

## Chapter 2

# How to Meditate

"Let us begin."

In this extemporaneous exposition Venerable Sona guides us in a simple yet insightful way through the fundamentals of breath meditation practice. Using the method taught by the Buddha as a framework he leads the reader in the direction of clarity and stillness, this clarity and stillness allows us to investigate the nature of reality, truth, and goodness.

### Meditation on Breathing

By Ajahn Sona

Meditation on breathing is one of the most widely practiced of Buddhist meditation techniques. It was devised and developed by the Buddha himself, and He taught it during his lifetime. For 2500 years it has been widely studied both by monks and laypeople.

Breath meditation has many virtues. It is simple and portable -- your breath goes with you wherever you go. It will be with you until your last breath. The breath is neither a fascinating, attractive nor interesting object; it is not a repulsive object. It is neutral.

The breath is observed through contact. It is not visual; it is felt. The location to focus on -- which is given by the Buddha himself in several discourses in which he described the meditation -- is at the entrance to the body. The breath enters the body at the nostrils or the mouth. Some people have conditions where they must breathe through their mouth, if they have a cold, for example. They need not abandon breathing meditation. Contact of the breath at the lip is also a possible site -- although it is difficult to feel the inhalation there. But primarily the breath is felt at the nose.

Begin by paying attention to the coolness of the inhalation inside the nostrils. The Buddha makes a simile that mindfulness is similar to a sentry at the entrance to a walled city. The sentry is posted at the entrance. He does not have to know who is inside the city and who is outside. All he has to know is that there is just one way in and out of that city, and that is the entranceway. Therefore, he guards the entrance in the same way mindfulness observes the entrance of the breath. It does not follow it inside the body. It does not concern itself with the outside of the body. It merely acts as a sentry. All the air coming into the body or going out of the body must pass through the nostrils. So we post mindfulness at the nostrils.

The same qualities we value a sentry for, we value mindfulness for at the nostrils: alertness, constancy, non-distraction, non-sleepiness, non-agitation, and inability to be bribed. Being bribed is like asking your mind to pay attention to the breath, and then seeing other more enticing thoughts and images come along. You may be bribed into paying attention to those, rather than to the breath. The sentry should not be easily bought off. You have to refuse the offers of more tantalizing images, thoughts, plans and reveries. You must strictly observe the breath at the entrance of the body.

One should not be over-rigid and excessively zealous, otherwise this produces agitation. Neither should you be drifting off into sleep -- too relaxed. You need the middle ground, a balance between tension and drifting away. Feel the coolness of the inhalation. Feel the warmth of the exhalation.

The Buddha advises we pay attention to the duration of the breath. Is it a long breath, or is it a short breath? He doesn't ask you to control your breath or your breathing; merely to breathe naturally and unselfconsciously. You should observe and not interfere. But note a long breath when one occurs on an inhalation or an exhalation, and a short breath when one occurs on an inhalation or an exhalation.

When your mind has established itself and is able to pay attention long enough to observe whether or not it is a long or short breath, then you can ask it to do something a little more challenging, as the mind may wander and still know whether it is a long breath or a short breath.

Now, the Buddha asks that we observe the beginning, the middle and the end of each breath, both the inhalation and the exhalation. In other words, the entire duration of the breath from its beginning to its end. This is a new demand on mindfulness: that the sentry observes every detail of what is passing in and out of that entrance. The sentry's attention must be constant, not wandering at all. It is a more demanding level of practice.

If you find the mind occasionally wanders -- which is very common and to be expected -- one should not feel frustrated or a failure at this normal action of the mind. Instead, simply notice when your attention has wandered and start the exercise again, noticing the beginning, the middle and the end of each breath.

This exercise itself should not produce excess tension or a hypnotic effect. It is an attempt to increase alertness, awareness and the capacity to sustain attention. If you succeed, you will feel a very great sense of clarity, presence, and lack of distraction. You will not feel in the least bored, agitated, irritated, nor will you feel in doubt. You will be confidently observing the flow of breath in this very lucid condition.

You will be aware of precisely what you are doing. This is the first benefit of this exercise, that one experiences well-being here and now. You have dispelled the variety of hindrances or negative mental states that occur in the ordinary mind: ill will, sensual fantasies or obsessions, agitation, sloth and drowsiness, and indecision or problematic doubting. By observing the breath, one is delivered from these negative mental states.

Proceeding further, one may begin to notice a subtle change, taking place at the very point of contact where the breath meets the nostrils. It may turn from a flowing sensation -- a cottony flow of air gently against the nostrils -- to a static pressure, a light, airy but motionless effect. It is as if light cotton batten is being touched to the nostrils. This is a sign that the mind is becoming very focused, still and calm. The object, the breath, begins to take on the quality of stillness rather than motion. This is a sign of increasing concentration, increasing focus, and increasing stillness of mind.

At this point the aches and pains in one's body tend to dissolve. The body is not troubled, and experiences a rather pleasant sensation. The mind also experiences a pleasant sensation of being undistracted, calm, strong, even, present, alert, and untroubled.

Now, one may turn one's attention to the topic of the impermanent nature of this process, or the impermanent nature of all phenomena, or the substanceless nature of the breath. Since it is a flow,

there is nothing enduring or substantial to it. Noticing this characteristic in the breath, one can also notice this characteristic in all sense objects -- whatever one sees, hears, smells, tastes, touches and thinks. All are flowing; all are insubstantial.

The mind in this rested, very alert state, when asked to investigate the flowing nature of reality, will often perceive it with greater impact than in normal distracted states of consciousness. It will be less preoccupied with this flowing world, or realize that since all things in the world are flowing, they cannot be grasped, held or controlled. They do not last. When the mind sees this characteristic, this sign, it relaxes its grip and its futile attempt to control, to grasp, and to hold. This is one of the direct benefits of calming the mind through breath meditation, turning the attention to the flowing quality of the breath, and then further, to the flowing quality of all phenomena.

You may also wish to go deeper into tranquility by focusing the mind on the still quality of the breath, that is, this cottony characteristic where the breath contacts the nostrils. When that becomes very, very still, this is an indication that the mind is stilling. By continuing to focus without too great a tension and without relaxation, in an alert way, one goes deeper into stillness, clarity, and a profound well-being. There is a lack of pain in the body, a decrease of pleasant feelings in the body, and an increase of joy.

This is in the direction of profound concentration, the eighth factor of the Noble Eightfold Path. Do not expect to enter this state without a good deal of preparation, without a good deal of refinement in your life. It requires a great deal of sensitivity and refinement of the mind. On the other hand, do not think it impossible to calm the mind, to produce clarity and stillness in the mind. It is possible for the ordinary person to develop. Given enough patience and time and correct practice, one may learn the great value of breath meditation.

Breath meditation is something that can unfold during the entire lifetime. It becomes one's best friend. It becomes a refuge. It becomes an unending source of clarity and stillness from which to base investigation into the nature of reality, the nature of truth, the nature of goodness. It is an invaluable aid to awakening, taught by the Buddha himself, practiced by the Buddha himself, and recommended by twenty-five centuries of teachers of meditation.

I leave you with these instructions. May you be well, happy, and peaceful.

(Transcription by Donna Woods)

## **Commentary**

Adding to these wise words of Ajahn Sona: when you sit down to meditate it is important to sit upright. Don't lean back on anything, except maybe your hip in the back of a chair. Relax into it; you should not feel strained. Think of yourself as a puppet with the string coming out of the top of your head. Or imagine your spine as a stack of neatly piled golden coins, or a stack of dinner plates. If you lean way back on a chair there's a big danger of falling asleep. Ideally, sit cross-legged on the ground.

You can use a chair if your legs aren't so supple, and keep your legs straight if that is comfortable. If your legs fall asleep you can mindfully move them. Some people think meditation is boot camp and they are supposed to endure as much pain as they can, but this is not so. You should sit on a cushion about six inches thick. Unless you have been raised in a culture in which you're used to sitting flat on the floor, you will need to use something to raise your buttocks six to eight inches above your legs. You may prefer

a wider cushion, almost a square meter in size, which will allow you to sit and also rest your feet and ankles on the cushion. Or you could use a separate cushion for your ankles.

Complete your posture by placing your hands lightly, together in your lap, or palms down on your thighs, or anyway that is comfortable. In Theravada Buddhism we generally meditate with our eyes closed as there is less distraction but if you get sleepy you can open them a crack, looking down. The light coming in helps to keep you awake. If you're not sleepy, it's better to keep the eyes closed to cut out sensory distraction.

You follow the breath going in and out at the nostrils. That is the object of your meditation. There is a natural gap between breaths. If it helps to use words, during the in-breath you can mentally say to yourself "in-breath" and during the out-breath you say "out-breath." The words are like training wheels for the mind; they help you keep your mind on what you're doing while you're doing it because they displace other discursive thoughts. Just allow your breathing to be natural. Do not try to interfere with it in any way. Sometimes it is shallow, sometimes deep. Be mindful because there is a natural tendency to control the breath once you start to focus your attention on it.

As you sit, very soon you will be distracted by a thought, any thought. You may have a thought about the past or fantasies about the future. At that point you just ignore the thought, try to let it go, and come back to the breath. Whatever arises in the five senses of seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling and tasting, you just let those go as well. Try not to space out but of course we all do, so just be gentle with yourself and come back. Come back to your breath. Ram Dass practiced meditation in Burma and he said "When you're meditating you can visualize your thoughts as autumn leaves floating down a stream, and your mind is the stream itself. Some leaves are brighter than others, with speckles of water on them but let them all go. If you pick up a leaf and hang onto it then you're just thinking, not meditating." You can visualize that image from time to time if it helps you to let go of your thoughts. I've used that image on thousands of people during guided meditations in my courses.

Extra techniques that you can try in your meditation, if you need them, is you can notice the coolness of the breath on the nostrils on the inhalation, then the breath is warmed by the body and you notice the warmth on the nostrils on the exhalation. How many millions of breaths have people taken? When I point that out some reply, "Say! I've never thought about that before!" You can also count the breaths. You note, "one" on the inhalation, "two" on the exhalation", then "three" in, "four" out, counting up to ten, then go back to one. If you lose your count, just go back to one. Counting is like a thread that joins the breath together so it makes it easier, it gives you something to do to keep you occupied. Just following the breath in and out is difficult to do, isn't it? The technique is simple but the mind is so complicated.

Another practice is to label your thoughts by saying to yourself "thinking". This gives you some leverage to come back to your breath. Just say "thinking," then go back to the breath. "Thinking", back to the breath. The labelling technique means that you label your thoughts and your five senses. This is mindfulness/ awareness. You are aware of what is arising in your mind. It's like crap shooting.

"Seeing," pow! "Hearing," pow! "Thinking," pow! "Feeling," pow! Whatever comes up, you blast it, or note it. Don't space out. You can use this technique when your thoughts are tumbling and rumbling but if the mind is calm it's best to let go of all the words and just be with the peace. So do it just when you need to but you shouldn't be labelling all the time.

A mantra is also a useful technique. When your mind is so distracted that you can't stay with the breath, you can repeat a meditation word. Mantra means "mind protection". You repeat a word on the inhalation to knock out your thoughts. Then you repeat another word or the same word on the exhalation. You can even visualize the letters of the word in white letters. Then visualize the next word in yellow letters, or whatever. This uses the sense of sight, sound and sub vocalization. By engaging your senses in this way you dominate the mind so as to knock out the discursive thoughts. Then, when you get some handle on your mind, you can drop the mantra and go back to the breath again.

I encourage you to experiment with all of these techniques to make your meditation work. The Tao says that you should facilitate what actually is happening, rather than stick to what you expect to happen. Another practice is to bring your awareness into your body and scan your sensations. Whatever pulls your mind out of your thoughts and into the body is good. You should regularly review how the body is positioned because you are synchronizing your body, speech and mind in meditation. This is precise inner work and hard inner work.

Take a working man's approach. To always connect your mind to your body will keep you in reality. I took flying lessons and my instructor told me forcefully "You steer the plane. You don't let it steer you!" In meditation you steer your thoughts rather than allowing them to steer you. Meditation is not spacing out. You are being present, looking into yourself, into your heart. If you want to know what something is like, you observe it. If you want to know what the mind is like, you observe the mind, watch the thoughts. As you look at your mind, there's nothing else happening, just your breath and your deepest innermost being churning around, unravelling your confusion.

You can have your mouth slightly open with your tongue touching the palate, the roof of your mouth. This reduces salivation and it prevents you from unconsciously clenching your jaw. Frequently bring your attention to your posture, to your head and shoulders. Some people end up leaning over a few inches. Try to sit still because it's good for building concentration, but if you have to move because of physical discomfort, move mindfully. Buddhism is the middle way. We work ourselves hard, but not too hard. It's good to make minor adjustments in your position to overcome pain.

When you're meditating, don't blame yourself for having a constantly wandering mind. Everyone feels that way, because everyone is that way. Your mind is not hopeless! The Buddha insisted that your mind is a workable situation. You can do it! You can meditate. It takes practice, like any other skill or craft that you have learned. All anyone can do for you is to bring you to the beginning of the eightfold path. You must choose to tread that path, and do the rest yourself. Sangha is there to help keep you on track, but you must do your own work. What matters is getting yourself to the cushion in the first place, and then doing your practice. The actual technique that you choose to practice is one thing but having the discipline to do that practice is another. Discipline is the basis of all virtue so keep regular. Stay with your meditation practice as humble as it is. It is wise to have one or two main practices of meditation such as breath and loving kindness. With that established, you can add other Buddhist contemplations and meditations such as the contemplations on dana -- generosity, death and impermanence, precious human birth, karma, considering the shortcomings of samsara, the recollection of deities and others. During the day reflect upon the view. When you're not meditating you still live within the world view of the dhamma and refine your view. The Buddha had big plans for us. He spent the first seven weeks after his enlightenment planning how he would present his message to devas and men, and then he proclaimed himself boldly.

Meditating puts us in tune with our being, with experiencing our life as it ordinarily is. Ajahn Sona said, "Sometimes when people see someone sitting with their legs crossed and their eyes closed they think they are very remote from the way we function in the world but actually what we're trying to do is gain a very heightened state of realism. Most people are very unrealistic. They think they have a job and raise a family and they're very realistic but they're not realistic at all. They are out of touch with reality."

You should meditate every day, ideally for one hour. You can start with as little as ten minutes per day, but try to get it up to 30, 40, and even 60 minutes. You don't have to do it all at once, or at any set time per day, but it probably works better to pick one time in your schedule to meditate, or you might skip it. Mornings are good because your nerves are a bit more refreshed after you've slept. You can wake yourself up, have a shower and a cup of coffee, then meditate. Don't sit right after a meal because you'll get sleepy. The Buddha taught his monks and nuns to go for a walk after a meal. Ayya Khema taught "Meditation is a very important thing to do, like flossing your teeth." She was a German Buddhist nun and the most famous Western nun. Her books and talks are a treasure.

Someone once told the Dalai Lama that they were living a good life, they followed all the precepts, they cared about others and had compassion. So, they asked the Dalai Lama, what could they possibly do next? Immediately the Dalai Lama said "Mental stabilization." What the Dalai Lama meant by this is that the next stage after living a moral life is to stabilize the mind in meditation practice. Meditation practices are the essential steps along the path to enlightenment. The Buddha recommended a balance of practice and study. So, let's get into some meditation practice now. The definition of meditation in one sentence is that meditation means to pay attention in a particular way. This means to familiarize your mind constantly and thoroughly with a virtuous object. In the meditation technique which we will do, you pay attention to your in and out breath at the tip of the nose. Meditation works with our wandering thoughts in an effort to train the mind with mindfulness and awareness, to stay in the present moment and move the mind toward tranquility and serenity. Meditation can clear away our confusion and stress, and help purify our minds. Meditators often secretly believe that they are the worst meditators in the world but everybody has a neurotic wandering mind. I remember when my father got me into meditation. He took me on my first meditation retreat in 1974. It was at a beautiful location on Niagara-on-the-Lake and I was the only 14 year old in the group. I thought that maybe I was too immature to do the practice properly because my thoughts kept wandering all over the place. Then we had a group discussion and everybody else was saying the same thing about the difficulties they were having with thoughts chattering away on the inside of their skulls. That was a revelation and an encouragement that I wasn't any worse than the other meditators so I kept at it.

It is good for meditators to share their experience with a teacher and get some experienced feedback. It's also an uplifting feeling to meditate in a group. It would be good to find a group to sit with once a week, or form your own group. Sangha is the Buddhist word for community. Not only are people crying out for some sense of community, but the Buddhist teachings indicate that the path to enlightenment is easier with a sangha. The three jewels are: the Buddha, the dharma and the sangha. Ananda once remarked to the Buddha "Having good friends to practice with is half of the spiritual life" -- "Not so Ananda," the Buddha replied. "Having good friends to practice with is all of the spiritual life." It is a blessing to have a good teacher, or a group of monks and nuns at the core of a sangha. You are still responsible for working out your own understanding. It is a disempowering model to have students relying on a teacher so the Buddha did not want his monks to depend upon him. He taught that you must work out the truth for yourself. In the Tao Te Ching, Lao Tzu taught that the second greatest leaders are loved by the people but the greatest leaders of all are hardly noticed by the people.

A good book providing 101 more techniques for meditation is, *Mindfulness in Plain English*, by Bhante Gunaratana. You can get it or download it for free off the net.

## Vipassana Meditation

There is a fair bit of confusion around vipassana meditation. Buddhist meditation is a process of samatha-vipassana. Samatha means calm, vipassana means insight or clear seeing with the eye of wisdom- clear seeing about the truth of the way things are. The Buddha almost always hyphenated the term. He almost never used the word vipassana on its own. Vipassana is the result of a process. Samatha-vipassana are two sides of the same coin. Ajahn Chah taught that "They go together, they always go together, they must go together." This is taught in the Theravada Forest tradition because we are following the Buddha. Over time some groups have separated the two as two different kinds of meditation going in two different directions. Vipassana has been separated from Buddhism itself as "the vipassana religion." Ajahn Viradhammo said "The word 'vipassana' is not that important a word in Theravada Buddhism." Today Vipassana has become a brand name and people think they are practicing that but the Buddha taught an eightfold path- not just meditation. The whole path needs to be practiced, not just some specialized vipassana techniques. Within vipassana there are different technique schools with over excessive advocacy of one technique. This gets misleading and confusing. Go back and read what the Buddha taught about how to meditate. It's OK to call breath meditation Vipassana meditation because the people who are using the vipassana brand name are doing breath meditation as well. Whole Vipassana schools are based upon the Satipattana sutta, which is a composite of several suttas combined by the Theravadin fathers to make "the longest discourse" on how to meditate. In it the Buddha teaches how to connect with reality but he didn't specify precisely about whether meditation practice had to be just this way, or that way. Lord Buddha gave us the parameters by saying for example, "When a monk has a thought, he knows he has a thought." Ajahn Sucitto from Chithurst Monastery in England said "Meditation is not just about sitting, it's weather the mind can be skilful" (Sucitto, 2002; 23).

### Meditation on Loving kindness

By Ajahn Sona

The Buddha taught throughout his life that the practice of loving kindness is central to happiness here and now, and happiness in the future. The practice of loving kindness is a blameless practice. Its fruits are all positive. There are no negative by-products. The Buddha left us with several detailed discourses on loving kindness and how to practice them.

The word 'loving kindness' is an English translation of the word 'metta' which comes from the ancient Pali language. The word 'metta' has its roots in 'friendliness'. So friendliness is really what we're talking about when we speak of loving kindness—a profound, deep friendliness towards other beings and towards oneself.

This quality of friendliness must be generated in the mind, cultivated and practiced often. People often feel that such emotions as loving kindness or deep friendliness need to arise spontaneously, that they shouldn't be exercised, that they should just happen, or that they drop into your mind from heaven. But the Buddha emphasizes again and again that although this is a heavenly state—a sublime abiding, a divine condition of the mind and the heart—it happens **from** you and not **to** you. You are the maker of your own heaven.

When the Buddha gave the discourse on loving kindness, it is very interesting to note that the first quarter of the teachings are preliminaries to loving kindness - what has to be done before you can satisfactorily practice loving kindness.

Detailing the preliminaries, he begins by saying, "This is what should be done by one who is skilled in goodness and who knows the path of peace." "Skilled in goodness" means we have to know what is skilful and what is unskilful thought, speech, and action. To "know the path of peace" is to know the Noble Eightfold Path, which explains skilful and unskilful speech and action. Therefore, this knowledge is required for the regulated generation of loving kindness. It is the solid basis for the practice. It requires some wisdom and knowledge.

The Buddha continues, "Let them be able and upright, straightforward and gentle in speech." "Able and upright" is a kind of virtue, a kind of attitude. "Straightforward" is again a quality of character, a lack of deviance, a lack of cunning and conniving, being up-front and straightforward, but also "gentle in speech." The speech is true but beneficial. These are also the foundations for loving kindness.

As a basis for practicing loving kindness, one must also be "humble and not conceited", the Buddha continues. Humility means a lack of ego. It is a kind of flexibility. The grass is often compared to humility, while a brittle tree is compared to rigidity and conceit. When a strong wind blows, the brittle tree will break but the grass will bend and have no difficulty because it is low and flexible. So the low ego, the flexible personality, is not disturbed by reports from reality, either about themselves or about others, because they have not invested themselves with false dimensions or enlarged themselves inappropriately. They have little suffering.

The Buddha also mentions other prerequisites for loving kindness. He says they are to be "contented and easily satisfied." Contentment and satisfaction allow room for the generation of an emotion like loving kindness. If one is constantly filled with ambition and the tension that goes with ambition — the drive to accumulate, the drive to have power — it doesn't leave room for the peaceful, expansive nature of loving kindness. These are two mutually exclusive mind states. To be discontented and demanding is opposed to the atmosphere of loving kindness.

The Buddha then reminds us that those who wish to practice loving kindness should be "unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways." In the household life, it is sometimes difficult to be unburdened with duties. In the monastic life, it is certainly an ideal to seek a simple life in a small cottage or meditation dwelling without too many duties. But this ideal is something also to be aspired to in the household life.

The Buddha is saying that one should not clutter one's life with frantic activity, thinking that the mere rushing about and doing things is wise or profitable. Rather, one should undertake duties that are proper, necessary and helpful to oneself and others but without merely distracting oneself continuously. The cultivation of loving kindness requires an undistracted mind.

Frugality is one of the ways in which you can allow yourself to have more time, not to be reckless in spending money or in accumulating things. One should be modest and moderate, knowing what is appropriate and what is not, what is necessary and what is frivolous, so that the mind is not burdened. One then has time and space to cultivate what is truly lasting and truly valuable.

The Buddha then goes on to mention other skilful states for generating loving kindness: "Peaceful and calm, and wise and skilful" Peace and calmness of mind are also foundations for the development of



loving kindness. And the reverse is also true: loving kindness is also a foundation for peace and calm. So if you want to practice a calming meditation, quite often it is helpful to start with loving kindness. And if you want to practice loving kindness, it is often helpful to start with a calming meditation. They support each other mutually.

He goes on, "One should wish that in gladness and safety, may all beings be at ease." This is the essential wish of loving kindness or friendliness, that beings be glad, safe and at ease. When we send out loving kindness, we may use phrases like, "May all beings be happy, may all beings be at peace, may all beings be safe, may all beings be at ease."

Then there is a series of categories. The Buddha makes sure that we include all beings without restriction. He says, "Whatever living beings that there may be, omitting none, weak or strong, great, medium, or small, the seen and the unseen, those living near or far away, the born and to be born (those in the womb), may all beings be at ease." And we wish, "Let beings not deceive each other, let them not despise other beings, let none through anger or ill, will wish harm upon another," so we wish that they also may have loving kindness.

The final simile that sums up the picture that the Buddha paints is the beautiful line, "Even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings, radiating kindness over the entire world: upwards to the skies, downward to the depths, outward, unbounded, without any ill will." So we have the simile of the affection of the mother for her only child, where she protects with her life her only child. This means one encourages the positive and discourages negativity. One should explore and dwell on the nature of the kindness a mother has for her only child.

The Buddha then describes how and when this should be practiced. "Whether standing, walking, seated or lying down, one should sustain this recollection." So the posture is not important. It is a thing that one does with one's mind, whether just before going to sleep or just upon waking up. Whether in the middle of the day, at work, sitting quietly in the forest, in the meditation room with a group or whether alone, one can practice, "one can sustain this recollection." So one can recollect one's attitude throughout the day.

"This is said to be the sublime abiding." A heaven here and now is cultivated and generated through one's own mind. And it is through one's own mind, and no other way, that one produces the refinement of consciousness, which corresponds to heaven. The loving kindness meditation answers many needs and wants in our lives. But it is our responsibility to generate this. It is not dependent on who loves us. It is dependent on us generating love unconditionally for others.

So in meditation you may bring up the image and feeling of a mother's love for her only child, radiating it outward from oneself to other beings. Or you may begin with other beings, radiating loving kindness towards oneself. You can begin with beings you have a natural affection for, and radiate it slowly outward to those more distant from you, or you can radiate loving kindness to the vast universe itself.

These are all suggestions and techniques. There are no rules for this. All we want to understand is, does it work? And what works well for me? Images, poems, and songs - all of these things may work for different people. One should explore one's own techniques, and find whatever helps. That is the process of the meditation. You cannot over-meditate. Loving kindness is always appropriate. It is not a disadvantage in the world.

The Buddha lists eleven benefits from the practice of loving kindness. We will close this meditation by giving the entire discourse. In speaking to the monks, he said,

*“O monks, there are eleven benefits from loving kindness that arise from the emancipation of the heart. If repeated, developed, made much of, made a habit of, made a basis of, experienced, practiced, well-started, these eleven benefits are expected:*

*One sleeps well; One wakes up well;*

*One does not have nightmares;*

*One becomes affectionate to human beings;*

*One becomes affectionate to non-human beings;*

*The deities protect one;*

*Neither fire nor poison nor weapons harm one;*

*One’s mind is easily calmed;*

*One’s countenance is serene;*

*One dies without confusion;*

*Beyond that, if one fails to attain Nibbana, one is reborn in the higher heavens.”*

Without a doubt, these are benefits to be earnestly hoped for in one’s life. We can see that loving kindness is not something to be occasionally reflected upon, but “repeated, developed, made much of, made a habit of, and practiced,” in order that it does have these benefits.

If it is a fragmentary practice, it will have fragmentary results. If it is a practice deeply steeped into the bones, then it will have a deep and profound result. It is a protection for yourself and a protection for others, both to body and mind. It is conducive to a great stability and sanity. It ensures one’s maximum enjoyment of this life and pre-disposes one to an optimal fate after death.

So I leave you with these words and images from the Buddha on the practice of loving kindness or profound friendliness. May you be well, happy, and peaceful.



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(Transcription by Donna Woods)

Now, we will apply Ajahn Sona's instructions. If you go on retreats, loving kindness is a familiar practice. You can make your own CD of my guided meditation below. If you read it slowly with appropriate pauses it should take about 15 minutes. You can play it back for yourself when you meditate. The advantage of following a guided meditation is that it's easier to do than trying to remember all the ways to develop and direct loving kindness. It's like your mother reading you a bedtime story. You just follow along and accept the suggestions so there's less effort needed. You're encouraged to experiment with it, change it and use personalized images that work for you.

### **The Guided Meditation on Loving Kindness**

Sit upright in meditation posture and close your eyes. Begin with thoughts of friendliness... warmth, loving kindness... then direct that feeling of loving kindness to yourself. Overspread yourself with that friendliness, thinking, "May I be happy. May I find true happiness." And realize the rightness of your wish to be happy. And where does true happiness come from? It has to come from within. And the more happiness you have, the more you naturally share with others, thinking, "May I be happy. May I find true happiness." And smile to invoke that feeling of happiness. Then bring your attention to your heart - your heart centre and dissolve away any ill-will towards yourself. You realize that you have goodness and gentleness in you already. You don't have to be hard on yourself. And you chant to yourself... "May I be well, happy and peaceful. May I be well, happy and peaceful... May I be free from affliction, free from anxiety, free from hostility. May I be well..." And you can visualize yourself sitting in a hot tub, filled to your chin with this white, warm, luminous loving kindness, friendliness, dissolving away your anger and your tension. And it's saturating your body and your mind. Imagine yourself floating in this tranquil space, feeling the best you've ever felt. You can recall memories from your life of times when people were tremendously kind towards you. Or think of moments when you were very kind to others, and get that feeling. You can alter and exaggerate those images to enhance that feeling of metta. Metta means a deep profound friendliness towards yourself and others. It is the emotion and nothing other than the emotion that is loving kindness, not the words. And you can use images from fiction, like novels or movies that inspire feelings of upliftedness or friendliness. You can even use poetry or songs- whatever works for you. Thinking, "May I be happy. May I find true happiness!"

Next, extend that feeling of friendliness outwards to a dearly loved friend or family member, wishing, "May they be happy! May they find true happiness as well!" And imagine them sitting right in front of you and you're feeling their presence here. From your heart centre you're enveloping them with your feelings of love and gratitude. Then imagine that they are sending loving kindness to you. And you're exchanging that feeling back and forth. You build that feeling of metta on the friend. Next, think of a benefactor... someone who has helped you a lot in your life, such as a parent or a teacher and visualize them bathed in sunshine, smiling, happy and extend loving kindness to them in the same way, wishing, "May they be happy. May they find true happiness."

Then send loving kindness to your family and friends, those closest to you. You could visualize them all in the same way, bathed in sunshine, smiling, happy. Then send loving kindness to more neutral persons, colleagues, teachers, students, neighbours, acquaintances, strangers, people you meet in shops. Give your loving kindness to everyone without thought of your relationship to them. Then, think of someone you're having difficulties with but think of them as a stranger in a crowd of people and extend your feeling to them as though they were a neutral person. Try to neutralize any feeling of aversion, thinking, "May they be peaceful, may they be at ease." See if you can extend some loving kindness to them, to break down these barriers in your own heart.

Next, extend your loving kindness to everyone in the room, in the building, then spread it around the neighbourhood north and south, east and west, like a blanket of loving kindness a mile thick covering the whole city, saturating all sentient beings with this friendliness and love. And you can chant to yourself, "May all beings be well, happy and peaceful. May all beings be well, happy and peaceful." In the Metta sutta the Buddha said:

"Wishing, in gladness and in safety,  
May all beings be at ease!  
Whatever living beings there may be;  
Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,  
The great or the mighty, medium, short or small,  
The seen and the unseen,  
Those living near and far away,  
Those born and to-be-born -  
May all beings be at ease!  
Let none deceive another,  
Or despise any being in any state.  
Let none through anger or ill-will  
Wish harm upon another.  
Even as a mother protects with her life  
Her child, her only child,  
So with a boundless heart  
Should one cherish all living beings;  
Radiating kindness over the entire world:  
Spreading upwards to the skies,  
And downwards to the depths;  
Outwards and unbounded,  
Freed from hatred and ill-will.

Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down  
Free from drowsiness, One should sustain this recollection..."

This is said to be the sublime abiding corresponding to the heavenly state but heaven happens from you not to you. It is by generating and developing loving kindness in your mind and in your heart that you can create this heavenly condition in your life. So, expand that feeling further across the whole province, the whole country and the continent and expand it out over the entire world wishing, "May all beings be well, happy and peaceful. May all beings be well, happy and peaceful."

Then... send that loving kindness up into the sky, to the beings that live in the sky, and to the higher realms of existence, the devas, the heavenly beings. Tune into their happiness in their celestial palaces and visualize that as you are sending loving kindness upwards to them, in response, they're sending their loving kindness down here to you like a funnel of love saturating the space here with the luminosity of their loving kindness and benevolence and you feel their presence and their intelligence and their power. You're breathing in the luminosity of their loving kindness and it's saturating your body and your mind and you're chanting "May all devas be well, happy and peaceful. May all devas be well happy and peaceful."

Later, send your loving kindness below you into the earth, to the beings that live in the earth and to the lower realms of existence - the animal realm and the ghost realm. Give your warmth and friendliness to them as well. And then bring it up and extend your loving kindness around and across and everywhere. Imagine waves and waves of loving kindness emanating from your heart centre across the world. Then, bring that loving kindness back to yourself. Fill yourself like a vessel, filled to the top with that white warm luminous friendliness, loving kindness, thinking, "May I be happy. May I find true happiness!" Then dissolve the contemplation and open your eyes.

### **Commentary**

The loving kindness is a real touchy-feely practice. It's nice and enjoyable to do. It's easier than the breath because the breath is a non-conceptual practice. There's no concept. You're just meditating on the sensation of the breath touching your skin. It's a body meditation actually, but the loving kindness is a conceptual practice. You're contemplating upon the theme of profound friendliness. You're focusing your attention onto that area of your mind and expanding it outwards so that it pervades your being. The opposite of that is when you focus in on who you resent and expand that outwards until you feel like picking up the phone and telling them off. This shows the karma of sustained thought. If you have that sustained thought of goodwill and love, that is a karmic event because karma works through body, speech and mind. If you say something or do something, that is karma, but at the level of thought, even if you don't say or do anything, if you have that sustained intention of metta then it's a wholesome karmic act which will come back to you in a beneficial way. The Buddha was very concerned that the opposite is true. A sustained thought of ill-will, anger, resentment is negative karma that will rebound upon you in the future. Therefore, this practice of metta is a karmically very significant practice. If you keep it up for years you can become the kind of person that everybody likes to be around- beaming with friendliness, confidence and cheerfulness. Metta dissolves your aversion at a deep level like a solvent and in my own experience it has given me the power to be able to shift my thoughts when I get a bit depressed or negative. Since the time I first went to the Birken Forest Monastery in 2001, I've made metta my main meditation practice because of how skilfully Ajahn Sona taught it. You can listen to several of his discourses on loving kindness on the Birken website. He told me "You can make a whole life out of loving kindness."

During walking meditation you can practice loving kindness. As you walk down the path visualize the person you are sending loving kindness to, at the end of the path, thinking "May you be well, happy and peaceful." When you turn around, see them at the other end of the path, or imagine the next person you want to send metta to. Be creative. You can even imagine giving each other a hug when you get to the end of the path. Loving kindness can also be done as a lying meditation. It's a gentle way of getting up in the morning instead of just hauling your butt out of bed right away. You wish that all beings be happy, be safe.

You can kick start your metta practice by imagining that you're holding, close to your face, an object that makes the mind melt, like a cat or a puppy or a baby, wishing "May it be well, happy and peaceful." After you build up that feeling, merge that image into your own heart, your heart centre and extend loving kindness to yourself. That's the technique for people who have self hate. If they feel that they can't send metta to themselves they can do this first, or send it to someone that they admire because even people who hate themselves admire somebody. Once they genuinely feel some love, then that's the time to try to pour some of that feeling on themselves. I explained this to a woman in one of my classes and then she burst into tears saying that she did have self hate and this is just what she needed to hear.

One of the methods of practicing metta is to visualize a curtain with a being behind that curtain. You don't know who or what the being is but you are sending loving kindness to them anyway. Then imagine the curtain opening and you see who is there. You can let your mind spontaneously come up with a being or you can choose one after you've sent metta to them. Play with it. The curtain opens and you could see your mother standing there, or your brother or your friend. Then they walk away and the curtain closes again and now there's another being there that you can't see. You send them loving kindness and the curtain opens and it's President Barak Obama, then a total stranger, then a cat, a dog, then a difficult person. It could be Adolf Hitler. Keep experimenting with all sorts of people and beings. Eventually it helps to give you a feeling of anatta, non self. It doesn't matter who or what is there, you're sending loving kindness to all beings without distinction.

There's a story from Buddhaghosa, though it's not in the suttas, that the Buddha taught this metta practice to a group of monks. The monks were being tormented by devas who were trying to drive them out of their home region because they had overstayed their welcome. The devas created fearful appearances and foul smelling odors. The monks got up, all at once, and left and went to the Buddha to ask for a better retreat location. The Buddha said, "No. You must go back to that place." "But what about those fearful apparitions and the foul odors?!" the monks protested. "Before you were without weapons", the Buddha taught. "Now, I will give you the weapons of loving kindness." So he taught them the metta practice and they went back and their retreat was very successful; the devas loved the monks, and in return they made their rains retreat very pleasant by making food appear and by conducting them to their kutis to meditate.

The antidote to anger or aversion is to contemplate upon it's wholesome opposite, friendliness. This is a very wholesome meditation practice and it works indirectly. If you are angry at someone you counteract that by sending loving kindness to yourself first, then to a very dearly loved friend and then to neutral people. After you have genuinely built up some feeling of friendliness, benevolence and love towards yourself, the friend and a neutral person, then you try to think of the hostile person as a neutral person. This is a skillful way of sending loving kindness to difficult people.

Some people think that if they are angry at someone they should send them loving kindness, but that's not always good advice. Someone may feel worse about themselves if they attempt but fail in the attempt, feeling that they are incapable of generating kindness. If you use the indirect approach, what matters is that you are displacing the ill-will and aversion in your mind with friendliness by sending it to yourself and to a dearly loved friend or benefactor. That's great, just to go that far. You can stop there if you want, with the anger quelled. You don't have to send it to the difficult person.

U Silananda teaches that "When doing the metta chant, "May all beings...", three to ten times should be standard. When we send these metta thoughts, we can send them in different ways; we can send them by location or by persons. When we say the sentences, we should try to visualize the beings or persons mentioned in the sentences as being really happy and peaceful"(Paritta Pali, 1995; 70).

It is necessary to love yourself first, the Buddha taught, in order to be able to extend true loving kindness to others. Love everyone unconditionally - including yourself. The people with the most love and compassion in the world are the arahants; that's why we think of them.

In the *Path of Purification*, Buddhaghosa writes (Nanamoli, 1956; 323): "[If one develops their loving kindness contemplation] in this way 'I am happy. Just as I want to be happy and dread pain, as I want to live and not to die, so do other beings, too,' making himself the example, then desire for other beings'

welfare and happiness arises in him. And this method is indicated by the Blessed One's saying.

I visited all quarters with my mind  
Nor found I any dearer than myself;  
Self is likewise to every other dear;  
Who loves himself will never harm another (S.i, 75; Ud. 47)

So he should first, as example, pervade himself with loving kindness. Next after that, in order to proceed easily, he can recollect such gifts, kind words, etc., as inspire love and endearment, such virtue, learning, etc., as inspire respect and reverence met with in a teacher or his equivalent or a preceptor or his equivalent, developing loving kindness towards him in the way beginning 'May this good man be happy and free from suffering.' With such a person, of course, he attains absorption.

But if this bhikkhu does not rest content with just that much and wants to break down the barriers, he should next after that, develop loving kindness towards a very dearly loved friend, then towards a neutral person as a very dearly loved friend, then towards a hostile person as neutral. And while he does so, he should make his mind malleable and wieldy in each instance before passing on to the next."

Buddhaghosa continues with nineteen pages of commentary on this loving kindness practice, which is recommended reading. The benefits of loving kindness are to be aspired towards but it takes regular practice which should be repeated, developed, made much of and made a habit of, in order that it does uplift your life. It leads to great strength and happiness in one's mind. The fruition of loving kindness is playfulness.

You can follow my guided meditation CD with tracks 5 and 6, which is a 10 minute guided contemplation on loving kindness followed by a 20 minute guided contemplation on loving kindness. You can do the short one or you can really bliss out and do a whole half hour in a row if you like. The short guided meditation is also freely available on my website at [theravada.ca](http://theravada.ca).

### **Walking Meditation**

Walking meditation compliments sitting meditation. This keeps you awake, stretches the legs and it is a transition to the post meditation world. You can walk for the same period of time or a shorter length. You can do the walking first to settle yourself down, then go straight into sitting without a break. To do this, as in sitting meditation it is important to have direct personal instruction. You can put your hands together in front or behind you to prevent them from swinging and people seem to concentrate better with their hands together. Don't clasp too tight. Relax into it.

You concentrate on your feet -- the object of meditation. You don't need to meditate on the breath because that's too subtle a sensation. If you need to save space in a group you can walk in a clockwise circle. When people greeted the Buddha they kept their right side to the Buddha in coming or going. So when you go clockwise, you are keeping your right side to the centre. Many people say that they like walking meditation more than sitting because it gives them something to do; it keeps them in their body. When they sit they just space out and their mind is all over the place. On other days they will say that walking meditation is more distracting than sitting because they're moving around and their eyes are open. It's good to practice either technique depending upon what's right for you. Walking meditation stretches the legs and wakes you up if you have done a lot of sitting.

The dictionary definition of the word "step" is: "An act of progressive motion that requires one of the supporting limbs of the body to be thrust in the direction of the movement, and to reassume its function of support; a pace." But, you're not supposed to be thinking about that when you step; just step.

Walking keeps people awake. Many of my students report that their sitting gets more concentrated after the walking meditation. This is because the walking builds up your concentration, then you go right into the sitting without a break. This is why Ajahn Supan taught me, when I was a monk, to do the walking meditation first and then the sitting. Below are instructions from Ajahn Kusalo at [www.BuddhaMind.info](http://www.BuddhaMind.info) .

Walking meditation has many facets; it can be considered simply as an alternative posture. Unless you are very lucky, sitting for more than an hour or so is quite physically difficult -- there is a need to unravel the bones and muscles. Yoga and tai chi are good for this but walking is an easily developed technique which can maintain the direct thread of one's meditation. If you can give the time, extended periods of formal meditation are usually very fruitful and when you do change posture it is good to reflect on how the mind shifts with that change. There is a tendency to divide meditation into sitting and, 'all the rest.' The encouragement is to maintain mindfulness in all four postures; sitting, standing, walking and lying down. This does take quite some practice and the use of structured exercises is very supportive in establishing a strong internal sense of just what mindfulness is.

#### **Boundaries:**

As with any meditation technique it is important to set up boundaries. The overall idea being to determine an object of meditation for a determined amount of time. With breath meditation one might say: 'Now I determine to watch the breath for 40 minutes.' With walking meditation the path one selects creates the boundary. One chooses a stretch of (relatively) level ground -- about 20 to 30 paces long - and marks either end in some way. This can be with sticks or rocks or piles of leaves -- anything will do as long as it is quite clear. Between two trees is a traditional path but these are not readily come by so well placed. If you find walking useful and think to do a lot then you can build a path with brick edging and gravel or bark floor -- or whatever materials you have to hand. The advantage the boundaries of a walking path have over say those of breath meditation is that they are much more tangible. If you were walking between two trees you would be conveniently reminded that you had lost mindfulness when you got to the end of the path and bent your nose against the tree.

#### **Walk on:**

The defined nature of a path helps contain the mind and the tendency to wander. Begin at one end of the path. Bring attention to the body. You could spend a few moments doing 'body sweeping'. Feel a sense of balance -- both internal and external. Determine for how long you will walk. Let go of expectations. Relax. The usual suggestion is to maintain the focus on the feelings at the soles of the feet -- this helps define the boundary further. There is the possibility of distraction, and one can get caught in looking at the clouds or the flowers or the birds, etc. Walk with eyes downcast, looking about three paces ahead. Proceed at a 'normal' pace. Get to the end of the path -- stop - turn around -- stop -- begin walking. Try this for at least 15 minutes. An hour is good too.



**Variants:**

You can experiment with the point of focus. The swing of the arms -- or just the hands. The balance of the head (as in walking with a book on top of). Try keeping attention on the sensation of 'the whole body walking'. Or, the sensations of the wind or the sun on the body. Or joining walking with breath meditation. Try walking very slowly, noting each shift of the body, the positions of the feet and legs. You could formalise this: lifting left leg, stepping forward, reaching, lowering, placing, transferring weight, etc. If you are limited by space - especially if you are indoors - you could try circumambulating a room. You could do this with a group of people - there is no leader and a need to be sensitive to the group energy / speed. You could combine walking with chanting (it is fairly common for monastics to learn their chanting on the walking path). Try noting the beginning, middle and end of each length of the path (as with the breath). Note the intention to stop (easy, as it is signified by the end of the path); the intention to turn around (not so easy as it is only signified by a movement of the mind). It is good to develop personal boundaries or a style and just work with that. Be careful of the butterfly practice -- 5 minutes of this, a bit of the other, etc. Be clear that you are being clear.

**Generally:**

- Set your session up with the attitude of having nothing to get and, literally, nowhere to go. You can just enjoy a walk. Relax.
- Adjust the pace to suit your state of mind. Walk vigorously when drowsy or trapped in obsessive thought - like worry, anger, fear. If you are restless or impatient maintain a firm, gentle and steady pace. Get a sense of your internal energy and then set a pace to balance that.
- Walking can be an occasion for insight. As a good portion of the thinking is involved in keeping the body upright and forward, thought tends to be reduced and the mind can shift into 'neutral' quite easily. It is often into this 'doing nothing', letting it be' space that insight will arise.
- Associate your walking practice with 'every day' walking. Bring the sense of composure, containment, focus, etc. into your mind as you walk from your bedroom into the kitchen -- down the road -- in the shops (especially the eyes downcast part). This will greatly support your mindfulness in 'the world'.

**Lying down:**

- As one of the four postures this can be used for meditation. Lie full length on your (right) side with the left arm laying along your upper side and the right arm under your head (or vice versa). One can relax the body but there is a sense of being balanced on one side which helps stop one from falling asleep.
- A common thing is not having enough time to meditate. You could try bed time meditation. At the end of the day - you have switched the light out -- it is time for sleep. Usually there is some time before you actually fall asleep. Use this time for meditation. Relax. Breathe. Silently recite a mantra. Practice metta. You can develop a range of practices. This will make falling asleep easier and will affect the quality both of your sleep and your waking.

- If you do keep falling asleep during your meditation time perhaps you just need some sleep. It is not uncommon that people's energy is dependent on external stimulus. The first days of a meditation retreat -- without that stimulus -- and they are falling asleep all over the place. Make an effort but be compassionate.

To expand upon the lying meditation, in lying meditation you do much the same as in sitting meditation. You lie down, preferably on your right side, the Buddha taught, because your heart is on the left side. It puts less pressure on your heart. You can do breath or loving kindness practice the same way as with sitting. It's also great to do if you can't sleep in the middle of the night. For people who say that they don't have enough time to meditate, this is the time! No excuse. It's 4:00 am and you can't sleep. You don't want to disturb your partner by reading, even with an itty bitty book light, so practice meditation to cut through that insomnia. Often people are awake because they are worrying about their job or relationship or whatever, so you can cut through that neurosis and those thoughts going around and around by meditating until you fall back asleep. This makes the mind more peaceful and helps you to sleep and it's better than counting sheep. The Buddha said that a monk or nun should be mindful until the last moment of consciousness, and then immediately resume mindfulness practice as soon as they wake up. You shouldn't lie down if you want to meditate because you'll likely fall asleep. The rule is, if you want to meditate then sit; if you are lying down, then meditate. Lying meditation is meant for situations where you are lying down anyhow, like going to bed, or when you're sick. This is good for cold Canadian winters when you don't want to get out of your cozy bed, snuggled up to another warm lovable body beside you. It also a good time to practice metta. When you wake up you don't have to haul yourself out of bed straight away. You can gently start the day thinking "May I be happy. May all beings be well, happy and peaceful." I do lying meditation almost every night.

### ***Ordinary Walking***

When walking down the street you shouldn't use the usual walking meditation technique. You are moving faster and you need to be on the lookout for cars and people but you can still practice mindfulness. Usually our minds are all over the place when we're walking around in the city and we don't pay much attention to sensations in the body. You can still note the feet touching the ground. Bring your attention to your right foot as it touches the pavement. You say to yourself "Right, left, right, right, right. Right, left, right, right, right," as you walk along. You skip most of the left counts, otherwise you would be noting too fast for comfort. You can still practice mindfulness/ awareness in this way, in the midst of noisy traffic. We walk so often, even close to home so this is a true opportunity to practice dhamma.

### ***Standing Meditation***

There are four postures for meditation practice — sitting, walking, standing and lying. Ananda confused the arahant policy by attaining enlightenment in another posture. He was trying hard to get to nirvana. A few weeks after the Buddha died he took a break from his meditation. He was on the verge of assuming his laying down position when just as his hand touched the mat, pop! He attained full and permanent enlightenment.

To do standing meditation you stand with your hands comfortably at your side or together. Your balance is better with your eyes open. Cast your eyes down, in front of you. You can do a similar technique of breath or metta meditation as you do in sitting practice. With your eyes open you still follow the breath but you can put more attention on the sensations of standing. Scan your body up and down practicing

mindfulness of the body. It's natural to do this when you're doing walking meditation. When you turn around, just stop and pause and stand. Sometimes if your mind races ahead of you when walking, it's good to stop and do standing meditation to let it catch up. It's like when you're with a small child that races ahead of you and you fold your arms and stop, saying "Come back! I'm not moving until you come back! I'm going to stay right here."

This is a good technique if you've been meditating too long and need to stand up. This overcomes sleepiness. For a group in a crowded room with no space for walking meditation, use standing instead. This is a great one for line ups too, line ups anywhere, or bus stops because you don't look weird with your hands hanging at your side. Let such mindfulness practices infiltrate your being. Build a lifestyle of mindfulness. It is by being so ordinary that life takes on an extraordinary quality. Simplifying your life is defined as creating an environment in your life that allows you to be more mindful. When I was 20 my buddy from high school and I drove from Ontario to move to Vancouver and we visited my sister Diana. I was telling her about living "here and now". She thought I was talking irresponsibly about 'eat, drink and be merry' and we left without me really being able to express myself correctly. Thirteen years later when I was living in the monastery in Thailand I finally understood what being here and now meant. After three weeks of a retreat the mindfulness sunk into me at an experiential level. With mindfulness life can take on a 'sparkle in the rain' quality.

### **Going into the Silence**

The technique of going into the silence is for allowing answers to spring forth which may be buried under your confusion or in your subconscious mind. You must listen to the still small voice within. If an answer is coming, it will come from that still small voice within you. Do not practice conventional meditation but sit, wide awake with your eyes open and do nothing. You can write down the question you are asking or what the issue is and try to be as clear as you can. You do not try to figure out an answer. When your mind wanders, gently bring it back to the question. You remain open and wait for 30 minutes, 40 minutes. After this you may notice a stream of thoughts starting to flow through you. Sometimes, after a whole hour, 'bang!' an answer will pop into your mind that is complete and satisfying, clear and meaningful to you. Usually it is accompanied by the energy to immediately act on it. You may even have to go to the bathroom. This method works simply by creating a container around your mind in this way. This allows the fragile connection within to be nurtured. In our society it is rare for someone to sit attentively for an hour and do absolutely nothing. Our work ethic always keeps us busy. But, there is no faster way to get an answer to a question. I urge you to try it. I give credit to Brian Tracy for these "going into the silence" teachings.

## The Four Foundations of Mindfulness

Meditation is practiced from the perspective of what the Buddha called the four foundations of mindfulness.

1. Mindfulness of body — body position and movement.
2. Mindfulness of feelings — pleasant, unpleasant and neutral feelings.
3. Mindfulness of mind — awareness itself, as well as your underlying state of mind- expanded or contracted, etc.
- 4 Mindfulness of mind objects and dhamma categories — the six senses — thinking, seeing, hearing, feeling, smell and taste as well as the five hindrances, etc.

Every experience that you have had can be found under one of these four categories. Mindfulness of the body is the best place to start, the first aggregate of form. In meditation you are aware when your body acts up and distracts you. In post meditation you should make an effort to be mindful in each waking minute. That means that you should focus your mind on what it is that you are actually doing or contemplating. You can practice this with mindful eating. Some people say that this is almost a revelation to them, they realize that they were missing moments of their life. The discipline is to stop reading the newspaper (it's mostly negative anyway) while you eat, and stop listening to the radio at the same time. Just eat. This is meditation in action, you regard your eating and other activities as an extension of your sitting practice. When you meditate you don't read the newspaper and listen to music.

In reaching for a spoonful of cereal you can be silently mindful or you can use the noting technique, saying to yourself "reaching." You can note each part of the movement and mindfully eat the whole meal that way. You don't have to go particularly slow. The Buddha never associated mindfulness with moving slowly and he didn't act in a strange way. He ate his food the same as everyone else. You can continue to be aware of "chewing, chewing, tasting, tasting," noting "liking," or "disliking." "Swallowing, swallowing," as you feel it going down the throat. Meals in silence are a wonderful practice experience in family life. You don't have to have every meal in silence but it would be wise to do so at the right time. Phra Sawat, my meditation instructor at Wat Ram Poeng used to walk past me and my compadres many times saying only "Acknowledge, acknowledge."

The second foundation of mindfulness, mindfulness of feelings means that you catch yourself whenever your mind adversely turns away from things that bug you in the slightest way, plus note things that tempt your attention, and also note things that are neither pleasant, nor unpleasant — neutral feelings. This is a completely different meaning for 'feelings' than the 'feeling' in the 2nd aggregate of anatta (which means the five senses).

To remember the third and fourth foundations, there is an image which helps to anchor these concepts. It is of a goldfish swimming around in a goldfish bowl. The fourth foundation is represented by the bright goldfish. The mind objects are the bright reflections off the fins and body which are easy to see. What is not so easy to see and appreciate is the water around the goldfish. This is the mind itself, and the underlying state of mind (how clean the water is). Is your underlying state of mind joyous, rapturous, depressed, confused? All of your thoughts and sensory input from seeing hearing, etc. are mind objects, which are very dominating in your experience, practically the whole of your experience. Behind it all, your awareness is there, consciousness itself.