

Wisdom of Silence

Ajahn Brahm

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Preface to this revised edition

This revised edition is produced not only in print but also in an electronic format in order that this valuable insight will be more readily available and accessible, reaching a wider audience.

The electronic copy is downloadable for free at bswa.org and wisdomandwonders.org.

Bodhinyana Volunteer Team
Rains Retreat 2018

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CHAPTER 1

It is No Great Thing to Make a Mistake

Enlightenment means there is no anger left in your heart. There are no personal desires or delusions left in your heart.

In this life we have often forgotten that it's no great thing to make a mistake. In Buddhism, it's *all right to make a mistake*; it is *all right to be imperfect*. Isn't that wonderful?! This means that we have the freedom to be a human being, rather than thinking of ourselves as someone wonderful and great who never makes mistakes. It is horrible, isn't it, if we think we are not allowed to make mistakes? Because when we do make mistakes, we have to hide and try to cover them up! So, the home then is not a place of peace and quiet and comfort. Of course, most people who are sceptical say, "If you allow people to make mistakes, how will they ever learn? They will just keep on making even more mistakes!" But that is not the way it actually works.

To illustrate this point, when I was a teenager, my father said to me that he would never throw me out or bar the door of his house to me no matter what I did. I would always be allowed in there even if I had made the worst mistakes. When I heard that, I understood it as an expression of love,

of acceptance. It inspired me, and I respected him so much that I did not want to hurt him. I did not want to give him trouble, and so I tried even harder to be worthy of his house.

Now, if we could try that with the people we live with, we'd see that it gives them the freedom and the space of relaxation and peace. It takes away all the tension, and there comes respect and care for the other person. So, I challenge you to try an experiment of allowing people to make mistakes: to say to your mate, your parents, or your children, "*The door of my house will always be open to you! The door of my heart will always be open to you no matter what you do!*"

Allow yourself to make mistakes too. Can you think of all the mistakes you have made in the past week? Can you let them be? Can you still be a friend to yourself? It is only when we allow ourselves to make mistakes that we can finally be at ease.

That is what we mean by compassion, by *mettā*, by love. It has to be unconditional. If you only love someone because they do what you like, or because they always live up to your expectations, that love is not worth very much. That is like a "business deal" kind of love—"I will love you if you give me something back in return."

When I first became a monk, I thought monks had to be perfect. I thought they should never make mistakes—that when they sit in meditation they must always sit straight. But those of you who have been at the morning sitting at 4:30 a.m., especially after working hard the day before, you will know that you can be quite tired, and you can slump or even nod. But that is all right! It is all right to make mistakes. Can

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you feel how easy it feels? How all that tension and stress disappears when you allow yourself to make mistakes?

The trouble is that we tend to amplify the mistakes and forget the success, which creates so much of a burden of guilt and heaviness. Instead, we can turn to our successes—the good things we have done in our life. We could call it our “Buddha Nature” within us. If you turn to that, it grows. If you dwell on any thought in the mind, or any train of thought—it grows and grows, doesn’t it? So, we turn our hearts around and dwell upon the positive in ourselves—the purity, the goodness, the source of that unconditional love; that which wants to help, to sacrifice even our own comfort for the sake of another being. This is a way we can regard our inner being, our heart. Forgiving its faults, we dwell upon its nobility, purity and kindness. We can do the same with other people; we can dwell upon their goodness and watch it grow.

This is what we call *kamma* or actions: the way we think about life, the way we speak about life, and what we do with life. And really it is up to us what we do! It is not up to some supernatural being up there who says whether you will be happy or not. Your happiness is completely in your hands, in your power. This is what we mean by *kamma*. It’s like baking a cake. *Kamma* defines what ingredients you have, what you have got to work with. So, a person with unfortunate *kamma*—maybe as a result of their past actions—has not got many ingredients; maybe they have just got some old stale flour, one or two raisins, and some rancid butter and some sugar. And that is all they have got

to work with! Meanwhile, another person might have very good kamma, blessed with all the ingredients you could ever wish for: whole wheat flour, brown sugar and all types of dried fruits and nuts. As for the cake that is produced in the end—even with very meagre ingredients, some people can make a beautiful cake. They mix it all up, put into the oven, and the cake comes out delicious! How do they do it when the cake made by other people who might have everything tastes awful?!

Kamma defines the ingredients or what we have got to work with, but that does not define what we make with it. So, if a person is wise, it does not matter what they have got to work with, they can still make a beautiful cake as long as they know how.

Of course, the first thing to know is that the last thing to do when trying to make a good cake is to complain all the time about the ingredients we have!

Sometimes in the monastery, if there is an ingredient missing, the people who are cooking look in the pantry and just use whatever is there. They have to be quite versatile and you get some very strange cakes! But they are all delicious, because people have learnt the art of using what they have and making something of it.

So, where is kamma heading? What are we actually making of it? Is it to be wealthy or to be powerful? NO! With this meditation and in this Buddhism, the direction we are going in is towards enlightenment. We are using the ingredients we have to become enlightened. But what does enlightenment actually mean?

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Enlightenment means there is no anger left in your heart. There is no personal desire or delusion left in your heart.

At one time there was a Russian teacher called George Ivanovich Gurdjieff, who had a community in France. In his community there was one fellow who was just absolutely obnoxious, always annoying people and giving them a really hard time. So, the community would meet together and ask Gurdjieff to get rid of the fellow because he was always creating arguments and making people unhappy. But Gurdjieff never would. However, after Gurdjieff died, they found out that he had actually been paying the fellow to stay there! Everyone else would have to pay for board and lodging, but Gurdjieff was paying the fellow to be there—to teach the people a lesson. If you can only be happy when you live with people you like, your happiness is not worth anything because you are not being stirred up. It is like a glass of muddy water: when it is not stirred up, it looks clear, doesn't it? But as soon as it is agitated, the mud is stirred up from the bottom. It is good to stir up the glass just to see what is really in there. So, Gurdjieff paid this fellow to stir up everybody to see what was there.

A very good indicator of where one is in the spiritual life is to see how well you get on with other people, especially the difficult ones. Can you be peaceful when someone else is giving you a hard time? Can you let go of anger and irritation towards a person, a place, or towards yourself? Eventually, we have to. Otherwise, we are never going to get to enlightenment. We are never going to get peaceful.

Imagine what it is like to say, “No more will I get irritated. No more will I fight or reject a person or their habits. If I cannot do anything about it, I will learn to peacefully coexist with that which I do not like. I will learn to peacefully accept the pain, instead of always turning my head away from the pain and seeking the pleasure.” Imagine that!

Sometimes people think that if you do not get angry, you tend to be a vegetable. You just allow others to walk all over you; you will only be someone who sits here and does nothing. But ask yourself, “What do you feel like after you have been angry?” Do you feel full of beans, very energetic? In fact, we get worn out when we are angry. The anger eats up so much of our heart’s energy. Even when we are irritated or feeling negative towards a person or a place, that eats up energy! So, if we do not want to feel so tired and depressed, we can try as an experiment not getting irritated. See how much more wide-awake and zestful we feel. Then, we can send that energy out into caring for others and for ourselves as well. It is in our power to do that. If you really want to get on the fast track to enlightenment, try giving up irritation and anger.

How do you give it up? First of all, by wanting to give it up! A lot of us do not want to give up our anger and irritation—for some obscure reasons we like it.

There is a wonderful little story about two monks who lived together in a monastery for many years. They were great friends. Then, they died within a few months of one another. One of them got reborn in a heavenly realm; the other monk got reborn as a worm in a dung pile.

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The one up in the heavenly realm was having a wonderful time, enjoying all the heavenly pleasures. Then, he started thinking about his friend. *“I wonder where my old mate has gone?”* So, he scanned all of the heavenly realms, but could not find a trace of his friend. Then he scanned the realm of human beings, but he could not see any trace of his friend there, either. So, he looked in the realm of animals and then of insects.

Finally, he found his friend, reborn as a worm in a dung pile! *“Wow!”* he thought. *“I am going to help my friend. I am going to go down there to that dung pile and take him up here, so he can enjoy the heavenly pleasures and bliss of living in these wonderful realms.”*

So, he went down to the dung pile and called his mate, and the little worm wriggled out and said, *“Who are you?”*

“I am your friend. We used to be monks together in a past life. I have come here to take you to the heavenly realm where life is wonderful and blissful.”

But the worm said, *“Go away, get lost!”*

“But I am your friend, and I live in a heavenly realm!”

And he described the heavenly realms to him, but the worm said, *“No thank you. I am quite happy here in my dung pile. Please go away!”*

Then, the heavenly being thought, *“Well, if I could just grab hold of him and take him up to the heavenly realms, he could see for himself.”* So, he grabbed hold of the worm and started tugging at him, but the harder he tugged, the harder that worm clung to his pile of dung.

Do you get the moral of the story? How many of us are attached to our pile of dung? When someone tries to pull us out we just wriggle back in again, because that is what we are used to, and we like it in there. Sometimes we are actually attached to our old habits, our anger and our desires. Sometimes we want to be angry.

So, next time you get angry, stop and watch. Just take a moment of mindfulness to see what it feels like. Decide and remind yourself, *“Next time I am angry, I am going to feel it, instead of trying to be clever, to get my own way or to hurt the other person.”* Just notice how it feels. As soon as you notice how anger feels with your heart, not with your head, then you will want to give it up because it hurts, it is painful. It is suffering.

If only people could be more awake, more aware, and know what it feels like, instead of thinking about it, there would be no problem anymore. They would let the anger go very quickly because it is hot, it is burning. But we tend to see this world with our heads rather than with our hearts. We think about it, but very rarely do we feel it or experience it. Meditation starts to get you in contact with your heart again and out of thinking and complaining where all anger and desire starts from.

When you come from the heart, you can feel for yourself. You can be at peace with yourself and you can be caring to yourself. When I come from the heart, I can appreciate other people’s hearts, as well. That is how we can love our enemies—when we appreciate their hearts—seeing something there to love and to respect.

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People get angry because they are hurting or are not at ease. If we are happy, we can never get angry at someone else. Only when we are depressed, tired, frustrated, having a hard time, or when we have some sickness in our hearts, can we get angry at other people. So, when someone is angry at me, I feel compassion and kindness towards that person because I realise that they are hurting.

The first time I went to see someone who was supposed to be enlightened, I thought “Crikey! I’d better make sure I meditate before I get within ten miles of him because he is bound to be able to read my mind and that would be embarrassing.” But an enlightened person is not going to be cruel and hurt you. An enlightened person is going to accept you and put you at ease. That’s a wonderful feeling, isn’t it? Just to accept yourself, you can relax with no anger or irritation. There is that great understanding, great enlightenment that you are all right.

What a lot of pain that would take away from human beings’ lives! What great freedom it would give to people to participate in the world, to serve in this world and to love in this world, when at last they realise that they are all right. They do not have to spend so much time getting themselves right, changing themselves, always afraid of making mistakes. When you are at ease with yourself, you will be at ease with other people no matter who they are.

CHAPTER 2

Meditation: The Heart of Buddhism

I want to talk in depth about the nature of Buddhism. Very often I read in newspapers and books some strange things that are presented as Buddhism. So, I will point out the heart of the real Buddhist teachings, not as a theory but as an experience.

What is Not the Heart of Buddhism

Psychotherapy: I know that some people still think Buddhism is some form of psychotherapy, some way of applying wise attitudes or skilful means in order to live more at peace in this world. Indeed, in the rich storehouse of Buddhist teachings there are many things which do help people to live life with fewer problems. Using wise attitudes and compassionate intentions, Buddhism teaches an effective way of dealing with the problems of the world. When these Buddhist methods actually work, they give people faith and confidence that there really is something in this Buddhist path which is valuable to them.

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I often reflect on why people come here to the Buddhist Society on a Friday evening. It's because they get something out of these teachings: a more peaceful lifestyle, a happier feeling towards themselves and more acceptance of other beings. It is, in that sense, a therapy for the problems of life, and it does work. However, that is not what Buddhism really is, that's only one of the side effects.

Philosophy: Some people come across Buddhism and find it a marvellous philosophy. They can sit around the coffee table after I have given a talk, and they can talk for hours and still are not close to enlightenment. Very often people can discuss very high-minded things—their brains can talk about and think about such sublime subjects, but then when they go out, they can swear at the first car that pulls out in front of them on the way home. They lose it all straight away!

Rituals: Instead of looking at Buddhism as a philosophy, many people look at it as a religion. The rituals of Buddhism are meaningful and shouldn't be discarded just because one thinks one is above rituals. People are sometimes very proud, arrogant, and even think they don't need any rituals. But the truth of the matter is that rituals do have a psychological potency. For example, it is useful in society when two people are going to live together that they go through some kind of marriage ceremony because in that ceremony there is something that happens to the mind, something that happens to the heart. There is a commitment made deep inside which echoes with the knowledge that something important has happened. In the ceremonies and rituals of death, all of

those rites of chanting, reflection and kind words actually have a meaning for the people involved. It does help them to come to accept with grace the passing of a loved one. It helps them acknowledge the truth of what has happened, that a final separation from that person has occurred, and in that acceptance, they come to peace.

In the same way, at our monastery, in order to forgive another person and to let go of past hurt, a ceremony of forgiveness is often used. In the Catholic Church they have the ceremony of confession. The precise details of a forgiveness don't really matter, but what is important is that forgiveness is given by some physical means through some ritual or ceremony. If you just say, "Oh, I'm sorry", isn't it a lot different from also giving a present or a bunch of flowers? Or isn't it different from going up to them saying, "Look, what I did the other day was really unforgivable, but come out to dinner with me this evening." or "Here, have a couple of tickets to the theatre!" It is much deeper and more effective when you weave a beautiful ceremony around forgiveness rather than just muttering a few words.

Even the ritual of bowing to a Buddha statue has a great meaning. It is an act of humility. It is saying, "I'm not enlightened, and yet there is something that is beyond me which I am aspiring towards." It is the same humility that a person has when they go to school or university and they acknowledge that the lecturers and the professors know more than they do. If you argue with professors when you go to university, are you going to learn anything? Humility is not subservience, which denies the worth of yourself; in fact,

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humility is that which respects the different qualities in people. Sometimes the act of bowing, if it is done mindfully, is a ceremony or ritual that can generate a great sense of joy.

As a monk many people bow to me and I bow to many others. There is always someone that you have to bow to no matter how senior you are. At the very least there is always the Buddha to bow down to. I enjoy bowing, when there is a monk who is senior to me. Bowing is a beautiful way of overcoming ego and judging, especially when I must bow to a really rotten monk (the good monks are easy to bow to)! This is a ritual which, if done in the right way, can produce so many benefits. At the very least, as I tell people at the monastery, if you do a lot of bowing, it strengthens your stomach muscles and you don't look fat! However, it is more than that. So, these Buddhist rituals are useful, but Buddhism is much more than that.

Meditation and Enlightenment

When you ask what Buddhism really is, it is a hard question to answer in a few words. You have to come back to the process of meditation because it is the crux, the fulcrum, or the heart of Buddhism. As everybody who has ever come across the Buddhist teachings would know, the Buddha was a man who became enlightened while meditating under a tree. That enlightenment of the Buddha was actually what created this religion of Buddhism—it is its *meaning*; it is its *centre*. Buddhism is all about enlightenment, not just about

living a healthy or happy life, or learning to be wise and saying smart things to your friends around the coffee table. Again, Buddhism is all about this enlightenment.

First of all, you have to get some feeling or indication of what enlightenment actually is. Sometimes people come up to me and say, “I’m enlightened”, and I sometimes get letters from people saying, “Thank you for your teachings! Please know that I am enlightened now!” And sometimes I hear other people say of teachers or gurus, “Oh yeah, they are certainly enlightened!” without really knowing what that means. The word enlightenment stands for some opening of wisdom, some understanding which stops all suffering. The person who hasn’t abandoned all suffering is not enlightened. The fact that a person still suffers means that they are yet to abandon all their attachments. The person who is still worried about their possessions, who still cries at the death of a loved one, who is still angry and who is still enjoying the pleasures of the senses, like sex, they are not enlightened. Enlightenment is something *beyond and free* from all that.

Sometimes when a monk talks like this, he very easily puts people off. Monks seem like “wowers” (kill-joy or spoil-sport), as they say in Australia. They don’t go to the movies; they don’t have any sex; they don’t have any relationships; they don’t go on holidays; they don’t have any pleasures. What a bunch of wowers! But an interesting thing which many people notice is that some of the most peaceful and happy people you meet are the monks and nuns who come and sit here on a Friday evening and give the talks. Monks are quite different from wowers and the reason is that there

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is another happiness which the monks know and which the Lord Buddha has pointed out to them. Each one of you can sense that same happiness when your meditation starts to take off.

Letting Go

The Lord Buddha taught that it is attachment that *causes* suffering, and letting go is *the cause* for happiness and the way to enlightenment. Letting go? So often people have asked, “How do you let go?” However, what they really mean is why should we let go. It’s a difficult question to answer and it will never be answered in words. Instead, I answer that question by saying that now is the time to meditate, cross your legs, be in the present moment, because this will teach people what letting go is all about. Moreover, the final moments of the meditation are the most important. Please always remember this: in the last few minutes of your meditation, ask yourself, “How do I feel? What is this like *and why*? How did this come about?”

People meditate because it is fun, it is enjoyable. They don’t meditate to “get something out of it” even though when you meditate there are a lot of good benefits to be had such as health benefits or reducing stress in life. Through meditation you become less intolerant, less angry. But there is something more to it than that—it’s just the sheer fun of it! When I was a young monk, meditation was what made me become a Buddhist. It was inspiring to read Buddhist books

but that was not good enough. It was when I meditated and became peaceful—very peaceful, incredibly peaceful—that something told me that this was the most profound experience of my life. I wanted to experience this again. I wanted to investigate it more. Why? Because one deep experience of meditation is worth a thousand talks, arguments, books, or theories. The things you read in books are other people's experiences; they are not your own. They are words and they might inspire, but the actual experience itself is truly moving. It is truly earth-shattering because it shatters that which you have rested on for such a long time. By inclining along this path of meditation you are actually learning what letting go really is.

Acknowledge, Forgive and Let Go (AFL)

For those of you who have difficulty meditating, it's because you haven't learned to let go yet in the meditation. Why can't we let go of simple things like past and future? Why are we too concerned with what someone else did to us or said to us today? The more you think about it, the more stupid it is. You know the old saying "*When someone calls you an idiot, the more times you remember it, the more times they've called you an idiot!*" If you let it go immediately, you will never think about it again. They only called you an idiot at most once. It's gone! It's finished. You're free!

Why is that we imprison ourselves with our past? Why can't we even let that go? Do you really want to be free? Then acknowledge, forgive and let go. What I call in Aus-

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tralia the “AFL code” (The AFL code is also the acronym for the most popular form of football, ‘Aussie Rules’ in Australia.) Acknowledge, forgive, and let go of whatever has hurt you. Whether it’s something that somebody has done or said, or whether it’s what life has done. For instance, someone has died in your family and you argue with yourself that they shouldn’t have died. Or, you’ve lost your job and you think without stopping that that shouldn’t have happened. Or, simply something has gone wrong and you are obsessed that it’s not fair. *You can crucify yourself on a cross of your own making for the rest of your life if you want to, but no one is forcing you to.* Instead, you can acknowledge, forgive and learn in the forgiving. The letting go is in the learning. The letting go gives the future a freedom to flow easily, unchained to the past.

I was talking to some people recently about the Cambodian community here in Perth and being a Buddhist community, I have had much to do with them. Like any traditional Buddhist community, when they have a problem they come and speak to the monks. This is what they have done for centuries. The monastery and the monks are the social centre; the religious centre; and the counselling centre of the community. When men have arguments with their wives they come to the monastery.

Once when I was a young monk in Thailand, a man came into the monastery and asked me, “*Can I stay in the monastery for a few days?*” I thought he wanted to meditate, so I said, “*Oh, you want to meditate?*” “*Oh, no!*” he said. “*The reason I want to come to the monastery is because I’ve had an argument*

with my wife.” So, he stayed in the monastery. Three or four days later he came up to me and said, “*I feel better now. Can I go home?*”

What a wise thing that was. Instead of going to the bar and getting drunk, instead of going to his mates and telling them all the rotten things that he thought his wife had done thereby reinforcing his ill will and resentment, he went to stay with a group of monks who didn’t say anything about his wife, who were just kind and peaceful. He thought about what he had been doing in that peaceful, supportive environment, and after a while he felt much better.

This is what a monastery sometimes is: a counselling centre, a refuge, or a place where people come to let go of their problems. Isn’t that better than lingering on the past, especially when we are angry at something that has happened? When we reinforce the resentment, are we really seeing what’s going on? Or are we seeing through the perverted glasses of our anger looking at the faults in the other person, focusing only on the terrible things they have done to us, never really seeing the full picture?

One of the things I noticed about the Cambodian community was that these were all people who had suffered through the Pol Pot years. I know of a Cambodian man whose wife had been shot by the Khmer Rouge in front of him for stealing a mango. She was hungry, so she took a mango from a tree. One of the Khmer Rouge cadres saw her and without any trial, he pulled out his gun in front of her husband and shot her dead. When this man was telling me this, I was looking at his face, looking at his bodily movement and it

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was amazing to see that there was no anger, there was no resentment, and there was not even grief there. There was a peaceful acceptance about what had happened. It shouldn't have happened, but it did.

Letting go of the past is so that we can enjoy the present, so the future can be free. Why is it that we always carry about the past? Attachment to the past is not a theory. It is an attitude. We can say "Oh, I'm not attached!" Or, we can say, "*I'm so detached I'm not even attached to detachment.*" Which is very clever and sounds very good, but it is a lot of old rubbish. You know if you're attached—if you can't let go of those important things that cause you to suffer, that stops you being free. Attachment is a ball and chain which you tie around your own legs—no one else ties it around you. You've got the key to free yourselves, but you don't use it. Why do we limit ourselves so and why can't we let go of the future—all the concerns and the worries? Do you worry about what's going to happen next, tomorrow, next week, next year? Why do you do that? How many times have you worried about some exam or some test? Or a visit to the doctors? Or a visit to the dentist? You can worry yourself sick and when you get ready to go to the dentist you find they have cancelled your appointment and you didn't have to go anyway!

Things never work out as you expect them to. Haven't we learned yet that the future is so uncertain that it doesn't bear worrying about? We never know what's going to happen next. When we let go of the past and the future, isn't that being on the path to deep meditation? Aren't we actually

learning about how to be at peace, how to be free, how to be content?

These are indications of what enlightenment means. It means seeing that many of our attachments are based on sheer stupidity. We just don't need them. As we develop our meditation deeper, we let go more and more. The more we let go, the more happiness and peace it gives us. This is why the Lord Buddha called this whole path of Buddhism a gradual training. It's the path that leads one on, one step at a time, and at every step you get a prize. That's why it's a very delightful path and the prizes get more delightful and more valuable the further you go. But even on the first step you get a prize.

I still remember the first time I meditated. I remember the room. It was at Cambridge University, in the Wordsworth Room at King's College. I'd never done any meditation before, so I just sat down there for five or ten minutes with a few of my mates. It was only ten minutes, but I thought "Oh, *that was nice!*" I still remember that feeling there was something that was resonating inside of me telling me that this was a path which was leading somewhere wonderful. I'd discussed over coffee and over beer with my friends all types of philosophy, but the "discussion" had always ended in arguments and they never made me happier. Even the great professors at the university who you got to know very well didn't seem happy. That was one of the reasons why I didn't continue an academic career. They were brilliant in their field but in other ways they were as stupid as ordinary people. They would have arguments, worry, and stress just

like everyone else and that really struck me. Why in such a famous university where people are so intelligent, are they not happy? What's the point of being clever if it doesn't give you happiness? I mean real happiness, real contentment, and real peace.

Real Contentment and Peace

The first person I saw who had real contentment and peace was Ajahn Chah, my teacher in Thailand. There was something about that man! I saw what he had and I said to myself, “I want that! I want that understanding, that peace!” People from all over the world would come and see him. Just because he was a monk didn't mean that everyone was subservient, obsequious, and always praising him. I remember a story about the first time he went to England with Ajahn Sumedho. He went on alms round in Hampstead and as he was walking on alms round—this was over twenty years ago—this young hooligan came up to this funnily dressed Asian and threw a punch at him just missing his nose. Ajahn Chah did not know this person was trying to miss. Then he tried to kick him and just missed. He was just trying to wind up this little Asian monk in funny clothes. Ajahn Chah didn't know when he was going to be hit. He never did get hit because he kept peaceful, kept cool, and never got angry. Afterwards, he said England was a very good place and that he wanted to send all his senior monks over there to really test them out. As for Ajahn Chah, he had equanim-

ity in practice. It is easy saying, “I’m enlightened”, but then something happens like that and you run a mile.

Another monk in Hampstead at the time was just going for a walk in the afternoon when he passed a pub. He didn’t realise at the time that there was a big soccer match between England and Scotland on that day. It had already finished, and the Scots supporters were in the pub getting drunk. Around this period, there was a popular TV series about a kung fu monk who when he was small was called “grasshopper.” These sozzled Scots soccer fans looked through the window of the pub and said “Och, it’s wee grasshopper!” and this monk took fright. These were big Scotsmen and they were very drunk. So, he started running away and they chased him all the way back to the Temple. “Wee grasshopper” was running for his life. He lost it. But the sort of practical letting go that Ajahn Chah did in Hampstead is something which gives you a sense that you are on the road to enlightenment.

A Gradual Path

The heart of Buddhism is a gradual path, one step after another step and you do get results. Some people say you shouldn’t meditate to get results. That’s a lot of hogwash! Meditate to get results. Meditate to be happy. Meditate to get peace. Meditate to get enlightened little by little. But if you’re going for results, be patient. One of the problems with human beings is that when they make goals, they are not patient enough. That’s why they get disillusioned, depressed,

and frustrated. They don't give their practice enough time to mature naturally into enlightenment. It takes time, maybe a few lifetimes even, so don't be in a rush. As you walk each step, there is always something you get out of it. Let go a little and you get freedom and peace. Let go a lot and you feel bliss. This is how I teach meditation both at my monastery and here. I encourage meditators to aim for these stages of letting go, these bliss states called *jhānas*.

Jhānas

Everyone wants to be happy and the *jhānas* are how you can achieve happiness. I mean real happiness, deep happiness. The only trouble is these states don't last very long, only a few hours, but still they are very attractive. They arise through letting go, real letting go. In particular, they arise through letting go of will, choice, and control. It's a fascinating thing to experience a deep meditation and understand how it comes about. Through such an experience you realise that the more you control the more you crave because of attachments, the less peaceful you get. But the more you let go, the more you abandon, the more you get out of the way, the happier you feel. Now this is a teaching of something very profound, much deeper than you can read in a book or hear in a talk and certainly much more useful than discussing these things over a coffee table. You're actually experiencing something. This is getting towards the heart of religion that which people call mysticism. You're actually

experiencing it for yourself. In particular, you are letting go of this “controller”, this “doer.” Now that is the prime problem for human beings. We can’t stop messing things up. Very often we should just leave things alone, but we can’t. We don’t. Instead we make a mess. Why can’t we just relax and enjoy ourselves instead of always doing something?

It’s hard to stop in meditation, but the more you stop the more rewards you get, the more peace you get. When you let go in meditation, you let go the will, let go of the control. When you stop talking to yourself, you get inner silence. How many of you are fed up yet with this racket that goes on inside your head all the time? How many of you sometimes can’t get to sleep at night when there’s no noise from the neighbours but there is something even louder between your ears: *Yak! Yak! Yak! Worry. Worry. Think. Think. Think!* This is the problem with human beings. When it’s time to think, they can’t think clearly; and when it’s time to stop thinking they can’t be at peace. When we learn how to meditate, we get this sense of being more balanced and we know how to let go. We know how to let go to the point where all the thoughts disappear. These thoughts are just commentaries—they’re just descriptions. The difference between thought and reality is the difference between say, reading a book about New York, and going to New York. Which is more real? When you’re there, you smell the air, you feel the atmosphere, you sense the character—all of which are things you can’t write in a book. *The truth is always silent. The lie is always with words.*

When the Body Disappears

Remember “con men”, (“con women” as well), these conmen can say anything to you! There’s one living in your mind right now and you believe every word he says! His name is “Thinking”. When you let go of that inner talk and get silent, you get happy. Then when you let go of the movement of the mind and stay with the breath, you experience even more delight. Then when you let go of the body, all these five senses disappear, and you’re really blissing out. This is original Buddhism. Sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch completely vanish. This is like being in a sensory deprivation chamber but much better. But it’s not just silence, you just don’t hear anything. It’s not just blackness, you just don’t see anything. It’s not just a feeling of comfort in the body—there is no “body” at all.

When the body disappears, that really starts to feel great. You know of all those people who have out of body experiences? When the body dies, every person has that experience, they float out of the body and one of the things they always say is it’s so peaceful; so beautiful; so blissful. It’s the same in meditation when the body disappears—it’s so peaceful; so beautiful; so blissful when you are free from this body. What’s left? Here there’s no sight, sound, smell, taste, touch—this is what the Lord Buddha called the mind in deep meditation. When the body disappears, what is left is the mind.

I gave a simile to a monk the other night. Imagine an emperor who is wearing a long pair of trousers and a big

tunic. He's got shoes on his feet, a scarf around the bottom half of his head, and a hat on the top half of his head. You can't see him at all because he's completely covered in five garments. It's the same with the mind. It's completely covered with sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch, so people don't know it. They just know the garments. When they see the emperor, they just see the robes and the garments. They don't know who lives inside them and so it is no wonder they're confused about what is life; what is mind; who is this inside of here; where did I come from? Why? What am I supposed to be doing with this life? When the five senses disappear, it's like unclothing the emperor and seeing what is actually in here, what's actually running the show, who's listening to these words, who's seeing, who's feeling life, who this is. When the five senses disappear, you're coming close to the answer to those questions.

What you're seeing in such deep meditation is that which we call "mind" (in Pali, it's called *citta*). The Lord Buddha used this beautiful simile. When there is a full moon on a cloudy night, even though it's a full moon, you can hardly see it. Sometimes when the clouds are thin, you can see this hazy shape shining through. You know there is something there. This is like meditation just before you've entered into these profound states. You know there is something there, but you can't quite make it out. There're still some "clothes" left. You're still thinking and doing, feeling the body or hearing sounds. But there does come a time, and this is the Buddha's simile, when the moon is released from the clouds and there in the clear night sky you can see the

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beautiful full disc of the moon, shining brilliantly, and you know that's the moon. The moon is there, the moon is real and it's not just some sort of side effect of the clouds. This is what happens in meditation when you see the mind. You see clearly that the mind is not some side effect of the brain. You see *the mind and you know the mind*. The Lord Buddha said that the mind released is beautiful; it is brilliant; it is radiant. So not only are these blissful experiences, they're meaningful experiences as well.

How many people have heard about rebirth but still don't really believe it? How can rebirth happen? Certainly, the body doesn't get reborn. That's why when people ask me, "Where do you go when you die?" "One of the two places" I say, "Fremantle or Karrakatta, that's where the body goes!" (Fremantle and Karrakatta are the two main cemeteries and crematoriums serving the whole of Perth.) But is that where the mind goes? Sometimes people are so stupid in this world they think the body is all there is—that there is no mind!

So, when you get cremated or buried, that's it, that's done with, all has ended. The only way you can argue with this view is by developing the meditation that the Lord Buddha achieved under the Bodhi tree. Then you can see the mind for yourself in clear awareness. Not in some hypnotic trance, not in dullness, but in the clear awareness, *this is knowing the mind*.

Knowing the Mind

When you know the mind, when you see it for yourself, one of the results will be an insight that the mind is independent of this body. Independence means that when this body breaks up and dies, when it's cremated, or when it's buried, or however it's destroyed after death, it will not affect the mind. You know this because you see the nature of the mind. That mind which you see will transcend bodily death. The first thing which you will see for yourself—the insight which is as clear as the nose on your faces—is that there is something more to life than this physical body that we take to be “me”. Secondly you can recognise that that mind essentially is no different than that process of consciousness which is in all beings whether it's human beings or animals or even insects; of any gender, age or race—you see that that which is in common to all life is this “mind”, this consciousness, the source of doing.

Once you see that, you have much more respect for your fellow beings. Not just respect for your own race, your own tribe, or your own religion. Not just for human beings, but for all beings. It's a wonderfully high-minded idea. *May all beings be happy and well and may we respect all nations, all peoples, even all beings.* However, this is how you achieve that! You truly get compassion only when we see that others are fundamentally just as ourselves. If you think that a cow is completely different from you, that cows don't think like human beings, then it's easy to eat one. But can you eat your grandmother? She's too much like you. Can you eat

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an ant? Maybe you'd kill an ant because you think that ants aren't like you. But if you look carefully at ants, they are no different.

In a forest monastery—living out in the bush, close to nature—one of the things you become so convinced of is that animals have emotions and, especially, feel pain. You begin to recognise the personality of the animals, of the kookaburras, of the mice, the ants, and the spiders. Each one of those spiders has a mind just like you have. Once you see that you can understand the Lord Buddha's compassion for all beings. You can also understand how rebirth can occur between all species, not just human beings, but animals to human, human to animals. You can understand also how the mind is the source of all this.

The mind can exist even without a body in the realms of ghosts and angels (what we call in Buddhism *devas*). It becomes very clear to you how they exist, why they exist, what they are. These are insights and understandings which come from deep meditation. But more than that, when you know the nature of the mind, then you know the nature of consciousness. You know the nature of stillness. You know the nature of life. You understand what makes this mind seek rebirth. You understand the "Law of Karma".

The Three Knowledges (Tevijjā)

The First Knowledge

When the Lord Buddha sat under the Bodhi tree, according to tradition, he gained three knowledges (*tevijjā*). The first knowledge was the memory of past lives. When you get close to the mind, there are certain powers that come with that experience. The powers are no more than an ability—a dexterity with the use of the mind. It's like the difference between a dog that has been running wild and a dog that has been well trained. You can tell that trained dog to go pick up the newspaper. It wags its tail and goes and picks up the newspaper for you. Some people have got their dogs so well trained that they can actually pick up the telephone. (Maybe they could answer the telephone as well, then that would really save you a lot of time.)

When you get to these deep states of meditation often, the mind becomes well trained. One of the things which the Lord Buddha did (and which you can do when you get into deep meditation) is tell the mind to go back to the past. What's your earliest memory? Go back further and further and further. Monks who do this get early memories of their childhood. They even get memories of the moment they were born. Sometimes people say that when you're born, you have no consciousness because the neurons aren't developed yet or something like that. But when you re-experience your birth, you know that that is just not true. When the memory of your own birth appears, it is just like you are

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there and you experience all feelings of that birth. Then you can ask yourself for an even earlier memory and then you get back into your past lives. That's what the Lord Buddha did under the Bodhi tree. Through meditation you know rebirth, you know your own past lives. This is just what happens with the mind and you know how it happens. That was the first knowledge the Lord Buddha had.

The Second Knowledge

The second knowledge was to know how you are reborn. This is the “law of kamma”. Someone was showing me a book today which, unfortunately, we had for free distribution but which I hadn't seen before. It had some really weird ideas in it about the law of kamma. I think what it said was that if you read one of the *suttas* (discourses) while you are lying on the ground, you will reborn with a bad back or something like that—just stupid ideas. Kamma is much more complex than that and it depends mostly upon the quality of your intention. The movement of the mind itself is what determines the kamma, not just the act but why and where it came from. You can see this in meditation, but also you can see just how that mind gets fully liberated.

The Third Knowledge

The third knowledge was the ending of suffering. With understanding of the Four Noble Truths, you realise the way and what enlightenment really means. It means free-

dom! The mind is liberated, especially liberated from the body—liberated not just from the suffering of the body but liberated from the happiness of the body as well. That means that there is no more inclination for sexuality; or fear of pain; no grief over the destruction of the body; no ill will; and no fear of criticism. Why do people get worried about bad words that are said? *Only because of ego!* They take something to be themselves. Just imagine for a moment being free from all those things. What would that be like? No fear, no craving, no need to move from this moment. In other words, nothing is missing, and nothing is left to do. Nowhere to go because you're completely happy right here no matter what happens! This is what we mean by enlightenment. This meditation is the source of the Lord Buddha's enlightenment and the source of every person's enlightenment.

There is no enlightenment without meditation. This is why Buddhism is far more than psychotherapy. It's far more than a philosophy. It's far more than religion. It goes deeper into the nature of being and it is accessible to all people. You know how to meditate. Teachers are giving all the instructions free without any charge. Do you want to do it? Usually the answer is "*Maybe tomorrow but not today.*" Nevertheless, because the seeds have been placed in the mind, because the meditation has begun already, there is an interest. Already there is a sense of this enlightenment, a fascination for peace, and you will not be able to resist that path. You may be able to put it off for a while, maybe for lifetimes, but it is a strange thing that, as someone said to me many years

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ago, “*When you hear these teachings you can’t discard them.*” You just can’t forget them. They aren’t telling you what to believe. They are giving you a theory which is merely rational. But they are pointing you to something which you can understand and experience for yourself and you get intuitions of this the deeper you go.

The Lord Buddha was a very remarkable person, his peacefulness, compassion and wisdom were legendary. There is something about enlightenment that is very attractive. In the same way there is something about freedom that you cannot ignore. That is why little by little, you will understand what Buddhism is about. You won’t understand Buddhism from books, nor will you understand Buddhism from what I say. You’ll only understand Buddhism in your own experiences of peaceful meditation. That’s where Buddhism is taught. So, have fun with your meditation and don’t be afraid of enlightenment. Get in there, enjoy it and you will have no regrets. That’s what Buddhism is. That’s its heart: meditation and enlightenment. That’s its meaning.

CHAPTER 3

Attachment (*Upādāna*)

Probably the most misunderstood term in Western Buddhist circles is that usually translated as “attachment”. Too many have got it into their head that they shouldn’t be attached to anything. Thus, there are jokes about such as the one on why Buddhists have dirt in the corners...

“Because they don’t allow even their vacuum cleaner any attachments!”

Some misguided pseudo-Buddhists criticise those living a moral life as being attached to their precepts and thus praise immoral action as a sign of deep wisdom. Bah!! Others in traditional Buddhist circles create fear of deep meditation by incorrectly stating that you will only get attached to the jhānas. It all goes too far. Perhaps the pinnacle of mischievous misinformation was said by Rajneesh who claimed, *“I am so detached I am not even attached to detachment!”* and thus conveniently excused all these excesses.

The Pali word in question is *upādāna*, literally meaning “a taking up.” It is commonly used indicating a ‘fuel’ which sustains a process such as the oil in a lamp being the fuel (*upādāna*) for the flame. It is related to craving (Pali word is

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taṇhā). For example, craving is reaching out for the delicious cup of coffee, *upādāna* is picking it up. Even though you think that you can easily put the coffee cup down again, though your hand is not superglued to the cup, it is still *upādāna*. You have picked it up. You have grasped.

Fortunately, not all *upādāna* is un-Buddhist. The Lord Buddha only specified four groups of *upādāna*:

1. “taking up” the five senses;
2. “taking up” wrong views;
3. “taking up” the idea that liberation maybe attained simply through rites and initiations; and
4. “taking up” the views of a self.

There are many other things that one may ‘take up’ or grasp, but the point is that only these four groups lead to rebirth. Only these four are fuel for future existence and future suffering. Only these four are to be avoided.

Thus, taking up the practice of compassion, taking up the practice of the five precepts or the greater precepts of a monk or nun and taking up the practice of meditation, these are not un-Buddhist and it is mischievous to discourage them by calling them “attachments”. Keeping the five precepts is in fact a letting go of coarse desire like lust, greed and violence. Practicing compassion is a letting go of self-centeredness. And practicing meditation is letting of past, future, thinking, and much else. The achievement of *jhāna* is no more than the letting go of the world of the five senses to gain access to the mind. *Nibbāna* is the letting go once and for all of greed, hatred and delusion—the seeds of rebirth.

Parinibbāna is the final letting go of the body and mind (the five *khandhas*). It is wrong to suggest that any of these stages of letting go are the same as “attachment”.

The path is like a ladder. One grasps the rung above and one lets go of the rung below to pull oneself up. Soon the rung just grasped is the rung one is now standing on. Now is the time to let go of that rung as one grasps an even higher rung to raise oneself further. If one never grasped anything, one would remain spiritually stupid.

To those without wisdom, letting go may often appear as attachment. For example, a bird on the branch of a tree at night appears to be attaching firmly to the branch, but it has actually let go and is fully asleep. When a bird lets go and the muscles around its claws begin to relax, they close on the branch. The more it relaxes, the more the claws tighten. That’s why you never see a bird fall off a perch even when they are asleep. It may look like attachment, but in fact it is letting go. Letting go often leads to stillness, not moving from where you are, which is why it is sometimes mistaken as attachment.

So, don’t be put off by the well-meaning but misinformed L-plate Buddhists who have completely misunderstood *up-ādāna* and attachment. *Attach without fear* to your precepts, your meditation object and the path for it will lead to *Nibbāna*! And don’t forget to purchase the attachments for your vacuum cleaner too!

CHAPTER 4

The Five Hindrances (*Pañca Nīvaraṇā*)

The major obstacles to successful meditation and liberating insight take the form of one or more of the five hindrances. The whole practice leading to enlightenment can be well expressed as the effort to overcome the five hindrances, at first suppressing them temporarily in order to experience *jhāna* and insight and then overcoming them permanently through the full development of the Noble Eightfold Path.

So, what are these five hindrances? They are:

- *Kāmacchanda*: sensory desire
- *Vyāpāda*: ill will
- *Thīna-Middha*: sloth and torpor
- *Uddhacca-Kukkucca*: restlessness and remorse
- *Vicikicchā*: doubt

Sensory Desire (*Kāmacchanda*)

Sensory desire refers to that particular type of wanting that seeks happiness through the five senses of sight, sound, smell, taste, and physical feeling. It specifically excludes any

aspiration for happiness through the sixth sense of mind alone. In its extreme form, sensory desire is an obsession to find pleasure in such things as sexual intimacy, good food, or fine music. But it also includes the desire to replace irritating or even painful five-sense experiences with pleasant ones (i.e. the desire for sensory comfort).

The Lord Buddha compared sensory desire to taking out a loan. Any pleasure one experiences through these five senses must be repaid through the unpleasantness of separation, loss, or hungry emptiness which follow relentlessly when the pleasure is used up. As with any loan, there is also the matter of interest and thus, as the Lord Buddha said, the pleasure is small compared to the suffering repaid.

In meditation, one transcends sensory desire for the period of letting go of any concern for this body and its five-sense activity. Some imagine that the five senses are there to serve and protect the body, but the truth is that the body is there to serve the five senses as they play in the world, ever seeking delight. Indeed, the Lord Buddha once said: *“The five senses are the world.”* To leave the world and to enjoy the other worldly bliss of jhāna, one must give up for a time ALL concern for the body and its five senses.

To leave the world in order to enjoy the other worldly bliss of jhāna, one must give up for a time ALL concern for the body and its five senses. When sensory desire is transcended, the mind of the meditator has no interest in the promise of pleasure or even comfort with this body. The body disappears, and the five senses all switch off. The mind becomes calm and free to look within. The difference

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between the five-sense activity and its transcendence is like the difference between looking out of a window and looking in a mirror. The mind that is free from five-sense activity can truly look within and see its real nature. Only from that looking can wisdom arise as to what we are, from where, and why.

Ill Will (*Vyāpāda*)

Ill will refers to the desire to punish, hurt, or destroy. It includes sheer hatred of a person or even a situation and it can generate so much energy that it is both seductive and addictive. At the time it always appears justified for such is its power that it easily corrupts our ability to judge fairly. It also includes ill will towards oneself, otherwise known as guilt, which denies oneself any possibility of happiness. In meditation, ill will can appear as dislike towards the meditation object itself, rejecting it so that one's attention is forced to wander elsewhere.

The Lord Buddha likened ill will to being sick—just as sickness denies one the freedom and happiness of health, so ill will denies one the freedom and happiness of peace. Ill will is overcome by applying *mettā*, loving kindness. When there is ill will towards a person, *mettā* teaches one to see more in that person than all that which hurts you, to understand why that person hurt you (often because they themselves were hurting intensely), and to encourage one to put aside one's own pain to look with compassion on the other.

But if this is more than one can do, mettā towards oneself leads one to refuse to dwell in ill will towards that person, so as to stop them from hurting you further with the memory of those deeds.

Similarly, if it is ill will towards oneself, mettā sees more than one's own faults; can understand one's own faults; and finds the courage to forgive them, learn from their lesson and let them go. Then, if it is ill will towards the meditation object (often the reason why a meditator cannot find peace) mettā embraces the meditation object with care and delight. For example, just as a mother has a natural mettā towards her child, so a meditator can look on their breath, say, with the very same quality of caring attention. Then it will be just as unlikely to lose the breath through forgetfulness as it is unlikely for a mother to forget her baby in the shopping mall, and it would be just as improbable to drop the breath for some distracting thought, as it is for a distracted mother to drop her baby! When ill will is overcome, it allows a lasting relationship with other people, with oneself and in meditation; a lasting, enjoyable relationship with the meditation object, one that can mature into the full embrace of absorption.

Sloth and Torpor (Thīna-Middha)

Sloth and torpor refers to that heaviness of body and dullness of mind which drag one down into disabling inertia and thick depression. The Lord Buddha compared it to be-

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ing imprisoned in a cramped dark cell unable to move freely into the bright sunshine outside. In meditation, it causes weak and intermittent mindfulness which can even lead to falling asleep in meditation without even realising it!

Sloth and torpor is overcome by rousing energy. Energy is always available, but few know how to turn on the switch as it were. Setting a goal, a reasonable goal, is a wise and effective way to generate energy as it deliberately develops interest in the task at hand. A young child has a natural interest and consequently energy because its world is so new. Thus, if one can learn to look at one's life, or one's meditation with a "beginner's mind", one can see ever new angles and fresh possibilities which keep one distant from sloth and torpor—alive and energetic. Similarly, one can develop delight in whatever one is doing by training one's perception to see the beautiful in the ordinary, thereby generating the interest which avoids the "half-death" that is sloth and torpor.

The mind has two main functions: doing and knowing. The way of meditation is to calm the "doing" to complete tranquillity while maintaining the "knowing". Sloth and torpor occur when one carelessly calms both "doing" and the "knowing", unable to distinguish between them.

Restlessness and Remorse (Uddhacca-Kukkucca)

Restlessness refers to a mind which is like a monkey always swinging on to the next branch never able to stay long with

anything. It is caused by the fault-finding state of mind which cannot be satisfied with things as they are, and thus has to move on to the promise of something better, forever just beyond.

Doubt (*Vicikicchā*)

Doubt refers to the disturbing inner questions at a time when one should be silently moving deeper. Doubt can question one's own ability: "*Can I do this?*" or, even question the meaning "*What is this?*"

It should be remembered that such questions are obstacles to meditation because they are asked at the wrong time and thus become an intrusion, obscuring one's clarity.

The Lord Buddha likened doubt to being lost in a desert, not recognising any landmarks. Such doubt is overcome by gathering clear instructions; having a good map so that one can recognise the subtle landmarks in the unfamiliar territory of deep meditation and so know which way to go. Doubt in one's ability is overcome by nurturing self-confidence with a good teacher. A meditation teacher is like a coach who convinces the sports team that they can succeed. The Lord Buddha stated that one can—one will reach *jhāna* and enlightenment—if one carefully and patiently follows the instructions. The only uncertainty is *when*. Experience also overcomes doubt about one's ability and also doubt whether this is the right path. As one realises for oneself the beautiful stages of the path, one discovers that one is

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indeed capable of the very highest and that this is the path that leads one there.

The doubt that takes the form of constant assessing, “Is this *jhāna*?”; “How am I going?” is overcome by realising that such questions are best left to the end, to the final couple of minutes of the meditation. A jury only makes its judgement at the end of the trial when all the evidence has been presented. Similarly, a skilful meditator pursues a silent gathering of evidence, reviewing it only at the end to uncover its meaning.

The end of doubt, in meditation, is described by a mind which has full trust in the silence and so doesn’t interfere with any inner speech. Like having a good chauffeur, one sits silently on the journey out of trust in the driver.

Any problem which arises in meditation will be one of these five hindrances or a combination. So, if one experiences any difficulty, use the scheme of the five hindrances as a “check list” to identify the main problem. Then you will know the appropriate remedy, apply it carefully and go beyond the obstacle into deeper meditation.

When the five hindrances are fully overcome, there is no barrier between the meditator and the bliss of *jhāna*. Therefore, the certain test that these five hindrances are really overcome is the ability to access *jhāna*.

CHAPTER 5

Satipaṭṭhāna: The Fourfold Focus of Mindfulness

More has been said about the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* than about any other meditation practice by Buddhist teachers of today. Except for this monk! So, in this Dhamma article, I will keep up with the trend by presenting some practical observations on this most misunderstood of Lord Buddha's Teachings.

Those of you who have been sitting around Buddhist Centres for a while have probably heard some teachers claim that the “fourfold focus of mindfulness”—my translation of *satipaṭṭhāna* (another translation “four foundations of mindfulness”)—is the “one and only way” to the goal of full enlightenment! Although this is an impressive sales pitch for the teaching, it is neither a true translation of the original text nor consistent with what the Lord Buddha said elsewhere. The very phrase *ekāyana magga* which is mistranslated as “one and only way” occurs again in the 12th sutta (discourse) of the Majjhima collection, where it unmistakably means: a path with only one possible destination.

5. SATIPAṬṬHĀNA: THE FOURFOLD FOCUS OF MINDFULNESS

Many different paths can share a common destination. In fact, the “one and only path” is the Lord Buddha’s description, not for satipaṭṭhāna, but of the Noble Eightfold Path.

“Of all the ways,
the Noble Eightfold Path is the best.
This is the only way;
there is none other for the purity of insight.”
(*Dhammapada* verses 273 and 274, abridged)

Thus, the “only way” to enlightenment, as all Buddhist should know anyway, is the Noble Eightfold Path. The fourfold focus of mindfulness constitutes only a part of this path: the 7th factor. Jhānas are the 8th factor and there are also right view, right intention, right effort (endeavour) and the three factors of right virtue. Each of these eight factors are necessary to achieve the goal of full enlightenment. If any were redundant, then the Lord Buddha would have taught a seven-fold path or a six-fold path, etc. So, in your practice of Buddhism, please keep in mind that all eight factors of the Noble Eightfold Path should be cultivated as the “one and only way”.

Now, the fourfold focus of mindfulness method as taught by the Lord Buddha is a very advanced practice. So advanced that the Lord Buddha said that if anyone should develop them in the way he described for only seven days, then they would achieve full enlightenment, or the state of non-returner. Many meditators reading this may have gone on such a retreat for nine days or even more and not yet fulfilled this most lofty of the Lord Buddha’s promises. Why not?

Because, I suspect you were not following the Lord Buddha's instructions.

If you want to practice the fourfold focus of mindfulness in the way that the Lord Buddha said leads so rapidly to enlightenment, then certain things are required before you begin. The essential preparations are in short, full cultivation of the other seven factors of the Noble Eightfold Path. Or, as the Lord Buddha said in the *Aṅguttara* collection (Nines, suttas 63 and 64), one should maintain the five precepts (the longer the better), abandon the five hindrances (sensual desire, ill-will, sloth and torpor, restlessness, and doubt) and then practice *satipaṭṭhāna*.

These vital prerequisites are actually stated by the Lord Buddha in his two discourses on the fourfold focus of meditation as *vineyya loke abhijjhādomanassaṃ*. (Please forgive me quoting Pali, but it is the only way I can make this important point.) This phrase is usually translated as “*having put away covetousness and grief for the world*”, or something similar. Such translations mean so little to meditators that they ignore this instruction altogether and thereby miss the bus! In the time of Lord Buddha, the monks, nuns and lay disciples would have understood the phrase to mean “*after having abandoned the five hindrances*”! The authoritative commentaries to the two *satipaṭṭhāna* suttas taught by the Lord Buddha both clearly state that *abhijjhādomanassaṃ* refers precisely to the five hindrances. Elsewhere in the recorded teachings of the Lord Buddha, *abhijjhā* is a synonym for the first hindrance, *domanassaṃ* is a synonym for the second hindrance, and together they stand, in Pali idiom, as an

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abbreviation of all five. This then means that the five hindrances must be abandoned first before beginning any of the focus of mindfulness practices. It is, in my not-so-humble opinion, precisely because meditators attempt to practice the satipaṭṭhāna method with some of the hindrances still remaining that they achieve no great or lasting result.

It is the function of jhāna practice, the ultimate factor of the Noble Eightfold Path, to abandon all of the five hindrances long enough to gain deep insight. For example, in the 68th sutta, Naḷakapāna, of the Majjhima collection, the Lord Buddha stated that for the meditator who does not attain jhāna, the five hindrances together with discontent and weariness invade the mind and remain. Only when one does attain jhāna do the five hindrances together with discontent and weariness not invade one's mind and remain in the way the Lord Buddha said they do. Any meditator who has experienced powerful jhāna would know through that experience what happens after, and what a mind without any hindrances is truly like. The meditator who hasn't known jhāna does not realise the many subtle forms hindrances can take. They may think that the hindrances are abandoned, but the truth is that they just don't see them, and so do not get great results in their meditation. This is why *samatha* practice which cultivates jhāna is part of the satipaṭṭhāna teaching and why it is misinformation to call satipaṭṭhāna "pure *vipassanā*." Even my teacher Ajahn Chah said over and over again that *samatha* and *vipassanā* (calm and insight), go together and are inseparable as the two faces of a coin.

Having patiently completed the necessary preparation, the meditator sustains their mindfulness on one of the four focuses:

1. their own body;
2. the pleasure and pain associated with each sense;
3. the mind consciousness; and
4. the objects of mind.

When the hindrances are gone and one can sustain one's powerful and penetrating attention on these four objects, only then is it possible to realise that deep in our psyche—far deeper than the veil of intelligent thinking—we have been assuming a “self.” We have been assuming that this body is “me” or “mine”, that pleasure or pain has something to do with me, that the mind which looks on is our soul or something close, and that the objects of mind such as thought or volition (the chooser) is a “self”, “me”, or “mine”. In short, the purpose of the fourfold focus of mindfulness is to instruct one what to do when one has emerged from a jhāna, to uncover the deeply disguised delusion of a soul and then see what the Lord Buddha saw, the truth of *anattā*.

This is not an easy thing to do, but it can be done and it can take only seven days. That is if one follows the Lords Buddha's instructions, follows them and takes no shortcuts!

CHAPTER 6

Offerings (*Pūjā*)

The offering of lights, flowers, food, fruit juice, incense etc., in the name of the Buddha is yet another practice, the meaning of which some people fail to understand. Offering of such things to holy persons is in fact an oriental custom. Even during the Lord Buddha's time, it was customary among Indian people to carry some flowers whenever they visited a holy person. This is only done as a mark of respect. Devout Buddhists, likewise, always offer something in the name of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. This symbolic act gives them a sense of happiness, peace, and relief.

At the same time, understanding Buddhists often use the same offerings as objects of their meditation. They are fully aware that these physical objects are simple representations of things spiritual. The flame of the candle or oil lamp and the flowers could each be compared to the physical body of life. The offering of light symbolises the dispelling of darkness or ignorance through light. The existence of the flame and its brightness, the beauty of the flowers, the aroma of incense and the final fading away of such brightness and beauty only manifest their impermanence—hence all these

natural phenomena could be taken up as suitable objects for meditation. The flowers on the altar represent one of the most beautiful and yet one of the most transient forms of nature.

These offerings symbolise meritorious deeds because of the wholesome and devout mental state they induce. Therefore, time spent in a shrine room in offering some of these articles or reciting some verses is not at all wasted. The devotees' pious acts have the effect of pleasing and calming the mind. It is good to start out for daily work after offering some of these objects to the Buddha as a mark of respect to the holy religious teacher who has shown us the correct path for our peace, happiness, and salvation.

However, Buddhists should not be satisfied by simply offering something in the name of the Lord Buddha, reciting in a parrot fashion some verses or suttas thinking that their duty has been done. To become good Buddhists, they have to do something more, they have to correct themselves by following the Lord Buddha's advice. Try to gain more knowledge and understanding through his teachings. One should not think that by just offering something to the Lord Buddha, one's wrong doings can be eradicated.