







# ON MEDITATION

Instructions from talks by  
Venerable Ajahn Chah

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by Venerable Ajahn Chah

Published by:

Aruna Publications,  
Aruna Ratanagiri Buddhist Monastery,  
2 Harnham Hall Cottages,  
Harnham, Belsay,  
Northumberland, NE20 0HF  
UK

Contact Aruna Publications at [www.aruno.org](http://www.aruno.org)  
This book is available for free download at  
[www.forestsanghapublications.org](http://www.forestsanghapublications.org)

ISBN 978-0-9568113-6-3

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ISBN 978-616-90279-6-6

Cover photo taken at Wat Dtao Dam, a branch monastery of Wat Pah Nanachat near the boarder between Thailand and Burma.

Leaf drawing by Madeleine Gusdal.

Produced with the L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X typesetting system. The body-text is typeset in Gentium, distributed with the SIL Open Font Licence by SIL International.

*Second edition*, 10,000 copies, printed in Malaysia – 2011

Printed in Malaysia by Bolden Trade.

*“Greater purity of our morality  
facilitates the development of stronger  
and more refined samādhi, and this in turn  
supports the maturing of wisdom.  
They assist each other in this way.”*

AJAHN CHAH

We would like to acknowledge the support  
of many people in the preparation of this book,  
especially to the Kataññutā Group of Malaysia, Singapore  
and Australia, for bringing it into production.

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## FOREWORD

Ajahn Chah (or Luang Por Chah) was a famous teacher in the Thai forest tradition of Theravada Buddhism. Born in 1917 in the province of Ubon Rachathani in north-east Thailand, he ordained as a monk in his early twenties. Ajahn Chah spent the rest of his life in the robes, practising, and later teaching the Dhamma to both Thais and foreigners.

This small booklet is a selection of some of his teachings dealing specifically with meditation practice. It contains edited extracts from various talks already translated and published over the years. The extracts have been put together following a general pattern of preliminary instructions, deepening one's meditation and cultivating insight. As it is a compilation of teachings there is a certain amount of repetition, but this in itself was a feature of Ajahn Chah's style, emphasizing key themes again and again throughout his years of teaching. We hope it helps bring to life some of the wisdom of this much loved meditation master.

The Sangha of Wat Pah Nanachat,  
Ubon Rachathani, October 2010



# 1

## MEDITATION

When sitting in meditation and making the mind peaceful, you don't have to think about too much. Just focus on the mind and nothing else. Don't let the mind shoot off to the left or to the right, to the front or behind, above or below. Our only duty is to practice mindfulness of the breathing. But first, fix your attention at the head and move it down through the body to the tips of the feet, and then back up to the crown of the head. Pass your awareness down through the body, observing with wisdom. We do this to gain an initial understanding of the way the body is right now. Then begin the meditation, noting that at this time your sole duty is to observe the inhalations and exhalations. Don't force the breath to be any longer or shorter than normal, just allow it to continue easily. Don't put any pressure on the breath, rather let it flow evenly, letting go with each in-breath and

out-breath. You must understand that you are letting go as you do this, but there should still be awareness. You must maintain this awareness, allowing the breath to enter and leave comfortably. There is no need to force the breath, just allow it to flow easily and naturally. Maintain the resolve that at this time you have no other duties or responsibilities. Thoughts about what will happen, what you will know or see during the meditation, may arise from time to time, but once they arise just let them cease by themselves, don't be unduly concerned with them.

During the meditation there is no need to pay attention to anything that arises in the mind. Whenever the mind is affected by any thoughts or moods, whenever there is a feeling or sensation in the mind, just let them go. Whether those thoughts are good or bad is unimportant. It is not necessary to make anything out of them, just let them pass away and return your attention to the breath. Maintain the awareness of the breath entering and leaving in a relaxed way. Don't worry about the breath being either too long or too short. Simply observe it without trying to control or suppress it in any way. In other words, don't attach to anything. Allow the breath to continue as it is, and the mind will become calm. As you continue the mind will gradually lay things down and come to rest, the breath becoming lighter and lighter until it becomes so faint that it seems as if it's not there at all. Both the body and the mind will feel light and energized. All that will remain will be a one-pointed knowing. You could say that the mind has changed and reached a state of calm.

If the mind is agitated, re-establish mindfulness and inhale deeply until there is no space left to store any air, then release it all completely until none remains. Follow this with another deep inhalation until your lungs are full, then release the air again. Do this two or three times, then re-establish concentration. The mind should be calmer. If any more sense impressions cause agitation in the mind, repeat the process on every occasion. Do the same when doing walking meditation: if the mind becomes agitated while walking, stand still, calm the mind, re-establish the awareness of the meditation object and then continue walking. Sitting and walking meditation are in essence the same, differing only in terms of the physical posture.

Sometimes doubts may arise, so you must have mindfulness, be '*the one who knows*', continually following and examining the agitated mind in whatever form it takes. This is what it means to have mindfulness. Mindfulness watches over and takes care of the mind. You must maintain this knowing and not be careless or wander astray, no matter what state the mind takes on.

The trick is to have awareness overseeing the mind. Once the mind is unified with mindfulness, a new kind of awareness will emerge. The mind that has developed calm is held in check by that calm, just like a chicken held in a coop. The chicken is unable to wander outside, but it can still move around within the coop. It doesn't matter that it is walking to and fro, because it stays in the coop. Likewise, the awareness that takes place when the mind has mindfulness

and is calm does not cause trouble. None of the thoughts or sensations that take place within the calm mind cause harm or disturbance.

Some people don't want to experience any thoughts or feelings at all, but this is not right. Feelings arise within the state of calm. The mind is both experiencing feelings and calm at the same time, without being disturbed. When there is calm like this, there are no harmful consequences. Problems occur when the chicken gets out of the coop. For instance, you may be watching the breath entering and leaving and then forget yourself, allowing the mind to wander away from the breath, back home, off to the shops or to any number of different places. Maybe even half an hour may pass before you suddenly realize you're supposed to be practising meditation, and you think: 'Oh, what am I doing?' This is when you have to be really careful, because this is when the chicken gets out of the coop – the mind leaves its base of calm.

You must take care to maintain the awareness with mindfulness and try to pull the mind back. Although I use the words 'pull the mind back', in fact the mind doesn't really go anywhere. Only the object of awareness has changed. You must make the mind stay right here and now. As long as there is mindfulness there will be presence of mind. It seems as if you are pulling the mind back, but really it hasn't gone anywhere, it has simply changed a little. It seems that the mind goes here and there, but in fact the change occurs at exactly the same spot. Then, when mindfulness is re-established,

it is back in a flash. It doesn't come from somewhere else. Understand that it is right here.

When there is total knowing, a continuous and unbroken awareness at each and every moment, this is called presence of mind. If your attention drifts from the breath to other places, the knowing is broken. Whenever there is awareness of the breath, the mind is there. With just the breath and this even and continuous awareness you have presence of mind.

There must be both mindfulness (*sati*) and clear comprehension (*sampajañña*). Mindfulness is recollection; and clear comprehension is self-awareness. Right now you are clearly aware of the breath. This exercise of watching the breath helps mindfulness and clear comprehension to develop together. They share the work. Having both mindfulness and clear comprehension is like having two workers to lift a heavy plank of wood. Suppose there are two people trying to lift some big planks, but the weight is so heavy, they have to strain so hard, that it's almost unbearable. Then another person, imbued with goodwill, sees them and rushes in to help. In the same way, when there is mindfulness and clear comprehension, wisdom will arise at the same place to help out. Then all three of them support each other.

With wisdom there will be an understanding of sense objects. For instance, during the meditation sense objects are experienced and give rise to feelings and moods. You may start to think of a friend, but then wisdom should immediately counter with: 'It doesn't matter', 'Stop', or 'Forget it'. Or if there are thoughts about where you will go tomorrow,

then the response would be: 'I'm not interested, I don't want to concern myself with such things'. Maybe you start thinking about other people: then you should think: 'No, I don't want to get involved', 'Just let go' or: 'It's all uncertain and never a sure thing'. This is how you should deal with things in meditation. Recognize them as 'not sure, not sure', and maintain this kind of awareness.

You must give up all thinking, the inner dialogue and the doubting. Don't get caught up in these things during the meditation. In the end all that will remain in the mind – in its purest form – are mindfulness, clear comprehension and wisdom. Whenever these things weaken, doubts will arise. Try to abandon those doubts immediately, leaving only mindfulness, clear comprehension and wisdom. Try to develop mindfulness like this until it can be maintained at all times. Then you will understand mindfulness, clear comprehension and meditation thoroughly.

If you focus the attention at this point, you will see mindfulness, clear comprehension, the concentrated mind and wisdom together. If you are attracted to or repelled by external sense objects, you will be able to tell yourself: 'It's not sure'. Either way they are just hindrances to be swept away until the mind is clean. All that should remain are mindfulness and recollection, clear comprehension and awareness, concentration, the firm and unwavering mind – and all-round wisdom.



## 2

### RECITING BUDDHO

Meditate reciting '*Buddho, Buddho*'\* until the word penetrates deep into the heart of your consciousness (*citta*). *Buddho* represents the awareness and wisdom of the Buddha. When practising, you must depend on this word more than anything else. The awareness it brings will lead you to understand the truth about your own mind. It is a true refuge, which means that both mindfulness and insight are present.

Even wild animals can have awareness of a sort. They have mindfulness as they stalk their prey and prepare to attack. The predator needs firm mindfulness to keep hold of the captured prey, however defiantly it struggles to escape death. That is one kind of mindfulness. For this reason you must be

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\*The word *Buddho* is often taught by meditation masters of the Thai forest tradition as a word to recite mentally in combination with the breath. One recites the syllable 'Bud' on the in-breath and 'dho' on the out-breath.

able to distinguish between different kinds of mindfulness. *Buddho* is a way to apply the mind. When you consciously apply the mind to an object, it wakes up. The awareness wakes it up. Once this knowing has arisen through meditation, you can see the mind clearly. As long as the mind remains without the awareness of *Buddho*, even if ordinary worldly mindfulness is present, it is as if unawakened and without insight. It will not lead you to what is truly beneficial.

Mindfulness depends on the presence of *Buddho* – the knowing. It must be a clear knowing, which leads to the mind becoming brighter and more radiant. The illuminating effect that this clear knowing has on the mind is similar to the brightening of a light in a darkened room. As long as the room is pitch-black, any objects placed inside remain difficult to distinguish or are completely obscured from view because of the lack of light. But as you begin intensifying the brightness of the light inside, it will penetrate throughout the room, enabling you to see more clearly from moment to moment and thus allowing you to know more and more the details of any object inside.

# 3

## DEVELOPING ONE-POINTEDNESS OF MIND

When developing *Samādhi*,\* fix your attention on the breath and imagine that you are sitting absolutely alone with no one and nothing else around to bother you. Develop this perception in the mind and sustain it until the mind completely lets go of the world outside. All that is left is simply the knowing of the breath entering and leaving. The mind must set aside the external world. Don't allow yourself to start thinking about this person who is sitting over here, or that person who is sitting over there. Don't give space to any thoughts that will give rise to confusion or agitation in the

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\**Samādhi* is one of the ways of practising meditation. The practice of *Samādhi* is focused on tranquillity and one-pointedness of mind, and entails the development of strong concentration. It leads to the various levels of *jhāna*, meditative states of deep inner peace that go beyond the planes of ordinary human experience. *Jhāna* is often translated as 'absorption'.

mind – it is better to throw them out and be done with them. There is no one else here, you are sitting all alone. Develop this perception until all the other memories, perceptions and thoughts concerning other people and things subside, and you're no longer doubting or wondering about the other people or things around you. Then you can fix your attention solely on the in-breath and the out-breath. Breathe normally. Allow the in-breath and the out-breath to continue naturally, without forcing them to be longer or shorter, stronger or weaker than normal. Allow the breath to continue in a state of normality and balance, and then sit and observe it entering and leaving the body.

Once the mind has let go of external mind-objects, this means you will no longer feel disturbed by the sound of traffic or other noises. You won't feel irritated with anything outside. Whether it's forms, sounds or whatever, they won't be a source of disturbance, because the mind won't be paying attention to them. The mind will become centred upon the breath.

If the mind is agitated by different things and you can't concentrate, try taking an extra deep breath until the lungs are completely full, and then release all the air until there is none left inside. Do this several times, then re-establish awareness and continue to develop concentration. When mindfulness is re-established, it is normal that for a period the mind will be calm, but then will change and become agitated again. When this happens, make the mind firm, take another deep breath and then expel all the air from your

lungs. Fill the lungs to capacity again for a moment and then re-establish mindfulness on the breathing. Fix mindfulness on the in-breath and the out-breath, and continue to maintain awareness in this way.

The practice tends to vary in this way, so it will take many sittings and much effort before you become proficient. Once you are, the mind will let go of the external world and remain undisturbed. Mind-objects from the outside will be unable to penetrate inside the mind and disturb it. Once they are unable to penetrate inside, you will see the mind. You will see the mind as one object of awareness, the breath as another and mind-objects as another. They will all be present within the field of awareness, centred at the tip of your nose. Once mindfulness is firmly established with the in-breath and out-breath, you can continue to practise at your ease. As the mind becomes calm, the breath, which was originally coarse, correspondingly becomes lighter and more refined. The object of mind also becomes increasingly subtle and refined. The body feels lighter and the mind itself feels progressively lighter and unburdened. The mind lets go of external mind-objects and you continue to observe internally.

From here onwards your awareness will be turned away from the world outside and directed inwards to focus on the mind. Once the mind has gathered together and becomes concentrated, maintain awareness at that point where the mind becomes focused. As you breathe, you will see the breath clearly as it enters and leaves, mindfulness will be sharp, and awareness of mind-objects and mental activity will be clearer.

At that point you will see the characteristics of morality, meditation and wisdom, and the way in which they merge together. This is known as the unification of the factors of the Path.\* Once this unification occurs, your mind will be free from all forms of agitation and confusion. It will become one-pointed and this is what is known as *Samādhi*. When you focus attention in just one place, in this case the breath, you gain clarity and awareness because of the uninterrupted presence of mindfulness. As you continue to see the breath clearly, mindfulness will become stronger and the mind will become more sensitive in many different ways. You will see the mind in the centre of that place (the breath), one-pointed, with awareness focused inwards rather than turning towards the world outside. The external world gradually disappears from your awareness, and the mind will no longer be going to perform any work on the outside. It is as if you have come inside your house, where all your sense faculties have come together to form one compact unit. You are at your ease and the mind is free from all external objects. Awareness remains with the breath, and over time it will penetrate deeper and deeper inside, becoming progressively more refined. Ultimately awareness of the breath becomes so refined that the

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\*This refers to the Noble Eightfold Path or the Middle Way, which the Buddha taught as the means to liberation. When the steps towards liberation are emphasized it is referred to as *magga*, the Path. Its eight factors are right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. These eight factors are divided into three groups that are mentioned frequently in this booklet: virtuous conduct or morality, meditation and wisdom.

sensation of the breath seems to disappear. You could say either that awareness of the sensation of the breath has disappeared, or that the breath itself has disappeared. Then there arises a new kind of awareness, awareness that the breath has disappeared. In other words, awareness of the breath becomes so refined that it is difficult to define it.

So it might be that you are just sitting there and there is no breath. Really the breath is still there, but it has become so refined that it seems to have disappeared. Why? Because the mind is at its most refined, with a special kind of knowing. All that remains is the knowing. Even though the breath has vanished, the mind is still concentrated with the knowledge that the breath is not there. As you continue, what should you take up as the object of meditation? Take this very knowing as the meditation object – in other words, the knowledge that there is no breath – and sustain this. You could say that a specific kind of knowledge has been established in the mind. At this stage you should make the mind unshakeable in its concentration and be especially mindful. Some people become startled when they notice that the breath has disappeared, because they're used to having the breath there. When it appears that the breath has gone, you might panic or become afraid that you are going to die. Here you must establish the understanding that it is just the nature of the practice to progress in this way.

At this point some people may have doubts arising, because it is here that a vision or mental image (*nimitta*) may arise. These can be of many kinds, including both forms and

sounds. It is here that all sorts of unexpected things can arise in the course of the practice. If mental images do arise (some people have them, some don't), you must understand them in accordance with the truth. Don't doubt or allow yourself to become alarmed.

What will you observe as the object of meditation now? Observe this feeling that there is no breath and sustain it as the object of awareness as you continue to meditate. The Buddha described this as the firmest, most unshakeable form of *Samādhi*. There is just one firm and unwavering object of mind. When your practice of *Samādhi* reaches this point, many unusual and refined changes and transformations will be taking place within the mind, of which you may be aware. The sensation of the body will feel at its lightest or might even disappear altogether. You might feel as if you are floating in mid-air and seem to be completely weightless. It might be as if you are in the middle of space, and wherever you direct your sense faculties, they don't seem to register anything at all. Even though you know the body is still sitting there, you experience complete emptiness. This feeling of emptiness can be quite strange.

As you continue to practise, understand that there is nothing to worry about. Establish this feeling of being relaxed and unworried, securely in the mind. Once the mind is concentrated and one-pointed, no mind-object will be able to penetrate or disturb it, and you will be able to sit like this for as long as you want. You will be able to sustain concentration without any feelings of pain or discomfort. Having



developed *Samādhi* to this level, you will be able to enter or leave it at will. When you do leave it, it's at your ease and convenience. You withdraw at your ease, rather than because you are feeling lazy, unenergetic or tired. You withdraw from *Samādhi* because it is the appropriate time to withdraw, and you come out of it at your will.

This is *Samādhi*: you are relaxed and at ease. You enter and leave it without any problems. The mind and heart are at ease. If you genuinely have *Samādhi* like this, it means that sitting in meditation and entering *Samādhi* for just thirty minutes or an hour will enable you to remain cool and peaceful for many days afterwards. Experiencing the effects of *Samādhi* like this for several days has a purifying effect on the mind – whatever you experience will become an object for contemplation. This is where the practice really begins. It's the fruit which arises as *Samādhi* matures.

*Samādhi* performs one function, that of calming the mind, while morality and wisdom perform others. These characteristics on which you are focusing attention and which you are developing in the practice are linked, forming a circle. This is the way they manifest in the mind. Morality, *Samādhi* and wisdom arise and mature from the same place. Once the mind is calm, it will become progressively more restrained and composed due to the presence of wisdom and the power of *Samādhi*. As the mind becomes more composed and refined, this gives rise to an energy which acts to purify our conduct. Greater purity of our morality facilitates the development of stronger and more refined *Samādhi*, and this in turn supports

the maturing of wisdom. They assist each other in this way. Each aspect of the practice acts as a supporting factor for each of the others – in the end these terms become synonymous. As these three factors continue to mature together, they form one complete circle, ultimately giving rise to the Path (*magga*). *Magga* is a synthesis of these three functions of the practice, working smoothly and consistently together. As you practise you have to preserve this energy. It is the energy which will give rise to *vipassana* (insight) or wisdom. Having reached this stage, where wisdom is already functioning in the mind, independent of whether the mind is peaceful or not, wisdom will provide a consistent and independent energy in the practice. You see that when the mind is not peaceful, you shouldn't cling to that, and even when it is peaceful, you shouldn't cling to that either. Having let go of the burden of such concerns, the heart will accordingly feel much lighter. Whether you experience pleasant mind-objects or unpleasant mind-objects, you will remain at ease. The mind will remain peaceful in this way.

Another important thing to see is that when you stop doing formal meditation practice, if there is no wisdom functioning in the mind, you will give up the practice altogether, without any further contemplation or development of awareness of the work which still has to be done. In fact, when your mind comes out of *Samādhī*, you should know clearly in the mind that you have withdrawn. Having withdrawn, continue to conduct yourself in a normal manner. Maintain mindfulness and awareness at all times. It isn't that you only

practise meditation in the sitting posture; *Samādhi* means that the mind is always firm and unwavering. Make the mind firm and steady as you go about your daily life, and maintain this sense of steadiness as the object of awareness at all times. You must practise mindfulness and clear comprehension continuously. After you get up from the formal sitting practice and go about your business – walking, riding in cars and so on – whenever your eyes see a form or your ears hear a sound, maintain awareness. As you experience mind-objects which give rise to liking and disliking, try consistently to maintain awareness of the fact that such mental states are impermanent and uncertain. In this way the mind will remain calm and in a state of ‘normality’.

As long as the mind is calm, use it to contemplate mind-objects. Contemplate the whole of your physical form, the body. You can do this at any time and in any posture, whether doing formal meditation practice, relaxing at home, out at work, or in whatever situation you find yourself. Keep the meditation and the reflection going at all times. Just going for a walk and seeing dead leaves on the ground under a tree can provide an opportunity to contemplate impermanence. Both we and the leaves are the same: when we get old we shrivel up and die. Other people are all the same. This is raising the mind to the level of *vipassana*, contemplating the truth of the way things are the whole time. Whether walking, standing, sitting or lying down, mindfulness is sustained evenly and consistently. This is practising meditation correctly – you have to be following the mind closely, checking it at all times.

It is now seven o'clock in the evening, and we have been practising meditation together for an hour, establishing the mind in the here and now. When we end our meditation session, it might be that your mind will stop practising completely and will not carry on by contemplating. That's the wrong way to do it. When we stop, all that should stop is the formal aspect of sitting meditation in a group. You should continue practising and developing awareness consistently, without letting up.

I have often taught that not practising consistently is like dripping water. The practice is not a continuous uninterrupted flow. It is like individual drops of water. Mindfulness is not sustained evenly. The important point is that the mind does the practice and nothing else. The body doesn't do it. The mind does the work, the mind does the practice. If you understand this clearly, you will see that you don't necessarily have to be doing formal sitting meditation in order for the mind to know *Samādhi*. The mind is the one who does the practice. You have to experience and understand this for yourself, in your own mind.

Once you do see this for yourself, you will be developing awareness in the mind at all times and in all postures. If you are maintaining mindfulness as an even and unbroken flow, it is as if the drops of water have joined to form a smooth and continuous flow of running water. Mindfulness is present from moment to moment, and accordingly there will be awareness of mind-objects at all times. If the mind is restrained and composed with uninterrupted mindfulness, you

will know each time that wholesome and unwholesome mental states arise. You will know the mind that is calm and the mind that is confused and agitated. Wherever you go you will be practising like this. If you train the mind in this way, it means your meditation will mature quickly and successfully.

Please don't misunderstand. These days it is common for people to go on *vipassana* courses for three or seven days, where they don't have to speak or do anything but meditate. Maybe you have gone on a silent meditation retreat for a week or two, afterwards returning to your normal daily life. You might have left thinking that you've 'done *vipassana*', and because you feel that you know what it's all about, carried on going to parties and discos, and indulging in different forms of sensual delight. When you do this, what happens? There won't be any of the fruits of *vipassana* left by the end of it. If you go and do all sorts of unskilful things, which disturb and upset the mind, wasting everything, then the next year go back again and do another retreat for seven days or a few weeks, then come out and carry on with the parties, discos and drinking, that isn't true practice. It isn't Dhamma practice or the path to progress.

You need to make an effort to renounce. You must contemplate until you see the harmful effects which come from such behaviour. See the harm in drinking and going out on the town. Reflect and see the harm inherent in all the different kinds of unskilful behaviour in which you indulge, until it becomes fully apparent. This will provide the impetus for you to take a step back and change your ways. Then you will find

some real peace. To experience peace of mind, you have to see clearly the disadvantages and danger in such forms of behaviour. This is practising in the correct way. If you do a silent retreat for seven days, where you don't have to speak to or get involved with anybody, and then go chatting, gossiping and over-indulging for another seven months, how will you gain any real or lasting benefit from those seven days of practice?

I would encourage all the people here, who are practising to develop awareness and wisdom, to understand this point. Try to practise consistently. See the disadvantages of practising insincerely and inconsistently, and try to sustain a more dedicated and continuous effort in the practice. Really take it to this extent. It can then become a realistic possibility that you might put an end to the impurities of the mind. But that style of not speaking and not playing around for seven days, followed by six months of complete sensual indulgence, without any mindfulness or restraint, will just lead to the squandering of any gains made from the meditation – there won't be anything left. It is as if you were to go to work for a day and earn 200 *Baht*, but then went out and spent 300 baht on food and things in the same day. How would you ever save any money? It would all be gone. It's just the same with meditation.



## 4

### USING TRANQUILLITY AND WISDOM

Calming the mind means finding the right balance. If you try to force your mind too much it goes too far; if you don't try enough it misses the point of balance, it doesn't get there.

Normally the mind isn't still, it's moving all the time. We must strengthen the mind. Making the mind strong and making the body strong are not the same. To make the body strong we have to exercise it, to push it in order to strengthen it, but to make the mind strong means to make it peaceful, not to go thinking of this and that. For most of us the mind has never been peaceful, it has never had the energy of *Samādhi*, so we must establish it within certain boundaries. We sit in meditation, staying with the 'one who knows'.

If we force our breath to be too long or too short, we're not balanced and the mind won't become peaceful. It's like when we first start to use a pedal sewing machine. At first we just

practise pedalling the machine to get our coordination right, before we actually sew anything. Following the breath is similar. We don't get concerned over how long or short, weak or strong it is, we just note it. We simply let it be, following the natural breathing.

When it's balanced, we take up the breathing as our meditation object. When we breathe in, the beginning of the breath is at the tip of the nose, the middle of the breath at the chest and the end of the breath at the abdomen. This is the path of the breath. When we breathe out, the beginning of the breath is at the abdomen, the middle at the chest and the end at the tip of the nose. Simply take note of this path of the breath at the tip of the nose, the chest and the abdomen, then at the abdomen, the chest and the tip of the nose. We take note of these three points in order to make the mind firm, to limit mental activity so that mindfulness and self-awareness can easily arise.

When our attention settles on these three points, we can let them go and note the in-breathing and out-breathing, concentrating solely at the tip of the nose or the upper lip, where the air passes on its in and out passage. We don't have to follow the breath, just establish mindfulness in front of us at the tip of the nose, and note the breath at this one point – entering, leaving, entering, leaving. There's no need to think of anything special, just concentrate on this simple task for now, having continuous presence of mind. There's nothing more to do, just breathing in and out. Soon the mind becomes peaceful, the breath refined. The mind and



body become light. This is the right state for the work of meditation.

When sitting in meditation, the mind becomes refined, but whatever state it's in we should try to be aware of it, to know it. Mental activity is there, together with tranquillity. There is the action of bringing the mind to the theme of contemplation (*vitakka*). If there is not much mindfulness, there will be not much *vitakka*. Then the contemplation around that theme (*vicara*) follows. Various weak mental impressions may arise from time to time but our self-awareness is the important thing – whatever may be happening, we know it continuously. As we go deeper we are constantly aware of the state of our meditation, knowing whether or not the mind is firmly established. Thus both concentration and awareness are present.

To have a peaceful mind does not mean that nothing is happening; mental impressions do arise. For instance, when we talk about the first level of the peaceful mind (i.e. *jhāna*, absorption), we say it has five factors. Along with *vitakka* and *vicara*, rapture (*piti*) arises with the theme of contemplation, and then happiness (*sukha*). These four things all come together in the mind established in tranquillity. They are as one state.

The fifth factor is one-pointedness. You may wonder how there can be one-pointedness when there are all these other factors as well. This is because they all become unified on that foundation of tranquillity. Together they are called a state of *Samādhi*. They are not everyday states of

mind, they are factors of absorption. There are these five characteristics, but they do not disturb the basic tranquillity. There is *vitakka* (the bringing of the mind to the theme of contemplation), but it does not disturb the mind. *Vicara* (contemplation around that theme) and then rapture and happiness arise, but do not disturb the mind. The mind is therefore as one with these factors. The first level of absorption in peace is like this.

We don't have to call it first *jhāna*, second *jhāna*, third *jhāna* and so on, let's just call it a peaceful mind. As the mind becomes progressively calmer it will dispense with *vitakka* and *vicara*, leaving only rapture and happiness. Why does the mind discard *vitakka* and *vicara*? This is because as the mind becomes more refined, the activities of *vitakka* and *vicara* are too coarse to remain. At this stage, as the mind lets go of *vitakka* and *vicara*, feelings of great rapture can arise, tears may flow. But as the *Samādhi* deepens, rapture too is discarded, leaving only happiness and one-pointedness. Finally even happiness goes and the mind reaches its greatest refinement. There are only equanimity and one-pointedness. All else has been left behind. The mind stands unmoving.

This can happen once the mind is peaceful. You don't have to think a lot about it, it just happens by itself when the causal factors are ripe. This is called the energy of a peaceful mind. In this state the mind is not drowsy; the five hindrances, sense desire, aversion, restlessness, dullness and doubt, have all fled. But if mental energy is still not strong and mindfulness is weak intruding mental impressions, will

occasionally arise. The mind is peaceful but it's as if there's a 'cloudiness' within the calm. The mind tends to play tricks within these levels of tranquillity. Mental images will sometimes arise when the mind is in this state, through any of the senses, and the meditator may not be able to tell exactly what is happening. 'Am I sleeping? No. Is it a dream? No, it's not a dream...' It's not a normal sort of drowsiness, though, some impressions will manifest – maybe we'll hear a sound or see a dog or something. It's not really clear, but it's not a dream either. This is because the five factors of a peaceful mind have become unbalanced and weak.

These impressions arise from a middling sort of tranquillity; but if the mind is truly calm and clear we don't doubt the various mental impressions or imagery which arise. Questions like: 'Did I drift off, then? Was I sleeping? Did I get lost?' don't arise, for they are characteristics of a mind which is still doubting. 'Am I asleep or awake?' Here the mind is fuzzy. This is the mind getting lost in itself. It's like the moon going behind a cloud. You can still see the moon, but the clouds covering it render it hazy. It's not like the moon which has emerged from behind the clouds clear, sharp and bright.

When the mind is peaceful and established firmly in mindfulness and self-awareness, there will be no doubt concerning the various phenomena which we encounter. The mind will truly be beyond the hindrances. We will clearly know everything which arises in the mind as it is. We will not doubt, because the mind is clear and bright. The mind which reaches *Samādhi* is like this.

Some people find it hard to enter *Samādhi* because they don't have the right tendencies. There is *Samādhi*, but it's not strong or firm. However, one can attain peace through the use of wisdom, through contemplating and seeing the truth of things, solving problems that way. This is using wisdom rather than the power of *Samādhi*. To attain calm in practice, it's not necessary to be sitting in meditation, for instance. Just ask yourself: 'What is that?' and solve your problem right there! A person with wisdom is like this. Perhaps he or she can't really attain high levels of *Samādhi*, although there must be some, just enough to cultivate wisdom. It's like the difference between farming rice and farming corn. One can depend on rice more than corn for one's livelihood. Our practice can be like this: we can depend more on wisdom to solve problems. When we see the truth, peace arises.

The two ways are not the same. Some people have insight and are strong in wisdom, but do not have much *Samādhi*. When they sit in meditation they aren't very peaceful. They tend to think a lot, contemplating this and that, until eventually they contemplate happiness and suffering and see the truth of them. Some incline more towards this than *Samādhi*. Whether standing, walking, sitting or lying down, enlightenment can take place. Through seeing, through relinquishing, they attain peace. They attain peace through knowing the truth, through going beyond doubt, because they have seen it for themselves. Other people have less wisdom, but their *Samādhi* is very strong. They can enter very deep *Samādhi* quickly, but because they don't have much wisdom, they

cannot catch their defilements in time, they don't know them. They can't solve their problems.

Regardless of which approach we use, we need to do away with wrong thinking, leaving only right view. We need to get rid of confusion, leaving only peace. Either way we end up at the same place. There are these two sides to practice, but these two things, calm and insight, go together. We can't do away with either of them. They must go together.

That which watches over the various factors which arise in meditation is mindfulness. This mindfulness is a condition which, through practice, can help other factors to arise. Mindfulness is life. When we don't have mindfulness, when we are heedless, it's as if we are dead. If we have no mindfulness, then our speech and actions have no meaning. Mindfulness is simply recollection. It's a cause for the arising of self-awareness and wisdom. Whatever virtues we have cultivated are imperfect if lacking in mindfulness. Mindfulness is that which watches over us while standing, walking, sitting and lying down. Even when we are no longer in *Samādhi*, mindfulness should be present throughout.



## 5

### CONTEMPLATION OF THE BODY

In training the mind, it is crucial to overcome sceptical doubt. Doubt and uncertainty are powerful obstacles that must be dealt with. Investigation of the ‘first three fetters’ – personality view, blind attachment to rules and practices and sceptical doubt\* – is the way out of attachment practised by the Enlightened Ones. But at first you just understand these defilements from the books – you still lack insight into how things truly are.

Investigating personality view is the way to go beyond the delusion that identifies the body as a self. This includes the attachment to viewing your own and other people’s bodies

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\* One of the ways in which the Buddha outlined the path to enlightenment was by means of the gradual abandoning of certain ‘fetters’, the obstructions of the mind that bind us to suffering. The first three of these are *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* (personality view); *silabbata-parāmāsa* (blind attachment to rules and practices) and *vicikicchā* (sceptical doubt).

as having a solid self. Personality view refers to this thing you call yourself. It means attachment to the view that the body is a self. You must investigate this view until you gain a new understanding and can see the truth that attachment to the body is defilement, and that it obstructs the minds of all human beings from gaining insight into the Dhamma.

For this reason, before anything else the preceptor will instruct each new candidate for ordination to investigate five meditation objects: hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth and skin. It is through contemplation and investigation that you develop insight into personality view. These objects form the most immediate basis for the attachment that creates the delusion of personality view. Contemplating them leads to the direct examination of personality view, and provides the means by which each generation of men and women who take up the instructions of the preceptor upon entering the monastic community can actually transcend personality view. But in the beginning you remain deluded, without insight, and hence are unable to penetrate personality view and see the truth of the way things are. You fail to see the truth because you still have a firm and unyielding attachment. It's this attachment that sustains the delusion.

The Buddha taught us to transcend delusion. The way to transcend it is through clearly seeing the body for what it is. You must see with penetrating insight that the true nature of both your own body and other people's bodies is essentially the same. There is no fundamental difference



between peoples' bodies. The body is just the body; it's not a being, a self, yours or theirs. A body exists: you label it and give it a name. Then you attach and cling to it, with the view that it is your body or his or her body. You attach to the view that the body is permanent, and that it is something clean and pleasant. This attachment goes deep into the mind. This is the way that the mind clings to the body.

Personality view means that you are still caught in doubt and uncertainty about the body. Your insight hasn't fully penetrated the delusion that sees the body as a self. As long as the delusion remains, you call the body a self or *atta*, and interpret your entire experience from the viewpoint that there is a solid, enduring entity which you call the self. You are so completely attached to the conventional way of viewing the body as a self that there is no apparent way of seeing beyond it. But clear understanding according to the truth of the way things are means you see the body as just that much: the body is just the body. With insight, you see the body as merely that, and this wisdom counteracts the delusion of the sense of self. This insight that sees the body as just that much leads to the destruction of attachment, through the gradual uprooting and letting go of delusion.

Practise contemplating the body as being just that much, until it is quite natural to think to yourself: 'Oh, the body is merely the body. It's just that much.' Once this way of reflection is established, as soon as you say to yourself that it's just that much, the mind lets go. There is the letting go of attachment to the body. There is the insight that sees

the body as merely the body. By sustaining this sense of detachment through continuously seeing the body as merely the body, all doubt and uncertainty are gradually uprooted. As you investigate the body, the more clearly you see it as just the body rather than a person, a being, a me or a them, the more powerful the effect on the mind, culminating in the simultaneous removal of doubt and uncertainty.

Blind attachment to rules and practices, which manifests in the mind as blindly fumbling and feeling around through lack of clarity as to the real purpose of practice, is abandoned simultaneously because it arises in conjunction with personality view. You could say that the three fetters of doubt, blind attachment to rites and practices and personality view are inseparable, and even effectively synonyms for each other. Once you have seen this relationship clearly, when one of the three fetters arises, such as doubt, and you are able to let it go through the cultivation of insight, the other two fetters are automatically abandoned at the same time. They are extinguished together. Simultaneously you let go of personality view and the blind attachment that is the cause of fumbling and fuzziness of intention over different practices. You see each of them as one part of your overall attachment to the sense of self, which is to be abandoned. You must repeatedly investigate the body and break it down into its component parts. As you see each part as it truly is, the perception of the body as a solid entity or self is gradually eroded. You have to put continuous effort into this investigation of the truth, without letting up.

A further aspect of mental development that leads to clearer and deeper insight is meditating on an object to calm the mind down. The calm mind is the mind that is firm and stable in *Samādhi*. This can be *khanika-Samādhi* (momentary concentration), *upacara-Samādhi* ('neighbourhood' or intermediate concentration) or *appana-Samādhi* (full absorption). The level of concentration is determined by the refinement of consciousness from moment to moment, as you train the mind to maintain awareness on a meditation object.

In momentary concentration, the mind unifies for just a short space of time. It calms down in *Samādhi*, but after momentarily gathering together, it immediately withdraws from that peaceful state. As concentration becomes more refined in the course of meditation, many similar characteristics of the tranquil mind are experienced at each level, so each one is described as a level of *Samādhi*, whether it is momentary or neighbourhood concentration, or absorption. At each level the mind is calm, but the depth of the *Samādhi* varies and the nature of the peaceful mental state experienced differs. On one level the mind is still subject to movement and can wander, but it moves around within the confines of the concentrated state. It doesn't get caught into activity that leads to agitation and distraction. Your awareness might follow a wholesome mental object for a while, before returning to settle down at a point of stillness where it remains for a period.

You could compare the experience of momentary concentration with a physical activity like taking a walk somewhere:

you might walk for a period before stopping for a rest, and after having rested start walking again until it's time to stop for another rest. Although you interrupt the journey periodically to stop walking and take rests, remaining completely still each time, this is just a temporary stillness of the body. After a short space of time you have to start moving again to continue the journey. This is what happens within the mind as it experiences such a level of concentration.

The practice of meditation by focusing on an object to calm the mind and reach a level of calm where the mind is firm in *Samādhi*, but with some mental movement still occurring, is known as neighbourhood concentration. In neighbourhood concentration the mind can still move around. This movement takes place within certain limits; the mind doesn't move beyond them. The boundaries within which the mind can move are determined by the firmness and stability of the concentration. The experience is as if you alternate between a state of calm and a certain amount of mental activity. The mind is calm some of the time and active for the rest. Within that activity a certain level of calm and concentration still persists, but the mind is not completely still or immovable. It is still thinking a little and wandering about. It's as if you are wandering around inside your own home. You wander around within the limits of your concentration, without losing awareness and moving outdoors, away from the meditation object. The movement of the mind stays within the bounds of wholesome mental states. It doesn't get caught into any mental proliferation based on unwholesome mental

states. Any thinking remains wholesome. Once the mind is calm, it necessarily experiences wholesome mental states from moment to moment. During the time when it is concentrated, the mind only experiences wholesome mental states and periodically settles down to become completely still and one-pointed on its object. So the mind still experiences some movement, circling around its object. It can still wander. It might wander around within the confines set by the level of concentration, but no real harm arises from this movement because the mind is calm in *Samādhi*. This is how the development of the mind proceeds in the course of practice.

When the mind enters absorption it calms down and is stilled to a level where it is at its most subtle and skilful. Even if you experience sense impingement from the outside, such as sounds and physical sensations, it remains external and is unable to disturb the mind. You might hear a sound, but it won't disturb your concentration. There is the hearing of the sound, but the experience is as if you don't hear anything. There is awareness of the impingement, but it's as if you are not aware. This is because you let go. The mind lets go automatically. Concentration is so deep and firm that you let go of attachment to sense impingement quite naturally. The mind can absorb into this state for long periods. Having stayed inside for an appropriate amount of time, it then withdraws.

Sometimes a mental image (*nimitta*) of some aspect of your own body can appear as you withdraw from such a deep level of concentration. It might be a mental image displaying an aspect of the unattractive nature of your body that arises

into consciousness. As the mind withdraws from the refined state, the image of the body appears to emerge and expand from within the mind. Any aspect of the body could come up as a mental image and fill the mind's eye at that point. Images that come up in this way are extremely clear and unmistakable. You must have genuinely experienced very deep tranquillity for them to arise. You see them absolutely clearly, even though your eyes are closed. If you open your eyes you can't see them, but with eyes shut and the mind absorbed in *Samādhi*, you can see such images as clearly as if viewing the object with eyes wide open. You can even experience a whole train of consciousness, where from moment to moment the mind's awareness is fixed on images expressing the unattractive nature of the body. The appearance of such images in a calm mind can become the basis for insight into the impermanent nature of the body, as well as its unattractive, unclean and unpleasant nature or the complete lack of any real self or essence within it.

When these kinds of special knowledge arise they provide the basis for skilful investigation and the development of insight. You bring this kind of insight deep into your heart. As you do this more and more, it becomes the cause for insight knowledge to arise by itself. Sometimes, when you turn your attention to reflecting on the unattractiveness and loathsomeness of the body, images of different unattractive aspects of the body can manifest in the mind automatically. These images are clearer than any you could try to summon up with your imagination, and they lead to insight

of a far more penetrating nature than that gained through the ordinary kind of discursive thinking. This kind of clear insight has such a striking impact that the activity of the mind is brought to a stop, followed by the experience of a deep sense of dispassion. It is so clear and piercing because it originates from a completely peaceful mind. Investigating from within a state of calm leads you to clearer and clearer insight, the mind becoming more peaceful as it is increasingly absorbed in contemplation. The clearer and more conclusive the insight, the deeper the mind penetrates with its investigation, constantly supported by the calm of *Samādhi*. This is what the work of meditation practice involves. Continuous investigation in this way helps you to let go repeatedly of attachment to personality view and ultimately destroy it. It puts an end to all remaining doubt and uncertainty about this heap of flesh we call the body, and brings about the letting go of blind attachment to rules and practices.

Even in the event of serious illness, tropical fevers or different health problems that normally have a strong physical impact and shake the body up, your *Samādhi* and insight will remain firm and imperturbable. Your understanding and insight allow you to make a clear distinction between mind and body – the mind is one phenomenon, the body another. When you see body and mind as completely and indisputably separate from each other, this means that the practice of insight has brought you to the point where your mind sees for certain the true nature of the body.

Seeing the way the body truly is clearly and beyond doubt from within the calm of *Samādhi* leads the mind to experience a strong sense of world-weariness and turning away. This turning away comes from the sense of disenchantment and dispassion that arises as the natural result of seeing the way things are. It's not a turning away that comes from ordinary worldly moods such as fear, revulsion or other unwholesome qualities like envy or aversion. It's not coming from the same root of attachment as those defiled mental states. This is a turning away that has a spiritual quality to it, and has a different effect on the mind from the normal moods of boredom and weariness experienced by ordinary unenlightened human beings.

When ordinary people are weary and fed up, they usually become caught up into moods of aversion, rejection and seeking to avoid. The experience of insight is not the same. The sense of world-weariness that grows with insight, leads to a detachment, turning away and aloofness that come naturally from investigating and seeing the truth of the way things are. It is free from attachment to a sense of a self which attempts to control and force things to go according to its desires. Instead you let go with acceptance of the way things are. The clarity of insight is so strong that you no longer experience any sense of a self that has to struggle against the flow of its desires or endure through attachment. The three fetters of personality view, doubt and blind attachment to rules and practices that are normally present, underlying the way you view the world, can't



now delude you or cause you to make any serious mistakes in practice.

This is the very beginning of the path, the first clear insight into ultimate truth, and it paves the way for further insight. You could describe it as penetrating the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths are to be realized through insight. Every monk and nun who has ever realized them has experienced such insight into the truth of the way things are. You know suffering, know the cause of suffering, know the cessation of suffering and know the path leading to the cessation of suffering. The understanding of each Noble Truth emerges at the same place within the mind. They come together and harmonize as the factors of the Noble Eightfold Path, which the Buddha taught are to be realized within the mind. As the path factors converge in the centre of the mind, they cut through any doubts and uncertainty you may still have concerning the way of practice.

The investigation and development of insight into the Dhamma give rise to this profound peace of mind. Once it is gained this clear and penetrating insight is sustained at all times, whether you are sitting in meditation with your eyes closed or doing something with your eyes open. Whatever situation you find yourself in, be it formal meditation or not, the clarity of insight remains. When you have unwavering mindfulness of the mind, you don't forget yourself. Whether you are standing, walking, sitting or lying down, the awareness within makes it impossible to lose mindfulness. It's a state of awareness that prevents you from forgetting yourself.

Mindfulness has become so strong that it is self-sustaining, to the point where it becomes natural for the mind to be that way. These are the results of training and cultivating the mind, and here is where you go beyond doubt. You have no doubts about the future, you have no doubts about the past, so you have no need to doubt about the present either, although you still have awareness that there are such things as past, present and future. You are aware of the existence of time and there is the reality of the past, present and future, but you are no longer concerned or worried about them.

Why are you no longer concerned? All those things that took place in the past have already happened. The past has already gone. All that is arising in the present is the result of causes that lay in the past. An obvious example of this is to say that if you don't feel hungry now, it's because you have already eaten at some time in the past. The lack of hunger in the present is the result of actions performed in the past. If you know your experience in the present, you can know the past. Eating a meal was the cause from the past that resulted in your feeling at ease or energetic in the present, and this provides the cause of your being active and working in the future. So the present is providing causes that will bring results in the future. Thus the past, present and future can be seen as one and the same. The Buddha called it *eko dhammo* – the unity of the Dhamma. It isn't many different things; there is just this much. When you see the present, you see the future. By understanding the present you understand the past. Past, present and future make up a chain of continuous

cause and effect, and hence are constantly flowing on from one to the other. There are causes from the past that produce results in the present, and those results are already producing causes for the future. This process of cause and result applies to practice in the same way. You experience the fruits of having trained the mind in *Samādhi* and insight, and they necessarily make the mind wiser and more skilful.

The mind completely transcends doubt. You are not uncertain or speculating about anything any longer. The lack of doubt means you no longer fumble around or have to feel your way through the practice. As a result you live and act in accordance with nature. You live in the world in the most natural way. That means living in the world peacefully; you are able to find peace even in the midst of that which is not peaceful. It means you are fully able to live in the world. You are able to live in the world without creating any problems. The Buddha lived in the world and was able to find true peace of mind within the world. As practitioners of the Dhamma, you must learn to do the same. Don't get lost in and attached to perceptions about things being this way or that way. Don't attach or give undue importance to any perceptions that are still deluded. Whenever the mind becomes stirred up, investigate and contemplate the cause. When you aren't making any suffering for yourself out of things, you are at ease. When there are no issues causing mental agitation, you remain equanimous, that is, you continue to practise normally, with mental equanimity maintained by the presence of mindfulness and an all-round awareness. You

maintain a sense of self-control and equilibrium. If any matter arises and prevails upon the mind, you immediately take hold of it for thorough investigation and contemplation. If there is clear insight at that moment, you penetrate the matter with wisdom and prevent it creating any suffering in the mind. If there is not yet clear insight, you let the matter go temporarily through the practice of tranquillity meditation, and don't allow the mind to attach. At some point in the future your insight will certainly be strong enough to penetrate it, because sooner or later you will develop insight powerful enough to comprehend everything that still causes attachment and suffering.

## REFERENCES

This booklet is a collection of passages from the following talks:

*Meditation*: from a talk given at IMS (tape 11B or 82).

*Reciting Buddhō*: from the talk ‘Clarity of Insight’; given to a group of lay meditators in Bangkok in April 1979.

*Developing one-pointedness of mind (samādhī)*: from a talk given at Hampstead Vihara, London (Thai: ‘Samādhī pavāna’, tape 11A)

*Using tranquillity and wisdom*: from the talk ‘On Meditation’ (Thai: ‘Garn tam jit hai sangob’), an informal talk given in the north-eastern dialect, taken from an unidentified tape.

*Contemplation of the body*: from the talk ‘Clarity of Insight’.





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