

The Fire Kasina

*Questions and answers on retreat
with practice notes and commentary*

Shannon Stein
Daniel M. Ingram

Heptarchia



Here is a book that presents a practical technique for the development of supernormal powers or *siddhis*, a topic that few contemporary teachers of meditation will dare to address, but which nevertheless has been for centuries an essential component of traditional Buddhist meditation training.

Kasina meditation is the ancient practice of focusing attention upon an external object until an internal mental image of that object forms, and then turning attention upon the image as a means of cultivating intense states of concentration that can then be utilised in various ways.

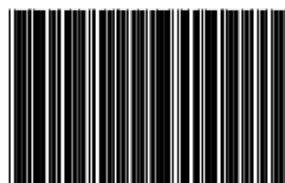
In 2015 Shannon Stein, a Lama in the Namgyal Lineage of the Karma Kagyu School of Tibetan Buddhism, with a particular interest in Theravadin practice, undertook a twenty-five day solo retreat to explore *the fire kasina*, a version of *kasina* practice that typically takes a candle flame as its object. She was guided and supported in this endeavour by Daniel M. Ingram, an experienced teacher and advanced practitioner of *vipassana* and *kasina* meditation, author of *Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha*.

The present text is Shannon's retreat journal and her record of questions and conversations with Daniel. It also includes explanatory material and Shannon's reflections and conclusions after the retreat.

With courage and honesty, and without neglecting the ethical benefits of *kasina* practice, its relevance to everyday life, and its potential pitfalls, the authors offer unique insights into a form of Buddhist practice that is often misunderstood and overlooked.



Heptarchia

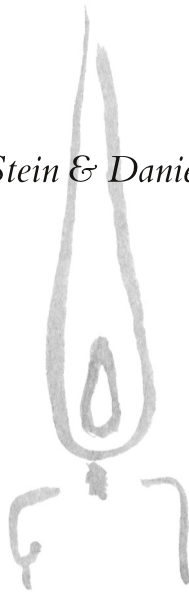


* T H E N I M I T T A *

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with Practice Notes and Commentary*

Shannon Stein & Daniel M. Ingram



HEPTARCHIA

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Dedications

To Keith.

— *Shannon Stein*

*I dedicate this book to the skilful, sane, and benevolent exploration of
the territory revealed by deep concentration, and to the use of this
ancient and amazing technology for the promotion of wisdom and the
benefit of all beings.*

— *Daniel M. Ingram*

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The Authors

Shannon Stein

Shannon Stein has been practising like her hair is on fire since first encountering *Buddhadharma* in 2010. She is a Lama in the Namgyal Lineage of the Karma Kaygu School of Tibetan Buddhism with a strong interest in Theravada practice. Shannon teaches and runs retreats in Canada. With a Masters Degree in Social Work, she has been providing individual, couple and family therapy for thirty years. She is happily married with two caring adult children.

Daniel M. Ingram

Daniel delights in exploring what is possible in meditation and magick and the open sharing of that adventure. He has various degrees and titles, and aspires to benefit others with the gifts and teachings he has been given. He wishes that all beings make skilful use of their hearts, minds and bodies. For further information, consult the freely-available book *Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha*.

Introduction

After being inspired by the material shared on-line by Daniel M. Ingram, Duncan Barford and Florian Weps following their fire kasina retreat in February, 2015, I decided to try out this practice by embarking upon a solo fire kasina retreat in the fall of the same year.

Given the strange and sometimes challenging psychological territory one can encounter in the high concentration states that predictably comes with intense fire kasina practice, I reached out to Daniel to keep an eye on me and provide on-going guidance during the 25-day retreat. Florian also provided regular email support throughout the retreat.

What follows are highlights from my daily conversations with Daniel that covered not only the fundamentals of candle flame meditation, but also a wide range of meditation and *dharma* topics. The dialogue – based primarily on my questions to Daniel – has been organised according to the most prevalent topics discussed each day.

The journey of awakening is a complex, organic process that can be as confusing as it is rewarding. At some point the seeker begins to realise there was never anywhere to arrive at, because it is all right here in the full experience of this moment. Yet until this light starts to

dawn, there can be much fumbling around in the dark.

From the time of the Buddha there has been an unbroken chain of capable, compassionate beings who have kept alive brilliant methods which, when taken up in earnest, shed light and lend efficiency to what otherwise would be a near-impossible achievement of awakening out of the darkness of ignorance.

This book is offered as one small link in that grand chain.

The prologue includes an intimate look at how Daniel M. Ingram, a modern meditation teacher and author of *Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha*, shook the dust off an ancient practice known as the *fire kasina* and revived it in his own process of enlightenment. The rest of the book presents lively conversations between myself and Daniel, in which he generously and joyfully shared his knowledge of the fire kasina and related *dharma* topics.

It was in October of 2015 when Daniel assisted me during this 25-day solo retreat where I gained some mastery of the concentration meditation known as fire kasina. Early in the retreat he asked if I would make note if something was particularly helpful in the instructions he provided, because he had found wisdom was more easily extracted from him when someone asked questions, whereas sitting down to write was for him a slower, more arduous process. In 2013 he had helped me almost daily on a two-month solo *vipassana* retreat, at the end of which the only *dana* he would accept was my agreement to practise well and assist others with what I knew. On this, my next retreat, my gratitude was so heartfelt, I was keen to follow through with Daniel's request for help.

At the end of my kasina retreat I sent him a lengthy write-up of most of my questions and his informative answers, for him to sift through as a resource for any future writing he might embark upon. He decided we should post it on his fire kasina website, firekasina.org*, having expanded his answers and inviting me to add personal commentary from my perspective as the retreatant. Just before we posted it, a trusted *dharma* friend of ours, having read the notes, suggested the writing would be an informative and unique resource as a book.

To provide the historical context of Daniel's entry into fire kasina practice, Daniel and I decided to have another conversation, using the Q and A format that runs throughout this book. This forms the prologue. It offers invaluable information on how to establish oneself in any traditional meditation practice from the ground up, using the specifics of the fire kasina as an example.

As in the rest of the dialogue that follows, the prologue captures some of the wholesome, unique energy that is exchanged between any two beings – in particular a teacher and a student – who are passionate about *dharma* development. In this sense, these conversations embody the pragmatic elements attendant on keeping alive an ancient oral tradition stemming back thousands of years to the time of the Buddha.

Shannon Stein
October 8th, 2016.

* Also freely available on this website are in-depth audio diaries recorded by both Daniel and myself.

Prologue

SHANNON

Could you start by saying how you originally began practising fire kasina?

DANIEL

I was a meditator and knew some people who had mentioned *jhana* practices, and I was on a retreat at Bhavana Society where Bhante Gunaratana talked about kasinas. Well, he talked a lot about the *jhana*s, the meditative absorptions, and a little about kasinas, one day in a general talk about meditation. My interest was piqued because I had read a little about it a long time ago in the *suttas* and the commentaries.* Afterwards, when I started running into ceremonial magick, I was struck by how the visualisation aspects of magick reminded me of the Buddhist kasina practice and, because I like to ‘Buddhify’ things, I thought maybe I will do my Buddhist visualisations once I learn how to do fire kasina. As a preparation for taking up the fire kasina, I started playing around with discs and colours, plates and pieces of construction paper that I

* Anguttara Nikaya (AN) 10.29, *Visuddhimagga*, *Vimuttimagga*.

would cut into circles. I was reading the instructions in books like the *Visuddhimagga* or *The Jhanas in Theravada Buddhist Meditation*, by Bhante Gunaratana, and whatever I could get from the old texts, which was pretty cryptic. I started playing with it all but did not get far because I was off retreat and in grad school at the the time, in the late nineties. Eventually I managed to develop strong *jhana* abilities and went on a 17-day retreat at the Bhavana Society in the winter of 2001 while in second year of med school. After I had finished up yet another of the many *vipassana* cycles* I went through on that retreat, I was considering what to do next. At Bhavana Society, which is in West Virginia, where Bhante Gunaratana is based, they have these little *kutis* without power, and my *kuti* had a wood stove and an oil lamp. I decided it would make an excellent kasina. It was this great little oil lamp, with a small round wick that produced the most beautifully stable flame, and I thought: ‘Well let’s just try it; the heck with it, my concentration is strong.’ I was about 10 to 12 days into the retreat. I said to myself: ‘Let’s just go for it. Stare at that flame and figure this thing out.’ And I just started figuring it out. I stared at the candle flame until I could not stand it any more and closed my eyes, saw what I saw, and went back to the flame and all of a sudden I started noticing here is this, here is this, and if I do this, then there is this, and then the next stage, and the next stage, and all of a sudden I started piecing it together basically by brute force and experimentation.

* Terms that feature in our Glossary of Technical Terms (Appendix A) towards the end of this book are highlighted by underlining upon their first occurrence.

SHANNON

I am curious why you did not use the flames in the wood stove as your kasina?

DANIEL

I could have, but the wood stove just had an iron door without an ornamental glass door.

SHANNON

You would have needed extraordinary magickal powers to see the flames through that solid iron door!

DANIEL

By the end of that retreat, I could have seen through the door easily – or thought I could, anyway. [*Shared laughter.*] On that retreat was the strongest concentration I ever obtained. On my more recent 12 day retreat in 2015, which was not as long, and I talked more, I did not get anything like the concentration I achieved on the 2001 retreat.

SHANNON

Did you reach the personal goals you set out to reach on the 2015 12 day retreat?

DANIEL

Well, the primary goal of that retreat was collective powers, which we managed to achieve: powers where

you are interacting with each other in real time and seeing phenomena related to what the other people are doing. That is to say, having experiences related to what the other people are doing. So, yes.

SHANNON

Were you able to take that as far as you wanted to?

DANIEL

No. I really felt, God, if I had one more week, we would have been blazing. But, you know, 12 days is pretty short from my point of view. I mean, it was good. I achieved the basic goal of drawing something in the air, and somebody else could tell me what it was and what colour it was. That, we achieved.

SHANNON

Do you think that somebody who had not been on retreat would have been able to see that?

DANIEL

I do not think they would. Duncan could see it, and I do not know if Florian could, because he was looking off down the road when it happened.

SHANNON

And could you see the things they were drawing as well?

DANIEL

The most interesting thing about that, was that we talked about doing all these experiments and then when we got into it, the retreat just took over and it became hard to stick to our original ideas because everybody went so deep into their own journey, so coordinating joint activity was pretty confusing at times. [*Shared laughter.*] And what happened with Duncan was a total accident. I was drawing pentagrams in the air and watching this liquid amber fire trace off from my finger, and it was so magnetising I was not even noticing anyone looking my way; I was lost in my own trippy thing [*more laughter*] and acting pretty eccentric. We were waiting to go into town because we knew we were all too odd to send anyone alone; we needed to go as a team, in case one of us wandered off into the colours or something. We were waiting for the taxi to come and pick us up in the late afternoon. I made a pentagram, and Duncan commented: 'You just drew an amber, orangeish pentagram in the air.' I said: 'Yes, I did.' That was pretty amazing.

Also, we would have midnight sits – the witching hour, of course – because we were all magicky in our robes and wands – total magick geeks – where we would do interesting things as a group. A couple of nights this involved standing in front of each other and – you have to understand that this was in a room where the only light was firelight from a wood stove over on one side of the room, and other than that there was no light, so it was pretty dark. That wood stove was not putting out a lot of light by that point. Usually, it was just glowing coals, because we were letting the fire die down for the last bit of the day. We would arrange ourselves so one stood in

front of another and moved his hands in the air and drew symbols, and the other person could see the shifting colour patterns in his colour space with closed eyelids. It became like liquid; you could stand in front of the other person and just wave your hand across, and his whole colour field would swirl and eddy as if the visual field was made of water with confetti or glitter in it and you were making it all move in patterns.

SHANNON

Almost like your hand was in their mental space.

DANIEL

Right – which it clearly was! [*Shared laughter.*] Because it was not something you could ‘see’, given that there was not enough light to be able to see what we were seeing. It was very much ‘you are in my mental space and I can see it.’ It seemed so normal at the time in some unexplainable way, because of the states we were in, that I did not take it as spectacular as it seems to be upon reflection.

SHANNON

Were all three of you able to do that with each other?

DANIEL

Yes, to varying degrees, given our individual natural aptitude for these things. For meditators working with this, there is an essential operating principle at play. Desire, intention and concentration: where those converge,

powers arise. The stronger these factors, the stronger the powers.

SHANNON

Going back to the 2001 retreat, I am wondering how you decided to look directly at the flame without putting up any kind of disc to look through.

DANIEL

Well, that was what I had. All I had was a little backpack with some clothing. I was in this stark cabin on a silent retreat with a candle flame and I had no access to anything else, really, so that is what I did.

SHANNON

Do you think it makes any difference to look at the flame through a circle when doing fire kasina?

DANIEL

The kasina is the object itself. Say if you were practising the earth kasina, you would make a disc out of a special colour of clay and stare at that disc. And for space kasina, you would set up some sort of aperture, or a frame, which initially holds the sense of space until you are able to just take on space as space. Same with water.

SHANNON

I suppose the flame itself with its circular shape provides its own frame.

DANIEL

I agree. It does.

SHANNON

After you completed your more recent group retreat, you described how you went back and forth between looking at the candle flame and looking at the flames in the wood stove. How would you decide when to do that, and at what point in a practice would you suggest it is helpful to move to staring at flames in a fire?

DANIEL

By the time I switched to the fire rather than the candle, I was into fire itself as a goddess, as an element, as a living entity, as a thing to worship. At that point in the retreat my brain had changed, my relationship to the fire had changed, my relationship to the kasina and what it was and what it meant had changed. I was seeing fire as this elemental thing that is pervading everything as one aspect of an elemental field. Fire was the predominant one, but after a time the imbalances related to the other elements became interesting as well. It was fire as *fire*, not as a kasina, that I would use to obtain a concentration state, which is one relationship to it. Another relationship to it is as an external support used to generate an after-image and a *jhana* that happens to have colours and shapes with it and can be used to obtain powers. That is perhaps the more usual way of relating to it. By this point, however, that was not how I was relating to it.

SHANNON

That really draws me. I find it compelling to be able to arrive at relating more to the elemental aspect of fire.

DANIEL

It is compelling. For me, fire became a goddess, pervading everything: the heat in my body was the fire kasina. All of space has fire elements to it; some colours have it more than others; and I was thinking of heat and the fire in the room and the heat in the room and the heat in my body all as fire: something that I did not talk about much in my audio diary, because it did not seem so extraordinary at the time.

SHANNON

Did that just happen on its own?

DANIEL

That was not the relationship I was expecting. Suddenly, that was the relationship that was occurring. I was looking at the world as a field of elements, and I was performing a worshipful, devotional practice to the all-pervading element of fire as an entity, as a living presence, like an aspect of divinity. This is obviously a very different way of looking at the fire kasina. Fire had become the most obvious part of the whole thing.

SHANNON

By then you probably could have looked just about any-

where and have seen fire.

DANIEL

More than seeing it, I was it. My body was the fire kasina, everything in the room was the fire kasina. The light of the sun was the fire kasina. The heat on the stove, the warmth in the stew was the fire kasina. It was everything. I was in an elemental world or paradigm without really intending to end up in one.

SHANNON

It is interesting that you experienced your concentration as higher on the 2001 retreat, yet you went deeper into the elemental aspect on this more recent retreat.

DANIEL

And I think the reason is that I only did five or six days of fire kasina on that 2001 retreat, after spending 10 or 12 days setting up the concentration by doing *vipassana*. Whereas on the more recent retreat it was after a week or so, at least, of straight fire kasina practice that all of a sudden the world as an elemental thing began to show up.

SHANNON

You took it really far – or rather it took you.

DANIEL

Farther than I had before, and, yes, it definitely took me,

because that was not where I was looking to go. I was not the only one experiencing it, because at the end of day nine, or so, I noticed Duncan and Florian were going down to the creek behind the Tower of Hallbar. I saw them going down the hill and hanging out down there. And I was sure they were noticing the elemental imbalance that I was noticing too.

SHANNON

By the way, how did you decide on the Tower of Hallbar for the retreat?

DANIEL

Because I am a total geek, and I had not taken this much time away from work in 13 years, so if I was going to do it, I was going to do it right. And 'right', to me, if I were travelling to the UK, would be in a medieval tower, dressed in robes, with wands and cool people and awesome food, even if it cost a fair amount to stay there.

SHANNON

Who found the tower?

DANIEL

I found it. There are now castle rental websites, which have opened up a whole world of travel I had no idea existed. Some of these castles have 140 rooms – it is crazy! Hallbar was one of the cheaper castles, as far as castles go. It is more of a tower than a castle, but still, there are not that many guest towers that you can rent.

So it was February in Scotland, and it was cold and wet. A wet, chilling, Scottish cold. When I first arrived there my bones almost ached from the chill. Not that it is not cold in Alabama, because it can drop below zero Fahrenheit here. It can snow here, and be icy. But something about Scotland that far north, and the short daylight, twilight by three-thirty or four in the afternoon. When I first got there, I was dressed in layers of wool and such, and yet by about seven days into it I was walking around in bare feet and a t-shirt with light fleece pants on. The stairway that wrapped around the tower was not heated; it is an old medieval tower, so substantial portions of it were not heated at all, including the room where I was sleeping. Yet by seven days in, I was hot.

SHANNON

Just burning up with the fire?

DANIEL

By day seven or nine I realised it was too much fire. I was starting to get fire overload, too much fire element. So, when I saw Duncan and Florian going down to the water, I instantly knew what they were doing, and I started spending time down there too in order to take in more water element and earth element and purposely tuning into those for elemental integration.

SHANNON

I wonder if my time on the lake up at a northern cabin, and walking out in nature, on the earth, helped keep

things more balanced for me during my fire kasina retreat.

DANIEL

Probably. That would make sense to me. In fact, at the end, we talked about if we did it again we would go to the Alps of Austria and be on a lake in a chalet, with the mountains and lake and a big view with water and air to instil more balance into the practice. If I ever do it again that is probably where.

SHANNON

Are you planning another retreat?

DANIEL

Yes, on my birthday in February.

SHANNON

Would you do fire kasina again?

DANIEL

I would like to. I am considering also a remote cabin in the desert somewhere far south where it is not too cold, perhaps in southern or mid-Arizona. A solo retreat, because there is a depth that the social aspect of my last retreat did not allow me to access in the same way. Not that it was not awesome to connect with Duncan and Florian. They are great people, and I really got to know them a whole lot better after living together for 12 days. That

was really worthwhile. But there is another part of me wanting to go on a totally solitary retreat, with nobody there, and I would be doing a very wide mix of formless realms, dzogchen, and general integration practice. Something deep, still, and quiet.

If I do end up doing another group retreat, which are just so impressive to do with the fire kasina, then next time I would be more wary, by the time I had accessed the highly altered states, of the need to find my way back to collective goals. Before the retreat even started, we could need to have a careful plan, with structured magickal goals! [*Laughter.*]

But part of me thinks, ‘No, Daniel, you need to just go out in the desert and play.’ What I imagine doing out there would involve magick. Some of the focus would be energetic. The other aspect of the previous retreat that I have not mentioned so far was the sense of the spirit world* being there. I have this strong notion if I was in the desert in New Mexico or Arizona – probably New Mexico, because it is somehow a more magickal place – I would build a circle around me and have a fire and let the energy and the spirits and the interactions – just drop the filter – and let it happen. There is something very compelling about that.

SHANNON

Does it appeal to you to try to walk through the fire?

* Interacting with various spirit beings, such as *devas* (gods), demons, ghosts, and a wide variety of other spirit entities is actually stock and standard traditional Buddhist practice.

DANIEL

No. I would keep the fire over there in a safe place.
[*Laughter.*]

SHANNON

Especially if you are on your own, in the desert. [*More laughter.*]

DANIEL

Exactly.

SHANNON

Can you describe how you would give a simple, complete introduction on how to do the fire kasina practice?

DANIEL

The most important thing is to remember that concentration on what is happening is more important than what is happening.

SHANNON

But can you walk me through, right from the get-go? Let us suppose I have never done candle flame before.

DANIEL

Right, so the first thing I would say is... that. Because I actually think that is the most important instruction: whatever is happening, one has to be paying really strong

attention to it, even if it is not doing what you think it should be doing. It is the most important thing I can say.

SHANNON

[*Laughter.*] You repeated that many times during my retreat. It is surprising how one can lose sight of such a basic and essential starting point.

DANIEL

Yes. That fact of attending is more important than what you are attending to because it is the attending to that makes what you are attending to do extraordinary things. So that would be the first and most important instruction. Then, the second thing, to sit in a comfortable position about three to five feet from the candle flame in a place where there is not a lot of wind or where you have a glass frame round the flame so it does not waver.

Sit comfortably and stare at the flame for a minute or two or until things start feeling they are getting a little strange or a little interesting or visually purplish or something, something different. Then close your eyes and stare at the after-images that come, and if you see anything resembling a red dot give that more attention. Follow it for as long as it endures until you have just static, then open your eyes and look at the flame again. Get the visual purple after-image that will burn on your retina. Close your eyes and do it again and keep doing that again and again and again and again and again. And that would be it. Just follow out the images with your full attention until you have really got nothing you could call organised in any sense. Sometimes you have to give that

another minute or two, and follow it out, and something will organise out of that. It requires patience – that is the other thing I would say.

You start to learn the cycles. You start to learn the sequence. You start to learn how to walk up to this image, to this image, to this shape, to this volume, to this width, to this *whatever*, and you become familiar with the shifts. You keep this as continuous a practice as you possibly can. The more hours that you can do, the better. Walk or exercise when you have to, but find a way to stay concentrated during that also. If you want to have a mantra, make sure it is one you really enjoy, which really feels great for your mind. Mantras definitely help galvanise something.

These practices are ancient, so it is useful to look at old *Buddhadharma* texts such as the *Visuddhimagga*, *Vimuttimagga*, and *suttas* such as ‘The Fruits of the Homeless Life’.

Looking back, one of the most helpful experiences that prepared me for my 2001 fire kasina retreat, came after I asked Joseph Goldstein about the powers, deep concentration and the kasinas, and he sent me to Christina Feldman. So in 1999, before medical school, I did two month-long retreats at Gaia House in England, which is where she teaches. I got to talk with her only one time, for 10 minutes, which was very disappointing, considering that I had travelled all that way not just to go on retreat but also to ask her some questions. It was a highly conflicted interview. I was a total brat about it, but I do not think she was expecting someone to come in and talk about the kinds of things I was talking about. It was a shock to her system, because this was not part of the cul-

ture. By the end of a very tense few minutes, I saw her manifest her full power of wrathful display, which is a rare thing to see a *dharma* teacher do. I had really pissed her off.

SHANNON

And was it skilfully done or not?

DANIEL

Oh, it was very skilfully done. It was fantastic. Essentially, I had walked in and said I wanted her to tell me how to access the deepest concentration so I could obtain psychic powers. And when she asked, ‘What about *vipassana*?’ I shot back with: ‘I’m an *anagami*, but I don’t want to talk about that because I have nine minutes left.’ I was watching the clock, because 10 minutes was all I had. I had come all that way, and I was feeling: ‘Come on, we’ve got to get to the point!’ And she was saying, ‘Hold on, hold on.’ I was aware we then had five minutes left, watching the seconds tick down, while she was deflecting and reacting to comments about practice. The whole conversation was really messed-up.

SHANNON

Do you think she had it in her to help you?

DANIEL

Oh, she did. She did help me. Finally at the end. Finally, after me pushing every single button she had, as far as I

could push it. She basically *dharma* exploded. It was wild to watch. With this ferocious, righteous indignation and anger, and also a profound passion, she said: 'You really want to know how to do it? Okay.' And she slammed her hand out powerfully into space as hard as she could, and shouted: 'The *nimitta*! The *nimitta*! The *nimitta*! Give all your attention to the *nimitta*! Take Bhante Gurantana's *The Jhanas* and read between the lines, but give your attention to the *nimitta*!' And that was it.

SHANNON

Wow. That really was it.

DANIEL

Yes it was: a transmission. In my head I was thinking: 'Okay, I should thank you. It was horrible, but I got what I came for.'

SHANNON

Powerful.

DANIEL

That was the retreat on which I started concentrating on kasinas, using just eyelid colours. I was practising the white kasina. I have a lot of visual confetti when I close my eyes, or if I am in a dark room, or even in a light room with my eyes open, only it is not as prominent. All through space, space is rainbow static-like, for me. So I would focus on the white parts. With everything I could see, I would bring out the white. Finally, I was able to

reach a point where my entire body was gone and there was this massive field of white, white everywhere. I knew this was good. This was doing it cold, using pure eyelid colours as the kasina. It was a very important foundation for the 2001 retreat, an important piece of the puzzle. It was that few minutes with Christina Feldman that galvanised the sense of bringing full, unbridled mental power to the thing. That was empowering. I should make sure to thank her.

SHANNON

It is interesting how these concentration practices support one another. One of the offshoots I have come to value about fire kasina practice, since my retreat, is the increasing ease of being able lucidly to explore varied states of consciousness taking place in the mental realm, without the limitations that come in the physical realm. Currently, I am exploring staying as conscious as possible when transitioning from the waking state to the sleeping state, including attending closely to the hypnagogia that occurs during the transition. There is such a crossover of skills that can be utilised for lucid dreaming, dream yoga, fire kasina practice with the vivid colours, and the quiet dreamscape of the fourth *jhana*, and the out-of-body experiences that can all occur in this realm.

DANIEL

Yes, the realm connected to sambhogakaya.

SHANNON

I am curious. Is dream yoga something that you still do at

night when you are sleeping? Even with your crazy schedule? I mean, first of all you have to sleep to dream, but when you are as busy as you are right now, do you still have access to dreams and, in them, all the activities you were doing before?

DANIEL

Yes. I still have a very active dream life. Dreams have always been natural for me. I am sort of a lucid dreaming and vivid dreaming natural. I am just built that way. I do not know how I would not do that.

SHANNON

That is pretty cool. So, whatever practice you were doing, such as *dzogchen*, you would be able to carry on while you're dreaming?

DANIEL

Well, I meditate in dreams sometimes, although it is not common. But I actually had a weird dream maybe a month or two ago. It was an uncommon dream for me. In it, I was *dharma* teaching, and I was sitting up on this front cushion, with all these people sitting on cushions in front of me, many of whom were wearing orange robes, and I was also wearing orange robes, so I guess in this dream I was some sort of a monk teaching monks, which was kind of surprising. But the interesting thing about it is that while I was teaching the *dharma*, I was talking about *dharmakaya*, and I was manifesting, as I was teaching. I was really holding a *dharmakaya* frame to the con-

versation, to the space I was in and to the room, as a very intentional, a sort of living embodiment transmission or resonance. This was a very unusual dream for me. It was not [*laughter*] a typical Daniel dream: my typical dream is about combat, and bizarre adventures in weird landscapes.

SHANNON

Were you intending for this kind of dream to happen?

DANIEL

No. It was a very lucid dream, but it was not an intentional dream. Do you see the difference? Lucid dreams are where you come in and you are, like, 'I'm lucid dreaming, I'm in control'. Then there are lucid dreams where you are very lucid. 'Control' is buying the dream story. The dream story is what is happening in the lucidity, without the intention 'I'm going to make this happen'.

SHANNON

Sure.

DANIEL

And what was really interesting, is that, it is very unusual for me in a dream to be checking out (it is sort of a strange thing to say) my level of realisation. That is, it is not typical dream activity. But in this dream I was sitting there, very ultra-consciously, while sleeping, with a substantial portion of attention just on the realised quality of the field of experience, which is a very *dzogchen* kind of a

way to be looking at things. So this had very much a *rigpa*-ish quality to it, like holding *rigpa* as a formless frame for the whole field of experience, or something like that.

SHANNON

Fascinating.

DANIEL

Yes a pretty unusual *dharma* dream that is not typical for me. But how about you? Are you going on any retreats any time soon?

SHANNON

I am considering one in early winter of 2017. I haven't decided on a focus. Eventually, *nirodha samapatti** is something I would like to experience.

DANIEL

Or not experience, as it were. [*Shared laughter.*] It is very worth doing, and I think you will really appreciate the depth of chill that happens after it.

* See Appendix B, which contains instructions and a detailed discussion of this attainment.

Day One

Concentration ~ Mantra ~ Visual ~ Third Jhana

Concentration

SHANNON

Although I had done intensive samatha (concentration) and vipassana (insight) meditation prior to my fire kasina experience, I had not achieved close to the level of concentration that occurred during the latter parts of the retreat. The phrase ‘high concentration’ has taken on new meaning since and although the supreme concentration that was developed in retreat mode eventually faded, knowing how to achieve it has led to elevated confidence as a practitioner. What did remain post-retreat was the ability to enter into satisfying concentration states for long periods of time, a skill that has been used for accomplishing day-to-day tasks with higher focus. In particular, I brought the new-found concentration strength into my development of sila (ethical conduct) in order to sharpen my attempts to do as little harm as possible to all beings, including myself. Given that the Buddha is often described foremost as an ethicist, it makes sense for gains from retreats to be used for the perfecting of conduct upon re-entering the everyday world.

During the retreat, conversations with Daniel about the importance of doing whatever it took to build and maintain steady concentration, both in the formal sits and during transitions, were re-visited many times. It was worth having such reminders; otherwise, as a novice to this practice, I could have missed out on the experience of rarely-achieved concentration by settling for what I considered to be a relatively high standard based on past accomplishment.

DANIEL

Continuity of concentration is important at all times; if possible, even when not sitting. Concentration is fragile, so protect and nourish it by always staying consciously attentive to something. Meditators often underestimate what this means, but those who persist in building continuous concentration will be richly rewarded. Here are important mantra and visualising tips to help keep concentration high:

Mantra

DANIEL

Keep a mantra going during all sits and transitions.

SHANNON

Would you recommend saying it in the mind or out loud? Did you stay with the same mantra? How long was your mantra?

DANIEL

I oscillated between two, starting with a very resonant Hindu mantra. It is better to sound it internally rather than externally. The length of the mantra is less important: what is important is to make it ring and have flowing resonance to it. Do not rush. When a mantra is very well developed, it may spontaneously start to incorporate surrounding sounds like parts of a rich orchestra.

SHANNON

Is *Om Ah Hung* a suitable mantra?

DANIEL

Sure. Or even just *Om*. Let the *Om* or whatever you choose roll and build. I have found this to be more effective than motoring through many different syllables or words.

Visual

DANIEL

Try to obtain visual purple after-images from things when you are walking around or, even better, carry the visual of the image from your sitting meditation. You can use the red dot (after-image) you derive from the candle flame. When carrying the after-image off the cushion, it generally takes a lot of attention and thus caution in how you move. With the kayaking meditation (SHANNON: *I explain this below*), try using an LED light at the end of

your boat to get an after-image. This will be best done at dawn, dusk and at night.

SHANNON

Using light physical exercise to balance energy and effort was crucial early on in the retreat. During the dissolution phase, which came up on Day One, I needed to find ways to increase energy and attentiveness. At other times, my tendency towards striving within the meditation would trigger tightness and constriction in the body, necessitating relaxing movement. Kayaking and regular walking in the fresh outdoors while maintaining the mantra were thought-free, repetitive activities that facilitated physical and mental looseness as well as mental alertness. The instructions outlined here for keeping up concentration could be applied to any off-cushion retreat activity.

DANIEL

You can also do what is known as ‘detailing’ in any of the transitions between sits. This involves implementing the same trick used for staying longer in a lucid dream or a ‘travel’ (an out-of-body experience). Detail with care the exact shapes and colours of the space you find yourself in. Notice the landscape, the colours, the light, and stay with vibrant, 3D experience. Include observing the parallax that happens with movement – see things change size and shape as the perspectives shifts. This detailed visual wiring will translate back to your sits.

SHANNON

These detailing tricks helped me stay in travels for longer

periods later in the retreat, which in turn allowed for an expanded repertoire of experience in these altered states, such as being able to clearly notice the space surrounding the objects in the travels as opposed to only focusing on the beings or objects themselves. On previous vipassana retreats, I had minimal success investigating the three characteristics during astral travels due to the randomness and brevity of the experiences. Even being able to stay in travels for seconds longer would have allowed for significantly more insight work. It was rewarding on the fire kasina retreat to discover a surprisingly reliable launching pad for travel and to have increased lucidity as well as significant influence during the out-of-body expeditions.

Third Jhana

SHANNON

How do I work with the phase after the red or black dot dissolves? When there is no clear object to focus on I keep spacing out, getting lost in vague thoughts, and I seem to be losing interest in the meditation...

I was enquiring here about what is known as the dissolution phase of the fire kasina sequence, the juncture where the second jhana begins tipping into the third. Brand new to the practice, I decided to get my meditational feet wet by engaging in a few hours of flame meditation three days prior to heading off to the retreat. Likely due to where I was at in my vipassana work, second jhana of the fire kasina came quickly. This was characterised by staring at the flame and then, with closed eyes, seeing an after-image of a steady and bright red oblong dot presenting itself in the centre of the visual field. It is important

for meditators who find themselves starting out their candle flame meditation in first jhana not to become discouraged by the typical frustrations which can come in that early phase of the sequence (such as: multiple and/or shifting, faint dots that do not stay in the centre of the field, or a distracted mind filled with thoughts – all of which make concentration on the after-image a challenge). Simply adhering to the instructions of patiently and repeatedly bringing one's attention to whatever is in the field will yield the results of eventually shifting into second jhana, as described above.

With the intense spacing out and nodding off to sleep so early into the retreat, I wondered if I was already losing my ability to do the practice. It was reassuring to find out that this sloth-like mode was actually a sign of having progressed to dissolution, the cusp of third jhana.

DANIEL

That is a tricky phase I refer to as ‘the murk’. Out past the red dot and black dot (with green stuff around it) there lies a big challenge in meditation. The phase problems and vagueness there explain why retreatants start with good concentration then feel vague near the end of sits. The visuals, if you can perceive them clearly, will show you something about what the brain and attention are like in that stage and why narrow attention is actually limited and will need to expand in order to progress in meditation.

SHANNON

In that bland shapeless murk, if I look for detail at the centre of the field – where I can see faint yellow colour

with barely perceivable white lines moving in circles – while also taking in the periphery of the field, then purple swaths of colour roll across the field, often past a greenish background. After watching the billowing purple for long periods of time, I am wondering how often to re-open my eyes to go back to looking at the flame.

DANIEL

Staying with that purple gets to good stuff, so as long as you are still seeing colours and are able to stay attentive without spacing out, there is no need to refresh the after-image on the flame. As I progressed in my retreat, I would often only look at the flame once at the beginning of the sit. Taking wider images around and past the red, green or black dot helps get to the murk. At this point you can try to change the shade of colour or what you are seeing by tuning into other colours that are more subtle and amplifying them by attention or by just intending to see different colours. You can try aiming for organised 3D structured things (such as a hallway, spiral, forest, or other more complex images). The murk phase can cause frustration because there is a longer delay and things need to be intended and shifted with more patience, as, if you try to force it to change too rapidly, your haste will just mess up your concentration and blow it. It takes time for the more complex images you find out there to filter through the brain. It is easier to gently coax something already forming into something more than to start from scratch in that phase. Note that the murk can have a dreamy quality.

SHANNON

Despite the fact I was not ready to set intentions, it was constructive having these seeds sewn in advance. To a mind that was unaccustomed to working with the setting of intentions within meditation, repeatedly hearing what was possible had a positive impact. Although Daniel could not do the work for me and was unable to predict specifically what would unfold given my personal proclivities and idiosyncrasies, his familiarity with candle flame meditation allowed him to regularly point out various aspects of the practice that could be pursued at any point should I be interested in doing so.

Another benefit in having a proficient meditator assisting was an objective viewpoint on when to try something new or stay with a current approach (for example, intending for more magickal effects versus absorbing deeply into whatever mundane aspects presented themselves during the sit). Progress with the kasina practice requires skilfully dancing with a continually moving target, a complex manoeuver to make on a solo retreat while at the same time attempting to learn basic technique.

Day Two

*Concentration in Transitions ~ Drawing Symbols ~ Body Bliss ~
Third Jhana*

Concentration in Transitions

SHANNON

Is it okay to use an LED light to refresh the mental picture of an after-image dot while moving around between sits? Also, my most success at this point in maintaining any after-image with my eyes open in transitions is if I keep the rooms in the cabin quite dark.

DANIEL

An LED is fine, and if the after-image is not bright enough when in more lit areas then for now stay in less-lit rooms, as whatever works is key! Seeing the images with your eyes open in broad daylight can be hard, early on. When outside, you could try to take the light of the sun that you can see through closed eyelids as an object, then open your eyes while looking at something other than the sun and then take the after-image as the object; done properly, it is like looking through rose-stained

glasses, and as concentration develops, you should be able to walk around holding that rose-coloured effect on your visual field.

SHANNON

I was determined to build concentration as continually as possible at the front end. One way of ascertaining high concentration was being able to maintain an eyes-open after-image of the candle while moving about between formal sits. It was sobering to realise how challenging this could be in broad daylight and I was relieved to be encouraged to go with whatever it took to sustain a perceivable image. For me, it was taking a brief look at the same low-power LED light I was using at the bow of my kayak at night (I used a mini flashlight in the end of a battery for charging cell phones), in order to gain an after-image and then moving slowly enough with eyes half-open in darkly-lit rooms to be able to still see the mental image of the light. One halting step at a time, while opening the fridge for example, I would watch the small dot in front of me, then close my eyes if need be to make the dot brighter and resort to the LED light when I could no longer bring up the clear dot on my own. Had anyone peeked into the windows of the northern cabin where I was retreating, they would have chuckled to watch me moving about in such a strange manner. However, it was well worth it in those initial days; the loss of the image accurately and readily indicated fading concentration. An important discovery I made during this time was the concentration jumped up significantly when, in addition to making sure I could see the dot, I made the effort to look at the fine detail within and outlining it. Attention to fine detail at any point on the retreat was always the gateway to progress.

Drawing Symbols in the Air

SHANNON

It was helpful during the retreat to augment the formal sits with looser, creative activities that still required keen mindfulness and tilted the mind into magickal directions. Making line drawings in space was ideal.

DANIEL

Draw any symbol appropriate for you. Since you have done Tibetan training, you might draw *Om* or *Hung*. For best odds, try this at night in a completely dark room. Literally draw slowly in the air, moving your fingers as if through thick syrup. Initially you may get a hint of a subtle trailing afterglow off your finger, but eventually more long-lived colour will be rolling from your fingertip. This takes practice and patience. Eventually, you will be able to do this in daylight.

SHANNON

This evolved into a ridiculously fun activity, performed to unwind at the end of a long day dedicated to meditating. By the evening of Day Ten I was finally able to produce spectacular light shooting from the end of my fingertip into the northern night sky, quite an outstanding experience for someone who had not attempted magick before. It took time to settle back into formal meditation after this exhilarating surge of success with drawing in the air.

Body Bliss

SHANNON

An enjoyable side-effect of flame meditation is the depth of relaxation that develops in the body during certain stages of the kasina sequence, allowing longer sits than would otherwise be comfortably possible. Compared to my fledgling attempts at meditation years ago, painstakingly pressing to go beyond five minutes of attention to the breath at the nose-tip, it was a delight to feel such physical ease in the body that having to interrupt hours of continuous sitting became an annoyance rather than a relief. Heavily into the second jhana on Day Two, I was experiencing distractingly blissful waves of bodily vibration at the crown and forehead chakras, which reverberated throughout the entire body.

When deep bliss takes over, it is hard to keep up the mantra. When you were on retreat doing these practices, could you keep up the mantra when strong bliss arose?

DANIEL

The problem with bliss is that it pulls you away from everything, from the visuals and the mantra. All are valid concentration objects, but you must choose. Bliss is obviously very nice but lowers the concentration that comes with staying on visuals and mantra. You can become stuck in bodily bliss and, later, in peace, and then neglect your kasina objects. That all said, sometimes it is just great to really tune into the bliss. However, generally, after a bit of doing that, we will become satisfied and/or bored with it and find we are able to move on to devel-

oping deeper concentration using our visual objects and mantra.

SHANNON

It would be easy to downplay the role that continual recitation of the mantra plays on a retreat such as this. Although not as sharp an indicator as the visuals, the level of power of the mantra was a great gauge of concentration. One may be tempted to use a mantra only during formal sits, but it is important to trust that the sound of the mantra throughout the day will be more wholesome than most of whatever distracting thoughts will be found tumbling about in the mind.

Third Jhana

SHANNON

Do you have suggestions on what to do with the swaths of purple predominating the visuals? Should I just be patient with gentle intentions for coherent objects?

DANIEL

Purple washing across the field: this is a relatively early phase. You can try subtly intending to shape it into something alive or tantric, which eventually can lead to invaluable insight from getting a fruition* through the no-self door. While the murk is initially disorganised, given time and continued attention, as well as a slightly

* The term ‘fruition’ rather than ‘cessation’ is used here to differentiate this meditative experience from the attainment known as ‘the cessation of perception and feeling’ (or *nirodha samapatti*). See appendices for more details.

looser and wider hold on attention, the mind will want to make coherent things from the murk once it figures out how.

SHANNON

Does spending hours with the washing of purple make sense at this stage?

DANIEL

Yes: it takes time for it to develop and organise. Be patient. Try to look for the beginnings of 3D shapes.

Day Three

*Mantra ~ Travel and Intentions ~ Importance of Audio Diary ~
Third Jhana*

Mantra

SHANNON

The mantra is now singing itself, but it sounds too quiet, perhaps because I am not saying it out loud. Why is it recommended the mantra be done internally?

DANIEL

Aim for internal thoughts, sounds and colours to be stronger than ordinary reality. By giving these more attention, you can shift the balance towards the internal experiences. External sound is in the ordinary realm. The powers are in the internal realm, with magickal effects like mantra ringing through the room and everything else chiming in, etc. This just takes time, good practice, and patience.

Travel and Intentions

SHANNON

The astral travels described below refer to the sensation of moving outside of the body while having clear awareness that the body is still sitting on the cushion. A partial travel is where only part of the body is mentally experienced in movement beyond the physical body, which in my case often involved a physical and visual sensation of my hands and forearms functioning in space in front of me during the meditation while at the same time having complete understanding my hands were resting in my lap. Astral travel had occurred spontaneously and randomly in past meditations; what was rewarding by the end of the fire kasina retreat was not only learning how to set up the conditions for the travel to consistently occur but also to successfully set intentions for certain activities, including fruitions, to be experienced during the travels.

I experienced a partial travel in which I found myself reaching for cutlery. This one was crystal clear. But I might have also *fully* travelled, very briefly, when there was a blur of activity and then I felt a fluttering of myself coming back into the body.

DANIEL

In the realm of magick it is productive to ask: where do you want to travel and why? Up the ante from the mundane to exploring an aspect of yourself, or perhaps visiting with tantric wisdom beings. Directed, skilful travels are more likely to happen with intent.

Importance of Audio Diary

DANIEL

I recommend that you keep an audio diary of what you are seeing each day and how the sequence is unfolding, so as to put yourself out there as an extra voice. Other meditators would likely benefit from having another reference point.

SHANNON

I also began recording quick audio summaries after my talks with Daniel for post-retreat reference. These ended up being an invaluable resource for this book.

Third Jhana

SHANNON

Early on, is there any advantage in staying with and exploring the red dot longer, or is it better to move quickly into the purple? I am now seeing the candle shape as well as other shapes in the room around the red dot in their complementary colour.

DANIEL

Building up the red dot as a foundation is productive. As practice progresses, as you have already seen, the wider background images begin to be incorporated into the after-image around the red dot, and this widening is important, as it helps to sync with the width of the murk.

You will start to notice the subtle oscillations and shimmering of the wider field, and the mind making sense of this wider, more complex phase of third *jhana* leads to more coherent, structured objects.

SHANNON

It became helpful while on retreat, regardless of the jhana I was in, to remind myself of the importance of keeping the eye muscles loose and relaxed. This was easier to adhere to once I figured out the inner vision does not require the use of the eyes in the same way external seeing does. Also, with some experimentation I was able to discover the value in not closing the eyes too tightly, otherwise the more subtle inner imagery had a tendency to disappear into darkness.

Day Four

Mantra ~ Jhana Sequence ~ Intention-Setting for a Deity Encounter

Mantra

SHANNON

It is incredible... the mantra has become like hearing energy, like an electric synthesiser in the air.

DANIEL

Nice! You can use the mantra to create sounds as loud or louder than ordinary reality. Concentration is extremely fragile, but when it is strong, amazing things can happen, as you are learning directly for yourself.

Jhana Sequence

SHANNON

How does the fire kasina sequence fit with first, second, third and fourth *jhana*?

DANIEL

First *jhana* is marked by a red dot that is small and initially somewhat unstable: you have to make an effort to stare at it and maintain it. Initially, it is hard to sync with it, but it gives great immediate feedback, as it brightens, centres and stabilises rapidly when your attention grows stronger and it fades when attention fades, representing applied and sustained attention: the classic first *jhana* factors.

Second *jhana* is when the red dot shows itself naturally in the centre of attention with shimmering detail, outlined with thin colours, and, as this develops, one will know the ‘happiness born of concentration’. The dot is still 2D in the second *jhana*.

Third *jhana* is where attention goes wide, starting at the beginning of the murk, the initial swaths of rich colour, and actually contains many sub-phases within it as attention develops and practice progresses. In the third *jhana* we find the beginning of subtle 3D shapes, and it can develop to rich, complex images, often with some repetitive theme and some sense of more space and depth. There can still be a lot of cooler bliss in the third *jhana*.

Fourth *jhana* is where we find clear luminous alive images, like living daydreams but much more clear, and the bliss is gone. A somehow pleasant neutrality prevails, and the mantra may go silent. The 3D objects may get detailed to a degree it is hard to believe your mind generated, and represent a radical increase in visualisation ability. Fourth *jhana* images often incorporate a substantial sense of spaciousness. Body sensations may vanish, vibrations may drop off, and one may find one’s attention totally buying into dream-like realms.

Intention-setting for a Deity Encounter

SHANNON

Despite my attraction to the magickal potential in learning candle-flame practice, it took several days of the retreat to warm up to trying it. I had never consciously experimented with it nor considered what I would want to explore. Upon reflection, my indecision wasted good cushion time and diminished the power of my intention-setting during parts of the retreat. However, this may be unavoidable for anyone low on the learning curve of developing magickal abilities.

After some brainstorming with Daniel, by Day Four I had settled on attempting to have a face-to-face encounter with the Medicine Buddha. In case there are others out there similarly uncertain about what powers to pursue, it could save time ahead of a retreat to think about what truly calls to you in the realm of magick. I eventually chose an encounter with a deity because of the high insight value that comes with being able to get a fruition from looking into the eyes of the deity, described in detail by Daniel below on Day Fourteen.

I specifically chose the Medicine Buddha, because I had behind me a long period of Medicine Buddha practice after receiving the empowerment (a ceremony introducing students to Tibetan meditations) several years ago. Given that I am a psychotherapist and also assist others with meditation, it made sense to meet a deity who embodies healing and assisting other beings. And finally, with the neon-like blue swirling shapes that often arose in the mind's eye during my sits prior to this retreat, it seemed likely this colour could naturally transform into the blue Medicine Buddha.

DANIEL

Fill the whole universe with the intention for the presence and teachings of Medicine Buddha to arise. Magick 101: the better the mind-state when the intention is made, the better the power of that intention and the better the odds of it manifesting as you wish. Patience will be required as this might take a while.

SHANNON

The recommendation to start serious intention-setting was given to me on this day because of the powerful effects that were starting to emerge: an extraordinary auditory mantra was developing, and on the visual field glorious colours were sparking out of the purple swaths in the sits, and sometimes it felt as if someone were standing behind me, pouring buckets of fresh paint into the mental landscape – all of which indicated that my mind was settling, albeit briefly, into elevated concentration.

Day Five

Beautiful Colour ~ Fear Ñana ~ Third Jhana ~ Concentration

Beautiful Colour

SHANNON

I am now seeing the most stunning colours I have seen in my life: blue and greens, with no pixilation, just incredibly smooth pools of colour.

DANIEL

Nice. You might notice an increase in the brilliance of external colours too.

Fear Ñana

SHANNON

During the previous night's sits, the visual field became filled with crab-like creatures that were captivating yet alarming to watch by myself in a remote cabin. I woke up in the middle of the night, still seeing the creatures moving around, even with

my eyes open. Not knowing I was in the fear ñana, I chose to err on the side of jeopardising my concentration by backing off from the meditation until my next consultation. As with most meditators in full-on retreat mode, my need for orderliness in my environment was peaking at this point, so, in addition to relaxing with a latte, I used my nervous energy to tidy the cabin as mindfully as possible.

Daniel, in some of my sits there were green, crab-like creatures that had countless legs and were crawling over each other. I became scared they would turn to face me, and, as I sort of believed they were almost real, I had a tough night.

DANIEL

Ah! Recognise the fear *ñana*: the creatures are not harmful, as the images are benign, but the belief that they can hurt you is what *can* hurt you. When concentration is strong, there is a fine line between magick and paranoid psychosis.

Third Jhana

SHANNON

While in the purple colour, during the past several days, I have had brief images form; for example, suddenly there were six ballerinas wearing purple tutus with heads made of the red dots and there have been visions of beings made out of multi-coloured lights. There were spontaneous flashes of images, such as bricks surrounded by flames, where I felt the heat on my skin and heard the

crackling of the fire – lucid dreams with tactile and auditory sensations are new to me.

With the kasina sequence, how do I get more solidly past the purple colour phase, or is that already happening?

DANIEL

Develop it by attending to it. Developing concentration is that mind-bogglingly simple! Any interesting imagery or visions that happen this early are gravy: it can take over a hundred hours of practice in a short period of time for the manifestations of strong powers to arise.

SHANNON

It was around this time I was getting brief, random glimpses of some of the extraordinary experiences that awaited any practitioner willing to put in solid cushion time and effort. It was important to be advised it would still take many hours of continued practice before anything near mastery could be achieved. As my first teacher Lama Gyurme Dorje is fond of saying, 'There is no such thing as advanced technique, only the creative application of the fundamentals.' With exciting visuals and sounds popping up in the meditation, this was a critical point in the retreat where I needed to diligently stay with the simple fundamentals. Nothing could replace the slow building fluency with the basic technique. From this foundation of getting to know the sequence of the fire kasina through patient repetition, the range and depth of experience by the end of the retreat became relatively reliable and productive in ways I could not have imagined.

Concentration

SHANNON

Should I still be really protecting concentration between sits?

DANIEL

Yes! It shatters like a pane of glass. If you are anything like me and my meditative colleagues, you will likely see this once you stop the retreat. Do not expect prolonged effects after the retreat, so cherish the ones you are able to create now in this protected space and time.

Day Six

Murk ~ Colour Control ~ Mesmerisation ~ Intention-Setting for Deity

Murk

SHANNON

I spent a lot of time in the murk last night: I do not know why.

DANIEL

That is where progress comes. The red dot is relatively easy, even for people new to meditation, but the murk is a slipperier journey to the other side.

SHANNON

When Daniel encouraged me throughout the retreat to let the mind sync with the visual field, such as in this murky phase of the meditation, I initially struggled to understand what he meant. Gradually meditation breakthroughs arose when the act of perceiving became an intimate connection with the details of the field, which involved 'getting myself out of the way' and attending in a bare manner to the visuals. A push for

something else to happen dropped away at these times. It was as if the field suddenly came closer, with the flickers and flecks of colour becoming fascinating. By sweeping the field for one minuscule fleck of colour that held particular interest, an intense red for example, and gently inclining my mind toward that colour, suddenly the entire field would come alive with incredible colour. A mind-to-field synchronisation began unfolding.

Colour Control

SHANNON

I am seeing a beautiful mauve shape of the candle, but only a brief red dot. Today I saw spectacular colours, many unnamable, across a delicate range.

DANIEL

Try tuning the colour shades to suit your interior design tastes. Be gentle. Appreciate it takes the brain time to process and manifest our intentions in this phase; immediate control will not work, as before, and will mess it up. It is not like deciding to move your arm.

SHANNON

After my attempt to change purple into red resulted in a dreary brown, I was disappointed, until realising the red I intended for had mixed with the purple wash to create brown. Eventually, over the course of the retreat, I was able to finesse the colours that showed up on the visual screen by using a feather-light

mental inclination towards a particular shade and then ‘adding’ other colours if whatever showed up did not meet my satisfaction. To get the exquisite teal I was after, for instance, I would commence with a blue and gradually add increasing amounts of green and white.

Mesmerisation

SHANNON

The colours become so mesmerising I lose the mantra altogether.

DANIEL

At this point, this is beneficial, as mesmerisation is important for deeper concentration: less striving for something, and just relaxing into the magnetism. Setting up any intentions for what the colours will do is best done earlier, before you end up deep into things.

Intention-Setting for Deity

SHANNON

The colours are the big thing right now: glowing and subtly changing. The meditation is blissful, quiet, and calm.

DANIEL

Aim for control of colours and shapes: this requires a del-

icate teasing of them. Also, before the sit you can try intending: ‘Should I find myself reaching for a bottle during a partial travel may I turn it into something spectacular, like a Medicine Buddha.’

SHANNON

Is it good to be spending all this time with the colours?

DANIEL

That is the whole point! What else is there? (SHANNON – *I remember we both had a good laugh at this.*) Going through the range of colours and starting to receive images wires something good into the brain. You might practise dropping frustration when intentions are not fulfilled, and instead then just stay with the colours. You could read Medicine Buddha texts for inspiration, as that sort of pre-programming can make desired images and entities manifest.

SHANNON

To enhance the chances of meeting with the Medicine Buddha, I incorporated the Medicine Buddha mantra into parts of the day and went through a simple puja (a Tibetan meditation ritual) each morning. One evening, while out kayaking, the moon’s reflection on the choppy lake surface appeared like tiny sparkling jewels, which I offered up to the Medicine Buddha to entice him into providing me with teachings.

Day Seven

*Intention-Setting ~ Fourth Jhana ~
High Concentration versus Ordinary Mind ~ Re-Observation*

Intention-Setting

SHANNON

Intention-setting is a subtle thing.

DANIEL

Keep in mind there will be a slight delay. Before looking at the flame, set intentions, look at the flame, go through the cycle, and see what happens at the end, then look at the flame again or not. Repetition is the exercise. Just keep at it.

SHANNON

Much cushion time was required to nuance fully surrendering to whatever was happening in the field while remaining mentally open to the possibilities for magickal effects.

Fourth Jhana

SHANNON

Eventually should I be intending for photo-realistic pictures?

DANIEL

The photo-realistic images show up in a space and mind state that is not manipulable in an ordinary way. That realm is what it is, and when it arises, it does what it does. You cannot tweak it like when you have colour and image control in earlier stages.

SHANNON

Do images just gradually get more realistic?

DANIEL

The jumps are surprising: when the realistic images arise, this happens in a total shift into a different way of doing things. Fourth *jhana* really is its own thing; it is as if suddenly you notice you are dreaming. The transition into it comes after a weird period of spacing out and relaxation, which allows the shift to occur.

SHANNON

How can I stay in these altered states and make the fleeting visions that do arise last longer?

DANIEL

Fragility of the very realistic images is normal. Learning to allow it to just be, to do what it does takes time, and simply developing more concentration is key. Staying in longer is harder for me, as I get pulled into fruitions or travel or have jarring, powerful interaction with a deity, all of which cause the images to end. The idea is to 'get to the point' (meaning fruition), and not necessarily to stay in those realms longer.

High Concentration versus Ordinary Mind

SHANNON

Since the Medicine Buddha is not coming to me, I have decided to practise intending to travel outside the cabin, perhaps to the realm of deities, and have managed to walk through a luminous door in one of my travels. I come out of high states like this into such ordinary living. It can be a harsh adjustment, yet the high states feel natural at the time they are occurring.

DANIEL

I offer two perspectives. The first is that these rare states are incompatible with anything apart from a deeply meditative setting. And the second, which is my dream, is that I could be able to move fluidly between rarified, deeply concentrated, magick-induced states and ordinary mind with no bad side-effects or interference between either. I have not managed that yet.

SHANNON

There was an on-going balancing act of opening up to the exalted moments of meditation, accepting they would not be ever-present, and finding a way back to the basic practice, without fixating on wanting to gain the peaks again or fantasising about what might lie ahead. Proficiency in working with intentions can only come with a masterful, light touch with no agenda of expectation for results – an easy concept to comprehend intellectually, yet challenging to realise.

Re-Observation

SHANNON

I am grateful to be conversant with the *vipassana ñanas*, because I was in re-observation recently yet able to easily climb out of it.

Some personal and work tasks arising from my city life interrupted the flow of concentration and were likely the trigger for re-observation. Re-observation can be so convincing, with its distorted thinking, that it took me a while to realise that the onset of heavy striving, fatigue, difficulty reciting the mantra and overall discouragement were linked to my location in the ñanas. Once recognition dawned, I took a long hot shower, drank a latte, and lay in the yoga corpse pose for hours, rebuilding a slow, loose mantra. It was humbling to realise that wanting concentration and having concentration were two different things. Finding the nimbleness to ease off from the practice when required was useful.

DANIEL

Next time, notice the colour aspects of re-observation and what it looks like: murky, creepy and how it tempts you to either too much effort or not enough.

SHANNON

There is a natural trajectory on retreats that heads towards a mastery phase, a coming together of what has been learned. This is an appropriate time to delve into territory that prior to mastery would have been destabilising or confusing. On Day Eighteen, the entry into the mastery phase of my retreat, Daniel provides details for developing expertise in working laterally with the dukkha ñanas in the context of the third jhana of the fire kasina sequence.

Day Eight

*Intentions ~ Eyes-Open Practice ~
Travelling versus Lucid Dreaming versus Fourth Jhana*

Intentions

SHANNON

Suddenly during the sit I will come up with an intention I want to make, but afterwards I have no idea if this is what I am supposed to be aiming for.

DANIEL

We discover much about ourselves by what we want to see or do. What we may realise about our real motivations is sometimes surprising.

SHANNON

Unfortunately, at this phase, the visions and creatures in the meditations only last seconds. Should I be intending for them to last longer? For example, I had three whimsical characters show up in front of me and the middle one smiled at me, then they vanished.

DANIEL

Magick 101: intend that when beings arise, may I ask them their name and may they tell me. Doing so can actually help stabilise the experience.

SHANNON

The images and visions I am getting are not the Medicine Buddha, so I immediately lose interest, but is the idea to go with whatever you get?

DANIEL

This question is a source of debate in the magickal world. On one hand you have groups like the spiritualists, who are relatively indiscriminate in what they conjure and are often willing to communicate with anything out there. On the other hand you have groups like ceremonial magicians, who generally are much more selective (and often elitist) in their invocations and associations. Everyone has to decide for themselves where they stand. (SHANNON – *We joked about whether there should be equal rights for these entities.*)

Eyes-Open Practice

SHANNON

Stunning colours are easy to access in the sits with eyes closed but not with eyes open or walking around.

My interest in developing specific skills (such as the ability to see mental colour with my eyes open) was a fluid process,

waxing and waning throughout the retreat, depending on what conditions were presenting at each particular phase.

Daniel patiently reiterated instructions whenever I expressed renewed interest in an earlier teaching. At one point I sheepishly apologised for getting him to run through something yet again, and he came back with: 'Do you know how many times my teachers had to say the same thing over and over to me? Hundreds!' Much of the challenge of what we learn to do in formal meditation lies not in the complexity, rather in the sometimes counter-intuitive yet skilful methods required to progress compared to the unproductive antics of the untrained mind. Regular review of meditation teachings is essential.

DANIEL

In the *Visuddhimagga* the standard instructions are to obtain a stable image from the kasina, then go carefully to a different location with eyes open while maintaining the image all the way there. On retreat one can practise with eyes open at night and dawn, and, as you progress, keep extending the eyes-open images out into the day. It got to the point on my last retreat where one of the other meditators could see the colours of a pentagram I was drawing in the air in broad daylight.

Travelling versus Lucid Dreaming versus Fourth Jhana

SHANNON

How do you experience the difference between a vision, travelling and a lucid dream? And does fourth *jhana* fit

into any of the above?

DANIEL

Dreaming: sleeping. Lucid dreaming: you know it is a dream and have some control. Hyper lucid dreaming: crackling vivid visuals and physical sensations that make ordinary waking reality look dull by comparison.

Full travelling: can be either cracklingly, crisply visual, or quiet and dreamlike. If travel occurs during formal sits, the physical body is on the cushion, but you are out doing things in a different realm. Visions can set the stage for a travel. Those who tend to refer to this as ‘astral travel’ often also refer to a ‘tether’ or ‘cord’ that causes the traveller to snap back into the body at the end of travel.

Fourth *jhana*: peaceful, low intensity, low vibrancy and often complex dreamscapes or luminous, intelligent beings: the sense of ‘me’ is minimal. This stage requires silence or the meditator will likely blow it. The fourth *jhana* benefits from direction in the form of pre-set intentions for interactions before one enters it.

Day Nine

*Brilliant Colour ~ Intention-Setting with Travel ~ Fourth Jhana ~
Magickal Suggestions*

Brilliant Colour

SHANNON

The colours are more brilliant than anything I have seen in my life: the main feature of the stage before this was a subtle, wide range of colour and now it is the brilliance. In one of the sits, an electrifyingly pink colour filled the visual field with even brighter pink stars bursting off of it.

DANIEL

‘More real than real’: this is the prequel to the realm of malleability.

SHANNON

It is no wonder the Buddha is said to have recommended meditation take place ‘at the root of a tree’. Retreating in the Precambrian shield of northern Canada proved to have many advantages. For example, when the colours described above

began showing up in the sits, walking through the glorious autumn woods made for an easy transfer of the internal visionary progress to external perceptual abilities. Also, being situated in nature and spending time on the water was profoundly grounding during re-observation phases. And, for a magician's paradise, nothing can beat drawing symbols in the midnight sky while watching shooting stars during the full eclipse of the moon. To sit in the city is not a show-stopper, but it is best to try to find a quiet place in nature when delving into retreat work.

Intention-Setting with Travel

SHANNON

Several times during lying meditation, I experienced a visceral whoosh where I know I was lying down but there was another experience of me sitting up: it is my version of pre-travel.

DANIEL

Intend for the mind to automatically stabilise on any travel activity and give it somewhere interesting to go and something to do. What calls to the deeper parts of your heart is more likely to happen.

Fourth Jhana

SHANNON

I am very briefly getting into quiet dreamlike spaces that

may be my first glimpses of fourth *jhana*. Is there a way I can get there more efficiently from third *jhana*?

DANIEL

You have to give up brilliance and even control, but not too early or you will fall back into lower *jhana*s and rapture: as clearly stated in the scriptures. Set up the base by attending to the lower three *jhana*s, then gently send the mind in the direction of the next *jhana*, as, if you have set up the base well, and have the skills developed from repeated practice, then when you let the mind go, it can go there.

Magickal Suggestions

DANIEL

Start thinking about magickal effects, such as the classic intention to make the candle flame move. Standard method: go up to fourth *jhana*, come out, resolve, and then forget about it. The forgetting is often the hardest part. Just take your foot off the gas, and, if nothing happens, resume practice.

SHANNON

Daniel described an experience of electrical light shooting out of him towards an oil-lamp and then causing its flame to flicker, after he had resolved to move the flame with his mind. He also suggested I try seeing colours of the chakras and emotions as colours in the body, and reminded me to intend for

teachings from the Medicine Buddha.

SHANNON

I am curious how much of the powers you have in daily living?

DANIEL

Regarding the level where you are now, just brief, occasional flashes. The level of powers you are cultivating now on retreat generally requires the right conditions. While you have it, use it, but, when you stop practising all day, it is likely to fade rapidly. Still, having seen the territory, it is easier to get to it next time.

SHANNON

After completing the cycle do you feel quite normal at that point?

DANIEL

Yes, however, it is an odd ‘fourth *jhana* normal’, with an ultra chill, clear feel to it. In some ways it feels normal, yet really there is nothing normal about it.

Day Ten

Intention-Setting with Travel ~ Visions

Intention-Setting with Travel

SHANNON

I am travelling like crazy, sometimes 50 outings in a sit: brief but mundane travels, often using my astral hands to do things. I keep intending to meet the Medicine Buddha but it has not happened.

DANIEL

All these things take patience and repetition. You are only ten days in. Set intentions once at the beginning of the sit (not during), and then let it go. Paying attention makes it all happen.

Visions

SHANNON

I had several visions of a Jesus-like being outlined in

dazzling light. I was unable to stay with it long enough to ask his name.

DANIEL

Magick plays to our earliest childhood ethos and to cultural resonances.

Day Eleven

Highlights of Fourth Jhana ~ Luminosity ~ Fruitions

Fourth Jhana

SHANNON

I am getting into quiet, calm spaces with sublime moving objects: for example, a hand holding an exquisite flashlight with the thumb pressing on a button causing gorgeous glowing colours to emanate from its interior. Does fourth *jhana* necessarily include living beings?

DANIEL

The images in the fourth *jhana* could be anything. I often see geometrical designs in vast landscapes and sometimes living beings. It is a realm where there is generally silence and things happening on their own. Fourth *jhana* provides a rare opportunity to leverage concentration power to see extraordinarily key aspects essential for insight. Maybe just brief glimpses. Integrating insights afterwards is a long, important project.

Luminosity

DANIEL

A profound aspect of fourth *jhana* is luminosity, a *things-are-where-they-are* aspect. Space is broad and can be taken as an object. Set the intention beforehand to see the luminous aspect. (SHANNON – *This advice was invaluable in helping me see the same aspects in travels later in the retreat.*) Typically, objects are seen and space ignored. However, in the fourth *jhana*, we can reverse normal ignorance. Notice the awareness of the colour is in the brightness of colour itself.

Fruitions

DANIEL

Insight opportunities in the fourth *jhana* are remarkable. Fruitions may occur off images into all three doors. Once the mind can access fruitions in that territory, it tends to want to go there again.

Day Twelve

*Samatha versus Vipassana Aspects ~ Sequence Description ~
Restlessness ~ Parallax ~ Black Disc ~ Crossing Transitions ~
Re-Observation*

Samatha versus Vipassana Aspects

SHANNON

How did you balance *samatha* and *vipassana* aspects?
Would you notice that *ñānas*, insight stages, come on
strong once in awhile?

DANIEL

For me they fuse together. Example: finely spinning
gear-like things around the dot is the *vipassana* aspect
(moving, vibratory aspect) of the *jhāna*. Post-stream
entry, cycling and the forward pull of the *ñānas* is inevit-
able. The insight aspect will take care of itself with
pointers and clear landmarks along the way. *Ñānas* or-
ganically taking over at times is normal.

SHANNON

Daniel described an image of a grid with insight along one

axis and concentration along the other and he pointed out how practice can fall off the concentration side into a ñāna, or go too heavy on the concentration side where it is too stable to see clearly the insight aspects. When insight and concentration are both strong, there will be luminosity, images, and vipassana insight based on those.

Sequence Description

SHANNON

I would like to describe what has been happening with my sequence lately.

DANIEL

Great: the sequence is key!

SHANNON

Okay, so: I look at the flame, close my eyes, see the vivid red dot, then neat stuff shows up in the centre or on the edges of the dot, and then I often see the after-images of the shapes of things in the room. Then the murk, which at times can be quite dark, is much easier to transition through when I notice the luminosity. Then I have airy colours that are gaining 3D depth, but are still quite abstract.

DANIEL

The surprising thing is that black is as luminous as white. When you obtain colours with depth, that is the more

developed part of the third *jhana*, as opposed to the early, dissolution part of the third *jhana* continuum.

SHANNON

When I rest attention on the colours, the colour screen flips and a moving object, such as a bottle with an opening and closing lid, appears on the screen. At one point a butterfly wing peeled up off the visual field towards me, and my arms felt like wings flapping in space. Then I either have what I think is a fruition, or I slip back into colours.

The audio journal entries recorded throughout the retreat were often recorded while in highly-altered states just after experiencing things like the above. Although periodically I sound as if I am high on recreational drugs, my states were in fact 100% meditation-induced. I also narrated a couple of sittings in real-time, beginning with observing the candle flame, up to the cusp of third jhana.

DANIEL

After a fruition, you have options. You can begin back at the beginning of the cycle with the candle flame to re-charge; this builds a strong foundation. Or, when falling back into the third *jhana*, you can then drift back to the fourth, and this cross-boundary transition, done again and again, builds mastery by hovering on those transition points and navigating them more easily. So explore what is the same and what is different about each side of the third / fourth *jhana* boundary, and really learn how to make that transition work.

Restlessness

SHANNON

Sometimes I drop out of these higher states into intense feelings of restlessness.

DANIEL

With restlessness one can:

1. Totally power-down all controls and try to just passively sit, this being what might initially feel like ‘bad practice’; but, you will find this floating can restore an imbalance regarding tranquillity.

2. It may be you are just sitting too long and your body is telling you that, so you could go kayaking, or try more walking to balance energy. Becoming more physically grounded will likely help the sits.

Parallax

SHANNON

What is parallax?

DANIEL

Things change shape and relation to each other in the visual field as we move around. Observe when you move your head back and forth, the thing in the frontal vision close to you moves in relationship to the wall. Usually people do not notice it much, but it is useful to notice it for teaching the brain something about how to make 3D

images and travel, as well as to just keep attention stabilised on the details of the visual field and what it is actually doing.

Black Disc

SHANNON

Can you describe what is referred to as ‘the black disc’?

DANIEL

When the red dot turns dark green or fades out, the meditator can get a bigger black dot with colour around it. This black dot can be taken as object. (Shannon – *We talked about the value of staying with that transition from second to third jhana as the black dot fades in and out and some red peeks through again.*)

Crossing Transitions

SHANNON

I am finding that sitting on the fence between two parts of the sequence, as I go along, is fascinating.

DANIEL

It is normal to go back and forth across these points as we learn to transition into one and give up the other. Learning what width of attention does can help with every further insight cycle. For example, transitioning from

dark night to equanimity, watching the visuals and how our experience of space changes, gives us clues on how to shift out of dark states. Kasina practice gives a visual diagram of what attention does across states.

SHANNON

I found it exceptionally helpful to be encouraged to explore my interest in transitions. One of my on-line audio journals includes an in-depth description of the transition across third jhana, teetering on the edge into fourth.

Re-Observation

SHANNON

Can you tell me how you experienced re-observation when you were doing fire kasina practice on retreat?

DANIEL

On my first fire kasina retreat, which was during approximately the second half of a 17-day retreat at Bhavana Society in 2001 over the winter break, at the peak of my practice, re-observation was just this vast, elaborate, manifold radial symmetry design in what I call ‘rainbow flux lines’, meaning white lines with some colours at the edges, like light that had passed through a crystal and had split slightly into its component colours. It would grow wider and wider, making gently swirling symmetrical patterns, which seemed to have an Aztec or Mayan art theme, and to stay with it properly required a

very chill, diffuse, extremely broad attention to all that complexity at the same time without really focusing on any of it. It would progress, and seemed to curl around behind me like it was drawn on the inside of a huge invisible hemisphere, and thus would flow to the far wide extremes of my visual field, as if it was trying to come around behind me and encircle me, though my body was barely perceptible at that point. There was no restlessness, no irritation, just beautiful, exquisitely complex, refined sacred geometry.

On my more recent retreat, which was only 12 days and involved more talking, I obtained some images but nothing that perfectly refined, and so re-observation often had more unevenness and restlessness. I was restless to figure how to come back into the vast, clear images of the fourth *jhana*. Despite brilliant colours and heavy bodily bliss, I was still edgy to move onward. Had I had more time, I think re-observation would have stabilised and purified to just images again, as I could see it progressing in that direction when I passed through it.

Day Thirteen

*Importance of Third Jhana ~ Vertical versus Horizontal Work ~
Positive Qualities in Meditators*

Importance of Third Jhana

SHANNON

I have continued exploring every minute aspect of third *jhana* (the murk, the billowing swaths of purple, the lustrous colours with explosive sparks, the slow moving airy 3D colours almost as silent as fourth). If I am intrigued, is this still a good use of my time?

DANIEL

It is putting together all those puzzle pieces which makes the fourth *jhana* work. Third, when well-developed and mastered, has much (though not all) of what fourth has, with fourth being more spatial and natural-seeming in some way, more complete, more finished, more resolved. Usually our attention is in a narrow first or second *jhana* mode: watching television, talking to someone, staring at a screen, even driving, activities in which peripheral vision is not normally required for us to stay safe, and

therefore is not well-developed. However, it is important for the later two *jhanas*.

Vertical versus Horizontal Work

SHANNON

Would it be good for me to know how *dukkha-ñanas* (dark night stages) fit with phases of the third *jhana*?

DANIEL

Just learn the base for now: nailing the sequence is essential. See how fast you can cycle, and when you become restless walk (or kayak, or whatever), then back to the cushion. The big bell curve of a retreat happens over days not minutes. A few days ago you had massive rapture and an incredible mantra and now things are generally more spacious and dreamy with a third *jhana* vibe. Keep going vertical until deep into fourth *jhana*. Later, in the review phase, you will be more confident, and that is a safer, easier time for more horizontal, *jhana-to-ñana* correlation exploration.

Positive Qualities in Meditators

SHANNON

Given your time in the meditation world, what qualities do you most appreciate in meditators you have met?

DANIEL

Strong morality! Those who don't project their stuff, are helpful, fun, and down-to-earth, regardless of level of mastery. Without strong morality there are likely to be problems, especially given the fascinating stickiness that can easily come with cool meditation experiences; this can show up as self-absorption or arrogance and be very annoying to others.

Day Fourteen

Fruitions

Fruitions

SHANNON

I have been going through several full cycles of the sequence per day, with each cycle ending with a fruition. With fruitions, I often cannot see the entranceways. Would the no-self door only happen when looking into the eyes of a deity, or could I possibly gain it from mesmerisation with the swirling colours?

DANIEL

You can try to set an intention to see the entranceways more clearly. Much insight can be gained from later reflecting on the clear experiences of entrances into the three doors. The doors will take anything as object, including swirling colours. One generally cannot choose the specific door, but one can produce higher odds for the no-self door by collapsing into the luminous eyes of a tantric image, recognising its intelligence is your intelligence. It is hard to beat the insight gained in that way.

SHANNON

I am concerned fruitions are getting in the way of staying longer with the 3D images and moving further into the fourth *jhana*. (*At this point I was still attempting to understand the dimensions of the fourth jhana.*)

DANIEL

If one is really getting fruitions, one must be in the fourth *jhana*, even if it is somewhat fleetingly and not clear that one is in fourth. Fruitions are one of the main points. After a fruition, you can decide, instead of going back to the beginning of the insight cycle, to go back into fruition, using the clarity and power of the afterglow of a fruition to make that happen. (SHANNON – *I would not otherwise have appreciated how possible it was to recycle back to another fruition immediately after attaining one.*) Work on mastery by going through the sequence repeatedly. Keep up intending to see Medicine Buddha and attempt to drop discouragement regarding outcome.

Day Fifteen

The Grey ~ Fruitions

The Grey

SHANNON

I am wasting too much time in a grey visual field. There is no colour.

DANIEL

I was also initially thrown by the grey, but then I realised grey is a fusion of black and white and all colours, like the true base colour, the equanimity of colour, the potential out of which all colours come. So there are two totally different relationships one can have with the grey: one not understanding, one better understanding. I agree, initially it feels wrong to stay with the grey, but it is not.

Fruitings

SHANNON

The initial fruition after a cycle is strongest, sometimes followed by such intense after-waves that my whole system needs to calm down before being able to rise up for another fruition. Eventually I am able to fairly easily intend for repeat fruitings, but they tend to be much milder. Also, I still rarely experience clear entrances.

DANIEL

It is normal for them to grow softer and feel less satisfying over multiple repeated fruitings, back-to-back. If you have had a fruition, the mind has experienced a door into it somehow, but, for many, they find that without language for it, or without someone pointing it out, they have no good way of categorising the qualities of the entrance to the door, or even remembering what happened. Look for very rapid, discreet mind moments: the experience of what is theorised in the *Abhidhamma*.

SHANNON

Are the shudders with the impermanence door visual at all? I briefly feel but do not 'see' them.

DANIEL

The shudders include space, time, physical awareness, full-on everything in all the sense doors, all together.

SHANNON

By the end of Day Fifteen I entered into a pristinely quiet and restorative phase, for the first time being able to watch a relatively stable visual field. The bodily vibrations that had been present throughout the retreat diminished to almost nothing. Striving dropped dramatically, replaced by a widespread sense of inner peacefulness and acceptance.

Day Sixteen

Arc of Development ~ Exit Out of Fruition

Arc of Development

DANIEL

It is helpful to consider the overall arc of development of the retreat. Each sit might not reflect it, but generally you are now in the territory of the fourth *jhana*, the territory of equanimity.

SHANNON

During this phase of the retreat the effortlessness of many of the current sits allowed me to experience a mind that was supremely concentrated without the effort of trying to concentrate. It was fascinating that it took so many hours of practice to end up feeling what could only be described as ordinary and natural.

Exit Out of Fruition

SHANNON

When I come out of a fruition, I am briefly disoriented. The visual sense door is what I initially become aware of.

DANIEL

The coming back on-line is actually ‘orientation’. Quickly, all the parts we think are us reassemble. Rather than a specific sense door that comes back first, is a perceptual configuring of a ‘this-over-here’ and a ‘that-over-there’. Eventually, in your practice, you should try to notice exactly how that happens and how the illusion of this side and that side split off and what goes on each side. This is subtle but very helpful to see, as in the moment we come out of fruition, we get an opportunity to directly observe exactly how the illusion of the split of duality seems to reconstitute itself. At this point in the retreat, it is likely better to focus on noticing the doors more clearly.

Day Seventeen

*Natural Strengths ~ Getting From Third to Fourth Jhana ~ Eight
Jhanas Using Attention as Object*

Natural Strengths

SHANNON

If you said, ‘Shannon, envision an apple or a face’, I am unable to do that. Could that block me from image control and success in meeting the Medicine Buddha?

DANIEL

Everyone has their proclivities, strengths and wiring. Meditators clearly have different capabilities. One person’s level of mastery is due partly to natural blessing, so try to avoid comparing your practice exactly to that of someone else, as it is likely that something they are very strong in, you may just be average in, but similarly, something you are very strong in, they may just be average in. Also, living entities are often not easy to get to. On my last retreat I rarely and briefly got there.

Getting From Third to Fourth Jhana

SHANNON

When in upper third *jhana* you described how you space out or gear down somehow. Do you have any other suggestions on getting to a fourth *jhana* with living beings? What helped you make the leap?

DANIEL

I dream out for a few seconds to something more broad and clean. (SHANNON – *I realised later this happens before I travel.*) To get to a manifest image of a deity, try gazing at a picture of the Medicine Buddha before you sit. Since you have decent colour control, go for better image control. Try for two-dimensional shapes for starters. Nudge whatever images you see in the direction you want it to go in. For example, try seeing faces in the images of the trees you are getting in meditation. Transitioning to the fourth *jhana* is sort of mysterious, and is outside a normal, linear way of working.

Eight Jhanas Using Attention as Object

SHANNON

I seem to have veered off the fire kasina practice and am meandering up and down through the *samatha jhanas*. Can you describe your experience, going from first to eighth *jhana*?

DANIEL

This was a practice I did for many years after lying down in bed at night. For my object, I used the width of attention itself, which is more abstract compared to typical objects but also more fundamental. Being an aversive type, I am generally less interested in taking pleasure as object, not that it cannot be fun. Still, for this practice, I used attention-width as follows.

In the first *jhana*, attention is narrow, pointed and effortful. In the second, attention is more natural, a little wider-centred, like looking straight ahead. In the third it is the opposite: the centre is vague, diffuse and spacey, like being under water. In the fourth *jhana*, attention is much wider, pervasive, panoramic and neutral. In the fifth *jhana* of boundless space, forms and body vanish, vast boundlessness prevails. In the sixth *jhana* of boundless consciousness, the boundlessness of the fifth becomes (or is recognised to be) luminous, like a clear light that fills space. In the seventh *jhana*, that of nothingness, it is as if boundless luminosity inverts, to take instead nothingness as object. In neither-perception-nor-yet-non-perception, the eighth *jhana*, nothingness de-tunes out to neither-perception-nor-yet-non-perception, which is extremely hard to describe in any other way save for the fact that nothingness clearly is tuned to nothingness, and the eighth *jhana* is what happens when you detune from even that level of certainty about what attention is tuned to. Then I would come out and gain a fruition from the post-eighth *jhana* junction point.

Day Eighteen

*Fruitions ~ Entrance to Fruitions ~ Fruitions with Deities ~ Vertical
versus Horizontal Work ~ Hearing Voices ~ Panoramic Vision*

Fruitions

SHANNON

Pre-retreat fruitions only happened when I was in high eleventh (equanimity) *ñāna*, after noticing fine vibrations in the experience field for extended periods. One highlight of this retreat is the ability to have fruitions in versatile ways. I have had them just sitting doing ‘nothing’ or when intensely looking at something while out walking, then shifting my gaze quickly; and, in meditation, suddenly hearing unexpected loud noises; and also, in sits, going through doorways in a travel.

DANIEL

Going through doorways is a common way to have a fruition. Consciousness blinks out briefly when exiting one room and then reappears when entering another, and the well-trained mind can catch that as object and utilise it to obtain a fruition. The fortunate convergence of the

phase of the breath, the walking through the door, the state of mind, the phase of practice, a lack of distractions, these can result in fruition. With walking, fruitions often happen for those who are well-trained on the turn-around in walking meditation. As for the loud, unexpected noise, stories of people awakening to the sound of the bell or the master shouting abound for this reason, because it is an easy object for the mind to suddenly lock totally on to, and then vanish at the end of. The mind is figuring out how to go home, to get the thing it wants. Then the mind keeps opening channels for obtaining fruitions in new ways.

Entrance to Fruitions

SHANNON

The three discreet shudders before fruition are so fast, how does the mind know what insight is to be gained from this?

DANIEL

The degree of natural understanding of the implications of the three doors and what they mean for practice and what they tell us about reality is wide. Some are freaked out by the doors. Others instantly grasp their profound, ultimate implications. Most are somewhere in the middle. Good instruction can help people who do not grasp it on their own to better understand the implications of what they experience.

Each door gives a different clue: they each fill in part

of the puzzle related to one of the three characteristics and so one of the three illusions. The no-self door provides counter-evidence against the fiercely-held myth that collapsing into reality would be horrible. One may have to cross the pain to get there, but it turns out that the other side is better. Doors give us rare opportunities to see this.

SHANNON

Can you still have significant insight without being able to see all of the entranceways clearly?

DANIEL

Yes, but still, it is helpful to have a contextual framework for these experiences, as much of our processing memory has linguistic components. I personally have rare phenomenological ability. I had some teachers with spacious, natural realisation, yet who had relatively low capabilities to explain fine phenomenology. However, I still derived great benefit from studying with them, as they had other strengths and wisdom to share which was of great value.

Fruitions with Deities

SHANNON

If I am able to see a living figure looking at me, say in a travel or the fourth *jhana*, do you think my mind will know what to do with that?

DANIEL

Many have visions of deities without collapsing into them. But one of the major points of tantric practice is to recognise how the intrinsic intelligence of the deity is the same as yours, and this deep insight causes the collapse, which produces further fundamental, direct insight. The more you practise, the more likely this is to occur.

Vertical versus Horizontal Work

SHANNON

Can you describe working laterally with the dukkha ñanas and the benefits of developing this skill?

DANIEL

Sure. Use the flame to get past dissolving the red dot into the murk. Then shift into your body to drop into and stay in dissolution. Keep a light touch on the colours, then switch heavily into investigating the transitory qualities of dissolution, which is vague, wide, and diffuse. Keep attention about 20% on the colours and 80% on other qualities of body, *jhanic* sensations. Then try to shift up into fear, switching back to 80% colours, 20% overall fear. Then ask the mind to shift in colours to misery and see what the colours do, then shift more fully into the vibrational, emotional elements of misery, etc. It is like climbing a ladder, one foot at a time.

Benefits of horizontal work: it opens flexibility and gives coherent mastery across mind states, as well as integrating the knowledge of the *ñanas*, *jhanas*, colours, vi-

brations and emotions. Horizontal work builds the ability to recognise these states in others by their tone of voice, word choice, quality of being, etc.

Hearing Voices

SHANNON

I am occasionally hearing a voice out-of-the-blue say a sentence to me, with the utmost conviction. (*Daniel mentioned some examples of similar experiences both on and off-retreat, some of which had held profound meaning for him.*)

Panoramic Vision

SHANNON

When walking around, my way of seeing has significantly shifted: not just noticing the depth of colour and radiance but taking a much wider view.

DANIEL

This is fourth *jhana* pervading. Attention naturally becomes more panoramic, which is psychologically healthier.

Day Twenty

*Mastery ~ Discouragement with Intention-Setting ~ Mantra with
Anapanasati ~ Suffering Door*

Mastery

SHANNON

For several hours, I have been finishing the sequence with a fruition about every ten to fifteen minutes. I can be just thinking the word ‘fruition’, and I will have one and then several more. There must be a mix of equanimity and concentration allowing things to flow. It is currently hard to believe that at the beginning of the retreat it was taking four or five days to get there. When I stopped pushing was the point at which things became quiet and tranquil with easy cycling.

DANIEL

Mastery! A subtle trap when assisting others is the assumption it will be this easy for everyone: particularly if one has something that comes naturally. At a primitive level we think it is the same for everyone.

SHANNON

Another sign a meditator is in a phase of mastery is that unlike the beginning of a retreat, where the morning sits can be slow-going due to the orientation back into the practice after a night of sleep, in mastery things often roll effortlessly at the outset of the day. Earlier in the retreat I would sometimes choose to briefly tune into the body bliss at the forehead and crown chakras, to help fire-up the practice at the sluggish start of a day's sitting, whereas by the end of the retreat the first meditation of the day started immediately and naturally.

Discouragement with Intention-Setting

SHANNON

My ever-shifting attitude toward intention-setting encompassed a striving, forceful stance (not fruitful), abject skepticism and forgetfulness (equally unproductive), as well as sincerely sending out an aspiration at just the right time while turning the mind back to absorption into the meditation object with the dropping of all agenda for a result (the most rewarding, angst-free path, yet comically elusive to this novice magician).

I get discouraged when specific intentions do not happen. Do I just keep trying wholeheartedly?

DANIEL

It is normal to get discouraged. Eventually equanimity arises regarding intentions, which is a phase that comes after frustration. When you stop caring, then, paradoxic-

ally, things are most likely to happen.

SHANNON

We talked about the similarity regarding intending for fruitions: wanting one too hard screws it up.

Mantra with Anapanasati

SHANNON

When people on retreat are doing *anapanasati* meditation at the nose tip, would a mantra during the sits mess up the breath?

DANIEL

Mantras occupy the cognitive mind and they change something in the relationship with the inner voice; mantras make the inner voice more clear and wieldy, and so it behaves better. They are taught traditionally – for example, the Tibetans use them. But mantras are not good for people prone to psychosis; for people hearing voices it is not helpful to amplify the inner voice. Mantras do not mess up the breath because one can fuse the breath and mantra together. Mantras have a location where they occur within the auditory field, and you can position it so that it seems to be coming from the nose or from wherever you are noticing the breath. When performing the fire kasina, you can position it centrally and then, as attention widens later, fan it out. The brain processes

sound by positioning it. Meditators are often unaware of how and where they are placing the mantra, but with attention to this, can learn to recognise and control its position.

Suffering Door

SHANNON

There was an upsetting aspect to the three shudders before a couple of the fruitions: which door would that be?

DANIEL

When the impermanence door predominates with suffering as its secondary aspect, reality disconcertingly stutters. When the suffering door predominates, there is this disturbing twisting away movement, as if everything is being ripped away, revealing the fundamental suffering of duality. The distance we insist on maintaining is torn away from us. Experiencing the doors repeatedly provides important bridging for further insight, as the mind gets to see there is not a catastrophe on the other side.

SHANNON

Daniel added that his suffering door lost its suffering aspect in 2003. Experiencing that particular door differently was what he termed the 'entryway' for him. The sense of a centrepoin had finally vanished and therefore the suffering, violating aspect of the doors had vanished alongside.

Day Twenty-One

*Travel and Deities ~ Mastery and Review ~
Rewiring with Control ~ Fear*

Travel and Deities

SHANNON

Do you think my best bet to see Medicine Buddha would be when travelling?

DANIEL

Likely, as that world is hyper-malleable: it has its own bizarre range of energy, yet is a territory where the options are essentially unlimited.

SHANNON

I have a better sense of the value of travelling. I can now stay in longer and observe the spacious aspect much more clearly.

DANIEL

Concentration enhances and stabilises. Few people un-

derstand what happens when you get your concentration really strong.

Mastery and Review

SHANNON

I have a problem when watching the colours swirling and gaining 3D depth, because mesmerisation brings on fruitions. How can I stay there longer?

DANIEL

The point is not to stay there. Instead, sculpt it to be what you want it to be through intention and practice, then repeatedly go through the cycle. Practise doing more of what you wish the mind to do. High review phase is a great time to work on mastery: for example, it would be good to gain better image control and travel-content control.

SHANNON

I found it instructive and amusing to hear in detail how Daniel on his last retreat, while working with the mental visual field, repeatedly tweaked and refined the image of a dragon, by giving it longer fangs and better nostrils, before obtaining fruitions from it.

Rewiring with Control

DANIEL

Repetition of successful intention, even fleetingly, wires the mind in good ways, particularly when compared to the average meditator, in whom a stream of random images and thoughts parade through that are 90 percent useless. Making the mantra amazing and the images what you want them to be, all you have to do next is fully combine that with getting the ultimate aspect (meaning going through the no-self door into a fruition), and you've got the whole thing.

Fear

SHANNON

Could you expand on your earlier comment that the meditation images cannot hurt me, but fear can hurt me? And what about when psychological issues come up in the *jhanas*?

DANIEL

Fear is nothing more than textures and energetic frequencies in the field. If taken as real, one can freak out and contract into weird behavior, with fear feeding on fear. These unfortunate patterns, when occurring in a concentrated mind, are written on that mind more strongly. Strong concentration can bring higher highs when well-directed and lower lows when allowed to run

amok, as strong concentration is a double-edged sword.

Obviously, in the world of meditation, there is a great debate: to ignore psychological stuff and stick with concentration, or allow issues to surface to develop healthier relationships to challenging patterns and gain insight. There are positive points to both, but you definitely do not want to wallow in psychological issues.

SHANNON

In the Sathipatanna Sutta, the discourse on the four foundations of mindfulness, there is scholarly controversy concerning the correct translation of the fourth foundation, 'mindfulness of the dhammas'. Where the translators agree, though, is contemplation of the five hindrances and the seven factors of awakening are to be included as part of this foundation. Indeed it proved invaluable for me to be well-versed in working with the seven factors of awakening, in particular to be able to recognise when joy and tranquillity were low, which often coincided with a rise in my habitual hindrances of fear and doubt. (The configuration of the specifics on this will be different for each meditator.) When I was at risk of wallowing in the unproductive, if all else failed, remembering to cultivate and tune into a soft physical and mental joy, and an inner tranquillity, worked well to allow for a deeper letting-go into whatever was happening.

Day Twenty-Two

*Meta-Cognition Messes with Concentration ~ Integrating Luminosity ~
Fruition with Deity or Self-Image ~ Formless Realms*

Meta-Cognition Messes with Concentration

SHANNON

Did you start working with dragon images deep into third *jhana* where colours were swirling and more 3D?

DANIEL

Even earlier. Working with shapes got me to fourth. Be aware the meta-cognition and mapping is not a substitute for concentration, and, although this can seem subtle, this is an important distinction. Drop the reactions and the commentary. Tune in to the images like a fascination with a dream.

Integrating Luminosity

SHANNON

Can you say more about the luminosity of other senses

(beyond visual) and how it takes time to integrate that? Is it closely connected to what is experienced when in the spaciousness of higher equanimity in the eleventh *ñāna*?

DANIEL

Luminosity, in theory, applies to visual sensations. In practice, it applies to everything. Hold the view there is just one sense door: space and everything in it are integrated. Given the luminosity of all phenomena, we can ‘see’ everything in space similar to the way visual objects are seen. Everything manifests in space with its own awareness. For example, when touching the thumb and fingertip together, the tip of the finger is cognisant of the tip of the thumb; where it is in space. The more one can walk around holding the view, the closer the connection to this aspect of ultimate reality in the present moment. The eleventh *ñāna* is the closest to it until you actually get there.

Fruition with Deity or Self-Image

SHANNON

What is the significance of looking into the eyes of a deity (or, even better, one’s own eyes) and obtaining a fruition? Have you had fruitions during eye contact with people in this realm or by looking into a mirror?

DANIEL

Fruitions like this reveal things about the nature and loc-

ation of awareness. My understanding of the Tibetan strategy is the practitioner is trained in reverence for the intelligence of an external tantric being, which provides a stepping-stone along the route to a realisation about one's own nature.

By collapsing 'your' awareness into the eyes (awareness) of the 'other entity', each realises it is the same thing. The direct route is to have awareness collapse into your own image, which sort of eliminates the tantric 'middleman' or 'middlewoman'. Try to see yourself, as in an out-of-body experience, and look into your own eyes.

SHANNON

Daniel described obtaining fruitions from a self-image by accident and being able to gain them looking into a mirror. The idea of obtaining them from people's eyes in the ordinary realm intrigued him, but he had not experienced that.

Formless Realms

SHANNON

How can meditators skilfully navigate through the formless realms?

DANIEL

Consider fourth *jhana*. Extend awareness as far as you can see and hear to notice the boundaryless quality around form. Everyone on the way to fruition goes through a vj4.j5, vj4.j6, vj4.j7, vj4.j8 phase, even if the vj4.j8 phase

to most is imperceptible. (SHANNON – *For those not familiar with it, this terminology denotes vipassana jhana.subjhana, and refers to sub-aspects of the vipassana jhana in question, in this case four subjhantic formless aspects of the formed fourth jhana.*)

Fifth *jhana*: By noticing the width of fourth and then de-tuning from fourth one can go directly to fifth, or, one can use the boundaryless aspect as the focus to drop all form. Fifth is like looking at space with a black background: the volume is now the focus.

Sixth *jhana*: From sj4.j6 (SHANNON – *That is, the boundless space aspect of the fourth samatha jhana*), there is wide fascination and the sense of the observer is subtle. Tune into luminosity and the location of everything for sixth *jhana*, or one can drop directly from fifth to sixth by noticing space is luminous, in that there is awareness of the volume, like space filling with clear light. There is a paradox here, as the luminous cognisance of all things is very obvious at all times, yet it helps to have teachers point it out. In the sixth *jhana*, it is much more obvious, as that is basically all there is.

Seventh *jhana*: You can think of it as black, but really it is a subtle twist of space that detunes from vastness in the other direction, if there is such a thing, to nothingness: the antithesis of the two earlier formless *ghanas*, just like the third *jhana* (cool, wide) is the opposite of the first and second (narrow, rapturous).

Eighth *jhana*: The state that follows eight often has an ordinary feel to it, yet is a powerful time to do many things.

SHANNON

Daniel outlined the benefit of having mastered shifting from state to state, for example: slam-shifting from first jhana to seventh, or choosing to go from the worst of re-observation (the epitome of an irritated, contracted mind) to spacious equanimity. At some point his practice became: 'every moment, every state, all qualities must be IT.'

Day Twenty-Three

Re-Observation ~ Fire Kasina as Home Practice ~ Value of Sequence

Re-Observation

SHANNON

What is the difference between basic re-observation and unstable states bordering on psychosis one may devolve into?

DANIEL

That is sometimes a fine line. The difference is mostly in being either torn down in a bad way by re-observation and spiralling into craziness versus having direct fundamental insight, which increases one's understanding and practice while applying appropriate remedies if troubles arise.

There is a staggering difference between being 'with it' and yet not caught in it, versus being really caught in it and freaking out. In review, it is empowering to sometimes decide to stay in re-observation intentionally for a controlled period of time: 'to turn the hunted into the hunter'.

SHANNON

Given how far-removed the qualities of re-observation were from the deity encounters I was wanting to experience, it was quite a stretch to undertake the above recommendation. However, I found myself speaking extensively in my audio diary about the benefits of not shying away from any aspects of re-observation when this ñāna reappeared. In addition to being confidence-boosting, entering fully into and out of this uncomfortable state while being in such high concentration from weeks of retreat, lent this ñāna an unbeatably rich, intense clarity.

Reviewing my audio diary, I was struck by how cheery and buoyant I sounded on this last phase of the retreat. Some heavier tones of seriousness that had been intertwined with the obstructions of striving, fear and doubt had dropped off and there was less ‘self’ remaining to take so seriously – a welcome shift which has continued to show up post-retreat.

DANIEL

One of the most important and challenging questions on the path is how attention is tuned in re-observation versus wide-open space. It is like walking between two things that seem to be the exact antithesis of each other, but must be same thing.

Fire Kasina As Home Practice

SHANNON

At home, would it be better for me to continue with fire

kasina or go back to my pre-retreat *vipassana* meditation?

DANIEL

Continuing with fire kasina would provide the world another useful data point on the speed at which strong concentration fades; keeping up the practice would also contribute to mastery as you integrate in daily living.

SHANNON

When walking around, do you recommend I go for that spacious, luminous view we spoke about? I experience it as ‘no hard edges’.

DANIEL

Holding the view has tremendous value. No hard edges is a good way to go, but do not miss the intricacy of everything. Notice the edges of the qualities of what is in space, yet also that there are no hard edges to space itself.

Value of Sequence

SHANNON

I continue to initiate the meditations by observing the candle flame, then moving through the sequence. Yesterday it was slower, as I was in dissolution longer. Then fruitions were occurring again. I am happy with any bits of successful intending I can do before the fruitions.

DANIEL

Navigating the sequence rapidly is a core skill.

SHANNON

Over the course of the retreat, the candle flame was useful in the following ways:

- 1. To re-start the sequence in order to gain mastery by repeatedly running through the phases from start to finish.*
- 2. To re-establish a clear after-image whenever necessary.*
- 3. During intense, psychologically challenging periods, sitting by the candlelight, particularly at night, was soothing.*
- 4. When lost in dissolution, if I could muster the effort to lift my head, looking at the brightly burning flame instantly upped the mental energy.*

Day Twenty-Four

Intentions ~ Thought Patterns Since Arahatsip ~ Holding the View

Intentions

SHANNON

There have been successful intention-settings with partial travels: for example, I can use my astral hands to write messages and draw shapes on the colour field, which is deeply rewarding. I intend, and in 30 seconds suddenly I see the hand is drawing.

DANIEL

That is exactly how it works. Just let out the intention, let go of it and wait. Most magick and high meditative attainments, such as *nirodha samapatti*, are more likely to happen in the delay, a space where you are not trying to do anything.

SHANNON

At times I have equanimity with intentions, but still can get discouraged when nothing happens.

DANIEL

Sometimes it works, and sometimes it does not. Mastery also involves understanding the fickleness of the powers.

Thought Patterns Since Arahatship

SHANNON

I can imagine how your relationship to thoughts has changed, but, as an arahaṭ, how have the frequency, patterns, and content of your thoughts changed, especially during downtime?

DANIEL

Since 2003 insight continues to percolate back into pattern after pattern. A painful memory arises in space, then sadness dissolves itself. Most people put up walls and rationalisations to protect themselves from painful thoughts and sensations. Now difficult emotions are, in some ways, more available, as they are just a natural part of what is happening. As to the content of my thoughts, these days I mostly focus on my rather intense work-life, and so most thoughts are steadily project-related, though this could perhaps be due to the stage of life I am currently in more than realisation. It is hard to sort out which is which.

Holding the View

SHANNON

Can you describe more about holding the view as a practice while walking around in everyday life?

DANIEL

Experiencing luminosity pervading the field: seeing the mind states and their energies, ever changing, yet naturally seeing something universal about them. Everything has its own qualities, yet this insight is not bound up in any specifics, as it applies to them all.

Day Twenty-Five

Form Control ~ Equanimity as Object ~ After Review Comes Progress

Form Control

SHANNON

Finally, I am seeing faces forming in colours, with successful intentions to have the eyes on the faces open and close. This is so mesmerising that it produces fruitions, and I have to start over again. I want to take form control further, but it is not coming as easily as travelling.

DANIEL

Most every skill in the world comes with repetition, deepening through concentration. That is the nature of the beast.

SHANNON

When forming dragons on your 2015 fire kasina retreat, did they evolve out of the third *jhana*? Were you somehow able to take them up with you to fourth *jhana*?

DANIEL

Definitely this was happening at the level of fourth *jhana*. They became alive, would breathe fire, and were extraordinarily detailed beyond what I could have created or drawn myself, and I would obtain fruitions from them. Colour control was suddenly followed by image control.

SHANNON

Once the meditator has become proficient with basic technique there are two options for practice – either refining the powers that come naturally, or rolling up sleeves to bear down on that which is more difficult to attain.

Travelling came so naturally in my sits it would be challenging to figure out ways to teach someone else how to do it. The refinement for me, with regards to travel, was specifically learning how to establish ideal conditions to consistently enter into travel mode and experiment with setting intentions regarding the travels.

The control of 3D forms was much more challenging and greatly benefited from a patient, creative and light approach. Again, being in nature had its benefits. I sometimes used my time in the kayak, paddling past shorelines under over-hanging trees, to imagine being in a 3D dreamscape. These experiential suggestions transferred into forms, such as mushrooms, and then evergreens arising from the misty colours in my sits. With effort, I was eventually able to intend to see faces in the trunks of the trees and to form arms and legs from the cylindrical shapes of the trees. Given more time, those body parts perhaps could have been nudged into those of a Medicine Buddha.

On any retreat it is likely to be a win-win situation if the decision is taken to develop both the naturally arising as well

as the more hard-won abilities.

Equanimity as Object

SHANNON

After many fruitions lately, I am in a deep, quiet state of equanimity, the most quiet, calm, neutral state I have ever experienced. During this time, both fruitions and the desire to set intentions drop away, and yet this state is immensely restorative. Is this common?

DANIEL

You are likely taking equanimity itself as object, which is prone to perpetuating itself due to those same peaceful, neutral qualities. In equanimity, sometimes the insight and the powers can become lost in subtle dullness. That is the paradox of equanimity: it is a state in which you can do almost anything, yet a state in which you do not want to do much except relax.

After Review Comes Progress

SHANNON

Fruitions are coming so easily on retreat; I am wondering what I can expect with fruitions in daily living?

DANIEL

Unpredictable. Overall, a new level of mastery with

fruitions is likely to remain but will fall away in the short term. Your concentration is very likely to drop. From a big cycle perspective, after a strong review phase new progress territory generally shows up, which is less conducive to fruitions. You may suddenly feel your mind is a mess. New insight stages are likely to arise, with thoughts splitting off and bodily tension. Typically this seems to a practitioner like regression, but is actually progress. At this point, we feel as if we do not know what we are doing. We feel less awake. But that is all normal in a new progress cycle.

If satisfied with your mastery of your current plateau, and if your daily life can reasonably handle it, you can resolve for the next insight cycle or next layer of mind to arise, so you can re-apply the same skills and techniques to a deeper stratum of consciousness.

Two Weeks After The Retreat

*First Jhana / Starting Over ~ Staying in a Ñana ~
New Progress Territory*

First Jhana / Starting Over

SHANNON

I think I am in the first *jhana*. After looking at the flame for a long time, I see a tiny dot (or multiple dots). It is annoyingly hard to focus, and the dot fades quickly. The open-eyes after-image keeps floating off to the side. If I sit long enough I seem to skip second *jhana* and go to third with purple swaths.

DANIEL

Given your high review phase during retreat, it makes good sense that new territory is showing up, as predicted. Purple swaths of colour is not always a sign of third; I can rapidly obtain purple without the candle flame. Strong fruitions at the end of a progress phase will be a sign it was a new cycle, otherwise, it was likely old territory. The instructions are the same regardless: keep up your practice!

Staying in a Ñana

SHANNON

I have been looking back on the review phase of the retreat when one decides to stay in a ñana and go deeper with it, how authentic is it really?

DANIEL

Review phase with intentions like that during intensive practice can be very *samatha*-like, so the ñanas you enter into may not feel as authentic.

SHANNON

Daniel and I talked about a meditator returning to ‘just surviving’ when landing in new territory, because the ñanas can feel so raw and vivid. There is not the level of finesse in the new, unawakened strata of mind to explore it in a samatha-like review fashion, and so what is required is to figure out how to navigate through this new territory of mind.

New Progress Territory

SHANNON

When you started over at the end of an insight cycle, were you aware of what new territory you were in or just that it was new?

DANIEL

Just that it was new, that I had no mastery of it at all, and I needed to re-learn those skills at a higher level again: how to investigate, and gain competence in that new territory. I went through many cycles of this. It takes patience to work with the new, unawakened layer of mind. It can be frustrating, but at least you have the opportunity to apply your skills to a fresh layer.

SHANNON

This was an encouraging reminder when I found myself struggling through new territory back at home.

DANIEL

Bill Hamilton had a model in which everyone has a body of psychological work waiting for them at each new level: sometimes slow, dull, boring or at other times like fireworks, dramatic. Simply trust that good, useful work is being done on each new cycle.

Conclusion

Some reflections several months after the retreat

SHANNON

As predicted, shortly upon my return to daily living, the supremely high states of concentration faded.

One may ask what is the point of jacking up the concentration for such a brief period of time. It is hard to say in exact terms, but the perceived advantages are significant enough to make it worth attempting to describe them.

In learning the simple-to-follow instructions of the fire kasina practice, one gains confidence in attaining high concentration; daily activities undoubtedly benefit from this ability to focus in a pristine way. Combine a heightened concentration skill with wholesome orientation towards personal development in *sila* (virtue) and you have a powerful package with respect to personal refinement.

The natural experience of pervasive luminosity from a wide, receptive perspective, which arose near the end of the retreat, quickly grew faint upon my return home, as did the capacity to intend successfully for various things (such as pre-determined elements of astral travel). What has not diminished since the retreat is a subtle yet

powerful knowledge that, at just the right moment, when conditions come together in a harmonious way, there is an opportunity to intend for a potentiality that previously I did not know could exist.

Just this knowledge in the background of the mind has enabled me to carry myself differently, more open to what can happen beyond the confines of how I previously approached situations, relationships and decision-making.

Although not on the same playing field as what can happen in retreat-mode, there continues to be a delicate aura of magick in my approach to day-to-day life from this frame of mind.

Spending so much time with the grey of the visual field and having my attitude toward it evolve naturally over the course of the retreat was a solid take-away.

After looking at the candle flame and closing one's eyes, it is the watching of the colourful mental imagery eventually fading to grey, and learning how to be with that grey, which is one of the indispensable turning-points in the unfolding of the fire kasina practice.

Entering back into daily living involves encountering the greyness of life, so to speak, in comparison to the rarer peaks of pleasant experiences. Yet now, in the moments that I remember to do so, I am able to engage with the swaths of greyish neutrality throughout my day, finding captivating interest simply by settling in and paying attention to what is there.

Having such a high number of fruitions, as well as seeing some of the entranceways while on retreat, has had an impact at an insight level I am not sure how to articulate clearly at this point. However, after starting over in a

new progress-of-insight cycle and gradually making my way to fruitions again, a month and a half following the retreat, there has been a palpable new baseline of calm and inner quiet connected to my deepening experiential insights into the way things work, as opposed to feeling reliant upon the presence of certain conditions one would normally associate with contentment. Of course, this now needs to stand the test of time.

Presently, my everyday practice while walking around has been very gradually expanding into experiencing the luminosity of all sensations for increasingly lengthier time periods throughout. Occasionally it comes naturally, and at other times requires remembering to exert the effort of attending to experience in this way.

After spending much of the retreat in full-on learning mode, including familiarising myself with the *samatha*, *vipassana* and magickal aspects of this ancient practice, I look forward to taking these newly-found skills and applying them again in a retreat setting to see where they can take me. Particularly I am curious to explore the fire element more deeply, as well as taking another shot at the magickal effect of gaining a fruition through the no-self door after interaction with a deity, given its inherently potent insight value.

Everyone will have different, specific experiences from the fire kasina, depending on their meditation background and individual proclivities; yet, even from the handful of people who have shared candle-flame notes in the past year, it seems there is a fairly predictable, fascinating arc of development that is likely to unfold.

May this be of benefit to fellow meditators.

APPENDIX A

Glossary of Technical Terms

Abhidhamma

A part of the Pali Canon that involves analysis of the elements of existence, states of mind, and a lot of other analytical meditation theory.

Anagami

According to Theravada Buddhism, there are four stages of awakening leading to full enlightenment. Someone who has completed the third of these stages is known as an *anagami*.

Arahat

One who has progressed through all four stages of awakening and thereby is understood to have taken penetrating insight into the nature of existence to the highest level of experiential understanding possible for a living being. Another commonly used term for this attainment is ‘full awakening’.

Dark night

In *vipassana* parlance this term refers to the often physically and mentally uncomfortable but necessary insight knowledges one experiences as part of clearly seeing through the illusion of self. Mild to strong emotions of anxiety, depression, hopelessness and a sense of meaninglessness can arise during the dark night given that long-held beliefs in a permanent, separate self must be adequately pierced with each path of awakening. Although not always experienced as separately delineated states, the classical dark night insight knowledges or *ñānas* are as follows: dissolution, fear, misery, disgust, desire for deliverance and re-observation. Steady *vipassana* practice gives best odds for the eventual breakthrough beyond the dark night into the next insight knowledge, known as ‘equanimity’ (see below).

Dharmakaya

One of the three *kayas*, which in Sanskrit refers to ‘that which is accumulated’ (see under *sambhogakaya*, below, for a complete description of all three *kayas*).

Dissolution

A standard stage of practice during which meditation can be vague, spacious, with low energy, poor concentration, difficulty translating intentions into actions, and a sense that things are fading or falling away.

Dukkha ñanas

These are synonymous with the dark night insight knowledges. See ‘dark night’, above.

Dzogchen

Literally ‘Great Perfection’, a Tibetan practice tradition that involves recognising and resting in the natural awakened state of mind.

Entranceways

An alternative term for ‘three doors’ (see below).

Equanimity ñana

The eleventh standard stage in the development of insight. It generally involves spaciousness, ease, a sense of well-being and equanimity. It follows the dark night stages.

Fear ñana

A standard insight meditation stage that follows dissolution, typically involving emotional fear and often numerous creepy sensations, including scary images.

Five hindrances

The five hindrances are ‘sensual desire’, ‘ill-will’, ‘restlessness / worry’, ‘sloth / torpor’, and ‘doubt’. These are mind-states that may hinder meditation.

Formless realms

Traditional Buddhist concentration or jhanic attainments, specifically ‘boundless space’, ‘boundless consciousness’, ‘nothingness’ and ‘neither-perception-nor-yet-non-perception’.

Fruition

Fruition is a traditional term found in the *Abhidhamma* and the commentaries. It refers to the total vanishing of all sensate reality, including space, time, reference points, and everything. It is like someone edited out frames of the metaphorical 3D movie that is this life. There is nothing in the gap, just a discontinuity.

Impermanence door

An entrance into *nibbana* / *nirvana* / fruition, which has the most neutral feeling-tone of the ‘three doors’, consisting of brief, distinct shudders as reality quickly strobes in and out of existence, with a ‘dat-dat-dat-gone’ quality to it.

Magickal powers

Typically called *siddhis* (Sanskrit) or *iddhis* (Pali), which refer to various ‘psychic powers’ that are traditionally developed in Buddhist practice. One of these is known as the ‘divine eye’, which allows unusual visual perception.

Misery ñana

The seventh standard stage in the development of insight. It generally involves feelings of sadness, loss and misery.

Ñanas

A series of stages or insight knowledges that *vipassana* meditators experience as they progress towards *nibbana*.

Nimitta

The *nimitta* is typically a bright white (or other-coloured) mind-created disk, sphere, or other shape that arises due to strong concentration and becomes the object of attention in some concentration practices. It can also have other sensate qualities, depending on the specific focus of practice.

No-self door

An entrance into *nibbana* / *nirvana* / fruition in which reality appears to fall towards the observer and vanish, sometimes with a sense of an image, face or intelligence on ‘that side’ falling into and merging with the awareness or consciousness of ‘this side’, meaning the sense of the observer.

Out-of-Body Experience (OBE)

Also known as ‘travel’, ‘astral travelling’, and other names. A hyper-lucid experience in which it appears we have left

our physical body and are now travelling in a different sort of body.

Re-observation

A standard insight meditation stage, the most challenging and unpleasant of the stages of meditation, both perceptually and emotionally. It is the peak of the dark side of the third *vipassana jhana*, and often a difficult stumbling block for meditators.

Review phase of a retreat

The phase of a retreat where one has gained a level of awakening and then reviews the benefits and stages of that level of awakening.

Rigpa

A subtle Tibetan *dzogchen* Buddhist term that refers to the most subtle level of untainted, pristine awareness.

Samatha

Samatha meditation is meditation based on concentration (as opposed to ‘insight meditation’ or *vipassana*), meaning meditation that is designed to produce stable, pleasant states of mind called *jhanas*.

Sambhogakaya

Literally ‘enjoyment body’, a complex concept related to various aspects of a Buddha, various aspects or planar dimensions of awakened reality, and, in this case, refers loosely to the unusual magickal dimensions, experiences, and perceptions discussed here. (O, Tibetan scholars, please forgive me!) This term is often employed in comparison with two related concepts: *nirmanakaya*, the ordinary, material manifestation of a fully-awakened being, sometimes used to refer to the whole of the ordinary world viewed through the awakened perspective; and *dharmakaya*, the all-pervading empty wisdom-mind of a fully-awakened being, sometimes also used to refer to the essential nature of the awakened aspect of manifestation from the awakened perspective.

Seven factors of awakening

The seven factors of awakening are ‘mindfulness’, ‘investigation’, ‘energy’, ‘rapture’, ‘tranquillity’, ‘concentration’ and ‘equanimity’, and, when properly cultivated and balanced, produce the stages of insight and awakening.

Suffering door

An entrance into *nibbana* / *nirvana* / fruition that has a creepy or violating aspect in which reality can feel as if it is being ripped away just prior to the fruition.

Three characteristics

The three marks of experiential reality, contemplation and direct sensate comprehension of which leads to insight into the true nature of experience, namely ‘impermanence’, ‘suffering’, and ‘not-self’.

Three doors

Corresponding to the ‘three characteristics’ (see above), a meditator will pass through one of these prior to a fruition, either the ‘impermanence door’, the ‘suffering door’ or the ‘no-self door’. See the separate entries for each of these.

Vipassana cycles

Standard insight stages that proceed degrees of awakening and occur in a predictable, cyclic pattern, typically called *ñānas* or ‘knowledges’.

Width of attention

This term refers to the variability in scope of the meditator’s focus. To become adept at the fire kasina, as well as other concentration practices, one must learn to take the narrow and centralised focus that works so well in the first two *jhanas* and broaden the attention out wide to engage primarily with the periphery of the visual field in order to tip into and progress deeply through the third and fourth *jhanas*.

APPENDIX B

Nirodha Samapatti

SHANNON

How long do you think a practitioner would need to be on retreat to have a good chance of experiencing *nirodha samapatti*?

DANIEL

I have no idea. I did it in daily life the first time and, in fact, have done it more times in daily life than on retreat. Strangely for me, when on retreat my concentration is not as balanced in some ways as when I am in daily life. For this particular attainment (this will sound paradoxical) my concentration is more balanced and conducive when I am not in a setting where doing it is the main concern.

SHANNON

Is that partly due to some striving? I can see that is where I could likely get caught up.

DANIEL

Yes, right. In fact, it happened to me when I was not expecting it.

SHANNON

And had you already been trying to do it in a retreat setting?

DANIEL

I had been trying to do it but not in a retreat setting. If you like, I can tell you the story of how it first happened and transmit what I know about *nirodha samapatti*; then it might help you achieve it.

SHANNON

Fabulous.

DANIEL

Here is what I know. I first started playing with this in 1996. Bill Hamilton talked about it a lot. Also, I was attending retreats at Bhavana Society where Bhante Gunaratana spoke of it strangely often, considering his audience. I was asking myself, 'Why do you keep doing *dharma* talks on *nirodha samapatti* for people who do not have the first *jhana* or anything? This is really strange.'

Later on, when I attained what I thought was third path, I knew, according to the *Visuddhimagga* that you should be able to gain this attainment, and that if you were not at third path then you would not. So I felt this

could be an interesting test. Third path performed well in some ways for me, but it did not line up the way I expected in other ways, so I figured that by attempting *nirodha samapatti* maybe I could gain more data points. Not to mention that it sounded totally mind-blowing, given that I enjoyed the more peculiar states and stages. The first thing is that you have to have eight jhanas; you have to be accessing the formless realms. I had gained them on retreat but not in daily life. So I just started working with that, particularly figuring out that transition from fourth to fifth is the real trick in terms of how you make forms disappear, and then there is the vastness of space, and then you take off into that realm.

I was only working about 25 total hours per week between field data collection for a nursing professor and working online at the National AIDS Hotline. I had no social life and was married to someone who was also a practitioner and supportive (this was my first wife), so I had about three to five hours a day to practise, which is a lot of practice in daily life. I had time to build up enough momentum to make some serious progress.

The first thing I learned was how to access those formless realms off retreat. Then I just started going for it. I would perform the set-up. Bill instructed me how to do this, even though he did not believe I had stream entry at that point. But he showed me anyway. That was the wonderful thing about him; you could get really great *dharma* information out of Bill. You just had to work at it. Thanks Bill! Also, I read through parts of the *Visuddhimagga* and Pali canon again and again, and practised what I had learned.

The first thing that is critical is to set the intent – this

really is important. You sit down, you set the intent, you say: 'I am going to go there'. When I first started doing this, I had all of the instructions and I followed all of them. There is this whole thing about the set-up: you need to make sure your robe is in order, so to speak, and you need to make sure you are in a safe place. You make a resolution you will not die in *nirodha samapatti*, and that if your teacher calls, you will wake up out of it. There is this formal routine to it, and I would do all of that. I later decided that I did not need to do it all, but it was beneficial. 'He follows instructions and plays well with others', as the saying goes. But the 'follows instructions part' is important.

Having set it up I would ask myself. 'What is the right balance?' I would try to find the right balance between concentration and insight and it turns out that, for me, it is a pretty chilled balance. I have a wired mind, so maybe it is different for other people. I had to stay at about two-thirds concentration, about one-third buzzy vipassana, and that really is when I started to learn about the *vipassana jhanas* and *samatha jhanas* and finding out how to establish the balance between them. It would be mostly chilled, but I was making sure that one third of my brain was noticing the tingling, the shifting, the sparkling, the fluxing, and about two thirds of my brain was noticing the jhanic factors. Given my temperament, that was the right balance for me; heavier on the side of concentration but still with shifting *vipassana* elements so I was not really aiming for 'ultra steady'. Too steady does not work because it will be too tight and will not drop. This I know for certain because I have tried it. Initially I had the balance too far towards concentration, over-hitting the

effort. I tried this for probably 30 to 50 sits. I would try and fail. I would get into some vague formless thing. Maybe I would get into neither perception nor non-perception, come out, and maybe get a fruition. I was not obtaining anything different or unusual, but I just kept at it.

SHANNON

And were you getting frustrated?

DANIEL

Oh, yeah. Then, at some point, I broke through the frustration. Eventually, you just get tired. So I came out into a space of routine where I would just set it up and try again. Eventually, the expectations went away. I did not expect anything to happen but I was doing the practice anyway. Still sitting regularly. I was fitting this in between my AIDS Hotline work and the nursing research. I found a supply closet in the hotline centre and I would just bring my cushion and sit in the closet for an hour or so before work. I was on the floor in this supply closet, my eyes were closed and I did not care. It was a quiet sitting spot out of the way, off the main hall floor.

SHANNON

A little meditation *kuti* for you.

DANIEL

Pretty much. You have to work with what you have. I would sit there and I would try for this thing and then,

one day, I have no idea why this day versus any of the other days – I guess finally I had the balance right – I set it up and I sat down, and I was shifting through the stages and states like I had before, and I come up out of neither perception nor non-perception, and I resolved to go into *nirodha samapatti* and all of a sudden: *PSHHH*... The power-down was ridiculous! A total power-down as if someone pulled the plug on reality and the whole thing just went *PSHHH*, beyond the lights going out. Space went out, but not like a fruition. Oh my gosh. And then things powered back up in the same way, slow and analog, over about a second or so. And then the afterglow tail was incredible. I have never taken Valium, but I imagine if I took 20 milligrams of Valium that is what I would feel like.

SHANNON

And the afterglow hit immediately after?

DANIEL

Oh yes. I wondered what had I just done to my mind. Am I going to be able to do my shift? Am I going to be able to talk, interact with people? What have I just done? I was able to function, but I was in an incredibly contemplative, pensive state trying to talk to people on the hotline. Fortunately they did not seem to notice anything different, but it was very obvious to me. Even driving home, six hours later, I was not sure if I should be driving in such an altered, ultra-chilled space. I was very clear, very lucid, but maybe not good enough to be driving. Is that helpful?

SHANNON

Yes. I think that being exposed to how to do it will be extremely helpful for the time when I am capable of accessing that.

DANIEL

The biggest trick is to just try and fail and try again. Keep setting it up, exactly as it is supposed to be, going through the steps, with all the resolutions. Read the books, do the experiments, go through the *jhanas*. Get up to neither perception nor non-perception, come out, see what happens and incline to it gently, and the biggest thing is that once you incline to it you have to let that go. You have to make the inclination and then just sit there like a brick and do nothing. If you do something you will screw it up.

SHANNON

That is so much like the intention-setting that can be done in the further stages of the fire kasina practice.

DANIEL

It is the same thing.

SHANNON

Did you ever you go on retreat just to gain mastery over *nirodha samapatti* or was it something you only did in daily living?

DANIEL

It would happen on retreat sometimes. There were two retreats where I did it. It was the oddest thing, because in some ways I was a pretty insecure practitioner, even though I had all these chops. Because I am more of an aversive type rather than a desire type, I am not that drawn by the afterglow, but it was the merit badge; I mean, it is hard not to be fascinated by the stages from a spiritually materialistic kind of view, to be honest. Nonetheless, I am more of an aversive type, so I do not necessarily gravitate toward these things, despite how interesting and cool and easeful. The last time I attained *nirodha samapatti* was in 2007.

SHANNON

You have not experienced it since then?

DANIEL

No.

SHANNON

You haven't craved it, you haven't needed it?

DANIEL

No, but I have sometimes thought I should do it, almost in the sense that I should take medicine. I have thought I should do that again, not because I want to, but because I know I should, like some people should take their blood pressure meds.

SHANNON

That state has to be good for you.

DANIEL

Oh, yes, that is my perspective on it these days. The last time I did it, I was studying for my first round of written medical boards in 2007. I had done five hours of cramming for a very academic exam. I was completely fried, and I knew I had to get more studying done. But I was too cooked, so I decided to maybe do some meditation, something helpful. Then I wondered what it would be like to study in that afterglow. It was more of a lark, because my brain was totally frazzled, and I had not been meditating due to all the studying. I was pretty sure I would not be able to get *nirodha samapatti* because my concentration was really low. I sat down and came out of the formless realms. I knew this was not the easiest thing to do, but I had nothing to lose because I had failed a thousand times before, so I just made the resolution and then all of a sudden, *bam, oh my God...* I had at least another five hours of studying to do and I was in this ultra-chilled but clear space.

My advice is to hold it loosely, do the set-up exactly like the instructions say, make the resolution and let it go and just do that again and again and again. That is my advice. Bang it out. You will fail and do it again. Fail and do it again. Like so many other things in meditation. Read the ancient books. There is something about that priming; you are gaining some solid transmission through the texts. I know it sounds like a magickal, goofy thing to say. However, take a good look at the *Cu-*

The Fire Kasina

lavedalla Sutta, the Shorter Series of Questions and Answers in *The Middle Length Discourses* (MN 44).

APPENDIX C

Candle Suggestions

Beeswax candles burn with a natural, steady flame. Ceremonial altar candles, approximately 15 inches tall and 1½ inches in diameter made of a high percentage of beeswax work well and can be purchased online on sites selling church supplies. These candles are generally more expensive than ones purchased in a local hardware store for example, but are worth the extra expense because the burn is even and clean. Usually altar candles have a ½-inch diameter vertical indentation in the centre of the bottom, so a candle stand with a vertical bar in the centre can provide a sturdy base for the tall candle to fit into. (Attempting to fix the candle by melting a spot of wax to a small plate or in a tall glass may work temporarily, but eventually the candle will begin leaning and dripping and continually rearranging the candle so that it is secure risks disturbing concentration throughout lengthy meditation periods.)

Make sure the area around the candle is free of combustibles such as paper and cloth, and use other commonsense precautions to ensure the experience of the flame is a meditative one, not an unexpected emergency.

One can expect, during an intense fire kasina practice, to go through approximately three to five inches of a 1½-inch diameter beeswax altar candle per day, perhaps more depending on the length of the sits. If planning a fairly long retreat, over-estimate the number of candles needed so the retreat is not interrupted by running short.

Try to sit in a space where the air is still so the flame is as steady as possible. And again for safety, be sure to extinguish the flame after each sit to avoid the fire hazard of an unattended flame.

A simple smoke-free way to put out the flame after each sit is to use a set of tweezers to bend the burning wick into the melted wax at the top of the candle. This will immediately douse the flame, leaving a bit of wax on the wick to be easily set aflame at the next sit.

An alternative to beeswax candles is to use a butter lamp. Instructions for making homemade lamps with unsalted butter or ghee are available online. Such lamps also provide a beautiful kasina.