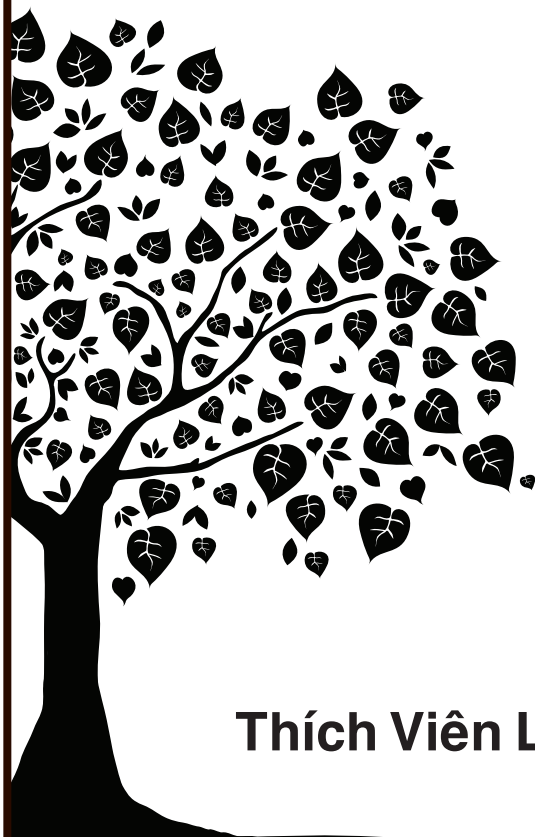




**BUDDHIST  
MEDITATION  
PRACTICES**

**Thích Viên Lý**

# **BUDDHIST MEDITATION PRACTICES**



**Thích Viên Lý**

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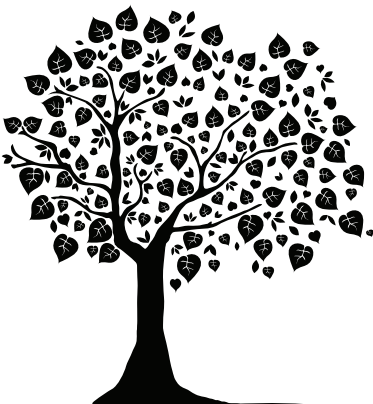
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## Chapter 1

# Introduction

### What good can meditation do for me?

In the hustle and bustle of daily living, one's concerns and worries can sometimes become too overwhelming to the point where the thought of meditation can be seen as an added burden. Common excuses such as "I have so many things to do", "I am too busy", "I don't have time for such things", "I am fine, I don't need that", and a thousand other reasons not to meditate may get in the way.

But then at some point, we may ask ourselves, "Is there more to life than this?" Sometimes we ask, "What is the meaning of existence?" When crisis or tragedy strikes, we wallow in pain and misery, or fall into depression and begin to search for higher truths. Socrates once said that an unexamined life is not worth living.

Meditation actually brings color back to a seemingly bland and colorless world and helps us realize the inherent beauty and mystery of life through living. Life can indeed be a celebration instead of the usual struggle for survival. Meditation can help us realize that beyond the display of sight and sound, beyond the drama of ups and downs, joy and pain, victory and defeat, there is a stable and immovable center of the spirit that enjoys all of these things without judgment and with perfect peace and equanimity. Meditation is the missing ingredient, the X factor that can make all the difference. Although it may seem counterintuitive, when time is set aside to meditate, it can give us extra time when we feel so busy by clearing the clouded mind. It can give us space when we feel cornered by life. It can give us that added boost of energy in order to live our lives to the fullest and make a difference.

Everybody wants to be happy, but meditating will make you wonder, “What really is happiness?” Is happiness dependent on the things you have or the clothes you wear? Is happiness dependent on good relationships? Is happiness dependent on your success? Even if we have it all but our minds are not at peace, happiness can be so hard to come by. With a peaceful mind attained through meditation, we can observe that we can still be happy even in difficult situations.

Meditation can teach us to experience purer and better forms of happiness that we never knew existed.<sup>1</sup>

Meditation can help us transform ourselves from normal to supernormal. The normal mind is a slave to life's circumstances. When things are better, the normal mind is happy. When things are worse, the normal mind is sad. Sometimes the normal mind can shift from happy to sad and back again in an instant. When we find love in a new relationship we become happy, and when there's a little quarrel we quickly become sad. When we have a new possession such as a new car, our normal mind becomes happy. When that car meets an accident, we become sad. Thus the normal mind becomes a slave to circumstances and external events. Meditation can make us realize that if we can control our minds and choose how we react to external circumstances, then we can always choose to be happy despite them.

During meditation, we realize that fluctuations in mood, feelings and thoughts are but part of the mystery and drama of external things and it is not necessary to identify ourselves with these fluctuations. We come to the realization of a greater self, allowing all of these experiences to happen with equanimity and acceptance.

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1 Allan Wallace, *Genuine Happiness: Meditation as the Path to Fulfillment*, New York: Wiley, 2005.

During meditation, it dawns on us that we have within us a supernormal mind that is peaceful and immovable in the face of happiness or sadness, victory or defeat, success or failure, pleasure or pain. Beyond all these dualities of existence is an understanding of a deep mystery that helps us celebrate life despite what happens. Thus we are made to realize that we have a secret smiling center that is immune to all of these experiences. We come to the realization of the balanced mind and a self in perfect equilibrium. In the center of all these fluctuations of thoughts and feelings, there is a peaceful center amidst the cyclone. If we choose to make this center our true center of command, then we will experience a higher form of happiness and a higher form of confidence and control in our lives. Our body, our feelings, our thoughts, our ideas, can easily be commanded as vessels under the command of our higher self. In this way we can say that meditation can really make all the difference.

Thus, there will dawn a realization that this world and this life is an adventure and a celebration where we learn life's lessons and enjoy the ride. We will come to realize that within us is the capacity to accept all things as they are with no judgment and with full compassion. Each of us can be a playful spiritual being that is not identified with our body, our feelings, or our thoughts. This playful being is simply

happy as it smiles in infinite delight at the impermanence, mystery, and beauty of it all.

In time, we will arrive at a state of ultimate freedom and ultimate happiness — a state described by the Buddhist mystics as Nirvana or reaching enlightenment.

### **What difference can Buddhist Meditational Practices make?**

Buddhist meditational practices are a product of thousands of years of experience and are actually not religious in nature. The practices are universal in nature and can be applied and integrated into all of the world's religious traditions. When looked at as a religion, Buddhism has been known to be one of the calmest of religions. It involves no worship of particular deities and gods, nor does it endorse the recognition of the human soul. It also does not endorse religious dogma. However, this does not mean that it rejects the existence of such, only that it is not considered to be part of the beliefs.

The practices themselves are assuredly safe and very practical. One can actually use these practices in whatever situation one is in. Even the world's busiest person can find a way to make use of these practices. Mindfulness, which is a central ingredient of Buddhist meditation, can

be applied wherever you are and to whatever you are doing. The Middle Path, which is the Buddhist way, is a way to seek enlightenment without the extremities of sacrifice and self-inflicted punishment. Moreover, the practices themselves are amazingly simple. The beneficial effects are immediate and cumulative. The Buddhist framework is also comprehensive as well as integrated as we can see in Buddha's Eightfold Path consisting of the Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Mindfulness, Right Effort, and Right Concentration.

The Eightfold Path, as described by Siddhārtha Gautama<sup>2</sup>, is “a practical guideline to ethical and mental development with the goal of freeing the individual from attachments and delusions; and it finally leads to understanding the truth about all things.”<sup>3</sup> Along with the well-known Four Noble truths, Buddhism's core is revealed. The eight aspects of the path are highly interdependent elements in relation to each other and do not have to follow a specific hierarchy. The paths of the right view and right intention constitute the field of wisdom; the paths of right speech, right action, and right livelihood govern the ethical

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2 Siddhartha Gautama is a spiritual teacher who founded Buddhism. He is also referred to as the religion's “Supreme Buddha,” and as its primary icon/figure.

3 thebigview.com, The Eightfold Path, [www.thebigview.com](http://www.thebigview.com). 2000. <http://www.thebigview.com/buddhism/eightfoldpath.html> (accessed August 4, 2011).

conduct of Buddhism; and the paths of right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration explain the mental development aspect.

Buddhist meditational practices are well balanced and wholesome so that the path to Enlightenment is not lopsidedly stressed on meditation only, but also in the practice of virtue and ethical conduct and mental training and cultivation<sup>4</sup>.

In the words of Siddhārtha Gautama (Buddha):

*“Do not believe in anything simply because you have heard it.*

*Do not believe in anything simply because it is spoken and rumored by many.*

*Do not believe in anything simply because it is found written in your religious books.*

*Do not believe in anything merely on the authority of your teachers and elders.*

*Do not believe in traditions simply because they have been handed down for many generations.*

*But after observation and analysis, when you find that anything agrees with reason and is conducive to the good and benefit of one and all, then accept it and live up to it.”<sup>5</sup>*

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4 Dharmacarini Manishini, Western Buddhist Review. Accessed at [http://www.westernbuddhistreview.com/vol4/kamma\\_in\\_context.html](http://www.westernbuddhistreview.com/vol4/kamma_in_context.html)

5 Siddhartha Gautama, Buddha Quotes, thinkexist.com. 2000. [http://thinkexist.com/quotation/do\\_not\\_believe\\_in\\_anything\\_simply\\_because\\_you/12103.html](http://thinkexist.com/quotation/do_not_believe_in_anything_simply_because_you/12103.html) (accessed August 1, 2011).

## Chapter 2

# The Basic Premises of Buddhist Meditational Practices

### The Four Noble Truths<sup>6</sup>

Gautama Buddha began his quest for Enlightenment on a very basic question: Why is there suffering? Gautama did not deny that there is suffering in this world. He, in fact, accepted it as the First Noble Truth. No individual in this world can deny that he can feel pain as well as hunger. He can also feel emotionally burdened by relationship problems among others. One can suffer physically, emotionally, and even mentally. Sometimes suffering can affect our whole being. Suffering exists not only on the individual level but on the global level as well. Worldwide, there is death, war, poverty, injustice, and violence. However, Gautama Buddha did not dwell on simply accepting the reality of suffering,

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6 Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, *How to Solve Our Human Problems: The Four Noble Truths*, (CA: Tharpa Publications, 2005).

but sought to explain the roots of suffering. This question led to the Second Noble Truth: The cause of suffering is desire and ignorance. This truth is of utmost significance because herein lies the key to end suffering. By clinging to things, people, and circumstances as if they were permanent, we suffer when these are taken away from us, as all things are impermanent. We suffer because we attach ourselves to the things that are impermanent.

As the saying goes, “When one is born, one will die. One who admires high status will fall one day.”<sup>7</sup>

This is the basic cause of our ignorance. We cling to our bodies, feelings, and thoughts as if they are forever there. The reality is that we will eventually die and yet we cling to our lives as if we are going to live forever. We crave for immortality, for pleasure, and for riches when all of these things will eventually disappear as we pass away. Our desire knows no bounds, therefore our suffering also increases. The Third Noble Truth is that suffering can be ended. One’s suffering can end by practicing the Fourth Noble Truth through Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right

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7 buddhanet.net, Teachings in Chinese Buddhism, [www.buddhanet.net](http://www.buddhanet.net). 2000. [http://www.buddhanet.net/cbp2\\_f4.htm](http://www.buddhanet.net/cbp2_f4.htm) (accessed August 2, 2011).

Mindfulness and Right Concentration.<sup>8</sup>This basically means practicing good ethical behavior, mental development, and being active in meditation.

## **The Universality of Impermanence**

Is there anything in this world that will never change? Is there anything in the whole universe that is absolute and eternal? The ancient Greek Philosopher Heraclitus once said, “The only thing that is permanent in this world is change.” If we really take to heart the fact that nothing is permanent in this world, then we would see the futility and ignorance of all our attachments and desires. Even if there is pain and suffering in our lives, we would know that these will all soon pass. If there is pleasure and abundance, we would also have the wisdom not to cling to these earthly and impermanent things. If we really put to heart and take into account that all things are passing, then we would enjoy the ride just like watching a movie.

When you watch a movie, you enjoy the drama, the conflict, the tears, and the laughter just the same. The same is true within our lives. We can fully enjoy the drama unfolding before us if we are not attached to it and we know that all these things are part of the flux of life and living.

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8 Thebigview.com

The following story of two rings illustrates this point:

*“In a division of a family estate amongst two brothers, two rings were discovered. One ring was expensive, made of gold and diamonds, the other was a cheap silver ring costing only a few rupees.*

*The elder brother took the gold ring. He suffered many ups and downs in life and could not handle them. He went through a nervous breakdown and had to be hospitalized, as he could not deal with the stress in his life.*

*The younger brother took the silver ring and discovered engraved on it the words, “This too will pass.” He also went through ups and downs in his life like his brother and like all of us. But since he had adopted as his motto the saying, “This too will pass,” he was able to see them in perspective and not get carried away or take these ups and downs too seriously. He went on to live a long and happy life.”<sup>9</sup>*

## **Egolessness**

Buddhism holds that what we call the self is really our ego, which is also impermanent. What we believe ourselves to be is also impermanent and must be relinquished. Much of our suffering is caused by our idea that we have a separate self and that this self must be defended at all times. Thus, we have self importance, pride, self pity, and we spend most of our lives nurturing a self that is actually an illusion, because

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9 Experience Festival, Dharma-Smriti-Upasthana, [www.experiencefestival.com](http://www.experiencefestival.com). 2002. <http://www.experiencefestival.com>. Eastern Philosophy and Meditation.com. “This Too Shall Pass.” [www.eastern-philosophy-and-med.com](http://www.eastern-philosophy-and-med.com)

this self will also pass away and die. We spend our whole lives feeding the cravings and nurturing the hurt of this self-important self, which will ultimately end in nothingness. Thus, as we wallow in ignorance, we also wallow in suffering. As we hold onto and cling to the idea of our separate selves, we encounter all types of pain and difficulties. We waste our lives in a vain effort to ensure our survival and comfort. We aim at fame, fortune, and pleasure as if they are eternal. Our temporary happiness from these things is permanently replaced by our sadness when these things are gone. The cycle goes on and on as it becomes more vicious and passionate. I quote from the Samyuktagama Chapter 10:

*One who thinks of impermanence  
will understand the truth of ego-lessness.*

*The Enlightened One  
lives in the state of ego-lessness,  
renounces self-conceit  
and hence progresses towards liberation and Nirvana.”<sup>10</sup>*

## **The Four Perverted Views**

In Buddhism, there are four perverted views that keep us from allowing ourselves the benefits of meditation:

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<sup>10</sup> Andrew Glass, *Four Gandhari Samyuktagama Sutras: Senior Kharosthi Fragment 5 (Gandharan Buddhist Texts, Vol. 4)*, Washington: University of Washington, 2008, Samyuktagama Chapter 10.

**1. The view that we can seek lasting happiness from things that are essentially transient.**

While we can be happy in a new relationship, with a new car, with fame and fortune and love, our happiness in these things is the same cause of our sadness when these are taken away. Then we cling, we grope in the dark, we attach, and we feel pain and sadness in the end. I quote from Samyuktagama Chapter 11:

*“All volitional actions are empty.  
There is no law that is permanent and unchangeable.  
There is no I nor mine.”<sup>11</sup>*

**2. The view of seeking comfort and satisfaction in the world where there are only compounded entities.**

We can never find true comfort and satisfaction in the world. The world, or Samsara, is full of suffering because it is full of desire. Samsara is where we experience desire and suffering together because in the end we will be separated from what we desire. In the end, we will eventually die and everything we ever desired in Samsara will be gone.

**3. The view of seeking the self in things which are not really the self.**

We seek ourselves in our work but our work is not really us. We identify ourselves with our personality, our feelings,

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<sup>11</sup> Glass, Samyuktagama Chapter 11

our body, and our thoughts, but these are not really who we are because we can always choose to have different reactions to these things. Even then, what we call the real self, or soul, is also transitory and impermanent.

#### **4. The view that there are things worth desiring and therefore worth striving for and clinging to.**

Let me relate to you a story about Chin Pi-feng:

*In Chinese Buddhist history, there is a story of a highly cultivated Ch'an master by the name of Chin Pi-feng. According to the story, he almost fell back in his cultivation because of a single attachment. He could let go of all his desires except his love for his jade alms bowl. Each time before he entered samadhi, he had to make sure that his alms bowl had been carefully put away before being able to rest his mind.*

*One day, as his life span was coming to an end, King Yama dispatched several of his messengers to claim the master's life. Since the Ch'an master could foresee his death, he entered into deep samadhi. The underworld messengers could do nothing but to wait for him to come out of his meditation. After waiting for a few days, they came up with a plan. Knowing that the Ch'an master treasured his alms bowl dearly, they sought out the bowl and began to bang it about with all their might. When the Ch'an master heard the racket, he immediately came out of his samadhi to try save his bowl from breaking. When Yama's henchmen saw their chance, they clapped their hands and said, "Good, you now have to come with us." When the Ch'an master realized that his resolve was about to be tested, he took up the jade bowl and threw it onto the ground, smashing it to pieces. He then re-entered samadhi, leaving this verse behind as he did so:*

*For one to claim the life of Chin Pi-feng,  
Chains must first be able to  
bind the vastness of space.  
If space can be shackled,  
Then you can come to claim me,  
Chin Pi-feng.<sup>12</sup>*

At that very moment, he entered Nirvana. From this, we can see that to enter Nirvana, one must let go of every shred of attachment and delusion. When we are not caught up in worldly phenomena, then we are at peace in all circumstances.<sup>13</sup>

## **SUMMARY OF CHAPTER 2**

**The Four Noble Truths are:**

- 1. Suffering exists.**
- 2. The root of suffering is desire and ignorance.**
- 3. Suffering can be ended.**
- 4. Suffering can be ended by following the Eightfold Path.**

**The Eightfold Path is:**

- 1. Right Understanding**
- 2. Right Thought**
- 3. Right Speech**

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12 Nanhua, Nirvana, [www.nanhua.co.za](http://www.nanhua.co.za). 2005. <http://www.nanhua.co.za/Reading/Master/Nirvana.htm> (accessed August 3, 2011).

13 Nanhua

**4. Right Action**

**5. Right Livelihood**

**6. Right Effort**

**7. Right Mindfulness**

**8. Right Concentration**

- **A central pillar of Buddhist teaching is that everything is impermanent, and desire creates an illusion by craving for something that will soon pass, which then creates suffering.**
- **Another central pillar of Buddhist teaching is egolessness. This means that even our concept of the self is impermanent.**

**The Four Perverted Views are:**

- 1. The view that we can seek lasting happiness from things which are essentially transient.**
- 2. The view of seeking comfort and satisfaction in the world where there are only compounded entities.**
- 3. The view of seeking the self in things which are not really the self.**
- 4. The view that there are things worth desiring and therefore worth striving for and worth clinging to.**

## Chapter 3

# The Importance of Smṛti-upasthāna, or Mindfulness, in Buddhist Meditational Practices

Smṛti-upasthāna is a major foundation of Buddhist Meditational Practices. It basically means the impeccable practice of mindfulness in everything. This practice focuses on being mindful of four basic things: mindfulness of the body, feelings, mind, and mental concepts.<sup>14</sup> By paying attention seriously but without judgment to all the physical, emotional, and mental processes occurring in oneself, in time, one will eventually arrive at a major realization that there really is no eternal soul.<sup>15</sup> All there is are compounded elements that are temporary and impermanent.

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14 Experience Festival, Dharma-Smṛiti-Upasthana, [www.experiencefestival.com](http://www.experiencefestival.com). 2002. <http://www.experiencefestival.com>. Eastern Philosophy and Meditation.com. "This Too Shall Pass."

15 Axelg, Buddhism in a Nutshell, [www.axelg.com](http://www.axelg.com). 2008. <http://www.axelg.com/buddhism-in-a-nutshell.html>.

This realization is an important realization because it is one of the last vestiges of the delusion of our earthly reality. Without delusion, we enter into an enlightened state, and the power of Samsara, or earthly existence that is full of desire, has been greatly diminished.

The beauty of Smṛti-upasthāna, or mindfulness meditation, is that one can do it anywhere at any time. Simply being aware of the rise and dissipation of our thoughts, feelings, and bodily processes with full concentration and observation is already meditation. You can do this while driving a car, while cooking, while in a meeting or in the actual practice of sitting meditation. Being mindful of all these things, we must remain calm without judgment, and with stable attention and liberating discernment. Research shows that that the practice of mindfulness reduces stress, anxiety, and even psychological disorders such as addiction, obsessive-compulsive behavior, and depression.<sup>16</sup>

Mindfulness, as defined by Kabat-Zinn<sup>17</sup>, is “paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.” It is also “bringing one’s

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<sup>16</sup> Wallace

<sup>17</sup> Jon Kabat-Zinn is a famous teacher of meditation who has combined the Buddhist studies with Western sciences. He is also the founder of the Stress Reduction Clinic and the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. (University of Massachusetts Medical School n.d.)

complete attention to the present experience on a moment-to-moment basis.”<sup>18</sup> In simpler terms, it is “paying attention on purpose” (Wildmind.org 2007), involving a direction of the consciousness. “Fourfold,” in the most basic sense, means opening and affecting from a person’s innermost core, and expanding to larger and broader aspects of one’s self. It is somehow related to the ripple effect, too. Meditation, as defined by Joan Borysenko, Ph.D.,<sup>19</sup> is “any activity that keeps the attention pleasantly anchored in the present moment.” It also involves filling the mind with calmness and peace, in a broader definition.

The key with mindful meditation is to pay close attention to what you have focused to be aware of. If you practice mindfulness of breathing, focus your attention on your breath and never let yourself lose attention. In case you lose attention, which happens all the time, do not be too hard on yourself and gently refocus back on your breath. The word retention is also an important element used in mindfulness meditation. It connotes unwavering and gentle focus on the object of awareness.

Mindfulness, among Buddhist scholars, is termed as a controlling ability (*indriya*). It is also called a spiritual

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18 Marlatt and Kristeller, *Integrating Spirituality into Treatment*, Washington, D.C.: American Psychology Association, 1999.

19 Joan Borysenko is a pioneer in the field of mind/body medicine.

faculty (bala). It is one of the factors of the Eightfold Path, and with earnest effort and mindfulness in every thought, enlightenment is facilitated in the practitioner.<sup>20</sup>

To give you a sense of what mindfulness is, let me tell you a story:

*Once there was a famous Thai monk who went around the world to teach meditation. In one of his lectures, a grave professor asked about complicated things about Buddhist cosmology. The monk simply said, “When we keep chickens, we collect the eggs, not the droppings.”*

*What did the monk really mean? The monk’s message is that mindfulness is not intellectualizing, but simply being aware. Meditation is not thinking, but rather awareness. If you are walking on the seashore, simply be aware of your feet touching the sand and the wind brushing your hair. One simply pays attention to every experience with steady focus but without too much effort. Intense concentration can be tiring and is not mindfulness at all.<sup>21</sup>*

With patient and steady practice, mindfulness can really become a habit and the benefits are invaluable. For one, it removes stress as we focus only on the present. The power of worries and negative thoughts are greatly diminished with non-judgmental observation. The mind can become relaxed, emotions are steady and stable and one becomes very patient and kind in dealing with others. When one is mindful and aware, he is always in full control

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20 Nyanasatta Thera trans The Foundations of Mindfulness Satipatthana Sutta, 1994.

21 Axelg

of himself. One will behave ethically in society because he will be aware of his actions and thoughts. Mindfulness can really lead to beneficial effects on the world around us. By simply being mindful, we raise our level of awareness. By raising the level of our awareness, old mental, emotional, and social programming will release their hold, and we will act with greater freedom and with wider perspective on life.

The ultimate aim of mindfulness is freedom. The Upanishads often reminds us, “Tarati sokaṁ atmave, the knower of the Self alone overcomes sorrow. Let’s follow the ancient path and become free.”<sup>22</sup>

The Buddha once said:

*“... that the only way that can lead all the livings to the purification, correct path, enlightenment, and nirvana is the practice of smṛti-upaśāna ... the past Buddhas got sambodhi (omniscience of a Buddha) all through the Smṛti-upaśāna, the future Buddhas will get sambodhi also through Smṛti-upaśāna, I got sambodhi also because of practicing the Smṛti-upaśāna ...”*<sup>23</sup>

This basically means that we have to observe our body all the time with zeal, vigilance, and carefulness. We have to observe our sensations and feelings vigilantly. We have to observe our thoughts zealously and remove all traces of desire and greed, which will remove all the causes of sorrow.

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22 Swami Sunirmalananda, Vipassna and Vedanta, [www.esamskriti.com](http://www.esamskriti.com). 2005. <http://www.esamskriti.com/essay-chapters/Vipassna-and-Vedanta-1.aspx> (accessed August 4, 2011).

23 Gautama

We have to observe everything and all things that our mind can dwell on, even our experiences of enlightenment and bliss, and cleanse all these of desire.

By being mindful of every sensation, thought and experience, we relish and enjoy each moment in peace. Even the most painful or joyful experience can be experienced with equanimity and quiet observation. When walking fast, you are mindful that you are walking fast as you relish each fast step with mindfulness. When walking slowly, you are mindful of walking slowly and you relish each slow step with mindfulness. You can do this while working, eating, and even sleeping. Thus, you will lend every thought, every feeling, every sensation with a certain sense of deliberateness and power, and you will have full control of the circumstances in your life. Instead of being a victim of life's circumstances, one becomes free of life's circumstances. All useless thoughts and feelings lose their power over you. You will look into your body as a body that is impermanent and passing. You will look into your feelings just as they are, whether good or bad, and see that they are also passing. You will look into your thoughts as passing thoughts. Thus, nothing can destroy your silence and emptiness and you will be free of illusion. You will be free of your ignorance and desire and

thus become a sage of the undisturbed mind.<sup>24</sup>

When we begin to notice everything in our life and in our consciousness, we can enjoy things as they really are. We can enjoy eating good food the same way we can enjoy hunger, as satiation and hunger are passing experiences. We can enjoy pleasure and feel every ecstasy with ardent observation the same way we can enjoy pain and feel every prick with detached sobriety.<sup>25</sup>

We will also observe how our desires come and go. We can see how our desires reach their apex of passion as they try to take hold of our body, feelings, and thoughts as if desire is the all powerful master. This desire has no freedom as it is lost in the delusion of its blind passion and attaches itself to our body, feelings, and thoughts. This desire will chase impermanent things as if they are everything. This desire will worry about many little things in our daily life and many big things in our future. Yet what determines little things and big things is also desire. Thus, desire is always chasing the wind as it is ignorant of itself without mindfulness, which can see through the many guises of desire.<sup>26</sup>

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24 Sue Hamilton, *Identity and Experience: the Constitution of the Human Being According to Early Buddhism*, (London: Luzac Oriental, 1996).

25 *Ibid*

26 *Ibid*

If we mindfully observe our thoughts, we can see it has many capacities of analysis, comparison, inference, conceptualization, integration, cognition, memory and abstraction. Yet even all these capacities are slaves of desire. This is the reason why the ignorant man always follows his thinking as if the mind is always the leader. Only mindfulness can see through the trap so that we can act in ways that are not compelled by desire and thus take action that is truly free from compulsion or passion. By acting out our desires as if they were the real thing, we are subject to pain and frustration because all the objects of our desire are impermanent.<sup>27</sup>

Mindfulness is totally different from the mind driven by desire for it looks into things and thoughts just as they are without thinking. There is no judgment. There is no blame. There is no praise. There is no resistance. Judgment, blame, praise, and resistance is the activity of the mind of desire and mindfulness simply observes all these in vigilance and unwavering attention. This is the process that eventually melts the ever persistent ego, and when the ego loses its hold, we are ready to encounter what is really real.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid

<sup>28</sup> Manishini Dharmacarini, Western Buddhist Review, [www.westernbuddhistreview.com](http://www.westernbuddhistreview.com). 2000. [http://www.westernbuddhistreview.com/vol4/kamma\\_in\\_context.html](http://www.westernbuddhistreview.com/vol4/kamma_in_context.html) (accessed August 1, 2011).

## The Five Skandhas are Empty (Hamilton 1996)

In Sanskrit, we hear of the five skandhas being empty. Skandha means group, heap, aggregate, or compounded things. The five skandhas or compounded things are physical form, feelings, perceptions, impulses, and consciousness. These generally form our ego and our personality. These are all driven with desire while at the same time they are all impermanent. When the Sanskrit says that the five skandhas are empty, it means that our ego is empty, all are impermanent and desire is an illusion. The realization of emptiness and the emptiness of realization actually summarizes the whole of Buddhist teaching. In modern physics, it is the vacuum that is the source of all energy.

To this, Red Pine would say:

*That form is empty was one of the Buddha's earliest and most frequent pronouncements. But in the light of Prajnaparamita, form is not simply empty, it is so completely empty, it is emptiness itself, which turns out to be the same as form itself... All separations are delusions. But if each of the skandhas is one with emptiness, and emptiness is one with each of the skandhas, then everything occupies the same indivisible space, which is emptiness... Everything is empty, and empty is everything.<sup>29</sup>*

The skandha of rūpa is the compounded phenomena corporeality where we can observe the sensations of the body

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29 Red Pine (2004). The Heart Sutra. Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard pp 75

such as hunger, sex, pain, and others. The skandha samjñā is the compounded phenomena, which includes the perception of form, smell, sound, touch, taste, sight, body functions and sensitivities, and mental objects. Without mindfulness we become slaves to our physical drives and needs.<sup>30</sup>

As the saying goes,

*“All form is comparable to foam; all feelings to bubbles; all sensations are mirage-like; dispositions are like the plantain trunk; consciousness is but an illusion: so did the Buddha illustrate [the nature of the aggregates].”<sup>31</sup>*

The skandha, which is called vedanā,<sup>32</sup> is the general compounded phenomena of feelings and sensations. By observing these in mindfulness we can notice pleasure, pain, or a neutral state. In unwavering observation, we can witness how pain, pleasure, and physical drives gain energy and intensify and how they lose energy and cease. The skandha saskāra is the compounded phenomena of impulse and mental formations. Mindfulness of these can lead to observations of joy, resolve, compulsion, volition, attention, even happiness and equanimity among many others. One can observe here the intricacies of one’s personality and character as well as the possibilities and qualities of one’s

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30 Hamilton

31 Kalupahana, David (1975). Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism. The University Press of Hawaii. P 85

32 Hamilton

consciousness. This is where karmic actions are formed and acted out. Mindfulness of *saṃskāra* actually frees oneself from the compulsions of karma or the cause and effect of one's predilections in life.<sup>33</sup>

The *skandha vijñāna* is the compounded phenomenon of consciousness of the reaction to sense perceptions as well as the thoughts of the mind. As one processes the data coming from our five senses, there arises the interpretation of our experience. We can also be conscious of our interpretations. By being mindful of *vijñāna*, we free ourselves from our thinking processes.<sup>34</sup>

An example of clinging to *skandhas* is this:

*If one holds that “this body is mine” or “I exist within this body,” then as one’s body ages, becomes ill, and approaches death, one will likely experience longing for youth or health or eternal life, will likely dread aging and sickness and death, and will likely spend much time and energy lost in fears, fantasies and ultimately futile activities.*

*In the Nikayas, such is likened to shooting oneself with a second arrow, where the first arrow is a physical phenomenon (such as, in this case, a bodily manifestation associated with aging or illness or dying) and the second is the mental anguish of the undisciplined mind associated with the physical phenomenon.<sup>35</sup>*

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33 Hamilton

34 Ibid

35 Nyanaponika Thera, *Sallatha Sutta: The Dart*, [www.accesstoinsight.org](http://www.accesstoinsight.org). 1998.

## SUMMARY OF CHAPTER 3

- **Smṛti-upasthāna is a major foundation of Buddhist Meditational Practices. It basically means the impeccable practice of mindfulness in everything. This practice focuses on being mindful of four basic things: mindfulness of the body, feelings, mind, and mental concepts.**
- **The key with mindfulness meditation is to pay close attention to what you have focused to be aware of.**
- **The benefits of mindfulness are: overcoming negative things in one's life; taking full control of one's body, feelings, thoughts, and consciousness, and ultimately achieving freedom or a state of nirvana.**
- **Mindfulness is totally different from the thinking mind or the mind driven by desire. Mindfulness is simply being aware without thinking.**
- **The Five Skandhas, or compound phenomena or aggregates, are empty because when you observe all these in mindfulness, one would realize that they are impermanent and therefore are illusions.**

The Five Skandhas are:

1. **The skandha of rūpa is the compounded phenomena corporeality where we can observe the sensations of the body such as hunger, sex, pain, and others.**
2. **The skandha saṃjñā is the compounded phenomena, which includes the perception of form,**

**smell, sound, touch, taste, sight, body functions and sensitivities, and mental objects.**

- 3. The skandha that is called vedan is the general compounded phenomena of feelings and sensations. By observing these in mindfulness we can notice pleasure, pain, or a neutral state.**
- 4. The skandha saṃskāra is the compounded phenomena of impulse and mental formations.<sup>36</sup>**
- 5. The skandha vijñāna is the compounded phenomenon of consciousness of the reaction to sense perceptions as well as the thoughts of the mind.**

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<sup>36</sup> Sheng-yen Lu, The Fourfold Mindfulness of Nagarjuna, [www.voyagestohell.com](http://www.voyagestohell.com). 2005. [http://www.voyagestohell.com/tbs/books/051\\_highest\\_yoga\\_and\\_mahamudra/06\\_fourfold\\_mindfulness\\_of\\_nagarjuna.htm](http://www.voyagestohell.com/tbs/books/051_highest_yoga_and_mahamudra/06_fourfold_mindfulness_of_nagarjuna.htm) (accessed August 4, 2011).

## Chapter 4

# The Fourfold Stages of Mindfulness in Buddhist Meditational Practice

The Fourfold stages of Mindfulness in Buddhist Meditational Practice is the means of achieving inner peace from the innermost core, enabling one to see things in full consciousness.

The path of right mindfulness<sup>37</sup> in Buddhism is “the ability to see things clearly, with consciousness.”<sup>38</sup> It enables a person to have a clear perception and conceptualize in a way that the emotions and impressions held are controllable. Also called “bare attention,” it enables people to watch everything

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37 “The controlled and perfected faculty of cognition.”  
(thebigview.com 2000)

38 Thebigview.com

they do consciously — every feeling, every sensation, and every thought — without being carried away or too attached to them. This path is constituted by the Fourfold foundations of Mindfulness: contemplation of the body, contemplation of feeling (repulsion, attraction, or neutral), contemplation of the state of mind, and contemplation of the phenomena.

These foundations can be explained in four basic points. These stages of achieving mindfulness meditation enable a person to cultivate the wisdom of *prajñā*<sup>39</sup>, cultivate it into experience, and achieve full understanding and/or realization.

There are four points to contemplate in order to comprehend the foundations of the mindfulness practice in Buddhism. The first point is the object of intention. In the path of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, there are four objects of intention, or meditation, and these are the body, the feeling, the mind, and the dharma or the phenomena. People relate to these objects in different, *samsaric*<sup>40</sup> ways. When people relate to them, they cling to these objects and develop the present relationship into a deeper one. With further improvement of the relationship, then, a whole world of *samsara* is created. Thus, these four objects are

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39 "Wisdom or understanding considered as the goal of Buddhist contemplation" (definition-of.net 2005)

40 *Samsaric*: endless, in a cyclical pattern

used as the objects for meditation, which would then lead to a more profound relationship with these objects. And the cycle goes on, and a person would achieve the transcendence of his or her relationship with these objects.

## 1. Mindfulness of the Body

The contemplation of the body is related to “the basis of clinging to oneself as an entity, as an existent, permanent ego.”<sup>41</sup> Contemplating, or being mindful of the body, involves becoming aware of its natural emptiness. “One who is deluded is an ordinary mortal. One who is enlightened is a Buddha.”<sup>42</sup>

The mindfulness of the body, in the general Buddhist view, is related to a person’s fundamental existence, which is always in flux and never stable. This constant changing of existence can be attributed to the samsaric pattern tendencies. The contemplation of the body involves three ways of elaborating the contemplation of the body, and that is through breath, through matter, and through mental awareness of the subtle corporeality of the mind.<sup>43</sup> And for the sense of following the fourfold concept, the mindfulness

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41 Rinpoche

42 Lu

43 Bhikkhu T. Seelananda, *Buddhist Meditation*, Metta.lk. 2005.

of the body is best to be worked on at the first stage of the mindfulness practice, as the form of the person should always be organized first before expanding to broader aspects.

Mindfulness, in this aspect, is not just simply being somewhere, but it also involves a certain *prajña* of what is.<sup>44</sup> Usually, people tend to think that the body is outside the mind, but then, they think that the body exists in a definite form. So this experience of having a definite form brings the wilderness of the physical existence to a level of calmness. This works for the general Buddhist approach. But according to the Mahayana approach, on the other hand, the mindfulness of the body refers to the original *vipashyana*<sup>45</sup> meditation on selflessness of form, emptiness of form.<sup>46</sup> With this concept of selflessness, the fourfold of emptiness is revealed, defining the gist of the mindfulness of the body according to the Mahayana tradition. “Form is emptiness, emptiness is form. Form is no other than emptiness; emptiness is no other than form.”<sup>47</sup>

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44 Rinpoche

45 To see things as they really are; a way of self-transformation through self-observation. It focuses on the deep interconnection between mind and body, which can be experienced directly by disciplined attention to the physical sensations that form the life of the body, and that continuously interconnect and condition the life of the mind. (dharma.org 2003)

46 *Ibid*

47 *Ibid*

## 2. Mindfulness of Feelings

With the body serving as the basis of the said clinging, feelings come out of the things people feel and experience. The contemplation of the feelings is “simply relating to or working with our basic existence in the world as samsaric beings.”<sup>48</sup> Feelings are defined in this sense as how a person works with his or her feelings and how he or she relates it to fear. The mindfulness of feelings relates to three objects: the pleasant objects, the unpleasant objects, and the neutral object. Along with these three objects, three classifications of fear come as well, which are the fear of attachment and desire, the fear of hatred and aggression, and the fear of neutral feeling and numbness, which relate to the pleasant, the unpleasant, and to the neutral, respectively.

The Buddha has mentioned that suffering is classified into levels by the nature of fear that causes the suffering. Considering this, people would have three: the suffering of fear, the suffering of change, and the all-pervasive suffering. The all-pervasive fear relies on how the fundamental fear exists in all levels of our feelings and pervades them. It is knowing that fear exists although it does not superficially manifest, just like developing a certain deadly illness. It is in this fundamental situation that the all-pervasive suffering

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid

exists and later on grows into the suffering of change.

Suffering of change, for example, is like honey on a razor blade. Knowing that the honey sits on a razor blade, risking our own safety, we continue to want and desire the honey because it is sweet. Taking off from the example, the suffering of change is “experienced as perhaps a more pleasurable, more pleasant, more pleasing experience of feeling, but it leads us to the result of pain, the result of suffering.”<sup>49</sup>

The suffering of change then leads to the suffering of suffering, just like realizing that the tongue is now gone or extremely damaged. When people start to realize what they have lost, they also realize losing everything that comes with what they have lost, just like the ability to taste the sweetness of the honey that they have just recently tasted. In the general Buddhist approach, mindfulness of the feeling refers to being totally conscious of what our feelings are, and being totally aware with every level of the fear we have, and working with them in the most fundamental way.

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49 Ibid

### 3. Mindfulness of the Mind

The third foundation of the fourfold of mindfulness is that of the mind. Mindfulness of the mind, in the broadest sense, is the “contemplation on the non-origination and non-extinction of all mental phenomena.”<sup>50</sup> The practice of the mindfulness of the mind in this sense relates to developing whatever we experience in our minds. According to Sheng-yen Lu, “the nature of phenomena arising from mental conditions is marked by non-origination, non-extinction, non-destruction, non-permanence, non-coming into being, non-going out of being, non-identity, and non-differentiation.” This stage then helps us identify the impulses that the mind receives and relates to the momentary experience of everything. With this idea, practitioners of the said meditation would free their emotions and free themselves as well. In this practice, we bring the mind back and forth to the sense of the present in order to achieve what is called for.

In this stage of meditation, too, three realms are created by the practitioner’s mind. From understanding that all phenomena are marked by non-origination and non-extinction, one realizes that emptiness and illusion exist as they are, thus allowing one to be in a state of equanimity.

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50 Lu

This then brings forth a person's ability to be mindful of the perfection of cognition, self-realization, and the practice of the bodhisattva<sup>51</sup> mind.

#### 4. Mindfulness of Phenomena, or Dharmas

The fourth mindfulness is the mindfulness of phenomena, or the mindfulness of dharmas. After developing the mindfulness of the mind, this stage takes people to the next level, which involves the study of the panoramic view of the phenomenal world. Being totally aware and conscious of all the phenomena happening around a person defines what this mindfulness is about. This stage recognizes the interdependence of the mind and the phenomenal world. It works “with the relationship of each individual phenomenon existing around us as the object of our experience.”<sup>52</sup> The main concept of this is having the *prajña* to relate with the phenomenal world outside more directly, more precisely, without any fear, and without any conceptions.

Every day, people encounter different phenomena encompassing the six senses: that of sight, smell, touch,

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51 A person who is motivated by compassion and seeks enlightenment not only for himself but for others as well.

52 Rinpoche

taste, hearing, and the last, mind perception. These sensory perceptions together are known as dharmas, as they help us reach the phenomena outside the body. Working precisely with these sensory perceptions defines the true nature of *pratityasamutpada*.<sup>53</sup>

Summing and achieving all of these stages of the mindfulness meditation, the Four Noble Truths come to the practitioner. It is said that through achieving the mindfulness of the body and of the feeling, people will be able to realize the truth of suffering, its causes and its origins. With the mindfulness of the mind, practitioners are enabled to let themselves and their emotions free. This means that the practitioner then, if he has achieved the mindfulness of the mind, would be awarded with the experience of complete freedom of the world and its worries. The fourth mindfulness, that of the dharmas or the phenomena, enables a practitioner to realize and actualize the truth, which is present in the phenomenal world. This truth leads then to cessation. Understanding the interdependence of all phenomena, and relating it to selflessness, emptiness, and egolessness, a practitioner is then lead to the path of nirvana or cessation.

Now, achieving all the above-mentioned results from

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53 The interdependent origination of the phenomenal world.

the foundations of mindfulness, one can achieve the ultimate goal of Buddhism, which is Nirvana.

## **SUMMARY OF CHAPTER 4**

**The Fourfold Stages of Mindfulness in Buddhist Meditational Practice are:**

- 1. Mindfulness of the Body**
  - 2. Mindfulness of Feelings**
  - 3. Mindfulness of the Mind**
  - 4. Mindfulness of Phenomena or Dharmas**
- **Mindfulness of the Body means patiently and vigilantly observing without judgment the body, forms, and functions such as hunger, satiation, attraction, repulsion, breathing, and many others.**
  - **Mindfulness of the Feelings means patiently and vigilantly observing without judgment how one's feelings arise, intensify and eventually dissipate.**
  - **Mindfulness of the Mind means patiently and vigilantly observing without judgment all the functions of the mind as it processes perception, retains experiences through memory, abstracts, analysis, cognition, memory and a myriad of things.**

- **Mindfulness of Phenomena means patiently and vigilantly observing without judgment experience, phenomena, dharmas, and mental objects.**
- **By being mindful of all of these, one achieves freedom and nirvana.**

## Chapter 5

# Step-by-Step Guide to the Meditation Practices of the Smṛti-Upasthāna

### 1. Mindfulness of the Body Exercises

#### a. Mindfulness of Breathing (Anapana-sati)

Mindfulness of breathing is one of the easiest, most practical, and effective meditational practice in Buddhist tradition. It is highly recommended to begin with this exercise. When one is actually at ease with this practice, other meditational practices may become secondary. By simply concentrating awareness on one's breathing, and observing thoughts as they come and go, in practice there dawns an abiding tranquility and unadulterated bliss. Negative thoughts can simply be observed in a detached manner and they lose their force. This meditation is such a good practice that a beginner can do it while those who are more adept will continue doing it.

**Steps:**

1. Choose a place where one can be at rest and in solitude. This place can be the privacy of your room or in a private and silent spot in a park or forest. The lighting of the place should be not so glaring so as not to lose concentration nor too dark to tempt one to sleep. When one is busy, one can do this sitting on a bus or by simply sitting inside your office. It is encouraged that the spot one chooses from the beginning will be the same spot to be used in continued practice. Choose a regular time in the day where you can do this. It is preferable to do anapana-sati in the morning or in the evening.

2. Sit upright with your spine relaxed and straight. To ensure that your spine is straight, imagine yourself hanging upright by a thread tied from the base of your spine going straight to your head. Those who can do the lotus or the half lotus position can do so. What is important is that you are comfortable, relaxed, and that the spine is straight. This facilitates the harmonious flow of energy during meditation.

3. The attention should be fixed on the tip of your nose or the upper lip where you can feel the air of breath coming in and out. Without leaving attention on the tip of the nose or upper lip, be aware of feeling your whole breath without missing a single phase.

4. Be aware of your breathing as you breathe in and breathe out. Experience your whole breath as you breathe in and out. You should be alert and aware without being tense. You should be relaxed and not strain too much on the effort.

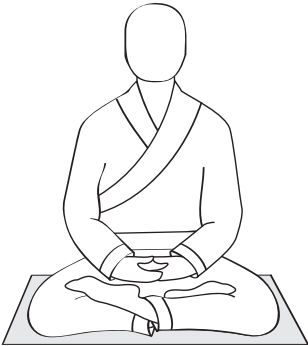
5. Focus on your breathing alone. A beginner will easily observe that his mind will race with a myriad of thoughts, as the mind is not yet accustomed to mindfulness. In a steady and sustained effort to focus on one's breath, one slowly tames the wild horse of the mind of racing thoughts and the thoughts will eventually slow down in speed, number, and intensity. When thoughts arise, simply bring back the focus on breathing.

In order to counter the racing of thoughts and images, some resort to counting. Count each in-breath as "one" and each out-breath as "two" up to ten counts, then count back down to one. This is a prop that you may find useful to keep the focus on breathing and not on the thoughts that may arise. As one goes along in practice, one can easily dispense away with counting in time.

6. With continued practice, you will notice that the breaths become fainter, but you must concentrate on being aware of the faint sensations of respiration. Thus a greater degree of mindfulness must be exerted in time as the breaths become fainter.

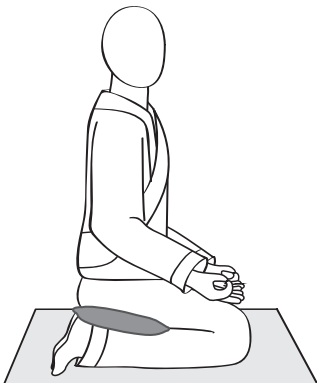
With perseverance, one day there will dawn a feeling of indescribable peace and joy. When in the mind's eye there shines a light, this is the sign that one is nearing the next stage of access concentration where insight can be gained. This is a stage where one can have a greater understanding and control of one's life circumstances and experiences.

### **Different Postures In Meditation**



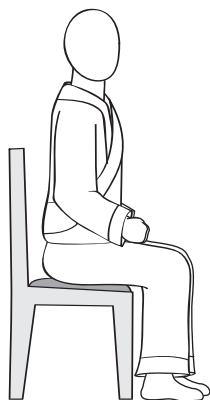
#### ***The Classic Lotus Position***

*With a little practice you can get accustomed to this position. You can also start with a half lotus that is a little less difficult.*



#### ***Zen Posture***

*Your feet are neatly tucked under a small wooden chair or pillow while you assume a semi kneeling position. What is important is that the spine is straight and you are relaxed.*



### ***Sitting On a Chair***

*Don't slouch or arch your back. Just relax and keep your spine straight. Keep your feet flat on the floor. You can rest your hands gently on your lap.*

## **b. Mindfulness of the Postures of the Body**

One can also practice mindfulness of the body by being aware of the postures of the body. When one is walking, one is mindful of walking. When one is sitting, one is mindful of sitting. When one is mindful of the postures of this body such as standing, moving, exercising, etc, one is connected with himself in the present, and useless thoughts and stressful emotions lose their power. There is a relaxed feeling of newness and grounding. There is a force that lends to one's movements with energy and focus.

## **c. Mindfulness with Clear Comprehension of the activities of the body**

When one is cooking one can be mindful of one's body while cooking. When one is driving one can practice a clear comprehension and awareness of his own driving. In eating,

cleaning, and even while talking, one can focus awareness on the activities of the body and be mindful. Thus there arises a certain deliberateness and energy in every act because every act is in tune with the eternal moment.

#### **d. Mindfulness of the different parts of the body**

One can also be mindful of the different parts of the body externally and internally such as with the head, skin, nails, teeth, heart, liver, kidney and others. When one contemplates on these, one will realize that this body will soon die and rot and is therefore impermanent.

## **2. Mindfulness of Feelings and Emotions**

The practice of mindfulness in emotions is done by simply accepting feelings and emotions as they arise and pass away.

*...when experiencing a pleasant feeling he knows, "I experience a pleasant feeling"; when experiencing a painful feeling, he knows, "I experience a painful feeling"; when experiencing neither a pleasant nor a painful feeling, he knows, "I experience a neither-pleasant-nor-painful feeling." When experiencing a pleasant worldly feeling, he knows, "I experience a pleasant worldly feeling"; when experiencing a pleasant spiritual feeling, he knows, "I experience a pleasant spiritual feeling"; when experiencing a painful worldly feeling, he knows, "I experience a painful worldly feeling"; when experiencing a painful spiritual feeling, he knows, "I experience a painful spiritual feeling"; when experiencing a neither-pleasant-nor-painful worldly feeling, he knows, "I experience a neither-pleasant-nor-painful worldly feeling"; when experiencing*

*a neither-pleasant-nor-painful spiritual feeling, he knows, "I experience a neither-pleasant-nor-painful spiritual feeling."*<sup>54</sup>

Mindfulness of feelings and emotions require the acceptance that these feelings are there and one simply feels them knowing they are also impermanent. One does not identify himself with his feelings, but still feels every feeling by being aware of them. By being aware that his feelings are there but are temporary, he develops detachment so that he becomes free to control and choose what to feel in different circumstances. He can choose to be joyful in times of grief or sad in times of happiness. This is because he has practiced awareness of the nature of feelings.

### **3. Mindfulness of Consciousness**

Mindfulness of consciousness means one is aware of his own thoughts and his own states of consciousness. He is aware if his consciousness is of a happy state or a depressed state but does not identify himself with his consciousness. He simply accepts his consciousness in full awareness. He is aware if his consciousness is low or high, elevated or not. And yet in all he simply remains conscious and detached and clings to nothing.

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54 Thera 1994

#### 4. Mindfulness of Mental Objects

Mindfulness of mental objects can be practiced by simply being aware and accepting sense desire whether it is present or absent; anger whether it is present or absent; sloth, laziness, and torpor whether it is present or absent; agitation and remorse whether it is present or absent; doubt whether it is present or absent. He knows that these arise and decline, and understands what happens if he abandons them. He is aware of how they come to be and observes how they will soon pass. In the end, his own awareness slackens the energy of these negative mentalities in his life thus bringing him a higher sense of well-being.

To end this chapter let me relate to you a story by Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh.

*There was one great master, a Buddhist master, Nagarjuna. A thief came to him. The thief had fallen in love with the master because he had never seen such a beautiful person with such infinite grace. The thief asked Nagarjuna, "Is there some possibility of my growth also? But one thing I must make clear to you: I am a thief. And another thing: I cannot leave it, so please don't make it a condition. I will do whatsoever you say, but I cannot stop being a thief. That I have tried many times—it never works, so I have left the whole sport. I have accepted my destiny, that I am going to be a thief and remain a thief, so don't talk about it. From the very beginning let it be clear."*

*Nagarjuna said, "Why are you afraid? Who is going to talk about your being a thief?"*

*The thief said, "But whenever I go to a monk, to a*

*religious priest, or to a religious saint, they always say, 'First stop stealing.'*"

*Nagarjuna laughed and said, "Then you must have gone to thieves; otherwise, why? Why should they be concerned? I am not concerned!"*

*The thief was very happy. He said, "Then it is okay. It seems that now I can become a disciple. You are the right master."*

*Nagarjuna accepted him and said, "Now you can go and do whatsoever you like. Only one condition has to be followed: be aware! Go, break into houses, enter, take things, steal; do whatsoever you like, that is of no concern to me, I am not a thief—but do it with full awareness."*

*The thief couldn't understand that he was falling into the trap. He said, "Then everything is okay. I will try." After three weeks he came back and said, "You are tricky—because if I become aware, I cannot steal. If I steal, awareness disappears. I am in a fix."*

*Nagarjuna said, "No more talk about your being a thief and stealing. I am not concerned; I am not a thief. Now, you decide! If you want awareness, then you decide. If you don't want it, then too you decide."*

*The man said, "But now it is difficult. I have tasted it a little, and it is so beautiful—I will leave anything, whatsoever you say. Just the other night for the first time I was able to enter the palace of the king. I opened the treasure. I could have become the richest man in the world—but you were following me and I had to be aware. When I became aware, diamonds looked just like stones, ordinary stones. When I lost awareness, the treasure was there. And I waited and did this many times. I would become aware and I became like a buddha, and I could not even touch it because the whole thing looked foolish, stupid—just stones, what am I doing? Losing myself over stones? But then I would lose awareness; they would become again beautiful, the whole illusion. But finally I decided that they were not worth it."<sup>55</sup>*

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55 Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, *The Thief*, [www.spiritual-short-stories.com](http://www.spiritual-short-stories.com). 1980. <http://www.spiritual-short-stories.com/spiritual-short-story-77-The+Thief.html> (accessed August 1, 2011).

## Chapter 6

# The Four Sublime States

### Introduction of the Four Sublime States

The Buddha, the Enlightened One, has proposed that the way to transform lives and render beauty, joy, and meaning is to allow people to experience powerful mental qualities. These qualities are called the Four Sublime States of mind or Brahma-vihara.<sup>56</sup>

These Four Sublime States are further regarded as the right or ideal behavior towards our neighbor that is geared towards peaceful social contacts.<sup>57</sup> These states implement peace in the society by removing tension and healing the wounds brought by suffering. Moreover, these levels surpass

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<sup>56</sup> Thera, Nyanaponika. *The Four Sublime States*. Penang: Buddhist Publication Society, 1999.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

social barriers, establish harmonious communities and awareness concerning generosity, bring back joy and hope which have been neglected, and advocate a human unity empowered to fend off egotism.<sup>58</sup> These states also integrate a better inspirational understanding of moral and ethical standards. They transcend various degrees of cultures and reach the point where humans begin traditions that help them attain balance in their spiritual life for happiness.<sup>59</sup> The characteristics of these Four Sublime States are very society-oriented and encourage people to prioritize the welfare of other individuals and the society while taking the spiritual journey.<sup>60</sup>

Furthermore, the Four Sublime States are “boundless states”<sup>61</sup> (*appamaññā*) since they should not be constricted exclusively as to the range of beings toward whom they reach out to; in another note, they should also be impartial and should not be limited to personal judgments and biases, which is hence supported by the statement of Nyanaponika: “A mind that has attained to that boundlessness of the Brahma-viharas will not harbor any national, racial, religious, or class hatred.”

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58 Ibid.

59 Thich Vien Ly. *The Four Sublime States Doctrine and Practice in Buddhism*, Mitram Books, California, 1998.

60 Ibid.

61 Nyanaponika, *The Four Sublime States*.

Centrally guided by the teachings of Buddha and the beliefs in his purity, the etymology of Brahma-vihara is coined in its concept. Brahma suggests one who is persistent and hardworking in developing the Four Sublime States both by conduct and by meditation. Hence complying with this quality, an individual is perceived as “God-like” or “Brahma-like.”<sup>62</sup> Vihara, on the other hand, relates to “abodes” because they are identified to be the mind’s “dwelling places” where the individual feels comfort and safety and with which the mind should be filled. In total, Brahma-vihara implies a notion of experiencing a spiritual niche that is built by the freedom from hate.

These Four Sublime States also contain a guideline that emphasizes that they should not only be restricted as principles of conduct and objects of reflection but also as subjects of meditation. This meditation is further identified as Brahma-vihara-bhavana, which initializes an individual to undergo a meditative development through the sublime states. This methodical meditation aims to achieve jhana or meditative absorption.<sup>63</sup> In addition, the aim is also to make the Four Sublime States penetrate the deepest recesses of the human emotion so that they will build a strong foundation on the attitudes of the person. Secondly,

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

this affects the individual by exposing and securing their “boundless extension” and revealing their open-mindedness. The experience of jhana is the most relevant factor since the practice of the meditational journey is central in the Buddhist tradition.<sup>64</sup>

The prime discussion of this chapter will be on the Four Sublime States themselves where each would be related to a relevant literary piece that further illustrates its concept. First of all, the Four Sublime States achieved in Buddhist meditational practice are love (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*).

### **The First Sublime State of Love or Loving Kindness**

In dealing with the first sublime state of love, especially as an emotion imbued with kindness, there is a synthesis of ideas of humanitarian compassion and self-renunciation.<sup>65</sup> This state signifies that there should be no implication of ownership occurring, no selfish intentions and any prejudiced selection or discrimination. There should be an idea of equality, that every individual is entitled to one’s own suffering. This highlights the issue that individuals are called

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64 Sharf, Robert. “Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience.” *Numen*, 1995: 228-283.

65 Heine, Steven. “[untitled].” *Philosophy East and West* 35, no. 2 (1985): 221-223.

to love selflessly through a life-giving compassion given to those who are abandoned, loveless, empty and in despair, where one is willing to understand and help. The Buddha has termed this as the “liberation of the heart” or the “most sublime beauty.”<sup>66</sup>

The story of Austrian millionaire Karl Rabader<sup>67</sup> illustrates the first sublime state. Rabader is an Austrian homewares tycoon who lives in the small town of Telfs. Recently, he initiated a movement to help the poor living in Central and Latin America by selling his luxurious farmland in France, turning over his business, selling his latest model of Audi along with a small fleet of glider planes. Rabader announced that “wealth doesn’t create happiness. For 25 years, I worked like a slave for things I didn’t want or need. Now my dream is to have nothing.”<sup>68</sup> Rabader claimed to have lived a poor teenage life with a dysfunctional family and only relied on himself to support his educational endeavors. It was at that time he believed that there was nothing to do but make money. Halfway through his second degree in college, his housewares and interiors business took off and helped him financially cope with his needs. Later in his life, he describes that he was gradually becoming unhappy as he

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66 Nyanaponika, *The Four Sublime States*.

67 Dickson, E.J. “Nothing But Joy.” *Reader’s Digest Asia* 96, no. 573 (2010): 116-120.

68 *Ibid.*, 118.

was “growing richer and feeling worse.”<sup>69</sup> He states that there was a certain emptiness in his lavish lifestyle. In 2003, his wife, Irene, left him for another man. However, to Rabader, this was the greatest thing that could have happened to him. In his many travels, he observed and affirmed that “in terms of happiness, Europe, Japan and the United States were actually underdeveloped,” and considering his numerous luxuries, “I realized I didn’t need [them], the next step was to connect with other people.”<sup>70</sup> On one trip, Rabader met a carpenter with whom he offered an open-ended loan for a special kind of saw. The following year the carpenter paid him back, claiming that he already had a business that sustained his family and fulfilled him artistically. This experience prompted Rabader to launch his micro-credit movement. In 1994, Rabader began getting involved with several philanthropic projects for the poor in Latin and Central America. Along with economist Wolfgang Mauer, they established [mymicroedit.org](http://mymicroedit.org), a Web-based nonprofit organization that helps micro-investors with projects in developing countries. This site also became a medium for him to raffle off his house at 99 euros per ticket. Rabader decided to live in the mountains with only his laptop, two boxes of books, clothes, and a monthly stipend of 1,290

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69 *Ibid.*, 119.

70 *Ibid.*

dollars, of which he says he would only need half as much. Rabader explains that “the more options you have, the more you have to decide what’s important.” This story exemplifies several factors concerning the first state, including being selfless and generous in giving out help to those in need. The story highlights the point that Rabader was not being blinded by his material wealth but was actually enlightened by the lack of his spiritual food.

### **The Second Sublime State of Compassion**

The second state is compassion, which eases the individual to cope with suffering in the present and to be prepared to face that which lies ahead. Most men are self-centered and attentive only to their own grief and joy that they are blinded and deafened to the greater sufferings of others.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, compassion with regards to the hardships of others has been generally defined as an escape from one’s own suffering in life.<sup>72</sup> Finding and giving compassion in the midst of suffering is best exemplified by the following story entitled “Love After Quadriplegia: Louise and John McLaughlin” by Suzy Zail<sup>73</sup>:

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71 Nyanaponika, *The Four Sublime States*.

72 Thurman, Robert. “Buddhist Hermeneutics.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 46, no. 1 (1978): 19-39.

73 Zail, Suzy. “Love After Quadriplegia.” *Reader’s Digest Asia* 96, no. 575 (2011): 77.

*Irish bricklayer John was a 39-year-old divorced father of two when he met divorcee Louise, 22, in 1997. "John told me he loved me the first week we met," she smiles. "And he has continued to tell me every day since." But their cozy life together changed on the day a blood vessel burst in John's brain. For nine weeks he skittered between life and death. Doctors said if he did survive he would be quadriplegic in need of full-time nursing. John spent six months in a nursing home. Louise visited daily. "Every day, I told him not to die. I told him we were still going to live happily ever after," says Louise. "When I told my family and friends I was going to take him home, they worried about what it meant for my future, but I knew if I didn't, my life would never really be complete." The wedding took place in 2005. Louise retrained as a nurse and became her husband's caretaker. It's not how things used to be, but it's still intimacy. "When someone you love almost dies in front of you, it changes everything." John turns his head to look at his wife and smiles. "She's a rare person for taking me on," he whispers, his eyes misting over. "I'm not easy to live with." Louise shakes her head. "I love my life, and I wouldn't change it. I couldn't fix John, but I could bring him home, look after him and love him. And that's been easy."*

In the story, Louise was evidently the one who manifested compassion despite the difficulty of caring and adapting to the new life of taking care of a very sick husband. Through the act of selflessness, she shared in the sufferings of another man and carried it as she lived her life, exemplifying a clear manifestation of the second sublime state.

### The Third Sublime State of Emphatic Joy

Emphatic Joy announces that a small share of happiness can teach people how to seek and find real joy within themselves and spread their happiness to others as well. The third state is very expressive of the idea of joy given unto others and to celebrate with them. Such an idea of sharing can be identified with the modern Buddhist Matthieu Ricard.<sup>74</sup> The 64-year-old Frenchman who is also an author, photographer, former molecular geneticist, and researcher has been scientifically proclaimed as the “Happiest Man in the World” having been observed to have a “sharp spike in activity” in the area of the brain responsible for positive emotions such as happiness.<sup>75</sup> After more than 35 years of meditational practicing, Ricard has obtained proficiency in controlling his mind. With his book published in 2007, *Happiness: A Guide to Developing Life’s Most Important Skill*, he travels and speaks to students and corporate groups, sharing his profound insights on attaining happiness with which he simply summarizes as “a deep sense of serenity and fulfillment, a state that actually pervades and underlies all emotional states.”<sup>76</sup> He further relates happiness as looking inwards to find joy rather than depending on outward

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74 Kilponen, Paige. “The Happiest Man in the World.” *Reader’s Digest Asia* 96, no. 574 (2011): 100-104.

75 *Ibid.*, 102.

76 *Ibid.*

occurrences. He believes that people are capable of teaching themselves to be happy by beginning to train their minds. Ricard, influenced by his Buddhist practices on meditation, suggests that the most efficient way is to allow all thoughts and emotions to pass across the consciousness without lingering to distract us. He stresses that it is how we react to the things that are happening around us that spells one's happiness. Furthermore, Ricard identifies ego and self-centeredness as the major threats in a person's search for happiness. The moment one swerves the focus off of oneself and begins to concentrate on showing compassion to others is when genuine happiness is achieved. He concludes that "genuine happiness doesn't mean pleasant feelings one after the other. It's more like a cluster of qualities that we can develop as skills — like openness, genuine altruistic love, compassion, inner strength and inner peace."<sup>77</sup> This philosophy enacted by Ricard stands as an example derived from a Buddhist perspective itself, that the third state of sympathetic joy is purely innate and dependent on the person himself.

### **The Fourth Sublime State of Equanimity**

The final state is equanimity, which is categorized as a control over the wholeness of oneself, especially

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<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

on maintaining balance and calmness despite external interventions.<sup>78</sup> Equanimity requires “vigilant presence of mind” and not passive dreariness<sup>79</sup>, where the authenticity of it is gained by being able to meet the challenges, presented in the aforementioned subliminal states, with strength drawn from internal sources. Take, for instance, the story of the hand-less chef, Maricel Apatan<sup>80</sup>. The 22-year-old Filipina chef works in one of the Philippines’ five-star hotels, Edsa Shangri-La, where her disability did not give her special treatment from the other chefs, and also did not make the work any harder for her compared to the chefs without disabilities. Apatan lost her hand in September 2000 during an attack made by machete-wielding men in the remote area of Mindanao. Despite being deprived of one of the most important parts of her body, Apatan could not stand to be unproductive; she functioned well by studying the culinary arts and by working hard to support her sisters in Manila and parents in Mindanao. In deciding that her disability would not be a hindrance from attaining what she wanted in life, she became an inspiration to others: “I wanted others living with disabilities to believe it’s possible to live a normal

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78 Nyanaponika, *The Four Sublime States*.

79 *Ibid.*, 21.

80 Alonso, Ross Harper. “Recipe for Inspiration.” *Reader’s Digest Asia* 96, no. 575 (2011): 18-20.

life.”<sup>81</sup> The demeanour Apatan displayed, considering her history and the gruesome incident that occurred in her life, stands as an example of having a balanced state of mind despite external disturbances. The way she carried on with her desires in life explains a certainty that she is “vigilant” of the possibilities that lay ahead by drawing strength from her tragic experience.

Given the above overview of these four states, the decision to actually begin can be difficult. However, by looking closely to the key points of each sublime state, one can initialize a practice. The main concern of the first state, *mettā*, is benevolence. To be able to reach this state, one must contemplate on the benevolent acts one can do for others and on what charitable acts have already been done.<sup>82</sup> The feeling of friendliness and concern for all living beings should pervade within, and the feeling of hatred (anger, ill-will and resentment) should be removed.

In reaching the second state, *karuṇā*, one needs to convey an attitude of compassion, sympathy, pity and mercy.<sup>83</sup> Here, the person should reflect on how to help those who suffer and how to show compassion to those who

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81 *Ibid.*, 20.

82 Bogoda, Robert. A Simple Guide to Life. June 5, 2010. <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bogoda/wheel397.html> (accessed August 5, 2011).

83 *Ibid.*

are deprived of it. Entering this state stands as a reminder of the characteristic of wanting to relieve the pain of others by not being indifferent to other's hardships. The second state emphasizes that the individual should always selflessly embed generosity in their deeds without expecting anything in return.<sup>84</sup>

Muditā highlights the concept of joy and the celebration of it. This form of meditation instills the person with the ability to reflect on the things that give him happiness and how he can share this happiness with others. This principle is characterized by a desire to search for that one true happiness, even in simple things. Furthermore, the third state is "altruistic joy," which is the desire to see others rejoicing in their happiness.

While the second state allows a person to acquire other's sorrows, sympathetic joy is the sharing of positive energy. On the process of meditating in this state, one should disregard the material happiness present in his life and form a refuge out of intrinsic values.

The most difficult part of the meditation practice is the attainment of equanimity since this tries to establish an absolute balance of the mind in an "unbalanced world"<sup>85</sup> of

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84 Ibid.

85 Ibid.

misfortunes and various evils. Reaching this state allows a person to evaluate his perspectives, personality and progress through the practice of self-control that leads to a fullness of understanding.<sup>86</sup> After meditation, Kongtrul bids that the practitioner should “...not allow the feeling of resting evenly to dissipate, no matter what form of activity you engage in. Continually foster the feeling of knowing that all appearances, yourself, others, inanimate or animate, appear though they seem to be nothing — be like a child of illusion.”<sup>87</sup>

The Four Sublime States are important to the development of a person, especially in the spiritual aspect, as it eventually affects the way one relates to society, particularly on helping it become an environment of peace. From being generous, a person’s state becomes filled with the compassion to share in the suffering of others. Then upon surpassing that step, the sense of joy and eagerness to share arises. The attainment of a balanced mind only comes to those who have successfully fulfilled the first three states. Only then will a powerful transformation occur in the person who reaches the state of equanimity. Furthermore, the Four Sublime States are called “sublime” because they

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86 Nyanaponika, *The Four Sublime States*.

87 Kongtrul, Jamgon. *The Great Path of Awakening*. Shambhala Classics, 1987.

are concerned with the control and the practice of lofty spiritual qualities<sup>88</sup> and are elaborated on through the Buddha's words, such as in his lecture on integrating peace into society: "I have never yet been met with anything that was dearer to anyone than his own self. Since to others, to each one for himself, the self is dear, therefore let him who desires his own advantage not harm another."

In addition, the Buddha queries on the idea that the journey in reaching the absolute control of the mind is like a battle: "I do not fight with the world but the world fights with me." This implies that the world outside of meditation is crawling with distractions that pull a person away from his spiritual growth. The numerous evils present in the world try to lure individuals toward the wrong path. The idea of the Buddha, however, did not suggest that people should fight against it. On the contrary, it suggests being calm and composed — a quality present in the fourth state, Equanimity. Hence, if one is able to neglect the negativities present in his surroundings and retain a serenity on his own, it is possible for him to walk in the path of Enlightenment.<sup>89</sup>

Lastly, this provision of the Buddha regarding the mental and meditational states simply advocates harmony in

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88 Thich Vien Ly, *The Four Sublime States Doctrine and Practice in Buddhism*, Mitram Books, California, 1998

89 Ibid.

the community, and unity and love among the people.

*A monk suffuses the world in the four directions with a mind of benevolence, then above, and below, and all around — the whole world from all sides, completely, with a benevolent, all-embracing, great, boundless, peaceful and friendly mind ... Just as a powerful conch-blower makes himself heard with no great effort in all four [cardinal] directions, so too is there no limit to the unfolding of [this] heart-liberating benevolence. This is a way to communion with Brahma.<sup>90</sup>*

## SUMMARY OF CHAPTER 6

**The Four Sublime States arising from Buddhist Meditational Practices are:**

- 1. The Sublime State of Love and Loving-Kindness.**
  - 2. The Sublime State of Compassion**
  - 3. The Sublime State of Emphatic Joy**
  - 4. The Sublime State of Equanimity**
- **Loving-kindness towards the whole world means willing and wishing all sentient beings, including plants and animals, all good things and aiming for the happiness of all.**
  - **Compassion is hoping that all sentient beings, including plants and animals, become free from suffering.**

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90 Majjhimanikaya, tr. by Kurt Schmidt, Kristkeitz, Berlin, 1978, p.261

- **Emphatic Joy is rejoicing in the happiness and virtues of all sentient beings.**
- **Equanimity is the total acceptance of every consequence of living and dying be it success or failure, pleasure or pain, victory or defeat, for oneself and for all sentient beings.**

## Chapter 7

# Conclusion: On Buddhist Emptiness and Enlightenment

The Great Mindfulness Sutra, or the Mahāsatiṭṭhāna Sutta, summarizes the Smṛti-upasthāna.

*“The Blessed One said this: This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow & lamentation, for the disappearance of pain & distress, for the attainment of the right method, & for the realization of Unbinding — in other words, the four frames of reference. Which four?”*

*There is the case where a monk remains focused on the body in and of itself — ardent, alert, and mindful — putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on feelings... mind... mental qualities in and of themselves — ardent, alert, and mindful — putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.”<sup>91</sup>*

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91 Analayo, Satipatthana: The Direct Path to Realization, (Birmingham: Windhorse Publications, 2006)

When you really put to heart the meditational practices of the Smṛti-upasthāna, where would that lead you? Some would speculate that one would have a series of mini-enlightenment experiences. And yet one would also attain a mindfulness of loving-kindness, emphatic joy, compassion, and equanimity. If one achieves the Four Sublime States, where would that lead? Some would say it would lead to Nirvana or Enlightenment but one would also have to be mindful of enlightened states. If one is mindful of one's enlightened states, where would that lead?

Eventually it would all lead to emptiness. This is where true enlightenment arrives. Unlike the Western traditional concept of emptiness, the Buddhist concept of emptiness is actually akin to the modern physics view of emptiness wherein the “vacuum fills the void.” In the Big Bang theory, the universe arose from emptiness. In quantum physics, the vacuum is the source of the most volatile physics where particles arise out of nothingness. Emptiness in Buddhist parlance is the real reality of our existence. Emptiness is actually synonymous with Enlightenment. Albert Einstein once said, “The past, the present, and the future is a stubbornly persistent illusion.”<sup>92</sup>

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92 This quote was taken from Einstein's letter to the family of his lifelong friend Besso when Besso died.

*All conditioned dharmas  
 Are like a dream, an illusion, a bubble, a shadow  
 Like dew and like lightning  
 Thus they should be perceived<sup>93</sup>*

Emptiness is similar to the concept of non-duality. This means that if one simply accepts things as they are, one would realize that one is simply a part of the whole and that all things are one. Our experience of ourselves as someone separate with separate thoughts, sensations and feelings is actually a delusion. This is the reason why we are deluded into believing that we are separate from the universe when the fact is that we are all one. We only imagine that we are separate. Through the constant practice of the Smṛti-upasthāna, we will slowly shed our false imaginations and realize the truth of the oneness of all things in the spirit of emptiness.

Even our views about ourselves, our culture, and our society are all mental constructions. Our minds are conditioned by our society, as we are not really free to think, to feel, and to act. By practicing Smṛti-upasthāna, it will dawn on us that everything is but an appearance and a false projection of the mind. Our minds produce what we call reality, which is actually only an imagination. Mindfulness will remove all

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93 Vajra Prajnaparamita Sutra, Translated from the Chinese Version of Kumarajiva by Venerable Yifa, M.C Owens, P.M. Romaskiewicz, Buddha's Light Publishing, 2007, p. 72

of these obstacles to reality so that everything becomes a simple flow of experiences as they are. Without judgment and without interpretation we will encounter the real reality of emptiness, which is the source of all forms. This is the emptiness that affirms our oneness with the universe in the all-embracing compassion of beauty and mystery.

*Samadhi Raja Sutra*

*Know all things to be like this:  
A mirage, a cloud castle,  
A dream, an apparition,  
Without essence, but with qualities that can be seen.*

*Know all things to be like this:  
As the moon in a bright sky  
In some clear lake reflected,  
Though to that lake the moon has never moved.*

*Know all things to be like this:  
As an echo that derives  
From music, sounds, and weeping,  
Yet in that echo is no melody.*

*Know all things to be like this:  
As a magician makes illusions  
Of horses, oxen, carts and other things,  
Nothing is as it appears.*

*The Buddha*

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In the hustle and bustle of daily living, one's concerns and worries can sometimes become too overwhelming. At some point, we may ask ourselves, "Is there more to life than this?"

Meditation brings color back to a seemingly bland and colorless world and helps us realize the inherent beauty and mystery of life through living. Life can indeed be a celebration instead of the usual struggle for survival. Meditation can help us realize that beyond the display of sight and sound, beyond the drama of ups and downs, joy and pain, victory and defeat, there is a stable and immovable center of the spirit that enjoys all of these things without judgment and with perfect peace and equanimity.



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