1.3 Exploring Buddhist Practice
Meditation
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Introduction
To begin this section on meditation we will be looking at an excerpt from one of the Buddha’s discourses from the Pāli Canon, called ‘The Fruits of the Homeless Life.’ This has been chosen because it puts meditation in its context, showing how it fits into the Buddhist path. It describes the attitudes and mental states we need to develop to make meditation effective, and it also describes the effects of meditation, which go far beyond our experience on the meditation cushion.

Meditation is what first attracts many people to the Dharma, and we can sometimes see it as the most important part of Buddhism, and even as a stand-alone practice we can pursue in its own right. But traditionally meditation was not seen in this way. It is seen as just one part of an overall process of transformation, which is often summarised as the Threefold Path of ethics, meditation, and wisdom. The text we are going to look at brings the Threefold Path alive. It describes a total process of inner transformation, caused by a combination of meditation and changes in the way we live and act. It shows how combining these practices can progressively transform our attitudes, our emotions, and the way we see the world. And it describes how this process of transformation ultimately culminates in complete liberation.

The text does this in the context of the Buddha’s recommended style of practice for those who were able and willing to become homeless renunciants, at a time when there was still a lot of forest wilderness for homeless wanderers to live in, when ordinary householders seem to have been generally happy to support spiritual practitioners by giving them food, and in a climate where living and sleeping outdoors was possible for most of the year. We probably won’t be willing or able to practice in exactly this way, even if it were possible in our very different social, economic, and climatic conditions. But this doesn’t mean we can’t put the same principles into practice in our own spiritual lives, and it is the principles behind the lifestyle that we need to be looking for in this text.

Setting the scene
There are no questions for discussion with this text; instead you will be reading it through in the group, and discussing it as you do so. To set the scene:

The Buddha and 1250 of his followers are staying in a mango grove belonging to the physician of King Ajātasatru of Maghada. The King is infamous for having gained his throne by killing his father. He has a troubled mind because of his crime, and has been looking for spiritual advice, but his practical, no-nonsense turn of mind makes it difficult for him to accept that purely spiritual benefits are worth pursuing for their own sake. So he has been asking different spiritual teachers what benefits, visible here and now in this life, we could expect from living the spiritual life, but nobody has been able to convince him that there are any. It is a beautiful
Different ministers suggest a number of spiritual teachers, but the royal physician’s description of the Buddha, who he says “may well bring peace to Your Majesty’s heart”, obviously carries much more conviction than anyone else’s suggestion. So the King orders his riding elephants to be made ready, and sets off for the doctor’s mango grove with a ridiculous procession of hundreds of riding elephants bearing, among others, his hundreds of wives. When he gets into the countryside and has to get off his elephant and walk he is terrified by the darkness and silence, and has to be coaxed along by the doctor. Then he is astounded and very impressed to come across the Buddha’s followers sitting ‘in silence like a clear lake’. He wishes that his son – who will eventually kill him to get his throne – could have the same calm.

The King introduces himself, and then asks the Buddha, as he had asked others, what benefits visible in this life he could expect from following the spiritual path. The excerpt we are studying is part of the Buddha’s reply, which deeply impresses the King, so that he declares himself a lay follower, and confesses his father’s murder with regret.

The Place of Meditation in the Spiritual Life

Text from The Sāmaññaphala Sutta: The Discourse on the Fruits of the Homeless Life, adapted from the translation of Maurice Walsh, in The Long Discourses of the Buddha.

1. ‘This Dhamma is heard by a householder or a householder’s son. Having heard this Dhamma, he gains faith in the Tathāgata. Having gained this faith, he reflects: “The household life is close and dusty, the homeless life is free as air. It is not easy, living the household life, to live the fully-perfected noble life. Suppose I were to shave off my hair and beard, don yellow robes and go forth from the household life into homelessness!” And after some time, he abandons his property, leaves his circle of relatives, shaves off his hair and beard, dons yellow robes, and goes forth into the homeless life.

2. And having gone forth, he dwells restrained by the restraint of the rules, persisting in right behaviour, seeing danger in the slightest faults, observing the commitments he has taken on, devoted to the skilled and purified life, perfected in morality, with the sense-doors guarded, skilled in mindful awareness, and content.

3. And how, Sire, is a monk perfected in morality? Abandoning the taking of life, he dwells refraining from taking life, compassionate, trembling for the welfare of all living beings. Abandoning the taking of what is not given, he lives accepting what is given, without stealing. Abandoning unchastity, he lives aloof from the village-practice of sex. Abandoning false speech, he is a truth-speaker, one to be relied on. Abandoning malicious speech, he does not repeat here what he has heard there. He is a reconciler, rejoicing in peace, and speaking up for it. Abandoning harsh speech, he speaks what is pleasing to the ear, reaching the heart, urbane. Abandoning idle chatter, he speaks at the right time, what is correct and to the point. Thus he is perfected in morality.

4. And then Sire, that monk who is perfected in morality sees no danger from any side. Just as a duly-anointed king, having conquered his enemies, sees no danger from any side, so the monk, on account of his morality, sees no danger anywhere. He experiences in himself the blameless bliss that comes from maintaining this noble morality. In this way Sire, he is perfected in morality.
5. And how, Sire, is he a guardian of the sense-doors? Here a monk, on seeing an object with the eye, does not grasp at it. Because unskilled states would overwhelm him if he dwelt leaving this eye-faculty unguarded, so he develops restraint of the eye-faculty. On hearing a sound with the ear, on smelling an odour with the nose, on tasting a flavour with the tongue, on feeling an object with the body, on thinking a thought with the mind, he does not grasp at it. He develops restraint of the mind-faculty. He experiences within himself the blameless bliss that comes from maintaining this noble guarding of the faculties. In this way, Sire, a monk is a guardian of the sense-doors.

6. And how, Sire, is a monk accomplished in mindfulness and clear awareness? Here a monk acts with clear awareness in going forth and back, in looking ahead or behind him, in bending and stretching, in wearing his robe and carrying his bowl, in eating and drinking, in evacuating and urinating, in walking, standing, sitting, lying down, in speaking and in keeping silent. In this way, a monk is accomplished in mindfulness and clear awareness.

7. And how is a monk contented? Here, a monk is satisfied with a robe to protect his body, with alms to satisfy his stomach, taking only what he needs. Just as a bird flies hither and thither, burdened by nothing but its wings, so he is satisfied. In this way, Sire, a monk is contented.

8. Then he, equipped with this noble morality, with this noble restraint of the senses, with this noble contentment, finds a solitary lodging, at the root of a forest tree, in a mountain cave, a charnel-ground, or in a jungle-thicket. Then he sits down cross-legged, holding his body erect, and concentrates on keeping mindfulness established before him.

9. Abandoning worldly desires, he dwells with a mind freed from worldly desires, and his mind is purified of them. Abandoning ill-will, by compassionate love for the welfare of all living beings his mind is purified of ill-will. Abandoning sloth-and-torpor, perceiving light, clearly aware, his mind is purified of sloth-and-torpor. Abandoning worry-and-flurry, with a calmed mind his heart is purified of worry-and-flurry. Abandoning doubt, he dwells with doubt left behind.

10. Just as a man who had taken a loan to develop his business might pay off his debts, and might think: “Before this I developed my business by borrowing, but now it has prospered”, and he would rejoice and be glad about that.

11. Just as a man who was ill, with no appetite and weak in body, might after a time recover, and regain his appetite and bodily strength. And he would rejoice and be glad about that.

12. Just as a man might be in prison, and after a time he might be freed from his bonds. And he would rejoice and be glad about that.

13. Just as a man might be a slave, unable to go where he liked, and after some time he might be freed from slavery, able to go where he liked. And he would rejoice and be glad about that.

14. Just as a man might go on a journey through the desert, and after a time arrive safely at a village, and think: “Before this I was in danger, now I am safe at a village”, and he would rejoice and be glad about that.

15. As long, Sire, as a monk does not perceive the disappearance of the five hindrances in himself, he feels as if in debt, in sickness, in bonds, in slavery, on a desert journey. But when he
perceives the disappearance of the five hindrances in himself, it is as if he were freed from debt, from sickness, from bonds, from slavery, from the perils of the desert.

16. And when these five hindrances have left him, gladness arises in him, from gladness comes delight, from the delight in his mind his body is tranquillised, with a tranquil body he feels joy, and with joy his mind is concentrated. Being thus detached from unwholesome states, he enters and remains in the first jhāna, which is with thinking and pondering, born of detachment, filled with joy and [physical] delight. And with this delight and joy born of detachment, he so suffuses, drenches, fills and irradiates his body that there is no spot in his body that is untouched by this delight and joy born of detachment.

17. Just as a skilled bath-man, kneading the soap-powder with water, forms a soft lump, so that it becomes one oleaginous mass, so this monk suffuses, drenches, fills and irradiates his body, so that no spot remains untouched. This, Sire, is a fruit of the homeless life, visible here and now.

18. Again, a monk, with the subsiding of thinking and pondering, by gaining inner tranquillity and oneness of mind, enters and remains in the second jhāna, which is without thinking and pondering, born of concentration, filled with joy and [physical] delight. And with this delight and joy born of concentration he so suffuses his body that no spot remains untouched. This, Sire, is a fruit more excellent and perfect than the former ones.

19. Just as a spring feeding a lake, the water welling up from below, would suffuse, fill and irradiate that cool water, so that no part of the pool was untouched by it, so, with this delight and joy born of concentration he so suffuses his body that no spot remains untouched. This, Sire, is a fruit more excellent and perfect than the former ones.

20. Again, a monk with the fading away of [physical] delight remains imperturbable, mindful and clearly aware, and experiences in himself that joy of which the Noble Ones say: “Happy is he who dwells with equanimity and mindfulness”, and he enters and remains in the third jhāna. And with this joy devoid of [physical] delight he so suffuses his body that no spot remains untouched.

21. Just as if, in a pond of lotuses, in which the flowers are fed from the water’s depths, those lotuses would be suffused with the cool water, so with this joy devoid of delight the monk so suffuses his body that no spot remains untouched. This is a fruit of the homeless life, more excellent and perfect than the former ones.

22. Again, a monk, having gone beyond pleasure and pain, and with the disappearance of former gladness and sadness, enters and remains in the fourth jhāna, which is beyond pleasure and pain, and purified by equanimity and mindfulness. And he sits suffusing his body with mental purity and clarification, so that no part of his body is untouched by it.

23. Just as if a man were to sit wrapped from head to foot in a white garment, so that no part of him was untouched by that garment, so his body is suffused, with mental purity and clarification. This is a fruit of the homeless life, more excellent and perfect than the former ones.

24. And so, with mind concentrated and cleansed, spotless, malleable, workable, and having gained imperturbability, he directs his mind towards knowing and seeing. It is just as if there were a gem, clear, bright, unflawed, and a man might take it in his hand and describe it clearly.
In the same way a monk with mind concentrated and cleansed directs his mind towards knowing and seeing. This is a fruit of the homeless life, more excellent than the former ones.

25. And he, with mind concentrated, applies his mind to the production of a mind-made body. And out of this body he produces another body, having a form mind-made. It is just as if a man were to draw a snake from its [old] skin. In the same way a monk, with mind concentrated, directs his mind to the production of a mind-made body. He draws that body out of this body, mind-made. This is a fruit of the homeless life more excellent and perfect than the former ones.

26. And with mind concentrated, purified and cleansed, malleable, and having gained imperturbability, he applies and directs his mind to the knowledge of the destruction of the corruptions. And through his knowing and seeing his mind is delivered from the corruption of sense-desire, from the corruption of becoming, from the corruption of ignorance, and the knowledge arises in him: “This is deliverance!” And he knows: “Birth is finished, the noble life has been led, done is what had to be done, there is nothing further here.”

27. Just as if, Sire, in the midst of the mountains there were a pond, clear as a mirror, where a man standing on the bank could see oyster-shells, gravel-banks, and shoals of fish. And he might think: “This pond is clear, there are oyster-shells… ” and so on, just so, with mind concentrated, he knows: “Birth is finished, the noble life has been led, done is what had to be done, there is nothing further here.” This, Sire, is a fruit of the homeless life, visible here and now, which is more excellent and perfect than the previous fruits. And, Sire, there is no fruit of the homeless life that is more excellent than this.’

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. In verse one, the “going forth” is a spiritual death, the death of the old person, who leaves his old identity and role completely behind, and even changes his appearance and perhaps name to mark this death. Why is this important?

2. We probably are not up for the radical “going forth” the Buddha describes, but how can we get some of this?

3. Verse three brings out the importance of positive emotion. It also brings out that ethics is about cultivating positive emotion, not about sticking to the letter of a set of rules, and that concern for the wellbeing of others is ideally part of our motivation for practicing.

   Why is positive emotion, and concern for others in particular, needed to meditate effectively and develop wisdom?

4. In verse four, “…that monk who is perfected in morality sees no danger from any side… He experiences in himself the blameless bliss that comes from maintaining this noble morality”. Why does being ethical free us from anxiety and a sense of danger?

5. In verse five, the monk is encouraged to guard the gates of the senses. Why might guarding the gates of the senses help us in our meditation practice?
6. In verse eight, the monk, “equipped ... with this noble restraint of the senses, with this noble contentment” goes to his solitary lodging to meditate. Would the monk be able to meditate effectively there while still subject to distraction and discontent? What would he probably experience if he tried to?

7. How might the ethical practice the monk has already undertaken help him get beyond the hindrances?

8. If the monk is already in such a good state, e.g. trembling for the welfare of all beings and completely contented, how could he still be subject to the hindrances of sense desire and ill-will?

9. What are your responses to the descriptions of the dhyānas, and the traditional images? Do they sound like a fruit of spiritual practice that is worth striving for? Have people had any experiences resembling these, and if so what were the circumstances that gave rise to this?
1.3.2
The Triratna System of Meditation

This text is an edited version of A System of Meditation by Sangharakshita, in A Guide to the Buddhist Path.

Introduction
Buddhism grew out of meditation. It grew out of the Buddha’s meditation under the Bodhi tree, 2,500 years ago. It grew therefore out of meditation in the highest sense: not simply meditation in the sense of concentration, nor even the experience of higher states of consciousness, but meditation in the sense of contemplation – a direct, total, all-comprehending vision and experience of ultimate Reality. It is out of this that Buddhism grew, and out of this that it has continually refreshed itself down through the ages.

Of the many methods of meditation developed within the Buddhist tradition, in my own teaching I have taken a few to form what can be called a system. The more important and well-known methods of meditation in this system are the Mindfulness of Breathing, the Mettā Bhāvanā, Visualisation Practice, the Recollection of the Six Elements, and the Just Sitting practice. We need a progressive arrangement of the methods of meditation, a definite cumulative sequence that takes us forward step by step.

The Mindfulness of Breathing
In such a series, first comes the ‘Mindfulness of Breathing’. This is usually the first method we teach in Triratna, for various reasons. One does not need to know any distinctively Buddhist teaching to practise it. And it is the starting point for the development of mindfulness in general. We start by being mindful of our breath, but that is only the beginning. We extend this until we are aware of all our bodily movements. We become more aware of the world around us and more aware of other people. We become aware, ultimately, of Reality itself. But we start with the Mindfulness of Breathing.

The development of mindfulness is the key to psychological integration. All too often we do not have any real individuality. We are a bundle of conflicting desires, even conflicting selves, loosely tied together with the thread of a name and an address. These desires and selves are both conscious and unconscious. The Mindfulness of Breathing helps to bind them together; it tightens the string, so that they are not so loose in the middle. It makes more of a recognizable bundle of these different desires and selves.

The practice of mindfulness helps to create real unity and harmony between the different aspects of ourselves. Through mindfulness we begin to create true individuality. Individuality is essentially integrated; an unintegrated individuality is a contradiction in terms. Unless we become integrated, unless we are really individuals, there is no real progress. There is no real progress because there is no commitment, and you cannot commit yourself unless there is just
one individuality to commit itself. Only an integrated person can commit themselves, because all their energies are flowing in the same direction; one energy, one interest, one desire, is not in conflict with another. Awareness, mindfulness, at many different levels, is therefore of crucial importance – it is the key to the whole thing.

But there is a danger that in the course of our practice of mindfulness we develop what I have come to term ‘alienated awareness’. This arises when we are aware of ourselves without experiencing our emotions. Therefore, as well as practising mindfulness, it is very important that we establish contact with our emotions, whatever they are. Ideally we will establish contact with our positive emotions, but it is better to establish real, living contact with our negative emotions (which means acknowledging them and experiencing them, but not indulging them) than to remain in an alienated state and not experience our emotions at all.

**The Mettā Bhāvanā**

It is here that the ‘Mettā Bhāvanā’ and similar practices come in: not just developing loving-kindness but also compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity, as well as śraddhā, faith. All of these are based on mettā. Mettā, loving-kindness, friendliness, is the fundamental positive emotion. As I come into contact with more and more Order members, Mitras, Friends, and people outside the Movement, I see more and more clearly the importance of positive emotions in our lives – both spiritual and worldly. I would say that the development of positive emotions like friendliness, joy, peace, faith, and serenity, is absolutely crucial for our development as individuals. It is crucial for each of us individually, and for all of us in association with one another. Therefore the Mettā Bhāvanā, as the practice for developing the basic positive emotion of mettā, is absolutely crucial.

**The Six-Element Practice**

But suppose you have developed mindfulness and all these positive emotions. Suppose you are a very aware, positive, responsible person, even a true individual, psychologically speaking. Then what is the next step? The next step is death! The happy, healthy individual that you now are must die. In other words, the subject-object distinction itself must be transcended. The mundane individuality must be broken up. Here the key practice is the practice of the recollection of the six elements.

There are other practices which help us to break up our present mundane individuality: the recollection of impermanence, the recollection of death, and the śūnyatā (emptiness) meditations. But the śūnyatā meditations can become rather abstract and intellectual. The recollection of the six elements – which involves giving back the earth, water, fire, and other elements in us to the earth, water, fire and so on in the universe, relinquishing in turn each element, and even our individualized consciousness – is the most concrete and practical way of practising at this stage. This is the key practice for breaking up our sense of relative individuality.

The six-element practice is itself a śūnyatā meditation, because it helps us to realise the voidness of our own mundane individuality – it helps us to die. There are many translations for the word śūnyatā. Sometimes it is translated ‘voidness’, sometimes ‘relativity’. But śūnyatā could well be rendered ‘death’, because it is the death of everything conditioned. It is only when the conditioned individuality dies that the unconditioned Individuality begins to emerge.

The recollection of the six elements and the other śūnyatā meditations are vipaśyanā (Pāli vipassanā) or insight meditations, whereas the Mindfulness of Breathing and the Mettā
Bhāvanā are Śamatha or pacification-type meditations. Śamatha develops and refines our conditioned individuality, but vipaśyanā breaks down that individuality, or rather it enables us to see right through it.

**Visualisation practices**

When the mundane self has died, what happens next? In not very traditional language, out of the experience of the death of the mundane self the transcendental self arises. In a visualisation practice, the visualised figure before you, the figure of a Buddha or Bodhisattva, sublime and glorious though it may be, is, in fact, you. It is the new you – you as you will be if only you allow yourself to die. In certain forms of visualisation practice we recite and meditate first of all upon the śūnyatā mantra, which means ‘om, all things are pure by nature; I too am pure by nature’. Here pure means Void, pure of all concepts, pure of all conditionality, because we cannot be reborn without passing through death.

There are many different kinds of visualisation practice. There are many different Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, dakas, ḍākinīs, dharmapālas that one can visualise. The practices most widely current in the Order pertain to Śākyamuni, Amitābha, Padmasambhava, Avalokiteśvara, Tārā, Manjūghoṣa, Vajrapāṇi, Vajrasattva, and Prajñāpāramitā. Every Order member has his or her own visualisation practice, together with the mantra pertaining to it, which they received at the time of ordination. I would personally like all the more experienced Order members to be thoroughly familiar with at least two or three different kinds of visualisation practice.

The general significance of visualisation practice comes out with particular clarity in the Vajrasattva practice. Vajrasattva is white in colour: white for purification. Here the purification consists in the realisation that in the ultimate sense you have never become impure: you are pure from the beginning, pure from the beginningless beginning, pure by nature, pure essentially. In the depths of your being you are pure of all conditionality, or rather you are pure of the very distinction between conditioned and Unconditioned, and hence are Void.

In visualisation practices when we see Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, these are not outside us; they are the manifestation of our own True Mind, the manifestation of the dharmakāya, and we can identify with them and thus be spiritually reborn, in a transcendental mode of existence.

**Summary of the four stages**

I hope that we can now begin to see the whole system of meditation, at least in outline. There are four great stages, which I will briefly recapitulate. The first is the stage of integration. That is the first thing you must do in connection with meditation. Integration is achieved mainly through practice of the Mindfulness of Breathing, as well as with the help of mindfulness and awareness in general. Here, in this stage, we develop an integrated self.

The second great stage is the stage of emotional positivity. This is achieved mainly through the development of mettā and so on. Here the integrated self is raised to a higher, more refined and at the same time more powerful level.

Then there is the third great stage of spiritual death, achieved mainly through the recollection of the six elements, but also through the recollection of impermanence, the recollection of death, and the śūnyatā meditations. Here the refined self is seen through, and we experience the Void, experience śūnyatā, experience spiritual death.
And then, fourthly, there is the stage of spiritual rebirth. This is achieved through the visualisation and mantra recitation practice. This, in broad outline, is the system of meditation.

But perhaps you are wondering: Where does ordination fit in? Where does the arising of the Bodhicitta fit in? What about the ‘Just Sitting’ practice? I will deal briefly with each of these questions.

The place of ordination
Where does ordination fit in? Ordination means Going for Refuge. Going for Refuge means commitment. One cannot commit oneself unless one is reasonably integrated. Otherwise you withdraw the commitment, because the total being was not involved. You also cannot commit yourself unless you have a certain amount of emotional positivity, otherwise you have nothing to keep you going. For commitment, there should also be a faint glimmer of Perfect Vision. Ordination therefore comes somewhere between the second and third stage. One might say that it comes when one has just begun to enter on the third stage, the stage of spiritual death.

The Bodhicitta
Secondly, where does the arising of the Bodhicitta fit in? Bodhicitta is often translated as ‘Will to Enlightenment’, but it is not an egoistic will, it is more of the nature of a supra-individual aspiration. It arises when the individuality in the ordinary sense has to some extent been seen through. The Bodhicitta is the aspiration to gain Enlightenment for the benefit of all – that is how it is usually popularly phrased. Not that there is a ‘real individual’ seeking to gain Enlightenment for the sake of ‘real others’. The Bodhicitta arises beyond self and beyond others – though not without self and others. It arises when the mundane self is seen through, but before the transcendental self has really emerged. It arises when one is no longer seeking Enlightenment for the (so-called) self, but has not yet fully dedicated oneself to gaining it for the (so-called) others. The Bodhicitta therefore arises in between the third and the fourth stages, between the stage of spiritual death and the stage of spiritual rebirth. The Bodhicitta is the seed of spiritual rebirth. There is an anticipation of this at the time of the private ordination when one receives the mantra. The mantra is the seed of the Bodhicitta.

After all, when one is ordained one has gone forth, at least psychologically, if not physically. One has died to the group. One aspires after Enlightenment. And one aspires not just for one’s own sake, but for the sake, ultimately, of all. It is not surprising, therefore, that at that time some faint reflection of the Bodhicitta should arise, at least in some cases.

Just Sitting
Thirdly, what about the ‘Just Sitting’ practice? It is difficult to say much more about this than ‘when one just sits, one just sits’. In all the other meditations, conscious effort is required. But one must be careful that this conscious effort does not become too willed, even too wilful, and in order to counteract this tendency we can practise Just Sitting, in between the other methods. There is a period of activity, during which you are practising, say, the Mindfulness of Breathing or the Mettā Bhāvanā, and then a period of passivity, a period of receptivity. In this way we go on: activity – passivity – activity – passivity – and so on. Mindfulness of Breathing – Just Sitting – Mettā Bhāvanā – Just Sitting – Recollection of the Six Elements – Just Sitting –

1 The word ‘Bodhicitta’ literally means something like ‘Mind (or heart) of Enlightenment’. In Mahayana Buddhism, the Bodhicitta is often seen as arising when our motivation for spiritual development becomes more about the well-being of others than about our own happiness. This is seen as the supremely important spiritual event this side of Enlightenment, because we have begun to genuinely transcend our egocentric motivations.
Visualisation – Just Sitting. We can go on in this way all the time, having a rhythm and balance in our meditation practice. There is taking hold of, and letting go; there is grasping, and opening up; there is action, and non-action. Thus we achieve a perfectly balanced practice of meditation, and the whole system of meditation becomes complete.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. “All too often we do not have any real individuality. We are a bundle of conflicting desires, even conflicting selves, loosely tied together with the thread of a name and an address.” Do you agree with this statement? What symptoms would we expect to see in someone for whom it was true? What would someone who had what Sangharakshita describes as ‘true individuality’ be like?

2. Why might the mindfulness of breathing help us to integrate the different parts of ourselves and develop more individuality?

3. “I would say that the development of positive emotions like friendliness, joy, peace, faith, and serenity, is absolutely crucial for our development as individuals.” Do you agree? Why, or why not?

4. What is your emotional response to the idea of spiritual death? Do you think there might be a connection between spiritual death and insight into the true nature of reality?

5. How do you respond to the idea of visualisation practice? Do you think there could be a connection between visualisation practice and the development of a ‘mind-made body’ described in the text we looked at last week?

6. In this text and the last one we looked at two different descriptions of the process of spiritual growth. Do you think these are in conflict with one another? Are there any similarities? Which do you think is most applicable to your own situation?

7. Which stage or stages of Sangharakshita’s system of meditation do you think you should give most priority to? Before going beyond the first two stages we might ask ourselves:

   a. Do I find it easy to carry out my resolutions? Can I stick at long term tasks and projects? How much energy do I have, and how effectively do I use it? Do I tend to change my mind or switch from one enthusiasm to another? How much inner conflict and anxiety do I experience? (All relate to integration.)

   b. How positive and upbeat is my emotional response to the world and other people? Am I generally happy most of the time? How often do I complain, or feel low, negative, or resentful? (All relate to positive emotion.)
Introduction
In the first text of this part of the course the Buddha described the hindrances that may stop us from focussing on the object of meditation – these were described as ‘worldly’ desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, ‘worry and flurry’, and doubt. These five hindrances are not caused by meditation – they are mental habits we are prone to in everyday life, and when our enthusiasm and motivation to meditate is not strong they are likely to assert themselves when we meditate.

Probably all meditators experience all of the five hindrances at some time, and working with them can be a profitable way of getting to know our own mental processes and learning to manage our mind, our energy, and our emotions. But we shouldn’t get the impression that meditation is just about working with the hindrances. If we approach meditation in the right way and set up the right conditions we can often leave our old mental habits far behind for a while, opening the gateway to mental states we perhaps have never experienced in everyday life.

In the following passage Kamalashila describes how we can use the positive elements in our meditation experience to take us past the five hindrances, and also how we can work with the hindrances when they do arise. You will find more information about ways of working in meditation in the book from which this passage is adapted: Meditation by Kamalashila, which includes an appendix giving a detailed list of ways of counteracting specific hindrances.

How to Work in Meditation
Text an edited extract from Meditation, Kamalashila, pp 49-57.

Appreciating concentrated states of mind
Even if you have only tried the Mindfulness of Breathing once, you will probably have discovered something about the nature of concentration. Even if it was just for a split second, you probably experienced some clarity of mind. If so, you’ll have a sense of what it is like to be without all the distractions, images, and thoughts which usually clatter away in the mind. A concentrated mind is happy; it is clear, like a blue summer sky. The more concentrated you become in meditation practice, the more you will find these distracted thoughts dissolving away. In fact when one is very absorbed in meditation there may be almost no thought at all. We usually identify mental experience with thoughts. But the experience of meditation shows us that thinking is not necessarily the most important activity that happens in our mind. We may discover that our mind can be at its clearest, richest, and most refined when there is virtually no thought at all.
A popular myth about meditation is that it involves ‘making your mind go blank’. But thought-free awareness is a very positive and natural thing. It is certainly not confined to meditation. We can get so happily absorbed, so ‘wrapped up’ in an activity, that thoughts simply do not arise.

**The elements of meditation**

Before we start looking at possible distractions and hindrances, it is useful to know roughly what we are aiming for. When we meditate, we should be looking for an absorbed, balanced, happy, concentrated state of mind. And it’s helpful to have some expectation that this happy state of concentration is ‘just round the corner’, or ‘just beneath the surface’. In fact there is always some degree of concentration present, even when we are distracted! If we have this attitude it is much more likely that deeper concentration will arise.

Meditation is like flying a glider, sailing with the wind, or surfing. We need to take the opportunities offered by the elements of meditation. We need to ride the warm air currents, use the power of the wind, launch ourselves skilfully in and out of the waves. And if we are to do so, we need to be aware of the positive potential of the states that arise in our mind. We need to be ready to ‘ride’ our mental states as they arise.

One example is pleasure and enjoyment. If we notice that we are experiencing a pleasant state of peacefulness – even if it is very slight – in the midst of an otherwise dull or distracted state of mind, this feeling is to be encouraged. We can allow this feeling to continue, and simply experience and enjoy it, as we concentrate on the object of our meditation. We should avoid getting distracted by the feeling, and simply use it as a support for our concentration. There is a bright energy in pleasure that we can learn to channel into our practice, rather than allowing it to divert our attention.

Similar to this is inspiration – deep joy and excitement – which can even be felt physically, in the form of ‘goose-pimples’ and ‘rushing’ of pleasure. Again, we can encourage this, include it as an aspect of our concentration. Another kind of recollection that can aid our concentration is the more sober, patient kind of determination – we feel deeply that we want to meditate, that we don’t want to be distracted, that we want to grow and develop. This kind of motivation can be profoundly moving. Another such aid can be the sense of concentration itself. As they grow, concentration and clarity of thought have their own distinct feeling-tones which we can learn to recognize and encourage.

We need to get to know these allies of meditation – to anticipate them, to utilize their aid, and to ride upon their positive influence. The more use we make of these allies, the less we shall have to be concerned with the hindrances to meditation.

**Hindrances to meditation**

Paying attention to just one thing, as we do in meditation, is not always easy. There is often a semi-conscious resistance from those parts of ourselves which want to stay in the ordinary sense-world and do other things. There are five recognizable kinds of hindrance to concentration, and everyone experiences all of them from time to time. If you know what they are, you can recognize them when they arise – perhaps before they take you over!

The five hindrances are:

1. Desire for sense experience
2. Ill will
3. Restlessness and anxiety
4. Sloth and torpor
5. Doubt and indecision

1. Desire for sense experience
Desire for sense experience is the most basic kind of distraction. We aren’t particularly interested in the meditation, so our mind keeps getting drawn back to the sense-world. We haven’t yet learned how to find pleasure in concentration, so we can’t help looking for it in pleasurable sense experiences. If we hear a sound, it seems so interesting that we start listening to it. We may have many pleasant thoughts – about what we could be doing this evening, about what we could have to eat, or ideas we have recently read about. These impulses are perfectly natural in themselves – but they make concentration impossible.

2. Ill will
Ill will is a variant of the previous hindrance: this time our interest is stuck in some painful experience. We are irritated – by something or someone – and we can’t let it go. We can’t stop thinking about the way we have been mistreated and about what we’d like to say, or do, to even the score. Or maybe there is some external sound, or smell, which irritates us so much that we cannot stop thinking about it. Perhaps some idea or opinion has struck a wrong note, and we feel we must analyse all its faults in detail. So long as this is going on, it is impossible to concentrate on anything else.

3. Restlessness and anxiety
Restlessness and anxiety gives us no peace – we cannot settle down and concentrate our mind. We need to slow down. We are ‘speedy’, going too fast. Either the body is restless and fidgeting, or the mind is anxious – or both are happening at the same time! A restless body and mind might be the result of insufficient preparation. Maybe we sat down to meditate too soon after some stimulating activity; or maybe there is a lot on our mind at present; perhaps there is something weighing on our conscience. If we can work patiently with this situation, meditation practice itself will eventually harmonize such conflicts.

4. Sloth and torpor
With sloth and torpor the hindrance to our concentration is dullness of mind. We feel tired, and our body feels heavy. There is vacuity in the mind (that’s the torpor) and heaviness in the body (sloth). Sometimes physical sloth can be so overwhelming that our head nods or we start snoring! The causes for this hindrance may lie simply in physical or mental tiredness, or our digestion may be coping with the onslaught of a recent meal. But it sometimes seems that psychological factors may be involved – perhaps the resistance has arisen due to some unacknowledged emotion. Again, it could also be a reflex of the previous hindrance, restless mental activity leading to exhaustion! We may sometimes alternate between restlessness and dullness, both in and out of meditation. If so, this demonstrates a need to find some new kind of balance.

5. Doubt and indecision
Can I, with all my problems, hope to get anywhere with meditation – especially with this meditation? Is this kind of meditation practice really any good? Can it actually do anything for me? Is this teacher any use? – Does he really know what he’s talking about? And how would I know, anyway?
All this is doubt – and it is also indecision, since in this state of mind we cannot make up our mind and get on with the concentration. We end up prevaricating, ‘sitting on the fence’ – we lose our motivation. Doubt, in this sense, is a very serious hindrance to meditation.

There is nothing wrong with the sincere doubts that we are sure to have about meditation and its effects. There is bound to be a degree of uncertainty in our mind; some things can only be found out from experience. To a certain extent we have to take what we are told on trust and discover the truth through our own experimentation. But we can do that only by giving ourselves wholeheartedly to our experimenting. The doubting, over-sceptical frame of mind might often stem from self-doubt, or a rationalisation of self-doubt. We can hardly expect to concentrate without some confidence that we will be able to do it.

**Learning from the hindrances**

These five hindrances are a useful check-list for assessing how a session of meditation is going. The most important thing is to recognize the hindrance as a hindrance. Very often the act of recognition will itself weaken the hindrance. However, there may be some tendency to avoid the recognition. Most people’s hindrances have their own style of ‘protection’ built into them. Sloth and torpor, for example, may succeed in completely walling itself off from our recognition. It’s like when we don’t want to get up in the morning: our mind firstly doesn’t want to know and, secondly, can keep finding good ‘reasons’ for lying in, just for another five minutes. When we’re taken over by ill will, we probably won’t want to stop picking on faults and running our minds over all the painful, unpleasant things that have happened to us. And our doubts can immediately fulfil their own prophecies.

We need to recognize clearly that we are entertaining a hindrance to concentration – the first principle is acknowledgement that the hindrance is actually there. It’s no good carrying on meditating regardless, trying to ignore it and wishing that it would go away. That approach just leads to headaches and sloth and torpor! You need to take responsibility for the hindrance. You should accept that for the time being this is your hindrance and that you need to do something about it. In meditation, you need to acknowledge each new mental state as it arises. Guilt can be a problem for some of us. Many people don’t like to think that they could experience emotions like hatred, or animal-like cravings for food and sex. Yet when their meditation experience forces them to acknowledge that in fact they do, they may feel unduly bad about it. Such an attitude is extreme and unrealistic, and blocks the possibility of progress. In meditation we need to cultivate a positive view of ourselves, to have faith in our spiritual potential.

**Creative use of antidotes**

There are a number of ways we can work against the hindrances. The first is to consider the consequences of allowing the hindrance to increase unchecked. What if we simply did nothing about our tendency to distraction, to hatred, or to doubt? Clearly, it would increase — our character would become progressively dominated by that trait. If we reflect on this, the importance of what we are doing may become clear.

The second is to cultivate the opposite quality. If there is doubt, cultivate confidence. If there is sloth, cultivate energy. If there is restlessness, cultivate contentment and peace. If the mind is too tight, relax it; if it is too loose, sharpen it. In other words, whenever a negative mental state gets in the way of our concentration, we try to cultivate some positive quality that overcomes or neutralizes it.
The third antidote is to cultivate a sky-like attitude. Sometimes the more we resist a particular mental state, the stronger it seems to get. If the previous two methods don’t work, try the ‘sky-like attitude’: the mind is like the clear blue sky, the hindrances are like clouds. With this way of working, we accept the fact that the hindrance has ‘got in’, and simply observe it. We watch it play itself out in our mind – we watch the fantasies, the worries, the images – we watch whatever arises. We watch, but we try not to get involved. Getting involved only feeds the hindrance. If we observe patiently, without getting involved with the hindrance, it will eventually lose its power and disperse.

Fourthly, there is suppression. This is something of a last resort: we just say ‘no’ to the hindrance, and push it aside. This is most effective when the hindrance is weak, and when we are quite convinced of the pointlessness of playing host to it. If the hindrance is very strong – or if there is an element of emotional conflict – we may find that using this method creates unhelpful side-effects. Tension, lack of feeling, and mental dullness commonly result from an over-forceful approach. The best rule of thumb is therefore to use suppression only with weak hindrances. If we are in a positive, clear state of mind, it can be quite easy to turn such a hindrance aside.

Finally, there is Going for Refuge. Sometimes, we completely fail to deal with the hindrances; we spend the whole of a meditation session, or part of it, in a distracted state of mind. When this happens, it is important not to lose heart. We need to see that session of practice in the perspective of our overall development. Unconscious tendencies are strong in all of us, and sometimes there is bound to be struggle. Some good effects are certain to result from that effort, even though we didn’t experience its fruits in that meditation! Going for Refuge is not so much a way of working against the hindrances as an attitude with which we try to connect after a meditation session. We need to reaffirm our commitment to our practice – in traditional terms, we need to Go for Refuge – to our development of higher human qualities in the direction of Enlightenment (symbolized by the Buddha), to his teaching (the Dharma), and to all those who practise it (the Sangha).

**Balanced effort**
You should make all these efforts in a balanced way – you need to tread a middle path between too much and too little effort. If you are too easy-going and lazy – if you don’t make any particular effort to become concentrated, don’t encourage positive qualities, don’t bother to avoid the hindrances – you will tend to drift in a hazy, unfocused state of mind. That is one extreme. On the other hand, if you force yourself too hard you will tend to become rigid and inflexible. There will probably be some kind of reaction: force can lead to dullness or headaches. You can find a middle way between these two extremes by ensuring that there is just enough tension, and just enough relaxation. We need to relax when our mind feels too tight, sharpen when it feels too loose.

When we get beyond these hindrances and achieve a steady stream of balanced concentration, we will become especially relaxed and especially energized, both at the same time. When these two states – the bright, joyful energy, and the deep calm – arise together, we enter a state of absorption. This is a state of consciousness known traditionally as dhyāna in Sanskrit, (jhāna in Pāli).

**Some auspicious signs**
If we practise regularly we will soon notice the benefits our meditation is having. We will probably see some signs of progress during our meditation itself – perhaps feeling unaccountably happy and peaceful. Ecstatic sensations of bliss may sometimes arise. We will
also find outside meditation that we are happier, that our life seems smoother, more under our control. We will probably find that our thoughts and ideas are clearer, and that our outlook is more expansive and creative. We may even find that our dreams have become unusually vivid and colourful. These are all typical results of meditation.

Our progress may also show itself in less definite ways. We may simply notice that there seems to have been some kind of indefinable change. It may even be the response of other people that brings it to our attention – we may find people are more attracted towards us than before. Perhaps they can sense that we are more inwardly free and content.

These inner changes may also present us with some challenges. Meditation can stir up a wealth of rich new feelings and emotions, and we may be unsure of what to do with them. We may start seeing our life very differently and may feel like making some fundamental changes. Such experiences are to be welcomed; they show us that we are breaking through some of our basic psychological limitations. It is important, though, that we understand what is happening. Meditation really can change people’s lives, and we need to participate willingly and actively in the process of change – if that’s what we want. If we don’t actually want to change – perhaps we just wanted something to help us relax after work – no harm is being done, but we should be aware that the meditation we are practising is essentially about spiritual transformation, and that its effects will go deep.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What positive experiences – perhaps pleasure, inspiration, or the ‘taste’ of concentration – have you had so far in your meditation practice? How could you use these to motivate yourself and give impetus to your meditation?

2. Which of the five hindrances do you experience most in your everyday life? Are there changes you could make outside meditation that would reduce the habit-energy you give to the hindrance, or help you develop its opposite?

3. Which of the five hindrances do you experience most strongly or most often in meditation? If this is not the hindrance you chose in question two, could there be something about your approach to meditation that encourages this hindrance?

4. Which of the “creative antidotes” to the hindrances do you find most useful? Are there any you haven’t used so far that you think you might find useful?

5. Do you need to make more effort or to be less wilful in meditation – is your tendency to be too lazy, or too rigid? (Or perhaps you get it just right?)

6. Has your meditation practice so far had any positive effects on your everyday life?
Introduction
Last week we looked at the mental habits that can get in the way of meditation. This week we look at what lies beyond these habits – the states we can get access to in meditation – using another text from the same book.

Access Concentration and the First Four 'Dhyānas’
Text condensed from Meditation, Kamalashila, chapter 4.

Dhyāna and psychological integration
Sometimes when we meditate we may find blissful feelings arising spontaneously. Such feelings can range from mild pleasure to an almost overwhelming ecstasy – the experience can sometimes be so beautiful that we shed tears. People often blush, find their hair standing on end, or feel ‘goose-pimples’. What is more, their ability to concentrate may enter a completely new dimension of lucidity and calmness. Whatever is happening? In psychological terms, they are directly experiencing what is known as the process of integration: somewhere, disparate parts of the psyche are combining into a whole.

In spiritual terms, we are beginning to enter a higher state of consciousness – the first of eight levels of ‘dhyāna’ enumerated by Buddhist tradition – which is experienced as a deep inner harmony. It is the transition to this harmony which is so blissful.

Before I explain the nature of dhyāna any further, it will be useful for us to understand how the process of integration takes place, to see the connection between dhyāna and our day-to-day states of mind – which may not always be filled with bliss and inner peace! More often our mind resembles a battleground of contradictory likes, dislikes, hopes, and fears.

Practising mindfulness is likely to reveal paradoxes and oppositions in our character. It’s almost as though we are not one person – as though we have a number of different ‘selves’. We may, for example, behave quite differently when we are at work, when we are at home, and when we are with particular sets of friends.

This is the case with everyone (to different degrees, and in different ways) and is perfectly natural. We probably even choose our activities and friends precisely because they allow us to express different sides of our personality. However, the fact that we do so indicates something of an imbalance, though we may not immediately see things that way.

Imagine you are walking along with someone with a friend, and you meet a colleague from work. These two people have never met before; both know you quite well, but in a different context. The personality that your workmates see every weekday probably differs in certain
respects from your ‘off-duty’ personality. Each friend may see you quite differently, and expect
different behaviour of you. Such an encounter may feel rather odd, since you find it difficult to
live up to both sets of expectations at once.

This example illustrates a way in which we may sometimes detect a hint of the hidden
divisions within the mind. We do not usually notice such blind spots ourselves, unless they are
pointed out to us. It is as though we have many different selves, or different ‘sub-personalities’,
which influence the mind in different ways at different times. Sometimes it is as if we had a
whole coach full of these different characters, and each of them wants to take over the driving!
Inconsistencies and conflicts like these are at the root of much of the psychological tension
that we experience in day-to-day living. They can be very strong – so when the tension bound
up in conflict is released through meditation, it’s no wonder that blissful feelings and clarified
concentration can arise.

However, these dhyāna-like feelings, enjoyable as they are, are not the aim of meditation. At
this stage they usually last for only a few sessions at most, so it may be tempting to chase
them – we’ll probably want to get them back! But such an approach is likely to stir up
distracted meditations. The pleasurable feelings we experience in dhyāna are a by-product of
the integration process – they are what we feel when inner conflicts come to a head and are
resolved. It is only natural that for a while afterwards we no longer experience quite the same
intensity of pleasure, as the leading edge of our practice once again gets to work on the less
integrated departments of our mind. For the time being our meditation will be more or less
‘back to normal’. Yet the general tone of our practice, in terms of concentration and emotional
engagement, will now be established at a new level. And, provided we keep practising, we
should be able to maintain that new level.

‘Horizontal’ and ‘vertical’ integration
Integration is an interesting phenomenon. It’s as though our life used to go on in several
different ‘compartments’ at once, and now the momentum of our practice has started to
remove some of the separating walls. We have begun to harmonize the contrary aspects of our
character, together with the thoughts and emotions that are associated with them.

On the whole we can actually see the changes that are happening; they are all more or less at
the surface of our mind, all on the same horizontal plane. But sometimes meditation can
penetrate deeper than this. Sometimes we may go beyond the hindrances altogether and
transcend the world of the senses and the ordinary mind. This is when we enter the state of
absorption (dhyāna) in the fullest sense. When we enter into absorption at this deeper level,
some of the contents of our subconscious mind will come ‘up’ into our consciousness. This
marks the beginning of a ‘vertical’ aspect to the process of integration.

This second aspect of integration is called ‘vertical’ because we are getting into contact with
our heights and our depths – we are discovering our heavens and our hells. At this stage a
completely new order of emotions, thoughts, and pictorial images may be released into our
consciousness. They may be connected with significant past experiences: happy childhood
memories, or perhaps painful experiences that have long been forgotten. They may well be
vision-like: sometimes people see divinely beautiful or awe-inspiring forms such as gods,
demons, Buddhas, or symbolic images. Such experiences have a very different character to the
samāpattis (distortions of sense-perception) that can occur at the edges of deeper
concentration. These are more like visionary experiences – universal images coming from the
heights and depths in our mind, such as the archetypes described by Carl Jung. Images like
these are commonly experienced in deep meditation. Clearly, there is much hidden energy and creativity in the depths, waiting to be activated through meditation.

‘Access’ concentration
When the five hindrances start to die away, we enter what is known as access concentration (Pāli upacāra samādhi): we now have ‘access’ to the dhyānas.

It is extremely useful if we can recognize whether we have reached this stage in our meditation. We will know that we are ‘in access’ when the concentration has become significantly easier. At this point our thoughts and emotions will start co-operating with our efforts to concentrate, instead of continually pulling us away from it. We will still experience some distractions, but these will not exert a strongly emotional pull, as do the five hindrances.

This new situation provides us with a significant opening. Since distracting thoughts now have less power over us, we have more free energy available. This allows us to notice distractions more quickly, before they have time to take hold; it is therefore easier to disengage from them. Reducing the level of distracted mental activity frees even more energy – which further sharpens our awareness. We are entering into an expansive, progressive phase; indeed, this is the beginning of meditation proper.

The term ‘access concentration’ doesn’t just mark a cross-over point between the ordinary mind and dhyāna. It describes quite a broad band of consciousness, ranging from the point at which we are concentrated but still frequently slipping back into distraction (i.e. almost in the hindrances) to a state in which concentration is extremely easy (almost in dhyāna).

This stage is within the reach of everyone who meditates regularly – it is not so very far away from our ordinary state of mind. If we know how to recognize access concentration, we can then learn how to encourage and dwell in it for as long as possible. The longer we can sustain access concentration, the more we are likely to move on into full concentration – that is, into the first dhyāna.

The first level of dhyāna is, again, within fairly easy reach of anyone who meditates regularly. We are likely to experience at least a taste of it within the first few weeks of taking up meditation – particularly if we ‘treat’ our practice to some time on a retreat.

Just now we noted that it isn’t helpful to cling on to the pleasure of dhyānic experiences, should they arise. But that does not mean that dhyāna ought not to be deliberately cultivated. On the contrary, it is important that we do so. We should definitely aim to develop higher states of consciousness – the benefits, in terms of our growth in maturity and insight, will be considerable. We can cultivate dhyāna in the ways that have already been outlined – by concentrating mindfully on the object of meditation, by acknowledging the hindrances, and by working with them with faith and confidence. As with the hindrances and access concentration, recognition is an important key. It will be very useful if we can learn how to recognize different aspects of the dhyāna state, so that we can encourage them to arise.

Images for the first four dhyānas
So how can we recognize them? Perhaps it is easiest to communicate the experience through images, as the Buddha himself did (as in the first text of this part of the course).
1. The experience of the first dhyāna is compared to soap powder and water being mixed thoroughly together – mixed until the soap powder is entirely saturated by the water and the water is completely pervaded by the soap powder.

2. Being in the second dhyāna feels like a calm lake being fed by an up-welling underground spring.

3. The third dhyāna feels as though lotuses and water-lilies are growing in that lake, soaked and saturated by its water.

4. The fourth dhyāna is like the experience of taking a bath in that lake on a very hot afternoon, and afterwards resting on the bank wrapped in a perfectly clean white cloth.

Notice how water, a universal symbol for the unconscious mind, links the images together into a series. In the first dhyāna the water is perfectly mixed with its opposite element, dry powder. This image of opposites mingling perfectly together reflects the theme of integration; we have already seen how, in our consciousness, there are all kinds of oppositions in need of integration, which are now all beginning to co-exist in harmony.

Dhyāna is an experience of pure happiness, pure in the sense that it has not been caused by anything external but comes from within our own mind. While it lasts, it makes us feel truly ourselves. We may feel the effects of this ‘perfect mingling of opposites’ for some time – hours, even days or weeks – after the meditation.

Yet dhyāna may not necessarily arise as a result of applying a particular meditation technique. It is a state of mind that occurs naturally in anyone who is extremely happy. Under special conditions it may be possible to dwell in dhyāna outside meditation for sustained periods of time. As a general rule, higher states of consciousness will arise naturally in our meditation if we are quite happy and free from guilt feelings.

In the second dhyāna, our concentration is so pure that we experience no thought whatever. Thoughts did occur back in the first dhyāna, of course, but even there they were minimal, and they were mostly thoughts about the meditation object. So as we cross over from the first into the second dhyāna we find ourselves in a far more lucid absorption which – apart from a subtle recognition of the state we are in – is completely without thought.

Outside of meditation, it is unlikely that the second dhyāna will simply arise on its own, spontaneously – but it isn’t impossible. Apart from meditators, there could conceivably be great artists, composers, or philosophers in the world who dwell in this sort of state frequently, even without meditating formally at all. The second dhyāna is thus a very inspired state of mind – we are sustained by an inner flow of inspiration which wells up inside us, like the constant trickling of an underground spring beneath the calm surface of a lake.

In classical times, artists and poets in need of inspiration would call upon the Muses, goddesses who personified different aspects of this higher nourishment. At times, inspiration may be felt as a powerful unification with forces that are normally viewed as ‘outside’ our conscious personality. So this dhyāna level is also the mental state of the inspired prophet, who receives ‘messages’ from a deeper level of consciousness.

The third dhyāna is compared to lotuses growing in the waters of the lake, completely surrounded by and soaked in the medium of water. In our progress through the dhyānas we become more and more integrated with the higher element of inspiration (which in the second dhyāna is experienced as just trickling into our consciousness). By the time we reach the third dhyāna the stream has greatly expanded until it has become our whole environment. This is a very rich experience of ‘vertical’ integration. In this third dhyāna, we feel as though we are
part of something much greater than our conscious self. It is a mystical state, in which we are completely surrounded, pervaded, and ‘at one with’ a higher element.

The fourth dhyāna is the perfection of human happiness – at least this side of Enlightenment. This attainment doesn’t endow us with any ultimate wisdom or compassion – we could still act unethically, even now, and fall back in our progress. However, even though we don’t possess the fullness of insight, we are in the best possible state of mental health. In the fourth dhyāna all the powerful energies that have been tamed and liberated through previous meditation co-exist in perfect harmonious peace. Notice how the Buddha changes his style of imagery at this point. An immaculate being appears, secure from harmful influences through being wrapped in the pure white cloth. It is as though the inspired state of consciousness, thoroughly purified through experience of the other dhyānas, is now ours to wear and to take with us, as both a protection and an outward influence upon the world. We are so happy that our positivity radiates outward, counteracting harmful influences – affecting others too, so that we become charismatic and even magical. This is why the fourth dhyāna is regarded as the basis for the development of ‘magical’ powers (walking on water, passing through walls, etc. attributed to practitioners of many religions) – and amazingly acute faculties of perception.

The ‘components’ of dhyāna

Images may help us recognize dhyāna from our own experience. But a check-list of its main ‘component parts’ – the mental states of which dhyāna consists – will also come in useful. Tradition enumerates five ‘dhyāna factors’, plus a sixth which only emerges in the fourth dhyāna. However, we should not think that dhyāna consists only of these factors, for we will experience many other positive qualities too.

Dhyāna is both a ‘warm’ state of positive emotion and a ‘cool’ state of increased concentration. The ‘cool’ portion includes one-pointedness, our ability to pay attention. It also includes what are traditionally called initial thought and applied thought, which are aspects of clear thinking.

In the ‘warm’ portion of the spectrum are the feelings of rapture and bliss that were spoken of earlier. Rapture is when we experience the process of integration as bodily pleasure. It is predominantly physical, though not entirely so – we feel both physically thrilled and wildly happy at the same time. Traditionally there are five degrees of intensity of rapture! We will probably recognize at least the first stage, which is the sensation of ‘goose-pimples’, when the hairs on our body stand on end.

Bliss is more subtle than rapture – but in its own ‘quiet’ way, actually more intense. Bliss marks a deeper stage of integration, in which our mind has begun to tame the somewhat wild, unrefined sensations of rapture. With experience one becomes less attached to these relatively coarse feelings, and begins to move into a deeper, stronger, and even happier, state of mind. As absorption takes a firmer hold, the deepening bliss gradually assimilates the bubbly, thrilling energy that is released in the experience of rapture. This is a particular feature of the third dhyāna, while the more physical sensations of rapture are features of the first and second dhyāna.

Encouraging the positive

We can encourage the dhyāna state to arise by developing those factors of dhyāna that are missing from our experience of meditation. By developing one of the positive features of dhyāna, we are simultaneously counteracting one of the five hindrances. As you work you
may be able to find ‘intermediary’ factors – for example, trying to arouse interest in the practice, rather than in the objects of sense desire.

**The actual experience**

The traditional classification of dhyāna levels is useful for defining higher states of consciousness in the abstract, but it is essentially an artificial way of looking at our experience. What we actually experience are various positive mental states arising. These factors become stronger, and then as we enter deeper into meditation discursive thought is left behind. At this point we find ourselves in that state of lucid, concept-less concentration traditionally classified as the second dhyāna.

From this stage onwards we experience ‘vertical’ integration increasingly strongly. In terms of the Buddha’s simile, an underground spring begins percolating up from the depths. The spring of inspiration expands and broadens until, in the third dhyāna, it becomes the entire medium in which we experience ourselves. By now all the wildness of rapture has been absorbed into bliss, so that the only dhyāna factors remaining are this peaceful bliss and one-pointedness. This process of purification continues into the fourth dhyāna, at which point bliss is transformed into equanimity. At this stage our mind goes beyond any possibility of conflict, and reaches a peak of emotional stability and purity. Our one-pointedness of mind becomes unshakeable, so that we can maintain the concentration undistractedly for as long as we wish.

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**Questions for reflection and discussion**

1. “It’s almost as though we are not one person – as though we have a number of different ‘selves’.”
   Do you agree? Can you recognise and maybe give a name to some of your main ‘selves’?

2. Have you ever experienced anything like the “higher states” described in the text – especially access concentration and the first dhyāna – either in or out of meditation?

3. If your answer to question two was “yes”, when did this happen, and what were the conditions that contributed to your experience?

4. If your answer to question two was “no”, do you accept that people can and do experience these states? If you compare your life to the life described by the Buddha in the first text of this part of the course, can you see any factors in your lifestyle that might be stopping you entering states of deep concentration?

5. Go back and look at the way the Buddha describes the dhyānas – or jhānas – in the first text of this section. Can you relate the way the Buddha describes them to the descriptions in the text?

6. “By developing one of the positive features of dhyāna, we are simultaneously counteracting one of the five hindrances.”
   What qualities are the opposite of each of the five hindrances? What qualities do you think need to be present in a state of meditative awareness? Are they the same? Which positive factor tends to be most lacking in your experience of meditation, and how might you cultivate it?
Introduction
So far in this section we have looked at meditation in a general way. This week we take a detailed, down-to-earth look at how we actually do one of the two main practices used by mitras in the Triratna Buddhist Community. In the process we will probably become more conscious of how we apply the practice ourselves, and we will almost certainly pick up some tips and techniques that will make the mindfulness of breathing more fruitful and powerful.

Practical Advice on the Mindfulness of Breathing
Text condensed from Wildmind, Bodhipaksa, Chapter 3.

Mindfulness
In the short term, the Mindfulness of Breathing practice helps us to become calmer and (paradoxically) more energised and refreshed. In the long term, it helps us to develop more awareness so that we have more freedom to choose our responses in any give situation. For example, in a situation that would normally make us anxious, we can choose to be patient and calm. Over time, we shape our habits instead of letting them shape us. Mindfulness allows us to take full responsibility for our lives and happiness. Practising mindfulness is enormously enriching. Instead of being half-aware of what we are doing, we can fully and richly experience every moment of our lives.

Stages 1 and 2

What’s the counting for?
The counting has a number of useful functions. It’s very easy to ‘space out’ instead of meditating – we get distracted without realising it. The counting helps us to get a more objective sense of how much of the time we’re distracted, and how much we’re remaining aware. It also gives us something to aim for. It’s good to have goals.

If you’re getting distracted before reaching the tenth breath, you can try harder to reach it, then to get to ten again. Without the counting it’s harder to notice the effects of your efforts. If you put effort into your meditation you will see results.

The numbers also act as an anchor. In the cycle of breathing the point at which we are most likely to get distracted is in the pause between the out-breath and the in-breath, when nothing much is happening. The number is a way of ‘touching base’ so that we can get through the pause without getting distracted.
When the counting seems boring
Sometimes people want to drop the counting. There can be good and bad reasons for this. Sometimes we’ve developed a strong current of stillness and it seems natural to drop the numbers. If so, let go. But often it’s just a resistance to structure, or a desire to be passive, and we’d rather just daydream. Be honest about your motivation.

If the numbers seem mechanical, bear in mind that this is not inevitable – it’s a product of the way your mind is working. If you approach the numbers gracefully and creatively, they’ll seem natural and fluid.

The difference between stages 1 and 2
Most people find that the first two stages feel very different. This is because of the different nature of the counting, which provides a structured way of deepening our experience.

The nature of the counting changes which part of the breath you’re most aware of. In the first stage, because you’re counting after the out-breath, your mind links the counting with the out-breath. In the second stage, because you’re counting before the in-breath, your mind is more aware of the in-breath. Taking a deep out-breath – or sighing – is what we do when we let go of tension. It feels like letting go, relaxing, moving downward, and it has a calming effect. Taking a deep in-breath on the other hand feels like expanding, opening up, rising, and it has an energizing effect.

So while the first stage is a stage of letting go, the second stage is one of energizing. Letting go is the perfect thing to do when starting a meditation – we let go of the tension in our bodies, and of the thoughts in our heads. Then in the next stage you energize your relaxed mind and body. By feeling the energy that comes with the in-breath, you help set up the conditions for being aware.

So there’s a natural progression here – relaxing then energizing – and it’s important to get these stages in the right order. Of course, if you start your meditation in a tired and sluggish state you might go straight into the second stage, and if in the second stage your mind is racing you may want to revert to the first stage to slow it down. These stages give us two tools – like a brake and an accelerator – which we need to learn to use appropriately.

Stage 3
Balancing energy
While stage one helps us to develop more calm, and stage two helps us to develop more energy and awareness, the third stage emphasizes the in-breath and out-breath equally, helping us to blend the calm relaxation of the first stage with the energized awareness of the second. In stage three you can be aware of the constant oscillation between the calming out-breath and the energizing in-breath, and allow these qualities to permeate each other.

Using anchors
If the first two stages have gone well, letting go of the numbers can allow us to develop a deeper and more balanced concentration. However the counting has been acting as an anchor for our awareness, so when we let it go we may tend to float off into distraction.

One way to retain an anchor while letting go of the numbers is to use a physical anchor. I sometimes use the physical sensations in my hands in the same way as I use the numbers. At the end of each out-breath and in-breath I take my awareness to my hands. This helps keep me
grounded. I maintain my awareness of my hands all the way through the cycle of the breath. I am still aware of my breath, but I’m also keeping some of my awareness in my hands. This isn’t as hard as it might sound. I experience my breath flowing towards my hands, and then flowing away from my hands, over and over again. This helps prevent me drifting away from the breath.

You can vary which parts of the hands you are aware of. You can be aware of both hands in their entirety, or you can be aware of only the tips of your thumbs in contact. If you are using the dhyāna mūdra this can bring a lovely sense of delicate energy into your awareness.

The physical anchor is a more refined anchor than the counting because it’s non-verbal – it cuts down on the amount of thinking, so that your mind can develop a deeper level of stillness.

Stage 4

Making the transition

In the third stage we’re usually aware of quite a large area of the sensations associated with the breath. We might have been focussing primarily on the belly, or the chest, or the sensations in the head and throat. These involve large muscles or anatomical structures. In the fourth stage however we’re focussing on a very small area of sensations: the rim of the nostrils.

I like to make a smooth transition from the third to the fourth stage, to maintain a sense of continuity and bring the quality of elegance to the practice. I do this by narrowing my focus over a series of seven or eight breaths, gradually homing in on the sensations on the rims of the nostrils. This helps the stages to flow together so that you can keep deepening your concentration. Simply jumping from stage three to stage four is rather crude.

Maintaining subtlety

Because the sensations at the nostrils are so subtle, there can be a tendency to breathe more forcibly in order to heighten the sensation. Try to resist this, allowing your breath to be light and delicate. Instead of breathing more heavily, try to find the subtle sensations by allowing the mind to become more receptive – this is the purpose of this stage of the practice.

If you don’t manage to find the sensations on the rims of the nostrils, you can become aware of the breath in your nostrils: cool on the in-breath and warm on the out-breath. Some people find it easier to detect the sensations on the upper lip. Over time, try to refine your awareness so that you become aware of the most delicate sensations possible – these are the true focus of this stage.

If you can detect the sensations of the air flowing over the rims of your nostrils, you can refine the meditation even more. For example, you can notice whether the sensations are more pronounced in the left or right nostril, and you can try to take your awareness into any ‘dead spots’ where sensations are lacking. Or you can become aware of the sensations at the front of the rims of your nostrils, rather than all around – just to stretch your ability to detect very subtle sensations. There are always greater degrees of refinement to which we can take our concentration.

Occasionally your mind will settle down and you’ll notice some interesting and subtle sensations related to your breathing. For example, you might hear a soft internal ‘sound’, which isn’t coming from any physical process. Or you might experience a sensation like silk associated with your breathing but not exactly a part of it. Or you might notice a delightful
sense of ‘flow’ that accompanies the rhythm of your breathing. (These things can be hard to describe.) What seems to be happening is that your mind has moved to a more subtle level of perception, and found for itself objects of concentration that are correspondingly more delicate than the usual ones. Far from being a distraction, such sensations act as doorways into even deeper states of calmness and concentration. Cherish them when they arise, and let your awareness become absorbed in them.

Between stages
It’s important to set up your posture at the start of a period of meditation. When you take your attention away from your posture in order to be more aware of your breath, often you’ll find that your posture starts to drift. You may find that some parts of your body start to sag, while others become tense, and these changes lead to mental and emotional changes. The tension in your shoulders may be related to some anger you’ve started to experience. The sagging in your spine may be related to a feeling of despair that’s crept in. If you relax your shoulders, the anger will start to disappear; if you straighten your spine you’ll start to feel more confident.

As you become more proficient in meditation you’ll learn that you can periodically check your posture and make minor corrections, without losing awareness of your breath. A good way to start practising this skill is to check and correct your posture between stages. You might want to do this every time you move from one stage to the next. Later you’ll find that you can integrate monitoring your posture into your practice in the way I have described.

A meditation toolkit
Here we’re going to look at some ways to use the breath to alter our mental and emotional states. These don’t necessarily work immediately, and you may need to give them time. Changing the method every couple of minutes will just lead to frustration and restlessness.

- Take a few deep breaths into the belly.
- Take a few slow breaths before letting your breath return to normal.
- Keep your awareness low in the body, e.g. in your belly, for as long as you need to develop calmness.
- Pay attention to letting go on the out-breath.
- On every exhalation, imagine a wave of relaxation flowing downwards into the earth, sweeping away your tensions and cares.
- Imagine your whole body is floating on warm water; with every inhalation you rise, and with every exhalation you fall.

Using the breath to stimulate the mind

- Take a few deep breaths into your upper chest (feel the expansion).
- Take a few quick, light breaths, then let your breathing return to normal.
- Keep your awareness high in your body, e.g. in your upper chest, or even your head.
- Pay attention to the sense of your body expanding on the in-breath.
- On every inhalation, imagine you are drawing energy upwards from the earth, filling every fibre of your being with awareness.
- Imagine you are inhaling light with every breath; on every exhalation you breathe out your distractions in the form of grey mist.

Why all the emphasis on concentration?
Have you ever had the experience of talking to a friend while you’re distracted, and realising that you haven’t been listening because you’ve drifted off on some other train of thought? We
all do this from time to time. How can we deepen our understanding of ourselves if we don’t experience anything but surface distractions?

Concentration allows us to go more deeply into our experiences. It allows us to experience more intensely, so that we can be more present with other people, and more present with ourselves. Concentration allows us to really enjoy what we’re doing, whether it’s walking in the countryside, reading a book, writing, or thinking.

Concentration allows us to think more clearly and deeply. When we can stay with a train of thought without wandering off, we can ask more penetrating questions of ourselves and, crucially, be able to hear the deep considered answers that come from our depths. The power of reflective concentration becomes crucial when we move on to vipassanā practices that require us to use thoughts and images as the objects of concentration.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What is your general experience of the mindfulness of breathing? Do you tend to prefer it to the mettā bhāvanā, or vice-versa? Why?

2. “Sometimes people want to drop the counting. There can be good and bad reasons for this.” Do you ever feel tempted to drop the counting in the first two stages? Are your reasons related to Bodhipaksa’s ‘good and bad reasons’?

3. Do you notice a difference between stages 1 and 2? If so, do you think Bodhipaksa explains this well? Might there be any other reasons for the difference?

4. Try focussing more on either the out-breath or in-breath at times in your meditation this week. Notice the effects, and be prepared to tell the group about it.

5. Do you tend to become more concentrated when you drop the counting and move into stage 3 of the meditation, or do you tend to become more prone to distraction?

6. Try using a physical anchor in stage 3. Do the hands work for you as an anchor, or does some other part of the body work better?

7. How do you experience the breath in stage 4 of the practice? Try to relate your experience to the description given in the text – e.g. do you feel the breath on the rims of the nostrils or somewhere else; is there more sensation in one nostril than the other; do you ever experience anything like the “internal sound”, “sensation like silk”, or “delightful sense of flow” mentioned in the text?

8. Try using some of Bodhipaksa’s ‘meditation toolkit’ in your practice this week. Tell the group about the effects.

9. Do you feel more interested in the mindfulness of breathing after reading this text and trying out some of the suggestions? If so, what does this tell you about a creative approach to meditation practice?
Introduction
In this last session of this part of the course we get some advice on how to do the mettā bhāvanā practice. Paradoxically it may be more difficult to suggest useful ways to be creative in this practice than for the mindfulness of breathing – at least in a short text – precisely because the scope for creativity is that much greater, and people's responses are so different. To describe the different approaches to this practice used by even a small sample of experienced meditators would need a book, and many methods would only ‘work’ for someone of very similar temperament.

In this condensed extract Bodhipaksa gives us a framework for experimenting with the mettā bhāvanā practice that should provide something for everyone, and give us a springboard for developing our own creative approaches to the practice. He also looks at the nature of mettā, talks about how we cultivate emotions, and examines some general methods we can use to change our emotional state.

Cultivating Loving-kindness
Text condensed from Wildmind, Bodhipaksa, Chapter 5.

The idea of cultivating emotions might strike us as odd: after all, don’t emotions just happen? From a Buddhist point of view this is not the case. Emotions are habits, and are actively created. It seems as though they have a life of their own because we aren’t conscious of how we create them. If we can bring more awareness into our emotional life we can consciously cultivate the emotions we want to experience and discourage those we don’t want. This is what we aim to do in the Mettā Bhāvanā – to cultivate the positive and discourage the negative.

We cultivate emotions all the time
An example of how we unconsciously generate emotions is this: imagine you’re with a group of people, and you get to talking about all the things that are wrong with the world. As the conversation goes on, and we get more and more involved, the chances are that we get angry, or depressed, or feel self-righteous. By focusing on things that anger or depress you without creatively trying to see what you can actually do about these issues, you actually cultivate these emotions.

In the Mettā Bhāvanā, we consciously generate thoughts that are likely to give rise to positive emotions. Over time, and with practice, this has a nurturing effect on our faculty of love. We encourage the development of our patience, kindness, and understanding, and in this way we become more loving.
What mettā is

- Mettā is a recognition of the basic solidarity that we have with others.
- Mettā is empathy. It’s the willingness to see the world from another’s point of view.
- Mettā is wishing others well.
- Mettā is friendliness, consideration, kindness, generosity, patience, understanding, considerateness, love, helpfulness.
- Mettā is the basis for compassion. When our mettā meets another’s suffering, it transforms into compassion.
- Mettā is the most fulfilling emotional state we can know. To wish another well is to wish that they themselves be in a state of mettā.
- Mettā is the fulfilment of the emotional development of every human being. It’s the potential emotional maturity inherent in each one of us.
- Mettā is more than just an emotion. It’s an attitude. We can act out of an attitude of mettā even when we do not ourselves feel happy, or even when we don’t subjectively feel loving.
- Mettā is the answer to almost every problem the world faces today. Money won’t do it. Technology won’t do it. Where there is no good will, there is no way to make positive change. Mettā can positively transform the world like no other quality.

What mettā is not

- Mettā isn’t the same as feeling good. When we feel mettā we do generally feel more joyful and happy, but it’s possible to feel good and for that not to be mettā. We can feel good but also be rather selfish and inconsiderate, for example. Mettā is an attitude of actively caring about others.
- Mettā isn’t all or nothing. Just as our anger can reveal itself in many intensities from mild irritation to fury, our mettā can make itself known as anything from polite behaviour to a passionate love for all that lives.
- Mettā isn’t something new or unknown to us. We all experience mettā. Every time you feel pleasure in seeing someone do well, or are patient with someone who’s a bit difficult, you’re experiencing mettā. In the Mettā Bhāvanā you are cultivating what is already there.
- Mettā isn’t a denial of your experience. To practise mettā doesn’t mean ‘being nice’ in a false way. Even if you don’t like someone or disapprove of their actions, you can still have their welfare at heart. This is one of the greatest miracles in the world, since it liberates us from the endless round of violence and revenge, whether on a global or personal level.

Emotion is a river

Rivers carve valleys. Water cuts channels that grow deeper with every passing year, and the channel then defines the course of the river. The river creates the banks, and the banks create the river. Our emotions also follow patterns. They give rise to thoughts, and our thoughts reinforce our emotions. For example, when we’re in an irritable mood, our thoughts tend to find fault. We notice things that we don’t like about ourselves, about others, and about the world in general. We overlook the good and the positive even when it is staring us in the face. This sense of being surrounded by faults reinforces our irritability, so our emotions shape our thoughts (the river bank), and our thoughts influence our emotions (the river). It’s a disturbingly circular dynamic!

How do we ever escape from a mood once we get into it? Why don’t we get into a particular mood and just stay there? Thankfully, there are other influences on our feelings that can break in to the cyclical patterns that I’ve outlined above. We’ll look at five of these in turn: the environment, the body, the will, thoughts, and communication.
**Emotions and your environment**
If you want to change how you feel, you can alter your environment. You can make your environment supportive of your efforts to develop mettā by creating a beautiful space in which to meditate. You can make a shrine that expresses your ideals. Candles, incense, flowers, and images that are meaningful for you can all help to uplift your emotions. Keeping the space tidy will help you to have better mental states in meditation, as well as helping you to keep the positive mental states that you develop. What you see when you open your eyes after meditation can have a strong effect – we are often more sensitive after meditation than we realize.

**Emotions and your body**
How you hold your body has a big effect on how you feel. So in setting up our posture for meditation it’s not just a matter of being comfortable – you’re working on your emotions through your body. It’s important to be aware of your body outside meditation too, and to make sure you’re setting up physical conditions that will support positive emotional states.

**Emotions and your will**
At every moment of your existence you have some degree of choice about how you feel. Whether you realize it or not, you can let go of negative emotions and find more positive responses. Sometimes we see venting our emotions as the only alternative to bottling them up. But there is another option: that of fully experiencing your emotions and learning to work with them: transforming them through awareness or, when appropriate, learning to express them more skilfully.

**Emotions and your thoughts**
Thoughts and feelings are deeply intertwined. Everything we think has some effect on how we feel. It’s therefore essential that we learn to cultivate more mindfulness so that we can choose which thoughts to encourage and which to discourage. Over time, these thousands of small changes create a huge change in our emotional life. Listen to the stories you tell yourself, and ask whether they are helpful. If not, change them.

In the Mettā Bhāvanā we encourage the conscious development of thoughts that will give rise to positive emotions, rather than those that will reinforce negative emotions. The most widely used thought in the Mettā Bhāvanā practice is, ‘May I be well, may I be happy, may I be free from suffering.’ The thoughts that we’ll use to cultivate mettā aren’t always verbal ones. We can also use visual imagery, such as a light radiating from your heart. Or we can use words and imagery together.

**Emotions and your communication**
Our communication has a powerful effect on our emotions. One way to change a mood is to talk to someone. When the emotions we express are positive, they become stronger through communication. Through communication we often get more in touch with our emotions. Communication need not be verbal. Non-verbal communication – a touch or a hug – can have an enormous effect on how we feel.

In the Mettā Bhāvanā we imagine we are communicating with others, and we actually communicate with ourselves. We call others to mind and we wish them well. We might imagine communicating our appreciation to a friend. We might call to mind someone we’re in conflict with and imagine apologizing to them. We might imagine non-verbal communication as well.
Nurturing seeds of emotion
We all experience mettā. This practice takes our seeds of mettā and nurtures them so that they grow and send deep roots into the soil of our being. For those seeds to grow, we need soil and water. The soil is our awareness. The rain is the variety of methods we can use to develop the seeds of mettā. There are four main methods that I’ve found useful: the use of words, memories, creative imagination and body memories. Some of these will work for you, and possibly others won’t. It’s best to try a few methods and see which suit you, but make sure you give any method time to work. Like seeds germinating in response to water, your emotions might take time to unfold in response to the method you choose.

Using words to cultivate mettā
The use of phrases is the classic way of doing the Mettā Bhāvanā meditation, and I use this method more often than any other. The traditional phrase for the first stage is ‘May I be well, may I be happy, may I be free from suffering.’ You need to say the phrase to yourself as though you mean it. You will also need to remember to keep your focus on your emotions: repeat the phrase, over and over, but observe its effect on how you are feeling. Leave time between each repetition of the phrase to absorb its effect. I often fit the phrase in with the rhythm of my breathing and say, ‘May I be well,’ on an out-breath, and for the next in-breath, out-breath, and in-breath, I tune in to my heart and see what effect it has had. Then on the next out-breath I say, ‘May I be happy’. Then two out-breaths later I say, ‘May I be free from suffering.’

When you’re thinking these words, you’re being active. When you’re listening for the effect they’re having, you’re being receptive. This practice needs you to be both active and receptive. You are actively working with your emotions, and receptively being aware of the effect of your actions. Both are equally important. Without active cultivation, your mind will tend to wander aimlessly and your emotions will follow old, habitual patterns.

Incidentally you might try saying the phrase to yourself on an in-breath instead of an out-breath. This produces quite a different effect. Try both methods and see which works best for you.

The traditional phrases are good to use as they so neatly encapsulate what the Mettā Bhāvanā meditation is about, but if you prefer you can just repeat a word like ‘love’ or ‘kindness’ or ‘patience’. Or you can use a series of such words. Or you can come up with your own affirming phrase. I believe it is best to use affirmations that are true. If you say ‘I am happy and content’ when you obviously are not, it will be hard to do it wholeheartedly. On the other hand, if you use a phrase that expresses a wish, such as ‘May I be happy and content’, it is more likely to be effective.

Using memories
We’re all familiar with the power of memory to evoke emotions. You remember something said to you and feel a rush of warmth and love. You remember doing something foolish and blush with shame. The power of memory is such that our recollections often provoke a stronger response than the original incident.

We can consciously use the evocative power of memory to help us cultivate mettā. Let’s say we’re cultivating mettā towards ourselves. You can recall a time when you felt appreciative of yourself. You might have been in a very good mood, and found yourself at ease with yourself. You might have been in the countryside and felt a great sense of harmony and peace. Or you might have just made a significant achievement in your life.
Recall every detail about that time. Remember what you were wearing, what you saw, how you held your body, any scents you were aware of, what people were saying. Call to mind the details: the texture of your clothing, the brightness of colours, tones of voice. The more vividly you recollect the experience, the easier it will be to re-experience the emotions. The more senses you involve, the more vivid and evocative the memory will be, so remember to use sight, hearing, touch and smell.

**Using creative imagination**

Again, let’s say we’re cultivating mettā towards ourselves. Think of an experience that would make you feel well and happy. Sometimes I imagine I’m snorkelling on the Australian Great Barrier Reef. I’ve never actually been snorkelling, but when I imagine the feeling of buoyancy, and the warm currents of water caressing my skin, the light rippling down from above on to the beautiful corals, and the shoals of vividly coloured fish swimming past, I feel a sense of well-being.

In the other stages of the meditation, you can invite others to join you. You’re generously offering them the benefits of the environment you’ve created for them. Again, the point is not simply to have a pleasant experience. Remember that mettā is a desire for well-being and not just a pleasant feeling. What we are doing is wishing ourselves well, and then wishing others well by imaginatively sharing our inner world with them.

By imagining that we are well, happy, and free from suffering, we are actually wishing these states upon ourselves. Our imaginations bring about real changes in our state of mind. We do this all the time – every time we daydream we’re cultivating some emotion or other. Sometimes they are creative and helpful, sometimes they are destructive and undermining. What we’re doing in the Mettā Bhāvanā is consciously bringing into being the useful emotions of love, appreciation, patience, and so on.

**Using your body**

We’ve already mentioned that the way you hold your body has a big effect on the way you experience emotion. You can use this principle in your Mettā Bhāvanā; use your posture to help you cultivate mettā by making sure that you avoid tension or slumping. It’s almost as if our bodies have memories. As you sit in your meditation posture, recall what it is like to feel confident, happy, and full of energy. Let your body help you access these states by relaxing and maintaining an upright spine with an open chest. Imagine that your body is full of energy.

Allowing yourself to smile slightly will also make it easier to cultivate mettā. If deliberately smiling feels false, then just allow your face to relax. As the practice of mettā starts to result in perceptible and positive changes in your emotional states, you’ll probably start to smile spontaneously.

**Questions for reflection and discussion**

1. How do you get on with the mettā bhāvanā practice? If you have difficulties with it, what are they?
2. “Don’t emotions just happen? From a Buddhist point of view this is not the case. Emotions are habits, and are actively created.”
Do you agree? If this is true, might it mean that we shouldn’t take the way we happen to feel so seriously?

3. “We can act out of an attitude of mettā even when we do not ourselves feel happy, or even when we don’t subjectively feel loving.”
Have you ever experienced this?

4. Have you ever needed to be reminded of any of the things Bodhipaksa says that mettā isn’t?

5. Bodhipaksa suggests four methods for developing our seeds of mettā: using words, memories, creative imagination, and the body. Which of these have you tried, and which worked best for you?

6. Do you use the traditional phrases that go along with this practice? What effect do they have? Have you ever invented your own words or phrases?

7. Try co-ordinating the phrases with you breathing as Bodhipaksa suggests this week. Notice and report back on the effects.

8. Do you ever use memories or creative imagination in your practice? If so, share what you have done with the group. If not, try it!

9. Do you have any experience of using the body to access emotions, either in the mettā bhāvanā or in another context? If so, experiment with this in your practice this week, and tell the group about it.