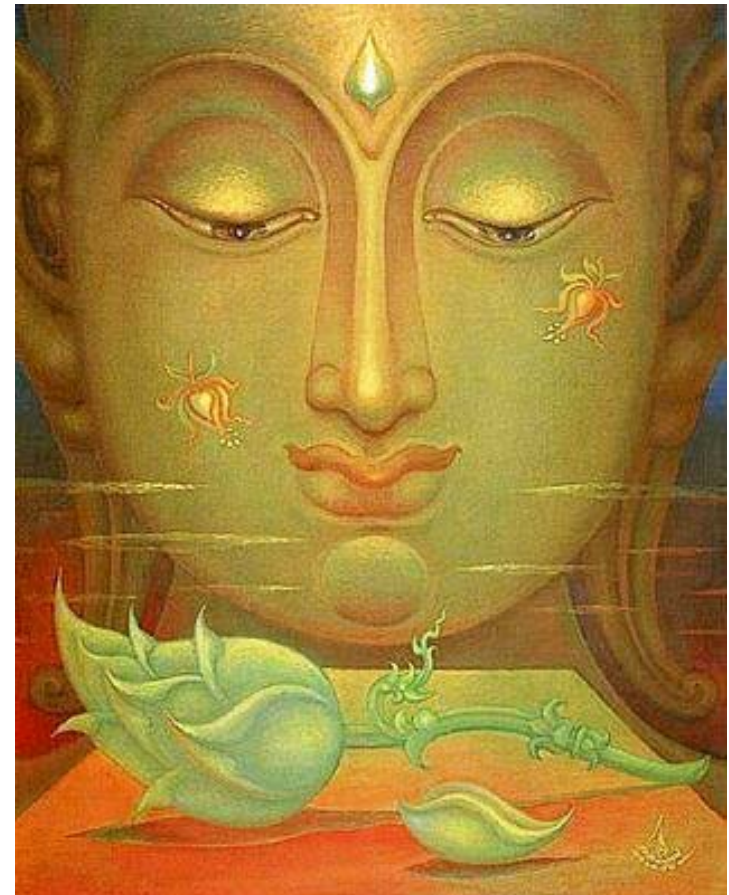


Insight Meditation for Beginners



Lust is a fire

There is no fire like lust, no crime like hate.
There is no ill like the body, no bliss higher
than Peace(Nibbana)



Compiled By Ven. Dr. Thanat Inthisan
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“Of course, there are dozens of meditation techniques to develop samadhi and many kinds of vipassana. But it all comes back to this—just let it all be. Step over here where it is cool, out of the battle. / Why not give it a try? Do you dare?” — Ajahn Chah, *A Still Forest Pool*.

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Insight Meditation for Beginners: A Brief Introduction

“Of course, there are dozens of meditation techniques to develop samadhi and many kinds of vipassana. But it all comes back to this—just let it all be. Step over here where it is cool, out of the battle. / Why not give it a try? Do you dare?”
— Ajahn Chah, *A Still Forest Pool*.

I. Preview

This booklet is a brief introduction to the concepts and techniques of Theravada Buddhist insight meditation. It is based directly on the writings of the Thai forest monk Ajahn Chah and his student Ajahn Sumedho, and to a lesser extent on those of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (see the references in Section XVI below). It is intended as a kind of road map for beginners to help them understand this meditation.

The booklet is divided into sixteen sections. It starts with a consideration of the difference between concentration meditation and insight meditation. Then there is a discussion of

preparations for meditation in the sitting position. The next section is about mindfulness with breathing: concentrating the mind on the breath (breathing in and breathing out) in order to achieve a calm state. This is a form of concentration meditation. The next two sections discuss alternate ways of carrying out this kind of meditation: standing and walking meditation, and lying meditation. At this point in the booklet it is necessary to point out the importance of personal conduct (morality) as an aid to meditation, for example, following the Five Precepts. Furthermore, directing loving-kindness toward ourselves and toward others while meditating is a way of bringing the essential ingredients of tolerance, good will, and peace to the practice. The next section is concerned with being aware of the mind’s activity. This is not just focusing on the breath any more, for instance, but observing the workings of the mind to see where it gets us into trouble. This is really what insight meditation is all about. In the course of watching the mind’s activity, moreover, the three essential characteristics of existence become more and more evident: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness (suffering), and the lack of a self (no-self). As we become more aware of how the mind works and how it causes problems for us, we see where corrections to our behavior are necessary. If we do not correct our behavior where it falls short, we will keep doing the things that cause suffering for us and will never see any progress in dealing with our problems. If we correct our behavior, however, we will begin to see a payoff. The next section shows how through insight meditation we are gradually able to let go of the world. We let go of what we like as well as of what we do not like. The more we let go, the further along we move on the path to perfect Enlightenment. Finally, insight meditation is shown to be not just an occasional activity to help us

eliminate suffering from our lives but, rather, a way of life. The practice of insight meditation is a way of living at every moment of our lives.



At the end of the booklet there is an Appendix presenting a version of the blessing for giving loving-kindness to ourselves and to others. The last section is a list of the key reference material used in the preparation of this work.

II. Concentration Meditation versus Insight Meditation

What, then, is concentration meditation? What is insight meditation? How do they differ? Concentration meditation, in the first place, is better called the mental development (*bh van*) of concentration (*sam dhi*). This is training the mind (*citta*) to focus on a particular object, for instance, the breath as we breathe in and breathe out. When the mind focuses in this way, it brings itself to a point. The result of this training is the development of tranquility. The body, and along with the body the mind, calm down. We develop the ability to focus the mind on one thing rather than simply let it jump around uncontrollably from one thing to another. Insight meditation, on the other hand, is the mental development of insight (*vipassan*), i.e., intuitive, firsthand seeing into the workings of the mind and into the nature of the world (cf. insight). It is important to note that the term *vipassan* is used in two senses in the literature: as the type of meditation (actually, *vipassan -bh van*) and, more precisely, as the insight

that is achieved through this meditation practice. So both concentration meditation and insight meditation result in something: in the former case a state of tranquility, in the latter case insight into the ultimate nature of things. In this sense both of these practices are tools for the improvement of the mind. What is more, they are tools that are developed through the meditation practice. This is “on the job” training: the way to get good at it is to just do it. Furthermore, both types of meditation work together: concentration meditation affords the tranquil state that is conducive to the mind’s ability to see into the reality of things. Because the mind can view things as they really are, it can clear up the problems that it otherwise causes for itself and live in peace and in harmony with the world.

Insight meditation is of the utmost importance. It is not a sometimes sort of thing, something done, for example, in a meditation retreat once in a while. It is not a special practice for monks or nuns, something not feasible for the rest of us in the workaday world. It is not a thing to take or leave, but a duty to perform if we are to live in conformity with the laws of nature, i.e., of the totality of the world of human experience. It is a natural process, one of gradually letting go of the world, both of what we like and what we dislike. It is the way all of us are supposed to live in order to achieve, ultimately, the highest spiritual perfection available to human beings, Enlightenment (*nibb na*).

III. Getting Ready

The previous having been said about the meaning of insight meditation and how it is related to concentration meditation, consideration can next be given to preparations for meditation in the sitting position. What do we need to do to

get our practice started? In the main we have to find the right time and place, do what we can to give our practice a chance to work, and learn how to sit in the proper way.



As regards place, first, most of us do not have access to a hut in the peace and quiet of the forest. On the contrary, we probably live in a noisy metropolitan area. However, we have to make the best of what we have. Ideally, we should meditate in a light, spacious, uncluttered room. Our mind will be better disposed toward meditation if this is the case. We want light and space to brighten up and open up our minds: we do not want to feel gloomy and closed-in. Moreover, if we practice in an uncluttered room, our minds will be less apt to get distracted by things sitting around. The temperature in the room should be somewhat cool. If nothing else, if possible, we should go to the temple and practice meditating in the Buddha “chapel” there or in the ordination hall. The point, though, is to just get started. With enough practice, eventually we should be able to meditate almost anywhere, even in a subway on the way to work if we have to do so. As regards time, we have to find an occasion that fits what is perhaps a busy work schedule. For a “morning person,” meditation at the beginning of the day before everyone else in the household is up is a good idea. Or, perhaps practicing right after work is suitable. We should meditate when we will not be thinking of another activity that is competing for the same time slot. We should not feel constrained to practice at a certain time, no matter what;

we have to be flexible, given our own personal situations. We should try to meditate every day, but three times a week at the start is better than nothing. Furthermore, we must not make the meditation time a marathon: fifteen minutes is enough at the beginning. Our practice should not be a burden for us. We should do it because we really want to do so, not because we think it is something we are supposed to do regularly, such as running on the treadmill, like it or not. We ought not to take too forced and rigid an approach toward meditation: in terms of time spent and skillfulness achieved, we should let the practice develop naturally.

Secondly, what can we do to give our practice a chance to work? For one thing, we have to do something to help ourselves and, for another, we have to get the help of others if necessary. To help ourselves, we should make some sort of initial commitment to really try. Commit to trying meditation for nothing more than a couple weeks, maybe, to see what it produces. That may mean, if necessary, skipping a favorite sitcom on television for a while, for example, to make the time. Furthermore, commitment to trying means being willing to change certain habits we might have that would be detrimental to our practice. It is a truism that good people do meditation, and meditation makes people “good.” (This point will be developed more later.) What this means is that right from the start of our meditation practice, we have to begin to break ourselves away from our bad habits in order to then be able to develop further the “good” life that meditation promises. In other words, concentration meditation and insight meditation have a foundation in morality. So the sooner we get out of the habit of kicking the dog, or gossiping about the supervisor at the water cooler, and so on, the better off our practice will be.

To give our practice a chance to work, we should also not hesitate to get the help of others if needed. If it is good, as far as possible, to have some sort of routine, it is also good to meditate with others if circumstances permit. If we can meditate with some friends, we will have a better chance of staying motivated. We will be able to “feed off” one another as we practice. We will not be subject so much to our own mood swings. We may need a “coach” to get ourselves going. This could be a monk at the temple or a more or less seasoned practitioner to help us, for example, with questions of technique if they arise. To get our meditation practice off the ground, it might be a good idea to go to the temple and have a monk sit with us in the first few beginning sessions and lead us through the breathing in and breathing out exercise. If we really need a “jump start,” we could attend one of the two- or three-day concentration and insight meditation retreats offered on a regular basis at the temple.



The third thing we need to do to get our practice started is to learn how to sit properly in order to meditate. We have, of course, been sitting all our lives, but there are some things to keep in mind as we prepare to sit to meditate. There are four proper postures for the Lord Buddha in his representations, three proper ways of sitting, and six proper hand gestures. However, if we are to sit properly for meditation, all we really have to do initially is sit comfortably, back straight, with hands on our knees. If we are senior citizens, heavy-set, have stiff joints, or the like, we may be able to do nothing

more than sit in a straight-backed chair. There is nothing wrong with that. For a more traditional approach, we may wish to sit on a meditation stool, if available, or on a cushion, or right on the floor. The key here is to relax and keep the back straight. We should keep the hips forward to avoid slumping, keep our backs naturally curved, and avoid hunching the shoulders. We should sit up straight but not get tensed up. If we use a cushion, we should place it toward the back of the buttocks to keep the angle of the hips correct. If we are not used to sitting at floor level to meditate, it may take a little time to get comfortable. We should not think we can whip ourselves into submission by dint of sheer will power. We have to work with our bodies, not against them.

If possible, we should try to get to the point where we can sit on the floor (perhaps on a mat) in the full lotus (diamond) position. In this case, the legs are crossed in front of us, left foot over right thigh, right foot over left thigh, soles of the feet upright. Why do this? This position, because of its stability (we will not tip over) and because it keeps the backbone straight, is very conducive to meditation. To work our way to this position, we can start with the legs folded in front of us, then advance to the half-lotus position (the right foot over the left thigh), then to the full-lotus position. Sitting this way, we can put out hands on our knees, or place them in our laps, one hand on top the other, palms up and tips of thumbs touching. If we are worried about hot, sweaty hands in our laps, we should keep our hands on our knees.

Something should be said, finally, about tension and sleepiness. If we are so tensed up during our first meditation efforts that we are getting a headache, let us say, we need to take things a little less seriously. Meditation is a natural healing process for the body and the mind; it should not make us

ill. To relieve tension, we can visualize a cool, soothing light shining throughout our bodies alleviating any pain or tension, or we can imagine that the tension is slowly draining out of our bodies. Another technique is to do a kind of sweep of the body, checking the muscles of every area and having them relax: we move from our feet up to the thighs, and then from the navel down, from the navel to the shoulders (including the arms and hands), then through the neck and head. Or we can move from the top of the head to the tips of the feet.

Then there is the matter of sleepiness during meditation. In a day and age when many people do not get the recommended eight hours sleep every night, meditation practitioners may very well get drowsy and begin to doze off. One of the Thai forest monks recommended meditating on the edge of a cliff to preclude the possibility of falling asleep. We hope he was not entirely serious. This may keep us awake, but what if it does not? We will never have the opportunity of benefiting from the fruits of meditation practice if we plunge to our deaths off the top of a cliff! If we have to resort to such extreme measures, we should probably just go to bed and get some sleep, and try again tomorrow. A better technique might be nothing more than lowering the temperature in the room. Or it might be meditating with our eyes open and gazing at the tip of the nose. Most beginners tend to meditate with the eyes closed because it helps focus the attention. However, this tends to make us sleepy. With a little practice, it is possible to



meditate with the eyes open; eventually, as our concentration improves, the eyes will close of themselves. Furthermore, to overcome drowsiness, we could stand up, stretch, and walk around for a few moments. Perhaps, too, we are meditating on a full stomach right after dinner, or late in the evening close to bedtime, and we need to find another time when our minds are more alert.

IV. Mindfulness with Breathing

As indicated above in Section II, the purpose of concentration meditation, the mental development (*bhavanā*) of concentration (*samādhi*), is to learn how to focus the mind on a particular object so that tranquility results. Unless the mind has focused and calmed down, it will not be able to gain any insight into itself and into the true nature of the world. The approach most frequently taken in the Theravada Buddhist tradition is for the mind to contemplate the breath, i.e., the breathing in and breathing out. Hence comes the term *ānāpānasati*, mindfulness of breathing (literally, mindfulness, *sati*, of the inhaled breath, *ānā*, and of the exhaled breath, *pānā*, of in-spiration and of ex-piration). Mindfulness of breathing has its basis in the Pāli Canon, i.e., in the *ānāpānasati Sutta*.

We begin our concentration meditation by doing a kind of sweep of the body (as described above in Section III). This serves two purposes: it helps us settle down a bit and relieve any tension that may be existing, say at the end of a stressful workday, and it also directs the mind away from the world toward the body, the focus of our attention. Mindfulness, *sati*, is not only awareness, knowing or contemplating, but also a kind of investigation. Doing of sweep of the body gets us in an investigative kind of mindset. It gets us ready for

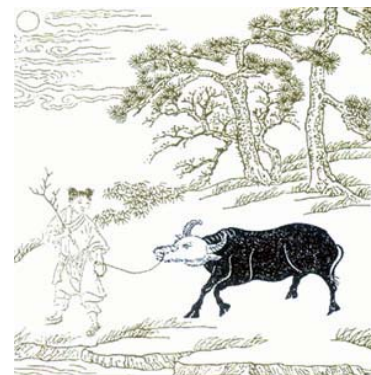
meditation, because meditation, as we shall see, is largely about investigation. After examining the body as a whole from top to bottom, we then focus specifically on our breath. We can do this in one of two ways. First, we can follow the breath as we breathe in through the nose, down through the chest, to the abdomen, then again as we breathe out by the reverse route. Of course, we know the breath does not go to the abdomen but rather to the alveoli (air sacs) in the lungs, but that is how we imagine it. Alternately, we can pick a point along the breath's route and focus on that. The tip of the nose is the obvious choice: this is a very specific location where the flow of the breath begins and where it ends. We focus on this point and notice everything about the flow of the breath here.

We do this for whatever duration of time we can; initially, our concentration will not last very long. It will take a while to develop it, but that is a goal of concentration meditation. When the mind wanders, we notice what is happening and where our attention has ended up, but we do not get upset with ourselves. We are not prosecutors, but investigators. Instead of concentrating on the breath, we may find ourselves thinking about a family member and how angry he or she made us feel. We let go of what we are thinking about and of any frustration we may feel about allowing the mind to drift. We just gently bring our attention back to the breathing in and breathing out. We are not trying to be yogis; we are not trying to enter into some kind of trance. We are just trying to develop our concentration to the point where we can use it as a tool in our insight meditation. It is not necessary for us to go any further. (There is anything wrong with perfecting our ability to concentrate so we can reach more refined states of awareness, from which insight meditation can begin. The point is this kind of refined awareness is not absolutely neces-

sary.)

Using concentration as a tool, we are starting to learn how to investigate what is going on in our minds, how our minds work. The more we perfect this ability to be aware of what is going on, to investigate, the stronger will our mindfulness become. Mindfulness is not an inborn ability; we have to work at developing it.

If we are having a difficult time concentrating at all (maybe we have a lot of things on our minds, and they keep jumping all over the place), there are several tricks that we can use. We can, first of all, inhale as deeply as we can until there is no room left in the chest cavity for any more air, then exhale forcefully until there is absolutely no air left. We repeat this process three or four times. This kind of rough exertion is more attention-grabbing than, for example, the more refined breathing in and breathing out at the tip of the nose. Secondly, we can try using a mantra to help us concentrate. A mantra is a word having religious significance that we repeat to ourselves in our meditation. For example, we can think the word, *Buddha*, to ourselves as we are concentrating on the breath: as we inhale, we think *Bud-*, as we exhale, *-dha*. We do this with every inhalation and exhalation. This mantric



repetition is not something in which we are rather passively engaged. We make ourselves vividly see the syllables as we say them to ourselves: *Bud-* and *-dha*. We make an effort to produce these syllables in the fronts of our minds in conjunction with breathing in and breathing out. This is how we settle our minds down and

bring them front and center. (Instead of the mantra, we may choose to use something as simple as the word, *rise*, or *in*, for breathing in, and *fall*, or *out*, for breathing out. The results are the same.) Thirdly, we can trick ourselves by counting as we inhale and exhale. Here, again, we vividly produce the numbers in our minds to establish concentration: ONE, TWO, THREE, and so on. Counting as we breath has an additional benefit: if we extend the count of each inhalation and exhalation, inhale counting to ten rather than five, for example, and exhale counting the same way, we extend the breathing in and breathing out. The fact is that the longer the breath, the more the activity of the body (and of the mind) tends to slow down. In other words, the longer breath brings greater tranquility. This is the kind of calm needed for insight meditation.

V. Standing and Walking Meditation

The approach to concentration meditation most frequently taken is for the mind to contemplate the breath, i.e., the breathing in and breathing out. The next two sections of the booklet discuss alternate ways of carrying out concentration meditation: standing and walking meditation, and lying meditation.

Standing and walking meditation, in the first place, is a very good supplement to meditation in the sitting position. It can be alternated with sitting meditation. It is a good practice for those of us who are having trouble keeping the mind alert or even staying awake. It adds a little vitality and vigor to our meditation. It may be done indoors, e.g., in the ordination hall, or outdoors. If weather permits, it is a good idea to do it outside in the fresh air. We choose a place about twenty-five paces long on level ground and stand at the end of our path. We can let our hands hang down at our sides, or clasp them in

front of us or behind us. This time we certainly want to keep our eyes open! We look at the ground about ten feet in front of us and try not to get distracted by what is going on around us.

We first do a sweep of our body, examining every part from the top of the head to the tips of the feet to relax ourselves. (There is more energy involved in standing and walking meditation than in sitting meditation, but it, too, is intended to produce tranquility.) We do a sweep, also, to bring our minds to a focus on the body. In standing and walking meditation our minds are involved in the contemplation of various motions and placements of the feet and legs, so this is all the more reason for beginning with a close examination of the body. Furthermore, this kind of meditation, with its focus on the body in action, is more connected with the world of ordinary human experience. In this way standing and walking meditation provides a transition from concentration meditation, which develops concentration, tranquility, and mindfulness, to insight meditation, which uses these three in the activities of daily life to gain insight into the workings of the mind and the world. In this respect standing and walking meditation plays an important role.

The mechanics of standing and walking meditation are as follows. Just as we contemplated the movement of the breath in mindfulness with breathing, in standing and walking meditation we direct our attention to each stage of the process of walking as we go through it. We walk normally, but with a sharply-pointed mind and a mind fully aware. Standing at the end of our path and facing it, we slowly say to ourselves, “Standing, standing, standing.” In this way we become completely aware of our standing position. Then we focus on our intention to walk, saying to ourselves, “Intend-

ing to walk, intending to walk, intending to walk.” The walking process itself is broken down into three stages, i.e., lifting, moving, and touching, each of which becomes the object of our full attention. We become aware of the fact we are shifting our weight to the left foot so we can raise our right one. As we say to ourselves, “Lifting,” we raise our right foot and begin walking. We say, “Moving,” as we move the foot forward in our first step, then, “Touching,” as we place the foot down. (We place the whole sole of the foot down solidly.) We consciously shift the weight to the right foot and repeat the process to take a step with the left foot. We repeat the procedure as we progress down the path to the end of it. All the while we focus our full attention on each stage of our walking. If our mind wanders, we notice what has happened but do not get upset with ourselves. We gently bring our attention back to our walking. We walk slowly and deliberately, but not too slowly, and naturally, trying to avoid awkward “balancing acts” as we shift our weight. As beginners, we may lose our balance at some point in the process, but we should merely note to ourselves what has happened, refocus our attention, and continue.

At the end of our path, we stand with our feet together and note our standing position, saying to ourselves again, “Standing, standing, standing.” We make a conscious effort to relax in order to produce a tranquil state. We have to get ourselves turned around facing our path again, so we next focus on that intention, saying to ourselves, “Intending to turn, intending to turn, intending to turn.” We shift our weight to the left foot as we prepare to move the right one. We notice the fact that we are shifting the weight. We divide our turning around 180 degrees into two 90 degree turns. That is we first say to ourselves, “Turning,” and at the same time move the

right leg 90 degrees to the side and set our foot down to complete half the turn. We focus on the movement of the leg and the placement of the foot. We shift the weight to the right foot, noticing the shift. We say to ourselves, “Turning,” and repeat the process to move the left foot next the right one. At this point we are facing the side of our path at a 90 degree angle. We repeat the process again for the right and the left feet so that we are once again facing our path. Then we traverse the path again, repeating the initial procedure so we end up at the starting point. So we walk back and forth across our path. Initially, we may wish to practice our standing and walking meditation for about fifteen or twenty minutes. We begin with what is comfortable for us.

When standing and walking meditation becomes easier for us, we might choose to combine mindfulness of breathing with mindfulness of the movement of our feet. We breathe in for two steps, and then breathe out for two steps. Practicing this kind of “double mindfulness” will certainly enhance our ability to concentrate as we prepare for insight meditation.



VI. Lying Meditation

Besides standing and walking meditation as an alternate to concentration meditation as mindfulness of breathing in and breathing out, another form of concentration meditation is lying meditation. For meditation masters, lying meditation may be incorporated into a formal meditation regimen (see the reference in Section XVI below to *Sop ko Bodh*).

However, for the purposes of beginners like ourselves, lying meditation may be considered an excellent practice at the end of the day to prepare us for our night's sleep. In lying meditation we assume the posture of the lying-down Buddha. We lie on our right side, keeping the body straight. We extend the right arm and bend it up toward the head so that the right hand supports the head. The left hand and arm are placed along the side of the body. The left leg is placed on top the right leg so it is comfortable. In lying meditation we may choose to do nothing more than a sweep of the body, top to bottom, checking the muscles of every area and having them relax. We let the troubles and tensions of the day melt away as we prepare for sleep. We clear our mind of everything, even expectations and plans for tomorrow. We establish an empty mind and then go to sleep. Or, we may choose to practice our mindfulness of breathing in and breathing out meditation for a few minutes to bring tranquility, and then sleep. At any event, effective lying meditation at the end of the day is much better than having to resort to sedatives or sleeping pills.

VII. Personal Conduct as an Aid to Meditation

In Buddhism morality (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*) make up a threefold training program preparing the individual for Enlightenment. The steps of the Noble Eightfold Path to *nibbāna* are classified in terms of this training: right speech, right action, right livelihood (morality); right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration (concentration); and right understanding and right thought (wisdom). Granted that the steps of the Eightfold Path are not taken consecutively, but, rather, all the stops along the way are developed simultaneously, nonetheless, it remains true

that concentration presupposes morality as its foundation, just as wisdom presupposes morality and concentration.

Similarly, in terms of meditation, concentration meditation is founded on morality, and insight meditation is founded on morality and concentration meditation. Concentration meditation does not make any sense apart from its moral basis. Concentration meditation, and insight meditation in its turn, both leading us to the “good” life, presuppose good people in the first place in order to be effective. It is a truism that good people do meditation, and meditation makes people “good.” Concentration meditation as well as insight meditation are not for the morally depraved and decrepit. Unscrupulous rogues who want to take up concentration meditation to try to achieve tranquility in their lives are clearly missing the point. They have to stop being unscrupulous rogues. The point is that concentration meditation is part of a training program for people who, intending to live in conformity with the laws of nature for human conduct, wish to achieve Enlightenment through insight into the ultimate reality of things. People who are morally unfit will not be able to reach Enlightenment because they are thwarting the laws of nature. The training program includes morality, as the “introductory course,” concentration meditation as the “intermediate course,” and insight meditation, as the more “advanced course.”

Two instances may be given of the morality that we should be developing in our lives as we advance in our skillfulness in concentration meditation and, then, insight meditation. One is the case of generosity, *dāna*, defined as any act of unselfish giving of one's time or resources for the benefit of others, for the good of society, e.g., offering food or other necessities to the monks at the temple. In traditional Buddhism generosity is understood in terms of making merit,

performing wholesome actions that will shape the outcome of one's present life and future lives in a positive way.

Generosity, however, can also play an important role as a tool, an aid, in the practice of concentration meditation. For one thing, to the extent we cultivate generosity in our relationships with other people, we are better able to calm ourselves down in concentration meditation because we have loosened the grip of the defilements (*kilesa*) of greed, anger, and delusion. If we are really developing generosity in our hearts, how can we think such angry thoughts about someone, or be so greedy about someone else's possessions, or be so deluded about what is the wise course of action with regard to another person? Generosity entails giving up something special we would really rather keep for ourselves. Giving a dollar to a homeless man in the middle of the street is one thing, but what about giving up our time on a Sunday to do some painting and yard work at the temple, instead of watching football on television or going golfing? To the extent we are selfish, not generous, we are not comfortable with ourselves. We have an unsettled state of mind because we are overly concerned and worried about what belongs to us. This condition shows in our attempts at concentration meditation. The way to make ourselves more comfortable is to be less taken up with ourselves and what belongs to us, and more directed toward the needs of others.



For another thing, a spirit of generosity, sharing our

resources and time with people, leads naturally to genuine goodwill towards others, i.e., to loving-kindness. Loving-kindness is important as part of the “divine life” we try to achieve as we advance in our skillfulness in concentration meditation and, then, in insight meditation (see the next section). The abode of loving-kindness is one of the hallmarks of the enlightened individual.

Then, too, generosity is a willingness to “let go” of things that belong to us. Generosity is like water running off a duck's back: nothing sticks. If someone needs something we have, it does not matter because it does not stick to us. We can let go of it without getting upset. This being able to let go of things without thinking about ourselves is exactly the kind of outlook we want to be developing as we begin our insight meditation practice. (This theme of generosity as letting go will be developed further in Section XII.)

A second instance of the morality that we should be developing in our lives as we advance in our skillfulness in concentration meditation and, then, insight meditation is following the Five Precepts. They are included under right action in the Noble Eightfold Path. The precepts, like generosity, are a presupposition for and an aid in the development of our meditation practice. They are the minimum standard for morality in Buddhism, a “passing grade” for the first course in the training program.

The intent of the Five Precepts is not just to prohibit, in the sense of commanding against something. They not like the Ten Commandments in the Judeo-Christian tradition that tell us what we *must* not do. Rather, they are guidelines for living life in conformity with the laws of nature for society so we can avoid the problems that we otherwise cause for ourselves and live in harmony with the world. They are things

we would want to do to keep ourselves out of trouble. Furthermore, despite the way the precepts are commonly presented, they are essentially positive in meaning. The Five Precepts promote the right kind of living for those taking up meditation:

1) Refraining from destroying living things: spreading loving-kindness toward all living things.

2) Refraining from taking things not given to us: being honest in our dealings with others and respecting their rights.

3) Refraining from sexual misconduct: exercising moderation in our sexual activities.

4) Refraining from lying: being honest in our speech and straight with people; using only speech that has the effect of producing good results.

5) Refraining from intoxicants: using intoxicants moderately and trying to give them up altogether.

Following the Five Precepts gives us a sense of contentment and comfort. We are free from worry and from regret because we have not done anything wrong. Because of the good we have engendered, we bring happiness into our lives. We escape the spiritual sufferings of a hellish life and find our “heaven” on earth.

VIII. Having a Heart

To have the proper frame of mind for concentration meditation, we also have to “have a heart,” that is, show kindness. For Buddhists this means having loving-kindness, *mettā*, which is directed to all living beings. Loving-kindness is not a warm-and-fuzzy feeling for people. It is not having a close relationship with them. It does not necessarily mean we like them. It has nothing to do with sexual attraction or romance. It is not equivalent to “real love”: unselfishly putting

someone else’s needs before our own and accepting the other for what he or she is without making demands upon that person. Loving-kindness means having goodwill toward all living beings; it means not having any aversion or hatred toward them, not wanting to hurt them. So, while we like our grandmothers and feel a closeness to them, we do not like terrorists or feel any sort of fondness for them. But we have loving-kindness toward both our grandmothers and toward terrorists. We want the latter to “go away,” but our intention is not to shoot them dead. Loving-kindness is goodwill to all living beings without exception: relatives, friends, attractive people, babies, but also the homeless, criminals, the insane, and the deformed. Then, too, it is goodwill to animals, insects, and plants, both the beautiful and the ugly, the beneficial and the noxious.

Loving-kindness also plays an important role in concentration meditation. As was discussed above in the section on mindfulness with breathing, when the mind wanders, we notice what is happening and where our attention has ended up, but we do not get upset with ourselves about losing control. By noting what our mind does in a situation such as this, we are beginning to understand how it works. This is the beginning of the insight we will be developing in our *vipassanā* meditation. At the same time we are learning how to investigate, i.e., we are developing our mindfulness. We follow the activities of the mind without passing judgment upon it. We also refrain from passing judgment upon any of the things that occupy the mind’s attention. We let go of what we are thinking about and of any frustration we may feel about our lack of concentration. We gently bring our attention back to our breathing. We just let our thoughts and feelings “go away.” This attitude of good will towards ourselves, of acceptance, is

really loving-kindness. Mindfulness as nonjudgmental investigation is akin to loving-kindness. Here we have no desire to get rid of anything in our mental life; we just want to see what is going on so we can begin to understand ourselves. Mindfulness as loving kindness is the kind of attitude we want to be developing early in our concentration meditation and then carrying over into insight meditation. Eventually this knowing, loving acceptance will be the outlook we will be having toward the totality of our world.

How do we nurture loving-kindness in our meditation, a loving kindness that will eventually color our view of the entire world? How do we bring good will, tolerance, acceptance, and peace into our mental life? Concentration meditation naturally “cools us down.” The stresses and hostilities of the day diminish as we focus on the breath or on the stages of our standing and walking. For example, the tensions we have felt or the anger we have experienced lose their intensity. We can deepen the calm and peace concentration meditation brings by adding thoughts of loving-kindness to it. This is like using a mantra, as discussed above, in this case a mantra focused specifically on goodwill and peace. As we breathe in we say to ourselves, “May I be happy,” as we breathe out, “May all beings be happy.” Or we can say, “May I have peace,” and, “May all beings have peace.” We bring the words vividly to the front of our minds. If we want, we can direct our loving-kindness first to ourselves, then to our family members, then to acquaintances, then toward people we for whom we have no real affinity. The idea is to extend loving acceptance to our own mental states and to all the beings in our lives. It is to foster the kind of nonjudgmental acceptance of our world of experience that we want to carry over into our insight meditation.

We can use the loving-kindness method of concentration meditation at the beginning of a session to get us in the proper frame of mind (or at the end so we carry this loving acceptance away with us), or we can devote the entire period to it, thereby truly giving heart to our practice. If nothing else,



when we do our sweep of the body at the beginning of our meditation to help us settle down and to direct our attention to the body, we can imagine our gaze as being healing and loving. We see our hearts as being infused with a loving-kindness that radiates outward to encompass all things.

Directing loving-kindness toward ourselves and toward others while meditating is a way of bringing the essential ingredients of tolerance, good will, and peace to our practice. We become “no problem” individuals: nothing in the life of our minds becomes problematic. We do not create any problems for ourselves as we follow the activities of the mind in our beginning attempt to gain insight into its workings. We do not pass judgment; we offer acceptance. We do not try to get rid of anything; we simply let things go away by themselves. Eventually, this loving acceptance of things will lead us naturally to the compassion toward all living things that characterizes Enlightenment.

IX. Being Aware of the Mind’s Activity

Concentration meditation, then, is a preparation for insight meditation in several ways. For one thing, we are developing our ability to concentrate. For another we are develop-

ing our mindfulness. For the third, we are learning how to let go of things and not get upset about them or ourselves. When the mind wanders, we take note of what has happened and what we are now thinking about, and then gently lead the mind back to the object of concentration. In this way we foster good will and acceptance toward ourselves. We are beginning to learn to step back from the world. This is the first thing we must do in order to live in harmony with the world. Furthermore, insofar as we direct loving-kindness towards ourselves and others, we further enhance this attitude of tolerance, good will, and peace.

The transition from concentration meditation to insight meditation is seamless and natural. We have seen how the mind can drift from its object in concentration meditation and start thinking about other things. Losing control of the mind in this way is unintentional. However, the mind can also purposely put aside the object of concentration, be it the breath or the stages of walking, and contemplate the stream of consciousness that it experiences. This is a conscious effort to begin insight meditation as such. The mind has briefly begun this kind of investigation when it considered the process of its losing its attention and regaining it.

Now we decide that precisely what we want to do is observe what is going on in the flow of consciousness. We simply watch what is happening in order to understand what takes place. We just pay attention. We do not pass judgment; we merely observe. There is neither praise nor blame. We bring all the powers of concentration we have been developing to bear upon the objects of the mind to study them. In this way we are able to put our mindfulness to work for us. (There is no reason we cannot begin our insight meditation during walking meditation rather than during mindfulness with breath-

ing meditation. Actually, walking might be more stimulating for the mind and better promote the flow of impressions.)

In our first attempts at insight meditation, then, we are thinking *about* the mind's activities. We may lose this distance from what is happening in the mind as we meditate and once again return to just engaging *in* these activities. We may go from making no choices about what we are watching to again choosing that about which we are thinking. In other words, we may lose our mindfulness. For example, we may start thinking about the bills we have to pay and trying to figure out how we will be managing our money to take care of them. Or, instead of contemplating the anger we feel toward someone, we may start considering how we can get even with him. In our walking meditation we may find ourselves trying to figure out what species of bird just flew by. Instead of losing distance, furthermore, we may start to lose focus. We may lose our mindfulness among a blur of mental images. (This could happen, for example, if we are too tired.) We may even be overwhelmed by a bombardment of impressions. In these cases we can return to our home base to steady ourselves: we can return to concentrating on the breath or on the stages of walking in order to once again focus our attention. Once a sharp, steady concentration is reestablished, we can put our mindfulness back to work investigating the workings of the mind. In this way concentration and mindfulness are the tools we use to do our work.

Why are we contemplating the objects of the mind? The whole purpose of insight meditation is to find out what is happening in the mind and where the mind gets us into trouble so that we can prevent problems from arising for ourselves.

What are we contemplating when we begin our insight meditation? At first we are more than likely doing nothing

more than considering the feelings and emotions associated with the practice. Perhaps we are dissatisfied with the way things are going, discouraged that we cannot seem to keep our minds from drifting away. Or we get angry with ourselves. We try to put some effort into our meditation and “get serious,” and that does not seem to work; we try to relax, and that does not seem to get us anywhere either. Maybe we do not feel like meditating any more and would rather be doing something else. We notice the numbness of a leg that has fallen asleep. We are a little restless because we have been sitting a long time. Or we feel quite peaceful and calm compared to the way we felt when we were at the job doing battle with our fellow employees. We feel an empty sensation in our stomach because we have not had breakfast or a burning sensation because the lunch we had does not agree with us. If we are walking outside, we may notice the warm feeling of the sun or the cool sensation of a breeze that is blowing. If we are meditating with others, we may experience a sense of loving connectedness to them. Whatever the situation, we simply contemplate the phenomena that are showing themselves to us.

We reach the stage in our insight meditation when we start to contemplate feelings and emotions that have arisen in our day-to-day living. These are frequently feelings and emotions that arise in our relationships with other people. This is a natural evolution of the meditation practice. As we reflect on how our relationships with other people play themselves out, we better understand how our minds work. We begin to understand that the things we say and do have definite consequences. We begin to understand what drives us to do certain things, and where our feelings lead us and how our emotions arise. We start to see where we get ourselves in trouble because of how we act, and under what conditions calm and

peace can originate. We gain some insight into nature, the totality of the world of human experience.

In our insight meditation we contemplate incidents that have recently occurred in our lives. The following are examples of what we might be investigating:



1) We get upset with a subordinate at work for not following instructions. Our anger gets the best of us. The discussion turns into a kind of yelling match that goes nowhere. Instead of helping the person in a kindly way improve his conduct, we have caused him to become upset and take offense. If loving-kindness begets loving-kindness, so does anger beget anger. And if anger reproduces itself, so does the suffering that goes with it. We clearly see the results of our ill will. We realize, furthermore, the inadequacy of blame as a means of dealing with people (or with ourselves). Blame creates needless problems; loving acceptance makes problems go away. This does not mean subordinates do not have to follow instructions. It does mean that showing kindness and patience, rather than being critical and demanding, makes the situation less problematic.

2) We give a gift to a friend, but he forgets to take it home and we get upset. An act of kindness turns into a fit of anger. How curious! We see that we cannot attach to anything, not to wicked deeds but not to good deeds either. Generosity is, we recall, letting go in every sense so that nothing at all sticks. Acts of kindness truly have “no strings attached.” We do not look for anything in return. We do not expect the

recipient to remember to take the gift home. We do not expect appreciation. Nothing matters here. This is more than not getting offended by what someone does, with not “getting an attitude.” It is actually “loving unattachment” to anything that happens. We understand that attachment of *any* sort by its very nature brings suffering into our lives.

3) The abbot at the temple gives a talk that we think is taking too long. He is speaking in Thai, and everyone else understands what he is saying, but we do not understand Thai. We think, “Why does he have to talk so long? Will he ever get finished? Doesn’t he realize it is time to eat and people are hungry? Doesn’t he understand that people get tired of sitting so long?” But what are we really thinking? Are we not intimating that we are very important and that we have some very important problems? In neither case, though, is this true. What we are doing is taking ourselves and our supposed “problems” too seriously. Taking things too seriously gets us into trouble. We need to “let go.” The reality is the other people in the room seem to be enjoying the abbot’s talk.

4) A co-worker at our job dies suddenly in an automobile accident. He is at work one day as usual; the next morning we get a call that he is dead. We are struck by the fleeting nature of human existence. Then there is the supreme irony of the situation: the man has been working at two jobs to prepare for his imminent retirement. He has just purchased his retirement home and is filling it with new furniture. He will not be alive to enjoy anything of what he has striven so hard to achieve. All that effort was worth nothing in the end. “You just can’t count on anything,” we think to ourselves.

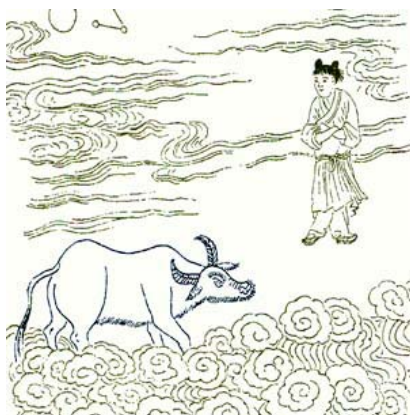
5) We are waiting for our wife outside the food store, but she is taking much too long to come out, and we are getting impatient. A feeling of displeasure at her being late quickly

develops into the emotion of anger. Why are we getting upset about such a little thing? She is a loving, kind-hearted person who is habitually a little late. So be it. We realize that if we did not attach to the feeling of displeasure but just put a stop to it, the anger would not arise. We would remain in a calm state. We would not get so dissatisfied over nothing.

6) We are in a convenience store in line behind someone who is using a credit card to buy a cup of coffee, and the card is rejected. We think disdainfully, “What an idiot! He must not have any real money that he can use.” But what did this person do to deserve such scorn? We see that what is required here is a little loving-kindness on our part. All living beings deserve to be free from enmity and ill treatment. Why are we directing what amounts to hatred to a living being for no reason? And why do we think we are so superior? We are making a problem where there is none. If we did not go around creating problems where there are none, we would not *have* any problems. There would be more peace.

7) We are driving home from work in a hurry to get to an appointment on time, and the car in front of us is plodding along. We think about “ripping the guy’s face off” for going so slowly, and wonder how such an awful thought could come into our minds in the first place. Surely we are not like that. We begin to question what this “self” really is that is thinking this way. We start to realize it is not clear who or where the self actually is. Is this some discreet being that stands face-to-face with the world as we have always thought, or is it somehow part of the world at large, part of the unfolding of nature as a whole? Maybe, just maybe, it is nature that is preeminent and not the ego. If the “self” is part of nature as a whole, then what are we holding on to when we attempt to hold on to a sense of self?

8) In a fit of rage we hit our dog because the animal does not act the way we think it should. We wonder what could be the origin of such terrible emotion. Surely we are not really so insensitive as to hurt a poor, defenseless animal for no good reason. Yet there must be some explanation for such incomprehensible behavior. We realize it is not really the dog we are hitting. We are rebelling against the dreariness and drudgery of a life lacking any meaning, and we happen to be taking it out on the dog. We are working two jobs so we can have a nice home, lovely furniture, cable T.V. in every room, a new car, and so on, and all this effort is rather pointless. When all is said and done, it is really a question of selfishness and greed. And all this “stuff” is more a burden than anything else. We see that our possessions do not bring any true happiness or lasting satisfaction into our lives. There must be something better.



9) At our job we knock over a full cup of coffee, and it runs all over a pile of books of special importance to us, totally ruining them. Something akin to incomprehension of what has occurred and a sense of horror come over us. Our precious books! How could this happen? We think how nice things would be if this incredibly unlucky thing had not happened to our things. We look for a solution: we think that we will just order new copies of the books, and that will be the end of our problem. We note how attached we are to our possessions. Because of this undue attachment to things, we realize we cause suffering for ourselves when something hap-

pens to them.

10) We see a picture in the newspaper showing a woman wailing at the death of her husband in a coal mine and being restrained by two of her friends. We feel so sorry for her. Not only has she lost her husband, but she does not even have the consolation of being able to claim his dead body, unreachable in the flooded mine. We recognize the impermanence of everything, including human life. We are also struck by the suffering the woman has to bear. “Why is there so much suffering and misery in the world?” we ask. Perhaps we sense there is ultimately no satisfactory answer to the question.

It may very well be that the direction of our insight meditation is greatly influenced by what a teacher has told us about Buddhism or by something we have read about it. So we are predisposed to think in certain ways. However, the teacher or a book really gives us little more than information that may or may not be true. It is up to us to verify the truth of what we hear or read in terms of the insights we glean in our meditation practice. This is why the monks tell us we have to meditate: reading books is not enough.

As far as the world of human experience is concerned, we do not have wisdom (*prajna*) in the strictest sense of the word until we have verified information through insight into reality itself. Wisdom here is not hearing, or reading, or thinking logically and conceptually about the world. It is one thing, for example, to understand conceptually the place of the tiger within the food chain in an ecosystem; it is quite another to be a coolie chased through the jungle by a tiger looking for its next meal. The former is a reflective, logical kind of thinking about the place of an animal in the food chain; the latter is a direct realization of what it means to be at one level of the chain. By the same token, it is one thing for our teacher to say

that feelings of displeasure lead to suffering, or for us to read a book that says such is the case; it is another for us to *see* firsthand that when we feel displeasure at some little thing our spouse is doing, we bring suffering upon ourselves because of our anger. This is not just seeing with the eyes but seeing into things with the mind, i.e., having in-sight. The evidence is there, and it “hits us in the face.” We have an immediate realization of how feeling, defilement, and suffering work. We look at similar situations and come to realize that these things work the same way every time. This is how we develop our wisdom.

So wisdom (*pañña*) is not information someone has given us, which may be nothing more than hearsay. It not just something we get from book learning, something which may not be entirely based on the facts (not that there is anything wrong with learning from books). Wisdom is not the result of a reflective, logical kind of thinking about things. It comes from direct experience of the way things are. Wisdom is immediate insight into the reality of things in the world. It is a clear discerning of things showing themselves to us for what they are.

X. The Three Characteristics of Existence

As we contemplate in our insight meditation the way the world works, we see certain fundamental characteristics emerge. Nature, the totality of the world of human experience, exhibits three main features that become clear to us: impermanence (*anicca*); suffering, or unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*); and no-self, lack of a self (*anattā*).

First of all, we realize the impermanence (*anicca*) of everything in our world. Nothing within the world lasts. Our experience is characterized by the constant flow of sense im-

pressions, thoughts, memories, feelings, emotions, and so on, that we can call a stream of consciousness. All the elements in this flow are conditioned, that is, one thing leads to another. For example, we hear the sound of a bird’s song, have a feeling of delight, remember a similar sound we heard yesterday, think about the species of bird that might be making the sound, form the opinion that this particular song is lovelier than a different one we heard last week, etc. Hearing a sense impression leads to having a feeling, having a feeling leads to remembering another sound, remembering a sound leads to a thought process, and a thought process leads to forming an opinion. This kind of conditioned activity happens countless times a day as we experience the world. It goes on and on. This is the way our world is; it is a place where nothing stands still.

The conditionality of nature does not just mean that one thing leads to another in a constant flow. Conditionality is not merely causality in terms of linear progression over a period of time. Things in nature follow one another in a causal connection, but they also condition one another in the sense that they depend upon one another at any given time for their very existence. Conditionality is the mutual interdependence of all things within nature. For example, we read an article in a newspaper because there is newsprint, because we have money to buy a newspaper, because newspapers are not forbidden by the government, because our optic nerves are functioning properly, because we know how to read, because we believe it is important to keep up with current events, etc. All these conditions exist simultaneously. Then, perhaps, because we have read the article, we remember certain events related to it, we form an opinion about what we should do, we decide to take certain action, and so forth.

We also get a real sense of the impermanence of the world when we contemplate our everyday experience of time. We say that “time flies,” and there is a reason for that. Try as we will, we cannot hold on to it; it keeps getting away from us. Lazy summer vacation days quickly pass by, and we find ourselves back at our jobs wondering what became of our days off. The carefree days of youth soon enough give way to the responsibilities of a first job, then, before we know what happened, to the challenges of retirement. The strength and agility of our younger years change to the feebleness and unsteadiness of old age. Summer school teachers we have gotten to know and like go back home at the end of classes, never to be seen by us again. Temple celebrations that were weeks in preparation go by in a flash. The lady we have seen occasionally at the temple shows up one day looking gaunt and weak; shortly thereafter we hear that she has died. Our whole life, in fact, is one of being constantly on the way to death, the final, inevitable destination for all of us.

Secondly, we see the suffering, the unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*), which exists in our lives. The world of experience being impermanent as it is, we are bound to get frustrated if we try to hold on to something within this flow. Nothing in the world really stays around long enough for it to truly belong to a self. If we try to hang on to the world, we are putting ourselves at odds with the way nature is, so dissatisfaction is bound to result. We are asking for trouble.

Anytime we people our world with “I” and “mine,” anytime we let selfishness in any form get the better of us, we bring suffering upon ourselves. If we get angry and blame an employee for not following instructions, we suffer. If we get upset with a spouse because she is making us wait, we suffer. If we extend ill will toward a fellow human being rather than

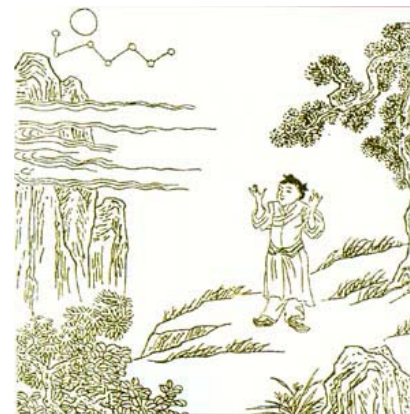
the loving-kindness we would expect for ourselves, we suffer. If we spend all our time and energy pursuing the accumulation of our material things, we suffer. Until we see that we should cling to nothing at all, we will continue to cause suffering in our lives.

Thirdly, we come to the realization that in nature there is no self (*anattā*). The world as is shows itself is real enough, but there is no perduring self evident within it. There is no self in nature; there is only conditioned nature.

In the totality of the world of human experience, there are many indications that it is not a self that “calls the shots,” but it is nature as a whole that does so. The ego, the self, the “I, is not in control here: nature is. The “self,” for example, cannot hold its breath as long as it wants; sooner or later nature starts the breathing again whether the self wants to or not. The self cannot jump off a cliff, change its mind, and go back to the top of the cliff. Nature dictates that if the “self” jumps off the cliff, the self’s body will plummet to the bottom to a sudden, certain death. The self, furthermore, try as it will, is never able to find satisfaction and happiness in the things of the physical world. Nature will always make sure of that.

Whether the self likes it or not, nature will take away the self’s possessions, loved ones, and even ultimately the very life of the self’s body. However firmly the self tries to keep a grip on things, nature ensures that nothing lasts, that everything is impermanent. The self can do nothing about this.

Why is the self unable to do



anything in these cases? Because there really *is* no enduring self; there is only nature unfolding according to its laws. The self is a fiction, a contrivance “we” impose upon a selfless nature. We come to realize that nature, the totality of the world of human experience, is bereft of any self, of any “I” or “mine.” We see that we suffer, in our self-ishness, because we refuse to simply let nature be.

We cannot find the self anywhere, for there is only the flux of conditioned phenomena that comprises nature as a whole. If we look hard enough at the world of human experience, no self is evident. There are discrete sense impressions (e.g., red, salty, hot, etc.), discrete feelings (pleasure, displeasure, sadness, delight, etc.), discrete thoughts (the Buddha lived about 2,500 years ago, George Washington was the first President, $E = mc^2$, etc.), discrete memories (e.g., a summer vacation, the day we got married, what we were doing when President Kennedy was assassinated, etc.), and discrete opinions (e.g., Coca Cola is better than Pepsi, Big Foot is a hoax, durian is delicious, etc.). Where is the enduring self, ego, person, individual, or soul? We see only nature, the sum total of the “inner” and “outer” dimensions of human experience, unfolding itself in all its conditioned complexity. The “inner” dimension is traditionally called “mind”; the “outer” dimension is traditionally called “world.” “Within” this mind-world, which is really one and the same world of the totality of nature, there is no self.

XI. Making Corrections to Behavior

We must make corrections to our behavior so we no longer get ourselves into trouble, so we can eliminate suffering from our lives. If we keep on making the same old mistakes, we will keep on getting the same old results. Some-

thing has to be different. We see we have to let go of what does not work for us. In our insight meditation we come to realize what corrections have to be made.

We have to bring the results of our insight meditation to bear upon our lives. This means we have to *renounce* behavior that we realize causes problems for us. Meditation is not primarily concerned with achieving tranquility or reaching a refined state of concentration; it is a gradual process of gaining insight into the characteristics of our mind-world so that we come to see firsthand how suffering originates. Meditation is all about what Buddhism itself is all about: how suffering comes to be, and how it can be eliminated so that we find real peace. Insight meditation is not an activity we confine to the temple hall or to a meditation retreat, and then forget about. If we do not make the application to our lives, we will not gain the fruits of our practice. For example, if our meditation practice does not lead to an improvement in the way we follow the Five Precepts, what is the point of it? If we continue to overindulge in drinking; gossip and spread rumors about our neighbors; watch worthless, sexually-explicit movies; exhibit dishonesty in our business dealings; and verbally beat our spouses and children, what have we gained? Why do we bother to meditate at all? Doubtless we are still bringing great suffering into our lives.

Examples were given above (Section IX) of possible incidents from our lives that we might be contemplating in our meditation. Consider the corrections to our behavior we would make based on the insights achieved:

- 1) We put a stop to displeasure so that anger does not arise. Furthermore, we show kindness and patience so that we do not create needless problems. We do not make demands on people. Rather than blaming people (or ourselves),

we live in peaceful co-existence with the world.

2) We do not attach to anything, neither to wicked deeds nor to good deeds.

3) We do not take ourselves or our problems too seriously.

4) We do not place any stock in the physical domain because soon enough all things pass away. We do not put our trust in any conditioned things.

5) We do not attach to feelings of displeasure (or pleasure), so that the defilements do not arise.

6) We show loving-kindness to all living beings. We do not create problems where there are none.

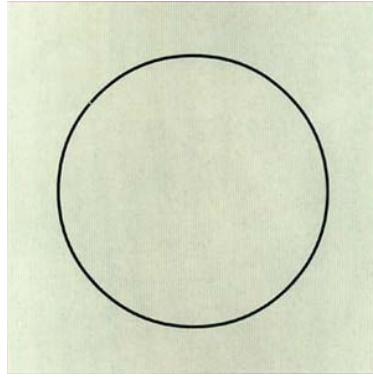
7) We do not people the world with the “I” and “mine,” for these have no basis in reality and do nothing but cause suffering for us.

8) We find a meaningful life somewhere other than in the pursuit of physical comforts, which do not bring true happiness.

9) We do not become attached to physical things, because they are a source of suffering for us.

10) We do not become attached to anything in the world, not even to our loved ones. We see that when we lose that to which we are attached, and sooner or later we inevitably will, we suffer. Furthermore, we do not do battle with the world but show loving acceptance of it, no matter what. We realize that the world by and large is the way it is, and there is not much we can do about that.

If we can make the corrections described, we will go a long way toward eliminating suffering from our lives.



We have been considering the role of mindfulness (*sati*) in our meditation practice as not only awareness, knowing or contemplating, but also investigation. We investigate the workings of our world to determine how we cause problems for ourselves. In this way insight meditation is a process of self-discovery. However, as has been seen, we are not just looking for the sources of our difficulties; we are also trying to find solutions. So we might say we are not just investigators; we are doctors as well, doctors doing self-diagnosis. We are isolating the symptoms of our illness in order to determine the underlying cause. Ultimately, we are looking for a cure for our illness. Insight meditation is like medical science looking for a “natural cure” for our sickness. And we follow the prescribed treatment for the disease so we can recover from it.

So whether we realized it or not, mindfulness has also had another role besides that of investigation, and that is the role of a kind of “moral sense.” This is not moral sense as conscience, as understood, for example, by Roman. For them conscience is something with which we are born, the voice of God speaking within us telling us what is right and what is wrong. Mindfulness as moral sense, on the other hand, is a faculty that has to be developed, and this can be done through the meditation practice. Mindfulness is the delivery vehicle for the truths of wisdom. When developed, it is always there when we need it as the quick awareness and speedy recall of the wisdom necessary to “see into” what is presented to the mind. Mindfulness makes us careful, circumspect, and clear about our duty with respect to the law of nature. It is what warns us against trouble when trouble shows up. It is like the security guard at the building of the mind that keeps the wrong kind of people from entering.

XII. Letting Go of the World

We have been learning how to “let go” of the world since the beginning of our meditation practice (see Sections IV and IX above). In our initial efforts at concentration, when the mind wandered, we took note of what had happened and what we were thinking about, and then gently led the mind back to the object of concentration. We let go of our thoughts and of any frustration we might have felt about allowing the mind to drift. We saw that generosity was a willingness to let go of things that belong to us (Section VII). When we considered the importance of loving-kindness in concentration meditation (Section VIII), we realized the need to look at ourselves and all beings in our world in terms of good will and tolerance. Mindfulness as loving-kindness meant that we did not pass judgment or make demands on ourselves or others but, rather, offered acceptance. We did not try to get rid of anything; we simply let things go away by themselves. We let go of everything by letting things be. Mindfulness as loving-kindness, once developed in concentration meditation, carried over into our insight meditation. In our insight meditation practice, furthermore, letting go meant renouncing behavior in our lives that caused problems for us (Section XI). It also meant something more: in a perpetually changing, conditioned nature bereft of any enduring self, it meant simply letting nature as a whole be (Section X).

The path toward Enlightenment is one of gradually letting go of nature, the totality of the world of experience, until we are not holding on at all anymore. We realize that nowhere within the vastness of nature, from the outermost reaches of the galaxies to the innermost recesses of the human mind, is there any enduring self. There is only the selfless void “within” “us” that is our center. In the mind-world of nature, there is

a lack of self, an emptiness of self, there is what the Buddha called simply voidness (*su at*). Nature is the ever-changing, conditioned conglomeration of sense phenomena, feelings, emotions, thoughts, memories, volitions, actions, defilements, etc. This is the nature that conditions us to be as we are and to do as we do. This does not mean we are not responsible for what nature has made us. We *are* responsible insofar as an understanding of the laws of nature regarding the individual and regarding the welfare of humanity is fully within the capacity of all rational human beings. Nature is just nature; it cannot act differently, but we can. What is more, though, until we extricate ourselves fully from the troublesome, self-ish world we have created for ourselves, there will be no complete relief from the suffering that results. We extricate ourselves fully by giving up every single attachment to the world.

It is as if we have made a slave of a nature that must be liberated. We have been slave masters. Consequently, we have suffered for our misdeeds. We must let nature go in the sense of giving it back (to itself), of throwing it back (*patinissagga*). This throwing back, giving up, is renouncing not just problematic behavior but nature *as a whole*. We let go of everything completely.

We let nature go because we realize that we cannot count on anything that is conditioned. We cannot put our stock in anything. Everything in nature is uncertain because nothing is permanent, because conditions constantly change. The only unconditioned is Enlightenment. In the world there is nothing worth having; there is nothing worth being. We do not want to get “messed up” in anything, so we let go of everything. Insofar as nothing is the world is “for sure,” we give up all liking and disliking. We have no preferences anymore. We

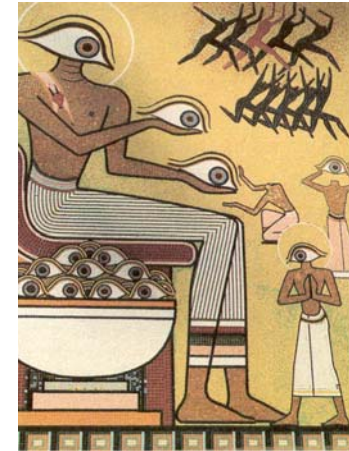
live in unattached, loving being-with the world, come what may.

This is why Thai forest monks scare themselves half to death by spending nights in graveyards. They learn that an enlightened life involves no preferences, no liking and disliking, but entails accepting whatever comes, be it death itself. We, too, let go of everything. We do not go around looking for death, but if it does show up, we accept it unflinchingly, just as we would accept anything else in life.

Generosity, morality, and loving-kindness, developed within the context of our meditation practice, also provide an impetus for our letting go of the world. Generosity, first, is like water running off a duck's back: nothing sticks. A spirit of generosity starts to loosen us from the selfish world in which most of us live. We willingly share our resources with other people. We soon enough realize, though, that the fruits of generosity, the "good feeling" generosity gives us and the welfare of society that the virtue brings, are ultimately disappointing. We see, for instance, that the warm, satisfying feeling of fullness we have after an act of generosity does not bring true bliss. We understand that it is precisely emptiness, voidness, toward which we should be striving. Moreover, we see that being generous in order to promote the best interests of society is still an attachment. As we push our generosity to the limit over time, we find ourselves gradually letting go of the whole world and retreating to the void "within" "us." This realm of Enlightenment is also the divine abode of *compassion*.

Through morality, leading a good life, secondly, we are able to get out of "hell" and get to "heaven" (see Section VII). We avoid the sufferings of hell and reach the happiness of heaven. Experiencing heaven in this way, then, is part of our

learning process. However, we discover that even goodness, especially when taken too seriously, is worrisome and wearisome. Doing good in this way just wears us out. The lesson of the moral life is that it does not suffice: there must be something more. We realize the need to give up the happiness of heaven, too, for the bliss of Enlightenment, which is beyond any opposition hellish and the beyond all opposition be-evil. To the dic- and avoid evil added: purify the implies getting rid ments. As we de- fulness in medita- ally learn how to and heaven, both happiness, to reach voidness.



between the heavenly. It is sitions, even the tween good and tum to do good there must be mind. And that of *all* attach-velop our skill- tion, we gradu-escape both hell suffering and

Thirdly, loving-kindness, too, provides an impetus for our letting go of the world. We let go of the world insofar as we extend tolerance and acceptance into it. We become "no problem" individuals who are not judgmental or demanding either toward themselves or toward other people. As our loving-kindness expands to encompass everything in the world, what arises naturally all by itself is once again compassion. For the perfection of our meditation practice, we find, is not an isolating, solitary experience. When, letting go of the world, we lose the self in voidness, that is where, in our compassionate embrace, we find all the rest of humanity and all other living beings. We lose our selfish selves in a life of unattached living-with the world in service to others.



XIII. Insight Meditation as a Way of Life

The numerous examples in Section IX above make it clear that insight meditation applies to situation after situation in our daily lives. Indeed, it applies to every situation. If the transition from concentration meditation to insight meditation is seamless and natural, so is the transition from insight meditation as a once-in-a-while “meditation” activity to that of a *continual way of living* day in and day out. Insight meditation is a way of life.

Meditation is not just going on a weekend retreat. It is not just going to our meditation room at the end of the workday. It is not just walking along the path we have laid out in the woods. These are all wholesome activities, but meditation does not end there. We must live all the time in the meditative mode if we are to eliminate suffering from our lives. Our meditation practice should flow like a steady stream, not dribble like a leaky faucet.

Whatever we do, we meditate. If we are driving the car to work on the interstate early in the morning, we meditate. If

we are shopping at the mall looking for a pair of shoes, we meditate. If we are at home on the sofa on a Sunday afternoon watching a football game on the television, we meditate. If we are talking to our mother on the phone about the weather back home, we meditate. If we are eating leftover macaroni and cheese and meatloaf for lunch, we meditate. If we are helping our children with their homework, we meditate. If we are surfing the Internet looking for cheap airline tickets, we meditate. If we are lying on the beach reading a novel, we meditate. Moment by moment we meditate, no matter what.

How do we meditate? We live our life of meditation by using the tools at our disposal. These are the tools developed in our practice to deal with the world as it continuously presents itself to us. We bring our mindfulness (*sati*) to bear in all situations in our moment-by-moment living. Our mindfulness is the vehicle for the quick delivery of wisdom (*pañña*). This is how we provide for our needs in the face of the world. Our wisdom is developed as we continue to gain insights into the workings of our mind-world. The delivery of wisdom by mindfulness is possible because of the focus concentration (*samādhi*) provides. The concentrated mind is steady and “one-pointed,” i.e., firmly fixed on the one thing before it. All three, mindfulness, wisdom, and concentration, function together to keep us problem-free.

Enlightenment is the highest spiritual reality available to human beings. However, the achievement of Enlightenment is not possible without insight meditation, *vipassanā*. Insight meditation opens up the possibility of Enlightenment. It paves the way to this reality. It then sustains us in this blissful domain. But this is not insight meditation as a once-in-a-while sort of thing. Rather, it is insight meditation as a continual way of living.

XIV. Conclusion

This booklet is a brief introduction to insight meditation in Theravada Buddhism. It is nothing more than a primer for beginners. It starts with a consideration of the preparation for concentration meditation and of the basic techniques involved. The work stresses the importance of personal conduct and the abode of loving-kindness in promoting the practice. It looks at the natural transition from concentration meditation to insight meditation. It goes on to discuss, with the help of examples, what the mind contemplates when it is engaged in insight meditation. It then describes how corrections to behavior take place as a result of insights into the world of human experience and how the mind gradually lets go of this world. Finally, the booklet ends with a consideration of insight meditation as a way of living at every moment of our lives.

Because this booklet is just an introduction, it necessarily simplifies the material as well as skirts all the complexities of the subject matter. For example, it does not even mention the rich, divergent tradition of meditation in the various schools of Buddhism. It does not deal with Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's sophisticated development of mindfulness-with-breathing meditation, or with his interpretation of the "nature" method of insight meditation. Furthermore, it does not treat the *jhāna* states as an alternate approach to reaching insight meditation. It does not consider yoga as training in concentration and mindfulness. Nor does it discuss how insight meditation as a way of life is a reflection on our past actions (cf. the examples in section IX) before it is a bringing of our mindfulness to bear on present situations. Lastly, the booklet spends no time on broader questions surrounding meditation

in Buddhism, for example, the possibility of freedom within a completely conditioned world, or the relevance of phenomenology's idea of the self as an identity in manifolds to the Buddhist notion of no-self.

Wat Thai Washington, D.C.

October 30, 2007

XV. Appendix



The Blessing of Loving-Kindness

Mett Bh van

Giving Loving-Kindness to Oneself

Aham sukhito homi.	May I be happy.
Aham niddukkho homi.	May I be free from suffering.
Aham avero homi.	May I be free from enmity.
Aham aby pajjho homi.	May I be free from ill treatment.
Aham an gho homi.	May I be free from trouble.
Aham sukh att nam parihar mi.	May I be able to protect myself from danger.

Giving Loving-Kindness to Other People and to All Living Beings

Sabbe satt sukhit hontu.	May all living beings be happy.
Sabbe satt aver hontu.	May all living beings be free from enmity.
Sabbe satt aby pajjh hontu.	May all living beings be free from ill treatment.
Sabbe satt an gh hontu.	May all living beings be free from trouble.
Sabbe satt sukh att nam pariharantu.	May all living beings be able to protect themselves from danger.

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Includes the two key suttas on meditation: *n p nasati Sutta* and *Mah satipatth na Sutta*.



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