs to be immediately identified as such. The skilled meditator, however, knows that the phenomenon as such, the sensory-mental input, has no intrinsic quality — it is the perceiving and evaluating part of the mind that labels it as "unpleasant", by *reacting* in a specific manner (rejection) to a phenomenon which is perceived as, in some way, a threat or an aggression. This rejection, this "not wanting" (suffering, discomfort, etc.), is *the origin of suffering* (the second truth). Now, when the meditator becomes aware of this reaction (provided that the awareness is really strong and clear), he thereby ceases to identify with it. His experience is no longer one of unreflecting reaction, but rather one of dispassionate observation of the emergent reaction. He no longer "desires" to stop the pain, discomfort, or whatever, but simply observes and notes. To stop "desiring" is to stop reacting, and this is *the cessation of suffering* (the third truth). A banal example of this (but one which is particularly striking precisely because it is so obvious and so easily experienced by anyone who tries) is the matter of the aches and pains in the joints and muscles which almost invariably assail novice meditators when they sit perfectly motionless for unaccustomedly long periods of formal sitting meditation. With a little practice, it is everyone's experience that, when contemplated with scrupulous mindfulness and without emotion, these disturbances cease to be perceived as "pains", and one discovers in them a whole range of varied physical sensations (prickling, pressure, tension, etc.) which, *in themselves*, have nothing to do with the concept of "pain" and which, like all sensations, are in a state of flux — changing, disappearing, and being replaced by others. Finally, the meditator comes to realize that, by practicing correctly with care and dedication, he is putting into practice one or more of the eight component factors of *the path leading to the cessation of suffering* (the fourth truth), not only during meditation periods (when, with right view and right thoughts, he applies right effort to develop right mindfulness and right concentration), but also in the intervals between sessions during a course or retreat (right view, right thoughts, right speech, right action, and right mindfulness), and also, between courses and retreats, in his daily life, to the extent that he is increasingly inspired and guided by the healthy principles that he has learned and practiced (guided by a right view of things, pursuing right thoughts, practicing right speech and right action on every occasion, earning a living in the right kind of occupation, and exerting right effort to maintain and develop this way of life).

**Conclusion of the Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness**

*"In truth, Monks, whoever practices these four foundations of mindfulness in this manner for seven years may expect one of two fruits: highest knowledge [Arahatship] here and now or, if some remainder of clinging is still present, the state of Non-Return [Anāgāmi].*

*"Let alone seven years, Monks! Should a person practice these four foundations of mindfulness in this manner for six years ... for five years ... for*

*four years ... for three years ... for two years ... for one year, he may expect one of two fruits: highest knowledge here and now, or, if some remainder of clinging is still present, the state of Non-Return.*

*"Let alone one year, Monks! Should a person practice these four foundations of mindfulness in this manner for seven months ... for six months ... for five months ... for four months ... for three months ... for two months ... for one month ... for half a month ... for seven days, he may expect one of two fruits: highest knowledge here and now, or, if some remainder of clinging is still present, the state of Non-Return.*

*"This is why it is said: 'This is the only way, Monks, for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the destroying of pain and grief, for reaching the right path, for the realization of nibbāna, namely, the four foundations of mindfulness'."*

*Thus spoke the Blessed One. Glad at heart, the Monks rejoiced in His words.*

The discourse thus ends as it began — with a solemn statement of the great importance of the practices it teaches to achieve the full realization of *nibbāna* (*nirvāṇa*). Before stating what little can be said about this ultimate achievement, which is something that can be experienced but not expressed in words, it is necessary to look a little more closely at the above quotation. Everything that is said there, as elsewhere in the discourse (and in the *Buddha's* teaching in general), is not just an example of inspirational rhetoric. Rather, it conveys a very specific practical meaning to the properly informed aspirant. Thus, the apparently rhetorical reference to years, months, etc., of practice makes the very important point that the rate of progress that can be expected varies considerably from person to person. What one person may achieve in a matter of days may take another person months or years. It all depends on the mentality, character, and abilities of each individual, as well as on his or her particular life situation. In traditional Buddhist terms, in other words, it depends upon the present mix of karmic imprints, beneficial or harmful, favorable or unfavorable, accumulated from previous mental, verbal, or physical acts. Secondly, the discourse stresses the fact that realization is achieved not at once but (as previously pointed out in Chapter 3) in successive stages. This is what the passage is about which refers to two results, or fruits, that may be expected of practice as "highest knowledge here and now, or, if some remainder of clinging is still present, the state of Non-Return". This brief allusion was quite sufficient, of course, for the Monks who were the original hearers of the discourse and were wholly conversant with the relevant frame of reference. For the modern, non-specialized reader, however, some explanation is required.

At this point, in order to prevent confusion, let us stop for a moment and consider the precise meaning of "rebirth" as it is understood in Buddhism, after which we can return to the explanation of the successive stages of purification.

**The Round of Rebirths**

When speaking of "rebirth" (*paṭisandhi*), people commonly tend to think in terms of a "soul" passing on, as a complete entity, into a new body at the death of the old one. This is what is known as "reincarnation", "transmigration", or "metempsychosis", and is a common belief in many Eastern religions (especially within the orthodox Hindu tradition) as well as in esoteric traditions in the West. In view of the fact that, as the *Buddha* taught, there is no such thing as a permanent self-entity to be found anywhere (see Chapter 2), it will be readily appreciated that it is a gross error to assimilate the Buddhist conception of "rebirth" to that of the "transmigration of souls" (an error which is, regrettably, quite often fallen into even by supposedly well-informed authors, who fail to make this crucial distinction either through actual ignorance, or through a tendency to assimilate Buddhism to orthodox mainstream Hinduism, or under the influence of the distorted views of Tibetan Buddhism).

In fact, the concept of transmigration or reincarnation necessarily presupposes the existence of a "soul" (*ātman*) as a lasting entity which moves on from one mortal body to another without losing its own essence or entity. But, as has already been made clear, the alleged lasting entity is precisely what the *Buddha* found to be ultimately non-existent, an insight formulated in the fundamental principle of *anattā*. This principle, namely, that there is no such thing anywhere as a permanent self-entity, is valid not only at the physical level (where transience and decay are all too evident) but equally so at all other levels, however they may be described — physical, mental, spiritual, etc. The *Buddha* taught, and this is the very core of His teaching, that absolutely everything (*including* the unconditioned *nibbāna*) is without abiding entity or substance, without self, *anattā*. Hence, the use of the word "rebirth", which, by not prejudging the issue of *what* it is exactly that is "reborn", is less encumbered with the erroneous "soul" connotation than the older terms.

On the other hand, however, the *Buddha* denied with equal firmness the purely materialistic view, that is, that the death of the body, the dissolution of the physical elements, represents the final annihilation of all the mental, volitional, and affective elements which were also part of the organism which has died. This is why He taught that the first fetter, that is, *personality belief*, arises in two equally mistaken and noxious forms: (1) eternalism (the idealist delusion that there is such a thing as an abiding self or an immortal soul) and (2) annihilationism (the materialist delusion that the end of a particular body is the end of everything). According to the *Buddha*, what happens is that the configuration of the conscious moment at the time of death (itself a conditioned product of the physical, verbal, and mental acts performed in the existence which is now ending, as well as in previous ones) conditions the initial conscious moment, the starting point, as it were, of the next existence.

In other words, one could say, very roughly, that what is "reborn" in the next life is the sediment, the mental residue (that is, the accumulated imprints [*saṁkhārā*] left by physical, verbal, and mental acts) of the current life and previous ones in so far as their residues have not yet been resolved. The consciousness of the new being is, therefore, not the same as that of the previous one, nor is it totally different, since it is, in fact, its consequence.

There is, therefore, no question of a "soul" which changes bodies similar to the way a person changes clothes. There is no transmigration of a permanent entity. This is why terms like "reincarnation" must be avoided, and it is preferable to use the more neutral term "rebirth", which, without necessarily implying a permanent entity, signals that there is a continuity that runs through an endless stream of existences.

What the *Buddha* teaches is, correctly speaking, the law of cause and effect working in the mental and moral domain. For, just as everything in the physical world happens in accordance with this law, as the arising of any physical state is dependent upon some preceding state as its cause, in just the same way, this law must have universal applicability in the mental and moral domain too. If every physical state is preceded by another state as its cause, so also this present psychophysical life must be dependent upon causes prior to its birth. Thus, according to Buddhism, the present life-process is the result of craving for life in a former birth, and the craving for life in this birth is the cause of the life-process that continues after death.

But, since there is nothing that persists from one moment of consciousness to the next, so also no abiding element exists in this ever-changing life-process that can pass over from one life to another.

Nothing transmigrates from this moment to the next, nothing from one life to another life. This process of continually producing and being produced may best be compared to a wave on the ocean. In the case of a wave, there is not the smallest quantity of water that actually travels over the surface of the sea. The wave-structure that seems to hasten over the surface of the water, though creating the appearance of one and the same mass of water, is, in reality, nothing but a continuous rising and falling of ever new masses of water. And the rising and falling is produced by the transmission of force originally generated by wind. Just so, the *Buddha* did not teach that it is an ego-entity (*attā*), or a soul, that hastens through the ocean of rebirth, but that it is in reality merely a life-wave which, according to its nature and activities, appears here as a human being, there as an animal, and elsewhere as an invisible being.

## The Process of Purification

In the *Buddha's* teaching, the process which, in today's language, we tend to describe in terms of "realization" is traditionally known as "purification" (*visuddhi*), hence, the title of the ancient meditation manually often quoted in this book, *Visuddhi-magga*, which means "The Path (*magga*) of Purification (*visuddhi*)". This is a very appropriate term, since it stresses the fact that, in order to achieve the enduring transformation of the human psyche that we have been talking about, what is needed can best be described as a cleansing process. Our mental and affective processes have to be gradually freed from the deeply ingrained habits of perception and reaction ("delusion" or "ignorance" — *moha* or *avijjā*, respectively) which prevent us from seeing and experiencing things as they really are. In describing the contemplation of mental objects, we saw that the main negative factors which each one of us has to eliminate through his or her own efforts are (1) the five mental hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*) and (2) the ten fetters

(*saṁyojana*). It is precisely these fetters which, according to the traditional method, provide the necessary benchmarks, depending upon the extent to which they have been weakened or eliminated, against which to measure progress along the path of purification. The purification process consists of four successive stages:

1. Stream-Entry: The first significant stage is signaled by the elimination of the first three fetters: (1) personality belief (that is, attachment to an illusory self); (2) skeptical doubts (about the efficacy of the teaching and practice); and (3) attachment to rites and rituals (which is a way, very commonly resorted to, of shirking the hard task of working on oneself). Someone who, through the development of insight, has done away with these three fetters is called a Stream-Enterer (*Sotāpanna*) because he or she has achieved the first stage of a process which, flowing now irrevocably like a stream, will lead to definitive enlightenment, that is, *nibbāna*, after no more than seven rebirths at most.

2. Once-Return: The fourth and fifth fetters, namely, (4) desire for gratification of the senses and (5) ill will, demand a great deal of work to be fully eliminated. This is natural enough, since they are the very stuff of our untutored everyday existence.

   Thus, the second stage of purification consists in substantially loosening the hold of these two fetters, but without yet achieving their entire removal. The person who, by assiduous practice of the eightfold path in all its aspects — ethical discipline, practice of meditation, and development of wisdom — has reduced to a minimum the influence of desire and aversion on his motivations, thoughts, and actions, is called a *Sakādāgāmi*, which means "Once-Returner". He or she will be reborn only one more time in the world of mind and matter of human existence and will achieve definitive liberation in that last life.

3. Non-Return: When the fourth and fifth fetters have been entirely eliminated, the resulting state is known as that of *Anāgāmi*, or "Non-Returner". This means that, being now entirely free from the first five fetters, consciousness is free from all attachment to the material world. If physical death occurs before the person has achieved the next and final stage, that is to say, definitive enlightenment or *nibbāna*, this consciousness, having attained a high degree of freedom, is no longer reborn in the physical environment. Since it is, however, still conditioned by the karmic effects resulting from the five remaining fetters, it is reborn within a certain class of higher states of existence, known as the "pure abodes" (*suddhāvāsa*), from where it achieves *nibbāna* directly when the remaining five fetters have been eliminated.

4. Arahatship: The last stage in the process of purification is that in which the subtler and more insidious fetters are eliminated: (6) craving for fine-material existence; (7) craving for immaterial existence (this and the previous fetter may occur as attachment and clinging to the extremely subtle and deep satisfactions of the altered states of consciousness of the fine-material and immaterial absorptions [*jhāna*]); (8) conceit (which is deeply rooted in human nature, both as excessive vanity attached to oneself and as the conceptualizing habit of the mind); (9) restlessness (existential anguish);

and (10) ignorance (which, by definition, persists to some extent as long as full insight has not been achieved).

The person who achieves this definitive liberation is called an "*Arahat*" (also "*Arahant*"), a term which is sometimes translated as "Holy One", but which literally means "worthy" or "deserving". The *Arahat*, indeed, is deserving of the utmost praise and recognition (not least as an inspirational model to be emulated) as having achieved the ultimate degree of freedom and perfection — *nibbāna*. During the remainder of his or her lifetime, the *Arahat* enjoys what is known as "*nibbāna* with the aggregates (*khandha*) remaining" (*sopādisesa nibbāna*), and, at death, there is the achievement of *parinibbāna* or "*nibbāna* without the aggregates remaining" (*anupādisesa nibbāna*), and, thereupon, the *Arahat* is no longer subject to the suffering of rebirths in cyclic existence (*saṁsāra*).

**Summary**

Now we can go back to the discourse and understand the full meaning of the phrase which says that, from the practice of the four foundations of mindfulness, one may expect one of two results: (1) "highest knowledge here and now" — that is to say, Arahatship — or (2) "if some remainder of clinging is still present [that is, if the last five fetters have not yet been eliminated], the state of 'Non-Return'."

Notice that the *Buddha* refers here only to the last two of the four stages that make up the process of purification. This may partly be due to the fact that the discourse was originally addressed to experienced Monks, direct disciples of the *Buddha* Himself, most of whom had probably already attained the first two stages.

There is, however, another reason which may be more fundamental. By placing as a goal before the student, directly, "the highest knowledge" of definitive attainment or, as an alternative, the already very advanced stage that comes immediately before it, the discourse stresses something which the *Buddha* repeated on many occasions, namely, that the attainment of *nibbāna* is not something that lies in some distant, hopeful future after who knows how many rebirths, but something which can be achieved, if one is prepared to work hard at it, "here and now" in this very existence. Of course, it is an arduous endeavor and may indeed require, depending on each person's burden of negative accumulations, more than one or two lifetimes. But, this should not be an excuse for not putting maximum enthusiasm and perseverance into doing as much as one can in this present life which is, after all, the only thing we have to work on for the time being. *Nibbāna* is for today — not for tomorrow. The present moment must be taken advantage of calmly, without self-defeating anxiety or haste, but also without weakening. And, the *Buddha* says, in effect, that, if we proceed as instructed in this discourse, practicing the foundations of mindfulness assiduously, we shall attain the goal, or very nearly. Another point which should be taken into account in this connection is that the four stages or levels which have just been described do not follow one upon the other in a rigid time sequence. That is to say, depending upon the capabilities, disposition, energy, and enthusiasm of each practitioner, moving on from one level to the next may take a whole lifetime, years or months, or may be just a matter of minutes. It is a well-known fact that

mental processes can unfold at tremendous speeds, and it is thus not surprising to find numerous examples in the scriptures of persons who being, for instance, already Stream-Enterers (*Sotāpanna*), became *Arahats* almost instantly, under particularly favorable circumstances, telescoping the intervening stages. As in so many things, it is the first step that is the most difficult, that is, managing to extricate oneself from the state of uncontrolled impulses and perceptual confusion which characterizes the typical mentality of unenlightened "worldlings" (*puthujjana*), and "entering the stream". Even there, however, examples of rapid progress are well-attested.

One more explanation seems in order, concerning the fact that traditional Buddhist terminology distinguishes, in connection with the four stages of purification, the four "paths" (*magga*) and their respective "fruits" (*phala*). These are terms that recur very frequently in Buddhist texts, and it is important that they should be clearly understood. To go into this in detail would require a discussion of the *Abhidhamma* (the section of the Pāḷi Canon which elaborates the epistemological and, most particularly, psychological aspects of the *Buddha's* teaching). Quite simply, however, it may be said that the "paths" and their "fruits" refer to the way in which the emergence of higher states of consciousness takes place in the progress of insight. In each of the four stages, the attainment of the transformative state of consciousness is instantaneous — that is, there is a single moment of *access*, and this moment is called the "path". Immediately thereafter, there follows the *experience* of the new state, and this is called the "fruit".

One last word of warning: It has sometimes been thought that, in order to practice correctly, one should undertake, one after the other, *all* the exercises mentioned in the discourse, beginning with mindfulness of breathing and ending with the contents of the mind. This is not the case. Some of the exercises are more generally suitable for all types of persons (such as mindfulness of breathing, which is the most universal of all), while others should rather be reserved for certain types of mentality. But, provided one practices properly, that is, that one is "ardent, clearly comprehending, and mindful, having overcome covetousness and grief concerning the world", as the discourse insists time and time again, each exercise is quite enough in itself to achieve the goal. It is in order to make this quite clear that the "Compendium of Practice" repeated in each individual section of the discourse specifies that the meditator "dwells contemplating the arising of phenomena … the passing away of phenomena … and the arising and passing away of phenomena … Or the mindfulness that 'there is/are body …, feelings …, mind …, mental objects' is established in him *to the extent necessary for knowledge and mindfulness*." The whole point is precisely to *experience* with fully mindful awareness the arising and passing away of phenomena, that is, complete impermanence, in order to achieve, in this way, the non-mediated, experiential knowledge which is freedom.

This is one side. On the other, however, it must be clearly understood that, while each exercise is enough in itself for use as the main or basic exercise in formal training, its practice also involves the practice of the others to some extent. This is so because, as has already been explained, certain exercises are sometimes deliberately used as complements, in conjunction with the main one, during a course of training (such as, for instance, formal walking meditation alternating with periods of sitting meditation), and also because one endeavors to maintain the highest possible level of mindful awareness

while performing ordinary tasks between meditation periods (by maintaining clear comprehension of one's actions, thoughts, etc.).

But, there is a more fundamental reason. Quite simply, since all the processes — mental as well as physical — are intimately connected with one another, there cannot fail to be a natural, continual interplay between the four foundations of mindfulness (body, feelings, state of the mind, and contents of the mind), a mutual feedback which fluctuates with the flow of phenomena, but is always present to a greater or lesser extent.

The most obvious connection is the close relationship between the contemplation of the body and that of feelings (*vedanā*). But, mental states and mental contents, too, have their physical correlates and, conversely, bodily processes and events have an effect on the mind and the emotions (one trembles with fear, taking a few deep breaths helps calm jittery nerves, etc.). The practice of mindful observation must take all of this into account, since the whole point of the exercise (whatever foundation of mindfulness it may be practiced on) is precisely to maintain full awareness of whatever is present "here and now" and to observe it impartially. When discussing the contemplation of the mind, it was pointed out that the awareness of mental states must also be maintained during the contemplation of the body in order to ensure unbroken mindfulness. If a sudden feeling of anxiety or of elation arises and is not consciously noted at once, the meditator is not paying proper attention.

This is why, in another famous discourse, the Ānāpānasati Sutta[130] (Discourse on the Mindfulness of Breathing), the *Buddha* devoted a whole course of instruction to explaining how the exclusive practice of mindfulness of breathing, used as the main exercise, perfects the other foundations of mindfulness and thus leads (in a certain sense, by itself, but, in fact, involving the whole spectrum of possible objects) to the ultimate achievement.

Very briefly, the discourse explains that mindfulness of breathing is, as we know, contemplation of the body; that paying close attention to the quality of the sensations which arise during breathing is contemplation of feelings; that paying attention to accompanying mental states is contemplation of the mind; and that paying attention to mental contents and, in particular, to the awareness of impermanence, of the arising and passing away of phenomena as perceived with mindful awareness, is contemplation of mental objects. Thus, the *Buddha* says:

> *"mindfulness of breathing, developed and assiduously practiced, perfects the four foundations of mindfulness; the four foundations of mindfulness, developed and assiduously practiced, perfect the seven factors of enlightenment; and the seven factors of enlightenment, developed and assiduously practiced, produce the perfection of knowledge and deliverance."* ■

[130] *Majjhima Nikāya*, no. 118.

# 7

# The Ultimate: Nibbāna

After undertaking at some length the ways and means of achieving that supremely desirable end that is *nibbāna*, one might well expect more explicit information about the goal itself. The problem here is that, as has previously been pointed out more than once, the very nature of *nibbāna* is such as to preclude an analytical or descriptive explanation. The ultimate achievement taught by the *Buddha* is inexplicable, in the literal sense of the word, because it does not fall within the verbal-conceptual categories that we are bound to use for intellectual communication and understanding. Consequently, every effort to explain *nibbāna* within the framework of these categories, every attempt to apprehend it conceptually, is, by definition, pointless. It is also inevitably misleading since, in trying to fit the inexplicable into some kind of intellectually understandable mold or framework, that is, into some kind of predetermined category, all that happens (and it has happened time and again in the history of Buddhist thought) is that it is "explained" by being subjected to all sorts of philosophical, soteriological, and linguistic distortions, all of them conditioned by the cultural environment or tradition from which they spring.

Thus, one finds, at the more superficial level, the erroneous identifications of "*nirvāṇa*" (*nibbāna*) (1) as a kind of heaven or paradise (essentially similar to those of Christian and Moslem eschatology), (2) as a mystic union with the Absolute, (3) as the realization of the *ātman*/Brahman identity (as in Vedānta Hinduism), or (4) as a total annihilation. A variety of more or less sophisticated "interpretations" along such lines have been propounded not only by Western students of Buddhism but also, throughout the centuries, by Buddhists themselves of the kind who were more inclined to speculate than to practice *vipassanā*. Thus, *nibbāna* "with the aggregates remaining" (*sopādisesa nibbāna*) has been variously interpreted (1) as a metaphysical experience, (2) as a mystic experience, (3) as a hypnotic state, (4) as a temporary annihilation, or (5) as a state of superconsciousness (of an absolute All, or of an absolute Nothing), while *nibbāna* "without the aggregates remaining" (*anupādisesa nibbāna*) (1) as a heavenly eternity, (2) as an eternal sleep, (3) as annihilation pure and simple, (4) as a merging back into the Absolute, (5) as a definitive union with a Supreme Consciousness, or (6) as the annihilation of the "self" (the separate, individual "self") in the realization of the "Self" (the ultimate, all-encompassing "Self"), etc.

All this is in striking contrast to the *Buddha's* own attitude; He abstained from theorizing and metaphysical speculation and considered the great questions which have traditionally challenged the minds of philosophers and religious thinkers as a waste of precious time which could be devoted, with greater profit, to the practice of *vipassanā*. The questions as to whether the world is eternal or not eternal, finite or infinite, as to whether there is a soul or a life principle which is identical or not identical with the body, of whether he who has achieved *nibbāna* goes on existing in some way after the death of the body or does not go on existing — all such questions, said the *Buddha*, are nothing but a clinging to mere views, "a thicket of views, a puppet-show of views, a toil of views, a snare of views".[131] They do not help us in any way to achieve that "unshakable liberation of the mind", which, He never tired of repeating, "is the purpose of the Holy Life, its essence, its goal."[132]

However, since words have to be used in order for us to communicate with one another, even the *Buddha* Himself sometimes could not avoid having to say *something* about *nibbāna* (usually in order to refute mistaken views about it). When compelled to do so, the *Buddha* would resort only to the simplest, soberest terms; *nibbāna*, and this is the crux of the matter, is *the end of suffering*. No other positive statement can usefully be made about it.

On the other hand, one can go on at some length about what *nibbāna* is *not*, in order to try to discourage the proliferation of "interpretations", which are all, in one way or another, reductionist, and clearly to establish its unique character and the one fact that it has nothing to do with anything whatsoever that makes up the conceivable universe:

> *"There is, Monks, something which is neither earth, nor water, nor fire, nor air, neither boundless space nor boundless consciousness, nor nothingness, nor the state of neither perception nor non-perception; neither this world nor any other world, neither sun nor moon. That, Monks, I call 'neither coming nor going, nor remaining, neither dying nor being born'. It is without support, development, or foundation. That is the end of suffering."*[133]

As has been noted before, the *Buddha* did not go in for rhetoric but was always intent on conveying quite specific, concrete information. This passage, too, far from being (as it has too often taken to be) one of those solemn utterances which aim to awe and impress rather than foster understanding, does, in fact, convey some very specific meanings. Let us take a close look at it.

It begins, obviously enough, by dissociating *nibbāna* from the realm of physical matter by stating that it has no connection with any of the four primordial elements (earth, water, fire, and air) of which, according to ancient tradition, matter is composed. Then, the realms which are beyond matter are equally excluded: we are told that neither boundless space nor boundless consciousness can be identified with *nibbāna*; nor can we say that it is nothingness; nor that it is a state where there is neither perception nor non-

[131] *Majjhima Nikāya*, Sabbāsava Sutta (All the Taints), no. 2.
[132] *Majjhima Nikāya*, Mahāsāropama Sutta (The Greater Discourse on the Simile of the Heartwood), no. 29.
[133] *Udāna* 8.1.

perception. The denial of any connection between *nibbāna* and anything that can be conceived is, as can be seen, rising to even more rarefied levels. In addition, it should be clearly noted that these last four categories have a perfectly concrete psychological (not metaphysical) meaning in the *Buddha's* teaching. They refer to the levels of experience attained in the four immaterial absorptions of *samatha* meditation. By pointing out that they are not related to *nibbāna*, the *Buddha* stresses here that it is not the practice of tranquility meditation that leads to ultimate insight and enlightenment.

There then follows a series of further negatives, which are all meant to stress, quite uncompromisingly, that *nibbāna* belongs to a different dimension from that which our intellectual apprehension of things — which always proceeds by opposites — operates: we think in terms of yes/no, life/death, here/there, time/eternity, etc. But *nibbāna* has nothing to do either with "this world nor any other world", has nothing to do with "coming or going, or remaining" (note here the dovetailing of two sets of opposites: coming/going, and coming or going/remaining), nothing to do with "dying or being born". In other words, the mechanism of opposites, of either/or, does not apply to it. Therefore, it cannot be stated that because "it is without support, development, or foundation", it is simply "nothing", since the concept of "nothing" is also part of the either/or dimension ("something/nothing"). In any event, the relevance of the concept of "nothingness" to *nibbāna* has already been denied earlier on in the discourse. The assimilation of *nibbāna* to "nothing", that is, the annihilationist interpretation of the *Buddha's* teaching has, however, always been a tempting one for those who approach the teaching from the outside (that is, attempting an intellectual understanding, but without practicing it). It was, in fact, one of the objections most commonly leveled against the *Buddha's* teaching by other religious leaders of His time. It was to show that the objection was unfounded that, on another occasion, the *Buddha* emphatically declared:

> *"There is, Monks, an unborn, unoriginated, unmade, and unconditioned state. If, Monks, there were not this unborn, unoriginated, unmade, and unconditioned, an escape from the born, originated, made, and conditioned would not be possible. Inasmuch as there is an unborn, unoriginated, unmade, and unconditioned state, an escape from the born, originated, made, and conditioned is possible."*[134]

The meaning of these words must be carefully investigated. Here, the *Buddha* states categorically that there is something that is not born, etc., and that, therefore, there is "an escape from the born, etc.", that is, there is such a thing as *nibbāna*, which, as we know, is the end of the suffering inherent in all that is born, etc. *Nibbāna* is not simply "nothing" (a category which, as we have just seen, is, in any case, not applicable to this issue), and the *Buddha* explains, once again, that it is "something" different from the world of mind and matter with which we are familiar. This time, He formulates the distinction in the broadest and most comprehensive terms possible. Earlier on, He made it clear that it has nothing to do with any aspect whatsoever of the web of interrelations, of causes and effects, mental and material, which constitutes our perceived universe. Everything that exists, from galaxies to viruses, from mathematical concepts to the most

[134] *Udāna* 8.3.

primitive instinctual drives, is, in one way or another, born, originated, or made, and certainly compound (that is, made up of a variety of component parts or processes). In this sense, *nibbāna* does not exist. But it is, nevertheless, something real and accessible to experiential knowledge ("If, Monks, there were not this unborn, unoriginated, unmade, and unconditioned, an escape from the born, originated, made, and conditioned would not be possible.")

Nevertheless, as just pointed out, both in the *Buddha's* own time and on many occasions since then, such an unequivocal affirmation has not deterred people who were unable or unwilling to accept the reality of "something" as conceptually undefinable as this *nibbāna* from labeling the *Buddha's* teaching as "nihilism" pure and simple. They have sought support for this view in the etymology of the term itself, since both the Sanskrit *nirvāṇa* and the Pāḷi *nibbāna* are derived from the combination of the negative prefix *nir-* with the root *vā-* "to blow", so that *nirvāṇa* means "blown out, extinguished", like a flame that lacks oxygen. When asked whether He was, therefore, a nihilist, the *Buddha* answered:

> *"In one sense, it may rightly be said of me: 'The Ascetic Gotama is a nihilist. He teaches the doctrine of annihilation and trains His disciples therein.' I teach the annihilation of greed, hatred, and delusion. I teach the annihilation of the many evil and unwholesome things. In this sense, it may be rightly said of me that 'The Ascetic Gotama is a nihilist. He teaches the doctrine of annihilation and trains His disciples therein'."*[135]

And He solemnly affirmed the positive value of *nibbāna* in terms of peace and supreme achievement:

> *"This is peace, this is the highest, namely, the end of all formations, the forsaking of every substratum of existence, the extinction of craving, fading away, cessation, nibbāna."*[136]

Let us consider this statement which, once again, is not poetically inspirational but concretely informative. "All formations" (*saṁkhārā*) refers to all that is compound and conditioned, that is to say, everything that is subsumed in the five aggregates of clinging which comprise all that can be perceived and cognized, all of which is impermanent and, consequently, a source of suffering as long as we persist in clinging to it. These aggregates, together with the whole network of causes and effects to which they give rise, constitute the "substrata of existence" which, according to the *Buddha's* teaching, are considered to be four in number:

1. The five aggregates of clinging themselves;
2. Sense desire ("craving"), involving the whole spectrum of wanting and not wanting, which is the root cause of suffering (the second Noble Truth).

[135] *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 8.12.
[136] *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 3.32.

3. The so-called ten "defilements" (*kilesa*) (which, like all these categories, is another way of bringing together, for the purposes of explanation and teaching, the main obstacles and unwholesome qualities which we must overcome in ourselves; it may be noted that some of them have already appeared under other groupings). These are: (1) greed; (2) hatred; (3) delusion (the first three defilements or "roots of existence", greed and hatred being the two aspects of attachment — wanting/not wanting —, which themselves spring from delusion, the fundamental misunderstanding of what is impermanent as lasting, and the consequent craving for it); (4) conceit (seen before as one of the fetters); (5) speculative views (which arise as a result of the fetter of ignorance); (6) doubt (also classified elsewhere as a fetter and as a hindrance); (7) sloth and torpor; (8) agitation and worry (this and the preceding are another two of the five hindrances); (9) shamelessness (described as "lack of moral shame", that is, unscrupulous behavior); and (10) lack of moral dread (that is, not fearing the negative consequences, for oneself and for others, of evil, harmful behavior).
4. *Kamma*: It is important to remember that *kamma* means "action, deed". Specifically, *kamma* is volition, an act of will, with its attendant mental and emotional factors. The act may not go beyond the mental sphere (wish, intention, disposition, etc.), or it may become manifest in words and deeds, but, at all these levels (even at the purely mental level), it is always an act, always *kamma*, involving, through the law of cause and effect, certain consequences (*vipāka*, literally, "ripening of the act") which condition our subsequent existence.

Then, the *Buddha* stresses the essential point: what needs to be achieved is "the extinction of craving" — this craving, which, with its attendant attachment, is the root and source of our problems. "Fading away" is a more literal translation of *virāga* and points both to the fact that all phenomena "fade away" or "pass away", and also to the fading away of, or detachment from, one's desire for and attachment to these transient phenomena as one gradually realizes, through direct experiential understanding, their impermanent nature.

As for "cessation" (*nirodha*), frequently used as a synonym for *nibbāna*, this is, of course, the cessation of delusion and of ignorance through the full understanding of the ephemeral nature of "all formations". As soon as this is really and truly understood, attachment ceases entirely, since it is seen that there is, quite literally, nothing whatsoever to be attached to. With the cessation of attachment, there is no further anxiety, anguish, and unhappiness. This is the end of suffering. This is *nibbāna*.

The fact that no satisfactory conceptual formulation can be offered concerning the essence or intrinsic nature of *nibbāna* does not mean, however, that it fails to inform the whole existence of those who experience it. On the contrary, those who achieve the deliverance of *nibbāna*, thanks to the experience of insight, live in a distinctly different mode of being. Even the most common activities or ordinary events are experienced and dealt with by such individuals in ways which are different from those of the rest of us, conditioned as we are by countless desires, aversions, and delusions. This is why, in the course of this book, the achievement of insight has repeatedly been referred to in terms of a total integration and restructuring of the human psyche and of a lasting transmutation of our intellectual, behavioral, and emotional habits. Of course, all such terms are only

manners of speaking, generalities, but they attempt the only thing that can be attempted, which is to give an idea of the tremendously positive nature of the nibbānic state or experience, a state which may be described as a higher state of consciousness, and which is distinguished by an attitude of total availability and openness to one's fellow beings, in the fullness of the four cardinal virtues (*brahmavihāra*): (1) loving-kindness (*mettā*); (2) compassion (*karuṇā*); (3) sympathetic joy (*muditā*); and (4) equanimity (*upekkhā*). ■