

# THE PATH OF MINDFULNESS MEDITATION

The Direct Path for Personal and Spiritual  
Transformation

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# INTRODUCTION

The psyche is a remarkably complex and dynamic system that continually processes huge quantities of sensory information and makes hundreds of unconscious decisions designed to maintain balance and health. Although automatic, this whole dynamic process is imbued with an innate intelligence that directs change in a specific direction towards stability and balance. In the same way that physiological homeostasis maintains balance and well-being in the body, psychological homeostasis maintains stability and well-being in the mind. In the ancient language of Pali, in which the Buddha's teachings were first recorded, this natural intuitive wisdom-intelligence that leads to stability and well-being is called *satipanna*, which means "mindfulness-based wisdom-intelligence."

Mental suffering, known as *dukkha* arises when the mind is not free to change under the direction of *satipanna* and is not able to resolve instability. The single most important factor that takes away this psychological freedom and prevents dynamic and intelligent change in the psyche is the phenomenon of conditioned habitual reactivity. Habitual reactivity distorts our perception, makes us insensitive in our relationships and makes the mind dull and inflexible. It is this insensitivity and inflexibility that inhibits inner transformation, as we become stuck in patterns of emotional reactivity, negative thinking and dysfunctional inner beliefs. Habitual reactivity limits our freedom to be fully present and fully engaged and this inhibits creativity and intelligent action.

During his awakening 2,500 years ago, the Buddha realized that reactivity depends on two key factors. These are *avijja*, or ignorance, which makes reactivity resistant to change, and *tanha*, which is the emotional force of unconscious attachment that compels us to react. The Buddha recognized that the path to freedom from reactivity and *dukkha* must involve removing *avijja* and *tanha*. He also recognized that this transformation cannot be achieved by the thinking mind, which is dominated by reactive conditioning, but through a totally different way of

relating to experience that is non-reactive. This non-reactive awareness is called mindfulness, or *sati*, in Pali.

The essential teachings of the Buddha involve the cultivation of mindfulness in daily life and in a form of mindfulness meditation called *vipassana*, or insight meditation. The application of mindfulness is at the very heart of the Buddhist path of personal and spiritual transformation, and *sati* becomes our refuge and guide in all our relationships, internally and externally. The primary focus of the Path of Mindfulness and meditation is to overcome habitual reactivity and free the mind so that we can engage fully and intelligently with our experience and restore the flexibility that allows the psyche to effectively heal itself through the action of innate intelligence, of *panna*.

Mindfulness meditation is not an escape from suffering, but a passionate engagement with the fundamental reactive processes that perpetuate suffering and take us away from our natural state of freedom and happiness. When we relate with mindfulness, we cultivate a relationship based on an openness of heart and mind that is itself free from the subjective reactivity of the thinking mind. Mindfulness leads to a pure objective knowing called *satisampajanna*, which is free from the reactions of greed, hatred and delusion. This means being completely open to whatever we are experiencing, pleasant or painful, with a mind that is willing to listen and investigate the intuitive dimension of experience.

Perhaps one of the most direct consequences of cultivating mindfulness is that we begin to see into the structure of our experience. We stop the reactivity that keeps us stuck at the superficial level of first appearances and start to discover a much richer dimension of experience that was hidden from us by our reactivity. Mindfulness is a movement from the superficial to the depth; from the gross level to the subtle; from abstract to actual. In effect mindfulness is the movement away from ignorance towards truth.

As we cultivate a relationship based on mindfulness and *satisampajanna*, we experience a fundamental shift from *becoming* the contents of the reactive mind to being the *knowing* of the contents of the mind. We begin to develop pure objectivity in our relationship with the thoughts and emotions that arise in the mind instead of blindly accepting them and suffering as a consequence. Mindfulness is liberating, because it interrupts our habitual reactive patterns by making them conscious. *Satisampajanna* is transformative because it opens up a space in the mind that allows a more complete non-deluded perception of

experience as it truly is. This therapeutic space provides a fertile ground in which holistic change can take place at the deepest level of the psyche and this facilitates transformation. In addition, this spacious quality of engaging with life has a profoundly enriching effect on the quality of our life and relationships. The Path of Mindfulness is, therefore, characterized by sensory enrichment as well as psychological and spiritual transformation.

To respond to the experience of the present moment with sensitivity and open receptivity is the underlying theme in all the teachings of the Buddha. He did not want to create a religion with dogma and ritualistic practices for people to obey and follow blindly, but instead invites us to come to know the truth of experience for ourselves. Above all, the Buddha invites us to discover what leads to the resolution of *dukkha* in our individual experience. The Buddha presents a very skillful path that removes the obstacles that we create through blind attachment, so that we can uncover the inherent purity and goodness and full potential of our existence. This is The Path of Mindfulness, which is called *satipatthana*, in Pali.

The Path of Mindfulness is described as the path to the deathless, because it leads away from the mechanical, conditioned reactivity of the unaware mind towards an alive and authentic state of being in the world. Mindfulness is all about cultivating full presence and engagement with everything that arises in our experience. The path teaches us to be responsive, rather than reactive and to live the present, rather than dwell in daydreams rooted in the past or in fantasies about the future.

The Buddha, more than any other teacher taught about the power of mindfulness and this teaching has been kept alive for over 2,500 years by countless Buddhist teachers and monks. In the last 50 years there has been a resurgence of interest in mindfulness and mindfulness meditation throughout the world, including Europe and North America, where you will now find many centers that teach mindfulness meditation. Mindfulness has also found a place in various schools of psychotherapy for either stress management or as a skillful way of working with emotional afflictions. It has attracted much interest in the treatment of depression in what has been called Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy. Mindfulness is central to successful therapy, because it allows the client to tune-in to the deeper structure of his emotional reactivity and to discover exactly what needs to change in order to bring about inner healing. This book gives a brief introduction to Mindfulness Meditation Therapy, which can be

described as the direct application of mindfulness to facilitate transformation. In this approach, we make emotional suffering the primary object of meditation and use mindfulness to create the ideal environment to bring about resolution and healing.

Mindfulness training teaches us how to recognize our patterns of habitual reactivity, which is an essential pre-requisite for transformation. Mindfulness allows us to respond to the emotional content that powers our reactions by creating a therapeutic relationship based on full presence, spaciousness and compassion. In this therapeutic space, repressed emotions begin to unfold and differentiate, often into a particular form of imagery called experiential imagery. In Mindfulness Meditation Therapy, there is a particular focus on experiential imagery, because the mind thinks in pictures, not words, and emotions are encoded in the detailed sub-modalities of our inner imagery. Mindfulness allows us to discover this inner structure of our emotions and allows the imagery to change in subtle ways that lead towards inner transformation and healing.

The truths, or *Dhamma* taught by the Buddha can be found in many traditions. You do not have to be a Buddhist to practice the teachings of the Buddha, only be willing to open your heart and mind to investigate the truth of things as they are. The Buddha wanted us to think for ourselves and most importantly, to investigate for ourselves how the mind creates suffering as well as happiness, and discover the best approach to transform the mind and reveal the natural inner beauty of the human spirit. Buddhism is a complex living religion with many different schools and traditions, but the central principles are actually very simple:

- Be attentive to every action of body, speech and mind with mindfulness.
- Engage fully with all life experiences, both pleasant and unpleasant with mindfulness.
- Rest in the pure knowing of each action with mindfulness.
- Practice the path of non-attachment with mindfulness.
- Let go of habitual reactivity with mindfulness.
- Discover freedom in each moment of life with mindfulness.
- Trust in your intuitive intelligence and allow things to change naturally with mindfulness.

Awaken to your original Buddha mind with mindfulness.

Engage with life internally and externally in a way that increases stability, happiness and well-being for all with mindfulness.

The central message of the Buddha is to awaken to experience as it unfolds, and be fully present for what unfolds. We tend to complicate this simple message and chain ourselves to dogma, conventions, beliefs and practices. We dismiss our inner wisdom in search of the wisdom of others, not realizing that the only wisdom that has any reality is in our own hearts and minds.

The essence of *Dhamma* is the pursuit of freedom to uncover our true nature by waking up to all the self-created obstacles that keep us imprisoned. Through this direct awakening, we intuitively discover those actions that lead to the resolution of suffering and the creation of inner stability, well-being and happiness. Through the Path of Mindfulness, we discover true compassion and wisdom within, and this is the same wisdom and compassion that will purify our world. Just as suffering is universal, so the *Dhamma* is also universal. When we take our first step on the Path of Mindfulness, the whole of humanity also take one step with us towards freedom, one step at a time.

May the words in this book, be of benefit to you and inspire you on your path towards greater freedom and happiness for all.

# 1 THE STRUCTURE OF EXPERIENCE

Each moment of our life is defined by what we experience. Each moment of experience is a unique composition of physical form and mental reactions. This is called *nama-rupa*, in Pali, which literally means “name and form.” From the Buddhist perspective, each moment of existence is a complex of five fundamental components called *khandhas*, which literally means “heaps,” or “aggregates.” *Rupa khandha* consists of the actual external form of a physical object, such as the physical shape of a statue of the Buddha, which is called a “Buddha-rupa.” However, *rupa* also includes the physiological and neurochemical processes of the sense organs of the body and brain that are required to perceive form. You need a body and a brain to see a Buddha-rupa, or a person or any other object, just as much as the actual physical presence of the object itself. The subjective mental component (*nama*) of our experience consists of four mental *khandhas* that arise in response to sensory contact. These are perception and memory (*sanna*), feeling (*vedana*), the cognitive reaction of thinking (*sankhara*) and sense consciousness (*vinnana*).

Everything that is experienced is formed by the interplay of these five aggregates in a continual flux of coming together, existing for a short while and then dissolving. Every mind moment, or *citta*, is like water that temporarily freezes into a rigid ice formation for an instant before it melts, only to refreeze a moment later into a different combination of the five aggregates. This view of existence as having no fixed essence is in contrast to our conventional view of mind as something that exists independent of contents. We imagine that we have a mind that thinks and experiences, but actually the mind *is the process of thinking* as it unfolds from moment to moment. This lack of essence is described by the term *anatta*, literally “not self.” This insight does not mean that we do not exist or do not have a personality, but that there is nothing substantial in that personality, simply because it is continually changing. There is nothing that you can grab hold of and say, “This is who I am.” The reality is that your notion of your self is an illusion. It is nothing more than a linguistic label, an abstract fabrication, and the closer you examine the reality of self, the more you see that it



has no definable form. In fact, it is not only our mind that changes from one moment to the next; the body (*rupa*) is also continually changing so you cannot even define yourself by reference to your body. The form of the body that you claim to be who you are will be totally different from one year to the next and if you look closely you will discover that it is actually different from one minute to the next.

It is also a common mistake to try and define ourselves as equal to our consciousness. We think of our self as the entity that is conscious and we believe that this consciousness exists independently. Many take this a step further and believe that this consciousness forms a soul that can reincarnate or that can unite with some kind of higher universal consciousness. However, if you investigate the reality of your own experience, you will discover that consciousness arises due to conditions and these conditions change from minute to minute. When you see a pretty flower, your consciousness is defined by the visual sensations, combined with memories, preferences and beliefs, creating an awareness of beauty. A moment later, you see a beetle eating the flower and your consciousness changes to the awareness of disgust. Which of those states of consciousness defines you? If you argue that you are all states of consciousness, then you become something that cannot be defined at all. Therefore, the term *anatta* simply means that you cannot be defined or reduced to a single entity and that your true identity is as the process of living itself.

The Path of Mindfulness and *vipassana* meditation is one in which we reverse-engineer moment-to-moment experience and investigate these five aggregates and see how we tend to blindly attach to each. Through illuminating our attachment to the five *khandhas* with mindfulness, we begin to discover freedom from reactivity and the suffering created by reactivity. Therefore, it is well worth becoming familiar with each one in more detail.

## RUPA

All experiences have an objective physical component (*rupa*) in addition to the subjective mental component (*nama*). In short, you need a brain and a body to have conscious experience and the body is, therefore, an integral part of mental and particularly emotional experience. It is not surprising that the state of the

body affects the state of the mind and of course, the state of the mind can profoundly affect the health of the body.

Mindfulness practice involves developing an acute awareness of physical sensations in the body as well as the awareness of physical activities and this is collectively known as *kayanupassana*, the mindful contemplation of the body. This is one of the four primary domains of mindfulness practice and the foundation for spiritual development, as taught by the Buddha. We tend to be so engrossed in thinking that we do not pay attention to our bodies, which is unfortunate, because the body is a powerful teacher. Through mindfulness practice we can begin to access this teaching and become conscious of the way we hold emotional energy in our bodies. This is a very powerful method of working with deep-seated emotions, because it provides a path to access the non-verbal and deeper structure of the emotional complex than can be accessed through thinking alone.

## SANNA

*Sanna* is the *khandha* of perception and memory, in which the mind recognizes and labels things according to past experience. When we see a cup, we do not simply perceive the original objective phenomenon, but we react to the visual data with a primary mental reaction that is conditioned by our past experience. We recognize and label the object as a cup. In fact, such labels are completely artificial, linguistic tools that we acquire through learning. There is no “cup” in the absolute sense and the label “cup” is added on to this objective reality as a primary subjective reaction. Another person may look at the same object and see a bowl rather than a cup. It all depends on our particular conditioning and the accepted conventions that we learn from family, culture and society. On a conventional level there is nothing wrong with calling a cup a cup, as long as we know that the label is not the object it represents. Unfortunately, the mind has a very strong tendency to create abstract representations such as word-labels and we tend to blindly attach to these labels and ignore the actual objective reality. The complex and dynamic reality of what we observe becomes reduced to a superficial representation.

Perception is conditioned by our inner beliefs and inner models of reality that we create as a way of organizing sensory

experience. Some of these beliefs are formed very early during our childhood and become core beliefs that shape the rest of our lives. We absorb the beliefs of our parents and influential people, including friends, ethnic and religious leaders and politicians and, of course, commercial advertising. All of these influences color our perception and we get a distorted picture of reality. If we are not mindful, we tend to identify with these distorted beliefs as real and true and lose sight of the reality of the present moment, which is unique. We become limited by our blind reactivity in which we blindly believe the surface appearance of things. This attachment to the superficial representation is the essence of delusion, called *moha* in Pali, which along with greed (*lobha*) and aversion (*dosa*), describe the three principle groups of habitual reactivity that creates suffering, internally and externally. We think we see what is before us, but actually what we are experiencing is our belief, our inner representation *about* the object; we do not actually see the object as it is. We don't see the truth of reality, but our *reaction* to reality.

This distortion and perversion of perception through blind attachment to our inner representations, labels and beliefs is called *sanna vipallasa*. When we attach to these delusions through, we create the conditions in which reactivity and suffering proliferate. Problems occur when we are unable to break free from our habitual way of seeing things, because we are unable to adapt to the needs of present reality. When we attach to our labels and beliefs, we turn our back on the path of discovering truth and retreat into a world of half-truths, generalizations and misunderstandings. Many people spend their whole lives living in a world of illusion, created by their own perceptual reactivity or through blind attachment to the beliefs of others. Krishnamurti spoke often on the subject of perception and the importance of freeing the mind from the perversions that come from attachment to labels and beliefs, as in the following passage:

Perception without the word, which is without thought, is one of the strangest phenomena. Then the perception is much more acute, not only with the brain, but also with all the senses. Such perception is not the fragmentary perception of the intellect, nor the affairs of the emotions. It can be called a total perception, and it is part of meditation. Perception

without the perceiver in meditation is to commune with the height and depth of the immense.

When we react to what we observe with labels, inner representations and beliefs, we inadvertently create division between an observer and the observed, because what we experience is not the observed, but the reactions of the observer. This subject-object duality lies at the core of all violence, experienced as inner conflict, as well as conflict in our external relationships. When we label a person as good or bad, it has the effect of closing the mind and heart to the complex reality and totality of the other person. The mind loses sight of reality and begins perpetuating delusion upon delusion, lie upon lie. Soon, the person we label as bad becomes our enemy. This makes it easier to justify reactions of hatred, aggression and violence.

Violence depends on ignorance and delusion in equal portion. When we understand the corrupting influence of ignorance and delusion on *sanna* and the effects that this has on people and society, then we can understand just how important the Path of Mindfulness and meditation is for society. Fundamentally, the Path of Mindfulness is the fight against ignorance and delusion and this will have direct beneficial consequences for all.

Perception without the perceiver means that there is no attachment to our subjective mental reactivity to the object perceived, but simply the direct experiencing of things as they are and this is the function of mindfulness. Krishnamurti used the term *choiceless awareness* to describe this direct perception that is independent of the perceiver. There is, therefore, a fundamental difference between “fragmentary perception,” based on the past, and “total perception,” which is experience without any interference from the past. Choiceless awareness is another term for mindfulness and leads to non-reactive perception, which is called *satisampajanna*. This clear seeing, or pure knowing is seeing the observed, without the reactions of the observer. When there is no reactivity, there is no separation between the observer and the observed, the knower and the known. What remains is simply “observing” and “knowing,” or the pure awareness of things as they actually exist in the present.

The purpose of mindfulness practice and meditation is to develop *satisampajanna* so that perception is always fresh and grounded in the direct knowing of the present. With a mind that is free and open and non-reactive, we gain access to a much richer

sensory reality than can be provided by our conditioned reactivity. To see a mountain in this way is to see true beauty in its highest form, which is beyond our ideas of beauty. To see a person, without the reactions of an observer, the ego, is to see him without prejudice and division. The same applies to our inner perceptions and when you can look at your mind with freshness, with what Suzuki Roshi called “beginners mind,” then you open up to a tremendous depth and breadth of experience that makes transformation possible and that will enrich both the psychological and spiritual dimensions of our Being.

Overcoming the limitations of reactive perception is particularly important when we relate to our emotions and when we look at reactions themselves. When we experience an emotion we tend to label it as happiness, anger, depression, joy or sorrow and identify with these labels. The labels, which are reactions based on inner beliefs are superficial illusions. They are the product of reactive thinking *about* the emotion and are not the same as the emotion itself. The label is not the same as the actual experience of happiness, anger or depression. Therefore, the perception of emotion, based on reactive *sanna* generates a pseudo-reality known as a *sankhara*, which is conditioned by ignorance (*avijja*). These *sankharas* are the superficial representations of our experience. When we blindly attach to these *sankharas* we become blind to the actual reality of the inner structure of the emotion and this has the effect of freezing the emotional reaction in place.

If you look closely at any emotion, such as anger, you will soon discover that “anger” is not a single state of consciousness, but a dynamic and unfolding process consisting of a collection of many different feelings, thoughts, beliefs and memories that have simply been aggregated together into a *sankhara* and labelled as “anger” or “fear.” This is an extremely important point, because it is almost impossible to transform something as abstract as “anger” or “fear,” because it *does not exist in reality*. Transformation of an emotional conflict depends, therefore, on letting go of the label and engaging with the actual structural contents of the emotion as it unfolds in the form of specific feelings, thoughts and memories. We cannot easily change core beliefs, but we can change present experience, and if you change present experience, the beliefs will change in response.

Eventually, as you develop mindfulness, you will find that you become less and less dependent on labels and beliefs and eventually transcend the belief-making process altogether. Then

your perception will be purified and you will be free to fully experience the vibrant and living reality of truth, of *Dhamma*, and it is the truth that liberates, not our efforts to manipulate and control the mind. The Path of Mindfulness is in many ways a process of stripping away the layers of perception and moving from the superficial to the real; from the abstract outer appearance of things, including our emotions, to the actual inner structure of our experience. Or, put simply the movement from delusion to truth.

## VEDANA

Descartes proclaimed “I think, therefore I am,” but it might be more accurate to say, “I *feel*, therefore I am.” Feeling energy is the power that gives both meaning and value to our experience and provides the motivation that leads to all actions of body, speech and mind. With perception comes feeling and all experience has an associated feeling tone or felt-sense called *vedana*, in Pali. *Vedana* is the undifferentiated feeling energy associated with sensory experience, and this energy occurs in three flavors. Experience can have a positive felt-sense (*sukhavedana*), which is pleasant, light and open in quality, or it can have a negative felt-sense (*dukkhavedana*), which is painful, dark and oppressive in quality. In addition, perception may be accompanied by a neutral felt-sense (*upekkhavedana*), which is neither pleasant nor painful, but is none the less compelling in giving meaning to experience. All three forms of *vedana* have positive and negative aspects associated with them.

The positive aspect of *sukhavedana* is that it is life affirming and provides positive energy that directs us towards a state of happiness and well-being. The negative aspect of *sukhavedana* is that it can lead to blind attachment and the compulsive emotional reactions of wanting and craving, called *tanha*, which is the primary force that leads to suffering. The positive side of *dukkhavedana* is that it is a signal that something is out of balance. Just like physical pain, unpleasant feelings can allow us to uncover the inner blind attachments that are the source of mental pain. The negative side of *dukkhavedana* is that it can lead to emotional reactions of aversion, which has the effect of repressing the underlying attachments. This will amplify instability and conflict and cause more emotional pain, more

*dukkha*. The positive aspect of *upekkhavedana* is the feeling quality, or felt-sense, that accompanies inner balance, stability and well-being. It is the felt-sense of equilibrium in the psyche. The negative side of *upekkhavedana* is ignorance (*avijja*) and delusion (*moha*), which are associated with blind attachment and identification with inner beliefs. *Upekkhavedana* can accompany blind faith, unquestioned obedience and a general absence of awareness as well as apathy and a lack of presence and engagement with reality.

Besides being pleasant, painful or neutral, *vedana* also comes in a range of different intensities, ranging from very mild feelings, such as the feeling we have when we remember what day of the week it is, to the very intense *vedana* associated with anger or fear. Generally, the mind does not attach to experiences that have weak *vedana* and these will tend to fall away, without leaving a trace in the subconscious mind. If *vedana* is strong, then the mind will tend to become attached and fixated on these experiences and they will leave a deep imprint in the mind as a memory that can influence future perceptions and reactivity. When *vedana* is very strong, it converts into *tanha*, the compulsive forceful energy that leads to attachment (*upadana*), and attachment forms the foundation for mental reactivity in the form of greed (*lobha*), aversion (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*). Ignorance of this conversion of *vedana* into *tanha* creates instability and conflict in the mind and this subtle shift from feeling to emotional reactivity based on blind attachment creates the conditions for mental conflict, disharmony and suffering, that we call *dukkha*.

The optimum state of being is, therefore, one in which there is no clinging to pleasant, unpleasant or neutral feelings, but rather a complete freedom to fully engage with our feelings, without any compulsion to react. We need to be free to engage with pleasant feelings without becoming greedy. We need to completely engage with painful feelings without aversion. We need to recognize neutral feelings and avoid indifference. Feelings are very seductive, whether pleasant, painful or neutral, and the Path of Mindfulness practice and meditation (*vipassana*) involves cultivating a very refined sensitivity and awareness to the movements of *vedana* and the relationship between *vedana* and *tanha* and how this leads to *dukkha*.

Focusing on the feeling tone of experience is extremely important in mindfulness practice and meditation and is called *vedanaupassana*: the mindful relationship and engagement with

feelings as they arise from moment to moment. During meditation, the practitioner deliberately seeks out areas of unresolved emotional conflict and chooses to work on them with mindfulness. However, this kind of work does not involve analysis or thinking, but cultivating a direct and open relationship with the more subtle and intuitive feeling level of the emotion. Through mindfulness, one begins to undo the reactive habits in which *vedana* converts into *tanha* and this has the effect of allowing *tanha* to change back into *vedana*. Transformation at the intuitive feeling level is much easier than trying to change emotional reactions powered by *tanha*, and with mindfulness, we introduce the element of freedom and choice and this provides the right conditions for change. Put simply, it is blind reactivity that sustains emotional suffering and it is mindfulness that provides an antidote to blind reactivity allowing the resolution of inner conflict to occur intelligently, under the guidance of *satipanna*.

The open and non-reactive relationship with the feeling level of an emotion allows us to make conscious the complexity and multiple layers of feeling that lie at the heart of an emotional complex like guilt, anger or fear. The freedom that is inherent in mindfulness allows experiential unfolding and this is how the psyche heals itself. What may start off as an unpleasant felt-sense associated with anger may change to a feeling of panic, which then changes to sadness, which may in turn change into another type of feeling. It is the conscious awareness of these subtle changes in *vedana* that arise during mindfulness meditation that leads to transformation. The process that leads to the resolution of *dukkha*, or inner mental conflict, needs this kind of freedom of movement between the different levels of *vedana* in conscious awareness. Mindfulness brings this freedom as well as providing the all-important conscious awareness.

The exact path of experiential unfolding that leads to the resolution of inner conflict can never be understood or analyzed, because it is an experiential process that unfolds at a much deeper intuitive level. This is where mindfulness is essential, because it is a state of engagement and relationship that is free from prejudice and preconceptions, and it is this quality of awareness that allows feelings to change at the experiential level according to the intuitive intelligence of what needs to happen internally. More often than not, resolution of trapped *vedana* energy requires nothing more than simply making contact with the feeling in a



way that is non-threatening and non-reactive. This simple act of being fully present is by itself remarkably healing.

Another important feature of *vedana* is that it can be used as a measure of inner change. If transformation is happening during *vipassana* meditation, then this will be accompanied by a shift in the quality of *vedana* from *dukkhavedana* to *sukhavedana* and eventually to *upekkhavedana* after resolution of the emotional conflict and when balance is restored. This can be described as the direction of decrease in *dukkha* and eventual cessation of *dukkha*. The shifts in feeling tone allow us to align with those inner processes that lead to the maximum resolution of *dukkha* and to let go of those processes that do not. It should, however, be remembered that the transformational process is not linear and it is quite possible that feelings may intensify before they dissipate. In general though, even if a painful feeling becomes temporarily more intense, there is also a sense that what is happening *needs* to happen. For example, focusing on the painful felt-sense of anxiety may bring up a traumatic childhood memory that evokes even stronger *dukkhavedana*, yet the experience of this memory with mindfulness is also accompanied by a sense of release.

The net direction of transformation should be towards the resolution of *dukkha* and the restoration of inner balance that can be verified at the subtle feeling level. This is change at the deepest level rather than through trying to manipulate feeling through thinking or rationalization. It is a good practice to revisit the emotion and see for yourself if it has resolved or not. Eventually, through repeated practice with this truthful attention to feeling, you will discover that something quite fundamental has changed at the experiential level. In this way we use the intuitive feeling level of our experience to guide us towards the resolution of *dukkha* and the core attachments that sustain *dukkha* and release the mind from the shackles that prevent us from finding real peace and happiness. In mindfulness practice and meditation the feeling tone of experience guides us from the condition of bondage to the state of freedom, and this can be quite clearly felt in the body as well as in the mind. When we pay attention to *vedana* in this way, then we learn to dance with this feeling energy with great sensitivity and use the subtle changes in feeling as our guide on the path to freedom.

## SANKHARA

*Sankhara* refers to anything, physical or mental, that is formed dependent on conditions. It refers to the generation of *form* and structure. The word *sankhara* is composed of the prefix *sam*, meaning “together,” and *kara*, which means, “doing or “making.”

While the term *sankhara* refers to anything constructed out of parts, including material objects such as a mountain or a house, the most common use of the term is in relation to experience and action. In each moment of existence, a person expresses himself through body (*kayasankhara*), speech (*vacisankhara*) and mind (*cittasankhara*) in the form of particular actions, patterns of speech and thoughts. In reality they all arise together as an integrated whole. An emotional reaction like anger will involve an angry facial expression in combination with an angry voice and angry thoughts, which are all necessary to create the emotional state of anger. If you take away angry expression or talk with a slow and gentle voice tone or if you have peaceful thoughts, then you will not be able to sustain the emotional *sankhara* of anger. In this way, the term *sankhara* conveys the bringing together of all these elements into a particular formation. Anger is one synthesis of body, speech and mind, whereas gladness involves a completely different assembly of patterns of body, speech and mind. Each moment of experience involves the arising and passing away of these formations, like the individual frames of a movie in an endless succession.

The *cittasankharas* are thought-feeling complexes that bring together *sanna* and *vedana* in reaction to present sensory experience and this is the most common use of the term *sankhara*. In this context, *sankhara* is usually translated as the conditioned mental formations that arise in the mind as thoughts, emotions and beliefs. *Sankharas* are reactive mental formations that influence all aspects of expression through body, speech and mind. As the Buddha said,

All that we are is the result of what we have thought.  
The mind is everything. What we think we become.

In the same way that physical actions and speaking are largely automatic and performed without much conscious awareness, thoughts, beliefs and emotions also arise without much choice or conscious awareness. In other words, *cittasankharas* are

conditioned mental reactions that arise when there is ignorance (*avijja*). This is not ignorance as lack of knowledge, but ignorance as lack of *knowing*, of not being aware of what is happening while it is happening. Hence, in the teachings on Dependent Origination (*paticcasamuppada*), *avijja* is the first of twelve links, and the condition for the arising of *sankhara* and the subsequent reactive process that results in habitual reactivity and suffering.

*Avijja paccaya sankhara.*  
*Sankharas* arise out of ignorance.

*Paccaya* means “the necessary condition for,” which in this case is *sankhara*. When there is ignorance of what is happening in the present, the mind generates thoughts, beliefs and emotions based on habitual conditioning. The *sankharas* from the past influence the *sankharas* being formed in the present and present *sankharas* become the conditions for future *sankharas*. This is *kamma* (Skt. *karma*), the fundamental law of cause and effect, or reactivity.

When *avijja* is dominant, then what manifests in the present will be largely influenced by reactivity based on the past and this leads to unskillful and unwholesome actions (*akusala kamma*). The Path of Mindfulness is fundamentally about removing this ignorance that leads to the formation of *sankharas* and the habitual reactivity that follows. Then we will have a clear perception of the present and will have a much better chance of responding with skillful and wholesome actions (*kusala kamma*) based on wisdom and compassion.

All *sankharas* are essentially superficial and unsatisfactory, because the reactions from the past are never quite appropriate to the unique needs of the present. Life is a dynamic process requiring fresh solutions in each new encounter, and this is why the Buddha explained that attachment to *sankharas* is a fundamental cause of suffering, as in the following statement:

*Sabbe sankhara dukkha.*  
All conditioned mental formations are  
unsatisfactory.

What arise in the mind as an emotional reaction, thought or belief are simply superficial surface representations. The reality behind that representation remains hidden.

The *cittasankharas* are like the footprints left behind when walking across muddy ground. When ignored, the *sankharas* harden in the mind and corrupt the natural dynamic flow of consciousness by reducing thinking to a set of rigid reactions, instead of dynamic responses. Thoughts, beliefs and emotions all have form and rigidity and if we blindly believe them as true, then we will deny ourselves the experience of the deeper structure of reality beneath the surface. We are deluded into seeing things as black or white, good or bad, right or wrong, and attachment to any *sankhara* tends to create the illusion of boundaries, which do not actually exist in the real world. Attachment and identification with *sankharas* creates friction, because they are never quite in harmony with life in the present, which is not completely black or white, good or bad, right or wrong, but an ever-changing process. Because of this, *sankharas* are, by their very nature, unsatisfactory and this mismatch between the *sankharas* and reality gives rise to suffering (*dukkha*).

The next major problem with *sankharas* is that they are very seductive and we inadvertently become attached to them and blindly identify with them as “me” or “mine.” If the thought “I am depressed” arises in the mind, we tend to blindly attach to this *sankhara* and then we *become* the thought “I am depressed.” If sadness arises, we become the sadness. If anger arises, we become the anger. This is the endless wandering mind of *samsara*, the habitual reactivity that makes us slaves to whatever arises in the mind. If there were no *avijja*, then there would be no attachment and no becoming and thoughts would simply dissolve away like a ripple on the surface of a pond. The Path of Mindfulness is very much concerned with overcoming this automatic process of habitual reactivity that takes away our freedom and happiness by training to wake up and recognize what is happening as it is happening. Then we will have a moment of choice about whether we want to feel sad or depressed and in that brief moment of choice there I freedom and the possibility of change.

Perhaps the single most important insight of the Buddha is the observation that all *sankharas* are inherently unstable and are subject to change,

*Sabbe sankhara anicca.*

All formations are impermanent.

This is the law of *anicca*, which is a central concept in Buddhism. All things fabricated, without exception, will change and finally dissolve away. Existence is a dance in arising and passing away and it is by awakening to this that we find spiritual and psychological freedom. All things born must die and it is the ignorance of this at the deep experiential level that is at the root of our suffering. However, *anicca* is more than just a reflection on the impermanence of life, but an understanding that life and existence is a dynamic *process* that thrives on change. *Sankharas* are like the individual frames of a movie, that need to change as quickly as they come into existence, if we are to experience the movie. Suffering arises when we attach to the individual frames, which leaves us with meaningless snapshots of life, instead of the full experience of the movie. Through the practice of mindfulness, we begin to align and harmonize with life as a dynamic process, without the constraints of attachment and clinging to *sankharas*. This is the condition of freedom that allows our innate intelligence and wisdom (*satipanna*) to arise and direct the psyche to make the subtle changes that lead towards stability and well-being. Without mindfulness, change becomes chaotic and creates disorder and dis-equilibrium.

The mind that is ignorant of its own reactivity is bound by that reactivity (*sankhata citta*) and suffers accordingly; the mind that is unconditioned (*asankhata citta*) and free from blind attachment to *sankharas* does not suffer. There will still be pain, because that is an unavoidable part of living, but there will not be the suffering that we add to pain through our subjective reactivity. The purpose of mindfulness work in daily practice and in *vipassana* meditation is to reduce the blind identification with the conditioned contents of the mind and “switch” to the unconditioned state of being. Actually, any mind moment (*citta*) contains both the conditioned element and the unconditioned element in close and inseparable unity. The conditioned element consists of the contents (*sankharas*) in the form of thoughts and emotions. However, there is also an unconditioned element, the *asankhata dhatu*, that is not the contents, but the *knowing* of the contents, and this pure knowing arises spontaneously whenever there is mindfulness (*sati*) of contents.

In each moment of non-reactive knowing, the mind is not attached or identified with the thoughts or emotional reactions that arise, but simply *knows* them as they are. In this pure knowing, called *satisampajanna*, or pure knowing, things are allowed to exist in freedom, and they will respond by changing in

a beneficial way. In this state, the mind is in perfect alignment with *anicca*, instead of resisting change and this is an essential component of awakening and liberation that leads to the cessation of suffering.

If we take the analogy of the ocean, the fish are the contents (*sankharas*) and the ocean is the formless element (*asankhata dhatu*) of pure knowing. The fish come and go according to conditions, but the ocean remains unchanged. Do you want to be a fish or do you want to be the ocean? In the Buddhist Path of Mindfulness, we choose to be the ocean, but this does not mean rejecting the contents in any way. In fact, when there is *satisampajanna*, we will be free to engage with the world of form and *sankhara* with complete focus and freedom that is denied when the mind is reactive. There is a Pali chant,

Impermanent are all conditioned things,  
Of the nature to arise and pass away.  
Appearing, they disappear.  
Their cessation is supreme bliss.

Identification and attachment to *sankharas* is like sitting on the rim of a spinning wheel, which is very unstable and stressful and this instability is the nature of *dukkha*. Taking refuge in the unconditioned, the *asankhata*, is like sitting at the center of the spinning wheel, a place that is stable and does not generate *dukkha*. The beauty of taking refuge in the still center is that it allows you complete and free access to all the *sankharas* on the rim, but allows you to retain balance in relation to them, without further reactivity that produces more *sankharas*. This is the “supreme bliss” of the still center in which the mind is no longer pushed around by changing conditions, but is free to fully engage with all phenomena as they arise, exist and disappear. This is the goal of the Buddhist path of spiritual development: to transcend the undependable world of conditioned phenomena and abide in the Noble Stillness of full engagement, free of compulsion and habitual reactivity. From this place, we can discover the true wonder of authentic living in which there is an alive and passionate engagement with everything.

## VINNANA

This is the aggregate of sense consciousness itself. The mental formations, perceptions, feelings and bodily processes are all accompanied by sense consciousness, which arises whenever the sense organs make contact with an object. As the Buddha said,

Conditioned through the eye, the visible object, light and attention, eye-consciousness arises.

And this same statement is applied to the consciousness that arises through the other physical sense doors. Similarly, all mental objects are accompanied by consciousness as they arise in the brain, which is the sixth sense organ.

Conditioned through the subconscious mind, the mind-object and attention, mind-consciousness arises.

This consciousness arises as a continuous progression of individual mind moments or *cittas* and consciousness always arises in association with particular sense objects or mental objects and is therefore conditioned. There is nothing independent of this in the form of a soul or essence. It is common to think that we are an independent self who then has thoughts about the world, but in the Buddhist view, there is no such independent entity. The concept of “self” or *atta* is simply a conventional way of referring to a person, but it does not really exist as an objective entity, simply because the self is continually changing from one moment to the next. Your true “self” is simply the process of arising and disappearing thoughts, feelings, consciousness and form: the five *khandhas* of our existence.

Many people like to believe in the concept of a soul or consciousness that can exist separately from our body and we like to take this a stage further in the belief in some larger and greater universal consciousness, that we call God. From the Buddhist perspective this is all abstract speculation that cannot be known and whenever a person thinks they know the truth, what they are really experiencing is delusion. For the Buddha, the only thing that can be truly known is what is in the immediate here and now of your experience and we must start there if we are to move beyond the superficial level of delusion. If there is a God, then this can only be discovered by opening the mind and heart to the

intuitive level of experience and not by inventing an idea or image of God or by blindly following religious leaders and traditions.



## 2 THE REACTIVE MIND

In a public talk given in 1996, J. Krishnamurti made the following comments about the nature of habitual reactivity:

Without freedom from the past, there is no freedom at all, because the mind is never new, fresh, innocent. It is only the fresh, innocent mind that is free. Freedom has nothing to do with age, it has nothing to do with experience; and it seems to me that the very essence of freedom lies in understanding the whole mechanism of habit; both conscious and unconscious. It is not a question of ending habit, but of seeing totally the structure of habit. You have to observe how habits are formed and how, by denying or resisting one habit, another habit is created. What matters is to be totally conscious of habit; for then, as you will see for yourself there is no longer the formation of habit. To resist habit, to fight it, to deny it, only gives continuity to habit. When you fight a particular habit you give life to that habit, and then the very fighting of it becomes a further habit. But if you are simply aware of the whole structure of habit without resistance, then you will find there is freedom from habit and in that freedom, a new thing takes place.

The mind is a remarkably creative instrument that is able to adapt to an extraordinary variety of changing conditions. This is testimony to the innate intelligence that we already possess and that we seek to further develop through The Path of Mindfulness. However, although the mind has such a remarkable capacity for creativity, it also has a strong tendency to create habitual reactions, as a default mechanism for coping with the complex demands of life. We learn from our parents, family and friends as well as from our culture and we unconsciously acquire patterns of thinking and feeling that coalesce into attitudes and beliefs. In effect, we learn patterns of habitual reactivity and these patterns form our personality, called *sakkayaditthi* in Pali. The Self is a vast network of inter-related habitual reactions that define what

we think, act and feel, or at least, greatly influence the possible activities of body, speech and mind. Reactivity depends on ignorance and the state of being unaware (*avijja*) of what is happening in the mind when it is happening. Reactivity also depends on delusion (*moha*), which causes us to blindly believe and identify with the reactions that arise and fall under their spell. Both of these factors lead to blind attachment (*upadana*) that keeps us repeating the same mental reactions over and over again. *Upadana* causes us to *become* the anger, worry, fear, guilt or any other mental states that arise. As long as we remain ignorant of these underlying attachments and blindly identified with our reactivity, then it becomes self-reinforcing and habitual and will exert more and more influence over our thinking process and our actions. Attachment is in turn powered by the energetic and compulsive force known as *tanha* that compels the mind to attach to reactive patterns of thinking and behavior. The combination of ignorance, attachment and compulsion perpetuates habitual reactivity and the endless cycle of becoming that is called *samsara* in Pali. In the words of Kalu Rinpoche,

Our present circumstances are like those of someone who has been bound in chains and locked in a dark prison cell. The cell is *samsara* and we are bound up and confined in it by our own ignorance.

Like a recurring nightmare, conditioned habitual reactivity forces us to re-experience reactions of anxiety, fear, worry, grief, sadness, disappointment, frustration and anger over and over again. The mind that is dominated by reactivity and *samsara* can never fully engage with life as it is, because this continual reactivity actually takes us away from the full experience of life in the here and now. The Path of Mindfulness is concerned with awakening to our habitual reactivity and overcoming it, not through force, but by developing a conscious relationship with each of the many reactions that arise that creates a space around the reaction in which there is a sense of choice and freedom. This special kind of non-reactive relationship is the essence of mindfulness.

## THE ADVERSE EFFECTS OF HABITUAL REACTIVITY

One of the fundamental problems of habitual reactivity is that it introduces a degree of inflexibility into the mind. On one level, habit gives us a sense of order and control, but this comes at a price, because each time we blindly identify with a habit, we lose a little more of our freedom. We become limited by our reactivity and our habits and that makes us less able to adapt and respond with intelligence to new conditions. Like a train passenger, we are taken to our destination without any say on the route taken, because the route is fixed by the train tracks. In the same way, the mind reacts according to the tracks laid down by past conditioning. This is not to say that we lack free will, but free will depends entirely on conscious awareness and if this is absent and *avijja* is dominant, then there is no free will. Habitual reactivity is a powerful force that *limits* the possible outcomes in the present. It limits our responsiveness to the demands of life by keeping us chained to our habits and chained to our past.

Besides limiting our responsiveness, habitual reactivity also leads to a form of sensory distortion. Like daydreaming or sleepwalking, we perform activities as if on autopilot. Instead of seeing reality as it is, we see only the shadows of our past projected onto the present and our conscious perception is limited by our subjective reactivity. The combination of ignorance and the limitations imposed by conditioned reactivity corrupts and distorts the mind, making it inflexible and rigid. The principle corruptions or perversions, called *vipallasa*, are of perception (*sanna vipallasa*), mind (*citta vipallasa*) and the distortion of inner beliefs (*ditthi vipallasa*). We see what we are conditioned to see and we believe what we are conditioned to believe. Reactivity distorts perception, because what we experience is not the actual, but the product of our conditioned reaction to the actual. Distorted perception leads to distorted beliefs, which can have a very negative effect if they become core beliefs. The greatest distortion of belief is the attachment to “me and mine” in which we blindly identify with the surface appearance of our thoughts and emotions as real and true reflections of self. Instead of seeing an emotion, such as anger, as an objective mental phenomenon, we tend to *become* the anger and we take it very personally as “my anger.” When this happens, we lose perspective and become the victim of the emotional reaction or negative thought patterns that arise out of habit. This is the nature of attachment and

identification at work in the mind and it is based on the fundamental reaction of delusion (*moha*), which causes us to blindly attach to the contents of the mind. We are effectively seduced by reactions as they arise in the mind and blindly follow them as if under a spell. This leads to the most obvious effect of persistent habitual reactivity, which is *dukkha*. Reactivity generates agitation, conflict and emotional suffering. This is an inevitable consequence of the inability to resolve conflict and adapt to changing conditions due to the lack of freedom and limitations imposed by reactivity. When things do not go according to expectation, we are compelled to react by becoming upset. We then react to being upset by becoming angry and so on in a futile path of activities of mind, speech and actions that proliferates the problem.

Besides distorting our experience of the world and limiting our possible responses, habitual reactivity has yet another detrimental effect: it leads to Sensory Impoverishment. When we react, what we see is restricted to the content of the reaction and we become blind to the complex and dynamic nature of reality as it is. Instead of seeing the totality of a person as he or she really is, we see our label, our belief and the story we tell ourselves about the person. In the world of knowledge, we attach to our views and opinions and remain blind to the full range of interpretations, unable to hear the views of other people. In the world of our emotional reactions, we don't see the reality of the detailed inner structure of the emotion, but only see the superficial outward appearance of things. Instead of enjoying present experience as it is, we react according to our internal expectations and ideals. The effect of reactivity is to take us away from the full experience of the present, leaving us with a fragment that is superficial and unsatisfying. Habitual reactivity is in effect a form of sensory deprivation and the effect of this separation from the living present leaves us with an existential emptiness that is a great source of suffering. People who are reactive by nature are seldom happy and usually very negative and fearful.

## REACTIVE DISPLACEMENT

One of the most detrimental consequences of any mental reaction is that it diverts attention away from the experience of the

present. This is the principle of Reactive Displacement, in which our present experience is dominated by our reactions to sense objects, rather than the direct experience of the objects themselves. The moment a reaction takes hold your attention is taken away from the present to an experience dictated by the reaction. You find yourself thinking *about* the sunset, rather than experiencing the sunset directly as it is. You see a person and react with a thought *about* him. This means that your attention is dominated by the thought and not by the reality of the person. We become distracted away from the experience of the present. You perceive a reaction of fear and react with worry *about* what you fear. The worry prevents you directly experiencing the feeling of fear. In effect you project your beliefs and reactions onto the present and you remain ignorant of the present. Reactive displacement takes you away from the richness of the living present as it unfolds before you and replaces it with a limited experience conditioned by the past, which is dead and unchanging.

Another more serious effect of the reactive displacement produced by secondary reactivity is that it diverts attention away from primary reactions. This has an unfortunate consequence, because conscious awareness is absolutely essential for the transformation of a primary reaction, or any other reactive pattern. Hidden from view, reactions become fixed in the mind and will not change. If, for example, you react to a primary reaction of fear with a secondary reaction of worrying then you are effectively prevented from experiencing the primary reaction of fear, because consciousness is distracted into thinking about the fear, or worrying. The experience of the thoughts about the fear, which you have when you indulge in worrying, are not the same as the direct experience of the original feeling of fear. In the absence of direct awareness, the primary fear reaction becomes frozen in place, trapping any associated negative feeling energy with it. As a consequence, the fear is effectively repressed and pushed out of consciousness and becomes imprisoned in the deep recesses of the mind, where it remains uncared for and where it will continue to fester and generate *dukkha*. This indirect repression can create deep-seated emotional complexes that become the inner “demons” that come back to haunt us over and over again. The effect of this feedback loop between the primary and secondary reactions is to produce a self-sustaining system that sustains the cycle of suffering. It may well be that just a few minutes of direct awareness of the original primary experience of

the fear reaction might have been enough to allow it to resolve, but the secondary reactivity of worrying prevented us from having that direct awareness of the fear.

The Path of Mindfulness is a path of stopping reactive displacement so that we can experience reality in the here and now and regain the richness of experience that is lost to reactivity. Knowledge is power and opening the mind to see the totality of experience in the here and now is an absolute prerequisite for beneficial change and spiritual transformation. Mindfulness allows us to regain access to the primary reactions so that we can bring about healing and transformation at the core level of our psyche. But above all, mindfulness is the direct antidote to the proliferation of reactivity that amplifies and sustains suffering. Through the practice of mindfulness the mind becomes flexible and malleable and this prevents reactivity becoming frozen into recurring patterns. This is the path of awakening that is central to the teachings of the Buddha and cultivated through the Path of Mindfulness.

## THE CORE REACTIONS

In the Buddhist tradition, mental reactions in the form of fixed patterns of thinking, dysfunctional beliefs and emotional reactions are called *kilesas*. The *kilesas* include all the varieties of conditioned mental reactions that perpetuate conflict, stress and suffering (*dukkha*) and the habitual round of becoming that is *samsara*. They are the prison bars created through ignorance and delusion that dominate the mind and prevent us from responding with wisdom and compassion to the needs of the present and attachment to the defilements robs us of our freedom and happiness. The *kilesas* not only perpetuate suffering in our own life, but they inevitably reduce our ability to respond with wisdom and compassion to the needs of others and even to the needs of our environment. The word *kilesa* comes from the verb *kilisati*, which means to stick, like mud sticking to your shoes. The *kilesas* cause the mind to become stuck in habitual patterns of reacting that condition and limit our ability to respond to the needs of the present. A mind that is dominated with reactivity becomes dull and inflexible and unable to respond effectively or intelligently. Just as trudging through mud is exhausting and unpleasant, continual reactivity drains us of our spiritual energy

and leaves us fatigued and despondent. Depression can be viewed as a chronic state of habitual reactivity and one of the symptoms of depression is lethargy and lack of vitality.

There are, of course, many forms of mental afflictions, but all the *kilesas* are manifestations of three root defilements (*mula kilesas*), which are often described as the three poisons or the three fires, of greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*). Traditionally in Buddhist art, the pig is the animal chosen to represent *lobha*, which is an obvious symbol of greediness. Most people are attracted towards the things they like and easily become obsessed with wanting to acquire objects, status or some form of experience. Closely following *lobha* is aversion (*dosa*), which is represented by the snake, an animal that is apt to strike out in anger when provoked. *Dosa* includes reactions of dislike, anger and hatred as well as disappointment and frustration when we do not get what we want. The third root *kilesa* is delusion (*moha*), which is represented by the rooster, presumably because a rooster spends all of its time strutting around under the delusion that it is king and believes that he alone is responsible for causing the sun to rise at dawn through his raucous crowing. Delusion causes us to become blindly attached to reactions and all the manifestations of *lobha* and *dosa* and this makes reactions habitual, creating the hell realm of habitual reactivity that is *samsara*. As the Buddha repeatedly stated, ignorance is the root of all evils, because in the unaware mind suffering becomes mechanical and will continue indefinitely. The three core reactions occur in close proximity, mutually reinforcing each other. Whenever there is wanting, there will also be some form of aversion to anything that opposes gratification and both forms of reactivity thrive on the milk of ignorance and delusion.

## *Lobha*

*Lobha*, the first root *kilesa*, refers to subjective habitual reactions based on wanting to acquire and control. We want to acquire an object or an experience and we want to manipulate our environment so that we get what we want and hold on to what we have acquired. It is useful to think of *lobha* in energetic terms as the force of attraction, rather like the pull of gravity, or the force that attracts iron to a magnet. It tends to pull us off balance and creates a state of energetic instability in the mind. We are seduced by the promise of pleasure and happiness, like the songs of the Sirens, the bird-women of Greek mythology who lured

sailors to their death on the rocks of reality. Other terms often used to describe wanting are *raga*, and *kamacchanda*, the reactions of lust and sensual indulgence, respectively, which are biological and sexual urges to acquire intensely pleasant sensual experiences.

The energetic force of *lobha* is not necessarily a problem if accompanied by awareness and the freedom to choose. However, when it is accompanied by unawareness (*avijja*) or delusion (*moha*) then the energy of wanting becomes the force of compulsion and reactivity, called *tanha*, literally “thirst” and this produces great instability in the mind, which results in mental suffering as well as compelling us into unskillful actions. The force of *tanha*, leads to compulsive attachment and identification (*upadana*) with the object of desire, whether it is an external object or a mental thought or feeling. Such blind attachment limits and restricts happiness by tying us to certain conditions that have to be met before we can be happy. This inevitably leads to conflict, as those conditions seldom exist in the real world. This inner conflict is the experience of *dukkha*. Ultimately, the delineating factor is whether we have freedom to choose how to respond in life, or whether we are compelled to react out of habit. The former leads to happiness, stability and well-being, while the latter leads to suffering, instability and existential dis-ease. Ultimately, reactivity based on *lobha* creates instability in the mind and leaves us dependent on external conditions for providing our happiness. This is unsustainable, because we cannot control external conditions and we cannot prevent conditions from changing. The world becomes unsatisfying and we become fearful and despondent or angry. A tremendous amount of energy is wasted in trying to make the world conform to our expectations and in trying to control what is beyond our control. Of course the primary result of this conflict is mental suffering, *dukkha*.

There is nothing inherently wrong with sensory enjoyment and the Buddhist path of awakening is not about removing sources of pleasure, but simply learning to remove the element of ignorance and delusion that causes us to cling. When we are free of clinging then we are able to fully enjoy all forms of sensory experience, without the addiction and compulsion, which inevitably lead to suffering. The Path of Mindfulness aims to restore freedom and choice, so that we can respond to our natural needs and desires, without becoming blindly attached, compulsive and reactive.



## *Dosa*

Closely associated with *lobha* are the reactions of aversion and hatred. This is the second root *kilesa* and hindrance to psychological and spiritual freedom. *Dosa* and *lobha* are different sides of the same coin and wherever there is *lobha* there will also be some form of *dosa* in close proximity. The common theme that powers both *lobha* and *dosa* is *tanha*, or the force of compulsive attachment. When we become strongly attached to our expectations and ideals, then we will become equally strongly attached to reactions of disappointment and frustration created by the dichotomy of having or not having, gain and loss, success and failure.

*Dosa* describes the energy of repulsion, as when the same poles of two magnets are brought together. It has the effect of pushing us off balance, just as *lobha* pulls us off balance. The effect is the same, which is to create instability in the mind that leads to *dukkha*. In its active form, the energy of aversion can lead to violence and aggression as we try to get rid of the things we don't like. *Dosa* includes the emotional reactions of anger, hatred and ill-will (*vyapada*) that cloud the mind and lead to unskillful action. In its passive form, *dosa* reactions take the form of frustration and disappointment and all kinds of negative thinking that collectively contract the mind and heart. *Dosa* reactions readily proliferate into secondary reactions of pessimism, apathy, cynicism, negativity and fear. People consumed with *dosa* are unable to fully engage in life, because their minds are closed by negativity and their hearts are contracted by fear. The reactions of hatred are closely associated with fear, because the world is seen to be threatening, unsafe and unreliable.

The Path of Mindfulness involves learning to relate to fear and anger and all the reactions based on *dosa* with an open mind that does not react with further aversion, but provides a healing space in which these negative emotions can change and resolve themselves. As with *lobha*, the best way to control reactions of fear and hatred is to surround them with non-reactive space, which is exactly what happens when you relate to such emotions with mindfulness. The challenge is to train yourself in the fine art of recognizing *dosa* in all its many forms just as you must learn to recognize all the varieties of reactions based on *lobha*. Your enemy is not the reactions of greed and hatred themselves, but the *ignorance* of these reactions as they arise in the present. The Path

of Mindfulness is about becoming aware of all the movements of reactivity in the mind and to respond with equanimity and objectivity, rather than indulging in further blind reactivity.

## *Moha*

The third major component of all mental reactions is the force of ignorance (*avijja*). *Moha* is closely related to *avijja*, but *moha* has a slightly different flavour, referring to the delusional characteristic of *avijja*. This is where we blindly accept the superficial appearance of things as somehow complete, genuine and true. *Moha* is the psychological glue that keeps us bound to the individual reactions of *lobha* and *dosa* and that perpetuates the wheel of *samsara*. Whereas *avijja* is simply an absence of awareness, the mental sleepwalking that sustains habitual reactivity, *moha* is the conscious expression of *avijja* in which we falsely believe in the superficial appearance of things as they present themselves in our experience. When *avijja* is dominant we blindly react with frustration when things don't go our way, because we are ignorant of what is happening. When there is *moha*, we are aware of the reaction, but are deluded into believing that the reaction is true and that there are no other possibilities. We go through life reacting with frustration, worry, fear or anger when things don't go according to our expectations and we blindly accept these emotional reactions as normal.

In reality all reactions are learned and there is absolutely no law that dictates how we should react. The blind acceptance of learned reactions is the essence of delusion (*moha*) and fuels the whole process of reactivity. We inadvertently take these subjective reactions as reality and follow them blindly and without question. If someone insults us we become angry, if we lose something we become upset, if things don't go according to our expectations we become irritated. These are examples of delusion, because there is actually no law that compels you to feel angry, upset or irritated. These reactions are learned through personal and cultural conditioning and they have no real substance. Whenever we react, we are operating from some level of *moha* and the effect of this is that we are fooled into believing whatever arises in the mind and when this happens we lose our choice and freedom, our mind becomes agitated and we suffer. We become victims to the changing conditions of pleasure and pain, gain and loss, praise and criticism, success and failure and have very little freedom to choose what feelings we will have.

In society, the delusional reactivity of *moha* fuels all forms of prejudice, fanaticism and fundamentalism. Ignorance and delusion perpetuates cruelty and violence and the worst aspects of human nature. Wars begin with the blind attachment to beliefs about what is right and what is wrong, who is good and who is bad. Attachment to ideals may seem important, but when that attachment is based on ignorance and delusion then it quickly becomes a force of evil, rather than a force for good. During war it is surprisingly easy to kill someone you don't know and have labelled as "the enemy." We become so brainwashed by our beliefs and concepts that we believe the label to be true instead of being nothing more than a superficial untruth. The distortion of perception and thinking by *moha* is the foundation for unwholesome and unskillful speech and action. Ignorance is the way of the coward, someone who prefers not to face up to truth and the hard work of investigating the nature of reality. Humans have a great propensity for ignorance and will readily accept the superficial constructs of their mind, rather than open to the uncertainties of reality and truth. For this reason, ignorance is described as one of the seven *anusayas*, or underlying negative inclinations of the human mind. The other six are sensual greed, ill-will, craving for existence, attachment to blind beliefs, conceit and sceptical doubt. These inclinations are themes that arise over and over again in all human beings and feed suffering and *samsara*.

## MINDFULNESS OF HABITUAL REACTIVITY

Suffering, or *dukkha* refers specifically to the mental anguish created by our subjective emotional reactions to the stresses of life. Pain is an inevitable part of life, whereas suffering is created through the subjective reactions to pain that we learn from our parents, our culture and even from our religious teachers. Through cultural and parental conditioning, we unconsciously acquire patterns of reacting that produce mental anguish and suffering.

The challenge of the Path of Mindfulness is to undo the conditioned patterns of habitual emotional reactivity that create and proliferate suffering, both internally in our selves and externally in others. This begins when we awaken to reactive habits and learn a totally different way of relating to *dukkha*: a

relationship based on mindfulness, rather than further reactivity. The Path of Mindfulness develops the ability to recognize and respond with presence to reactivity, in all its many forms. The ability to recognize reactivity is a skill that has to be learned, as is the right way to respond to reactivity once we have detected it in ourselves. Most of the time, we are not aware of our habitual reactions and we blindly obey them as if under a hypnotic spell. We become angry or sad, frustrated or afraid when events happen, but never stop to question whether we need to react in these ways. In reality, we react out of habit, not choice and we blindly accept this way of being out of habitual ignorance, not conscious awareness. Reactivity depends on this blind attachment, the combination of *upadana* and *avijja* and this is what we seek to counteract through the practice of mindfulness. Instead of blindly reacting to situations, we choose to treat each and every moment of experience, reactive and non-reactive, as a means of developing and strengthening the response of mindfulness. The beginning of the Path of Mindfulness is learning to say “No!” to reactivity and to respond, instead, with the open attention of mindfulness.

Recognition is the first and most important step in the response to reactivity and stops the proliferation of further reactivity. It allows us to break the habit of reacting to situations and experiences and re-introduces freedom and choice. But mindfulness is more than simply recognizing reactions when they arise. Mindfulness is also a *response* to the reaction and that response is to form a relationship with the reaction that is based on openness, receptivity, sensitivity and complete presence. It is only when we can establish this mindfulness-based relationship with our own afflictions and *kilesas* that they can transform and resolve themselves. The mindfulness response to reactivity must involve both aspects: Recognition and Relationship.

Mental reactions come with varying intensities, ranging from minor disappointments and irritations to core traumas and unresolved emotional issues. When we practice mindfulness we choose to pay close attention to all these manifestations of *dukkha*, no matter how big or small. Nothing is left out, because our mission is to resolve *dukkha* and discover freedom from suffering wherever it occurs. All *dukkha* comes from the same root of ignorance and attachment and all *dukkha* is connected. When we heal one manifestation of suffering, we strengthen our innate ability to respond to all suffering in a skillful way that facilitates resolution. By choosing not to react to *dukkha*, but to

respond with complete presence, openness and receptivity, we create a safe space in which *dukkha* can unfold. It is when *dukkha* is allowed to unfold in full consciousness that it will begin the process of self-resolution under the guidance of the innate intuitive intelligence of the psyche that we call *satipanna*. When we practice mindfulness, we choose to cultivate a relationship based on compassion and openness, in which we neither indulge in, nor react against pain or the reactions to pain, but choose instead to observe either with complete objectivity and presence of mind.

## *Stress*

It is 8am and you wake up after a difficult night's sleep only to discover that the alarm didn't go off. This makes you very agitated as you realize that you will be late for work and your boss told you off for being late only last week. You tumble out of bed and rush down stairs for breakfast. No coffee. You become flustered at the prospect of starting the day without coffee and you lose your temper with your partner for forgetting to turn on the coffee maker. Then you feel guilty about being angry and that weighs heavily on your mind as you climb into your car. The car won't start. Now you are furious, because you recently paid a lot of money to have the car serviced. Being late, you hit rush hour and have to deal with all the frustrations of slow traffic, which increases your stress level to boiling point. Things are made even worse when a car cuts in front of you and you explode with anger and yell at the driver. The driver turns out to be an old lady and you feel embarrassed and guilty for your actions. Eventually you make it to the office, but there is nowhere to park since you are late and you become even more dejected. Exhausted, you finally make it to the office, sit down at your work and begin a day doing a job that you don't enjoy in an environment that you hate and with people who do not seem to appreciate how hard you try. The boss says he wants to see you and panic sets in.

Does this sound familiar? For much of the time we live as slaves to the negative habitual emotional reactions of agitation, disappointment, frustration, anger, guilt, stress, anxiety and fear. The emotional suffering of *dukkha* is not caused by being late or the difficult drive to work. These may be a source of pain, but are not sufficient to cause mental suffering. *Dukkha* is always a product of the way we react to such events and these subjective *dukkha*-producing reactions are something that we have

unconsciously learned. We learn to react with anger and disappointment when things don't go our way, just as we learn to be happy when our expectations are fulfilled. This is an important point, because although you cannot control external events, you can control how you react to them. If you remain attached to your reactions then you will suffer indefinitely as long as those attachments remain in place. A major part of The Path of Mindfulness involves learning to recognize and respond with mindfulness to all these forms of emotional stress, which is a form of *dukkha*, as they arise throughout the day. Each stress reaction may be relatively small, but the combined effect can be very debilitating. We will benefit greatly if we train ourselves to recognize these stress reactions as they arise during the day and then respond to each with mindfulness and not simply fall under their spell and perpetuate further reactivity.

### *Emotional Trauma*

Reactions of disappointment and frustration and the stresses of life are one thing, but there are much more intense challenges in the form of significant life changes, including sickness and death or the breakdown of a marriage or a major conflict within the family. Another source of deep emotional trauma comes from the experience of significant loss, such as the loss of a home to fire or flood or earthquake. Those involved in war or violent conflict are faced with intense emotional traumas, which may remain unresolved and which may lead to post-traumatic stress, nightmares and recurrent anxiety attacks.

Such life events can be a source of great pain and if we are not careful, the mind will unconsciously generate a complex of habitual reactions to emotional trauma that will amplify and sustain the pain and create the suffering of *dukkha*. Sickness creates pain. Loss is painful as is failure, criticism and loss of face. However, the real source of our suffering lies in how we relate to the pain generated by life. For the unmindful, the response to pain is likely to be in the form of emotional reactivity and aversion and these reactions make the pain much worse. This secondary emotional reactivity is like pouring salt onto a wound and simply makes the pain worse and last longer. Pain is inevitable, but how much we suffer and how much suffering we create in the world is very much our creation and our responsibility. In the Path of Mindfulness we choose to cultivate the relationship of mindfulness with the emotional traumas that

we encounter and create a therapeutic space in which the pain can resolve and heal itself. This will involve the more focused application of mindfulness that we call meditation. We choose to care for our inner pain by being fully present for it in the same way that we would care for a child in distress. Through this mindfulness based self-nurturing we create the best conditions possible for healing deep wounds.

### *Core Emotional Complexes*

In addition to stress and psychological trauma we can also be affected by deep-seated negative emotional reactivity that lies at the core of our personality. These are the demons of the mind that come back over and over again to haunt us and may take the form of recurrent fear, anger, depression, guilt, low self-esteem or feelings of helplessness and emptiness. These inner recurrent emotional complexes eat us from the inside and will paralyze the mind and spirit if left unresolved. Such reactive emotional complexes require the greatest attention and compassion, which can be best provided by the therapeutic space of mindfulness. Mindfulness Meditation Therapy is a particularly good way of working with these deep-seated issues, because it allows us to establish a non-reactive relationship with the trapped emotional feeling energy that lies beneath the surface. When you take away the diversion of reactivity then you create a therapeutic space in which that trapped energy can unfold and transform experientially.

The inner demons usually begin to take shape in childhood when the mind is most vulnerable and least able to process intense emotions. Physical, sexual and emotional abuse leave powerful imprints in the subconscious mind that the child is unable to process and resolve. Faced with inner unresolved conflicts, the child develops a complex of negative secondary reactivity such as reactions of guilt, low self-esteem, generalized anxiety, fearfulness and anger. These secondary reactions effectively prevent adequate processing of emotional conflict through the principle of Reactive Displacement and the unresolved negative feeling energy becomes frozen in place, where it continues to fester and generate future suffering.

Such deep-seated emotional complexes may take years to resolve, because it is so difficult to access the repressed emotions. Therapeutic change proceeds through the transformation of the internal structure of an emotional complex and this requires

bringing the complex back into immediate present awareness. The whole structure has to change and for this reason, everything depends on the quality of the relationship that you establish with your core emotions. If the relationship is reactive, then nothing will change; if it is non-reactive, then change becomes possible. The relationship with emotional pain must be primarily experiential, rather than analytical, because thinking is always biased and limited by past conditioning. Therefore, we choose to establish a relationship based on mindfulness with our emotional pain and allow transformation to occur internally from within the experience itself, which it will do if we remain mindful and resist secondary reactivity. Even the most painful and traumatic memories will resolve themselves given time, if we allow the natural innate intelligence of the psyche, called *satipanna* to operate freely.

Thinking and analyzing are a subtle form of reactivity based on the past and are distractions, like emotional reactions, that take us away from this innate intuitive intelligence. This is not to say that psychological insights are not important, but that they should arise out of mindfulness, rather than out of thinking. The conscious ego cannot heal the problems that it has created and it must open to the deeper intuitive level of the psyche. In this way, we make mindfulness the ground to which we return over and over again and allow transformation to occur at this intuitive level of relationship with our emotional suffering. Specifically, in mindfulness meditation, we learn to sit with the feelings that surround the stress, traumatic memory or core emotional complex. Rather than indulging in thinking or analysis we listen with care and attention, without trying to change anything or fix anything. This can be described as the Art of Awakening rather than the Art of Doing. As you develop the skill of listening with mindfulness, you create the therapeutic space that will allow the immensely subtle changes to unfold and that are required for transformation and resolution. Over and over, we return to this creative interface at the feeling level, taking small steps with each encounter. It is persistence that wins the day, rather than intense outbursts of emotional catharsis. As you learn to relate with mindfulness to your inner pain it will change internally, but in addition, mindfulness produces a fundamental change in the whole psyche and in the way you relate to pain in general. It is this totality of change within the structure of the emotional complex as well as in the way the psyche relates to *dukkha* that leads to transformation and liberation.



### 3 PRIMARY AND SECONDARY REACTIVITY

After contact with a physical sensation through the physical sense organs or mental objects in the form of thoughts, memories and feelings, the unaware mind tends to react according to past conditioning with attraction (*lobha*), repulsion (*dosa*) or delusion (*moha*). When we see something we like we react by wanting to possess it and if we see something disagreeable then we react by pushing it away. In general, we become seduced by whatever arises and tend to unconsciously identify and attach to these subjective reactions, which is the nature of delusion. These initial and automatic reactions based on past conditioning are called *primary reactions*. Something doesn't go to plan and we become upset or angry or disappointed. We see a snake and react with fear or we see a beautiful sight and react with pleasure. During mindfulness practice we try to cultivate an awareness of all these automatic reactions as soon as they arise because so that we don't become seduced into further reactivity. If we are not mindful, then the mind will start reacting to the primary reactions themselves, producing *secondary reactions* and the proliferation of ruminative thinking and further emotional reactivity. Secondary reactivity is the process through which we literally take things personally and make them into something bigger than they really are. We start to generalize and make false assumptions and beliefs that are completely artificial. Most of all, this proliferation of thinking and emotional reactivity reinforces and feeds primary reactions and keeps them alive. Worry is a classic example of secondary reactivity. It serves no purpose other than to intensify an underlying fear. Other examples are anger and doubt. Preoccupation with negative thinking in general is unskillful and does not lead to beneficial results.

Secondary reactivity has the effect of preventing the resolution of *dukkha* through the effect known as Reactive Displacement. Secondary reactivity takes our attention away from the underlying primary reactions and prevents their transformation and resolution. It is very important to become attentive to all forms of secondary reactivity and ruminative thinking and this is a major activity in mindfulness practice.

## THE FIVE HINDRANCES

The Buddha described five common classes of secondary reactivity, called the Five Hindrances (*nivarana*). These are sensual craving (*kamacchanda*), ill-will (*vyapada*), sloth and torpor (*thina-middha*), agitation and worry (*uddhacca-kukkucca*) and doubt (*vicikiccha*). They are called “hindrances” because they sustain *dukkha* and mental instability and keep us in bondage to habitual reactivity and *samsara*. The hindrances prevent us from seeing things clearly as they are by distracting us away from the present into endless rounds of fantasy and ruminative thinking. They prevent us from being fully present with what needs our attention. We are unable to see reality as it is and this perpetuates ignorance. Suffering will not resolve if we cannot be fully present with our pain or the pain of others. Without the presence of mindfulness, the painful cycle of suffering continues indefinitely. Sensual craving is likened to water that is colored by a dye and ill-will is like water that is boiling. Sloth and torpor is likened to water that is covered with waterweed and restlessness and worry is like water that is whipped up by the wind. Doubt and perpetual uncertainty is like water that is muddy. In each case, we are prevented from seeing into the depth of the water and are confined to the superficial level of perception, characterized by ignorance and delusion. Unable to see the full nature of reality, we are condemned to suffer.

During mindfulness meditation and general mindfulness practice throughout the day, we must pay particular attention to these five groups of secondary reactions and learn to recognize them when they arise and also recognize the conditions that cause their arising. It is only through becoming mindful of secondary reactivity that we can overcome them. Once we have learned to recognize the hindrances we learn to respond to them, not aversion or further ego-directed reactivity, but with sustained mindfulness. We choose to form a caring and receptive relationship with our afflictions in which we create the right conditions of mindfulness that will allow the hindrances to resolve themselves. The hindrances are not our enemy, they are the reality of the human condition and we must come to terms with this reality and work with it in a constructive manner. We can never rid the mind of the hindrances through the actions of the ego or any attempt to control the mind through willpower or

coercion. This is simply another form of secondary reactivity, another manifestation of *nivarana*. The only effective way to purify the mind is to learn not to react to the hindrances or any other manifestation of the *kilesas*, but to respond to them with mindfulness and trust in the transformative power of a mindfulness based relationship.

### *Sensual desire*

One of the most obvious forms of secondary reactivity is the proliferation of craving for sensual stimulation, called *kamacchandha*. Preoccupation with sensory stimulation, whether originating from the physical senses or from the pleasant sensations associated with thinking and fantasy distracts us from being aware of the present moment. We become lost in the experience of our sensations, which leaves us unable to be fully present with either the experience of the external world or the inner experience of our mind. Besides becoming lost in pleasant experiences, we also become lost in thinking and planning and how to acquire more. This can lead to obsession and the proliferation of craving, called *tanha papanca*.

The best response to the reactive thinking of sensual fantasy and proccupation is mindfulness itself. Through training to recognize *kamacchandha* we can learn to say “No. Not now. I choose to be mindful of my present experience.” If the pull is very strong and you are clearly experiencing an emotional reaction of intense craving, then you should switch attention to this emotion and make it the primary object for meditation.

This hindrance can take on many forms. One situation in which it can be particularly distracting is when you choose to focus mindfulness on *dukkha*, which is an important focus if there is some form of agitation and worry that is causing you emotional suffering. The ego always seeks pleasant experiences and will create distractions that take you away from your attempts to be mindful of your inner pain. You are distracted into a pleasant fantasy or seeking satisfaction through eating, shopping or some other activity that gives you temporary relief. The skillful response to this form of secondary reactivity is to focus mindfulness on the impulse that takes you away from your primary object of meditation. What you will discover is that the secondary emotional reactions of avoidance are actually an integral part of the original emotional complex. By resolving

these reactive habits, you will make a major impact in the resolution of the original emotional complex.

### *Ill-will*

Whether you focus mindfulness externally on the experience of your environment or internally on the contents of your mind, the habitual reactivity of aversion, hatred and irritation will clearly distort perception. This hindrance, called *vyapada* is equally effective as sensual desire at distracting you away from being fully present and prevents you fully experiencing the reality of what is before you. If you choose to meditate on some form of *dukkha*, such as anxiety or fear, then it is important to be aware of secondary reactions of aversion that arise. Aversion is a very powerful form of Reactive Displacement that has the effect of distracting our attention away from the primary experience. This inhibits change and the resolution of *dukkha* and it is almost a certainty that the more you resist, the more you will intensify the original problem. In fact, the very act of resistance creates division between you as the ego-observer and the problem as something to be fixed or destroyed. In the reactive relationship, the observer is the ego, with its thirst for control.

If you notice a feeling of revulsion or dislike for whatever you are experiencing, including painful emotions, then you must learn to recognize what is happening and respond with “No. Not now. I choose to sit with my pain.” It is likely that the secondary reactions of aversion will carry a strong energetic charge and this is a signal that you need to switch focus onto the *vyapada* itself. Work with that energy until it resolves itself before returning to the primary object of your meditation. Again, after you have resolved the aversion to your inner pain you will probably also find that the original emotional suffering will have significantly changed.

Besides specific aversion to your inner pain, it is possible to become consumed by hatred and thoughts of revenge directed externally against someone or some situation that caused the pain. Anger, thoughts of ill-will and revenge are not skillful responses and often these negative thoughts will do more harm to you than to the perpetrator. As the Buddha said,

Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned.

As always, you may have the noble intention to meditate on your fear, anxiety or sadness, but if your mind is consumed with anger, then you will not be able to do this effectively. If the hindrance of *vyapada* arises during your meditation, then you must make this your primary object for *vipassana* meditation and seek to bring it to a state of resolution, before you can meditate on anything else. The mind is like a complex ecosystem in which all the emotional complexes are interrelated. Every emotional state is linked to some aspect of sensual craving and aversion. Working on resolving these hindrances is often the key for the resolution of deep emotional problems. More often than not, it is the hindrances of craving and aversion that prevent the transformation of our inner pain and suffering. They get in the way and prevent us from bringing the healing power of mindfulness to the *dukkha* within.

### *Sloth and torpor*

The next common hindrance and group of secondary habitual reactions is called *thina-middha*, which is most often translated as sloth and torpor. This hindrance encompasses all the forms of reactivity that causes the mind to contract as it encounters sensory experiences. This contraction is experienced as apathy, blind acceptance, blind belief and a certain stiffness of mind that leads to fatigue. *Thina-middha* is a hindrance to meditation and The Path of Mindfulness, because the mind needs to be fresh and alert and actively engaged with experience in order to develop the inner wisdom that will lead to purification and transformation of the mind.

Attachment (*upadana*) leads to mental torpor and stiffness, called *thina*, which literally means to congeal and become hard. Ignorance, delusion and attachment creates a certain dullness and lack of vitality in the psyche. The mind that is dominated by blind attachment to beliefs, conventions and practices and to habitual patterns of reactivity becomes mechanical, inflexible and lacks the malleability necessary for transformation. *Thina* describes those reactions that lead to a loss of spontaneity, creativity and responsiveness. This hindrance has *avijja* at its core, an ignorance that dulls the mind and makes us blind to the richness of life. It represents a form of sensory deprivation and the mind literally falls asleep even though our eyes may be open.

Mindfulness is the path of letting go of the constraints of ignorance and the chains of habitual conditioning and opening, instead, to the ongoing new possibilities of the present. Through the cultivation of mindfulness, we begin to peel off the death mask of *thina*, so that we can engage fully with the present. Mindfulness is the antidote to apathy and reactivity. It allows us to become responsive rather than reactive and awake rather than asleep. Through mindfulness we emerge from the stiff chrysalis of our conditioning and discover the freedom of authentic living in the immediate present.

Drowsiness and fatigue, or *middha* is the natural consequence of a closed mind and a very common problem for meditators. Attachment to subjective reactivity, beliefs and fixed ways of doing things consumes energy and leaves the mind stressed and exhausted. In particular, we become fatigued from the continual frustration of not getting what we want and the immense effort of trying to make the world conform to our expectations. This is the stress of the over-controlling ego that tries to acquire and keep states of consciousness that it craves (*bhavatanha*) coupled with the stress of trying to get rid of states of consciousness that do not conform to expectation (*vibhavatanha*). Having ideas and dreams about things being different is one thing, but blind craving founded on *avijja* inevitably leads to conflict and *dukkha*. This conflict is draining, produces mental fatigue and in its severe form, depression.

Sometimes, the best way to work with drowsiness is simply to take a break, walk around or find another activity. Traditionally, it is quite common to alternate between sitting meditation and walking meditation to keep the mind alert. However, this hindrance has much to teach us and can be made an object for meditation. You can use this emotional state as a way of accessing the blind fixation and *tanha* that lies beneath the surface and meditate on the inner felt-sense of this compulsive emotion with mindfulness. If you can release just a fraction of the energy that is trapped consumed in the underlying pattern of blind attachments then you will find that the drowsiness and fatigue will lift as energy is released back into the psyche. Mindfulness brings energy into the psyche by releasing energy that was previously frozen into habitual reactivity. When the mind opens, energy is restored and as we awaken to reality as it is, we feel the rapture of new life. This is the great happiness of non-attachment, of not clinging to anything as “me or mine.”

## *Mental Agitation and Worry*

One of the hardest hindrances to work with is mental agitation and worry (*uddhacca-kukkucca*). This hindrance embraces the universal problem of restlessness and distractedness (*uddhacca*) as well as the emotional reactivity of worrying (*kukkucca*). Both of these factors are strong reactive forces that prevent the development of *samadhi* by making the mind agitated and unable to focus on present experience. The mind is distracted away from the present into secondary reactivity that has the effect of strengthening habitual reactivity and repressing underlying core emotional complexes. To be fully present implies that you are free of mental agitation and worrying and other forms of cognitive reactivity. You cannot be present with another person if your mind is full of negative thoughts and worrying. Similarly, you cannot fully appreciate living and the experience of your environment if your mind is full of thoughts. And, it is obvious that worry and agitated thinking will prevent your inner work, if you choose to meditate on a primary reaction such as anxiety, fear or anger. Agitation and worry represent one of the strongest forms of secondary reactivity that prevents change by distracting our attention away from the primary object. If we choose to meditate on our inner emotional pain, our fear or anxiety then we must be able to stay present for that experience. We need to be fully present with mindfulness to create the right conditions of freedom and space that will allow the emotional complex to unfold, transform and resolve. Worry and negative thinking take our attention *away* from the direct and full experience of the emotion. This is called Reactive Displacement and its effect is to prevent change. When following The Path of Mindfulness, we understand that our mission is to cultivate presence, which we do through mindfulness. No presence, no change; partial presence, partial change; full presence, complete change.

Instead of fighting the tendency of the mind to become ensnared by agitation and worry, we can learn to work skillful and intelligently with this hindrance, in what can be described as the dance of mindfulness. The more attuned you are to the natural impulse of the mind to become agitated, the easier it will be to pull the mind back and the less time will be lost in daydreaming and worrying. Each time your mind wanders and you bring it back will strengthen the beneficial habit of mindfulness and weaken the dysfunctional habit of reactivity. Over time, the faculty of mindfulness will develop into a powerful balancing

force that will stabilize many aspects of life where concentration, non-reactivity and presence of mind are important. Through the sustained practice of mindfulness of the hindrances and particularly this hindrance, you will develop a very real form of *samadhi* that will stabilize how you relate to all experience, pleasant or unpleasant. This in turn will strengthen the faculty of mindfulness. *Samadhi* is the opposite of agitation and worry and the best possible way to develop *samadhi* is to work with *uddhacca-kukkucca* and use it as a teaching platform. This transforms it from being a hindrance into being a means for purifying the mind and cultivating freedom from all the hindrances. This therapeutic effect is brought about by the fundamental shift from the usual reactive mode of *becoming* the reaction, to the responsive mode of *knowing* the thought-emotion as an object. Any factor that overcomes *avijja* will tend to reduce reactivity and suffering and mindfulness is the pre-eminent antidote to *avijja*. This strengthens the perceptual shift from subjective reactivity to objective knowing and little by little, we become more in tune with the *knowing* part of our experience, rather than the *known*. The process of not getting caught up in reactivity takes away the fuel that powers emotional reactions and when we stop feeding them, then they will wither away and spontaneously resolve themselves. Even core emotional complexes benefit from mindfulness, because so much of what sustains emotional suffering and *dukkha* is the blind subjective and habitual reactivity itself.

The mind may experience anxiety produced by habitual reactions to memories of the past or thoughts about the future. Worry, called *kukkucca* in Pali, is a form of secondary reactivity that intensifies and sustains the experience of anxiety in the present. The word “worry” has its roots in the Old English *wyrgan*, which literally means, “to strangle.” Generally, this kind of reactive thinking does not resolve problems, but simply intensifies the mental anguish of *dukkha*. Negative thinking and worry also intensifies the hindrance of *thina-middha* and makes the mind rigid, contracted and fearful, which leads to apathy and fatigue.

During mindfulness meditation, we learn to recognize worry-thoughts as they arise and respond to them with mindfulness and thereby stop the proliferation of secondary reactivity. This response of letting go is not a product of telling ourselves to stop worrying, but simply the natural consequence of the principle of Reciprocal Inhibition: you cannot be both



reactive and mindful at the same time. In each moment of mindfulness, the reaction of worry stops, the mind unclenches and a healing space opens up. However, stopping is only the first step of the Mindfulness Response and the most important part is what follows. This is the response of opening our awareness and forming a relationship with the worry-thought based on mindfulness. Mindfulness is all about the quality of relationship and about increasing our ability to engage objectively with our experience. The name for this special quality of non-reactive relationship is *satisampajanna*, or the pure knowing that accompanies mindfulness (*sati*). In the case of worry, we choose to make the thought-feeling complex of worrying the object for our meditation. Mindfulness meditation (*vipassana*) creates the space in which dissonant feeling-energy can unfold. This creates the right conditions in which the underlying anxiety can spontaneously resolve itself through the action of intuitive intelligence (*satipanna*).

## *Doubt*

It is healthy to have doubt and scepticism to the extent that it encourages investigation and discovering for yourself what is skillful and what leads towards the resolution of *dukkha*. Buddhism is very much a path of self-discovery and is not about blindly following dogma and the Buddha actively discouraged blind attachment to religious conventions, which he considered a major impediment to spiritual awakening. However, there is another kind of doubt that is not healthy and leads to indecision and spiritual contraction and this is called *vicikiccha*, from *vi-*, without and *-cikiccha*, wisdom. Meaning “without wisdom” this hindrance prevents one from even beginning the path of investigation through mindfulness. Such skepticism is like a brick wall that closes the mind and heart and prevents the development of experiential wisdom. The greatest cause of doubt is ignorance, the unwillingness to open the mind and look and see what is there. Chronic doubters live behind a wall of beliefs that create a smokescreen and insulate them from reality. The path of mindfulness is not something that requires blind belief; it is simply a willingness to let go of prejudices and really look closely at the world of experience, at the happiness and suffering in our lives and the lives of others and discover how we contribute to the creation of both.

We may feel that we are not skilled enough to practice mindfulness or that we are not capable of facing our inner demons and emotional pain without being overwhelmed. We convince ourselves that we don't have the time to practice or that we tried meditating for a month or two, but it just didn't lead anywhere. However, it is important to understand that these stories, like any other form of secondary reactivity are just that – stories. The path for overcoming these and other negative reactions is not to blindly accept them and be seduced into inactivity, but to recognize that they have arisen and then attend to each with mindfulness. If you are plagued by insecurity and a lack of confidence, be mindful not to allow yourself to be seduced into believing them. Instead, make these emotional reactions of doubt and insecurity the very objects for *vipassana* meditation. Study the feeling tone in detail and establish a relationship with these feelings based on mindfulness and allow them to change internally and resolve themselves. In the Path of Mindfulness, we train ourselves not to blindly indulge in any reactions and not to accept the superficial appearance of what arises in the mind. With mindfulness we greet each and every thought and emotion, no matter what its origin and respect each as a visiting guest. The most important thing is not to give in to the doubt and insecurity, because that will only further strengthen the reactivity. Similarly, we do not reject our doubts through rationalization and positive thinking. If there is doubt and insecurity, then these reactions must be acknowledged and attended to with genuine respect, kindness and mindfulness.

The most effective path for the resolution of insecurity is to be open and mindful of the negative energy (*dukkhavedana*) that empowers the thought-emotion. In the open therapeutic space that is created by mindfulness any trapped negative energy will be free to transform itself, without interference from the ego. Reactivity simply locks *dukkhavedana* in place and when you are feeling inadequate or overwhelmed the last thing you need to do is tighten up further. Through mindfulness of these reactions of self-doubt and insecurity we create a space in which things can change and we can witness the release of *dukkhavedana* and the gradual resolution of insecurity. Working at this subtle level of change brings positive experiences and in the light of this experience the negative hindrance of *vicikiccha* will fade away and be replaced by *saddha*, growing faith and confidence. As we experience the dissolution of suffering and the cause of suffering through the application of mindfulness, we directly experience a

new possibility for living. However, the development of *saddha* should arise from your inner intuitive experience and not through blind attachment to beliefs and dogma. Faith has to come from within, from the heart and from the totality of the psyche if it is to be truly transformative.

In conclusion, the primary approach in your meditation should be to treat each of the five hindrances as mental objects for mindfulness meditation. The approach to the hindrances should be the same as for any other type of mental reactivity beginning with vigilance, followed by a relationship of receptive opening and finally creating a space that allows our transformative intelligence (*satipanna*) to bring about resolution. These three factors are all part to the response of mindfulness.

## 4 REACTIVE ATTACHMENT

For a reaction to become habitual there must be *avijja* and *tanha*, but there is another important factor, which is that the reaction must have a structure and form that can be repeated when the conditions are right. This structure is called *sankhara* and it is the blind attachment to *sankharas* that leads to habitual reactivity. The Pali term for attachment is *upadana*. *Upadana* is the fixation of the compulsive emotional energy of *tanha* onto a specific structure in the form of thoughts, memories, beliefs, emotions and physical actions. The strength of *upadana* depends on the force of *tanha* and if this force is weak then the resulting attachment will also be weak and the reactions will be transitory, like bubbles rising to the surface of a pond. The stronger the *tanha*, the greater the attachment and when *tanha* is very strong then the resulting habitual reactivity will dominate our mind and our actions. The Buddha described three different classes of *tanha*, as in the following passage:

There are these three cravings. Which three? Craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, craving for non-becoming. These are the three cravings.

Essentially, the energy of *tanha* is the blind and compulsive force that drives the ego to acquire and control. The thirst to acquire and control sensual experiences is called *kamatanha*. The force to acquire and control desirable states of existence (*bhava*) is called *bhavatanha* and the force that pushes us to get rid of states that we do not like is called *vibhavatanha*. We might be obsessed with buying a new car and want to experience the sensual feelings that come with owning a new car, which is an example of *kamatanha*. Owning a new car gives us a sense of power and prestige that we want to have (*bhavatanha*) and more than anything we want to get rid of the perception of being poor (*vibhavatanha*). At a deeper level of understanding, *bhavatanha* describes that compulsive and habitual drive that causes us to react repeatedly, re-creating states of mind, such as anger or anxiety. *Vibhavatanha*, in contrast, the same compulsive drive to

repress or destroy states of mind through patterns of negative habitual reactivity. We may or may not be aware of this compulsive drive, but the end result is that it keeps us stuck in *samsara*, the round of becoming this or that. If you look closely, you will see that all motivations and impulses are driven by either wanting to acquire some form of sensory experience or wanting to replace an undesirable sensory experience with a desirable one. It is not the sensual experiences, nor the desire for things to be different than they are that is a problem, but the enslavement that comes from ignorance of the compulsive force of *tanha*, because this robs us of our freedom.

Beneath the addictive compulsive force of *tanha* and the attachment is the primary force of ignorance (*avijja*). *Avijja* sustains reactivity by keeping it hidden from consciousness and anything that remains unseen and repressed is shielded from the transformational wisdom of *satipanna* and the pattern of reactivity is prevented from changing. We become slaves to our conditioned reactivity and this perpetuates craving, attachment and suffering (*dukkha*). It is not surprising that in Buddhist philosophy, ignorance is considered the root of all evil and suffering for the individual and for the world. All the unwholesome actions of greed, hatred and delusion have ignorance as their root. As Buddhadasa, one of the great twentieth-century Thai Buddhist teachers said,

All troubles arise from attachment, which has  
ignorance as its mother.

By ignorance, we do not mean the lack of conventional knowledge or lack of intelligence. *Avijja* refers to something much more immediate, of not seeing what is happening in each unfolding moment of our present experience and this unawareness is what allows reactivity to take hold.

In the West, the word attachment does not necessarily mean something bad, but indicates that we care and believe in the thing to which we are attached. No one would say it is wrong to be attached to your friends and family, your country or your beliefs and the Buddha did not mean for us to abandon these things. What concerned the Buddha was whether we have the *freedom* to engage with these parts of our living experience. What he observed is that most of our actions and thought patterns are reactive in nature and conditioned by *avijja*. This reactivity inhibits our ability to fully engage with life freedom and creates

the conditions that lead to suffering. For this reason *upadana* is best translated as *blind attachment* or reactive attachment in which ignorance (*avijja*) combines with the compulsive-obsessive energy of *tanha* causing us to become attached to the mental objects (*sankharas*) of thought reactions, emotional reactions and beliefs. When *avijja* is dominant you are not fully present for your experience, let alone the experience of others. Your actions are dominated by habitual reactivity like a machine on autopilot with little real freedom or choice. This is the common state of sleep that we call *samsara*, the endless round of habitual reactivity and becoming.

The root meaning of *upadana* is “fuel” and just as dry tinder sustains a fire, so blind attachment sustains and strengthens mental reactivity and makes it habitual. *Tanha* generates *upadana* and blind attachment strengthens *tanha*. The two feed each other in a vicious cycle generating habitual emotional, cognitive and behavioral reactivity of *samsara*. The fundamental nature of *upadana* is bondage and fixation on form. Each blind attachment is a chain that binds us and restricts our freedom. *Upadana* restricts, constrains and limits us so that we become *reactive* rather than *responsive*. To be responsive means that we are free to choose our actions and have the flexibility to respond to life situations with intelligence and always in a way that reduces suffering and increases inner stability and happiness. The psyche, if allowed, will naturally move towards a position of greatest stability both internally as well as externally in our personal relationships. This is the nature of spiritual freedom, in which intuitive intelligence (*satipanna*) is able to operate, without the constraints of compulsive reactivity. Every moment is unique and requires a fresh response and to be truly free means that we have the freedom to adapt and respond appropriately to each moment of existence and this requires freedom from blind attachment.

There are four kinds of *upadana* described by the Buddha: *kamupadana*, attachment to sensory experiences; *ditthupadana*, attachment to views, opinions and beliefs; *silabbatupadana*, attachment to conventions, rules, authority and tradition; and *attavadupadana*, unconscious identification with the subjective reactions of “me or mine.” The first three *upadanans* represent attachment to mental objects: the experience of sensations, beliefs and conventions, whereas the fourth represents attachment to the subjective reactions of the Self or ego. For example, if we receive praise, we attach to the pleasant sensations that arise when we

hear these words of praise (*kamupadana*); we become attached to the beliefs and expectations that constitute our inner story of why we deserve praise (*ditthupadana*); and we can even become attached to the specific right way that praise should be given (*silabbatupadana*). However, what is even more important is how we become blindly attached to our subjective conditioned reactions, such as feeling happy when we receive praise and feeling disappointment and anger when we do not. Attachment to mental objects creates the conditions that give rise to *dukkha*, but attachment to our subjective habitual reactions of greed, aversion and delusion is by far the stronger source of *dukkha*. This is what is meant by *attavadupadana*, attachment to self, where we take our own subjective reactions as true, objective reality, instead of being insubstantial fabrications based on past conditioning.

Essentially, all forms of *upadana* lead to becoming, called *bhava* in Pali. We are in effect forced through ignorance and reactivity to *become* the products of our reactivity. We react with greed when we see something we want, because we have become attached to this particular subjective reaction through ignorance and conditioning and we *become* the greed. If we are blindly attached to a reaction of anger when we don't get our way, then we *become* the anger and that emotion will dominate our consciousness. We learn to react with disappointment when something goes wrong and we *become* disappointed, according to our conditioning. When we have a belief to which we are strongly attached, we *become* the belief and it dominates our perception. If we are strongly attached to a certain conventional way of doing things, then we *become* limited by that convention. We lose our freedom and choice as we are compelled to become whatever arises in the mind as products of habitual reactivity. In reality, we do not have to react with greed, anger or disappointment, because there is no law that dictates how we should react. We react in these ways out of ignorance and conditioning and attachment to these particular forms of subjective reactivity.

The purpose of mindfulness practice is to regain our freedom from the endless rounds of becoming (*bhava*) that characterizes *samsara* and *dukkha*. When we are free from the compulsion to become, then we are free to experience the full wonder and complexity of life *as it is* and this leads to skillful and wholesome responsiveness that will be in harmony with the path that leads towards the resolution and cessation of suffering.

## ATTACHMENT TO SENSORY EXPERIENCE

The first variety of *upadana* is called *kamupadana*, the attachment to sensory experience. The most obvious source of sensory experience comes from the physical senses of sight, sound, taste, smell and touch. However, the mind itself is regarded as the sixth sense organ and thoughts, beliefs and emotions are sense objects to which we can become very attached. We tend to attach to sensory experiences that are pleasant, whether in the form of a pleasant sight or sound or in the form of a stimulating thought. Good food, music and things of beauty all create pleasant feelings and states of consciousness to which we naturally become attached. We become attached to our possessions, our friends and partners, because they make us feel good. We become attached to symbols of wealth, power and respect from others, because they lead to pleasant sensations. We create a world in which we become dependent on having these things around us to continually stimulate us. Even painful emotions such as anger can be addictive, because they are stimulating and make us feel alive.

However, the desirable feelings that come from the pursuit of sensory experience depend on the conditions that create them, which presents a problem, because conditions change. Consequently, compulsive attachment to sensory experience will almost always result in disappointment and we are left feeling empty and grieving for what we have lost. As it says in the Dhammapada,

Those who are infatuated with lust fall back into the stream as does a spider into the web spun by itself.  
The wise, cutting off the bond of craving, walk on resolutely, leaving all ills behind.

We have to find a balance in which we can enjoy sensory pleasures, without becoming dependent on them. This is the principle teaching of the Middle Way (*majjhima patipada*) in which we neither blindly indulge in sensory pleasure, nor blindly reject it. Instead, we choose to develop balance and equanimity in relation to pleasure. The problem is never in the sensual experiences themselves, but in the way we become blindly attach to them and become inadvertently dependent on something that is inherently not dependable. Equanimity (*upekkha*) is one of the



most important qualities that we develop through mindfulness practice and *upekkha* is the principle vehicle for developing balanced engagement in life, so that we can enjoy sensory experiences to the full, without becoming dependent or addicted.

Needless to say, developing mindfulness of all these various manifestations of *kamupadana* is a primary focus of practice on the path of *Dhamma* for the purpose of “breaking the bond of craving” and attachment to sense experience. However, the path of breaking these bonds is not an action of willpower and aversion. The only effective way to break free from the grip of *kamupadana* is through awakening to the energetic force of *tanha* and the underlying *vedana* that fuels the attachments. It is in that space of awakened mindfulness, where there is freedom and non-reactivity that the bonds of *kamupadana* are broken. We cannot break them through willpower, but through the gentle path of awakening to the way things are. When you remove the element of *avijja*, then *tanha* will weaken and dissolve away. With the dissolution of *tanha*, the bonds of *upadana* will loosen, restoring freedom and wisdom-intelligence. Mindfulness is learning to be fully present for the emotional impulses of wanting and hating as they arise and residing in that place of pure knowing, which is the essence of Buddha mind.

## ATTACHMENT TO BELIEFS

The second major type of clinging and blind fixation that creates all kinds of conflict and suffering is *ditthupadana*, attachment to views, opinions and beliefs. Views and opinions represent the superficial level of *ditthi* whereas core inner beliefs create our personality (*sakkayaditthi*) and define who we are through their influence on perceptions, thoughts and actions. The human mind is unique in the animal kingdom for its ability to generate internal beliefs and conceptual models of the world. These internal models help us organize experience and allow us to make rapid responses to changing circumstances.

It should be made absolutely clear that beliefs are not in themselves a problem; the problem is only in how we relate to beliefs and opinions. If we can maintain objectivity and equanimity (*upekkha*), then beliefs become tools to help us better understand and cope with life. If, however, we are negligent and become blindly attached to beliefs, then they will limit our

responsiveness and cause us to act unskillfully. All beliefs, by their very nature are superficial representations of the truth and are ultimately unsatisfactory representations of reality. Beliefs, views and opinions are like a carpenter's tools. Each tool has a very specific usefulness, but that usefulness is limited to the specific task for which it was designed. Clinging to a belief is like trying to make a house using only a hammer. We need to use all the tools available and so it is in life, where we need to keep our minds open to the total reality and the truth of whatever arises in the here and now. Clinging to beliefs as if they were true and perfect is one of the chief causes of *dukkha*, because of the inevitable conflict between our beliefs and reality. This conflict not only exists in the mind but also affects our relationships with our family, community and society. To quote Krishnamurti,

Man has built in himself images as a fence of security - religious, political, personal. These manifest as symbols, ideas, and beliefs. The burden of these images dominates man's thinking, his relationships and his daily life. These images are the causes of our problems for they divide man from man. His perception of life is shaped by the concepts already established in his mind.

Man has a very strong propensity to codify life, to reduce life to a set of internal representation, which may be symbolic or structured in the form of a belief. Every aspect of life is influenced by these internal beliefs, views and opinions yet most are acquired without conscious choice. They are absorbed unconsciously from parents, family, friends, society and cultural practices and we unconsciously become attached to them. We blindly attach to beliefs and ideas, which in turn distorts our perceptions, thinking, feelings and actions. Blind attachment to beliefs or any representation of the world is a breeding ground for subjective reactivity. To quote William Blake,

The man who never alters his opinion is like standing water, and breeds reptiles of the mind.

The subjective reactivity that arises around beliefs is a form of secondary reactivity, or *ditthi papanca* that has the effect of insulating core beliefs so that they solidify into the "reptiles of the mind" that make us intransigent and insensitive. It is a good

practice to investigate our beliefs and focus on the force of attachment that keeps us in bondage to them. Notice if there is genuine freedom and equanimity or a compulsive energy associated with the belief. If there is *tanha* associated with the belief, then we need to focus mindfulness on the feeling energy of the compulsive belief and give it lots of room. There is a fine line between compulsion and passion. The first is based on *avijja* while the second is imbued with genuine presence and engagement with life, which is the expression of *panna*. Beliefs should be brought into the light of mindfulness so that they can change and adapt to the reality and truth of the present under the influence of *panna*, rather than *avijja*. We must be able to let go of beliefs, opinions and attitudes, not because they are wrong, but because they need to change and adapt to truth. We need to make space for the truth, which is always bigger and more complex than our beliefs and other inner representations.

Ultimately, we must understand what constitutes Right Belief (*sammaditthi*) and what constitutes Wrong Belief (*micchaditthi*). From the Buddhist perspective, right beliefs are simply those views that lead to Right Action. Right Action is defined as any response in the present that is guided by wisdom-intelligence, or *panna* and that leads to the resolution of *dukkha*. Whether *dukkha* exists internally in your mind, or externally in your relationships to family, society and the world, Right Action should lead to the state of greatest stability and happiness. Right beliefs are always in harmony with the Four Noble Truths, which means awakening to suffering and awakening to what leads to the resolution of suffering and the promotion of well-being. The basic question to ask yourself is do your beliefs lead to more happiness or more suffering? If they lead to more suffering then they are wrong beliefs, from a Buddhist point of view. The intelligent awareness of this principle should guide us in everything we do and especially in our relationships with mental content, with other people and with the material and natural world.

Taking this argument further, we need to understand that there can be no absolute beliefs, because conditions are always changing and a belief is essentially static and unable to reflect changes. *Sammaditthi* is not a static entity, but something to be discovered and rediscovered from moment to moment as a direct response to the specific conditions of the present. If you try to impose beliefs onto reality, then you will create fragmentation and conflict, because no belief can adequately match the needs of

the present. Therefore, in order to be open and flexible enough to perceive *sammaditthi*, mindfulness becomes extremely important, because mindfulness is the direct opening to the reality of the present without the intervention of the ego and habitual subjective reactivity.

### *Language and labels*

We see a tree and label it “tree” and think we know the object, whereas all we really see is our label, our internal model of “tree,” which is always an abstract representation of the actual. When we become attached to our perceptions and labels we see what we are conditioned to see, rather than what is actually there. The reality of any linguistic label is that it is nothing more than a tool that points to a reality. When there is a lack of awareness, accompanied by blind attachment to our labels, then our preconceptions become a barrier that separates us from the truth. As Merry Browne expressed it,

Preconceived notions are the locks on the door to wisdom.

We try to impose our labels on life in an attempt to control the world by reducing it into definable entities when, in reality, life is a dynamic and constantly changing process that flows like a river. We think we know what a river is, but actually it is impossible to define, except in an abstract and generalized way. One day the river is full and flows rapidly while the next day the flow is just a trickle. We say it is the same river, but what exactly is the same?

We have labels for everything: He is a teacher, an employee and a father. She is a mother, a Christian, a lawyer. All these labels may be true at the superficial and abstract linguistic level of accepted conventions, but unfortunately we tend to go a step further and believe these labels to be the reality they represent. This is the primary reaction of delusion (*moha*), because a person is infinitely more complex than the label “teacher” or “parent” or “Christian” or even “good” and “bad” and in reality, people are a combination of all these things and a whole lot more that we are not aware of at all.

We must be very careful not to fall under the spell of our own preconceptions and prejudices, because to do so knowingly is an act of wanton violence that denies the actual reality and truth of existence. In its most violent manifestation, we can be

brainwashed by our beliefs into killing someone we label as “enemy.” If you let go of the belief and genuinely seek to understand and know the reality of that “enemy” you would find it almost impossible to kill him. Prejudice, hatred and mistrust are all fuelled by attachment to the labels we impose on others. In the same way, we also do great injustice when we impose labels and preconceptions on ourselves.

### *Expectations*

Blind attachment to beliefs inevitably generates expectations and demands. Any statement with “should” or “shouldn’t” in it, is based on an expectation formed through blind attachment to an ideal and because of the force of ignorance, it is very easy to become convinced that our expectations are right. The self-righteousness attitude of the ego drives us to expend significant energy in trying to control the world according to our expectations of what should be and shouldn’t be. Our computer should work and when it doesn’t we react by becoming frustrated. We should be treated with respect and become upset when we are treated unkindly. If our expectations are fulfilled we will have a brief moment of happiness, but more often than not, our expectations are not fulfilled and we suffer. We have very little control over external events and as Mark Twain said,

Climate is what we expect, weather is what we get.

Expectations are like cats, they have a tendency to scratch! We must take great care not to become blindly attached to ideals and expectations, because this will result in a very unhappy existence filled with endless disappointments and frustrations. There is nothing wrong with expectations in themselves, as long as we do not become blindly attached to them. If we can retain freedom and balance in relation to expectations then we will not suffer if they are not fulfilled.

Not only are we faced with the problem of attachment to expectations, but also with attachment to our habitual subjective reactions to expectations when they are not fulfilled. Things are as they are and usually fall short of our expectations, because they are not under our control, but this does not mean that we are condemned to react with disappointment, anger or any other manifestation of suffering. These emotional reactions are nothing more than subjective fabrications that we add on to objective

experience through ignorance and conditioning. Not getting what you expect may produce a painful feeling, but suffering is an entirely subjective creation that we add on as a negative reaction to the pain. This is analogous to burning your hand by grabbing hold of a red-hot coal and then plunging your painful hand into boiling water. Attachment to an expectation produces one level of suffering, but attachment to the subjective reactions of greed, hatred and delusion when expectations are not fulfilled amplifies *dukkha* many fold. The blind attachment (*upadana*) to all these subjective reactions is one major aspect of attachment to self, or *attavadupadana*.

All expectations have a compulsive forcefulness behind them and we must learn to develop a balanced relationship with this energy so that it does not dominate our mind. In the practice of mindfulness, we focus on this impulsive energy by directing attention to the feeling level, rather than the content of the thought. In a relationship based on mindfulness, we do not try to get rid of such compulsive impulses, but focus on maintaining our freedom and spaciousness in relationship to them. In order to transform compulsion you need to establish a relationship that is not itself based on the compulsion to control. This means letting go of thinking and analyzing and opening to the deeper intuitive level of the psyche. Transformation is seldom about what you do, but how you relate and the relationship of pure knowing, or *satisampajanna* will transform compulsion or any other form of emotional complex just by opening up a space that is non-reactive where change can happen.

Expectations are essentially an impulse to control through outward projection, but beneath these impulses there may be feelings of powerlessness, helplessness and fear. To gain freedom from the compulsiveness of expectations we need to explore these more subtle feelings in depth and create the conditions that allow transformation. When change occurs at this subtle level, then the forcefulness of our attachment to expectations, demands and the need to control will also change. Mindfulness is the art of listening to experience at the intuitive and subtle level as well as the process of creating a therapeutic space in which these often unheard and unseen forces can emerge into consciousness. It is when these subtle aspects of *dukkha* emerge into the light of consciousness that they can undergo self-transformation and resolution.

## *Causal beliefs*

One of the characteristics of the mind is that it seeks causal links between what we feel internally and what happens externally. Just as we can become attached to an ideal or a belief about how things should be, we can also become attached to beliefs about cause and effect. The mind is designed to search for patterns through which it can organize experience and this has been very important for humans as a species. However, as always, this mental faculty requires flexibility and freedom so that it can adapt to changing conditions and this requires mindfulness. If there is an absence of awareness and *avijja* is dominant, then this extraordinary ability to find connections becomes reduced to an unskillful and harmful process of superstitious thinking that leads to unfounded assumptions and generalizations.

One particular manifestation of delusional attachment to causal beliefs occurs when we blindly link subjective emotional reactivity to external objective reality in “because” statements. We blindly accept that we feel happy *because* something went right and upset *because* something went wrong. We feel uplifted *because* a friend was kind to us and we feel angry *because* another person treated us badly. We feel at ease *because* we have money in the bank or we become worried *because* we don’t have enough money to pay the bills. We become anxious *because* we have to take an exam and then we become relaxed *because* the exam has finished. Throughout the day, we continually make these causal connections between external conditions and how we respond and feel internally. However, if you really think about it, there is no law that requires you to react with a particular emotion when certain things happen. These causal connections are learned through conditioning and ignorance and to identify with them as inevitable is a major form of delusion (*moha*). The reality is that there is no *because* except that we make it so. When we can really understand this in depth, then we will have the confidence to see that we can change how we feel and that nothing is fixed.

In the absence of awareness, causal beliefs are like ropes that coil around us ever more tightly and keep us bound to the wheel of *samsara*. However, if we choose to become aware of each reactive impulse and respond to it with mindfulness, then it is possible to develop more functional responses that do not create suffering. This is one of the principle aims of mindfulness practice: to develop the wisdom (*panna*) to dissolve illusory beliefs by making each belief an object of mindfulness

meditation. In particular, we focus mindfulness on the compulsive feeling energy that empowers the belief. Through the practice of mindfulness, we learn to recognize the mental hooks that keep us bound to habitual reactivity. This simple action of recognition, in itself, helps break the habit, simply by the principle of Reciprocal Inhibition, because you cannot be mindful and reactive at the same time. Mindfulness and reactivity are always mutually exclusive and when you are mindful of a reaction, then in that moment the causal link is replaced with freedom and choice to discover a better way of responding.

The more you develop this awareness of *because* statement, the more freedom you will have and the less you will be caught out. You may still be poor, but you do not have to compound this fact with the suffering caused by your conditioned emotional reactivity. Someone may offend you, but if you respond with mindfulness you break the link that compels you to feel hurt. A project may fail, but if there is mindfulness then you are less likely to be sucked into reacting with disappointment. With continued mindfulness, we can cultivate a non-reactive relationship with causal beliefs, a kind of spacious relationship of pure knowing, or *satisampajanna*. This relaxed, yet dynamic relationship provides the therapeutic space in which transformation occurs and that brings a change in perception allows us to break free of attachment to causal beliefs.

## ATTACHMENT TO CONVENTIONS

The third kind of *upadana* is attachment to conventions and is called *silabbatupadana*. Conventions are learned from the influence of family, friends, community, religious groups, politicians and others. We learn certain ways of doing things and conventional ways of behaving through conditioning, rather than through conscious choice. There is nothing inherently wrong with conventions or traditions, except that we need to become aware of them and not let them dominate our actions. We must maintain balance and freedom to respond wisely and in a way that is guided by *Dhamma* and the path that leads to the resolution of suffering. All too often we see examples of the negative effects of blind conformity to tradition and the dictates of authority that leads to division and conflict and a dulling of intuitive intelligence. It is very easy to become blindly attached to the



teachings offered by charismatic leaders, including spiritual teachers, because they seem to have the authority that we feel lacking in ourselves. This tendency to follow authority is a particular problem for the spiritual seeker, because a spiritual path requires letting go of the past and the familiar so that you can discover a totally new way of being. Simply attaching to another set of conventions and practices is not liberation, but simply a movement within the domain of conventions.

In particular, we must avoid becoming dependent on others for providing the answers to our problems, because it is only when we can face *dukkha* directly that we can discover the inner path that leads to transformation and freedom. The Buddha was very insistent on encouraging us to take responsibility for our own spiritual journey as the only reliable path for developing the transforming wisdom-intelligence of *panna*, as in the following passage from the *Kalama Sutta*:

Do not go by revelation or tradition,  
do not go by rumor, or the sacred scriptures,  
do not go by hearsay or mere logic,  
do not go by bias towards a notion or by another  
person's seeming ability and  
do not go by the idea "He is our Teacher."  
But when you know that a thing is good, that it is not  
blameable, that it is praised by the wise and when  
practiced and observed that it leads to happiness, then  
follow that thing.

We must not blindly follow tradition and all the rituals, conventions and practices of religions, whether taught by a teacher or learned from books. It is so easy to be seduced by the majesty of historical traditions, ancient rituals and the inspired historical creations of art and architecture. There is the mistaken assumption that if a tradition or practice has been around for thousands of years then it must be superior; but ignorance and *avijja* has been around much longer than that. Krishnamurti spoke often of the dangers of blind conformity and urged us to trust nothing except the alive awareness of the present as in the following passage:

To carry the past over to the present, to translate the  
movement of the present in terms of the past destroys

the living beauty of the present. There is nothing sacred in tradition, however ancient or modern.

The Buddha taught the Middle Way (*majjhima patipada*), which means the perfection of non-attachment as well as non-aversion. If you reject tradition, then you are simply forming an attachment to the belief that religion and traditions are wrong. The Middle Way has a positive message, which is that we can passionately engage with all traditions, practices, rituals and teachings, but with the essential factor of conscious choice and freedom from delusion and compulsive attachment that comes with mindfulness. As the Buddha advises, the guiding principle in choosing which conventions to follow is to consider whether these practices are “not blameable,” meaning that they do not cause suffering, but that they lead to the resolution of suffering and the promotion of happiness and well-being. This means that we must be continually vigilant while engaged in a practice to ensure that each and every action follows this rule. This of course, requires the cultivation of mindfulness and an openness of mind that seeks to learn from moment to moment. To engage in a truly spiritual path requires that you open to the reality of your own experience and discover the truth for yourself, not as an abstract concept, but in the here and now. Zen master Suzuki Roshi called this the attitude of “beginner’s mind,” the mind that is forever open to discover the truth of each moment of life, as it unfolds.

The term *sila* in *silabbataupadana* means virtue and morality and another important dimension of *silabbataupadana* is the problem that results from blind attachment to ethical codes, rules and practices that are the hallmark of most religions, including Buddhism. The Buddha urged us not to blindly follow commandments, but to use them as skillful signposts to help us awaken to *Dhamma*. True *sila* can arise only if we remain open to discover what is the appropriate moral action in each present moment, because each new moment is unique and what is required in response will also be unique. If there is a difficult moral decision to be made, then we should respond to this emotional conflict with mindfulness, rather than following the rules set for us by some external authority. Through mindfulness, intuitive intelligence (*satipanna*) allows us to see the totality of the situation and to maintain a balanced perspective, which is essential for right action. Without mindfulness, ignorance and reactivity take over and when this is coupled with strongly held

beliefs and practices, the resulting actions are likely to cause more suffering. Moral rules are useful guides, but there can never be one rule to fit all occasions. Such rules of conduct should be taken as aspirations designed to inspire and guide us towards wholesome action (*kusalakamma*). But, ultimately the actual form that action takes has to be discovered in each new moment of life. This requires a great sensitivity and openness of mind and heart that comes through mindfulness and not through blindly obeying rules, teachings and ideals. It is only when the mind is free of the past, free of conditioning and the reactive patterns of the ego, that we can discover true morality and this is the purpose of the path of liberation through mindfulness. In the end, true morality is the *kusalakamma* that leads to the greatest resolution of *dukkha* and the greatest happiness and well-being for self and others. How can you know what that action will be unless you are completely open to experience the truth of the present moment?

## ATTACHMENT TO SELF

The fourth variety of *upadana* is *attavadupadana*, the attachment to ego-identity (*atta*) or simply attaching to “me and mine,” called *atta* and *attaniya* in Pali. Just as it is possible to become blindly attached to wanting sensory experiences that we find pleasurable or wanting to get rid of sensory experiences that we don’t like, or to become attached to beliefs, or to blindly follow conventions and established practices, we also have an even stronger tendency to become attached to the habitual subjective reactions of the ego. Through ignorance, we blindly follow the unwholesome reactions of greed, hatred and delusion that arise from blind conditioning. This unquestioned attachment to our subjective reactions is best described by the term *identification*. Identification is a particular form of attachment in which we blindly attach to the conditioned reactions themselves. When there is blind attachment to subjective reactions, “me and mine,” or ego arises. As Bikkhu Buddhadasa said,

In terms of the Four Noble Truths, suffering results from the feeling of me-and-mine; the cause of suffering is me-and-mine; the cessation of suffering, nibbana, is the cessation of me-and-mine; the Noble

Eightfold Path is the method or means of eliminating me-and-mine.

Through the process of *attavadupadana* we identify with all the subjective reactions of the self. This collection of habitual patterns of reactivity to which we have become attached is called *sakkayaditthi*. Where ignorance and unawareness exists, *upadana* thrives and we become bound to the patterns of reactivity that arise and with repetition, reactive conditioning takes hold and creates the strong underlying drives that shape our personality.

Identification with self does not mean that we think about experiences as “my thought” or “my feeling,” which is an abstract sense of self, but that we unwittingly identify with our subjective reactions of “me and mine.” *Atta* and *attaniya* arise through blind identification with the reactions that arise due to conditioning. We fall under their spell and essentially *become* the reactions of the mind. *Atta* is not an abstract concept of self or what we think about our self, but what actually happens in each present moment when we react subjectively. When we say or think, “I am irritated, I am agitated, I am depressed, I am worried, I am angry, I am fearful,” we are reacting in a way that creates *atta*. We inadvertently take the feeling of irritation or agitation or anxiety to be real and we give it a solidity and permanence through our blind identification. In other words, identification with subjective reactions causes us to *become* the object of the reaction and this is *atta*. The teachings on *anatta* tell us that there is no self that is independent of habitual reactions. When you react, *atta* arises; when you don’t react, the self ceases to be.

*Upadana* leads to *bhava*, which means that attachment leads to becoming the thing to which you are attached. When we react with anger we *become* the anger. When we react with worry we *become* the worry. When we react with irritation we *become* the irritation and so on. If something doesn’t go to plan we will most likely react with disappointment and we tend to unconsciously identify with this emotional reaction and become the disappointment. In that moment when we come under the spell of the reaction of disappointment it will start to proliferate into all kinds of secondary reactions. Perhaps the disappointment gives rise to anger or fear reactions and through unconscious identification we are dragged along by the thoughts and emotions and become the anger or fear. When we lose objectivity through identification with the thoughts, beliefs and emotions that arise, we lose control and become the story dictated by our

conditioning. This is the world of *attavadupadana* and subjective reactivity that sustains *samsara* and the round of becoming from moment to moment, day to day and beyond.

## *Anatta*

In reality the self is not a definable entity, but a process in continuous flux, changing from moment to moment according to changing conditions. There is no fixed entity that we can call a self or an ego that is independent from conditioned reactivity. In fact, without reactivity and the underlying ignorance that sustains habitual reactivity *atta* cannot exist. The positive news is that once the attachment to reactivity ceases, the self also ceases. Then, the interesting question that we can ask is what is left behind when the mind is not reacting and the self comes to an end?

The Path of Mindfulness is essentially the path of rediscovering our true identity as a dynamic and intelligent process of being, rather than the mechanical and rigid identity of the self or ego. In its practical application, living in harmony with *anatta* means letting go of attachments and other forms of identification and living as a dynamic changing process that is continuously engaged with existence as it unfolds. There is a very important saying in Buddhism,

Sabbe dhamma nalam abhinivesaya.  
No *dhamma* whatsoever should be  
grasped at or clung to.

This one simple statement, if fully understood, and fully implemented in our daily lives and in our relationships will lead to complete awakening and complete freedom from suffering.

Mind objects, such as thoughts, perceptions and emotions are called *dhammas*, with a small “*d*” to distinguish them from *Dhamma*, or the teachings about the truth of the nature of *dhammas*. When there is no more blind attachment to the world of conditioned phenomena, then there is harmonization with *anatta* and the mind is free. Understanding the dangers of blind attachment and blind identification and applying these insights to life can be very beneficial, but the full realization of *anatta* means *living anatta* in each moment of our lives. This goes far beyond a belief system about non-self or a belief in the importance of non-attachment. You cannot create the state of

*anatta* through the force of belief, because that is the work of the conditioned ego, but you can experience *anatta* naturally, whenever we establish mindfulness. Essentially, there is nothing to do other than be mindful in the present moment and awaken to whatever arises. This is the response of pure knowing, the awakening to the here and now, which is the essence of the practice of mindfulness. In the very moment when *sati* arises, *anatta* also arises and *atta* ceases to be.

The teachings of the Buddha can be made incredibly complex, filling volumes with theory and philosophical analysis, but the heartwood of the teaching is actually incredibly simple: establish mindfulness (*sati*) in the present moment and trust in the intuitive intelligence (*satipanna*) of that moment. In each moment of pure knowing, or *satisampajanna*, there is just the process of *knowing* and in that moment there is complete liberation from the confines of the conditioned personality. This is the taste of freedom that we wish to cultivate and as we gain more experience of *anatta* through mindfulness, we will naturally gain more freedom. When *anatta* is present in every moment of our lives then the self is extinguished and we will have become fully liberated, a state referred to in Pali as *nibbana* (Skt. *nirvana*).

The ego continually reacts to the world, generating thoughts and emotions like streams of bubbles rising from the bottom of a pond. One moment we are happy and the next moment we become sad. All these mental phenomena, or *dhammas*, will naturally fade away if allowed to do so, because it is their nature to arise and die. It is only because of identification and attachment that we inadvertently keep these mind moments alive and interfere with the natural cycle of arising and passing away. For example, if you hold a grudge towards someone who hurt you and blindly identify with your subjective emotional reaction of feeling hurt, then in that very moment the ego comes into existence. This identification fuels emotional reactivity by proliferating thinking and feelings of indignation at how badly you were treated and perhaps even lead to thoughts of revenge. This is the ego in motion, compounding the problem through secondary reactivity. If on the other hand, you can respond to the feeling of hurt without attachment, but with mindfulness, then you stop feeding the reactive habit. The ego dies right there and then, in that very moment of non-identification and it is in each moment of non-reactivity that true freedom comes about. This is fundamentally different to trying to destroy the ego through effort and belief, which is really simply one part of the ego fighting

another part of itself. The relationship of mindfulness is what leads to transformation and freedom from reactivity, not our efforts to change anything. The only effort required is to cultivate and sustain mindfulness and allow change to happen naturally and spontaneously under the direction of your intuitive intelligence, or *satipanna*.

The less identified you are, the less you will suffer. Even intense emotional states like depression and anger depend on identification to keep them alive. If you stop blindly identifying with the feelings and thoughts that arise through reactive conditioning, then even the most complex emotional states will subside in time. This does not necessarily mean that they will be gone forever, but simply that you no longer feed them and compound the problem. Through the response of mindfulness, you create the right conditions in which emotional complexes will eventually change and resolve themselves. Reactivity can never do this, because reactivity inhibits change by confining consciousness to the reactions of the past. It is only when you apply mindfulness through *vipassana* meditation and allow *satipanna* to bring about transformation at a deeper level that deep-seated emotional reactions can resolve themselves.

Through the practice of mindfulness, we begin to transcend the whole reactive process and discover our true identity as the *knower* of experience, or more precisely, as the *knowing* of experience, as there is no “self” who knows. This very direct and pure knowing is the essence of Buddha mind, which is non-reactive, non-fabricated and unconditioned awareness. To emphasise the point, the path of *anatta* means not identifying with any contents of the mind. Be fully engaged with perceptions, thoughts and feelings, but do not identify with them. This is the perfection of objective equanimity (*upekkha*), which is regarded as one of the most noble and sublime qualities that can be cultivated.

If your mind says “I am worried, because I don’t have enough money to pay the rent,” don’t allow yourself to be sucked into worrying, but attend to the feeling level of worry with mindfulness. Worrying never changes anything, but simply adds suffering to an already difficult situation. We need something different, a response that allows a space to open up around the emotion and where we can relate to the emotion as an object. It is in the silent mind that *satipanna* arises and operates fully to transform internal conflict and dissonance. If the thought arises “I am unhappy,” don’t fall for it, just respond with mindfulness to

the underlying feeling and relate to it as an object for meditation. Thinking and analyzing won't cure the underlying suffering, but being truly present for a feeling in an open and caring way through mindfulness will create the best conditions for transformation. If anger arises, because someone hurt your feelings, don't get seduced into angry thinking. This will simply fuel the anger and strengthen the anger reaction, which will hurt you more. Better to attend to the feeling of anger with patience and mindfulness so that it has the opportunity to resolve itself.

There is nothing that will not benefit from the response of mindfulness as an alternative to blind reactivity and this is what we mean by "*Sabbe dhamma nalam abhinivesaya*." It is through the path of non-attachment and non-reactivity that we realize *anatta* and can begin to engage fully and intelligently with the chaos of our daily lives in a way that leads to the resolution of suffering and the liberation of the mind and spirit from the cause of suffering, which is blind attachment to subjective reactivity.



## 5 DUKKHA

The word *dukkha* is a compound of *du-*, which means “bad, painful, hard to endure” and the suffix *-kha*, which means “space” and so *dukkha* literally means “bad space.” *Dukkha* is a very complex term with multiple meanings depending on the context, which is not unusual for many key terms used in Buddhism. The Buddha describes the First Noble Truth of *dukkha* in terms of the conditions of existence that provide the ground from which suffering can arise,

And this, monks, is the Noble Truth of *dukkha*: birth is *dukkha*, and old age is *dukkha*, and disease is *dukkha*, and dying is *dukkha*, association with what is not dear is *dukkha*, separation from what is dear is *dukkha*, not getting what you want is *dukkha* - in short, the five aggregates of grasping are *dukkha*.

Although usually translated as suffering, *dukkha* refers to something much more specific than the conventional meaning of the word. From the Buddhist perspective, suffering refers to the mental anguish produced by our subjective reactions to objective events, rather than the event itself. The objective component of suffering is best described as “pain,” which comes from the inevitable ups and downs of life. Birth and death, physical pain, sickness or the pain of growing old, are all examples of the inevitable objective physical pains of life. Personal loss, disappointment, failure and abuse by others are examples of objective mental pain. These objective ups and downs of life are classically described as the “eight worldly winds” of changing worldly phenomena (*lokadhamma*). These include the polarities of pleasure and pain, gain and loss, success and failure, praise and criticism. Conditions come and go; sometimes they go our way, often they do not. The intensity of *dukkha* varies between people according to the nature of their learned habitual reactivity. What is very upsetting to one person may not affect another person; what makes one person angry may have no affect on another. Also, the intensity of suffering changes over time as our habits change. Clearly, the conditioned subjective reactivity is the

main component of the mental anguish we call suffering and this is the true meaning of *dukkha* as taught by the Buddha. There is a popular saying that summarizes the difference:

Pain is inevitable; suffering is optional.

Suffering has been described as the process through which we complicate our pain. We prolong the pain or make it more intense through the stories we tell ourselves and through the beliefs that we create. We take the concrete reality of pain and turn it into a monster of abstraction and generalization. A blemish on the skin becomes skin cancer; a failure at work becomes the end of the world. The perpetuation of craving (*tanha papanca*), of beliefs (*ditthi papanca*) and of comparison between self and other (*mana papanca*) creates a complex superstructure of secondary reactivity around pain, and this is the problem of *dukkha*. Pain comes and goes as conditions change, whereas *dukkha* tends to persist even if the external objective pain has gone away, because of these inner demons that we have created through blind subjective reactivity.

The primary subjective emotional reactions that lead to *dukkha* are described as sorrow (*soka*), lamentation (*parideva*), anguish (*domanassa*) and despair (*upayasa*). The Buddha recognized that suffering is generated by our inability to maintain freedom when we relate to the events of birth, aging, sickness, old age and all the disappointments of not getting what we want. We get caught up in our reactions of wanting things to be a certain way (*bhavatanha*), aversion to things we don't like (*vibhavatanha*). We become blindly attached to our inner beliefs about how things should be through the force of ignorance (*avijja*) and attachment (*upadana*). Each of these primary emotional reactions can proliferate into further secondary reactions of greed (*lobha*), aversion (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*).

These negative emotional reactions represent negative feeling energy (*dukkhavedana*) that has become trapped and frozen in place in the subconscious recesses of the mind. If left untended, this repressed negative energy will crystallize into core emotional complexes. Hidden from view, these inner demons generate habitual reactivity that corrupt the actions of body, speech and mind and have a serious long-term impact on the quality of our life and happiness. This is why the Buddha placed such emphasis on *dukkha*, because the only effective way to discover happiness is through the resolution of the core emotional

complexes of *soka*, *parideva*, *domanassa* and *upayasa*. It is by paying close attention, through mindfulness, that we can create the right conditions for the release of the trapped and repressed life energy that lies at the core of all emotional reactions.

## THE VARIETIES OF DUKKHA

When the Buddha described *dukkha* he referred to three principle states of suffering (*dukkhata*) that arise in the mind whenever there is blind attachment to subjective reactivity. These are *dukkha-dukkhata*, the subjective secondary reactivity to physical and mental pain that amplifies suffering; *viparinama-dukkhata*, the subjective reactions of resistance to change and impermanence; *sankhara-dukkhata*, the anguish and stress produced by reactivity to memories, thoughts, beliefs, emotions or any other mental object.

### *Suffering associated with pain*

*Dukkha-dukkhata* is literally the suffering that accompanies pain and refers to the suffering that we create through our subjective reaction to pain. Life produces pain, both physical and mental and experienced by all human beings. Life is just as it is and the phenomena of life are just as they are: neither good nor bad, satisfactory or unsatisfactory. Suffering arises because of our attachment to conditioned subjective mental reactions to pain. There is clearly pain associated with death, illness and loss, as there is with failure or being treated unfairly. However, this pain is not *dukkha* as described by the Buddha. *Dukkha* is produced solely by the mind and comes from what we add on to experience, painful or otherwise, through our blind conditioned reactivity. One person reacts to disappointment with wise acceptance, while another person has a mental break down. Even with physical pain, the degree of suffering experienced is closely related to the emotional reaction of fear and fear is created by the mind and depends on conditioning and previous experience. Fear amplifies pain and generates distress, but fear is a subjective reaction that we unconsciously add on to the actual experience of pain. In the words of Dan Millman, the inspirational writer and athlete,

Pain is a relatively objective, physical phenomenon; suffering is our psychological resistance to what happens. Events may create physical pain, but they do not in themselves create suffering. Resistance creates suffering. Stress happens when your mind resists what is...The only problem in your life is your mind's resistance to life as it unfolds.

When we follow *Dhamma* and The Path of Mindfulness, we choose to investigate how we create suffering by learning to recognize our subjective mental reactions and to focus on these events as the very objects for meditation. After recognition, we learn to respond to our mental reactions by opening our awareness to be present with them, which is the heart of mindfulness practice in daily life and meditation. The general rule is that the more you open to things as they are, the less you will suffer and conversely, the more you react and close up, the more you will suffer. What the Buddha pointed out is that the choice between responsiveness and reactivity is a choice available for all of us to make in each and every moment of life. By opening our awareness and mindfulness to the patterns of our habitual reactivity, we can begin to uncover the attachments and trapped feeling energy that keeps us reacting over and over again. This is the essence of The Path of Mindfulness that leads to transformation and release from the subjective reactivity that creates suffering in our minds and in the world.

### *Suffering associated with change*

The next level of suffering that we produce through subjective reactivity is called *viparinama-dukkhata*. This is the pain and disappointment that we create as a subjective reaction to the most fundamental law of all phenomena: the law of impermanence (*anicca*) and change. *Dukkha* is often translated as the "unsatisfactoriness" of physical and psychological phenomena, simply because all *sankharas* are subject to *anicca* and are inherently unstable and unreliable and cannot give lasting happiness. In fact, *dukkha* can equally be defined as the suffering that arises from the instability and unreliability of the phenomena to which we have become attached. In the words of the Buddha,

Sabbe sankhara anicca.  
All formations are impermanent.

The Buddha's last words are said to have been on this very subject:

Disciples, this I declare to you: All conditioned things are subject to disintegration - strive on untiringly for your liberation.

The Buddha summarized the fundamental problem of *dukkha* as the mental anguish that results from blind, compulsive attachment to any of the five *khandhas* that define our existence. All five *khandhas* of the body (*rupa*), perceptions (*sanna*), feelings (*vedana*), reactive thinking (*sankhara*) and consciousness (*vinnana*) are inherently unstable and subject to change. In each moment of our life, these five *khandhas* come together depending on conditions and exist for a very short instant, before they begin to dissolve. However, it is not the fact that they change that creates *dukkha*, but the resistance to the natural flow of change that is *anicca*. When we become blindly attached or identified with any of the five *khandhas* we immediately create conflict between an unchanging ideal and the undeniable reality of change. For this reason *dukkha* can be translated as the mental anguish that results from reactive aversion to instability and *anicca*. It is amazing how much of the time we live in denial of this most basic fact and how we live with the delusion that things will remain unchanging. However, it is a characteristic of all phenomena that they are unstable and therefore cannot provide a reliable foundation for lasting happiness. It is the inability to live in harmony with this natural flow of life that generates the conflict, stress and the mental anguish of *dukkha*.

In the end, we cannot control life, but we can learn to live skillfully in relation to change and we can control our habitual reactivity to change. In mindfulness practice we deliberately cultivate awareness of the reactions of resistance and aversion to change. We choose to form a relationship with the compulsive feelings of both aversion and the underlying fear around change. Through this practice we come to live in harmony with *anicca* and this is the nature of authentic living in which we embrace life as it is, without fear. Another way of thinking about living in harmony with *anicca* is that we are training ourselves to live in harmony with death. As Carlos Castaneda said,

Death is our eternal companion. It is always to our left, an arm's length behind us. Death is the only wise adviser that a warrior has.

Of course, the death of the body is inevitable and we must come to terms with this fact by choosing to encounter the feeling energy that surrounds the experience of death and dying and the deterioration of health that comes with aging. However, the application of mindfulness goes well beyond the contemplation of the physical death of the body to include a courageous encounter with all changing phenomena. When anything changes, something needs to die, whether that is an old belief, an attitude, an expectation or feeling. We have to let go of the past, which means allowing any mental construct, any *sankhara* to die and make way for something new. Only when we can accept this natural flow of change that is *anicca*, will there be the freedom for new life to arise and only then will we be living in harmony with the reality of existence as a flowing river of change.

### *Suffering associated with mental formations*

The next major source of *dukkha* is inherent in the mental formations and fabrications (*sankhara*) of the mind and is called *sankhara-dukkhata*. The mental aggregate of *sankhara* describes the process of subjective reactivity that produces thoughts, beliefs, emotions and anything synthesized under the influence of *avijja*, or unconscious conditioning. Existence is a process, very much like a river, which is continually changing form from minute to minute. One minute the river appears as a collection of ripples and bubbles and swirling eddies only to change seamlessly into another collection of ripples and bubbles. If we were to take a snapshot of the river, then that particular formation of ripples and bubbles would be a *sankhara*. However, this *sankhara* has no basis in reality, because the river is continually changing. Therefore, any given *sankhara* cannot adequately represent the truth or reality of the river. All *sankharas* are, therefore inherently imperfect and unsatisfactory and are formed at the expense of the truth and require that we ignore the truth. As the Buddha said,

*Avijja paccaya sankhara.*

Ignorance is the necessary condition for the formation of *sankharas*.

The same principle applies to the *cittasankharas* of the mind. They are formed as part of a continuous process of living and do not have any independent existence in reality. This is the teaching of *anatta*: that nothing has a separate existence independent of the dynamic changing process of existence.

If we become attached to mental constructs such as beliefs, expectations, perceptions, memories or emotions then we are attaching to something taken out of context, that is imperfect and unsatisfactory and that is in effect an illusion. Attachment to *cittasankharas* leads to conflict between the static and imperfect *sankara* and the reality of existence as dynamic change and this conflict is experienced as *dukkha*. In the same way that a grain of sand irritates the soft tissues of the eye, the rigid unchanging *sankharas* irritate the changing process that constitutes reality. As the Buddha said,

*Sabbe sankhara dukkha.*

All conditioned formations are subject to suffering.

There is nothing inherently wrong with thoughts and this teaching is not an attack on thinking. However, we must fully accept that no *sankhara* can adequately represent reality: it will always be imperfect, inadequate and unsatisfactory. Therefore, we must not allow ourselves to become *blindly attached* to thoughts or anything that takes form in the mind. It is really quite simple: if there is no blind attachment to mental objects, then there will be no suffering. There may still be pain, but we will not create suffering.

In mindfulness practice we learn to fully engage with reality as it is. With mindfulness we can fully experience *sankharas* as they arise, but without being seduced by them. We receive them, but do not believe them and know them for what they are: imperfect and unsatisfactory illusions. We do not dismiss them or react with aversion to the *sankharas*, but simply stop proliferating the habitual emotional reactions of the ego that creates *dukkha*. To attach to any *sankhara* is to play Russian roulette with our happiness and the odds are not in our favor. The challenge is to meet all such *sankharas* with mindfulness and equanimity (*upekkha*), which is the response of freedom, where we can choose how to act, based on intelligence rather than compulsion.

## AWAKENING TO DUKKHA

In the beautiful and succinct words of the Thai meditation master, Ajahn Chah,

There are two kinds of suffering: the suffering that leads to more suffering and the suffering that leads to the end of suffering. If you are not willing to face the second kind of suffering, you will surely continue to experience the first.

The message is clear: mindfulness practice and mindfulness meditation should be directed towards the resolution of suffering as you encounter it in your daily life. This is important to understand when you approach your practice of *vipassana* meditation, because meditation is not meant to be an escape from the suffering in your life, but rather a choice to directly engage with *dukkha* with mindfulness so that you create the best conditions for its resolution.

To take this a step further, we should take up the challenge to actively seek out *dukkha* wherever it exists and surround it with the healing energy of mindfulness. It is better to take the initiative, rather than wait for *dukkha* to attack you when you are least prepared.

Begin by searching through every aspect of your mind and seek out inner conflict. Examine your painful memories and regrets, the failures and disappointments from your past and examine how they affect you in the present. Look at your fears and worries about the future. These are all examples of *dukkha* that result from some form of deep-seated attachment that have become hidden from you by *avijja* and secondary reactivity. If they remain hidden, they will continue to fester and create suffering. The Path of Mindfulness, or *satipatthana* asks you to seek out each and every dissonance and relate to it with mindfulness.

Examine your relationships with your partner, family, friends and colleagues. Look for *dukkha* there in the form of conflicts, hurt feelings and bruised pride. Relationships are a great place for practice and will provide countless challenges. There is no need to dwell in thinking or analysis, as that will be far too limited in its effects. Begin by surrounding the pain with



mindfulness and allow actions to arise from that still and compassionate presence.

Look at how you relate to the world, to your possessions and expressions of wealth. Can you fully appreciate what you have or do you become embroiled in wanting something different? Can you fully enjoy the richness of your present experience or do you live in perpetual disappointment? Do you have anger towards your material possessions when they fail to perform to your expectations? Do not blindly accept the habitual reactivity that generates *dukkha*, but respond to this reactivity with mindfulness.

The Path of Mindfulness and *vipassana* meditation is fundamentally one of learning a totally new way of relating to *dukkha*. In the unaware and unawakened mind, we blindly react to *dukkha* with wanting (*lobha*), with aversion (*dosa*) and with delusion (*moha*). This is the first kind of suffering described by Ajahn Chah that simply perpetuates suffering and prevents its resolution. The alternative approach is to learn to respond to our suffering with mindfulness, which is non-reactive and provides the right conditions for beneficial change. This is not an easy path and may involve more suffering before suffering ends, but every step on The Path of Mindfulness leads to the resolution of suffering in some measure, whereas the path of reactivity and ignorance leads only to more suffering.

The choice you face in each and every moment whenever you encounter *dukkha* is between the action of Reactivity or the action of Responsiveness to *dukkha*. Reactivity is characterised by ignorance (*avijja*) and attachment (*upadana*), while Responsiveness is characterised by mindfulness (*sati*) and wisdom (*panna*). Mindfulness (*sati*) leads to a higher quality relationship with *dukkha* that is spacious, intuitive, soft and pliable and open to see and experience the subtle details of each manifestation of *dukkha*. This opens up a therapeutic space that both stops further reactivity and allows *dukkha* to transform itself. Mindfulness allows a creative and intuitive interreaction between the whole psyche and the experience of *dukkha*, which is quite different than relying on the ego to try and fix things through thinking. Instead, by forming a relationship based on mindfulness, we trust in the power of our intuitive intelligence (*satipanna*) to guide us towards the transformation and resolution of *dukkha*.

The Buddha realized that each manifestation of *dukkha* always contains within it the path to its own resolution and eventual cessation. In effect, the arising of *dukkha* and the

cessation of *dukkha* are inseparable; they are simply different sides of the same coin. The whole purpose of mindfulness practice and the form of mindfulness meditation called *vipassana* is to uncover this natural path and this is why we focus our attention on *dukkha* as our primary object for meditation. If you engage mindfully with *dukkha*, then your innate intuitive wisdom-intelligence (*satipanna*) will guide you towards the resolution of the core emotional complexes that cause us to react over and over again. In the spiritual freedom of a relationship based on mindfulness and where *satipanna* operates freely, *dukkha* in all its forms will melt like snowflakes in the sunshine. Mindfulness is the warmth and light of sunshine.

*Dukkha* is not the enemy; reactivity is not the enemy. The enemy is *avijja*, because ignorance perpetuates reactivity and keeps us blind to the reality of what we are doing. This same blindness also prevents the natural process of resolution of *dukkha* by preventing the action of *satipanna*. The Path of Mindfulness is a steady journey of uncovering the dark places where *avijja* thrives and illuminating them with mindfulness so that the innate wisdom-intelligence of *satipanna* can arise and bring about healing and the resolution of *dukkha*.

## 6 MINDFULNESS

Subjective reactivity is the fundamental driving force that leads to suffering and at the heart of every reaction is some form of blind attachment (*upadana*) that is fuelled by the compulsive force of grasping (*tanha*). But, there is an even more fundamental force that supports reactivity, attachment and compulsion and that is ignorance (*avijja*), the absence of awareness that allows reactivity to dominate the mind and to take away our freedom. Besides the basic absence of awareness, there is another dimension to *avijja*, which is the blind and unquestioned acceptance of reactivity whenever it occurs. This is the form of ignorance called delusion, or *moha* that seduces us to become whatever arises in the mind. An anger reaction arises and we become the anger. Happiness arises and we become happy. Sadness arises and we become sad. Fear arises and we become afraid. *Avijja* prevents us from seeing reactions as they arise, which causes us to become attached to them, but *moha* makes us believe them once they have arisen. Both *avijja* and *moha* lead to the *identification* with the *sankharas* produced by subjective reactivity. It is this identification and attachment that imprisons the individual and condemns him to act in unskilful and unwholesome ways.

The Buddha investigated the fundamental problem of ignorance, delusion and attachment and understood how individual suffering spreads outwards like a virus, causing suffering and violence in the family, the community and beyond. He saw that the only way to stop the spread of this disease is for the individual to awaken to his habitual reactivity. As a person awakens and becomes fully conscious of each reaction as it arises then in that moment of awareness he has choice and he is freed from the compulsive force of the reaction. This small opening allows wisdom and intelligence to enter leading to the purification of action. The primary tool for creating this opening and illuminating ignorance is mindfulness, or *sati* in Pali. The path for cultivating mindfulness is called *satipatthana*, The Path of Mindfulness.

The Buddha also saw the great potential of the individual for creating happiness and well-being through compassionate and

intelligent action and that these positive forces lie dormant in all of us, waiting to spring forth quite naturally when the mind and heart are freed from reactivity and ignorance. Therefore, the Path of Mindfulness is a path that develops freedom from ignorance and reactivity, while simultaneously cultivating the right conditions that allows the wholesome and good qualities of the individual to develop and flourish. Mindfulness provides the essential ground from which the noble qualities of wisdom-intelligence (*panna*), love (*metta*) and virtue (*sila*) can develop and transform our lives.

## SATI

In Pali, the word for mindfulness is *sati*, a word derived from the Sanskrit *smṛti*, which means to recall, or to keep in mind. This gives us an insight into the fundamental meaning of *sati*, which is to remember what you are doing, while you are doing it. Mindfulness means being fully present and fully engaged with your experience in the present. The mindful mind is alert and awake to the present, which is the opposite of reactivity and *avijja*. It is the process of staying awake and remembering to return your attention to the present. *Sati* is a form of vigilance that keeps us firmly rooted in the present so that we can fully know whatever we choose to focus on.

The two major hindrances to meditation are *distraction* and *reactivity*. The mind naturally reacts and naturally becomes distracted and it is *sati* that serves the function of bringing our attention back to the original object over and over again. Without mindfulness, we readily become lost in daydreaming, inattention and patterns of habitual reactivity, or *samsara*. *Sati* is the antidote to this habitual sleepwalking or living death that destroys our aliveness, vitality and authenticity. For this reason *satipatthana*, the cultivation of mindfulness is referred to as the path to the deathless (*amatapada*).

### *Presence and Engagement*

The essential practice of mindfulness is a path of developing *presence* and *engagement*. As the Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh said,

The most precious gift we can offer others is our presence. When mindfulness embraces those we love, they will bloom like flowers.

*Presence* means that there is no self, no ego, no interpreter, no analyzer and no thinker reacting to the object of awareness. When you think about what you perceive you are no longer perceiving, but reacting and what you experience is not the original object, but your thoughts *about* the original object. This is not being fully present for the original object. Experience shows the immense value of being fully present with a friend or partner when they want to talk about something that is troubling them. More often than not what they need is for us to listen with complete attention and be there for them. There is tremendous power in the art of being a good listener. This is the fertile ground from which insights and skillful actions will arise, but we must start by listening.

When our relationship with whatever we are experiencing is grounded in this open presence then whatever eventually emerges as thoughts and actions will be very much more in tune with the needs of the present. *Sati* has this quality of genuine and undistracted listening, like a mother waiting for her newborn to take its very first breath. The quality of presence is totally focused, yet soft and perfused with positivity and happiness. There is no thinking about the experience, just the experiencing itself in its purest form. *Sati* is often described as the “purification of awareness” in the sense that it strips away all extraneous reactivity and allows us to be fully aware of our experience. The mind readily wanders off into reacting either in the form of thinking about what is being experienced or simply becoming distracted. When you begin meditating you will soon see how difficult it is to stay focused and how easily our attention becomes consumed in thinking, planning and analyzing. The most basic function of *sati* is simply to bring the attention back from these distractions to the original focus of meditation and to do this over and over again.

The factor of *engagement* is a very important part of mindfulness. Mindfulness is more than just the passive recognition of sense objects, but includes an active element of investigation. This is called *dhammavicaya*, the investigation of mental phenomena, or *dhammas*. Mindfulness brings us into direct contact with sense objects, whether physical sensations or mental thoughts, feelings and perceptions, but then we must

respond with the factor of *dhammavicaya*. This is why investigation is the second of the Seven Factors of Awakening described by the Buddha and follows mindfulness, which is the first factor. The Path of Mindfulness and the journey towards the resolution of *dukkha* and freedom flows from this foundation of *sati* and *dhammavicaya*. The Path of Mindfulness is above all else, a path of discovery in which we move from the superficial to the depth; from the gross to the subtle; from illusion to truth. The journey towards truth has no end and requires that we cultivate an extraordinary openness of mind that relies on nothing other than the direct experiential knowing of the present moment. As expressed by Rene Daumal in his book, *Mount Analogue*,

In the whole show there's nothing but mystery and error. Where one ends the other begins.

Life is a mystery and cannot be reduced to the level of beliefs and theories or any representation through thought. The “mystery” refers to the total and absolute reality that we call Truth (*sacca*). The ego, in its attempt to control life, creates error and unskillful actions, because it is limited by conditioning. Any creation of the thinking mind (*sankhara*) is worldly, conventional truth (*sammutti sacca*) and limited by the distorted perceptions of the observer and his past. Knowledge about reality can never substitute for the actual or ultimate truth (*paramattha sacca*) and can never be more than a superficial snapshot of that ultimate truth. Such ultimate truth is not an abstract theory or ideology, but simply the direct experience of existence as it is in every detail.

Living with life as a mystery means opening to the whole drama of life with the freedom of mind that can fully engage with each moment, without reacting out of habitual conditioning. Full engagement leads to authentic living, in which we are open to receive life as it is, rather than imposing our superficial beliefs onto reality. In order to engage fully with life, the mind must first be empty to receive truth. Zen master Suzuki Roshi described this quality of openness as “Beginner’s Mind,” also called “Not sure Mind” by the Thai Buddhist meditation master, Ajahn Chah. Therefore, our spiritual path must involve cultivating a way of engaging with phenomena that is non-reactive and not conditioned by the past. This full presence and engagement is the fundamental nature of mindfulness: the process of bringing us

back into the direct knowing of our experience, without the distortions of subjective and habitual mental reactivity.

### *The innate wakefulness of Sati*

*Sati*, the skill of being fully present and engaged is a natural quality that we all have and that we seek to develop and perfect on The Path of Mindfulness. For example, the hunter needs to develop not just concentration and undistractedness (*samadhi*), but also the openness of awareness that allows him to see the detailed structure of his environment. The successful hunter pays great attention to every detail of the landscape, noticing a broken twig here, a movement there, or a sudden change in sound. His mind is completely open to everything in his field of awareness and also exquisitely interested in the smallest details. *Sati* has this quality of actively seeking out every detail of experience and to look below the surface appearance of things. It is not just a passive process of observation, but of welcoming the least important detail as if it was the only thing that mattered. This is how we should approach our mind when we practice mindfulness meditation.

Mindfulness represents a completely unique response to the objects of perception, whatever their origin. To quote John C. Lilly,

The miracle is that the universe created a part of itself to study the rest of it, and that this part in studying itself finds the rest of the universe in its own natural inner realities.

Experience is the combination of three interacting factors: the *knower*, the *known* and the *knowing*. The *knower* is the subjective observer that reacts, depending on past conditioning, to what is perceived. The *known* is the objective reality being perceived. The *knowing* is neither the subjective reality nor the objective reality, but the pure awareness of both the object *and* the subjective reaction to that object. This pure knowing, called *satisampajanna* is the perfection of objectivity and equanimity (*upekkha*) and the complete absence of subjective reactivity. It is the experience of sensory phenomena without the intervention of an “I” thinking about what is being experienced and in each moment of mindfulness the subject-object duality created by the reactive ego collapses. *Sati* is the conscious action that brings us

back into this relationship of pure knowing, of *satisampajanna*. This relationship is the root of freedom, both at the psychological and spiritual level of being. Whatever arises, pleasant, unpleasant or neutral, the response is the same, which is to fully know what is arising and to be completely present for the experience of both the object and our reactions to the object.

In practice, *sati* is the faculty of recognizing when you are *not* mindful and in that very moment of recognition, the state of mindfulness automatically returns. The exact nature of *sati* may be difficult to comprehend, but this is not important if you look at mindfulness as primarily the effort to recognize when the mind is reactive, to see when the mind is contracted and agitated. In that very moment of recognition, a space opens up and in that space *sati* arises and the possibility for clear seeing and transformational insight begins. Mindfulness is not a state that you create, but a state of conscious awareness that arises spontaneously in the very moment when you become aware of non-mindfulness. Therefore, it is best to think of mindfulness as simply the awareness of non-mindfulness, or as Krishnamurti described it,

Attention is the awareness of inattention.

This switch from reactivity to non-reactivity is like switching on the light in a dark room. The effect is instantaneous and all is illuminated, without any effort to *become* enlightened or to gain some great spiritual insight about the nature of experience and the nature of *dukkha*. The awakening happens spontaneously as a consequence of switching on the light and not because of what you do. This is the nature of experiential awakening and it is in that microsecond of awakening that Buddha mind, or *bodhicitta* arises. It happens in each moment when you recognize inattention and respond to that inattention with mindfulness. The simple action of switching on the light is amazingly powerful, because it allows you to interact with everything in the room: to see danger, to see opportunity, to cook your dinner, in fact everything required for living. Mindfulness, *sati* is simply remembering to switch on the light.

However, the switch works in both directions and we can just as easily become non-mindful and return to darkness, ignorance and reactivity. Therefore, to cultivate *sati* requires sustained effort to keep switching the light back on so that we remain awake. The skill of mindfulness is to recognize as quickly



as possible when we have slipped back into reactivity. For this reason, the practice of *sati* also involves the cultivation of another factor called *samadhi*, which means concentration and focused presence of mind so that we can develop continuity of mindfulness. Throughout the Buddhist texts, you will find *sati* and *samadhi* mentioned together: the two inseparable twins of the Buddhist path of mental development. In fact the spiritual path for the purification of the mind and release from habitual reactivity involves five spiritual factors. These are faith and confidence (*saddha*), energy (*viriya*), *sati*, *samadhi* and wisdom-intelligence (*panna*). All five factors develop during the practice of mindfulness and mindfulness meditation (*vipassana*). Given the direct connection between *sati* and the liberation of mind and spirit, it is not surprising that the cultivation of *sati* lies at the very heart of Buddhist practice and meditation and is the workhorse for psychological and spiritual transformation.

## THE RELATIONSHIP OF PURE KNOWING

Above all, mindfulness is the Art of Relationship. Mindfulness is the quality of conscious relationship with anything in the world of sensory experience, whether experienced externally through the physical senses or internally as thoughts and feelings perceived through the mental sense door. *Sati* allows the experience of the reality of things without any perceptual filtering and without adding anything to the experience in the form of thinking, judging, analyzing or any other form of mental reaction. The essence of mindfulness is awakening to experience, without the reactions of the conditioned mind and without becoming infatuated with liking or disliking. Mindfulness is experiencing sensory phenomena just as they are, with complete objectivity. When we see things objectively, instead of reacting to them out of habit, we are opening to the truth of phenomena in all their detail. You don't need to go searching for the truth, you simply need to open your eyes and see the truth right in front of you.

This pure objective knowing, without the reactions of the observer, is called *satisampajanna*, literally comprehensive pure knowing through mindfulness. The quality of *pure knowing* is described, very succinctly, in the *Samutta Nikaya Sutta*:

In what is seen, there should be just the seen;

In what is heard, there should be just the heard;  
In what is sensed, there should be just the sensed;  
In what is thought, there should be just the thought.

Can you look at a beautiful object, without becoming infatuated and overwhelmed with desire? Can you touch excrement, without feeling revulsion? Can you look at your child or parent or employee and not label them according to your perceptions and prejudices? Can you listen to an angry or irritating person, without reacting with aversion? Can you listen to praise, without becoming conceited? Can you listen to a teacher, without blindly attaching to his views? Can you experience the disagreeable aspects of yourself, without becoming angry or disgusted? Can you see your pain and not react?

### *The knower, the known and the knowing*

Mindfulness produces a fundamental shift in the psyche from the process of reactivity to the process of direct experiencing. In the words of Dhiravamsa, a much respected *vipassana* teacher,

You are the observing and you observe the reactions  
of the observer.

In each moment of mindfulness the mind temporarily ceases to react and there is simply the pure and direct knowing of whatever you are experiencing. The *known* is as it is, the objective and independent reality of what is being observed whereas the *knower* describes the experiences created through *reacting* to what is observed. When there is no reactivity, the *knower* simply ceases to be and you become the *knowing* itself. You become *the observing*, rather than the *observer*; the *knowing* rather than the *knower*. This pure knowing consciousness is called *satisampajanna*, in which there is no division between the observer and the object observed, because there is no person reacting to the object with likes and dislikes or other distortions of perception. During mindfulness practice, we cultivate this natural relationship with phenomena by bringing the attention back, over and over again, from being the *knower* to being the *knowing*. This applies equally to our relationship to the contents of our mind or to our experience of the external world. With practice, even the “reactions of the observer” can be seen as mental objects to be seen with mindfulness and *satisampajanna*.

As we cultivate mindfulness, we learn to relate to both the *known* and the reactions of the *knower* and in so doing, we become free from both. This is the essence of the path to liberation described by the Buddha.

## THE COMPASSIONATE FACE OF MINDFULNESS

On the Statue of Liberty is engraved the sonnet by Emma Lazarus, which includes the lines,

Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

You cannot be mindful without also developing compassion, because mindfulness is by definition, a non-judgmental relationship to *all* experience and this includes suffering as well as happiness. The response of *sati* is an invitation to all, beginning with opening the door of awareness to the inner world of thoughts, feelings and reactions followed by reaching outwards to every aspect of your world. With mindfulness you open to the truth of *dukkha* and welcome in “Your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free.” All await illumination by the lamp of mindfulness and when we “lift my lamp beside the golden door,” we embrace all suffering, internal or external with the compassionate embrace of mindfulness. The golden door is the gate to the deathless (*amatapada*), the gate to liberation that is to be found through the all-pervading response of mindfulness. The Buddha described four beneficial qualities of mind, known as the four sublime abodes (*brahmaviharas*) that develop quite naturally when we cultivate mindfulness and wisdom, instead of reactivity and ignorance. These qualities of mindfulness are friendliness (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), appreciative joy (*mudita*) and equanimity (*upekkha*). When there is true mindfulness (*sammasati*) then these qualities naturally express themselves in our relationship to our internal experiences as well as to the external experience of the world and other beings.

The first of these benevolent qualities is called *metta* and is most often translated as “loving-kindness.” This is the quality of

relationship based on friendliness and good will combined with complete openness and receptivity. All is made welcome, pleasant or unpleasant, large or small, beautiful or ugly in the same way that you would welcome a friend into your home. It is the attitude of reaching out and embracing, of holding and caressing experience as a mother holds her baby. This is not naïve openness, but openness that comes from wisdom and understanding completely that nothing can hurt you more than your own reactivity and ignorance. With *metta* we open our mind and heart to receive our pain and suffering and we open to our success and happiness. We open to the pain and suffering of others and we open to the success and happiness of others. We open our eyes, our mind, our spirit and our whole Being to the experience of everything in life, without discrimination or prejudice.

The sublime abodes of *karuna* and *mudita* are manifestations of *metta* as it flows naturally to embrace suffering or happiness, respectively. Compassion (*karuna*) is opening the heart and mind to receive suffering wherever suffering exists, in self, in others or in the world itself. This compassion is always coupled with wisdom (*panna*), which means that *karuna* naturally leads to actions that reduce suffering and the cause of suffering in the here and now. *Mudita* means opening to non-suffering, or happiness (*sukha*) in self and others. *Mudita* is essential, because in order to effect a movement from suffering to non-suffering, you must develop a clear understanding at the experiential level of non-suffering, just as you must develop an understanding of *dukkha*. Suffering and non-suffering are both part of the reality of existence that must be fully embraced if we are to become fully authentic human beings. When the mind truly opens to experience both *dukkha* and *sukha* completely without discrimination, then the intuitive and innate wisdom-intelligence of *satipanna* will naturally guide the inner and outer actions that lead to the greatest benefit for self, others and for the world.

The fourth sublime quality of mindfulness is equanimity (*upekkha*), or balance of mind in the midst of the whirling chaos of life. Equanimity is the perfection of non-reactivity, non-attachment and perfect objectivity. *Upekkha* provides the foundation for *metta*, *karuna* and *mudita* and is required for each of these to develop and mature into a form that is beneficial for self and others. Compassion and the ability to engage positively with another, requires complete presence of mind and you cannot be fully present with someone if you are caught up in reactivity.

Just as *metta* reaches out to engage with experience, *upekkha* provides the steadiness of mind that allows you to receive experience without becoming reactive and this is essential for any kind of relationship, internal or external. *Upekkha* becomes absolutely essential when working with painful core emotions in oneself or in a personal relationship, because it allows us to remain objective and resist the compulsion to react and become overwhelmed by subjective emotional reactivity.

These four qualities of mindfulness work together to develop the highest form of presence in our relationships with self, in our relationships with other people and in our relationship with the world. The very core of The Path of Mindfulness is about learning to be fully present with your experience with the positive intention to resolve suffering and to enhance happiness. The response of mindfulness should have these qualities of reaching out to fully embrace experience, pleasant or painful with the positive attitude of genuine interest and love. Every moment of mindfulness towards self or others is an expression of *metta*, *karuna*, *mudita* and *upekkha*. This happens naturally, because of the nature of mindfulness and not because of our efforts to be kind, compassionate, appreciative or objective.

The Path of Mindfulness, *satipatthana*, is a truly living and passionate relationship and engagement with all experience that involves every aspect of our being. It is the complete unification of purpose that will ultimately resolve suffering and facilitate healing in the psyche and in the world. In fact, when we develop mindfulness we are doing a great service that not only benefits ourselves, but benefits the whole world. It is worthwhile reflecting on the true purpose of mindfulness practice and the place of *metta*, *karuna*, *mudita* and *upekkha* before we begin each session of meditation so that we keep our practice alive and fully in tune with the ultimate purpose of The Path of Mindfulness. We practice to reduce *dukkha* and the conditions that sustain *dukkha*. We practice to promote freedom and happiness in all aspects of life through the Noble Eightfold Path. This is the path of *Dhamma* that we choose to cultivate through The Path of Mindfulness.

## 7 THE FOUR FOUNDATIONS OF

### MINDFULNESS

In the *Satipatthana Sutta*, the Buddha describes in great detail the importance of mindfulness (*sati*) and how *sati* is to be applied, cultivated and established. The suffix *-patthana* means “foundation, to establish, to keep steadfast,” so *satipatthana* means to develop, cultivate and establish mindfulness. *Satipatthana* is the Pali term for The Path of Mindfulness, the path of awakening to each moment of our life and being fully present and fully engaged with each experience as it arises and unfolds. *Satipatthana* is at the very heart of Buddhism and the path of spiritual development and the purification of the mind. It is understood that the purification of the mind and the elimination of negative habitual reactivity also leads to the purification of our actions. Through freeing our mind and heart we enhance our ability to be truly present for others so that we may bring peace and happiness into their lives. Therefore, *satipatthana* is the primary vehicle for the purification of *Sila*, or morality and right behavior as well as *Panna*, the wisdom-intelligence that leads to the resolution of suffering and the well-being of all and *Samadhi*, the stabilization and purification of mind in relation to internal and external phenomena.

The *Satipatthana Sutta* begins with the unambiguous statement:

Monks, this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and distress, for the disappearance of *dukkha* and discontent, for the gaining of the right path, for the realization of *Nibbana*, namely the four *satipatthanas*.

The Path of Mindfulness is described as the direct path, because it works with the moment-to-moment experience of life, pleasant or unpleasant, rather than trying to transform the mind through the application of beliefs and indirect practices. One of the immediate consequences of a direct path is that we can experience the fruits of liberation from habitual reactivity and

*samsara* from moment to moment. Liberation is not a goal that we reach after years of study or the application of methods that we are told will transform our suffering. It is to be experienced now, in the midst of our world of chaos and *dukkha*. This is our guide and if we do not feel and directly experience healing as we are practicing mindfulness then we should step back and re-evaluate our practice. This practice is the direct path to the resolution of *dukkha* and we should apply *satipatthana* directly to *dukkha* whenever it manifests in our life.

Besides developing the skill of being fully present and engaged with whatever arises in our experience, *satipatthana* has another mission that should not be forgotten. This is the contemplation of experience in order to uncover *dukkha* in all its manifestations. The primary focus for the Buddha was to teach us how to resolve suffering and the underlying causes of suffering and this requires an active investigation of our experience to seek our *dukkha*. We might describe *satipatthana* as a “search and heal” mission to search out *dukkha* in the body and mind and then bring the healing energy of mindfulness to that place of blind attachment and suffering. It should be added that this is a “search and heal” mission and not a “search and destroy” mission, because suffering can never be removed by violence, but rather by transcending the whole field of conflict with the Eye of Wisdom and the Heart of Compassion, which is the fundamental nature of *satipatthana*.

The Buddha was very insistent that we cultivate mindfulness in *all* parts of our daily life and not just during formal meditation, because all activities will benefit from the purifying effect of mindfulness. There are four primary domains to our living experience where we should endeavor to cultivate mindfulness. These are mindfulness of the body and physical activities (*kayanupassana*), mindfulness of the feeling quality of experience (*vedanupassana*), mindfulness of mental contents and habitual mental reactivity (*cittanupassana*) and mindfulness of the natural laws pertaining to mental phenomena (*dhammanupassana*). The four *satipatthanas* are described as follows:

Here, a monk abides contemplating the body in the body; he abides contemplating the feelings in the feelings; he abides contemplating the mind in the mind; and he abides contemplating dhammas in the

dhammas, diligent, clearly aware and mindful, having put aside worldly greed and grief.

Contemplating mind in mind means that we penetrate beneath the superficial appearance of mental objects to reveal the inner structure of experience. As we let go of the gross structure, the subtle inner structure is revealed and we become aware of the deeper structure of our thoughts. What seemed like a solid emotion differentiates into a complex assembly of feelings, memories and perceptions. The same formula applies to the investigation of the body, investigation of feelings and the *dhammas* of the mind. *Satipatthana* is the investigation of experience with an open and receptive mind and the natural consequence of this kind of awareness is that we begin to see existence as a dynamic, unfolding process of changing phenomena. This natural movement from the static perception of self to seeing self as a dynamic process is the essence of *anatta*, no self. We directly see that nothing has a permanent existence that can be defined in concrete truths and everything that we experience is continually changing and evolving, arising and passing away.

As we watch the unfolding of experience in the body, feelings, mind and *dhammas*, the *Sutta* tells us to “put aside worldly greed and grief.” This statement urges us not to allow ourselves to become entangled in the contents of our thoughts, worries and fears, but to simply be mindful of our worries and fears. It does not mean that we should turn away from our pain, but, on the contrary, we should turn towards our suffering and form a relationship with it based on mindfulness. Mindfulness means being fully present, which is not possible if the mind is scattered and preoccupied with plans and daydreaming or regret about the past. If worry and fear exist, the point is to be mindful and observe the phenomena of worry and fear objectively and with an open and receptive mind. What we want to avoid is reacting to the worry and fear with further worry and fear or further reactions of wanting, aversion and delusion.

There is an important refrain after the description of each of the contemplations of body, feelings, mind and *dhammas*, that describes the full extent of what should be attended to with mindfulness:

In this way, in regard to the mind (body, feelings, *dhammas*) he abides contemplating the mind



internally, or he abides contemplating the mind externally, or he abides contemplating the mind internally and externally. Or, he abides contemplating the nature of arising in the mind, or he abides contemplating the nature of passing away in the mind, or he abides contemplating the nature of both arising and passing away in regard to the mind. Mindful that 'there is a mind' is established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world.

We encounter physical sensations through the physical senses of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting or touching. These physical sensations may arise internally in our own body or they may arise externally as we come into contact with an external object. When watch a sunset, we notice physical sensations in the back and legs and various movements that we might make with our head, arms and legs. We also notice the warmth of the sunlight and the coolness of the air or the feel of the rock we are standing on. We also encounter mental objects in the form of perceptions, memories, thoughts and emotions that arise internally or we encounter perceptions, memories, thoughts and emotions externally as we come into contact with external stimuli. We may have thoughts about our family, wishing they were here while experiencing rapture at the sight of the sunset unfolding before us.

The other essential part of *satipatthana*, The Path of Mindfulness, explained in this passage is the contemplation of the arising of experience and the passing away of experience in both body and mind. This is an extremely important passage that embodies the spirit of the whole practice of mindfulness meditation. This is to awaken to *anicca* in action and to allow experience to flow unimpeded by attachment and clinging. Mindfulness is not a passive process, but actually creates the right conditions in which change can be beneficial. Without mindfulness, change becomes chaotic and does not move in harmony with the innate intelligence of what needs to happen and what needs to change. When we are meditating in this way, with direct insight into *anicca*, the mind and psyche are free to move and change without interference from the ego and its attachments and this *allows* wisdom-intelligence (*satipanna*) to influence the course of change in a beneficial direction that leads to the

resolution of *dukkha*. Being mindful of the whole cycle of arising and passing away is simply another way of saying that we are open to allow the natural process of transformation and resolution of *dukkha* to occur. We are fortunate that the reality of phenomena is that they are not static and unchangeable, but that their very nature is to change. However, conscious awareness (the opposite of *avijja*) is essential to allow *satipanna* to operate effectively and if transformation is to lead to completion, we must maintain mindfulness throughout the whole process of transformation. If you notice that there is fear or worry in the mind, then it is not sufficient to simply recognize that these reactions are present and then divert your attention to something else. You must stay with the fear or worry reaction and stick with it until it has completed its cycle of transformation and resolution. This extremely important point is often overlooked in *vipassana* meditation, where a practitioner learns to recognize reactions such as fear or lust or worry and then returns his attention onto the breath. This is nothing short of a direct avoidance of the reality of the *dukkha* of fear or worry or any other mental agitation and that is not in accord with the First Noble Truth, which is the most fundamental starting point for the path of awakening: You must awaken to *dukkha* in the living present and respond to *dukkha* with mindfulness.

*Anicca* simply informs us that everything, including emotional suffering, is a dynamic and ever changing process. In our “normal” state of consciousness, which is dominated by habitual reactivity and ignorance, we blindly cling to our habitual reactions and this inhibits intelligence and the possibility of intelligent transformation. Therefore, the essence of *satipatthana* is to avoid clinging to anything that arises in the mind or body, but to “abide independent, not clinging to anything in the world.” This does not mean that we cultivate indifference to internal or external phenomena, but that we maintain balance (*samadhi*) and equanimity (*upekkha*) in relation to whatever is experienced. This is the response of mindfulness and the response of freedom. Hence *satipatthana* is not simply a practice to purify the mind; it is the realization of awakening, which is to liberate the mind from *samsara* in each and every encounter with the sense world.

It is also emphasized in this refrain that the approach of *satipatthana* is to establish a mindfulness-based relationship with whatever we perceive and that this is enough in and of itself. We practice to the extent necessary to establish bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness. Bare knowledge or bare attention is a

primary characteristic of *sati* as described previously and it is the nature of *satisampajanna* or pure knowing, without the corruption of reactivity in the form of judgement, analysis or interpretation. The prime activity of mindfulness is simply to establish an open and receptive relationship with sense experiences, including thoughts, memories, perceptions and emotions and then remain in this relationship with sustained mindfulness. The sustained mindfulness, or *samadhi* is absolutely essential to allow the completion of the process of transformation as described above. In this way we create a transformational and therapeutic space around whatever we experience and this is the nature of freedom and non-clinging. Nothing can change if we don't have this inner freedom, but when we do live in this way, then we are living in harmony with *anicca* and that inevitably leads to freedom from *dukkha*. Put in a different way, we allow the psyche to heal itself in its own way, which can only happen when the mind is free from reactivity and thinking about what it is experiencing. The psyche has extraordinary powers to heal suffering and trauma if only we can let it do its job. The Path of Mindfulness is a path of "getting out of the way of the psyche" and letting it do its work in alignment with *anicca* and *satipanna* to resolve suffering and instability in the mind.

The Pali term *anupassana* means seeing, observing and investigating our experience. It is derived from the prefix *anu-*, which means "at, on" and the suffix *-passana*, which means "insight knowledge" as in the word *vipassana*. It is most usually translated as "contemplation," but we need to be careful, because contemplation is often taken to mean an activity of thinking about an object, whereas mindfulness is the direct experiential knowing of whatever is being contemplated, which is not a product of thinking. The original meaning of the word "contemplate" comes from the Latin *contemplari*, to "gaze attentively," "to observe" and "to mark out space for observation" and this is actually much closer to the true meaning of *anupassana*. The notion of creating a space around the object is very much a quality that we associate with *sati*. Another translation of *anupassana* is "experiential knowing." The term "experiential" is a very important term in Buddhism and psychotherapy and refers to the direct conscious awareness of experience in the present, rather than trying to interpret experience through a system of beliefs. Experiential knowing means seeing what is actually happening while it is happening in the present and this direct knowing is the unique

quality of mindfulness that has the power to bring about transformation and liberation of the mind and spirit.

*Satipatthana* is the art of developing an acute awareness of whatever enters our field of consciousness and to awaken to experience in the present moment. Every experience is a drama between three characters: the *knower*, the *known* and the *knowing*, or the *observer*, the *observed* and the *observing*. The *knower* and the *observer* are manifestations of the self, the ego that reacts to what is experienced according to past conditioning. The *known* and that which is *observed* constitutes the actual reality and truth of the sense object. Besides self and object there is another ground, the ground of pure knowing, or *satisampajanna*, which is not self and not object, but the ongoing fluid process of direct experiencing and which is not the reactivity of the self. This awakened *knowing* contains both the object and the subjective reactions to the object; both the *known* and the *knower*. *Satipatthana* is the art of learning to be the *knowing* of both the sense objects and the subjective habitual reactions to those objects. Mindfulness practice is the process of becoming established in the *knowing* aspect of conscious in all the myriad encounters with the sense world of mental and physical phenomena.

## KAYANUPASSANA

The first area for the cultivation of mindfulness is called *kayanupassana*, in which we direct mindfulness toward the physical sensations that occur of the body and all physical activities involving the body. We are continually bombarded with physical sensations that may arise internally or from our contact with the world and the purpose of *kayanupasana* is to develop our mindfulness of all these sensations as they arise throughout the day. Through mindfulness and the cultivation of clear knowing (*satisampajanna*), non-clinging (*upekkha*) and non-reactivity (*samsara*) we develop a great inner stability in our living relationship with the physical world. This is body-centered *samadhi*, or *kaya-samadhi* that provides a foundation and refuge for our practice of *satipatthana*. The body is the foundation for the mind and spirit and we need to make this foundation as strong as possible to support the development of both mind and spirit.

Therefore we begin mindfulness practice by cultivating full presence of mind at the physical level of sensations.

### *Mindfulness of Physical Sensations*

The first level of *kayanupassana* involves developing awareness of the physical sensations of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching. At the start of a session of meditation it is very beneficial to begin by focusing awareness on the sensations of pressure that come from sitting or sensations in the knees, back and neck. Some of these may be painful, others pleasant, but all provide an opportunity to develop mindfulness that is grounded in the present. Body sensations are good objects for meditation, because they are relatively simple and most are free from the complications of associated emotional reactivity. It is relatively easy to be mindful of common physical sensations without becoming caught up in thinking or becoming lost in painful memories or anxiety about the future. By focusing mindfulness on these neutral sensations we strengthen the skill of mindfulness, which will be very beneficial when we progress to the greater challenge of focusing mindfulness on the contents of the mind. We can use mindfulness of physical sensations to develop *samadhi*, the very strong sense of stability in the midst of the chaos of changing phenomena. We become the center of our experience, rather than seduced by the peripheral world of changing phenomena. As we sit in the middle of the storm of physical sensations, we develop the faculty of pure knowing, or *satisampajanna* as an alternative to conditioned reactivity. *Samadhi* begins in the body and proceeds to developing stability in our relationship to feelings and mental contents, but to have *vedana-samadhi* and *citta-samadhi*, we must first develop *kaya-samadhi*.

Although the foundation of mindfulness of the body is simply to know and be present for physical sensations and physical movements, *kayanupassana* also includes a series of body related subjects for contemplation as a way of developing mindfulness. One of the most popular mindfulness trainings is mindfulness of breathing (*anapanasati*). In this method, we observe the subtle physical sensations of in-and-out breathing. As we sustain mindfulness we observe that breathing is a complex flow of bodily sensations of movement, heat and cold and pressure. Through practicing mindfulness of breathing, awareness naturally moves from the gross and superficial level to the finer

details of experience. This is an example of Sensory Enrichment, which is one of the most important functions of mindfulness practice and which will be invaluable when we begin meditating on the more challenging contents of the mind, such as the emotions. Our normal experience of an emotion is abstract and very superficial and it is only when we uncover the subtle and more concrete structure of an emotion that we are able to bring about beneficial changes. Mindfulness is the pre-eminate skill for doing just this, of translating the abstract into the concrete, of enriching our experience through the differentiation of the superficial appearance of experience into detailed experiential structure.

During *anapanasati*, you will also see first hand how the mind readily becomes distracted and you will see just how agitated and reactive the mind really is. This provides you with an excellent opportunity to develop the primary skill of mindfulness, which is vigilance (*appamada*). The object of mindfulness meditation is not to eliminate distractions through an iron will and concentration, but to learn how to respond to distractions in a way that leads to their natural cessation. In *vipassana* meditation the object is not to try and make distractions go away, but to simply respond to them with mindfulness. This means that we learn to know a distraction as a distraction, just like any other sense object that enters our field of awareness; we learn to receive it as it is, without any further reactions of like or dislike or blind acceptance. In the pure knowing of a distraction, it will go through the usual cycle of arising, existing and passing away, without any need for us to try and make it go away. Allowing things to change naturally in this way, rather than grasping at them or reacting with aversion to them is one of the most important skills of mindfulness practice and is central when working with emotional complexes and *dukkha*.

### *Mindfulness of Activities*

The second aspect of *kayanupassana* involves cultivating mindfulness of physical activities such as walking, eating, driving a car, washing the dishes or working at the computer. We wish to develop mindfulness of any activity that involves the body, including speech and movement as we interact with other people and with the physical world. The purpose of activity-based mindfulness practice is to become acutely aware of what we are

doing while we are doing it. This is intended to counteract the usual lack of awareness that accompanies so many of our activities. Through mindfulness, we cultivate yet another manifestation of *samadhi*, in which there is stability, equanimity and non-reactivity in relationship to movement and activity. We become like a Samurai warrior who is ever watchful and completely present in the midst of his assailants. Such attention to the movements of self and others becomes a skillful dance with the phenomenal world. As his enemies lunge at him, he retreats in perfect response or redirects his assailant's aggression to his own ends. Although armed with a sword capable of cutting through a tree, it is the quality of his attention that is his strongest weapon. The Path of Mindfulness is an art form in which we learn to dance with life and respond with great sensitivity to each unfolding experience. There is no place for the ego in the dance of mindfulness; it simply gets in the way and makes us clumsy. In the dance there is neither the knower nor the known, but the pure knowing that embraces both.

Whether at work or play, the more mindful we are, the more we will enjoy what we are doing, because one of the most noticeable effects of mindfulness is that it enriches experience. The more we are directly involved in what we are doing, the more enjoyment we will have and The Path of Mindfulness is about enriching all aspects of our life. Like the kiss that awakens Cinderella from her perpetual sleep, everything touched by mindfulness springs to life. Mindfulness is the kiss of life, just as ignorance is the kiss of death. In the practice of *satipatthana* we choose to embrace all aspects of conscious experience with *sati*. Even mundane activities such as walking can provide a tremendously rich ground for training in mindfulness. Even drinking a cup of tea can become a dance of great beauty as in this quote from the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh,

Drink your tea slowly and reverently, as if it is the axis on which the world earth revolves - slowly, evenly, without rushing toward the future. Live the actual moment. Only this moment is life.

By practicing mindfulness of the simple activities of life, we develop *samadhi* in relation to those activities and this is the same composure and steadfastness of mind that heals *dukkha* in the mind. Through cultivating mindfulness of body sensations and activities we develop a solid foundation, a base to which we

can return to at any time and from which we can venture out in our search to heal *dukkha* both internally and externally in our world.

### *Old age, sickness and death*

Besides using *kayanupassana* as a skillful means of developing *sati* and *samadhi*, we must remember the original purpose of *satipatthana*, which is to seek out *dukkha* and heal it. The body is a process characterized by aging, sickness and eventual death. As the Buddha said,

And this, monks, is the Noble Truth of *dukkha*: birth is *dukkha*, and old age is *dukkha*, and disease is *dukkha*, and dying is *dukkha*.

This does not mean that birth, aging, sickness and death are suffering in the absolute sense, but that they are fields of experience in which suffering can arise and will arise if the mind is dominated by *avijja*. It is important to reflect and contemplate birth, old age, sickness and death and investigate how we relate to the experience of these in our lives. How do we react to aging? Does getting old generate worry, anxiety and regret? If there is sickness, do we react with fear? How do we relate to the prospect of dying? We need to contemplate these realities and search out the suffering that we generate through our conditioned subjective reactions. We can choose to continue reacting and continue to suffer or we can choose to respond to our *dukkha* with mindfulness and bring the healing power of *satisampajanna* to the experience of the body and mind. The choice is ours. There is no law that requires us to live in fear and dread of death, sickness and dying. The purpose of reflection on these parts of our life is not to burden the mind with worries, but to liberate the mind and spirit from *avijja* and the psychological clinging that keeps us bound to our subjective habitual reactivity. This is an example of the active “search and heal” dimension of *satipatthana* practice. We don’t wait for *dukkha* to come to us; we take the initiative and meet it directly on the field of mindfulness and on our terms.



## VEDANUPASSANA

The second major area for the cultivation of mindfulness is *vedanupassana*, mindfulness of feelings. When we practice *vedanupassana*, we pay attention to the three qualities of feeling energy that arise along with mental objects. These are *dukkhavedana*, *sukhavedana* and *upekkhavedana*: painful feelings, pleasant feelings and neutral feelings. These feelings are of central importance, because it is feeling energy, more than anything else that gives meaning to thoughts and beliefs and that provides the driving force for the reactions of body, speech and mind. If we remain unaware of our feelings, then they will control us and they will fuel the reactivity that leads to suffering. A negative emotional reaction such as anger contains the negative feeling energy of *dukkhavedana* that has become crystallized into a particular reactive pathway, a *cittasankhara*. Similarly, a positive emotion such as happiness is experienced as *sukhavedana* and contains the positive feeling energy of *sukhavedana* that has been channelled into a particular form, a *cittasankhara* that generates positive feelings. The neutral feeling of *upekkhavedana* describes the quality of feeling energy that gives power and meaning to beliefs about self and others and what appears real.

Clearly, the really important subjects for *vedanupassana* meditation are the feelings that fuel the emotional reactions of greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*). The emotional reactions of greed (*lobha*) include longing, lust, envy and jealousy and any reaction that contains the compulsive drive to acquire. The emotional reactions of aversion (*dosa*) include anger, hatred and ill-will and the compulsive drive to destroy. The emotional reactivity of delusion (*moha*) includes fixation on beliefs, conceit, arrogance and self-righteousness as well as the delusion of blind identification and attachment to our patterns of reactivity that creates most of our suffering. All emotional reactions depend on the strength of the underlying feeling energy of *vedana* and when that energy is very strong it becomes the obsessive-compulsive force of *tanha*, or craving. The stronger the *tanha*, the stronger the resulting emotional reaction will be. By focusing mindfulness on the feeling energy or feeling tone that underlies an emotional reaction we can access the very powerhouse that fuels our reactivity and if we can produce a change at the level of feeling, then we can disarm the compulsive

force of *tanha*. As with *kayanupassana*, through cultivating mindfulness of the feeling energy of our experiences, we are able to strengthen the quality of our relationship with our feelings. We move away from reactivity towards a relationship based on full presence and engagement. We can observe objectively and surround the experience of our feelings with the spacious quality of mindfulness. In this way we develop *vedana-samadhi*, or stability in relation to our feelings. This is very important and provides a therapeutic space in which feelings can differentiate and unfold, leading to transformation and the resolution of *dukkha*.

## CITTANUPASSANA

The third area for establishing mindfulness is in our relationship to the contents of the mind, called *citta* in Pali. Thoughts, memories, emotions, beliefs and other mental objects arise in a continuous stream as we come into contact with sensory objects. Cultivating awareness of the contents of the mind is called *cittanupassana*, or “mind watching” and is the most important foundation for counteracting the habitual reactivity of the mind. All spiritual work begins by awakening to the reality of the mind and removing the cloak of ignorance (*avijja*) that prevents change and sustains habitual reactivity. You cannot change what you cannot see and one of the key activities of mindfulness practice and *vipassana* meditation is to illuminate the unseen manifestations of reactivity. In this practice we learn to recognize thoughts as they arise and learn to respond to thought reactions with mindfulness, rather than simply being seduced into further reactivity. In the same way, we learn to observe emotions as they arise, rather than falling under their spell. The same applies to mindfulness of our beliefs. Nothing is blindly accepted as truth and instead we choose to observe any *cittasankhara* that arises with mindfulness and equanimity and with a mind that “abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world.”

When we follow the Path of Mindfulness, we understand that we are responsible for our sorrow as well as for our happiness and this means taking responsibility for our habitual patterns of thinking. Instead of blindly accepting negative thoughts and states of mind, we choose to relate to them with mindfulness. We learn how to see thoughts and memories, or any

other mental phenomena, as objects that we can observe objectively in the same way that we might observe a tree or a table or any other external sense object. If the thought arises “I am depressed” or “I am upset,” we do not simply give in and become depressed or upset, but respond to the thought with the bare recognition that “a thought has arisen in me” and then establish a relationship of mindfulness with the thought. Thoughts, emotional reactions, memories and beliefs are seen as visitors to our home: we greet them with respect and friendliness, but we do not have to agree with them or follow their bidding. In this way we develop *citta-samadhi*, or stability in our relationship to mental contents. We learn to sit perfectly still at the center of our mind and engage with full presence with each of the thoughts and memories that come to visit. This spiritual path requires mental discipline and this inevitably means learning to control the reactive thinking mind. As the Buddha said,

To enjoy good health, to bring true happiness to one’s family, to bring peace to all, one must first discipline and control one’s own mind. If a man can control his mind he can find the way to Enlightenment, and all wisdom and virtue will naturally come to him.

However, it should be understood that to “control one’s own mind,” cannot be done effectively by the activities of the conscious thinking mind, because the mind that is fragmented by reactivity cannot heal itself. As Albert Einstein said,

No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it.

When the Buddha talks about control, he means creating a totally different relationship with the mind that is based on mindfulness and the intuitive wisdom-intelligence (*satipanna*) that transcends the reactive content of the thinking ego-mind. This kind of discipline and control arises when we let go of thinking and the activities of the ego and open to the total experience of the present. The path to “Enlightenment” is to be found through the practice of mindfulness, which is opening to reality, rather than thinking about reality or imposing beliefs and ideas onto reality. Therefore, our primary activity in *cittanupassana* is to learn to recognize when a thought has arisen and to respond with

mindfulness. This provides the right conditions in which transformative *satipanna* will arise.

## DHAMMANUPASSANA

Through cultivating mindfulness of the body, feelings and mental contents we start to develop a completely different relationship with the contents of our experience that is not based on reactivity, but on insight and direct knowing. We begin to see how phenomena arise, do their dance and pass away and that this process of change obeys natural laws that exist independent of the ego or beliefs. We see that *dukkha* arises whenever there is clinging to these phenomena and that nothing that is created by the mind or by physical processes has any inherent existence that is independent of a dynaminc process of change. These are the natural laws of *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anatta*, or impermanence, suffering and not-self, that apply to all phenomena and particularly to the phenomenon of conscious experience. The term *Dhamma* includes these and other natural and unchangeable laws and the insight into these laws as they operate in the mind is called *dhammanupassana*.

At a very practical level, *dhammanupassana* means relating to our ongoing experience in terms of the Four Noble Truths: awakening to suffering; awakening to the underlying attachments that create and feed suffering; awakening to a different way of being that is not based on reactivity and suffering; and awakening to the The Path of Mindfulness as the primary means that leads to the resolution of reactivity and suffering. The contemplation of *Dhamma* means that we learn to recognize and know directly and clearly what is happening in the mind and know whether it is wholesome (*kusala*) and contributes to the ending of suffering or whether it is unwholesome (*akusala*) and perpetuates suffering. As we develop *dhammanupassana*, we develop the innate wisdom of *satipanna* that allows us to see the difference between *kusala dhammas* and *akusala dhammas*. Through practice we develop *dhamma-samadhi*, or stability and harmony in our relationship to the natural processes of the mind so that *Dhamma* becomes our refuge and guides us in everything we do. As with all the *satipatthanas*, what we are trying to cultivate is a living, moment-to-moment harmony with *dhammas*, *cittas*, *vedana* and *kaya*. It is awakening to “real-time” existence as it is, without

interference from our habitual patterns of reactivity; without interference from the ego, or *atta*. It means that we see the body as body, feelings as feelings, mind as mind and how all of these phenomena exist as an ever-changing process dependent on conditions that are not I, not me and not mine. We see how clinging to that which is impermanent and unstable produces suffering and how non-clinging provides the right conditions for genuine happiness.

Wherever we start in our *satipatthana* practice, we will arrive at *dhammanupassana*, because mindfulness puts us in touch with the true nature of mental phenomena. Mindfulness is the absence of reactivity, which means the absence of clinging and *avijja*. The Path of Mindfulness is the path of non-attachment and non-clinging that leaves the mind open to perceive truth in every moment. When there is no reactivity and no clinging then we are able to awaken to *annica*, *dukkha* and *anatta* as living insights that operate automatically and without effort in every moment of life. This is the perfection of *panna*, the innate wisdom-intelligence that we all possess. The relationship of pure knowing through mindfulness means that we awaken to *anicca* and live in harmony with the dynamic and impermanent nature of phenomena. We relate to thoughts, emotions and beliefs not as static truths, but as temporal manifestations of an ever-changing process. As we look closely at each emotional reaction that arises in daily life, we see that it does not exist as a solid “thing,” but as a constellation of more subtle feelings and inner thoughts and perceptions. As we become mindful of the subtle experiential structure of our emotions, the entire field changes and purification through insight begins. As we awaken to *dukkha* through mindfulness, we create a healing space around the suffering and this provides the freedom in which change can occur at the experiential and intuitive level. Reactivity is the ignorance of *dukkha*, the force that keeps us chained to the past. Mindfulness is the antidote to *avijja* that brings healing intelligence back into the midst of the inner disorder and instability of the mind.

As we awaken to *anicca* and *dukkha* we also awaken to *anatta*. This does not mean that we simply develop theories about not-self, but that we live in an ongoing relationship with phenomena in which there is no interference from the *knower* or *observer*, the ego-mind, or *atta* that automatically reacts to whatever it perceives. To awaken to *anatta* means that our essential identity becomes the *knowing*, the pure conscious

experience of the *known* that is free from both the *known* and the reactivity of the *knower*. This is the essence of *anatta* and *dhammanupassana* means that we live in an ongoing, minute by minute relationship with whatever we experience, painful or pleasant, based on this awakening to *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anatta*.

## 8 PURE KNOWING

*Sati* directs our attention away from reactivity and back to the direct conscious experience of the present. It puts us back face-to-face with our immediate experience. *Sati* brings us back into a relationship in which there is no reacting, but just the simple bare experiencing of things. This direct perception, without the observer or subjective reactivity is called *satisampajanna*. *Sati* is switching on the light in a dark room, while *sampajanna* is the direct awareness of what is in the room. The word *sampajanna* is made up of the prefix *sam-*, which means “right, complete, entire” and the suffix *-pajanna*, which means, “knowing with wisdom.” *Sampajanna* is often translated as “clear comprehension,” although this does not mean conceptual understanding, but rather the process of knowing things objectively in their true, original form in the present moment of experience. The two terms are most often combined as *satisampajanna*, which means the pure knowing of any phenomenon that is experienced with mindfulness. In reality, you cannot have *sampajanna* without mindfulness, because mindfulness is required to be fully present. Each moment of contact with an object of experience through mindfulness brings a moment of *satisampajanna*. When we become distracted or reactive, it is *sati* that returns us to this state of pure awareness. Ajahn Sumedho uses the term “intuitive awareness” to describe *satisampajanna*. “Intuitive” is a good term, because it indicates a deeper form of knowing that precedes the more superficial level of knowing through thinking. Intuition is a form of inner wisdom that arises from openness to the entirety of an experience and not just the habitual reactions of the ego. Intuition arises through contact with the psyche, the totality of experience in the present that embraces both the present and the past.

*Satisampajanna* can be described as *pure knowing*, in the sense that there is no subjective reactivity from a *knower* that gets in the way of seeing and experiencing things objectively. There is, in effect, no “you” who does the “knowing,” as there would be when you think or react. When there is *satisampajanna*, there is no separation between the knower and the known, no observer

who observes, but simply the direct process of knowing and observing.

*Satisampajanna* is awakening to the reality of the here and now and this is the essence of the Path of Mindfulness and *vipassana* meditation. We learn to awaken us to whatever is in the field of our awareness and see it with objectivity (*upekkha*) and non-reactivity (*samadhi*). If our focus of awareness is on something external, then this means awakening to what we can see, hear, smell, taste or touch and know it *as it is*, without the distortion of perception, beliefs and other forms of subjective mental reactivity. If our focus of awareness is on the internal contents of the mind, then this means being able to fully know and engage with thoughts, feelings, emotions, beliefs and all the mental reactions and *know* them objectively, without any further reactivity. Of course, there will always be subjective reactivity and, therefore, *satisampajanna* must in effect include and embrace both objective and subjective reality.

*Satisampajanna* is the antidote to ignorance (*avijja*) and the whole cycle of *samsara* that depends on ignorance. When there is *satisampajanna*, then in that state of spacious freedom *satipanna* also arises and the mind changes from being a reactive machine, to being a finely tuned channel for intelligent action. When action arises from this intelligent ground of mindful knowing, it is purified. The psyche becomes in alignment with *Dhamma* and the path that leads to the resolution of *dukkha* and the promotion of happiness and well-being in the individual, family and society. When we are mindful and not reacting, it is as if we open a space around the thought or emotion or external object of attention and in the Path of Mindfulness practice and meditation, we actively cultivate this space of pure objectivity. The first property of this space is that it creates a safety zone in which we are much less likely to become overwhelmed by reactivity, which is in dramatic contrast to the contracted and cramped nature of the reactive mind. We discover that as *satisampajanna* develops, the compulsion to react naturally begins to wane and the mind begins to stabilize. This quality of stability and non-reactivity is called *samadhi*. Agitation arises when the mind is not grounded in the present, but is seduced into patterns of reactivity based on conditioning. When we settle into directly investigating what we are experiencing with *satisampajanna*, then the mind naturally settles into a state of non-agitation, or *samadhi* in which sustained mindfulness becomes possible.



With the development of mindfulness, we become more and more attuned to the reality of our experience both internally and externally in the present moment. The first effect of opening our eyes is that we see more and the quality of our experience is naturally enriched. This is like the difference between looking at the world through a dirty, cracked window, compared to stepping outside and opening our senses to the fullness of the wild, with all its sights, sounds, smells and experiences. In the famous words of Sir Isaac Newton,

I have been as a child playing on the seashore, every now and then finding a brighter pebble, while all around me the great ocean of truth lay undiscovered.

The enrichment of experience that comes with mindfulness and *satisampajanna* is naturally very satisfying and nourishing and brings joy, rapture and bliss (*pitisukha*). This is the natural joy that arises when the mind lets go of old perceptions and allows experience to come alive and change from the dull monochromatic view of the contracted mind into the vibrant full color view of *satisampajanna*. Truth naturally leads to greater fulfilment and a greater sense of authenticity and a feeling of being alive, whereas ignorance leads to emptiness, inauthenticity and spiritual death.

## OPENING TO INTUITIVE INTELLIGENCE

The direct consequence of *satisampajanna* is that we become increasingly aware of subtlety and it is in this subtle realm that the shy voice of intuitive intelligence is to be heard. The Pali term for this intuitive wisdom-intelligence is *satipanna*, “mindfulness wisdom” and this is what directs beneficial transformation. Whatever the insight or intelligent action that results, it always leads in the direction of decreasing suffering and increasing happiness and well-being. *Satipanna* transforms instability into stability, in the mind and in our personal relationships. *Satipanna* is not “wise knowledge” in the conventional sense of the word “wisdom,” but refers to the dynamic fluidity of movement in the psyche that leads towards stability. Through *satisampajanna* we are able to access a much deeper dimension of our experience than is possible when we are reactive and it is this unconstrained

insight into the inner workings of reality that allows *satipanna* to arise. Mindfulness and pure intuitive knowing has the effect of releasing the mind from its blind attachment to habitual reactions, beliefs and conventions. In this condition of freedom, the whole system of the psyche becomes fluid and responsive and where there is freedom to change, *satipanna* will naturally guide the internal process of transformation towards the resolution of suffering. This requires a stillness in which the mind is not lost in thinking and reacting, which is often referred to as the Noble Stillness or the *creative void*. It is void, because it is empty of thinking and subjective reactivity and creative, because it is not limited by past conditioning. Free of the corruptions of the past, this inner stillness is pure and untarnished, like the noble metal gold. Mindfulness practice cultivates this *creative void*, the silent interval between thoughts, where true authenticity and true healing resides.

Anyone who meditates will soon become aware of the way one thought leads to another in a continuous stream of consciousness, sometimes referred to as the “monkey mind.” It is the nature of consciousness to move in this way from one sense object to another, like a monkey swinging from one branch to another in its search for food and stimulation. Mindfulness meditation, called *vipassana* or insight meditation is very focused on becoming aware of this natural tendency of the mind to wander. The purpose of mindfulness practice in general is to learn to become increasingly present for each new experience and resist the habitual tendency to react. The objective is to maintain freedom and resist being carried along without conscious choice from one thought to another as if in a daydream. With practice we become more and more tuned in to the interval between thoughts and as practice deepens, these intervals become longer. It is in this creative void that wisdom-intelligence flourishes and transformation takes place. This state of mind, that is not consumed by thinking is also called *sunyata*, a term which means “the state of emptiness.” This is where the mind is free from the constraint of conditioned reactivity and, by definition also free to change in the direction that leads to the maximum resolution of suffering and the greatest state of stability in the mind and spirit.

If the thought “I am afraid” arises, the most likely reaction will be blind and obedient acceptance of this reaction, which is an example of an attachment to habitual subjective reactivity, called *attavadupadana*. We become the reaction. We may then indulge in thinking why we became afraid and generate imaginary

scenarios that perpetuates and intensifies the suffering (*dukkha*). This is the secondary reactivity of *papanca*, the proliferation of suffering. However, there is another possibility open to us in which we respond to the primary fear reaction with mindfulness and *satisampajanna*. When we do this, the fear becomes nothing more than an object that is experienced within the field of awareness of *satisampajanna*. With *satisampajanna* there is simply the direct knowing of “fear” with no further reaction. In the sustained mindful relationship of *satisampajanna*, we create the right conditions, the “creative void” in which the emotional knot of “fear” can and will unfold and become fluid again. As it unravels and differentiates, the whole field of both the fear as an object and the psyche that contains the object changes in a way that will eventually lead to the resolution of the fear. In other words, the more we see and the more we become conscious of the fine details of experience, the more likely it is that transformation will occur. The concept of sensory enrichment leading to transformation is a major part of *satisampajanna* and described by the term *gocara sampajanna*. *Gocara* literally means “field or domain” and *gocara sampajanna* means to know every aspect of whatever we are contemplating with mindfulness. This means knowing the physical-bodily aspect of what we are doing when we are doing it. The field includes the feeling energy that permeates our experience. The field of awareness includes all movements of thought, memories and other mind objects. Above all, the field of *gocara sampajanna* includes the clear knowing of *Dhamma*: the natural laws of experience and knowing what is unwholesome action that leads to the perpetuation of *dukkha* and what is wholesome action that leads to the resolution of *dukkha*. This means contemplating an object such as “fear” and illuminating all four *satipatthanas*: bodily reactions, feeling reactions, thought reactions and the *Dhamma* of these reactions.

When we contemplate an object such as fear, we investigate every aspect of the object of “fear” as it manifests in our body and mind and we contemplate it in such a way that leads to the resolution of the *dukkha* of “fear.” Perhaps one of the most consistent messages throughout the teachings of the Buddha is not to blindly accept the superficial appearance of things, but to investigate thoroughly the reality of what we experience with mindfulness. When we do this, then what we ignorantly take as real, such as the emotional reaction of “fear” dissociates into a million pieces, like a mirror shattered by a rock. The reality is in the million pieces and freedom from suffering is in the process of

seeing these millions of individual pieces with clear and direct *satisampajanna*.

## NON-DELUSION

Above all, *satisampajanna* is non-delusional awareness, called *asammoha sampajanna*, by which we mean the absence of blind acceptance, or identification with thoughts, beliefs, emotions or any *sankhara* produced by the reactive mind. With *satisampajanna* we are able to see a reaction as a reaction and learn not to identify with it and not become entangled in it or seduced into further reactivity. With *asammoha sampajanna* all *sankharas* are seen as illusions in the sense that they are only superficial snapshots that never represent the total story or truth and should not to be attached to as “me or mine.” Being imperfect and unsatisfactory we recognize that all *sankharas* are not to be relied on. However, it would be a great mistake to then take the attitude that the contents and reactions of the mind are inferior rubbish to be disposed of. This tendency towards aversion is such a common problem and we must understand that mindfulness is the expression of *metta* and awakening, not self-judgement and an ego-centric desire for control. The way of mindfulness is to choose to be fully present for all *sankharas* and to relate to them with care and friendship. The mind is not your enemy; your thoughts and emotions are not your enemy. The only enemy is ignorance, because with ignorance comes bondage and suffering. When there is mindfulness, then the *sankharas* have no power over you: they simply become objects to which you can engage with mindfulness and from which you can learn.

*Asammoha sampajanna*, or knowing with non-delusion is also to be in complete harmony with *anicca*, the truth of impermanence and change. Existence is a dynamic process in which parts come together into temporary structures, the *sankharas* and then instantaneously begin to dissociate back into their component parts, which are free to reassemble into new *sankharas*, ad infinitum. At the psychological level of experience, thoughts, feelings and perceptions come together into moments of conscious experience that exist for a brief moment before changing into another *cittasankhara*. This is the natural order of life, of existence and experience that is the *Dhamma*. Understanding this at the conceptual level of insight is valuable,

because it helps modulate our tendency to grasp things that we know are not under our control and that will not last. But, what is much more important than this conventional wisdom, is to *harmonize with anicca* in each living moment. Rather than resisting change, we embrace change with mindfulness. When we form a relationship with *anicca* in which we live as a process instead of a series of disjointed *sankharas*, then we will be harnessing the great energy of the river of change. Living in harmony with *anicca* is another way of talking about freedom and liberation, because true liberation is the freedom to change. With mindfulness and *satisampajanna*, change becomes an intelligent process, under the direction of *satipanna* that always leads towards the resolution of *dukkha*. When *avijja* is dominant, then the process of change becomes chaotic, leading to instability and *dukkha*.

At another more basic level, *sampajanna* means that there is an understanding of the purpose and suitability of what you are doing, called *satthaka* and *sappaya sampajanna*, respectively. At the practical level, this means doing things with care and attention. At a spiritual level this means that you fully comprehend what is skillful and wholesome (*kusala dhamma*) and what is unskillful and harmful (*akusala dhamma*). With *satisampajanna* you see quite clearly, at the experiential level whether your actions lead to happiness, stability and freedom or whether they lead to unhappiness, instability and bondage. You gain direct insight into how your conditioned reactivity causes *dukkha* and how freedom from conditioned reactivity leads to the resolution of *dukkha*. For much of the time we are on autopilot and perform actions of body, speech and mind without ever questioning their purpose or suitability. For example, you may find yourself consumed by worrying about your relationship or health or financial circumstances. This is an example of habitual secondary reactivity that has been added on to the experience of the reality of a changing relationship, change in health or change in circumstances. When mindfulness is directed to the *cittasankhara* of a worry reaction, you begin to see that the proliferation of worrying only leads to more suffering. You understand that blind attachment to that *sankhara* leads to *dukkha*. But, if you continue to be mindful, you will also see that the more you illuminate the reaction with mindfulness, the less power it has to proliferate *dukkha*. With *satisampajanna*, wisdom-intelligence (*satipanna*) arises and you gain direct insight (*vipassana*) into how letting go of reactivity resolves

*dukkha*. Seeing this directly, the psyche naturally moves from the condition of instability to a condition of stability and the mind lets go of the reactivity as a natural consequence of clear and direct insight. You gain direct experience of a totally different state of being that is not continually creating conflict and suffering and this is nothing short of the realization of the Four Noble Truths in the here and now, which is the purpose of the Path of Mindfulness. Forming a relationship with the *dukkha* of worry is the First Noble Truth of awakening to *dukkha*. Awakening to the force of blind attachment to the habitual patterns of reactivity that cause the *dukkha* of worry is the Second Noble Truth. Directly experiencing the non-suffering that comes from non-attachment to these patterns of habitual reactivity is the Third Noble Truth and The Path of Mindfulness that takes you to this new way of being is the Fourth Noble Truth.

## SATISAMPAJANNA AS REFUGE

The word “Buddha” literally means “the awakened one” and this signifies the central importance of pure non-reactive, non-conditioned awareness in Buddhism. Taking refuge in *satisampajanna* means trusting in the pure direct knowing of experience in the here and now and the wisdom-intelligence that comes from this pure knowing. The contents of experience as thoughts, feelings and beliefs come and go according to changing conditions, but the conscious knowing element, the Buddha mind, remains constant and is, therefore, much more reliable as a refuge.

The practice of *Dhamma* through mindfulness is a path in which we gradually let go of dependence on the reactive mind that creates thoughts, views, opinions and emotional reactions. What is left is the Original Mind, the Buddha Mind or *bodhicitta* that is the clear, luminous and unlimited spaciousness of unconditioned consciousness. Unlike the conditioned world of *form*, which is unstable and not dependable, *bodhicitta* is completely dependable, stable and beyond the transient world of *form*. From this ground of *bodhicitta* all becomes possible and living becomes an adventure in which we fully engage with each moment of life with vitality and passion. This is the Buddha’s vision of freedom, of being truly alive and truly authentic.

Taking refuge in *satisampajanna* is like being at the center of a hurricane, where it is completely still. You are free to fully engage with all the individual mental objects as they fly around on the rim of the storm, but without clinging and without becoming part of the debris. This still center of tranquility and stability is called *samadhi* and arises quite spontaneously whenever you establish mindfulness. This still center is not something that you can create, but something that you discover and awaken to through *satisampajanna*, when you come into relationship with whatever you experience with mindfulness. In the pure and direct knowing of things, there is nothing that can harm you, no matter how horrible it might be. Not even the most fearful wild beast or demons of the mind can pull you off balance, because as long as there is non-reactive attention then you are able to move freely and respond wisely. If the beast attacks, the acuity that comes from mindful awareness allows you to respond by stepping back. Even if the beast has horribly sharp teeth and claws, it cannot harm you as long as you remain vigilant and mindful. It is what you can't see that has the power to harm you and your real enemy is not the beast, but ignorance and unawareness (*avijja*). *Satisampajanna* dispels ignorance through direct illumination of whatever you are experiencing, pleasant or unpleasant, internal or external. You can, in fact, dance with the beasts and demons of your mind when there is *satisampajanna* with passionate engagement and complete presence of mind. In this dance of mindfulness, which is also a dance of compassion and wisdom-intelligence, the demons are finally given permission to change themselves, which is what they have wanted to do all along. As a demon transforms and resolves and finally passes away it rewards you with a gift of the energy that was trapped in its tortured form. This release of energy is both energizing (*piti*) and tranquilizing (*passadhi*) and revitalizes the psyche. The inner demons are really your spiritual companions and they will bring passion and energy back into your life when related to with mindfulness. They are not to be fought against or destroyed, but to be fully *known*. This is the wisdom of the Buddha's teaching and the truth of the *Dhamma* that leads to freedom from suffering and the round of habitual reactivity that is *samsara*.

This "knowing mind" has no form in itself, but has an infinite capacity to know anything that does have form. It is a process that has no beginning and no end. The path of Buddhism and the cultivation of mindfulness is essentially to make this

“pure knowing” the center of our Being, the refuge from which we can relate to all phenomena, rather than identifying with superficial content and form. The great insight of the Buddha was that our true original nature is not the contents of our experience, but the experiencing itself, the pure conscious knowing. To quote James Bugental,

When I begin to realize that my truest identity is as process and not as fixed substance, I am on the verge of a terrible emptiness and a miraculous freedom.

Through The Path of Mindfulness, we begin to uncover our Original Mind or *bodhicitta*. Mindfulness is the mental process of bringing attention back to *bodhicitta*, through the “pure knowing” of our experience in the here and now. *Bodhicitta* cannot be created, but simply comes into existence whenever mindfulness is present. This state of being is to be known in each moment of experience, whether in deep meditation or in the chaos of daily living. *Satisampajanna* is the one sure refuge that can bring stability in the midst of happiness and sorrow and all the vicissitudes of life. It is the “miraculous freedom” that heals, transforms, liberates and leads to the full realization of compassion and wisdom.

Buddhism is a vast subject, but it is good to realize that at the heart of the Buddha’s teaching is this simple principle of awakening to the objective reality of the here and now. The heart of the path is the cultivation of mindfulness. If you make this your path, then you will be walking the same path as the Buddha and the awakening and transformation of mind and spirit will follow quite naturally. When you take refuge in mindfulness and *satisampajanna*, you are also taking refuge in the Buddha and the *Dhamma* and the *Sangha* of all other beings who also follow The Path of Mindfulness.



## 9 INNATE WISDOM-INTELLIGENCE

The natural consequence of *satisampajanna* is that you become liberated from blind reactivity due to the simple fact that you cannot be both reactive and mindful at the same moment in time. This principle of Reciprocal Inhibition is the first and most significant change that interrupts the habit of reacting and creates a space in which transformation can occur. This freedom brings a fundamental shift in the mind from habitual blind reactivity to present-centered and intelligent responsiveness. This awakening is called *cetovimutti*, liberation from the reactivity of the conditioned mind. Released from reactivity, the psyche is free to heal itself, which it is more than capable of doing if given the freedom to operate. This healing, brought about by the freedom of *satisampajanna* is called *pannavimutti*, the liberation of the mind under the direction of our own innate wisdom-intelligence, called *satipanna*.

*Panna* (Skt. *Prajna*) is a very broad term that describes wisdom and intelligent insight. *Panna*, like many other concepts in Buddhism consists of two quite different levels of understanding. The first is the conventional level of understanding that we are all very familiar with and that can be represented in ideas, beliefs and knowledge. This is the level of *sammuti sacca*, relative truth. At the conventional level, wisdom takes the form of knowledge and psychological insights that help us resolve suffering and prevent unskillful actions that produce suffering. However, this kind of conventional wisdom is still limited and conditioned and what works in one situation may prove completely inadequate in a different situation. There is another level, called *paramattha sacca*, or absolute truth that cannot be reduced to thoughts or psychological insights, but comes from direct and immediate experience. It is the penetrating insight that arises whenever we open to the intuitive and experiential level of experience in each present moment. Conventional wisdom is comprised of what is known, whereas ultimate wisdom can only be known in the immediacy of the present moment: it is the *knowing* rather than the *known*. For this reason, *panna* depends on *satisampajanna*, which in turn depends on *sati*. Hence *sati* and *panna* are combined into *satipanna*, the

intuitive intelligence that arises through mindfulness in the living present.

The great awakening of *satisampajanna* gives us access to a tremendous quantity and quality of knowledge. This sensory enrichment enhances the effectiveness of our actions as well as providing the subtle details of the internal structure of experience that facilitates transformation. You cannot change what you cannot see and this is why *satisampajanna* is so important, because it allows you to know clearly and precisely what is happening while it is happening. *Satipanna* depends on this living insight into the structure of experience. When there is full presence and awareness, then our innate intelligence will direct beneficial change in a direction that leads to the resolution of *dukkha*. For example, if you find yourself too close to a fire, you will experience pain. If you refuse to turn your attention towards the pain and remain unaware (*avijja*), then the pain will persist as suffering. If your mind is open and free to be fully present with the pain, then you will intuitively know the right action to take and you move away from the fire. This is the intuitive intelligence of *satipanna* in action and it naturally leads to the resolution of *dukkha*. You do not have to think about what to do or try and analyze the situation. You simply respond with intelligent action based on *satisampajanna* and guided by *satipanna* that is perfectly aligned with the needs of the present. As long as there is freedom to respond, then any action that results will be purified by *satipanna*. With *satisampajanna* as foundation, actions of body, speech and mind become more in tune with the needs of reality and they become more refined and more wholesome under the guidance of *satipanna*. The ultimate purpose of mindfulness practice and meditation is to develop this skillfulness and intelligence in each unfolding moment so that we can fully engage and respond to life, rather than simply react out of habit, compulsion and ignorance.

*Dukkha* is the expression of emotional instability and suffering in the mind. If we resist this instability or remain ignorant, then *dukkha* will persist indefinitely. If we approach *dukkha* with mindfulness and establish an objective and non-reactive relationship with the instability then we create a therapeutic space and in this space the emotion, like any other *sankhara* will become malleable and able to change. The emotional complex loses its solidity and is seen as a dynamic movement of thoughts, memories and shades of feeling. With mindfulness we let go of the superficial appearance of the

complex and begin to see the reality and fine detail of what is actually there. When we become conscious of this richness of sensory experience the psyche will naturally move under the direction of *satipanna* until it reaches a state of stability. All emotional *sankharas* are inherently unstable and will automatically resolve into a more stable state under the direction of *satipanna*. All that is required is freedom to see the subtle reality and the truth of experience that lies below the labels, beliefs, thoughts and emotional reactions. It is not what we do that is as important as creating the condition of freedom so that *satipanna* can operate freely in the mind. Mindfulness practice and insight meditation (*vipassana*) is not the process of developing psychological insights that we then apply to solve our suffering, but the living process of allowing *satipanna* to operate in the present moment, allowing it to resolve *dukkha* directly. This is the psyche healing itself, which produces change at a much deeper level than can ever be attained by the ego and the thinking mind.

Imagine a fantastic glass sculpture of an eagle with incredibly fine workmanship in which every detail and every feather is carved in immaculate detail. However, this delicate glass eagle is entombed in a huge block of dirty ice that we want to remove. We can try to free the eagle by chipping away the ice with an ice pick, which is the approach of the thinking mind and ego. This approach works well at the surface level and much ice is successfully removed. However, as you get closer to the eagle, the blows from the ice pick are more and more likely to damage the delicate glass sculpture. The tool of thinking becomes less and less skillful the closer we get to the truth. The healing that is brought about by mindfulness and clear comprehension (*satisampajanna*) is analogous to opening the window and allowing the warm rays of the sun to shine onto the ice block. The ice naturally and effortlessly melts away, freeing the glass eagle, leaving it undamaged and in its full glory. Even the action of the melting ice has a cleansing effect as it washes away the dirt. This is the nature of the transformational effect of the innate intelligence of *satipanna*, where the illumination of pure knowing allows the psyche to heal itself and melt away the constraining ice block of our habitual reactivity and attachments. All that is needed is to allow *satipanna* the freedom to operate and it will do the rest and this freedom is provided by mindfulness.

## INTUITIVE WISDOM

We think that the ego is in control and makes all the important decisions in life, but if you look more closely you will see that most decision-making actually arises from intuitive thinking. When you make a decision to accept a job, buy a house or even what to have for dinner, you begin by accessing your intuitive felt-sense of what feels right. Thoughts and actions follow after this contact at the pre-conceptual intuitive feeling level. The ego claims to be in control, but actually the ego played very little part in the decision making process. Mindfulness not only frees the mind from the grip of compulsive habitual reactivity, but also opens awareness to the intuitive and creative dimension of the larger psyche. The practice of mindfulness allows us to access this deeper intuitive space and from this place of inner freedom intuitive intelligence flourishes. As the mathematician Alan Turing said,

Mathematical reasoning may be regarded rather schematically as the exercise of a combination of two facilities, which we may call intuition and ingenuity.

*Satipanna* is the intuitive intelligence that shines through when there is mindfulness and arises in the fertile ground of *satisampajanna*. When thoughts, actions and words arise under the direction of *satipanna*, they will be much more effective and in tune with reality and the needs of the present moment. It is not our intention to replace thinking with pure intuition, but to make this intuitive ground and creative space the foundation for skillful thinking and action. In fact intuition has been described as a kind of superior logic, a powerful and direct expression of intelligence. To quote Robert Graves,

Intuition is the supra-logic that cuts out all the routine processes of thought and leaps straight from the problem to the answer.

The intuitive mind works through the language of feelings (*vedana*) and sensitivity to these subtle intuitive feelings is the primary way to access the intuitive intelligence of *satipanna*. We can sense what needs to happen through monitoring the subtle changes in feeling-tone. *Satipanna* coupled with the sensitive

mindfulness of *vedana* provides a powerful guide that will promote skillful thoughts and actions during daily life and ultimately such intelligent action will always facilitate the resolution of *dukkha*.

In mindfulness meditation, we deliberately use mindfulness to explore the feeling level of whatever we experience. This is particularly important when we encounter *dukkha* in the form of painful emotions. If you focus mindfully on an emotion like anger you may find that the deeper felt-sense level of the emotion is more about feeling hurt than feeling angry. Following the felt-sense of feeling hurt may reveal an underlying sadness and beneath that there may be a feeling of loneliness and beneath that a feeling of abandonment. Staying with the felt-sense of abandonment you may notice that something shifts internally and somehow the whole emotional complex, including the original anger becomes less intense and may even resolve altogether. This is a common experience during *vipassana*, or insight meditation and is called Experiential Resolution. By following the intuitive level of feelings under the natural direction of *satipanna*, we are taken through a sequence of subtle changes and it is the conscious experience of these subtle feelings that results in the resolution of an emotional complex.

## FREEDOM FROM ATTACHMENT TO SELF

*Satipanna* is the inner intuitive intelligence that guides the psyche towards freedom and inner balance. Freedom implies space and when we can relate to our inner suffering with spaciousness then we create a safe place for change. Wisdom and intelligence begin to unfold only when we let go of identification, attachment and delusion. There has to be a clear space that is free from the clutter of reactivity, free of the ego (*atta*) and the blind beliefs and habitual patterns of personality (*sakkayaditthi*). This does not imply that we should try to get rid of the contents of our personality, because the problem is never in the contents (*sankharas*) of the mind, but in how we relate to the contents. If we cling out of ignorance, then the contents will control us, but if we maintain a relationship based on *satisampajanna* then we will be free from the control of mind and with this freedom comes an infinity of new possibilities. This is the essence of intuitive wisdom, or *satipanna*. The Buddha outlined this as follows:

Whatever is material shape, past, future, present, subjective or objective, gross or subtle, mean or excellent, whether it is far or near, all material shape should be seen by perfect intuitive wisdom as it really is: "This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self."

Whatever is feeling, whatever is perception, whatever are habitual tendencies, whatever is consciousness, past, future, present, subjective or objective, gross or subtle, mean or excellent, whether it is far or near, all should be seen by perfect intuitive wisdom as it really is: "This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self."

"Me and mine," or *atta* and *attaniya* in Pali, refers to the process of blind attachment (*upadana*) to the subjective reactions of the ego. When you become angry, there is no "you" who becomes angry, only the process of blind identification with this specific emotional reaction. When you become upset, worried or sad, there is no "you" behind these reactions; you are simply the process manifesting these reactions in the present. What we refer to as our personality, or *sakkayaditthi*, is simply the accumulation of all these different subjective reactions to which we have become identified through ignorance. The teachings on *anatta*, or not self, which is perhaps the most central teaching in Buddhism, is about this very observation: that there is no "ego" or "self" that can be found independent of these accumulated habitual reactions. Or, to reduce this statement further: When you react, ego exists; when you cease to react, ego does not exist.

When *satipanna* is operating in the mind, then we no longer attach to subjective reactions and *atta* and *attaniya* cease to exist. We do not create *satipanna*, it arises spontaneously when there is *satisampajanna* and *satisampajanna* arises when there is *sati*. This is living in harmony with *anatta*, which is one of the most important living insights of the awakened mind. As the mind becomes free, we begin to see that who we are is something far beyond the contents of our experience and cannot be defined by any *sankharas* or anything created by the mind. Mindfulness is the path of non-attachment, or *anupadana* and as we let go of more and more of "me and mine," we become free to engage with all the contents of our experience with a new freedom that

enriches experience and reveals a multitude of new possibilities. However, the wisdom of letting go cannot be created by the thinking mind deciding to let go, but happens when we open to the truth of experience with mindfulness. Mindfulness is the direct antidote to both attachment and reactivity and the *avijja* that spawns both. In the very moment when there is *sati* there will also be *anupadana*, without us thinking about it or trying to make ourselves free.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL HOMEOSTASIS

*Satipanna* is the wisdom-intelligence that arises in the present moment when the mind is free to change in a way that leads to the resolution of *dukkha* and the underlying conflicts that sustain *dukkha*. Energetically, *satipanna* directs internal changes that lead to greater stability in the psyche. Mental conflict, anxiety and anger and other states of dis-equilibrium are highly unstable and consume a great deal of energy. Under the guidance of *satipanna* the psyche will naturally move from an energetically unstable state of instability and disorder to an energetically stable state of stability and order. This movement from conflict to harmony, from cognitive dissonance to consonance is the natural movement of the whole psyche towards *dukkhanirodha*, the resolution of *dukkha*. However, for natural resolution to happen there must be complete freedom in the mind, which means freedom from all forms of clinging to “I and mine” and freedom from all forms of subjective reactivity. Conditioned habitual reactivity simply perpetuates ignorance (*avijja*) and inhibits beneficial change and this prevents the realization of *dukkhanirodha*.

The body is regulated by a complex series of responses called *homeostasis*, which literally means “same state,” and which are designed to maintain equilibrium, stability and health. The body adapts to instability created by external or internal stress by initiating self-correcting responses. Muscles and bones become stronger or weaker depending on how much they are used. If blood glucose level becomes elevated after a meal then insulin is secreted to reduce it back to an optimum level. The concentration of oxygen in the blood is carefully controlled and homeostasis increases or decreases the rate of breathing in order to maintain the optimum level to meet the needs of the body

during exercise or rest. Physiological homeostasis clearly involves innate intelligence, because it orchestrates changes that are beneficial and lead to balance, stability and health at the physical level. However, an essential requirement for this body intelligence to be effective is that there exists the state of freedom in which the body can respond to change. In fact, freedom is a fundamental requirement for homeostasis in any system, whether physiological, psychological or physical. On Earth, water flows down hill under the influence of gravity on its journey to the ocean, but it must have the freedom to move if it is to reach this state of maximum stability. If it is frozen or trapped in a rock pool on top of a mountain, then the water will not be free to move and the journey to the sea will be interrupted. Similarly, if something prevents the ability of the body to respond to change, then the body is prevented from restoring equilibrium and physical suffering or disease will follow.

The principle of dynamic homeostasis as observed in the body and in the physical world also applies to the psyche and this is called *psychological homeostasis*. There is a natural state of equilibrium for the psyche, which is free from conflict and suffering. This is the state of *dukkhanirodha*, the extinction of suffering in which there is no dissonance created through the reactivity of grasping, aversion and delusion. This is the state of maximum energetic stability, harmony and equilibrium, just as *dukkha* represents the state of instability and dis-equilibrium. If given the freedom to change, the psyche will naturally move towards an optimum state of inner stability by making intelligent changes that resolve inner conflict and *dukkha*. However, the defining word is *freedom* to change and if the mind is limited by conditioned habitual reactivity and blind attachment, then it is not free to respond in the best possible way to resolve *dukkha* and restore stability. Habitual reactivity puts constraints on the psyche that inhibit the expression of the innate intuitive intelligence of *satipanna* and prevent beneficial change. Just as frozen water is prevented from moving in its natural journey to the ocean, so the psyche is unable to resolve *dukkha* if frozen by blind attachment and reactivity.

This is where mindfulness becomes so important, because mindfulness frees the psyche and allows *satipanna* to arise and guide the transformation of *dukkha*. Mindfulness is equivalent to blowing warm air onto ice causing it to melt and freeing the water so that it can resume its journey towards the ocean. Therefore, we should strive to create this state of inner freedom



that will allow the mind to respond intelligently both internally in the mind as well as externally in the world of relationships with people and with our physical world. This state of freedom from reactivity is called *cetovimutti* and the freedom that allows innate intelligence to direct change is called *pannavimutti*. Mindfulness allows intuitive intelligence to flourish and *satipanna* will always guide the psyche towards a state of maximum stability, balance and harmony at the energetic level.

One of the most interesting aspects of suffering is that, unpleasant as it may be, the pain that accompanies suffering has a positive function, which is to point to any underlying dissonance or conflict in the mind. If we develop a positive relationship to our suffering through mindfulness then we will uncover the natural path that leads to the resolution of *dukkha*. Mindfulness is the mental factor that allows the fire of *dukkha* to be extinguished by freeing the mind and allowing *satipanna* to arise. The solution is always to be found in the problem and the path to the resolution of suffering is mapped out in the internal structure of suffering itself. All that is required is that we awaken to *dukkha* and let our innate intuitive intelligence do the rest. Given freedom to operate, the psyche will always move towards less suffering and greater energetic stability. The Path of Mindfulness is not about trying to solve the problem of suffering through analytical thinking or psychological insight, but about how to free our conscious awareness so that *dukkha* can resolve itself under the influence of *satipanna* and psychological homeostasis.

## 10 THE ACTIVE DIMENSION OF

### MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness (*sati*) is multi-dimensional with active, passive and transformational dimensions that arise when we form an open and non-reactive relationship with our experience. The active dimension consists of vigilance, watchfulness, alertness and heedfulness, called *appamada* in Pali. Such watchfulness is needed to maintain continuity of mindfulness and to recognize when the mind has slipped back into reacting. This is the most basic meaning of *sati*, literally remembering to stay awake and consciously aware of what is happening while it is happening. The passive dimension of *sati* is the response of opening to experience so we can see the subtle inner structure of experience. This is the quality of *satisampajanna*, the pure knowing through mindfulness of our experience. The third quality of *sati* is the transformational dimension. This involves awakening to our innate intuitive intelligence of *satipanna* that leads to the transformation and resolution of *dukkha* and the liberation of the mind and spirit from habitual reactivity. Thus, whenever we practice mindfulness, or *satipatthana* we progress through each dimension, beginning with *appamada*, which allows *satisampajanna* to arise, which in turn creates the freedom and therapeutic space in which *satipanna* can arise and transform the mind. Ultimately it is *satipanna* that acts as our inner guide and directs the process of transformation. It is this movement from reactivity to non-reactivity, from clinging to non-clinging, from ignorance to awakening that ultimately leads to the resolution of emotional conflict and all manifestations of *dukkha*. The relationship of mindfulness contains all three aspects of *appamada*, *satisampajanna* and *satipanna* and they arise together when *sati* is present.

Mindfulness brings about a fundamental change in how we relate to the contents of our mind, how we relate to other people and how we relate to the world in general. However, the path begins with the most fundamental active dimension of mindfulness, which is learning to recognize reactivity when it

arises. Through this simple awakening, we create the opportunity to stop the propagation of reactivity and to stop feeding the flames of blind attachment that feed *dukkha* and the endless round of habitual reactivity that is *samsara*.

## VIGILANCE

Above all, the first function of mindfulness practice is to overcome ignorance (*avijja*) and the unawareness of what is happening in the present moment. The natural state for the mind is one of continual activity, moving like a humming bird from flower to flower or like a monkey swinging through the trees in search of fruit. Whilst this is perfectly normal, it does reduce our conscious awareness to something more like daydreaming or sleepwalking in which we perform actions mechanically. This can be perfectly adequate for mundane activities, but it does lead to a degree of sensory impoverishment and inflexibility that leaves us vulnerable, because it reduces our ability to adapt intelligently to change. When we react to experience, what we see is our reaction and not the richness of what is before us. Our perception becomes mechanical, dull and impoverished. It is what we don't see that is most damaging and incomplete awareness leaves us vulnerable. In addition, if we react mechanically based on the past, how we respond in the present will also be incomplete and poorly adapted to the unique needs of the present. In order to restore flexibility, adaptability and to revitalize the quality of our sensory experience, we need to develop an advanced degree of presence through mindfulness and vigilance. In effect, the most basic and primary activity of mindfulness practice is simply recognizing when mindfulness is absent and when we are not present and then responding by re-establishing presence in the here and now. This response to the recognition of non-presence is the heart of mindfulness practice that we will repeat over and over again during meditation or during the practice of mindfulness throughout the day. It is only through the clear awareness of reactivity, that reactivity can be stopped in its tracks.

The root meaning of the word “vigilance” means to “stay awake” and for mindfulness practice this means watching closely for the reactions of mind, speech and body. This active dimension of mindfulness is called *appamada*, in Pali, which means

“heedfulness” and is the starting point for all mindfulness practice and meditation. *Sati* is often defined as a form of recollection or remembering to bring the attention back to the present so that one knows what is happening while it is happening. It takes considerable effort and patience to develop *appamada*, but it is absolutely essential if we are to overcome the entrenched habits of the reactive mind. In the Dhammapada we find the passage,

Heedfulness is the Deathless path,  
heedlessness the path to death.  
Those who are heedful do not die,  
heedless are as if already dead.

Mindfulness is often referred to as the path to the Deathless (*amatapada*) that leads to the unconditioned (*asankhata*) state of consciousness in which there is perfect freedom from the conditioned (*sankhata*) contents of our mind. The state of consciousness that is conditioned by blind attachment to *sankharas* created by reactivity is the essence of death, because all *sankharas* are impermanent and subject to decay and eventual extinction. Those who are in the grip of conditioned mental reactivity are controlled by the *sankharas* that arise and pass away in their minds; they are condemned to a life of slavery and bondage, which is the death of the psyche. In contrast, the truly authentic and awakened human being has the inner freedom to fully engage and respond to life with intelligence and wisdom. To be truly alive, one must be free from the constraints of blind conditioning and the habitual reactivity of *samsara*.

We must be free to be happy and *appamada* is the beginning of the path to both freedom and happiness. In conventional understanding, freedom usually implies freedom *to do* what we like. From the Buddha’s view, freedom means freedom *from* conditioned reactivity. The last words said by the Buddha on his deathbed are reputed to be as follows:

Vaya-dhamma sankhara, appamadena sampadetha.  
Transient are all creations of the mind. Work out your  
deliverance with heedfulness.

The cultivation of mindfulness is a skill that has to be learned and like any other skill, benefits from practice. Your task is to develop heedfulness and catch the reactions of *cittasankhara* as

soon as possible after they emerge so that you do not become blindly attached to them and compelled to become the *sankharas*. You do not have to do anything with the thoughts and feelings that arise; it is sufficient to just know that they have arisen and then respond to them with mindfulness. In this way we no longer perpetuate *avijja* and we do not allow *sankharas* to proliferate into all manner of secondary reactivity. This is a difficult practice and requires great patience, but the benefits of developing the skill of *appamada* are immeasurable. Each moment of mindfulness is a step on the path to the Deathless and freedom that benefits all.

## STOP, LOOK AND LISTEN

Whether mindfulness is practiced as vigilant awareness from moment-to-moment throughout the activities of the day or in focused meditation sessions, the basic approach of mindfulness practice is the same and involves the three basic steps that we all learned as children when crossing the road: STOP, LOOK and LISTEN.

**STOP:** Notice when you are reacting and respond by letting go of the content or story line of the reaction. This is *appamada*, which is the beginning point of *sati*.

**LOOK:** Apply mindfulness and investigate the detailed structure of your experience. This is *satisampajanna*.

**LISTEN:** Be attentive to the intuitive direction of change at the feeling level and allow that change to take place. This is *satipanna*.

The Path of Mindfulness is a practice of learning to STOP being blindly seduced by thought reactions and emotional reactions as they arise and to STOP the secondary proliferation of further thinking and emotional reactivity (*papanca*). Before we can stop reactivity from proliferating we must learn to recognize a reaction when it arises. With practice we can refine this even further and recognize the impulse to react before the reaction takes form. To develop this aspect of mindfulness we must learn to watch our mind with the keen attention of a hunter as he looks for the signs of his quarry. All mental reactions have an impulsive emotional quality and we can develop our ability to detect reactions by

looking for disturbances in the energy field of our consciousness. Reactions create agitation and tension depending on whether the reaction is based on wanting, aversion or delusion. All reactions create a degree of conflict and tension between *sankhara* and reality and this tension is the fundamental energy of *dukkha*. When we train ourselves to recognize this agitation caused by reactivity, we are training ourselves to recognize *dukkha* as it arises, not as an abstract concept, but as a concrete reality. This is the primary mission for followers of The Path of Mindfulness: to awaken to *dukkha* in all its forms and to respond by forming a relationship with *dukkha* based on mindfulness and compassion.

During the activities of the day, we cultivate a keen attention to any manifestation of the agitation of *dukkha* that may arise in our relationships, when we are speaking, driving a car, doing our work or thinking about the past or future. Wherever tension arises, that is where we respond with mindfulness and the objective of our practice is to develop vigilance to such a degree that no reactions escape our attention. During mindfulness meditation (*vipassana*), we take an even closer look at our mind and actively search for any manifestation of *dukkha* and respond to them with mindfulness.

In the very moment of recognition there will be a temporary release from the impulse to react. If we respond with mindfulness, then the reaction is prevented from taking on form and proliferating. The response of mindfulness effectively interrupts the reaction and creates a space or interval. This in itself can make a tremendous impact in breaking the habit of reactivity and the more experience you gain in STOPPING, the more you will develop the power to resist reactivity. This is an art, but like any other skill it can be learned and improved with practice and practice. Eventually, the response of mindfulness becomes a habit in itself, a skillful habit that leads towards balance and freedom from reactivity, rather than perpetuating further reactivity and suffering. This skill of vigilance and careful attention is the foundation for the Path of Mindfulness and all spiritual development.

STOPPING also requires that you take responsibility for your own *dukkha* and recognizing that ultimately it is your choice whether you react out of ignorance or respond out of wisdom. You recognize that you alone are responsible for your happiness or suffering, rather than blaming external conditions for causing your agitation and unhappiness. Living generates pain, but

suffering, or *dukkha* is generated by the mind in reaction to the pain through blind attachment to habitual reactivity.

The Path of Mindfulness is based on the clear understanding that you do not have to remain a slave to your habitual reactivity. If a reaction of anger, anxiety or fear arises, you do not have to become angry, worried or afraid. The only reason you react with these emotions is because you have become conditioned to react in these particular ways and you are blind to this habitual reactivity. Reactivity causes you to become ignorant of the cause of your suffering and this ignorance and conditioning is what you overcome through the practice of mindfulness. Literally, you are learning to say “NO!” to the compulsive drive to become angry, upset, worried, frustrated, depressed or any of the multitude of reactions that assail you during the day or during meditation. This is the courageous proclamation of the spiritual warrior who chooses to live on his or her terms, rather than as a slave to habitual existence. In the words of Dylan Thomas,

Do not go gentle into that good night - rage, rage  
against the dying of the light.

Do not allow yourself to be seduced into becoming upset, disappointed, angry, worried or by any other creation (*sankhara*) of the conditioned mind. This requires effort and courage to resist the force of habit, to rage against ignorance, “the dying of the light” and the closing of the mind, which is the essence of death.

It is important to have the right attitude when you practice STOPPING. After saying “NO!” to a reaction, you should then respond with *metta* and *upekkha*, positive openness and equanimity, which is the essence of mindfulness. Mindfulness does not stop after the recognition of a reaction, but should always be followed by a response of opening and investigation. Mindfulness is a turning towards experience and not a turning away from experience, including the painful face of *dukkha*. Thought reactions and emotional reactions are not, in themselves the enemy; the problem is only in the way you relate to them. If you blindly accept them through ignorance, then you become attached to the reactions and they become habitual. If you react against them with aversion or wanting something different, then you simply reinforce the original primary reactions. Any form of reactivity has the undesirable effect of repressing the original primary emotions and building a reactive superstructure that keep them imprisoned and repressed. Repression cultivates ignorance

(*avijja*) and this prevents the resolution of *dukkha*. The reactions of aversion, like greed and delusion simply feed reactivity and solidify inner emotional conflict, making the mind less malleable and less able to transform and resolve *dukkha*. What is needed is an alternative response, a more healthy response in which you greet each thought, emotion or other reactive *sankhara* with non-reactive mindfulness. This is meeting fire with water. In this stillness and spaceousness you create a safe space in which reactions have a chance to soften, unfold and change. What is needed is an attitude of firmness to prevent the proliferation of further reactivity coupled with kindness and sensitivity that creates the best conditions for bringing about change and healing the pain of *dukkha* with the cooling water of wisdom and compassion.

After STOPPING comes the response of LOOKING. Mindfulness is the art of relationship based on careful observation and this quality of looking is not tarnished by the preconceptions of the ego and is not tangled up in the reactivity of the ego. It is the pure *knowing* of what is being observed as it is and this is called *satisampajanna*. Looking begins with awakening to what arises in consciousness as thoughts, feelings and sensations, but mindfulness does not stop there. Mindfulness is a much more dynamic and active process of investigation in which we engage with the contents of our experience with a mind eager to learn. This is the factor of *dhammavicaya*, the investigation of phenomena, which is the second of the Seven Factors of Enlightenment described by the Buddha that lead to liberation from suffering. The first factor is mindfulness and the factors that follow the foundation of mindfulness and investigation are energy, rapture, tranquility, *samadhi* and equanimity. Mindfulness, the first factor, is the process of establishing the right relationship with our experience, based on complete openness and non-reactivity, but this must be followed by a thorough exploration of what is inside our experience, what surrounds our experience; in fact exploring every detail of the inner structure of our experience. When we establish mindfulness of a thought or a feeling or an external object, we embark on an intriguing voyage of discovery. This is not a voyage of analysis and thinking about the experience, but a voyage of *awakening* and fully *knowing* our present experience in all its dynamic richness. This investigation does not involve a subjective observer, evaluating experience, because that would simply be another manifestation of reactivity, conditioned by the past.



Instead, *dhammavicaya* is the process of allowing experience to unfold by itself and come into conscious awareness, without the interference of an observer. This is why *dhammavicaya* has to be grounded in *sati* and cannot arise in the absence of mindfulness. However, when mindfulness is established and sustained, then the experience will differentiate and unfold by itself.

Needless to say, in order for mindfulness to be effective there must be active LISTENING so that we can receive the unfolding content of experience that arises from LOOKING. The particular type of listening that we use in mindfulness is attention to the intuitive and experiential level of our experience. This means letting go of the words and thinking and the content of our experience and opening to the feeling level of our experience with a quality of receptive stillness. This kind of listening is often called Noble Silence, because it is beyond the conditioned world of thoughts and opinions. It is a space into which experience can unfold in great detail and subtlety and experience is seen as a dynamic process of phenomena arising and passing away. It is the awareness and knowing of this unfolding content that is the essence of freedom and in this freedom, the innate wisdom-intelligence factor of *satipanna* comes into existence. This is what directs transformation that leads to the resolution of *dukkha*. This is the healing space of the Buddha mind that is a natural feature of the human spirit and that is revealed when there is freedom from conditioning; a freedom that comes from the relationship of mindfulness.

In the practice of STOP, LOOK and LISTEN, we cultivate mindfulness throughout the day at each and every encounter with our mental reactions. In meditation sessions, we develop this to a fine art and strengthen the factor of mindfulness and equanimity in the mind. Mindfulness begins with STOPPING, proceeds to LOOKING and is followed by active LISTENING and this cultivates freedom and choice and the ability to engage and respond in a balanced way guided by intuitive intelligence. This awakened state of living is quite different to the usual habit of blind conditioned reactivity.

## NON-ATTACHMENT

As Ajahn Chah so eloquently expressed the path of letting go,

Do everything with a mind that lets go. Do not expect any praise or reward. If you let go a little, you will have a little peace. If you let go a lot, you will have a lot of peace. If you let go completely, you will know complete peace and freedom. Your struggles with the world will have come to an end.

The Path of Mindfulness is the path of non-attachment. In Pali, this is called *anupadana*, non-attachment to mental reactivity. This includes freedom from attachment to sensual desire (*kamupadana*), freedom from attachment to beliefs (*ditthupadana*), freedom from conventions (*silabbatupadana*) and most importantly of all, freedom from attachment to the subjective habitual reactions of the ego (*attavadupadana*). If you relate to the experiences of life, to the irritations and frustrations, disappointments and pain as well as the joys and moments of happiness with this relaxed attention of non-attachment, then you will be free to fully experience life and free to respond wisely to the changing conditions of life.

Now it should be made clear that non-attachment is not the same as detachment, which implies a degree of aversion, avoidance and indifference. Non-attachment is actually a process of getting closer and more engaged with experience, including *dukkha*, but from a position of non-reactivity and equanimity (*upekkha*). The whole purpose of cultivating non-attachment is so that we can engage more fully and be more present for our internal mental experiences and this includes being more present with others in our personal relationships and being more present for our environment. Non-attachment and full engagement go hand in hand, because it is only when the mind is free of attachment that it can receive and know what is happening in the present and this is essential for skillful engagement. Mindfulness brings about non-attachment quite spontaneously, because attachment (*upadana*) depends on *avijja*, the unawareness of present experience and mindfulness is the direct awareness of experience. The two are mutually exclusive and when ignorance is removed, attachment simultaneously falls away. This is taking the path of non-attachment to a far higher level than trying to deliberately let go, which is little more than the ego trying to control the mind. Allowing the ego to solve the problems of the mind is like asking the fox to guard the farmer's chickens. We should understand that the mind that is controlled by reactivity is not able to effectively rid itself of its own attachments and

ignorance. All that it can do is replace one set of attachments with another set of attachments.

Mindfulness is a different kind of conscious relationship in which there is no fragmentation of the mind into the controller and the controlled. When we follow The Path of Mindfulness we do not try to get rid of our attachments, but simply envelop them in the spaciousness of pure awareness. Without reacting further, without creating the superstructure of habitual secondary reactivity, reactions simply lose their power to dominate us. That power depends on ignorance and if we replace ignorance with the pure knowing that comes with mindfulness, then reactivity is effectively neutralized. This is the mind letting go of itself, which is quite different than one part of the mind trying to control another part through coercion. Blind attachment sustains *dukkha* while non-attachment nourishes the transformation and resolution of *dukkha*. Mindfulness facilitates the shift from *dukkha* to the resolution of *dukkha*.

# 11 THE PASSIVE DIMENSION OF MINDFULNESS

The active side of mindfulness is very important, because it helps us recognize when we are reacting. Without this basic recognition of what is happening as it is happening nothing can change and this is the most fundamental step in the battle against *avijja* and the domination by habitual reactivity. In that moment of recognition it becomes possible to respond by letting go of the impulse to react. However, this is just the beginning of the response of mindfulness. We need to follow through by opening the mind and heart to see the subtle inner structure of experience. This is the response of investigation into the reality of whatever we perceive with mindfulness. This important aspect of mindfulness is called *dhammavicaya*, the investigation of mental phenomena with mindfulness. Whether you are watching a waterfall, listening to a friend or focusing on the contents of your mind, the response of mindfulness is to take a keen interest in whatever is perceived through the six sense doors of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and thinking. Rather than our usual reaction of carelessly dismissing objects according to our past conditioning and attachment to beliefs about what is important or unimportant, we choose to respond to all phenomena with a freshness of mind and an appetite to investigate and learn.

## INNER STILLNESS

Mindfulness is deliberately making the effort to be fully present with whatever is experienced, internally or externally with a mind that is silent and open. This is the art of listening and requires inner stillness and deep sensitivity to the experience of the present moment. Zen master Gensha described this presence of mindfulness as,

a stillness, which abides in the present.

The mind has a very strong tendency to react to what it sees, hears, smells, tastes, touches and thinks. It becomes caught up in activity and loses that inner stillness. Mindfulness brings us back to that place of stillness and tranquility time and time again. However, stillness and tranquility by itself is not the point of The Path of Mindfulness. What is far more important is to develop this stillness *in relationship* to the objects of our experience, whether external sense objects or the inner mental objects of thoughts, memories and emotions. If agitation arises in the mind, mindfulness allows us to *relate* to the agitation, without being overwhelmed by the agitation, which is our usual response when we react. If anger arises, mindfulness allows us to be still with the anger. If fear or anxiety arises, mindfulness allows us to sit with the fear or anxiety, listening with complete stillness. Mindfulness is the response of stillness to the pain and happiness, gain and loss, success and failure, praise and blame and all the chaos of changing conditions that visit us in daily life or in our meditation sessions. This unique stillness in relationship to the world is called *samadhi*, from *sam*, which means totality, *a-*, towards and *-dha*, to hold. *Samadhi* is the state of mental stability and harmony that comes from having the right relationship of mindfulness with the objects of our experience.

Whatever the object that we perceive, we seek to develop this stillness from one moment to the next such that every aspect of our life is touched by stillness. The stillness of being fully present is extraordinarily powerful and transformative and for this reason it is often called the Noble Stillness. With this noble stillness we can perceive the full richness of experience and transcend the conventional world of illusion and superficiality. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi,

In the attitude of silence the soul finds the path in a clearer light, and what is elusive and deceptive resolves itself into crystal clearness. Our life is a long and arduous quest after Truth.

The more we see of the truth, the more freedom we will know. Stillness is freedom and when there is freedom from the constraints of our habitual reactivity, we create a fertile therapeutic space in which transformation and skillful action can arise. In this stillness, the wisdom-intelligence of *satipanna* flourishes and purifies our actions and “what is elusive and

deceptive resolves itself into crystal clearness.” We struggle so hard to try and find the answers, when what is really needed is that we cultivate an inner stillness and attentiveness and allow the psyche to heal itself and to present solutions based on our innate and intuitive intelligence.

Complete openness and stillness of the thinking mind allows new insights to arise, which facilitates creativity and problem solving and supports the resolution of core emotional complexes. As J. Krishnamurti said,

When the mind is still, tranquil, not seeking any answers or any solution, neither resisting nor avoiding - it is only then that there can be a regeneration, because then the mind is capable of perceiving what is true; and it is truth that liberates, not your effort to be free.

Krishnamurti was keenly aware of the supreme importance of the still mind, the Noble Stillness that does not grab on to the subjective reactions of the ego. The ego can solve things at the superficial level, but not effectively at the deeper level of the emotions. The effort to control emotions by the ego, or the force of thinking, invariably creates division and fragmentation in the mind and such inner conflict will create more suffering. When there is noble stillness and *satisampajanna*, then in that moment we are letting go of the limited control of the reactive ego and allowing our conscious awareness to open to a much deeper intuitive level of our experience. When there is no interruption, our experience will begin to unfold from the inside out, rather than having change imposed from the ego. Being in harmony with this natural unfolding and being aware of experience as a process is the heart of the spiritual path that leads to purification of the mind and liberation from the mechanical world of *samsara*.

## SAFE HAVEN

The best way to work with emotional reactivity or any form of *dukkha* is to create a space around the emotion in which it can exist in safety and without being threatened by the judgmental ego. Often, just this simple attitude of respect and acceptance is enough to bring about transformation and healing. Many

emotional conflicts will resolve themselves if we simply provide a safe space in which they can exist. The importance of being fully present and non-reactive is immensely healing and transformative. This phenomenon is called Contact Resolution and is one of the main mechanisms through which mindfulness heals suffering. As with someone in pain, the best action is often to simply hold them in your arms and comfort them. This genuine contact and presence is often more important than advice or wise words. The Path of Mindfulness teaches us to relate to our inner *dukkha* in the same way, being present as a friend and caressing our pain with great care and love. This is the perfection of mindfulness, which is called *sammāsati* in which there is not just the bare recognition of mental phenomena, but also the response of compassion and a quality of friendliness called *metta*.

Spaciousness is always beneficial to a mind in pain and is synonymous with freedom, just as contraction is a characteristic of the reactive mind. There is a popular Zen proverb that the best way to control a wild bull is to place it in a very large field. When there is plenty of space surrounding the bull then there is much less risk of being hurt by the bull, no matter how fierce it is. By the same token there is much less chance that the bull will hurt itself. This quality of creating a safe therapeutic space in which painful emotions can exist is central to mindfulness practice. Besides creating a safe haven, the spacious dimension of an open mind allows things to move, change and unfold at the experiential level. Openness creates the right environment for transformation and resolution of inner conflict by allowing things to untangle and unfold in full conscious awareness. Consciousness is in fact another name for this therapeutic space, but this variety is pure unconditioned consciousness is not constrained by the contents of the thinking mind. It is free from any content and therefore can be fully present for all mental phenomena, including suffering.

## BARE ATTENTION

Bare attention is a term used by many *Dhamma* teachers and gives us an idea about the simplicity and uncomplicated nature of *sati*. It is bare in the sense that nothing is added to the direct experience of an object perceived through the senses. There is no “dressing up” of experience by adding layers of interpretation based on beliefs and preconceptions. Mindfulness is the

witnessing and knowing of any experience in its pure, original state, which is closer to objective reality and truth. Mindfulness is always about bringing the mind back from the world of illusion to the truth of things as they are. To quote Robert Frost,

Anything more than the truth would be too much.

All the subtle and not so subtle reactions of the thinking mind and the emotional mind are definitely more than the truth, because they are created through our reactions to truth, which is not the same as original truth. Mindfulness is a response that simplifies experience into the knowing of experience as it is happening in the present moment. When you practice mindfulness you will soon notice a profound change in your perceptions and you will discover a richer dimension of experience. As Marcel Proust said,

The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking  
new lands but seeing with new eyes.

The mind is always more than ready to form opinions and react to sensory experience by labelling and categorizing, which is seeing through the “old eyes” of past conditioning. But truth can never be reduced to labels and concepts and in fact, these superficial representations are one of the many faces of *avijja*. We tend to project our ego onto experience, which obscures the truth and keeps us in superficial world of illusion. Knowing with bare attention means putting aside the prejudices of the past and dwelling in the pure knowing (*satisampajanna*) of things in the present. Without the distortions of the past, we are more likely to respond with intelligence and wisdom (*satipanna*) to the present, because we are at last able to see reality as it is, without distortion. With bare attention the truth illuminates the soul and we see with new eyes, the eyes of wisdom and freedom.

We are so habituated to react to sense experiences that we never actually see what is in front of us. All we see are our reactions: cognitive reactions of thinking about what we are experiencing; perceptual reactions and memories; and emotional reactions of wanting and aversion. Every type of reaction is actually a diversion from the direct awareness of things as they are and this takes us away from the pure knowing of things in their primary state. When we are not able to see things as they are, we become less able to respond wisely to the present moment, because we cannot see the subtlety of what is needed. In



other words, the obstruction of knowing, or *avijja*, prevents the arising of intuitive intelligence (*satipanna*). This is particularly relevant when working with emotional complexes, where the process that leads to the resolution of an inner conflict can be very subtle and not obvious to the thinking mind. If we are unable to see this experiential subtlety then the emotion will not be able to change. The movement of bare attention allows us to move from the superficial to the depth of our experience, from the gross to the subtle and this is the most important movement in consciousness that happens during the practice of mindfulness, especially during mindfulness meditation, or *vipassana*.

## CHOICELESS AWARENESS

Choiceless awareness was a favorite term used by the influential Indian philosopher J. Krishnamurti, who emphasized the importance of direct experience, without the interference of all the prejudices and expectations of the subjective mind. As Krishnamurti said,

Freedom is not a reaction: freedom is not choice. It is man's pretence that because he has choice he is free. Freedom is pure observation without direction, without fear of punishment and reward. Freedom is without motive; freedom is not at the end of the evolution of man but lies in the first step of his existence. In observation one begins to discover the lack of freedom. Freedom is found in the choiceless awareness of our daily existence and activity.

Freedom means many things, but the essence of psychological freedom arises when we can fully engage with the present without the baggage of our reactive conditioning from the past. There is little freedom when the past conditions the present, because the actions that result will seldom be in alignment with the real needs of the present. This lack of flexibility and intelligent responsiveness to the present is the characteristic of slavery and spiritual ignorance. True spiritual freedom is not something that can be created by the manipulations of the ego (*atta*), which tries to control existence through the narrow and distorted views of the reactive mind, but arises when the ego

ceases to exist. Also, Krishnamurti taught us that the time for applying choiceless awareness is in every aspect of our daily life and not just in meditation and this is what makes the practice of mindfulness a spiritual path, rather than just another technique for the ego to use to control the psyche. It is through the very practice of awakening to everyday experience, moment to moment, that we discover true freedom. With this understanding, life and meditation become one and the same.

Choiceless awareness means that we allow experience to unfold naturally, without interference, but this does not mean that we cannot take responsibility and choose a subject to contemplate with mindfulness. The underlying purpose of mindfulness practice is to facilitate the resolution of *dukkha* and the conditions that give rise to suffering and conflict. If you are affected by a painful memory or you have a specific worry about the future, then the skillful response is to bring such memories or worries into the present as subjects for mindfulness meditation. However, the practice of mindfulness of past recollections or future worries is not the same as indulging in thinking and worrying. In the practice of mindfulness, the primary focus is to establish an objective relationship with the *present* experience of the selected painful memory or anxiety-thoughts. Present awareness is like a screen onto which you can project mental phenomena for investigation. It is a space into which you can place thoughts, feelings and reactions for observation. After you have selected a subject for meditation, you then exercise choiceless awareness and allow the emotion to unfold in its own way, without interference. This is very important, because how things unfold is not a rational or linear process, but a highly complex process that involves many factors that you cannot know ahead of time. This is the nature of experiential unfolding, which is directed by the psyche and not by the ego.

Mindfulness provides one of the best tools to prepare for the future by allowing us to cultivate balance and non-reactivity as we contemplate our worries. Mindfulness of the past creates the best environment for resolving the emotional reactivity of any past traumas that have become repressed and solidified in the mind. Suffering is suffering, whether from the past, present or anticipation of the future. However, the resolution of suffering can only happen in the present, therefore all manifestations of *dukkha* should be brought into the present and cared for with mindfulness. In the therapeutic space of mindfulness all manifestations of *dukkha* have the freedom to transform and

resolve themselves under the guidance of our intuitive intelligence, or *satipanna*. However, this healing can only occur when there is complete freedom from any movement of the thinking mind and this is to be found in the choiceless awareness of *dukkha*.

# 12 THE TRANSFORMATIONAL DIMENSION OF MINDFULNESS

Perhaps the most significant insight gained by the Buddha on his enlightenment is that when you touch *dukkha* with mindfulness, it changes and when you develop a relationship based on mindfulness, *dukkha* is transformed and resolved.

After we encounter a sensory experience, either internally in the form of a thought or emotion, or externally through the sense organs, we are faced with a critical decision point. We can either react according to habitual conditioning or we can respond with non-reactive mindfulness. Reactivity simply intensifies mental stress and *dukkha*, like pouring oil onto a fire. Reactivity also perpetuates *samsara* by reinforcing the subjective reactive habits of the self so that they repeat over and over again. But perhaps the most unfortunate aspect of reactivity is that it effectively prevents resolution (*dukkhanirodha*) by distracting our attention away from suffering into secondary reactivity. Reactive Displacement has the effect of repressing primary reactions and hidden from consciousness, repressed emotions are unable to change and resolve themselves. The inner emotional conflict is kept out of the reach of *satipanna*, the innate healing intelligence of the psyche.

The other possibility available to us is that we respond to *dukkha* with mindfulness, which is the response of knowing, without becoming entangled in the contents of the reaction. With this pure knowing we are able to see what is most skillful and wholesome and respond accordingly. We allow action to arise out of the totality of the situation, rather than blindly reacting out of habit.

Mindfulness supports therapeutic change in many different ways and can be used in a general way for stress reduction and for promoting general psychological health as in the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn of the University of Massachusetts Medical School. This program teaches mindfulness to help individuals develop present, body-centered awareness that helps counter the

proliferation of negative thinking and rumination that sustains emotional stress. This approach can be very effective for the treatment of depression and anxiety disorders in what is called Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT).

Besides using mindfulness to cultivate general present-centered awareness, there is another approach in which mindfulness is applied directly to emotional mind states to facilitate beneficial changes. This is called Mindfulness Meditation Therapy (MMT). Meditation refers to the focused application of mindfulness to an object such as the breath or physical sensations to develop presence and stability of mind. In MMT, the meditator makes the emotion the primary object for meditation. In this form of psychotherapy the therapist guides the individual to develop a mindfulness-based relationship with his or her direct present experience of an emotion. With practice, the individual can sustain a stable relationship with his or her emotional trauma, anxiety or pain, without becoming reactive and this opens the way for transformation and resolution. This is The Path of Mindfulness, or *satipatthana* applied directly for the resolution of emotional suffering, or *dukkha*, which is a primary direction for all mindfulness meditation as taught by the Buddha.

Mindfulness Meditation Therapy proceeds in three phases: RECOGNITION, RELATIONSHIP and RESOLUTION.

The first benefit from cultivating a mindfulness-based relationship with *dukkha* is that it helps break the patterns of habitual reactivity that keep us in bondage and ignorance and this is an absolute prerequisite for inner transformation. Through careful and systematic attention, we learn to recognize reactions as they arise. We learn to see anger before it takes on the form of unskillful words and actions. We learn to notice the petty reactions of frustration, irritability, impatience and disappointment as well as the significant emotional reactions of fear and anxiety. Transformation in the individual or in relationships and families depends on being able to recognize reactivity as it arises. As long as we remain blind to our reactivity and in the grip of *avijja*, then nothing can change and the patterns of *dukkha* will continue indefinitely. Mindful recognition is an immensely important skill, especially if we then respond with mindfulness, which means that we open to our experience and investigate the deeper structure of our emotional reactivity. If we cultivate an attentive relationship with reactions and refrain from reacting further with self-criticism and aversion or blind

identification, then we open up a space in which change becomes possible.

The second phase in MMT is to develop this non-reactive relationship and establish a *therapeutic space*. This is called the RELATIONSHIP phase in which we build and sustain a relationship based on openness, compassion and stability of mind. In the mindfulness-based relationship, we cultivate complete presence with the felt-sense of the emotion. The term “presence” is a particularly good description of the mindfulness-based relationship and indicates the sense of turning towards experience, including *dukkha*, rather than turning away from experience, which is exactly what happens when we react. When being with a friend in need or a child in pain, it is more often the quality of our presence that is sought, rather than our advice. In this same way, we can learn to be fully present for our inner pain with complete attention and openness and friendliness, which is called *metta*. Through mindfulness we establish a safe zone in which the emotional complex can exist, unmolested by the ego and its patterns of secondary reactivity and in which we as the observer can exist, free from the compulsion to react. The direct experience of this relationship has a profound effect and is central to the therapeutic process. When both the observer and the observed are at peace with each other, transformation becomes a reality.

The third phase in MMT occurs spontaneously in the therapeutic space established through mindfulness involves the experiential unfolding and differentiation of feelings. This process leads to the transformation and eventual resolution of emotional reactivity and is called the RESOLUTION phase of Mindfulness Meditation Therapy.

All emotions including anger, depression, anxiety and fear or phobias have an internal structure and there is a direct relationship between internal structure and the intensity of feeling. A change in feeling produces a corresponding change in the internal structure of an emotion and a change in the structure of an emotion changes then the intensity of feeling. This is known as the Structural Theory of Emotions, which is central for understanding the process of psychological transformation. In the usual state of eactivity and ignorance, we become blind to this inner structure and only see the superficial outer appearance of the emotional complex. However, with focused mindfulness we discover that what first appeared in our consciousness as a solid emotion, like anger or fear, is actually a composite of many parts

in the form of specific feelings, specific memories, specific bodily sensations and specific experiential imagery. This process of *differentiation* is extremely important in the therapeutic process and a fundamental characteristic of mindfulness practice. But, it doesn't stop there, because if we continue to meditate with mindfulness on the specific feelings and sensations, they in turn differentiate into even more subtle sensory content. Anger differentiates into fear, which further differentiates into an internal image, such as a memory. This differentiates further and we become aware of the sub-modalities of the image in the form of size, color, position and movement. Each of these subtle details encodes feeling energy, which accumulates and combines to produce the emotional reaction.

Mindfulness is a movement in conscious awareness from the gross to the subtle, from the superficial to the actual, from the abstract to the concrete. Like the layers of an onion, mindfulness allows us to uncover each layer of the inner structure of our core emotions to reveal finer and finer details. It is the very process of uncovering this detailed structure of experience and especially at the concrete level of the sub-modalities that leads to transformation and resolution of emotional complexes.

Emotional complexes are formed through the accumulation of patterns of secondary reactivity formed around a core primary emotional reaction such as a traumatic memory. Through time we become ignorant of the detailed structure of our emotions and all that remains is superficial and abstract and this is very hard to change. It is only when we begin to consciously experience specific objective content that change becomes possible. This is an example of Sensory Enrichment and it is a general rule that the more aware we become of the details of our experience, the greater the chance for beneficial change. It is almost always the case that it is the lack of conscious awareness, which is another name for *avijja*, that sustains and perpetuates habitual emotional reactivity and it is what you don't see that does most harm. A primary function of mindfulness practice is to illuminate what was unknown and replace ignorance with clear knowing.

Experiential Transformation occurs as the result of two fundamental psychological processes. These are described as Contact Resolution and Experiential Resolution. The first process of Contact Resolution describes the direct healing effect that comes from forming a mindfulness-based relationship with a painful emotion. Experiential Resolution involves the unfolding

of the internal structure of the emotion into specific contents, which eventually leads to transformation.

## CONTACT RESOLUTION

Perhaps one of the most remarkable effects of mindfulness (*sati*) is that the very act of making mindful contact with the feeling level of our inner emotional conflicts is, by itself transformational. When we focus mindfulness repeatedly on a painful feeling it is quite usual to experience a softening in the intensity of the feeling. This is called Contact Resolution: the spontaneous healing that arises simply through responding to mental pain with mindfulness.

From everyday experience, we know that listening with a silent, yet engaged presence is very effective in helping people resolve their pain. As is so often the case, it is not what we do or say that is as important as the quality of being with that person. What facilitates healing is being attentive and compassionate, without any trace of reactivity. He or she needs to know that it is safe to open up and the attitude of silent listening, the Noble Silence of mindfulness creates this safe space. In this same way, mindfulness of our inner suffering creates a safe space in which repressed emotions can unfold and heal. It is often enough to just touch the feeling level of the emotion with mindfulness and listen with compassion and friendliness. Repeat this over and over again and in time, you will begin to develop a totally different way of relating and engaging the your *dukkha*. The quality of presence is one of the most transforming aspects that we cultivate through mindfulness.

Contact Resolution also happens as a result of profound shifts in our conventional perceptions. When you are free from the constraints of habitual reactivity your perceptions are free to change and when there is mindfulness then these changes in perception will be guided by *satipanna* and naturally lead to the resolution of *dukkha*. When the light is switched on what you see is changed forever. What you thought was a dangerous animal lurking in the darkness is now seen as nothing more than a mouse. In that instant of seeing, the fear evaporates like snow flakes landing on a hot stove.



Being present means suspending the activities of the thinking mind just enough that we can be. In the words of Eckhart Tolle,

When you surrender to what is and become so fully present, the past ceases to have any power. The realm of Being, which had been obscured by the mind, then opens up. Suddenly, a great stillness arises within you, an unfathomable sense of peace. And within that peace there is great joy. And within that joy there is love. And at the innermost core there is the sacred, the immeasurable, That which cannot be named.

Healing the broken heart and spirit is a movement in presence, in which we learn to be with our pain, our *dukkha*, without resistance. This simple act of love unleashes a great power within that transforms and heals and this healing is beyond the world of concepts and ideas, but lies in the wisdom that arises when we let go of trying to fix things and relax into the expansiveness of pure knowing of things as they are.

## EXPERIENTIAL RESOLUTION

Many of us experience patterns of emotional reactivity that are persistent and that have a negative effect on our happiness and our personal relationships. Working with these core emotional complexes is one of the prime activities for *vipassana* meditation, because such complexes are a very potent source of *dukkha* and the prime mission for *vipassana* meditation and *Dhamma* practice as taught by the Buddha, is to bring about the resolution of *dukkha*. Therefore, it is essential to search inwardly to find these inner demons and work directly on them with the tools of mindfulness meditation.

Emotions are simply the outward expression of inner knots of “frozen” feeling energy that has become aggregated into a core emotional complex. In Mindfulness Meditation Therapy the approach is to facilitate, through the application of mindfulness, the unfolding of this frozen inner feeling energy into conscious awareness. Repeated mindfulness contact allows the frozen inner complex to unfold and it is the conscious awareness of this unfolding content that brings about transformation. It is as if

these inner feelings, thoughts, images and other experiential content have to be seen and known before the emotional complex can resolve itself. Through focussing mindfulness on the present felt-sense of an emotion, intangible and abstract emotions differentiate into tangible mental objects in the form of specific feelings, images and symbolic representations that form the internal structure of the emotion. The theory is that as these individual experiential contents change, then the emotional complex as a whole will change. Rather like repairing a car engine, it is only when you examine the individual parts that you discover how to fix the car. The car is an abstract assembly of parts like an emotion, whereas the parts are like the specific mental objects. One of the most direct effects of mindfulness is that what appears solid differentiates into parts. An emotion seems solid on first appearance, but when you look more closely with mindfulness you begin to see the emotion as a complex system of moving parts. It is in the direct conscious awareness of this differentiation into parts that is one of the most powerful factors in bringing about transformation and resolution of core emotional complexes.

Experiential unfolding begins with mindfulness (*sati*), which leads to *satisampajanna*, the intuitive awareness in which mental contents are seen with clarity and full consciousness in the present. Through *satisampajanna* the psyche gains access to all the data available from the depths of the mind, rather than being restricted to the incomplete and superficial products that arise through reactivity. In this totality of experience arises the intuitive intelligence of *satipanna*, which directs the process of transformation that eventually leads to the resolution of *dukkha*. However, the process of transformation begins when we make conscious the inner structure of our experience, including the how we experience our emotional suffering. As Carl Jung said,

One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious.

Consciousness can be thought of as the working space in which the psyche transforms and resolves inner emotional conflict to create greater stability and to achieve this the psyche must have access to concrete experiential details. The essence of Mindfulness Meditation Therapy and *vipassana* meditation is to make conscious the details of your inner experience, not in the

form of thoughts about your experience, but in the tangible elements of sensory experience as physical sensations, feelings and experiential imagery.

### *Differentiation of Body Sensations*

Emotions are encoded in the body as well as in the mind and an important part of the four-fold *satipatthana* practice is to develop mindfulness of the physical component of our emotions. These bodily sensations are useful, because they provide a direct path to the underlying core emotional complexes.

A middle-aged man described working with recurrent anger during a session of Mindfulness Meditation Therapy. He had injured his thumb as a child leaving partial numbness. Normally it did not bother him, but whenever he became angry, his thumb would begin to hurt. When he focused mindfulness on the psychophysical sensations in his thumb, he noticed a tingling sensation. As he focused on this sensation, his anger changed into a feeling of intense fear. As he focused mindfulness on the fear, he began to cry and there was a tremendous release of emotional tension. After completion of this episode, he returned his attention back to his thumb, which led to further shifts in the feelings experienced, sometimes anger, sometimes fear and sometimes sadness. Eventually, he became less agitated and came to a natural closure. The anger complex had resolved itself and even when he recalled the events that had triggered the anger, he did not feel the same compulsion to react.

The sensations in his injured thumb acted as a psychophysical focal point, or trigger point for his emotional pain. The therapeutic process of experiential unfolding and differentiation consisted of just sitting mindfully with the sensations in his thumb and allowing experience to unfold in its own way. The content that unfolded was guided by the intuitive intelligence of *satipanna*. It is as if the path that leads to the resolution of his anger was already mapped out and all he needed to do was allow this path to unfold under the direction of his intuitive wisdom. The open and safe therapeutic space of mindfulness allowed this unfolding to take place and allowed him to be conscious of the hidden feelings that formed the inner structure of the emotional complex of anger. Illumination of the deeper inner structure of his anger in the form of these more subtle feelings allowed the whole complex to transform. Mindfulness allowed him to re-connect with these repressed

feelings and this allowed the emotional energy that had been frozen into the anger complex to be released. In this open and dynamic state of mindfulness, the psyche had the necessary freedom to discover a new state of balance and stability and this led to the resolution of the anger. He had discovered a completely different way of relating to his inner world of feelings and this gave him the strength and insight necessary to overcome a life-long pattern of habitual anger.

### *Differentiation of Feelings*

The primary changes that guide the whole process of experiential transformation and resolution are the subtle changes that occur at the level of intuitive feeling. An emotional reaction like anxiety or anger may appear as a solid entity, but on closer examination, we see that it is not a single entity, but a complex of many subtle feelings, memories, perceptions, beliefs and physical sensations. An emotion, like any other experience is an aggregate of the five *khandhas* of form, perception, feeling, mental reactivity and consciousness and the process of transformation depends on uncovering the fine structure of the emotion in terms of these five *khandhas*. An emotion, like anger or anxiety, can seem very solid and impossible to change, but this is an illusion created by ignorance (*avijja*) of the fine structure of the emotion. This state of *avijja* is created and maintained by habitual reactivity in which we react with avoidance or resistance to the experience of the emotion of anger or depression. When *avijja* is dominant, these powerful emotions can become inner demons that control us and proliferate suffering and *dukkha*. They take on an illusory form in the same way that the shadow of a mouse projected onto a bedroom wall appears larger than reality and frightening. But, the fear is generated by the illusion, not the reality. Therefore, what is needed is to dissect the illusory emotional complex into its component parts: the intuitive feelings and memories and inner representations in the form of symbolic imagery. It is very difficult to change an abstract and superficial structure such as anger, anxiety or depression, but once we reduce it into its subtle experiential content then we have something much more tangible to work with. Mindfulness provides the right conditions that will allow an emotional complex to differentiate and unfold.

When we meditate with mindfulness on an emotion, it will naturally and spontaneously differentiate into a variety of feelings that have aggregated together to form the structure of the

emotion. Mindfulness practice can be thought of as the “reverse engineering” of the emotional complex allowing us to rediscover the reality beneath the outward, illusory appearance of things. If the mind becomes stuck at the level of blind superficial reactivity then it is prevented from changing and the emotional complexes become frozen like blocks of ice. This is the nature of emotional suffering in which the mind becomes frozen into patterns of *dukkha*. Illumination with mindfulness brings warmth to the emotional complex that melts the rigid ice and returns it to a state of fluidity and this promotes transformation and healing. The deeper we penetrate into the actual reality of experience, the more we are able to change, or more accurately, the more our mind is able to change itself. It is only when we start to become aware of the actual detailed experiential reality beneath the surface that change becomes possible.

Differentiation of the solid emotional complex through mindfulness reveals different qualities of feeling and associated memories. The initial feeling tone may be one of anger, but after *vipassana* meditation on the anger, it may differentiate into a feeling of betrayal, which in turn may transform into sadness, followed by fear, which further differentiates into a feeling of emptiness. In other words, the structure of anger actually contains a complex of many feelings and memories that have become amalgamated together into “anger.” What is important is to allow the emotion to unfold in its own way and be fully conscious of each new feeling as it arises. In experiential transformation, you allow change to come from the experience itself and not from thinking about the experience or what it means. You allow feelings to change in their own way, guided by your intuitive intelligence, rather than your ideas about what is supposed to happen.

As is so often the case, the solution to our suffering lies within the suffering itself. What prevents suffering from naturally resolving itself is our inability to be fully present with our suffering. We react with secondary reactivity in the form of avoidance, seeking more pleasurable thoughts and activities or we react with aversion and actively suppress the emotion. These are the reactions of wanting and aversion and both have the effect of taking us away from the source of the *dukkha* and this has the effect of inhibiting change. The other form of reactivity that prevents transformation and resolution of *dukkha* are the reactions of delusion, in which we blindly identify with the reactivity that arises. This causes us to be overwhelmed by the

reactivity and nothing can change in a mind that is chained to becoming angry or depressed. The Path of Mindfulness gives us the opportunity to break free of our usual habitual reactivity of wanting, aversion and delusion so that we can, perhaps for the first time, be fully present with our anger, grief, sadness, disappointment and frustration with a mind that is ready to receive and awaken to *dukkha* as it is. It is through awakening to *dukkha* that *dukkha* will transform and resolve itself, as expounded by the Buddha in the First Noble Truth: the truth of suffering.

### *Differentiation of Experiential Imagery*

When mindfulness is focussed onto an emotional complex, whether anxiety, grief, depression or anger, it is very common to notice some form of inner imagery. If the emotion is based on a traumatic memory, then the inner imagery will be vivid and photographic in quality. If the imagery is associated with a more general anxiety or depression, then it may be much more abstract and symbolic, appearing as shifting colors and changing shapes. This imagery is intimately connected to our emotions and arises from our inner experience. For this reason it is called *experiential imagery*, to distinguish it from imagery created through visualization. We do not create experiential images; they arise spontaneously from the present experience of an emotion. Mindfulness establishes the ideal form of conscious awareness that is receptive and non-interfering, and exquisitely sensitive to the detailed structure of our unfolding experience.

The mind thinks in pictures, not words and it uses the rich sensory structure of imagery to organize and represent emotional experience. As the expression goes, a single picture is worth a thousand words, and this is because feeling energy can be encoded in the countless variations of color, shape, size, texture, position and movement that make up the structure of imagery. It is not simply the memory of a car accident or other trauma that evokes a painful emotional reaction, but how that image is represented internally. Intense colors produce intense feelings; rapid movements produce feelings of confusion and panic; large or close-up images are likely to produce a feeling of fear; small or far-off images will feel less threatening. Each of these specific sub-modalities is said to *encode* feeling energy and the variations

in these sub-modalities encodes a vast range of different feelings and meanings.

Just as psychophysical sensations and feelings will unfold and differentiate when there is mindfulness, so inner experiential imagery will also differentiate into more subtle content, revealing the inner structure of the emotional complex as it is encoded in the imagery. This is one of the most important aspects of a mindfulness-based relationship; it allows us to see and experience more of the actual inner structure of our experience; a phenomenon called Sensory Enrichment. The universal movement of mindfulness is always from the abstract and superficial experience of things to the experience of the concrete reality and truth of phenomena and this movement from ignorance to truth is essential for the transformation of *dukkha*. As we become more aware of the internal structure of an emotion through experiential imagery, we enter into a rich world of possibilities. It is generally very difficult to change an abstract emotion, but much easier to change specific concrete details such as the size, color and position of the experiential imagery. Not surprisingly, mindfulness of the unfolding of experiential imagery is a central part of Mindfulness Meditation Therapy.

## 13 THE SEVEN FACTORS OF AWAKENING

The process of experiential transformation during mindfulness practice and *vipassana* meditation involves seven key mental factors, which when developed lead to the resolution of *dukkha* and freedom from *samsara*. These are known as the Seven Factors of Awakening or Enlightenment, called *bojjhanga* in Pali. The word is derived from the root *budhi*, which means to “awaken.” These seven factors are mindfulness (*sati*), investigation of the true nature of mental phenomena (*dhammavicaya*), energy (*viriyā*), rapture (*pīti*), tranquility (*passaddhi*), concentration and stability (*samadhi*) and equanimity (*upekkha*). These factors are essential for the progression towards freedom from *dukkha* and lead us out of *samsara* to *nibbana*, the extinction of *samsara*.

### *Mindfulness*

The seven factors of awakening and transformation proceed in a stepwise fashion where each factor becomes the foundation for the next and not surprisingly, the first foundation for transformation is mindfulness, *sati*. Nothing can change until reactivity ceases and we are able to open our heart mind to experience *dukkha*. Our fundamental enemy is blind reactivity, and mindfulness is our primary weapon against the unawareness, or *avijja*, that sustains reactivity. After we have learned to recognize our reactivity we must proceed to the second part of the response of mindfulness, which is to establish a relationship with the inner experience of the emotional suffering. When we have established a mindfulness-based relationship we create a therapeutic space in which experience can unfold and differentiate. With *sati* as foundation, *satisampajanna* and *satipanna* arise and all three interact to facilitate transformation and the eventual resolution of *dukkha*.

### *Investigation*

The second factor is *dhammavicaya*, the investigation of *dhammas*, which means that we choose to investigate the inner



structure of our experience. If we are meditating on an emotional reaction, then we investigate the emotion and look beneath the surface and allow the emotional complex to differentiate. Mindfulness is like a spotlight that serves to illuminate, but this is not sufficient by itself to resolve suffering. For mindfulness to become a transformational force, it must be combined with investigation, which means moving beneath the superficial appearance of things to see the totality of things as they are. It is not sufficient to just recognize *dukkha* and the mental afflictions; we must proceed to the second step, which is to investigate them in depth. Therefore, it is the combination of *sati* and *dhammavicaya* that lays the foundation that leads to the transformation of emotional suffering and for our eventual liberation from *samsara*.

When we awaken to *sati-dhammavicaya* we simultaneously awaken to the universal characteristic of *anicca*, the impermanent and dynamic nature of all phenomena. No longer stuck at the superficial perception of things, we allow experience to become fluid and malleable and allow experience to change in accordance with its innate nature. Living in harmony with *anicca* is a fundamental characteristic of the awakened mind. It not only prevents the arising of *dukkha* and the mental afflictions, but it facilitates the resolution of *dukkha* and emotional suffering. All forms of *dukkha* are states of psychological and spiritual instability in which emotional energy is trapped in the internal structure of the emotion. Nature (*dhamma*) does not tolerate instability and will always seek a resolution if allowed to do so. When we harmonize with *anicca* we simply allow things to change in the therapeutic space of inner freedom provided by mindfulness and conscious awareness. When we have established *dhammavicaya*, we cultivate a very keen awareness or insight that allows us to perceive what change in our inner experience will lead to transformation and resolution. This is opening to the inner truth of our suffering and it is this truth that liberates, not the efforts of the ego. In essence, we provide the freedom of consciousness that allows the psyche to heal itself, which it is very capable of doing as long as we do not interrupt the natural and intuitive flow of change. Any resistance or attachment to form prevents transformation and sustains *dukkha*. In fact, *dukkha* can be defined as the suffering that results from the resistance to change.

Besides awakening to *anicca*, the practice of *sati-dhammavicaya* also helps us awaken to *anatta*, or not self, not

mine. *Anatta* is simply a way of describing a relationship to experience that is free from attachment (*upadana*) to the habitual reactions of a self or ego. Clearly, nothing will change if you continue to blindly identify with your habitual patterns of emotional reactivity. There must be freedom to relate to each emotional reaction; to each manifestation of *dukkha*, and this requires a relationship based on mindfulness and not on the habitual reactivity of the ego (*atta*) conditioned by the past. When there is the combination of mindfulness and investigation, we are in that very moment, letting go of our attachment to the superficial ego and allowing things to unfold in a natural way. We become the *knowing* of this process of unfolding and change, and this is the essence of our real self as a dynamic process, rather than as a static collection of habitual reactions. *Anatta* does not mean that we have no self, but that we are infinitely more complex than anything we can experience and know. Awakening to *anatta* means that we awaken to ourself as a process that is not fixated on the contents of experience. We are the knowing of our emotional reactions, our thoughts and beliefs, but none of this content constitutes our essential self.

Through these awakenings to *anicca* and *anatta*, *dhammavicaya* represents the flowering of wisdom, *panna* and it is this wisdom-intelligence that heals, transforms and liberates us from the grip of *dukkha* and the causes of *dukkha*.

## *Energy*

The third *bojjhanga* is energy, *viriya*. This represents the courageous application of energy and effort required to sustain mindfulness and investigation so that awakening can occur. When we are in a blind reactive mode of feeling angry, frustrated or worried, the mind follows a familiar and habitual path that simply perpetuates suffering. It requires effort to overcome these habits of negative and contracted thinking. We need to direct our effort intelligently, which means that we are always keenly aware of what is skillful and wholesome and leads to the resolution of suffering. The Buddha described four kinds of effort that should be developed. The first is to root out the underlying patterns of reactivity that cause us to act unskillfully. The second right effort is to stop unwholesome reactions that have arisen, through the application of mindfulness. On the positive side, we should direct our efforts to develop dormant positive responses that lead to

freedom, happiness and well-being and cultivate these qualities once they have arisen.

Therefore, these teachings on Right Effort, which is one of the factors of the Eightfold Path, requires that we make the effort to identify *dukkha*, the *kilesas* and any form of emotional suffering and instability in the mind and investigate each with care and attention. The Path of Mindfulness is a courageous path of actively searching for *dukkha* and choosing to face our emotional suffering face-to-face and this has a direct consequence for our meditation practice. Meditation should not be thought of as an escape from suffering, but the opportunity to work on our suffering with mindfulness, compassion and wisdom. With this understanding, we can choose to make our anger, depression, fear, grief or disappointment the very object for our meditations. Like a lion, we become a hunter, rather than a victim as we deliberately search our suffering, rather than waiting for it to find us. We might call this a “search-and-destroy mission,” as we seek to uproot our mental afflictions and suffering, but actually it would be better to described this noble path as a “search-and-heal” mission.

However, there is more to *virīya* than just the application of effort. *Virīya* is the spiritual energy of the psyche that supports life and brings vitality into our being. When we become locked into patterns of habitual reactivity and *samsara*, we lose this vitality and aliveness. It is clear that the process of transformation and liberation must involve freeing this spiritual energy so that we awaken from our sleep and discover our true essence and authenticity as a living, dynamic being. Through the foundation of mindfulness and investigation we develop a natural harmony with *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anatta*. This is the mindfulness-based relationship of *satisampajanna* and in this therapeutic space, emotional complexes and other dissonant states will spontaneously begin to change, and resolve. Transformation and resolution will happen quite naturally under the direction of *satipanna*, leading to the resolution of *dukkha* and the resolution of emotional and spiritual instability.

### *Rapture*

As the core structure of *dukkha* changes, emotional energy is released and the psyche re-integrates this energy into a new and more stable state. This release of trapped emotional energy is experienced as rapture, *pīti*, which is the fourth factor of

awakening. This experience of empowerment and re-energizing of the psyche is a form of spiritual rapture that permeates the whole psyche. It is like the joy of a slave who finally gains his freedom or the relief from putting down a heavy load. It takes a lot of energy to maintain habitual reactivity and *dukkha* and when we break free from the chains that keep us bound to *dukkha* then elation naturally follows. This is the taste of freedom, which is the sweetest of all tastes and the greatest of all pleasures.

Besides the happiness that comes from the release from bondage and from *dukkha*, there is another quality of elation that is called Sensory Enrichment. Living in the grips of reactivity limits and distorts our perception of both internal and external sensory experience. We see only the superficial appearance of things and this leads to dullness in the mind, often accompanied by fearfulness and emptiness. This is a form of sensory deprivation that leaves us empty at both the experiential and spiritual levels. Contrast this with the alive and engaged investigation of experience that comes with mindfulness and investigation. There is a natural and universal excitement that comes from learning new things and revealing the intricacies and wonders of nature, including the contents of the mind. The more we tune-in to the experience of the truth of things as they are in reality, the more we feel connected. If all you see of a waterfall is your own distorted reactions then you are denying yourself the richness that is naturally inherent in that phenomenon. If you can see and experience the same waterfall with a mind that is completely open, present and engaged with what you are looking at, then your experience will be infinitely more rewarding. This is the nature of the sensory enrichment that comes as a natural consequence of *sati-dhammavicaya*. This same phenomenon occurs when we apply mindfulness-investigation to our emotional suffering. The more that we see of the inner detailed structure, the more at ease we feel with the emotion and the sensory enrichment that follows is part of the process of transformation and resolution of the suffering.

### *Tranquility*

After the elation that follows the release of trapped emotional energy, the psyche finds a new state of balance, stability and tranquility. This is the fifth factor of awakening, called *passaddhi*. The release of psychological and spiritual energy brings peacefulness not only to the mind (*citta passaddhi*), but

also to the body (*kaya passaddhi*). The mind and body relax into the experience of freedom and this quality of being settled and at rest provides the foundation for all spiritual growth. As the mind settles, it is like the sky clearing after a thunderstorm and this is nothing other than the natural state for the mind. Just as the natural resting state for water is complete stillness, so the psyche will return to this state of tranquility, if given the freedom to change. Mindfulness and investigation creates the therapeutic space and inner freedom in which the wisdom-intelligence of *sati* can move freely within the psyche resolving *dukkha*, releasing energy and bringing the mind to rest. The mind returns to its natural pure state of calm and stillness, no longer agitated by the winds of attachment and ignorance.

## *Samadhi*

Following experiential resolution and the re-integration of emotional energy into a more stable state, the mind becomes naturally very steady and collected. This state of stability is called *samadhi*, the sixth factor of enlightenment. The mind becomes focused, concentrated and unified and better able to interact with phenomena, without becoming reactive and agitated. The mind becomes steady in the face of the experiential complexity of our world. *Samadhi* is not so much a state of concentration, as a state of stability, which allows the light of mindfulness to penetrate into the inner structure of experience. The word *samadhi* is derived from *sam-*, meaning “complete, all together, integrated,” *a-* meaning “towards” and *-dha* meaning, “to hold or contain.” *Samadhi* refers to a state of stability and composure in our relationship to both the contents of mind and external sensory experience.

*Samadhi* and *sati* are frequently mentioned together throughout the Buddha’s discourses and along with energy (*viriyā*), faith (*saddha*) and wisdom (*panna*) forms the five spiritual factors or powers required for transformation and liberation from *samsara*. *Sati* and *samadhi* are the inseparable twins that work together to generate *panna*, because *sati* counteracts reactivity and allows the mind to settle down and tune-in, rather than react out of habit. In turn, *samadhi* supports mindfulness, because a settled mind that is not caught up in thinking and reacting is better able to observe the deeper levels of experience. Not being distracted and agitated by the activities of the reactive mind, the state of *samadhi* allows very direct,

focused and one-pointed attention to develop quite naturally and this increases the clarity of what we see. In fact, *samadhi* should always arise out of a foundation of mindfulness, rather than through willpower and this is where *samadhi* differs from the more usual meaning of concentration. Conventional concentration is analogous to looking through a microscope at the fine details of an object to the exclusion of other things that might be happening. *Samadhi*, on the other hand has a much broader focus that allows us to embrace whatever arises in the mind, without exclusion.

Traditionally, *samadhi* describes the state in which the mind has overcome the Five Hindrances (*nivarana*) of sensual desire, ill-will, apathy and mental fatigue, agitation and worry, and spiritual doubt. We are no longer seduced into habitual patterns of blind wanting or aversion or endless thinking and worrying. We no longer allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by life or by our subjective reactions when things don't go to plan. In practice, the factor of *samadhi* means that we have stability in our relationships to whatever arises in our experience, including the emotional reactions of the habitual ego. Anxiety, anger, grief or suffering may arise, but when *samadhi* is present, we are no longer seduced into further secondary reactivity. With *samadhi*, we can be fully present for our pain, without reacting with worry, aversion or the proliferation of further emotional reactivity and suffering. We can also be fully present for the pain and suffering of others and the stability of *samadhi* is the beginning of true compassion and true love, or *metta*. In general terms, we can say that *samadhi* protects us from the excesses of greed, hatred and delusion.

### *Equanimity*

With the mind stabilized, unified and free from the force of reactivity, we now find ourselves able to respond to life. We can respond to the desirable or the unpleasant sensual experiences of life, without becoming seduced into patterns of blind attachment and reactivity. This freedom to respond with freedom and equanimity is the seventh factor of spiritual awakening and transformation called *upekkha*. Now, being liberated from the compulsive grip of the habitual reactivity of the ego, we are free to respond to life with complete presence of mind. This presence allows us to respond with balance, clarity, compassion and wisdom and only with *upekkha* as foundation can we know the

true nature of compassion and love. Just as *sati* develops the art of relationship and presence with whatever we experience, internally or externally, *uppekha* develops the art of responding to whatever we experience, internally or externally.

To transform our lives we must take the challenge and face every manifestation of *dukkha*, from the petty irritations and disappointments of the day through to the intense pain of loss, grief and tragedy. If we choose to work with *dukkha* in all its forms, then *dukkha* will become our teacher and we will grow and become stronger. It is only through awakening to *dukkha* with mindfulness and investigation that we can unleash the natural process that leads to inner transformation and freedom. Only then can we develop the noble qualities of compassion, kindness, genuine virtue and wisdom in our relationship to other people and to our world.

## 14 THE PATH OF MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness meditation sessions are for the purpose of applying mindfulness in depth to heal inner conflicts, dissolve underlying attachments and liberate the mind from patterns of habitual reactivity. However, meditation sessions should be seen as an integral part of a much bigger picture, which is the development of mindfulness throughout the day in our moment-to-moment living. As the Buddha said in the *Satipatthana Sutta*,

Mindfulness, O disciples, I declare is essential in all things everywhere. It is as salt is to the curry.

Ultimately, the Path of Mindfulness practice is for developing the mental qualities outlined in the Eightfold Path so that mindfulness touches all activities of body, speech and mind. Right mindfulness practice (*sammāsati*) should begin the moment you open your eyes in the morning and continue to the last moment before sleep. Every moment of mindfulness is of great value, whether in meditation or daily activities, because each mindful encounter helps counteract the force of reactivity and ignorance and helps establish equanimity and freedom so that we can discover what is skillful and wholesome action.

We can describe three levels of mindfulness practice that all have their place in The Path of Mindfulness. These are AWARENESS, CONTEMPLATION and MEDITATION. We can think of mindfulness practice as a continuum between the vigilance of moment-to-moment mindfulness throughout the day at one end and concentrated *vipassana* meditation sessions at the other end. In between these two extremes, we can also focus mindfulness in short periods of contemplation and reflection on emotional reactions as and when they arise during the day.

### AWARENESS

Mindfulness practice in any context begins by cultivating awareness and waking up to what you are doing both mentally



and physically in the present. It also means becoming more aware of the world as you come into contact with it so that you engage more fully with life.

You can strengthen this Mindful-Awareness by deliberately choosing to cultivate mindfulness during any activity such as walking or washing the dishes. As you gain experience through deliberate practice with one task, you can then expand this mindfulness to take in more and more physical activities. The goal is to develop uninterrupted mindfulness throughout the day. This is almost impossible to achieve, but through practice you will gain greater acuity of attention and strengthen the faculty of mindfulness so that you spend less time doing things on autopilot.

The more you develop the general skill of mindfulness in physical activities, the easier it will be to recognize mental reactivity. The sooner you can catch yourself before you become unmindful, the easier it will be to prevent unskillful reactions of body, speech or mind from arising. Throughout the day you train yourself to recognize reactive impulses as soon as they arise and then respond to these impulses with mindfulness and repeat this over and over again. Most people can recognize anger or other intense forms of emotional reactivity, but remain oblivious to the more subtle forms of agitation such as disappointment, frustration or irritation.

Suppose you want to go for a walk, but it starts raining. Habit causes you to react with a feeling of disappointed. Be vigilant and notice the impulse to react before it takes hold and respond to the impulse with mindfulness. It may seem trivial, but the more you practice responding with mindfulness instead of reacting, the more you will develop the power of mindfulness and the more you will cultivate balance and equanimity (*upekkha*) that will be essential when working with more challenging emotional habits.

Driving is a wonderful opportunity for practicing Mindful-Awareness. You find yourself in heavy traffic and start to react with impatience. STOP. Catch yourself and respond with mindfulness. If you react blindly out of habit, then you will simply make yourself miserable and create more *dukkha*. This is how *dukkha* arises and perpetuates itself. Every time you react out of blind attachment you cultivate *dukkha*; every time you STOP and respond with *sati* you counteract the force of habit and the cause of *dukkha*. This is the beginning of the path to freedom and it is really very simple, but the art is to recognize reactions as soon as they arise and to respond with mindfulness.

A driver cuts in front of you and your habit is to react with anger. STOP and say “No! Thank you. I choose not to react that way.” Don’t be seduced by the impulse to react and become the anger. It is nothing more than a habit and like any habit it thrives on ignorance, but all habits can be changed by cultivating awareness. It is also always worth reminding yourself that there is no law that requires you to react with anger. Any reaction is simply a conditioned response that has been acquired unconsciously. In the end it is your choice whether you perpetuate *dukkha* through reacting or cultivate choice through the practice of mindfulness. Each and every impulse to react is either going to create more *dukkha* through blind reactivity or it can be used as an opportunity to undo the habit of reactivity and gain greater mental stability and freedom. In this way you actually use your habitual reactivity as a vehicle for developing greater freedom, choice and happiness, instead of simply feeding the habit of *samsara*. The more you develop awareness of your reactivity throughout the day, the more chance you will have to break the habit and begin a process of change for the better.

Throughout the day you will be bombarded by impulses to react with anger, frustration, disappointment, sadness and worry, as well as temptations to indulge in obsessive sensory gratification, fantasy and other forms of escape. Many of these impulses to react are minor, like swarms of biting insects while others may be quite painful or emotionally intense, like wild dogs. Obviously, it is essential to train yourself to be mindful of intense reactions such as anger or jealousy or strong compulsive desires, as these can have far reaching negative effects on your state of mind and happiness. But, it is also just as important to train your awareness to detect the “biting insects,” of smaller irritations, because their negative effects are cumulative. The practice of Mindful-Awareness helps you recognize each and every impulse, no matter how big or small so that you can prevent unskillfull actions and then skillfully use them to develop wisdom and compassion in your activities and relationships.

## CONTEMPLATION

A further development of Mindful-Awareness in active daily life is to find a few minutes to “sit” with and reflect on emotional reactions that arise during the course of the day. Mindful-

Contemplation is like a mini-meditation session in which you spend a little more time exploring the feeling level of the emotion than would be possible during Mindful-Awareness practice. This is a form of *cittanupassana*, the contemplation of mind states that is intermediate between the practice of Mindful-Awareness and *vipassana* meditation.

When you notice something that is bothering you, try to find a few minutes to simply be mindful of this state of mind and allow yourself to touch the underlying feelings. Nothing dramatic needs to happen, but just a few quality moments spent being mindful with the inner emotion can have profound effects over time. It will soften the way you relate to the underlying hurt or dissonance and will counteract the compulsion to react with wanting or aversion that will simply amplify the problem. Cultivating this stability, or *samadhi* and equanimity (*upekkha*), combined with positive friendliness (*metta*) and compassion (*karuna*), are all very skillful ways of being with painful emotions. You do not need to try and resolve the emotion or analyze it during these periods of Mindful-Contemplation; it is sufficient to simply be present with them. However, the accumulated effect of such loving care and attention can have a profound effect over time. In many ways, these mini-meditation sessions are more important than long, formal meditation sessions, because they allow you to access emotional reactions as they arise and when they are fresh in your mind. Often, anger, worry or fear will not arise outside of the real life situation with all the associated stimulatory triggers and this is precisely where you most need to cultivate mindfulness.

The practice of *cittanupassana* in meditation or in reflective contemplation is simply learning to be present. There is no need to try and solve problems, or to analyze them or to do anything other than give them your full attention and trust in your intuitive intelligence (*satipanna*). You will be surprised how many problems will resolve themselves quite effortlessly, if you stop feeding them with worry or other secondary reactivity. This may seem like a path of non-action, but what you are doing is opening your mind to the totality of the experience, both internally and externally, which you cannot see when you are locked into worrying or reactive thinking. Such spontaneous healing that arises as a consequence of being fully present with our pain is called Contact Resolution and mindfulness provides these “quality encounters” throughout the day.

## MEDITATION

Meditation is simply the application of mindfulness and vigilant awareness in a more focused way. Meditation includes the mental factors of concentration (*samadhi*) and investigation (*dhammavicaya*) that allow you to explore the depth of your experience. There are, of course, many different types of meditation, but the meditation described throughout this book is called *vipassana* meditation, or “insight meditation.” This kind of meditation can be described as the exploration of the detailed structure of experience and the process of transformation that leads to freedom from suffering. *Vipassana* meditation is an in-depth exploration of the inner world of your experience and in this direct knowing we discover liberation from the attachments and reactivity that form the conditioned world of *samsara*.

Mindfulness Meditation sessions provide a time to focus on the more persistent emotional reactions and core emotional issues that affects your happiness and well-being. Meditation sessions are also very important for developing and strengthening the skill of mindfulness itself, so that you will be better able to be mindful throughout the day.

## 15 VIPASSANA MEDITATION

*Vipassana* means experiential insight into the experience of the here and now and *vipassana* meditation provides the conditions in which experiential insight, or *satipanna* can arise and flourish. The term *vipassana* has the root *vi* meaning “behind or within,” *passana*, which means “seeing” and *na*, direct knowing. A common translation of *vipassana* is “insight” although *vipassana* insight is much more than the psychological insights that may arise during *vipassana* meditation. *Vipassana* operates at a much deeper experiential level of insight and refers more to the *process* of seeing than any insight-knowledge produced. It might be better to describe *vipassana* as “in-seeing” meditation, rather than “in-sight” meditation, to emphasise that *vipassana* is a process of awakening and not knowledge gained. The whole purpose of *vipassana* meditation is to bring about this direct and immediate quality of experiential knowing of whatever is in our present awareness. To re-emphasise the point, *vipassana* insights are not ideas and concepts that we acquire and then use to change our behavior as might occur in conventional psychotherapy. In *vipassana* it is the direct knowing itself that transforms and liberates the psyche. Krishnamurti expresses this approach to change beautifully throughout his many talks and books, as in the following:

When the mind is still, tranquil, not seeking any answer or any solution, neither resisting nor avoiding – it is only then that there can be a regeneration, because then the mind is capable of perceiving what is true; and it is truth that liberates, not your effort to be free.

As with all mindfulness practice, *vipassana* meditation is the process of establishing a special kind of relationship with our inner experience, with our core emotions, thoughts, memories and beliefs. This special relationship is a movement in stillness, openness, listening with complete attention and full presence with whatever we choose to investigate with mindfulness. Through this quality of complete presence, which is *satisampajanna*, we

create a therapeutic space that allows access to the deeper and more intuitive level of our experience. Meditation provides a more intimate and complete level of relationship than is possible in the chaos of daily life and Mindfulness Meditation is the perfect complement to the practice of Mindful-Awareness and Mindful-Contemplation.

In *vipassana* meditation the focus is on developing pure undeluded knowing (*satisampajanna*) of mental phenomena (*dhammas*) as they arise in the present moment-to-moment experience, but with the added factors of investigation (*dhammavicaya*) and concentration (*samadhi*). *Vipassana* meditation is an exploration into the depths of experience, which is essential for the resolution of emotional suffering and for developing experiential insight and wisdom. This may not be possible during the practice of general mindful awareness throughout the day. We need to set aside a period of time for the focused application of mindfulness on the emotional content of the mind. However, whether we are engaged in general mindfulness practice or *vipassana* meditation, the direction is the same, which is to know phenomena directly in a way that leads to liberation from the grip of habitual reactivity.

Mindfulness (*sati*) is like a bright spotlight with the power to illuminate anything on which it is focused. It allows us to see things clearly and directly by focusing awareness onto the object of our attention. The function of *sati* is to bring us back to the present focus of experience over and over again by noting each distraction and each impulse to react. Thinking about the object of attention or reacting to it with wanting or aversion, has the effect of taking us away from the present experience. Mindfulness allows us to see these reactions as they arise so that we can return our attention back to the primary object of our meditation. In this way we cultivate presence for the object of awareness, whether internal or external.

Establishing this non-reactive awareness and compete presence is the beginning of the process of transformation. However, it is only the beginning and we must take the second step, which is to sustain mindfulness on the object of attention and investigate our experience in depth. This will reveal the vertical dimension, the deeper structure of our experience, which is not obvious and not apparent, but becomes apparent through investigation. To quote Ray Mears, the popular teacher of outdoor survival skills,

The secret of survival is to learn to look into the wilderness rather than just at it.

Investigation into the structure of our experience is called *dhammavicaya*. The term *dhamma* refers to the objective reality or truth of any mental phenomenon. Therefore, *dhammavicaya* means investigation into the actual objective truth of experience, which can only be revealed when we stop reacting, because the reactivity of the subjective ego prevents us from seeing what is actually present. Mindfulness is not simply being aware of sense objects and mental objects as they arise, but a dynamic response to what arises. This is the response of investigation, *dhammavicaya* and this is why *dhammavicaya* is listed as the second factor of enlightenment after the first foundation, which is *sati*. Mindfulness naturally leads to investigation and the combination of *sati-dhammavicaya* paves the way for transformation.

Each mind moment (*citta*) consists of a dynamic collage of mental factors: the five *khandhas* of thought (*sankhara*), perceptions (*sanna*), associated feeling tones (*vedana*), consciousness (*vinnana*) and the physical aspect of experience (*rupa*). This collage of inner experience becomes condensed into a thought or emotion that takes shape and arises in consciousness as a *sankhara*. However, a *sankhara* is nothing more than a superficial representation of the totality of our experience. Just as a word is not the thing it represents, so the initial conscious form of a thought, belief, emotion or other *sankhara* does not equate to the totality of our experience. However, the mind has a strong tendency to become identified with these abstract labels and becomes dissociated from the reality of the underlying structure of our experience. This is the nature of *avijja*, which has the effect of inhibiting transformation and keeping alive dysfunctional and habitual patterns of reactivity. For example if we experience anxiety, we typically identify with the surface appearance of the emotion and lose sight of the specific perceptions, feelings, memories and thoughts that form the inner structure of the emotion. In effect, we become attached to the superficial illusion and remain blind to the reality and in this state of ignorance and delusion, nothing can change and *dukkha* cannot resolve itself.

The mind always benefits from investigation into the truth of mental phenomena, of *dhammas*, and as we uncover the real inner structure of our emotions and beliefs we begin to see the

rich and dynamic reality of what lies below the surface and it is the conscious illumination of this inner reality that leads to transformation. As Krishnamurti said many times in his teachings,

It is the truth that liberates, not our efforts to be free.

When we follow The Path of Mindfulness, the direction of our practice is always to move from the superficial to the actual inner structure, from the abstract to the concrete, from the gross to the subtle. With mindfulness-investigation, we see experience as a process that is continually changing and rich in detail. When we relate to experience, including our experience of *dukkha* in this way, we begin to harmonize with the truth of experience as a dynamic process of change and we create the freedom in which intelligent change can occur. When we see only a fraction of the structure of an experience, then only a partial change is possible. When we open to the totality of experience through mindfulness and investigation, then complete transformation becomes a reality. In order to heal suffering we must first awaken to suffering and then investigate suffering through investigation with mindfulness to uncover the truth that will liberate us from suffering.

## INSIGHT INTO ANICCA, DUKKHA AND ANATTA

There is another way of describing the *vipassana* insight of *vipassana* meditation as the direct and experiential insight into *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anatta*. These are the three universal characteristics, or marks of existence, which are respectively, impermanence, suffering arising from attachment, and not self. In many ways, the term *awakening* is better than insight, because it describes a process of waking up from our conditioned and habitual existence, which is a form of sleep. As we awaken through mindfulness and see things as they are, we spontaneously come into harmony with these three marks of existence. The purpose of *vipassana* meditation is not to develop a new set of beliefs that you then use to solve the problem of suffering, but to allow these insights to arise in real-time so that you are living *Dhamma* in the here and now. It is from this direct and living experience that suffering is able to resolve itself, through the



direct experiential awakening to *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anatta* in each unfolding moment.

The Law of *anicca* refers to the quality of impermanence, which is the most fundamental characteristic of all mental phenomena, as indeed it is of all structures, mental or physical. This is usually presented as a rather negative philosophy that everything we hold on to will disintegrate and eventually die. Understanding this has a certain value in discouraging us from becoming too attached to objects and placing unrealistic expectations on life. For example, if you attach to staying youthful and beautiful, you will suffer; if you attach to a relationship forever remaining a certain way, you will suffer; if you cannot face the fact that you will not always get your way, you will suffer. However, the concept of *anicca* goes far beyond this negative view. What often gets overlooked is that *anicca* also has a positive side and change is very often desirable and beneficial. If nothing changed, then it would not be possible to bring an end to suffering. Seen this way, *anicca* is also our friend as Thich Nhat Hanh said,

Thanks to impermanence, everything is possible.

*Anicca* does not only refer to the destructive forces of sickness, aging and death as is often portrayed, but equally applies to the creative forces of birth, growth, healing and the process of renewal. In order to heal, we must allow things to change. When we become at one with *anicca* we embrace both the creative and destructive aspects of impermanence.

*Anicca* informs us that the reality of all phenomena is that they are transitory manifestations of a continuous process, rather like ripples on the surface of a flowing river. The truth of the phenomenon of a river is that it has no definable form and nothing remains static; the river is a dynamic process that is always changing. *Vipassana* meditation is the process of awakening to this dynamic flux of experience in the living present such that you become the river, rather than the transitory ripples on the surface. This is awakening to *anicca* and the essence of *vipassana* insight into impermanence. When you relate mindfully to the activities of mind, you can directly experience how mind states arise, do their dance and then disappear, but more importantly you *allow* this process to continue without resistance. This constant flow of arising and dissolution is the natural state of all mental phenomena (*dhammas*) and it is living

in harmony with this continuous process of change that brings liberation and transformation.

Rather like water, in its endless journey towards unity with the ocean, all mental states of emotional instability will, if allowed, spontaneously change to a state of greater energetic balance and stability. This is the innate wisdom-intelligence (*satipanna*) that is intrinsic to all phenomena, including emotional conflicts and suffering. In order for change to be intelligent change there must be freedom of movement and this is where mindfulness comes in. Mindfulness provides the fertile ground of non-reactive and un-fettered consciousness that provided the freedom in which *satipanna* can arise and direct intelligent change in a way that leads to the resolution of instability and *dukkha*.

Living in harmony with *dukkha* means awakening to the First Noble Truth of suffering. In practice this means facing your suffering directly without fear or aversion and without blindly identifying with the surface expression of *dukkha* in the form of emotional reactions. When we stop resisting suffering and stop reacting against *dukkha*, then we create the right conditions for beneficial change. Most schools of psychotherapy encourage us to face our fears and inner demons, but few explain how to do this in practice. Most will advocate some form of interpretation and analysis or emotional catharsis as a way to release inner emotional conflict. From the perspective of *vipassana* meditation and mindfulness-based psychotherapy, these psychological insights, while useful, are secondary to the process of allowing change to arise from within, at the experiential and intuitive level. From this perspective, awakening to *dukkha* means establishing a sensitive and mindful awareness of the feeling level associated with an emotion followed by investigation into the inner structure of the emotion. There is no agenda other than remaining mindfully focused on the movements of mind associated with *dukkha* and the unfolding of the inner structure of *dukkha* and allowing *satipanna* to direct the process of change and transformation. In effect, we allow the emotion to heal from within, rather than trying to impose change. The essence of the process of transformation comes from the direct illumination of the detailed inner structure of emotional complexes, rather than what we do. If we have a Swiss watch that is not working, the intelligent action is to take off the back and look within. Depending on the quality of our investigation, the solutions that lead to fixing the watch will become readily apparent. The real

power is in the looking itself and this principle applies to great effect when we wish to resolve *dukkha*; we must open the lid and investigate the reality of the inner structure of our experience. This in itself is transformational and your intuitive intelligence will guide you on what specific changes to make or action to take.

Living in alignment with *anatta* means letting go of self-identification and all the forms of blind attachment that keep us in bondage to habitual reactivity. The self or ego (*atta*) is identical to our patterns of blind reactivity and only comes into existence when we react. The cultivation of *anatta* means that we relate to internal and external phenomena without reactivity. This also means that we cease to react further to thoughts, beliefs and emotions that were themselves produced by reactivity. We simply see whatever arises in experience as it is. Awakening to *anatta* is to experience phenomena objectively, without an intervening ego (*atta*) that reacts according to conditioning. Awakening to *anatta* means that we do not *become* the hurt, disappointment, anger, anxiety or any other product of the reactive ego. When we are in harmony with *anatta*, we have complete objectivity and equanimity (*upekkha*) in our relationship to mind. From this position we can fully engage with any product of the mind with freedom and intelligence and without any compulsion to react with wanting (*lobha*), aversion (*dosa*) or delusion (*moha*).

When we live in harmony with *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anatta*, without clinging and delusion then we see each phenomenon that appears in its true light as part of a living process. To live in alignment with *anicca* and *anatta* is to fully know *dukkha* and it is the direct and pure knowing of *dukkha* that leads to its dissolution to freedom from the clinging that sustains *dukkha*.

## 16 MEDITATION ON THE MIND

The Dhammapada begins with the famous verses:

Mind precedes all mental states. Mind is their chief;  
mind is their maker.

If with an impure mind a person speaks or acts  
suffering follows him like the wheel that follows the  
foot of the ox.

Mind precedes all mental states. Mind is their chief;  
mind is their maker.

If with a pure mind a person speaks or acts happiness  
follows him like his never-departing shadow.

The heart and mind, collectively called *citta* in Pali, is the foundation for all our actions and the purification of mind is central for The Path of Mindfulness and *vipassana* meditation. The defining factor that will determine if the mind becomes pure or impure; free or bound by the chains of *samsara* is the presence or absence of mindfulness. We must, therefore, apply mindfulness and *vipassana* meditation directly to the contents of the mind and actively search for all traces of blind attachment and habitual reactivity that create agitation and instability in the mind. We do not wait for *dukkha* to take control, but choose to actively search for all traces of emotional dissonance and instability and attend to it with mindfulness. This ardent application of mindfulness to reveal what is happening in the mind as it is happening is called *cittanupassana*, or “mind watching.” In essence, we choose to seek out *dukkha* wherever it exists and purify it through the direct application of mindfulness.

These opening verses are particularly interesting and give much insight into many aspects of the path of *Dhamma*. The ox refers to the ego, the rather dull and limited part of the mind that is dominated by fixed patterns of habitual reactivity in the same way that the ox is chained to the cart. When our mind and psyche are governed by the ego, we become dull and inflexible and unable to respond or engage intelligently and compassionately with life. Consequently, the heavy burden of suffering will follow

us as we repeat the endless cycles of emotional and behavioral reactivity that is *samsara*. The ox represents the unawakened mind, dominated by *avijja*, that is mechanical and lacking vitality and authenticity.

Contrast this with the effortless nature of the awakened mind that is not chained to habitual reactivity. A shadow has no weight and creates no *dukkha*, no emotional instability and dissonance. The never departing shadow refers to the Buddha nature of Original Mind that is always present. Not being chained to reactive thoughts, beliefs and emotions, the Original Mind, or *bodhicitta* is free to engage fully with life, without creating suffering. The pure mind is the mind that is free from blind habitual conditioning and where *sati*, *satisampajanna* and *satipanna* are dominant. Awakening through mindfulness allows the wisdom-intelligence of *satipanna* to arise and this leads to skillful actions that are not conditioned by the past. This is why the purification and liberation of the mind is so central to the path of Buddha *Dhamma* and why such great attention is given to searching out *dukkha*, the sign of the ox mind. The purification of the mind requires liberation from the forces of reactivity and ignorance. Only when the mind is completely free in the present can it fully engage with life and respond wisely and compassionately. We must free the mind and spirit, collectively called the psyche, from the reactive patterns of the ego, the compulsive reactivity of thinking based on blind attachment to inner beliefs. There is an ancient Chinese saying,

Watch your thoughts, for they become words.  
Choose your words, for they become actions.  
Understand your actions, for they become habits.  
Study your habits, for they will become your  
character.  
Develop your character, for it becomes your destiny.

Everything begins with the mind, and the spiritual path for the purification of the mind and heart must place the mind at the very center of mindfulness practice and meditation. The Buddha emphasized that the only way to effectively liberate the mind and heart from *samsara* is to work directly with the mind, with the beliefs, emotional reactions and other *cittasankharas* that arise out of habit and ignorance. Hence *cittanupassana*, the contemplation of mind, should become the foundation for our mindfulness practice and *vipassana* meditation. The Path of

Mindfulness and the focused application of mindfulness in *cittanupassana* meditation is the main path for purifying the mind through observation and investigation of the contents of the mind. The best way to purify our outward actions is by purifying the contents of our mind and this is what we do in *cittanupassana-vipassana* meditation. Ajahn Chah was renowned for his emphasis on the importance of mindfulness of the mind, as in the following passage:

The untrained heart races around following its own habits. It jumps about excitedly, randomly, because it has never been trained. Train your heart! Buddhist meditation is about the heart; It's about developing the heart or mind, about developing your own heart. This is very, very important. Buddhism is the religion of the heart. Only this. One who practices to develop the heart is one who practices Buddhism.

*Cittanupassana* meditation or “mind watching” involves observing each state of mind that arises in the present and observing it with *sati* and *satisampajanna*. If there is anxiety, then we respond to the anxiety with mindfulness and know that there is anxiety and observe the anxiety as a mental object. If there is agitation, then we respond to the mental object of agitation with mindfulness. If there is anger, then we respond to the anger with mindfulness and relate to it as an object to be investigated. If there is depression, then we observe the depression, without becoming depressed. If there is sadness, then we observe the sadness, without becoming sad. If there is fear, then we observe the fear without becoming afraid. If a thought arises, we observe the thought without becoming lost in thinking. Each thought, belief, opinion and emotion that arises can be made into an object to be observed with mindfulness.

The reactions of the mind are very seductive and when there is unawareness and *avijja* we tend to blindly identify with the form that they take and *become* the thought, belief or emotion. When something doesn't happen according to expectation or desire the mind produces an emotional reaction and we *become* disappointed or angry. We remember a painful event, the mind reacts out of habit and we *become* upset. A minute later we remember something pleasant and we *become* happy. Reactivity creates successive states of mind, or *cittasankharas*, but it is *avijja*, or ignorance that causes us to become the thought or

emotion as dictated by past conditioning and attachment. The active side of mindfulness is required to restrain this tendency to be seduced by every thought and emotion, every *sankhara* that arises in the mind. Consequently, the very first skill that we need to develop in *cittanupassana* meditation is vigilance (*appamada*). We need to wake up from our daydreams and resist the pull of thinking and reacting so that we can fully engage with each thought and emotional reaction as they arise in the present.

Once we have recognized that we are reacting, we can stop right there and begin the most important part of *cittanupassana*, which is to open the eye of direct conscious awareness, or *satisampajanna*. Through awareness and *satisampajanna*, we establish an objective relationship with the thought or emotion as a mental object to be investigated. No longer distracted by reacting or thinking, we can now listen at a very subtle intuitive level to the experience as it unfolds in the present. This paves the way for *vedanupassana* meditation, the mindfulness contemplation of the feelings associated with mind states. This creative interface with intuitive feelings is where transformation takes place, because the mind states depend on feeling energy (*vedana*) to give them power. Thus, mindfulness of mental states naturally progresses to mindfulness of the underlying feeling tone of the thought, memory or emotion.

Through mindfulness we take the abstract and reduce it to objective content that can be observed, and mindfulness of the associated feelings facilitates the process of experiential unfolding that leads to transformation. For example, if you look into the structure of anger, you will probably discover a whole ecology of feelings such as sadness, fear, frustration, disappointment accompanied by a variety of inner beliefs and memories. These specific mental objects are much easier to work with than the original abstract emotion. This is how *cittanupassana* facilitates inner transformation. Through uncovering the detailed inner structure of emotions, we are able to see what makes the engine run and as we change these component parts, the engine will run much better. Change at the subtle level revealed through intuitive feeling results in transformation of the structure of emotional reactions and the core belief structures that dominate our mind and create *dukkha*.

## BECOMING THE OBSERVER

In perhaps one of his most famous descriptions of *vipassana* meditation, Ajahn Chah describes The Path of Mindfulness as follows:

Try to be mindful and let things take their natural course. Then your mind will become still in any surroundings, like a clear forest pool. All kinds of wonderful, rare animals will come to drink at the pool and you will clearly see the nature of all things. You will see many strange and wonderful things come and go, but you will be still. This is the happiness of the Buddha.

The art of observation means to cultivate mindfulness of the flow of thoughts and emotions that arise in the mind. Letting things “take their natural course” means that we are receptive to the innate intuitive intelligence of each situation. When we awaken to our experience with mindfulness, we are in that very same moment awakening to *anicca*, the natural flow of change. This freedom allows things to take their natural course and change as they need, without the corrupting influence of the reactive ego. When guided by a sensitive and alive awareness, change will always lead towards maximum stability and the resolution of *dukkha* under the direction of *satipanna*. With *satisampajanna* we relate to things without reaction, which means that we don’t grasp on to the *sankharas* of our experience. Instead, we allow experience to change under the guidance of intelligence (*satipanna*) and this is the in-the-moment realization of *anicca*.

With sustained mindfulness, “your mind will become still in any surroundings, like a clear forest pool.” This stillness and composure is the state of *samadhi* that develops out of mindfulness. From this still center, the mind can relate to everything with equanimity (*upekkha*), friendship (*metta*) and non-attachment (*anupadana*). Developing the mind that is still in any surroundings allows us to awaken to our Original Mind, or *bodhicitta*, that is not conditioned and not reactive and as we develop the Path of Mindfulness, this becomes our refuge as the “clear forest pool.” Like the pool, *bodhicitta* welcomes all the animals of the forest, from the fierce tiger to the poisonous snake; from the elephant to the smallest insect, and this openness of



heart is the expression of *metta*. The “rare animals” that come to drink at the pool are the shy voices of the subtle aspects of experience that arise during *cittanupassana-vipassana* meditation and that we do not normally see when the mind is reactive. When we awaken, the world opens up before us and our experience is enriched by the details that we see. We become dynamic and intelligent living beings that respond to life, instead of cold and mindless robots that can only react out of habit.

Mindfulness is the expression of freedom and when we are grounded in freedom we can engage with all phenomena, pleasant or painful with a sense of wonder and interest, instead of reacting out of fear and aversion or wanting to acquire and control. When we relate to the “strange and wonderful things” of our thoughts and emotions with pure, objective mindfulness, then they become our teachers. Fear and anxiety become our teachers; anger and hatred become our teachers. Happiness and well-being become our teachers; beauty, order and stability become our teachers. All becomes possible when we open to the truth of experience as it is with an open mind and heart and a willingness to learn. This is the relationship of freedom that leads to true and lasting happiness. The equanimity and stillness of *bodhicitta* is being in the world with freedom to fully engage with life without compulsion and without reactivity. This state of inner and outer harmony is indeed the true “happiness of the Buddha” and it is our birthright, to be realized in each moment of life. The path of Buddha *Dhamma* is about awakening to this happiness right now, in every present moment of life, pleasant or painful. It is not some distant esoteric state of consciousness to be achieved in the future after years of study and practice, but something to awaken to right now, and learning to do this is the Path of Mindfulness and *vipassana* meditation.

## PREPARATION

A session of *vipassana* meditation is often simply called *sitting meditation*. The term *sitting* is very appropriate, because it conveys the qualities of patience, attentiveness and non-reactive awareness that you might use when sitting with a friend. You know from experience, that the most important attitude is to listen with an open mind and heart. This attitude of warm and receptive presence is the expression of *metta*, or loving-kindness, which is

the essence of mindfulness as we apply it during *vipassana* meditation.

Meditation sessions can be anything from fifteen to forty-five minutes long, but you should not force yourself to practice longer than feels comfortable. It might be more appropriate to do three fifteen-minute sessions with breaks, rather than one long session. Meditation should not be an exercise in endurance, and it is the quality of meditation that is most important and how well you are able to sustain mindfulness. Five minutes of high quality sitting is preferable to forty-five minutes of forcing yourself beyond your comfort level. The quality of your meditation will improve with practice, especially when you approach it in this relaxed way. As always, you start with where you are and find what works best for you, rather than trying to follow some prescribed method. There is no simple technique that will substitute for what evolves organically through your practice of sitting and observing the mind.

Make a special place in your home for meditation that is quiet and comfortable. It is helpful to establishing a routine and it is useful to set aside a certain time each day for practice. Regular practice is important, as it is with any skill that you are trying to develop. With practice your mind will become progressively more tuned in to the process and you will find it easier to settle into meditation. Whether you sit on the floor or in a chair is not important; you need to experiment to find what works best for you. It is often very beneficial, but not essential to meditate with a group, because there is something very powerful in the energy transmitted within a group that aids the development of *samadhi*. Humans are social animals and when they meditate together there is a connection at the non-verbal level that is mutually supportive.

Meditation is not about following conventions and you do not need to become a Buddhist to meditate. You will become a Buddhist by default if you practice the Path of Mindfulness and are genuinely interested in uncovering what is skillful and what leads to happiness, well-being and the resolution of *dukkha*. What interested the Buddha was helping people awaken to *Dhamma*, or the truth of experience, rather than adopting the conventions, beliefs and rituals of a religion and, in fact, he strongly advised against attaching to conventions and rituals. Your temple for worship is your heart and mind and the path of awakening to the truth of experience in each moment of living.

It is usually helpful to begin with a few minutes of *samatha* meditation to stabilize the mind and there are many techniques to

choose from. Meditation techniques that develop awareness of the body are particularly helpful in stabilizing the mind. This can start with simple body scanning, to notice the various sensations throughout the body. The practice of mindfulness of breathing, called *anapanasati* is one of the most popular preliminaries for *vipassana* meditation. This involves simply noticing the in-and-out breathing in a relaxed and natural way. You do not try to modify your breathing, as in some yoga practices, but simply observe with mindfulness what is happening at the level of physical sensations. This will naturally focus your attention and strengthen *samadhi* and mindfulness, as well as refining the level of your awareness. When you begin to notice the mind becoming more settled, then you can let go of *anapanasati* and turn your attention to the contemplation of the mind, or *cittanupassana*.

## MEDITATION ON THE STILL CENTER

The mind resembles a pool of water in which the surface is continually stirred up by reactive thoughts and emotions such as worrying about the future, regretting something said or done, making plans and thinking about things. Meditation begins when we deliberately cultivate mindfulness of all these activities of mind that create agitation. As we recognize each reaction in turn, we create a moment of choice and in that moment we can decide to let go of this automatic thinking. In that very moment of recognition and letting go we open up a space in the mind that is non-reactive and non-doing. This is the natural state of tranquility that is cultivated as a direct consequence of our mindfulness. We cannot create the still center, but simply return to it over and over again through our mindfulness of mental agitation. It is the recognition of non-mindfulness that takes you back to the still center.

This state of inner stillness and silence is called *samadhi* and during meditation we will use mindfulness to bring us back to this still place over and over again. This is your reference point from which you can engage and relate to the contents of mind. The pool becomes still and the surface as smooth as a mirror. Such stillness allows you to penetrate beneath the agitated surface to see the true structure of our experience, which is essential for the transformation of the mind. Through mindfulness practice and meditation you will become progressively more

tuned in to this still center at the heart of the psyche and it will become a tremendous source of freedom, strength and stability that will help you in all aspects of life. As Chuang-tzu said about the power of *samadhi*,

To a mind that is still, the whole universe surrenders.

The still mind of *samadhi* arises when there is *sati* and when we allow thoughts, beliefs, emotions, impulses and perceptions to arise and pass away, without any taint of further reactivity against them or entanglement in their content. This inner stillness allows equanimity to arise, so that we can greet each sensory experience and mind object without becoming reactive. There is nothing to do except be silent and mindful of the stream of thoughts and feelings that arise, without clinging to any of them. In this way you establish “mindful presence,” which is the opposite of reactivity where you are distracted and agitated.

The mind will often wander and become distracted by extraneous thoughts and worries that do not have any particular relevance. You may have made a courageous resolve to meditate on an important core emotion that has been a source of much *dukkha*, yet before you know it you find that you have become lost in seemingly irrelevant thoughts about what to have for dinner. This is a perfectly natural activity for the mind and you should not fight against it, because resistance will simply create more tension. The appropriate response to the wandering mind is simply to develop vigilance and notice when the mind has wandered and then gently, but firmly bring the attention back to the primary object, which in this case is the still center. The faculty of *sati* and *samadhi* will strengthen over time and you will develop a natural resistance to the hyper-reactivity of the mind. The only time that you would *not* let go of a distracting thought is if it carries an emotional charge, in which case you should temporarily switch your mindfulness onto this mental object and follow it until it has resolved. You must be careful about what you discard as unimportant, because that is a judgement by the ego-mind and you may end up missing a very important part of the experiential unfolding process. Sometimes, the irrelevant details turn out to be very important and at other times what seems truly insightful at a psychological level proves to be ineffective at producing change. Therefore, it is advisable to approach *all* thoughts that arise in the mind with equanimity and

openness and a willingness to investigate them fully with mindfulness, before returning back to the still center.

This form of meditation, in which you cultivate inner stillness and tranquility through mindfulness of agitation and reactivity in the mind, is one of the most common forms of *vipassana* meditation. It teaches us to be aware and tuned-in to the continual arising and passing away of phenomena, without becoming attached to the contents. This form of general mindfulness meditation practice provides the foundation for more focused *vipassana* in which we deliberately seek out *dukkha* for contemplation.

## FOCUSED MEDITATION

*Vipassana* meditation is always focused on the real-time, moment-to-moment feeling experience as it arises in the present. However, it is often very appropriate to choose an object for meditation. Attention is always focused on the present experience of what unfolds, but we direct the mind to an area that clearly needs attention. *Vippassana* meditation can and should be used as an opportunity to examine unresolved issues from the past as well as worries about the future, because these will affect the quality of our living present. Meditation should not be seen as an escape from our worries and suffering, but an opportunity to investigate these phenomena in a totally new way, with mindfulness and investigation, *sati-dhammavicaya*.

Mindfulness practice should incorporate the whole field of past, present and future and bring them all into the present moment for investigation with mindfulness. *Vipassana* meditation is not an escape from *dukkha*, but a courageous engagement with *dukkha* and all thought formations, whether past, present or future, that are associated with emotional suffering. This is where *vipassana* differs from meditation techniques that focus on calming the mind by focusing attention on a neutral or inspirational object as a way of removing stressful thoughts. In *vipassana* meditation, we deliberately focus on stressful thoughts and any other manifestation of *dukkha* so that they can transform and resolve through the healing action of *sati* and *satipanna*. This is simply good preparation, rather than leaving things to chance, because if you are worried about the future or troubled by painful memories, you can be sure that they

will return. The First Noble Truth of *dukkha* instructs us that the path to freedom and happiness at the psychological and spiritual levels requires that we must awaken to our suffering. This means that we must acknowledge our suffering and engage with *dukkha* with mindfulness and compassion. The Path of Mindfulness is a path of awakening to *dukkha* and the truth of experience as it is; it is not an alternative to reality or a path that avoids reality, but the choice to be fully present for reality as it is.

### *Search for Dukkha*

After you have established mindfulness internally, it is helpful to begin actively scanning the mind for any hint of *dukkha*, any vestige of attachment and subjective emotional reactivity that constricts the heart and mind. When you look inside, does it feel relaxed and balanced or agitated and in conflict? It may be helpful to pose a question such as:

Do I feel completely at ease in relation to myself, right now?  
Do I feel completely at ease in relation to my family, right now?  
Do I feel completely at ease in relation to my work, right now?  
Do I feel completely at ease in relation to my world, right now?

You may find that the mind is already very peaceful and free from agitation, worry or other manifestations of *dukkha*. If this is the case, then meditate on this state. It is just as important to fully experience inner stability and well-being as it is to focus on instability and *dukkha*. It is through our experience of what is skillful and wholesome and free from suffering that the psyche can learn new ways of being.

If you detect emotional suffering or some form of dis-ease, then your response should be to simply “sit” with the present experience, mindfully and create lots of space around the experience in which it can unfold and differentiate. As always, the response of mindfulness is to develop complete presence for the experience and begin to investigate the deeper structure of the emotion. After you have accessed a particular emotional state, pleasant or unpleasant, it is often useful to find a word that best fits the emotional complex. The word acts as an anchor that allows you to access the particular emotional state throughout your meditation and allows you to check the resolution process and determine if the emotion has become more or less intense. The other great benefit of a word anchor is that it helps the

process of objectification so that you can relate to painful emotions without becoming overwhelmed by them.

#### FROM CITTANUPASSANA TO VEDANUPASSANA

After you have successfully established a relationship of mindfulness with the present state of consciousness (*citta*) arising from either the present situation or from a painful memory or anxiety about the future, then you are ready to proceed to the next step of *vipassana* meditation, which is to investigate the underlying feelings that form the inner structure of the emotion. This is the second level of *vipassana* meditation, called *vedanupassana*.

## 17 MEDITATION ON THE FEELINGS

The purpose of *vipassana* meditation is not simply to investigate the deeper structure of experience, but to become exquisitely sensitive to what needs to change in our living experience and then facilitate that change. In other words, *vipassana* meditation has a purpose, which is to allow intuitive wisdom-intelligence, or *satipanna*, to arise and direct inner transformation in a way that leads to the resolution of *dukkha*. If the mind is dominated by conditioned habitual reactivity and *avijja*, then change becomes chaotic and destructive, leading to conflict and further suffering, but when mindfulness is present, then change becomes intelligent and constructive leading to greater stability and harmony in the psyche.

It soon becomes evident to anyone practicing mindfulness meditation, that within every dissonant state of *dukkha* there is also an innate directionality, a kind of positive pressure that naturally leads to the resolution of that state of instability. It is as if the path to the resolution of instability is encoded in the inner structure of that state when it was created. We can see this most clearly in the natural world. For example, if a glass of water is emptied on top of a mountain, that water will naturally begin a journey towards the ocean. The direction of this purposeful and intelligent change was set in motion the moment the water was carried to the top of the mountain. The journey is dictated by this innate direction of movement from the state of instability on top of the mountain to stability, when it reaches the ocean. In this same way, *dukkha* will naturally resolve by itself into a more stable energetic state within the psyche, if given the freedom to change. *Vipassana* is simply the insight, or awakening, into the path that leads to the resolution of *dukkha*, and mindfulness provides the freedom in which intelligent change can take place.

This process of Psychological Homeostasis happens at the experiential and intuitive level, far below the level of the ego and the thinking mind and this is why investigation with mindfulness is so effective, because it penetrates beneath the surface into the dynamic structure of experience. The wisdom-intelligence that guides this process is called *satipanna*, which will arise whenever there is *sati* and *satisampajanna*, and *vipassana* meditation is the



process of awakening to this innate intelligence. This form of transformation is intuitive and is something that is revealed the moment we let go of preconceptions and reactive thinking. We do not make change happen by applying psychological insights gained from meditation or elsewhere, but simply by bringing about a state of inner freedom in which change can occur spontaneously, under the direction of *satipanna*. Most of our work involves learning to stay out of the way, rather than trying to solve problems through the intervention of the thinking ego-mind.

During *vipassana* meditation, we deliberately tune in to the intuitive and experiential feeling level that lies beneath the thoughts and emotions and use these intuitive feelings as a guide to facilitate the changes that lead to the resolution of suffering. Therefore, the investigation into the depth of our experience must include an investigation with mindfulness of the feelings (*vedana*) that accompany the mental states that arise during the contemplation of the mind, or *cittanupassana*. This means letting go of the contents of our thoughts and emotions and searching for the feeling tone and feeling energy that powers these thoughts and emotional reactions. This important part of *vipassana* meditation is called *vedanupassana*, the investigation of feelings, which is one of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (*satipatthana*).

*Vedana* refers to the general felt-sense or feeling tone that accompanies an experience and can be pleasant, painful or neutral. A pleasant or positive felt-sense is called *sukhavedana*, while a painful or negative felt-sense is called *dukkhavedana*. Alternatively, experience may have a neutral felt-sense, called *upekkhavedana*, which is neither pleasant nor painful, but none the less powerful in its effect. The associated *vedana* gives meaning and power to thoughts, beliefs, emotions, memories and perceptions. *Vedana* is the glue that holds experience together and without it, memories, negative thoughts and emotional reactions would not become lodged in the mind, but would simply evaporate like drops of water in the hot sun.

Mental pain is analogous to physical pain in that its primary purpose is to direct attention to the cause so that you can see what must be done to remove the cause. If you perceive a burning sensation in your hand, you respond by looking at your hand and intuitively take the appropriate action of moving your hand away from the fire until the pain subsides. The appropriate response to the pain of the fire is dictated by awareness of the cause, and your

innate and intuitive intelligence (*satipanna*) automatically directs the appropriate action that leads to the resolution of the pain. You do not have to think about what to do and in fact, thinking would be a distraction that may prolong suffering. Mental pain (*dukkhavedana*) has a similar function and is intended to direct your attention to the source of your mental suffering (*dukkha*). If you respond with mindfulness to the *dukkhavedana*, then you will allow *satipanna* to arise and this intuitive intelligence will guide the mind to change internally to resolve the underlying *dukkha*. However, as has been said before, there must be freedom in which *satipanna* can arise and operate and this requires mindfulness and *satisampajanna*, the clear and direct perception of things as they are.

In *vedanupassana* meditation, we do not focus on the meaning of our thoughts or emotions, but on the feeling energy, which is often called the *felt-sense* or *feeling tone* that accompanies each thought or emotion. Mindfulness and investigation are applied to unveil the *vedana* that permeates our mind states, beliefs and emotional complexes and gives them power. This is the heart of *vedanupassana* meditation: a journey into the subtle awareness of intuitive feelings as a guide to facilitate transformation and liberation. This practice is not restricted to our inner journey of transformation and we can apply the same sensitivity to intuitive feelings in our personal relationships. The more sensitive and open we can be to the intuitive feeling level, the more in touch we will be with the needs of others and with the unique needs of each new situation. Compassion requires this extraordinary sensitivity and presence for the subtle feeling level of experience.

## INTUITIVE FEELINGS AS OUR GUIDE

The heart of meditation at the feeling level is to use changes in felt-sense as a guide. This means tuning in to the subtle shifts in the intensity of *dukkhavedana*, *sukhavedana* and *upekkhavedana*. The principle of Psychological Homeostasis informs us that given the freedom to change, the psyche will always move in the direction that leads towards the resolution of *dukkha*. Mindfulness and *satisampajanna* provides this freedom, or therapeutic space, in which *satipanna* can arise and transformation can happen, just as habitual reactivity sustains

*dukkha* by inhibiting *satipanna* and the freedom to change. When suffering resolves in this way, it is naturally accompanied by a shift in feeling tone from *dukkhavedana* to *sukhavedana* and finally to *upekkhavedana* and we can monitor these changes during *vedanupassana* meditation.

When *dukkhavedana* resolves, it is accompanied by a release of trapped feeling energy (*vedana*) from the highly constrained state of attachment to a state of non-attachment. This release of energy is experienced as *sukhavedana*. In experiential psychology, this change is called a *felt shift* and provides a guide that something beneficial has happened internally.

During experiential unfolding, there is a further progression from *sukhavedana* to *upekkhavedana*. This represents the completion of the reintegration of feeling energy back into the psyche and a return to a state of stability and equilibrium (*upekkha*) and this is the last step in the resolution of *dukkha*. This resolution happens as we let go of inner attachment to reactivity; but it is not you who lets go, it is the mind letting go of itself. This process happens all the time in everyday life. For example, you may be consumed by anxiety (*dukkhavedana*) about an upcoming job interview, but once you are actually in the interview, the tension subsides and you feel a surge of enthusiasm (*sukhavedana*) and after it has finished, everything returns to normal (*upekkhavedana*). When we focus mindfulness on painful emotional state of *dukkha*, we may experience a powerful release of energy from *dukkhavedana* to *sukhavedana* as the emotional complex begins to unfold and transform, but eventually the euphoria subsides as this emotional energy reintegrates back into the psyche. This state of stability and balance produced by the resolution of suffering is accompanied by the felt-sense of *upekkhavedana*, which is a much higher state of happiness associated with peace and freedom.

## WORKING WITH EMOTIONS WITH MINDFULNESS MEDITATION THERAPY

*Vedana* should not to be confused with emotion, because an emotion has a very definite structure, whereas *vedana* simply describes the property or quality of an experience. *Vedana* is undifferentiated feeling energy, whereas emotions have a structure composed of thoughts, memories and physical

responses in the body. An emotion takes shape when the energy of *vedana* becomes crystallized around these thoughts, memories, beliefs and actions.

It is very easy to identify with emotions because they are so compelling, but this is a form of delusion called *moha*, the seductive face of *avijja* that causes us to become identified with mental reactions (*sankharas*). Something goes wrong and we *become* upset and act out the emotion in the form of conditioned patterns of negative thinking and behavior. *Moha* causes us to identify with the reaction and become upset. If anger arises as a primary reaction and we identify and attach to this reaction, then we *become* the anger and it will dictate how we think, feel and act. *Moha* prevents change by limiting our freedom, so you must develop mindfulness as an antidote to *moha*. Through mindfulness, we learn to avoid identifying with emotional reactions and learn to see them simply as mental objects that arise in the mind.

The Path of Mindfulness and particularly *vipassana* meditation and Mindfulness Meditation Therapy is a very skillful way of working with emotions in which we essentially deconstruct the emotional complex and illuminate the internal structure of the emotion. All emotions have an internal structure composed of specific feelings, memories, perceptions, beliefs and imagery. The internal imagery provides an organizational structure for feeling energy and gives cohesiveness to the emotion. This inner structure is like the workings of a Swiss watch. When you gain a thorough familiarity with the internal mechanism and individual parts, then you have something very tangible and concrete to work with. You cannot repair something as complex as a swiss watch without this knowledge, yet do we approach our emotions with this degree of attention to detail? We do not. We are seduced by the superficial and immediate appearance of our emotions; we identify with this and remain completely ignorant of the inner workings. This is the state of ignorance, or *avijja*, that is the central problem that sustains emotional reactivity and *dukkha*. The Path of Mindfulness is a deliberate path of dispelling *avijja* by the simple and persistent application of mindfulness and investigation (*sati-dhammavicaya*).

No one wants to experience sadness, fear, anger, anxiety or depression, but avoidance and aversion or resistance will not make them go away. Trying to replace negative thoughts with positive thinking may keep painful emotions at bay for a while,

but this will not stop them reappearing in the future. Similarly, using meditation to try and empty the mind of thoughts in an attempt to create a state of tranquility is simply another form of resistance and avoidance. The emotional reactivity will return the moment it is given a chance. Understanding that avoidance and repression are not skillful, the Buddha taught us that the only effective way to resolve *dukkha* is to face our suffering directly and compassionately with mindfulness. This is the First Noble Truth of suffering, which states that we must awaken to suffering, wherever it exists, internally or externally. We awaken by establishing a relationship of non-reactive mindfulness with the feeling level that lies at the heart of all emotional reactions. Mindfulness provides the right conditions for the transformation and resolution of *dukkha* just as unawareness, or *avijja*, inhibits transformation and resolution.

Mindfulness creates a therapeutic space of non-deluded, pure knowing, or *satisampajanna*. This creates the right conditions in which intuitive wisdom-intelligence (*satipanna*) can arise and this is what leads to transformation and liberation. *Vipassana* meditation, when focused on emotional suffering as the object of meditation, creates the right conditions in which *satisampajanna* and *satipanna* can arise and this facilitates transformation. This form of *vipassana* meditation is the primary tool in Mindfulness Meditation Therapy. In this approach, we allow emotional complexes to heal from within, which is much more effective than anything we might try to do to them through thinking. We do not heal emotional suffering; it heals itself, and mindfulness combined with investigation provides the right conditions in which this natural healing can take place.

### *Reframe the emotions*

When an emotion arises, it is usually in the form of a personal statement, such as, “I am anxious; I am angry; I am frustrated; I am disappointed; I am afraid; I am sad.” The reference to “I am” is a statement of subjective identification with the emotion and this is the root reaction of delusion (*moha*) that causes the emotion to dominate consciousness. If you remove the self-reference, then the emotion becomes reduced to an objective phenomenon that can be observed with mindfulness. Therefore, it is helpful to change “I am...” statements into “I notice...” statements, such as “I notice anxiety in my mind; I notice anger; I notice frustration; I notice disappointment; I notice fear.” This

simple process of reframing emotional reactions creates a space between you as the knower or observer and the emotion as a mental object that you can observe. This helps prevent you from becoming overwhelmed by emotional reactions. If you cultivate this non-reactive relationship with the emotion, then you create the ideal conditions for intelligent change. Through this simple exercise in reframing the emotion, you effectively stop yourself from becoming entangled in the emotional reaction. Instead, you become the *container* of the emotion. Cultivate an objective relationship based on mindfulness with your anxiety, anger, disappointments, fear or any other of the numerous emotional reaction that torment you and you will create the ideal conditions for transformation and liberation from them all.

### *Establish a Safe Zone*

We must take special care when working with powerful core emotions such as depression, anger or the intense emotions associated with childhood trauma and abuse. There needs to be a safe working relationship, so that you do not become overwhelmed by the emotion. Without this therapeutic space you will become vulnerable to secondary reactivity and the proliferation of negative thinking. Forming the right relationship with emotional suffering requires positive friendliness (*metta*) and patience (*khanti*), which are natural qualities of mindfulness.

We must begin by taking a gentle approach based on friendship and genuine interest. The emotional afflictions are not enemies to be uprooted and destroyed. That is the way of violence and completely contrary to The Path of Mindfulness. *Dukkha* is not our enemy, but our teacher whose function is to show us the way to non-suffering. Therefore, the best way to begin to establish a safe relationship with our suffering is not to react against it with resistance, but to learn to be present with it. This requires small steps, in which we touch the suffering with mindfulness and then withdraw. Through repeated mindfulness contact we begin to replace the original reactions of aversion with a more stable state of presence. There is a cumulative effect from making frequent contact with any painful emotion and in time, mindfulness will become the natural response to the emotional reaction instead of habitual secondary reactivity. Through frequent contact, you will naturally become more familiar with the emotional reactions and you will naturally become less reactive. The more we see of the details and structure of the

emotion, the less overwhelming it will be. This may seem counter-intuitive, but fear depends on abstraction and ignorance and mindfulness counteract this. If we were to encounter a cobra in the wild, our first reaction will most likely be one of fear and panic. However, if we stop and focus mindfulness on the snake, we will naturally begin to learn more about the reality, or truth, of the snake. We see how it reacts to our movements, how quickly it moves its head and whether it feels threatened or not. All of this information allows us to respond to the cobra in a skillful way and it is exactly the same when we relate to our *dukkha* with mindfulness. Ignorance breeds *dukkha*; mindfulness dispels ignorance and heals *dukkha*.

If the emotion becomes too strong, then simply step back, open the eyes and take a break for a minute or two. There is no rush; practice with patience and compassion towards yourself. The relationship of mindfulness is like a dance in which you make continual adjustments to the needs of your partner and the needs of the dance. Every step you take in the “dance of mindfulness” is a small yet significant victory, so allow yourself plenty of time to become a skillful dancer when working with strong emotions.

### *Access the feeling level*

If you are troubled by a traumatic memory, then carefully recall the memory and picture the event in your mind, just to the extent necessary to access the associated feelings, without becoming caught up in thinking about the event, which will simply perpetuate emotional reactivity. Surround the emotion with lots of space and approach it in small steps so that you can maintain a mindful and comfortable relationship with the feelings. It is often very helpful to first practice approaching and withdrawing many times in quick succession. The purpose is not to dwell on the emotional reaction, but to make *contact* with the present felt-sense of the emotion. This does not involve thinking about the emotion, but *sensing* the emotion. Do this as many times as you need until you can sit comfortably with the felt-sense of the memory, without becoming overwhelmed. Learning to develop this balanced way of relating to painful memories is an essential part of establishing the mindfulness-based relationship with the emotion. Learning not to react is a very beneficial skill in its own right, but this also creates the right space in which the core emotions can begin to change internally.

If you are worried about the future, then picture possible future scenarios. Again, adjust your position until you find a safe zone where you can sustain mindfulness of the feelings and avoid being overwhelmed by emotional reactivity and thinking. Make frequent mindfulness contact and learn to dance with the felt-sense of the anxiety about the future, keeping just the right distance as you would with a dance partner.

Memory images or imagined future images provide a reference point, or anchor to which you can return at periodic intervals to monitor progress during meditation. The purpose of recollection is not to proliferate suffering by wallowing in painful memories or worrying about the future, but to learn a different way of relating to these emotions that allows you access the inner structure of the emotion, without becoming reactive. It may take considerable practice, approaching and withdrawing over and over again with traumatic memories or intense anxiety about the future, but in time you will be able to sustain contact for longer and longer periods of time. This process of contact desensitization is widely recognized as an essential requirement for working with trauma and phobias, but most importantly it paves the way for working with the internal structure of the emotions, which will lead to transformation and resolution.

Another useful tool that will help you access the feeling energy that surrounds an emotion is to find an anchor word that resonates with the feeling. Allow a word to emerge from the emotion and check it to see if it really fits with the internal felt-sense of the emotion. You may be focusing on anxiety and the word “heavy” emerges as a good fit. This technique of finding word anchors is used to great benefit in a psychotherapeutic technique called Focusing, developed by Dr Eugene Gendlin. As experiential unfolding takes place, you may find that the word anchor that best fits the felt-sense of your experience will also change. “Heavy” may change to “sad” and later to “black” before resolution is complete.

After you access the feeling level of an emotional complex, simply allow yourself to rest there, being mindful of the feeling tone and bring your attention back to the feeling over and over again if you get distracted. If you become distracted by thoughts then gently acknowledge the thought, let go of the thinking and return to being mindful of the feeling. Often, these frequent transitions between distractions and mindfulness of the primary emotion can be very important, even if the distracting thought seems totally irrelevant. Distractions can be thought of as a safety



mechanism that allows the psyche to process feeling energy in small bite-sized chunks and you should look at distractions as a natural part of the process of transformation, rather than something to be resisted.

It is not necessary to do anything or to try and understand anything about the feelings that you are experiencing. The whole focus is on simply being present for the feeling with mindfulness and *satisampajanna*, because this intuitive awareness is itself much more transformational than any indirect knowledge about the feelings that you may acquire. The conscious presence of mindfulness contact is often sufficient by itself to produce major changes in an emotional complex, even if nothing else happens at the level of psychological insight. This is the phenomenon called Contact Resolution, in which the simple act of making contact with inner suffering with mindfulness brings about a resolution. At other times there may be considerable movement as the feelings behind the emotion unfold. This process is called Experiential Resolution and is more common with intense emotional complexes such as trauma and will typically involve the differentiation of inner experiential imagery.

Take time to cultivate the mindfulness-based relationship with your feelings. This is one of the most valuable things that you can do and is worth doing with care and attention. In many ways, the practice of contacting inner emotions with mindfulness is like blowing warm air onto a block of ice. As the ice melts, the water is set free to continue its natural flow towards the ocean, where it finds complete peace and stability. Often, all that is needed is that you experience this new way of relating to your inner feelings with love, compassion, appreciation and the equanimity of mindfulness. The power of this quality of mindful presence for facilitating healing cannot be overemphasized. True mindfulness (*sammasati*) is the attitude of loving kindness (*metta*), which has the characteristics of openness, compassion and genuine interest even towards the most unpleasant aspects of our experience. This change in relationship allows the contracted and rigid parts of the mind to soften and become malleable, which creates the ideal conditions for change.

### *Explore the feeling*

When you are able to relate to the felt-sense of a core emotion, then you can begin to explore and investigate the inner structure of the emotion. All emotions have an internal structure, which is

based around experiential imagery. The psyche thinks in pictures and uses imagery to organize emotions. We often think that emotions arise out of strongly held beliefs, but actually beliefs and thinking originate from a much deeper level of organization in the psyche, which is provided by inner imagery. The inner imagery encodes all the feelings that make up the emotion and give it power. When we focus mindfulness on the felt-sense of an emotion like anger or anxiety, we will begin to uncover the inner imagery and this provides a rich field of specific and concrete material, which aid in the transformation of intense emotions. Sit with the emotion. Walk around it. Hold it in your hands. Observe it with careful attention to detail.

What does it look like? Is it big or small, stationary or moving, in color or monochrome? Does it have a shape or is it amorphous? Is it organic or inorganic, alive or dead?

What does it feel like to the touch? Is it hard or soft, rough or smooth, brittle or malleable, hot or cold?

What does it sound like? Does it make any sound? Is it trying to say something?

What does it smell like? Does it have a pleasant perfumed scent or an unpleasant smell?

What does it taste like? Is it sweet or bitter?

By exploring these and other structural details of the emotion that you are observing, you will make it much easier for the energy to differentiate and unfold, which leads to transformation and resolution. In general, ignorance (*avijja*) promotes reactivity and inhibits change, whereas conscious awareness of these experiential details promotes change.

### *Allow experiential unfolding*

When you have established a relationship of mindfulness with the feeling level of an emotion, the feelings that have become amalgamated into the emotional complex will begin to differentiate. It is important to follow these subtle changes in the quality of feeling and be fully mindful of each and the more of this internal structure that you make conscious, the more the emotional complex will transform. What seems like an impenetrable fortress of depression or anger will begin to differentiate into the underlying feelings that form the feeling structure of the emotion. This is the process of objectification, in which the abstract nature of an emotion differentiates into tangible objects. Touching each of these individual feelings with

mindfulness and *satisampajanna* will begin to take apart the fortress of the emotion, brick by brick. What seemed impenetrable is now penetrated and this is the beginning of the process of experiential differentiation that will eventually lead to resolution. It should always be remembered that what keeps emotional reactivity such as anger and depression alive, is ignorance of the individual feelings and memories that make up the internal structure of the complex. As you expose each component into the light of conscious awareness, you are embarking on a path that will inevitably end in the resolution of the emotional complex. The only thing that keeps reactivity alive is ignorance of this internal structure, which is the reality of the emotion, and delusional attachment to the superficial and abstract appearance of the emotion, which is pure illusion.

When you focus mindfulness on the intuitive felt-sense level of an emotional complex, it is not uncommon to experience inner symbolic representations. This is particularly the case with intense core emotional complexes such as anger, anxiety, fear, depression and guilt, or emotional trauma. Generally, the most common forms of symbolic representations that arise during experiential unfolding are psychophysical sensations and experiential imagery.

It is quite common to notice heaviness around the eyes or tightness in the jaws. It is also not uncommon to experience psychophysical “hotspots” where emotional energy seems to be highly focused. Again, the object is not to analyze, but to be mindful of whatever unfolds at the experiential level. Psychophysical sensations, like memories provide a way of accessing repressed feeling energy. The correct practice is to focus mindfulness on the associated feelings and allow your experience to unfold. You may notice that the physical sensation gets stronger or changes from a dull heaviness to a sharp sensation. As you follow these changes in sensations, you may notice changes at the feeling level as well. This is the process of transformation in progress. You may not understand what is happening, but you can sense at an intuitive level that what is happening is important.

The other main type of inner phenomena that most people will experience when they focus on strong emotions is some form of experiential imagery. This is not surprising, because the mind process information through the language of mental pictures and imagery is a rich medium for representing feelings. Experiential imagery is not the same as visualization created by the

imagination, because it arises spontaneously from the intuitive feelings themselves, without us making any effort to construct images.

Memory based images are relatively easy to work with, but often imagery can take on a much more abstract and surrealistic form with shifting colors and shapes. Sometimes, imagery of a mythological or archetypal form may arise. Whatever the form of imagery that arises, the response is the same, which is to access the feeling level and allow intuitive wisdom to guide the unfolding process. We do not need to do anything except be fully present and for the experience and allow our intuitive intelligence (*satipanna*) to guide the process, rather than trying to understand or interpret what unfolds. This is experiencing transformation as a living process, rather than trying to change the mind by applying external wisdom. Whatever form the experiential imagery takes, the principle is the same, which is to stay mindful and be sensitive to the directionality inherent in the imagery and let transformation happen in its own way. This is what leads to Experiential Resolution of emotional complexes.

### *Revisit the feeling level often*

At frequent intervals return your attention back to the original thought-emotion that you chose for *vedanupassana* meditation. You may find it useful to use a word anchor to help you conjure up the emotion. If it was anger, then re-access the anger by remembering the specific situation that led to the anger. Determine for yourself whether there has been any resolution in the intensity of the emotional reaction. By doing this in an objective and scientific way, you will learn what is helpful and what is not and you will begin to build an inner skill in the application of mindfulness. Return to the emotional complex over several days or weeks and check whether it has changed. Repeat another session of *vedanupassana* on the same emotion. With this degree of attention with focused mindfulness combined with investigation (*sati-dhammavicaya*) the emotional reactivity is bound to change. Ignorance is the major factor that sustains and fuels emotional suffering and if you systematically counteract this *avijja* with applied mindfulness, then it is only a question of time before the emotional complex will dis-assemble and resolve itself. Mindfulness is one of the most effective ways to promote healing, but it will take time to undo the years of habitual reactivity so you must be patient and persevere.

## 18 EXPERIENTIAL IMAGERY AND MINDFULNESS MEDITATION THERAPY

During mindfulness meditation or in a session of Mindfulness Meditation Therapy (MMT) it is very common for repressed emotional energy to represent itself in the form of dream like imagery called *experiential imagery* and we can use this imagery very effectively to facilitate the transformation and resolution of persistent negative emotions. Experiential imagery refers to inner visual representations that arise out of the emotion itself. There is something about the experiential image that feels intuitively right and *resonates* with the feeling. Experiential imagery is not the same as visualization, in which you deliberately create an image, because they are allowed to arise quite spontaneously from your inner feelings, without any preconceptions of what form they should take. Sometimes, experiential images are easy to interpret, but more often than not, they seem to have a life and language of their own that is beyond rational interpretation. Fortunately, we do not need to interpret or understand their meaning; what is much more important is to simply *experience* them. We can think of experiential imagery as the psyche expressing itself in the field of conscious awareness through the medium of imagery. The psyche uses imagery to organize experience and emotions internally and the imagery gives a framework around which experience, memory, feeling and beliefs are assembled. This is called the Structural Theory of Emotions.

There is a particularly strong connection between feeling energy and the structure of experiential imagery and if the emotion changes so will the imagery. By the same reasoning, a change in the structure of experiential imagery will produce a change in the intensity of the emotion. This is called Image-Feeling Reciprocity and has profound implications for our inner process of transformation. It is very difficult to directly change an emotion like depression or anger, because it is very abstract; but it is very much easier to change the structure of an image, because it is concrete and has a specific form. Every subtle change in color, position, size, context and other sub-modalities will produce a corresponding change at the feeling level.

As always, the starting point for working with experiential imagery is to focus mindfulness on an emotional complex, which we make the object of our meditation and allow imagery to arise from the present felt-sense of the emotion. Imagery may first appear as a color, which may later differentiate into a shape with a certain texture and position in our inner visual field. During Mindfulness Meditation Therapy, we allow the imagery to change in its own way, without any kind of interference or attempt to analyze the contents. What is most important is the direct conscious experience of the imagery as an unfolding process and not the interpretation of what it means. If you allow the imagery to change freely, under the guidance of the intuitive wisdom-intelligence of *satipanna*, then what emerges will naturally lead towards the resolution of *dukkha*. We are allowing the psyche to heal itself through the medium of inner imagery. This can be very effective, because experiential imagery is the natural language of the psyche and imagery acts as a catalyst for transformation and healing.

## THE SUB-MODALITIES OF IMAGERY

The Structural Theory of Emotions states that emotions have an inner structure, organized around experiential imagery. Feeling energy, called *vedana* is encoded in imagery and specifically in the sub-modalities of imagery. There are three main categories of visual sub-modalities: Spatial, Sensory, and Associated sub-modalities. The spatial sub-modalities include position, size, shape, and movement. The sensory sub-modalities include color, color intensity, and texture. Imagery also has the associated sensory modalities of heat, sound, taste and smell. Each of these sub-modalities encodes a particular quality of feeling energy and brings this energy together in the form of an emotion. The emotional energy takes on further form as thoughts, beliefs and intentions, which eventually manifests as speech and action. Every habitual emotional reaction has a structure that leads to an outward expression, but this whole process is powered by emotional energy that is encoded in the core experiential imagery. Awareness of the subtle qualities of this inner imagery is, therefore, very important for facilitating emotional transformation, because any change in these sub-modalities will produce a corresponding change in the intensity and persistence

of an emotional reaction. The specific form of the sub-modalities is ultimately what gives power to our beliefs and actions and is equivalent to the inner mechanism of a Swiss watch or a car engine. Understand these specific details and the process of transformation, resolution and healing, will begin to unfold quite naturally. The solutions appear in direct proportion to how thoroughly you investigate the emotional imagery in the same way that the very act of carefully examining every part of the Swiss watch or the car engine will reveal the problem that needs to be fixed. The most important action in either case is the response of investigation with mindfulness, because this allows you to see what is *actually* there and it is the seeing and knowing that is transformational. When you see the loose wire, the broken spring or the intense red color of experiential imagery you immediately know what needs to be done to resolve the situation. If you do not look, then no solutions will appear. In the case of the experiential imagery, changing the color from red to white or blue may be the key step that helps resolve the emotional suffering.

Experiential imagery often appears at a very specific position in our inner visual field. Why this is the case is not important; what is important is that you focus mindfulness on the feeling energy associated with this specific position and allow experience to unfold from that awareness. For example, you may be meditating on an anxiety reaction and experience a patch of red color that always appears at the upper right-hand corner of your inner visual field. You can sense intuitively that this is the correct position and that the left-hand corner or the bottom of your inner visual screen does not fit with your experience. In this case, the combination of the sensory sub-modality of color and the spatial sub-modality of position encodes the specific feelings that form the emotion of anxiety.

Whenever we uncover experiential imagery, we always investigate what needs to happen next. If you were to meditate on this inner imagery, you may notice that the image seems to want to change its position and move from one side to the other side or from top to bottom or even diagonally. It is useful to follow these inner movements and see how they affect the quality of what you are feeling. If a threatening image moves from the top to the bottom of your visual screen, does it become more or less threatening? You can experiment and discover what leads to the reduction of *dukkha* and what does not. Similarly, you may find that as you continue to focus mindfulness on the imagery, the

color spontaneously changes from red to green. Such subtle changes may seem insignificant to the rational mind, but at the intuitive, experiential level, such changes are frequently very significant.

Another important spatial sub-modality is the size of the image, which is also related to how close the image is relative to you, as the observer. A large image will be more threatening than a small image. Size is often a key sub-modality in phobias. If a person has a phobia of spiders, it is very likely that his internal representation of a spider will be very large and very close. If the phobia resolves itself spontaneously or after a period of therapy, the internal image will probably have also become substantially smaller and appear at the back of his inner visual field. Like all sub-modalities, any change in structure correlates with a change in the intensity of feeling. When a person says “It’s not such a big problem now,” this reflects an actual change in the size of his internal imagery.

Movement is another spatial sub-modality that can encode feelings. Rapid movements are often associated with intense emotional reactions, whereas slow movements generally convey calm and balance. Again, when there is mindfulness, your intuitive feelings will show you what resonates with your present experience and what needs to happen next. All you have to do is be aware and allow these changes to happen. If you feel overwhelmed or confused, this may be represented internally in the form of spinning imagery. By focusing on the spinning image with mindfulness, you may discover certain subtle adjustments that result in the image slowing down to a more comfortable speed, with a corresponding reduction in the feeling of confusion. What is most important is to allow these subtle changes to arise spontaneously, which they will do if given the freedom of mindfulness. We do not have to make the changes happen through deliberate intervention, but simply allow the changes to arise naturally from our inner experience of the emotion. These natural, experiential changes will always be more effective than anything we do deliberately.

Of course, color is one of the most important sensory sub-modalities and encodes a great deal of feeling energy. The color red is often associated with anger and frustration, sexual lust and other highly charged emotions. Black often indicates emptiness and depression, as in the expression “He is in a black mood.” The color blue is often associated with tranquility and a sense of well-being. White is associated with purity and innocence and green is



associated with rejuvenation. Besides the specific color, the intensity of the color also encodes emotional energy. Vivid imagery is associated with equally intense emotional reactions, whereas distant memories often appear indistinct and dull.

Besides spatial and sensory sub-modalities, experiential imagery is often associated with other sensory modalities such as touch sensations and sounds. An image may feel cold and clammy or hot and prickly. Very often, experiential imagery will have an auditory component. The imagery might contain a person or yourself, speaking. It is important to investigate the voice tone, loudness, speed and other auditory sub-modalities, because these are what carry the meaning and emotional energy that gives power to the emotion. If you feel intimidated by a parent or by your boss, it is very likely that your inner imagery of that person will not only be very large relative to you, but that he will speak with a louder voice. When you ask yourself what needs to change, you might find that making the imagery of the parent smaller and you larger; and making your voice louder and their voice softer could completely change how you feel and react. These subtle changes are what you discover quite naturally from your investigation with mindfulness of the actual internal structure of your emotions.

Nothing can change if you remain at the superficial and abstract level of perception, but the moment you open the lid and investigate the reality of what is there, you will find that the possibilities and solutions will present themselves in abundance. The key is to look and this is the purposeful application of mindfulness to investigate mental phenomena and the essential nature of *vipassana* meditation. All these details are immensely important for the transformation of emotional complexes and the more you become conscious of the detailed structure of the sub-modalities, the more things will change in a beneficial direction. Ignorance sustains suffering and one of the specific ways that it does this is by preventing us from knowing the subtle details of the internal structure of our experience.

## TYPES OF EXPERIENTIAL IMAGERY

Internal experiential imagery occurs in a variety of forms depending on the nature of the emotion and the individual. Some of the most common types of experiential imagery are Inner

Drama, Memory Imagery, Abstract Imagery and Symbolic Imagery.

### *Inner Drama*

Inner drama is one of the most common forms of internal imagery in which the mind replays an event that has strong associated feelings of pain or pleasure. It could be a recent argument with your partner or child or a difficult encounter with a colleague at work. Emotions like guilt, anger and remorse often involve elaborate inner imagery in which we relive events over and over again. Often, worries about the future will result in playing out various scenarios. Such inner dramas can serve a useful function in helping us prepare for the future. However, they are only useful if we can remain objective and have a balanced, non-reactive relationship with the content of the drama.

The best way to work with inner drama is to watch the drama as if projected onto a screen or a stage. You need to remain objective so that you can examine the unfolding imagery with mindfulness, without getting caught up in the drama. As always, the content is not as important as the feeling energy (*vedana*) that empowers it, and as you meditate on the drama, pay careful attention to the feelings that arise. After you make contact with the feeling energy, or felt-sense of the inner drama, you can let go of the contents and stay with the feeling and allow changes to unfold experientially. Eventually, after the process of experiential unfolding has reached a natural conclusion, return your attention to the original inner drama and see if there has been any change in the intensity of the emotion.

We can use inner drama as a way of accessing unresolved emotional reactivity, which we then make the object of our mindfulness meditation. Additionally, we can use this form of imagery as a method of preparing ourselves for the future. It is always a good practice to take the initiative now and train the mind to meet the potential difficulties that may unfold in the future when we meet the parents, or get some disappointing news. If we don't prepare ourselves, then we will most likely fall into our usual patterns of habitual reactivity and suffer. We should prepare, and the best way to prepare is to meditate on the specific emotions that are likely to arise and find a way to resolve this emotional energy beforehand.

## *Memories*

Visual memories are the most familiar form of imagery, but memory images are much more than just a photographic record of events. They can become highly symbolic as they are processed by the psyche. The original memory may change under the influence of other parts of the mind until it no longer represents what actually happened.

Some memories are particularly vivid, with a photographic quality that encodes a great deal of emotional energy. These photographic, or eidetic memories often arise after emotional trauma and particularly if we were unable to process and assimilate the emotions associated with the experience. Not surprisingly, physical, sexual or emotional abuse during childhood can produce post-traumatic imagery, because a child does not have the maturity to process these experiences. Post-traumatic stress may arise from witnessing an accident or from war or the experience of a violent event, because these experiences fall outside of the normal range and are equally difficult to process, even as adults. These trauma-induced memories become recurrent, because the underlying emotional energy remains unresolved and unassimilated. Unable to process the emotional conflicts associated with trauma, the mind becomes highly reactive, generating many layers of secondary reactivity. This secondary reactivity results in the repression of the original unresolved primary reactions and prevents transformation and resolution of the conflict. The repressed emotional energy becomes trapped in the mind where it continues to generate further reactivity and suffering, called post-traumatic stress disorder.

At the core of many phobias is some form of eidetic imagery that encodes intense emotional energy. A traumatic experience of drowning, being shut up in a closet, or even a frightening encounter with a spider can all generate very intense eidetic imagery that becomes imprinted in the subconscious. When the appropriate stimulus is present, these vivid eidetic images reappear along with the intense associated emotional reaction of fear and terror. When a phobic sees a spider, it is not the external image of the spider that causes the emotional reaction; the reaction is produced by the internal representation, the subjective inner image of the spider. This will probably be very large and have intense color. These subjective sub-modalities are added on

to the actual memory and this post-experience processing leads to the intense emotional reactivity of a phobia.

We can work with memories during *vipassana* meditation and cultivate a relationship with the memory image as a primary object for meditation. We do not try to interpret the memory, but simply cultivate mindfulness and *satisampajanna* of the memory image and allow it to unfold and change, experientially. The photographic quality of traumatic memories means that they tend to be very detailed and display the sub-modalities of intense color, size and rapid movement. These vivid sub-modalities give emotional intensity to the memory and are actually much more important than the contents. Therefore, resolution of a traumatic memory requires that these sub-modalities change. Resolution may lead to a decrease in color intensity or a change from color to black-and-white or the image may become significantly smaller and seem more distant. Traumatic images are typically very close and “right in your face” so you might expect that if the image recedes into the distance, then it will become less emotionally intense. The contents of the memory may remain the same, but how it is perceived changes and this is what matters.

It is the full conscious experience of the transformation of the sub-modalities that leads to resolution and this requires sustained mindfulness. During mindfulness, the details and sub-modalities unfold quite spontaneously under the guidance of *satipanna*, as the psyche re-processes sensory data into a more stable form. An intense traumatic memory-image is most certainly a very unstable state for the psyche and Psychological Homeostasis will direct the psyche to find a new state that is more energetically stable. The freedom and therapeutic space of mindfulness allows the process of inner re-adjustment and re-processing to occur. Habitual reactivity has the opposite effect and prevents conscious awareness of the sub-modalities and internal structure of the emotion. Without this conscious awareness, nothing can change. Mindfulness Meditation Therapy (MMT) provides a very effective method of treating phobias and post-traumatic stress. The first phase of MMT teaches the client to recognize his habitual patterns of reactivity, which is essential, because nothing can change if it remains hidden from conscious awareness. The next phase of MMT involves forming a relationship with his inner experience of his feelings and associated imagery. Gradually he learns to stop the secondary reactivity that takes him away from the underlying core primary emotions. Mindfulness provides a systematic

approach to noticing each and every impulse to react and as the client becomes skilled in this, he will begin to see the reaction before it overtakes him. This allows him a moment of choice that was not previously available when he was unaware of the reactive process.

Through sustained periods of mindfulness contact, the client experiences more and more of the detailed sub-modalities of the inner traumatic imagery. As this experiential detail is made conscious, the imagery will begin to change under the influence of *satipanna* and the process of Psychological Homeostasis. As the imagery changes, it produces corresponding changes at the feeling level and this can be monitored throughout the mindfulness meditation session. Eventually, the phobia begins to resolve into a more stable and less traumatic state and the associated inner imagery becomes less overwhelming. Over time, the phobia will lose its compulsive strength and no longer produce such intense emotional reactions, but this can only happen after there has been a significant change in the internal representation of the inner experiential imagery that lies at the heart of all phobias and traumatic memories.

Working with traumatic memories and phobias requires care, so that you do not become overwhelmed by the intense emotional reactions that have developed in reaction to the inner imagery. The best way to work with a painful memory, as with any intense emotion, is by slowly approaching the perimeter of the memory-image and carefully monitoring the level of feeling until you are able to experience the feeling without reacting. In this careful approach, which is greatly facilitated by mindfulness, you will be able to find a safe distance in which you can observe the inner traumatic imagery, without being overwhelmed. This approach of repeated controlled exposure is well recognized as an essential part of the treatment of phobias and traumatic memories. This well tested method is called exposure desensitization and resembles allergy desensitization, where patients are systematically exposed to low doses of allergen over several weeks. Each time we successfully experience traumatic imagery without reacting, we create a new response pathway in the brain, and through repetition, becomes the default pathway.

### *Abstract Imagery*

Abstract imagery is quite common and often arises when you focus mindfulness on a general emotional state such as anger,

fear or anxiety. Often, what you first notice is one or more patches of color, which later take on a particular shape. The shape may have a specific geometric form, such as a sphere or a cube or it may have a completely amorphous shape, like a cloud. Whatever the shape, the meditator will typically feel that this shape is significant and resonates with the inner felt-sense. Intuitively it is right, even if rationally it make no sense at all.

In one example, a person decided to meditate on a feeling of uncontrollable anger that appeared after his partner had said something particularly hurtful. What appeared in his inner experience was an abstract image consisting of a fuzzy orange patch on the left side of his inner visual field. As he continued to focus mindfulness on this abstract imagery, the color blue began to appear around the edges of the orange patch. At the same time, both colors became more intense and sharper and the image changed into a heavy, metallic sphere. With continued mindfulness, he observed the heavy sphere drop to the bottom of his inner visual field, where it rolled around from side to side and each time it rolled it seemed to get smaller. After a while, he was distracted by a seemingly unrelated thought about what to have for dinner. When he returned his attention to the original memory that made him so upset, he noticed to his surprise, that he no longer felt any anger.

In another session of Mindfulness Meditation Therapy, a young man in his late twenties, was experiencing intense anxiety and sadness about an upcoming move, away from his home. When he focused mindfully on the felt-sense of this emotion he noticed a black patch in the middle of his inner visual field. As he continued to investigate this abstract image, he further noticed that there was a yellow layer on the outside of the black patch. After further mindful-investigation, he was surprised to notice that now there were two black and yellow patches, but the second one was yellow on the inside and black on the outside. As he continued to focus on the unfolding imagery, yet a third patch appeared; but this, he described, much to his amuzement, as “pink and fuzzy.” When asked what needed to happen next, all three parts spontaneously combined together to form one large patch. The feelings that accompanied this event were of a tremendous upwheling of strength and calm. When he focused his attention back on the thoughts about the upcoming move, he noticed that the anxiety and sadness had become significantly less intense and he felt better able to meet the challenges that lay ahead.

In both cases, the conscious experience of these unique changes in the sub-modalities of experiential imagery had a dramatic effect on the underlying emotions. None of this experiential imagery could have been predicted and no attempt was made to analyze it. What was important was that the clients *experienced* this unfolding content in the present and not what it all means. The colors and abstract forms arose intuitively and spontaneously as a result of the non-reactive awareness of *satisampajanna* and the intuitive intelligence of *satipanna* acting together to direct the sequence of changes that eventually led to the resolution of the emotional complexes. These sessions of experiential transformation can have a profound effect and this can be regarded as the psyche healing itself through the natural language of imagery.

In another session, a client meditated on the inner felt-sense of depression, which he had been struggling with for years. When he focused on the present felt-sense of his depression, the first thing he noticed was a sense of blackness. This is not uncommon, because black has a symbolic association with depression and anxiety, as reflected in our language with statements such as: “He is in a black mood.” After a few minutes of sustained mindfulness, the amorphous black cloud differentiated into a doughnut shape. When he imagined touching this shape, he noticed that it was rubbery, like a car inner tube. After further mindful-investigation to see what needed to happen next, he noticed that the inner tube began to deflate and as the air escaped, the depression lifted. Through the conscious experience of these changes in the structure of his depression, he discovered a way to free the core emotional energy that had become locked up in the mental formation of depression.

This kind of experiential change is often significantly more effective than trying to understand why we feel depressed, anxious or angry, because when we work with experiential imagery, we are working at a much deeper level of the psyche. Thinking about experience is always one step removed from the actual truth of experience; thinking is a reaction and not the direct experience of the emotions. As has been said many times already, it is the truth that liberates, not our efforts to become free from suffering and in the cases described above, the truth refers to the actual experience of the concrete inner language of imagery that forms the inner structure of the emotions. When we can see this structure, in all its detail, we provide the ideal conditions in which emotional suffering can transform and resolve.

## *Symbolic Imagery*

Perhaps the most familiar kinds of symbolic images are those that arise when we are dreaming. Dreams are internal representations of inner psychological processing and like experiential imagery, they arise spontaneously. The emotional meaning of a dream image is encoded both in the symbolic form of the dream and in the sub-modalities, such as color, shape and size. Like any other prominent emotion, dream imagery can be made a primary object for mindfulness meditation. Traditional dream work usually involves the interpretation of the symbolic meaning of dream images in order to shine a light on the underlying psychological process. However, in Mindfulness Meditation Therapy, the emphasis is not so much on the contents as on the process of experiential unfolding of the dream imagery. If you remain mindful and try not to interfere with the dream imagery, it will usually undergo a process of transformation and this can lead to profound changes at the emotional level. This way of working with dreams is called Active Imagination and was originally developed by Carl Jung. Active Imagination is not fantasy or visualization, which are products of the thinking mind, but involves allowing the imagery to unfold in its own way through being mindful of the imagery and the feeling energy (*vedana*) that accompanies the imagery. As Jung said,

A fantasy is more or less your own invention, and remains on the surface of personal things and conscious expectations. But active imagination, as the term denotes, means that the images have a life of their own and that the symbolic events develop according to their own logic - that is, of course, if your conscious reason does not interfere.

The guiding principle in using Active Imagination is to be mindful of the intuitive feelings associated with the symbolic imagery and allow changes to unfold in a way can be felt internally to be meaningful and right. As always, you let your innate intelligence, or *satipanna* guide the unfolding process and resist trying to make things change according to preconceptions about what is supposed to happen. Mindfulness helps the process of Active Imagination by allowing us to tune-in to our present experience and discover the specific sub-modalities of the dream imagery that encode feeling. If you dream of a unicorn, it is not



the symbol itself that is as important as the intensity of the white color of its coat, the color of its horn and the position of the beast in your inner visual field. These and other sub-modalities give power to the dream image and it is through mindfulness of these details, that experiential unfolding and transformation will occur. It is the attention to these details that makes the imagination *active*.

Symbolic imagery is not confined to dreams and similar dream-like imagery may arise during mindfulness meditation and particularly during Mindfulness Meditation Therapy where we focus our attention on core emotions. If symbolic imagery arises during meditation, it can be very productive to investigate the imagery, become familiar with the fine details of the structure of the imagery and allow the imagery to change in its own unique way within the field of mindfulness. As always, such imagery will change and eventually disappear, but if we allow it to change under the direction of our intuitive intelligence then that change will be beneficial. If we ignore the imagery or react to it with attraction (*lobha*), aversion (*dosa*) or blind belief (*moha*), then the changes that occur will not be in alignment with *satipanna* and the opportunity for healing will be lost. As always, mindfulness is the essential factor that allows us to follow the right path.

In one case, a woman complained about feeling completely overwhelmed by too many responsibilities and the continual frustration of things not working out according to expectation. She desperately wanted to find an inner sense of balance and calm to help her cope. During a session of mindfulness therapy she was able to access this inner sense of calm, strength and freedom and it took on the form of a wooden boat with a bright yellow sail. There was something very powerful and very real about the color yellow and the form that it took as a sail. This symbolic imagery provided her with a way of accessing her inner stillness that could not be corrupted by all the demands and frustrations of her life. As she continued to work with this powerful image, she discovered to her amazement that the “frustrations” took the form of small hard billiard balls. When asked what needed to happen next, she imagined taking these balls for a trip in her boat! This gave her the sense of control that she had long been searching for and could not find by simply talking about her problems. The change came about as a result of her direct experience of this inner experiential imagery and allowing the imagery to change under the direction of her innate intelligence. When we maintain a relationship based on

mindfulness, the solutions present themselves quite naturally. It is not what we do that matters as much as being fully present and open to discover what needs to happen. This is allowing the psyche to heal itself, rather than trying to fix things through the distorted activities of the ego.

## 19 THE FREE MIND

Ultimately, the purpose of mindfulness practice and *vipassana* meditation is liberation (*vimutti*). This means liberating the mind (*ceto-vimutti*) from all the habitual mental reactivity and ignorance that imprisons our being and limits our freedom to respond effectively to the demands of life. Along with the liberation of mind, we also seek to purify the mind through alignment with wisdom-intelligence (*panna-vimutti*) so that we live in harmony with *anicca*, allowing change to manifest under the guidance of our innate intelligence.

Mindfulness facilitates transformation by stopping the proliferation of reactivity by making us aware of reactions as they arise and restoring the freedom to know and see experience as it actually exists, instead of being distracted away from the direct experience of the present. In this way we overcome *avijja* and begin the process of movement from the superficial surface structure to the deep inner structure of experience. Mindfulness brings about transformation by allowing intelligent change to unfold without interference from the conditioned ego, because when there is mindfulness there is freedom from the reactive ego. This is freedom from the *knower* of conscious experience. The *knower*, or ego doesn't simply experience phenomena, it *reacts* to phenomena and that reactivity is conditioned by the past and attachment to this reactivity is what produces *dukkha*. It is only when we let go of the chains of habitual reactivity that *satipanna* can arise and bring about harmony through the resolution of *dukkha*. Such transformation with mindfulness always leads towards the resolution of suffering, because the psyche, like any other living system will always try to find the most stable state possible, which is free from *dukkha*.

In addition to facilitating transformation of *dukkha*, mindfulness also leads to a fundamental shift in the whole psyche, because when there is *satisampajanna* we transcend the *known* and become the *knowing* itself. We become the container, rather than the contained; the space around mental objects, rather than the objects themselves; the pure awareness of observing, rather than the mental objects observed. From this new perspective, even if reactivity continues to arise, we are no longer

seduced into reacting and if we do not feed reactivity then it will surely wither away. As we begin to align with the *knowing* rather than the *known* we find that we discover the possibility of freedom from our habitual reactivity. Reactions may still arise, but we are no longer compelled to become the anger, sadness, fear and we begin to relate to them as objects to be observed, without further reacting. Instead of becoming angry when an angry thought arises, we respond with the pure awareness that observes the phenomenon of anger. Instead of becoming fearful when a fearful thought arises, we respond to this mental object with *satisampajanna*. Instead of becoming worried because a worrying thought arises, we respond with pure awareness and observe the worry-thought with complete objectivity. This is the universal response of mindfulness, which is a response of spaciousness, compassion and patience.

Through this practice, we transcend the realm of the conditioned habitual patterns of the mind and discover a new freedom and a much more authentic way of being in the world. As we progress in our practice, we discover a new refuge in the unconditioned and unchangeable dimension of existence called the *asankhata dhatu*, which literally means the un-fabricated dimension of existence. If it is not created, then it does not die and for this reason the transcendence of habitual reactivity is described as the path to the deathless (*amatapada*). Unlike an idea, thought or emotion that arises and eventually dies, the pure awareness of those ideas, thoughts and emotions has no *form* in itself, does not depend on conditions, and does not die. *Nibbana* (Skt. *Nirvana*) is the perfection of this transcendence of the conditioned state of mind such that there is no remnant of attachment and conditioned reactivity; it is the state of complete extinction of *lobha*, *dosa* and *moha*. The conditioned world of *samsara* is a world of illusions, and a prison that we create for ourselves through ignorance. However, the Good News is that as conscious human beings, we have the ability to de-construct our prison through transformation of our blind attachments, and to step out of the prison into the light of freedom.

Imagine a person who has spent his whole life living in a deep valley. His perception is completely limited by what he can see, touch and feel within the confines of that valley, and the valley is his whole world. Of course, this perception is an illusion, but habitual conditioning and ignorance prevents him from knowing anything different. One day he decides to climb the valley wall to the top, far above him. No one has ever done

this before, but something drives him forwards and upwards. When he reaches the top, something quite remarkable happens: he sees countless valleys and mountains stretching far into the distance. From that very moment of awakening, which could be measured in milliseconds, his entire perception has been changed forever and he can never again live with the old belief that his valley is the entire world. No thinking or analysis was required to reach this new perspective; it came about spontaneously as a result of direct seeing and direct knowing. His world was changed forever.

Rooted in ignorance, the habitual reactions of *sakayaditthi* create our world by projecting our perceptions onto reality and this is like being confined to the valley. To follow the Path of Mindfulness and *Dhamma* is to climb the valley walls. The first function of *sati* is to bring us into direct contact with our senses, without reacting. When we are fully present, then we know things as they actually are, which is the pure, undeluded knowing of *satisampajanna*, and with this pure knowing a completely different reality opens up before us. This new vision leads to *satipanna* and we experience a release from the blind acceptance of our reactivity. This is awakening to not self (*anatta*) in which we see that we are not the contents of our mind and that our essential being transcends anything that can be known or created. As we let go of our reactions, they lose their power and simply become objective phenomena that, like any other *sankharas*, are subject to the laws of *Dhamma*: they are impermanent, superficial and not self. Mindfulness practice brings us to the understanding and more importantly to the direct living realization that we are not our thoughts, but something much, much more. As the Tibetan meditation master Kalu Rinpoche said,

We live in illusion and the appearance of things.  
There is a reality. We are that reality. When you  
understand this, you see that you are nothing, and  
being nothing, you are everything. That is all.

The illusion and appearance of things refers to the surface structure of reality, the transient and superficial thoughts and emotions that arise in the mind. A painful thought arises and we become the pain; a happy thought arises and we become happy. This is living in the illusion (*moha*) and appearance of things. There is a reality and this is the totality of our psyche and the unconditioned ground of pure mind living according to *Dhamma*.

To see that you are nothing means that you see that the essential nature of mind is unconditioned pure awareness itself and this is beyond the thoughts, beliefs and the reactive conditioning that we take to be our personality.

This awareness can know the limitless variety of thoughts and feelings as they arise, yet the awareness faculty remains unchanged, just as the ocean remains unchanged by the bewildering array of life forms from plankton to whales that live in it. The essential nature of mind is therefore empty of form and described by the Pali word *sunyata*. The analogy of a mirror is often used to describe the nature of Original Mind, because the mirror reflects everything without distinction and without attachment. Actually, Original Mind is neither the mirror nor the things reflected, but the *reflecting* itself, which is empty of all form. This is the nature of the pure direct knowing of things that we call *satisampajanna*, without any hint of reactivity or identification.

## BODHICITTA

The mind is always active, continually generating thoughts, emotional reactions and other mental contents. This is its nature and there is nothing inherently wrong with an active mind as long as it is balanced with intelligence and wisdom. When we are lacking *panna* then we are at the mercy of this changing content and suffer accordingly. When we take refuge in the larger dimension of pure awareness then we are no longer at the mercy of the contents of the mind and the mind becomes steady and unwavering. As Ajahn Chah, who was one of the most influential meditation teachers of the twentieth century, expressed it,

The nature of the original mind is unwavering. It is tranquil. We are not tranquil because we are excited over sense objects, and we end up as slaves to the changing mental states that result. So, practice really means searching to find our way back to the original state, the “old thing.” It is finding our home, the original mind that does not waiver and change following various phenomena. It is by nature perfectly peaceful; it is something that is already within us.

The practice of mindfulness provides the mechanism for returning our attention to this original state, the “old thing” of pure awareness, which is called Original Mind, or *bodhicitta*. The term *bodhicitta* simply means, “awakened mind,” from the root *budhi*, which means “to awaken to experience in the here and now” and *citta*, which means “mind, heart, spirit or state of conscious experience.” The word Buddha also comes from the same root and means the awakened one, the one who is awake to the *Dhamma*, or the objective reality of phenomena.

*Bodhicitta* is the field of consciousness where intuitive awareness (*satisampajanna*) and intuitive wisdom (*satipanna*) come together, unified by the central theme of mindfulness (*sati*). In the very moment when there is mindfulness, then in that same moment there is no reactivity, simply because mindfulness and reactivity are mutually exclusive. When there is no reactivity, then *bodhicitta* arises. What remains, is an unconditioned state of consciousness (*asankhata citta*), in which there is no *atta*, no ego. In that moment of mindfulness the state of *anatta*, or no self, spontaneously comes into existence and there is no longer the subject-object duality created by the attachments and reactivity of the ego mind. What is left is the pure knowing, or *satisampajanna*, which is the original pure, luminous and immeasurable Buddha mind, or *bodhicitta* and the essence of our true self.

An important point to understand is that enlightenment or awakening is not some abstract state of consciousness to be achieved in the future after years of practice. Awakening is actually a living dynamic process that occurs in each and every moment when mindfulness and the clear non-deluded awareness of *satisampajanna* are present. *Bodhicitta* is a natural and direct consequence of mindfulness in action. The Buddha directs us to the path that best creates the conditions for discovering enlightenment for ourselves in the here and now, which is the path of freedom from the known. To quote the eighth century Tibetan sage, Padmasambhava,

The nature of your mind, which cannot be pinpointed,  
is innate and original wakefulness. It is important to  
look into yourself and recognize your nature.

In each moment of mindfulness we cease to be reactive, because the two are mutually exclusive. The state of *satisampajanna* is

the complete opposite of our usual state of *avijja*, in which we are pushed and pulled from one experience to another by the force of reactivity. *Satisampajanna* is the state of “innate and original wakefulness” that is not identified with any of the contents that arise in the mind. This wakefulness and the *bodhicitta* that arises simultaneously, is unconditioned (*asankhata*) and not limited by the fabrications of mind (*sankhara*), attachments (*upadana*) and mental reactivity (*kilesas*). As stated by the Buddha,

Through Bodhi one awakens from the slumber or stupor inflicted upon the mind by the defilements and comprehends the Four Noble Truths.

It is the accumulated habitual reactivity due to ignorance and attachment that dulls the mind into “slumber and stupor” and this obscures the original purity of our existence. The heart of the Buddhist path is about removing the *kilesas*, not through willpower and coercion, but through the liberating insight of wisdom-intelligence (*panna*). The path of purification is learning to greet each *kilesa* with *satisampajanna*, rather than reacting out of habit. The heart of the path is not a set of beliefs that we then apply to rid our mind of the reactive defilements, because that would remain superficial and limited by our views and opinions (*ditthupadana*). Original Mind is not a separate mental state to be achieved in the future, but rather the state that arises spontaneously in each and every moment when there is mindfulness and therefore our path must be to cultivate mindfulness so that we awaken *bodhicitta* within.

You cannot create *bodhicitta*, but you can remove the obstacles that obscure *bodhicitta* through the practice of mindfulness and allow *bodhicitta* to arise and be known in each present moment. *Bodhicitta* is always there, but obscured by habitual reactivity in the same way that an abandoned city becomes completely covered by jungle vines after years of neglect. Mindfulness practice and *vipassana* meditation are the tools that we use to excavate the lost kingdom of our innate original pure nature. This is achieved by the careful attention to each and every obstacle through illumination with mindfulness (*sati*) and clear comprehension (*satism pajanna*). Seeing things in their true light allows *satipanna* to arise and it is this that transforms *dukkha* and transcends *samsara*. When there is *satisampajanna* and *satipanna*, then experience is free to change in an intelligent direction that leads to the cessation of suffering.



This is awakening to the Four Noble Truths, not as a psychological concept, but as a living realization in each moment of consciousness. This natural and intuitive wisdom arises whenever the psyche is free to encounter *dukkha* and realize the natural path that leads to the resolution of *dukkha*. This path is not a conventional path of practice that has a beginning and an end, but a path that is to be discovered in *each and every moment* of our lives.

## SUNNATA

Original Mind, or *bodhicitta* is like the sky or the ocean or the Earth itself. It is the unbounded ground of all being, the infinite space in which any formation can arise and yet is independent of them all. This spaciousness is the nature of pure *knowing* and quite distinct from the contents that can be *known*. The essential nature of Original Mind is the boundless knowing of all mental and sensory phenomena, the pure consciousness that receives all manifestations of form.

By analogy, the ocean has an inexhaustible potential to contain any organism ever created from early life forms, through the age of dinosaurs to present day ocean life, in all its diversity. Throughout history, the ocean remains the same and unaffected by the contents that appear and disappear. This same analogy applies to the sky, which is similarly unaffected by the clouds, or birds that fly through it and which leave no permanent trace in the sky. The Earth also gives birth to all manner of forms, from mountains to glaciers and a bewildering variety of life forms and yet the essence of the Earth remains unchanged. We can look at Earth, ocean and sky as having an inexhaustible potential to allow all formations to arise, to do their dance and then to return to the ground of being. Original Mind, like the ocean, sky and Earth is formless and cannot be equated with any of the contents of mind. It has the quality of pure emptiness, or in more positive terms, pure openness and limitless creative potential. To quote Leonardo Da Vinci,

Among the great things which are to be  
found among us,  
the Being of Nothingness is the greatest.

Original Mind is the Being of Nothingness. Through mindfulness practice you will naturally become more familiar with the contents of your mind and see how these phenomena arise, do their dance and then pass away. You will gain insight into how thoughts, perceptions and feelings arise and disappear depending on conditions. You will gain insight into how all these phenomena lack permanency (*anicca*) and exist as part of a process; how they are fundamentally unsatisfactory (*dukkha*) and unstable; and how they are essentially impersonal (*anatta*) and beyond your control. The contents of experience are empty phenomena that come and go like bubbles in the ocean. But, what you will also become aware of through mindfulness practice, is the quality of unlimited consciousness that is the “Being of nothingness” that seems to provide a continuity and background to all existence.

This emptiness, or spaciousness is called *sunnata* (Skt. *shunyata*), which is the essence of Original Mind, or *bodhicitta*. The word is derived from the root *sunya*, which means “empty” and the suffix *ta*, meaning “-ness.” To say that the essential nature of the mind is emptiness may seem to be a pessimistic view, but in fact the root *su-* conveys the positive concept of good and being at ease, as in the word *sukha*, the Pali word for happiness. *Sunnata* is better translated as the “creative void,” or simply the state of complete openness to all phenomena and in which all becomes possible. The great Indian Buddhist, Acharya Asanga described *sunnata* as,

an aesthetic continuum with all possibilities.

*Sunnata* actually describes the liberated mind that is open to the real world with all its possibilities; *sunnata* is equivalent to the innate state of freedom that is our birthright. This is in complete contrast to the reactive, conditioned mind of *sankhata citta*, which is closed and restricted to only limited possibilities. To experience the truth of things and to be able to fully engage creatively with life, the mind must be free of conditioning and reactivity. If the mind is cluttered with thoughts, prejudices, views, opinions and habitual emotional reactions, then the mind cannot connect to the “continuum with all possibilities” and will remain imprisoned in *samsara*, the endless round of suffering. Original Mind is un-originated, unconditioned and deathless. It simply exists as the infinite consciousness of pure knowing.

To taste *sunnata* is to taste freedom. To taste it a little brings a little freedom, to taste it a lot brings a lot of freedom and to taste it continually brings continuous freedom. From this position of freedom we have the flexibility to engage skillfully and wisely with every moment of life. Natural wisdom and intelligence (*panna*) flow in response to this freedom. As Zen master Suzuki Roshi said,

If your mind is empty, it is always ready for anything; it is open to everything. In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, in the expert's mind there are few.

Original Mind has *sunnata* as its foundation, allowing an infinite capacity for creativity and intelligence as we relate with each and every experience that arises. Through *satipanna*, action is purified and is much more likely to be appropriate and balanced and this is the *panna* of the "beginner's mind."

The concept of *sunnata* is very closely associated with *anatta*, an equally fundamental concept in Buddhism, which asserts that any phenomena experienced through the senses has no permanent essence, nothing that can be said to be an independent self. The theory of *anatta* is based on the reality of what we can observe in the world, namely that all phenomena are subject to change (*anicca*) and are inherently unsatisfactory (*dukkha*) due to their impermanence and superficiality. Phenomena arise and pass away according to conditions, but what remains is *sunnata*, the essential substratum of complete openness and complete freedom from changing conditions. *Anatta*, like *sunnata*, is not in any way a negative statement about existence, but a very positive statement that affirms that you are actually much, much more than you can possibly imagine; that you are essentially infinite and cannot be reduced to concepts or labels or anything that can be given a name. Needless to say, this also applies to the natural world. The truth of reality is far beyond what we think and can express and this should encourage us to hold our views lightly about the world and about other people. The truth is always beyond what we can know and opening to this is the path to real wisdom and freedom.

*Sunnata* is said to be equivalent to *nibbana*, the extinction of all grasping and attachment. This is why the Buddha taught that,

Sunnata is Nibbana and Nibbana is Sunnata.

Awakening to *sunnata* is actually not that difficult. Every time we respond to experience with mindfulness, then in that very moment there is an opening to *sunnata* and we become *sunnata*. In each moment of mindfulness we touch *sunnata* and *sunnata* touches us back. When this happens the mind opens and becomes infinitely expansive. In this relationship with *sunnata* we allow an intelligent space to arise in which healing, transformation, creativity and wisdom (*panna*) flourish. The heart of the Buddhist Path of Mindfulness is to bring our whole being into alignment with *sunnata* so that we live *nibbana* in each present moment of our life. As this happens, there is simultaneous direct experiencing of the innate process of transformation and transcendence from the fetters that sustain suffering. There is a Zen saying,

Whether sitting or walking,  
Silent or talking,  
The Essence Itself,  
Is always at ease.

*Sunnata* is the ultimate state of liberation, where our total being is free to respond without the constraints of the habitual reactivity of our personality (*sakkayaditthi*). It is the antithesis of the conditioned and contracted state of the reactive mind. It is through continuity of practice that we establish and develop this center of balance, this still-point of reference that becomes our refuge and spiritual guide. The essence of *sunnata* is always at ease, a place of stability and well-being and through mindfulness we can discover this healing presence in each moment of existence when there is mindfulness. The more mindful we are the more we will know *sunnata* and the more we will be at ease and free from suffering. *Sunnata* cannot be defined or created, but it can be known when there is mindfulness. When there is *sati*, there is *sunnata* and when there is *sunnata* there is *sati*. Mindfulness is the skillful application of awareness that brings us back to the place where we are in touch with *sunnata* and where we are healed by the creative intelligence of the creative void. In each moment of contact through mindfulness, we bring the living presence of *sunnata* into our experience, and truth and wisdom will flourish.

*Sunnata* is spiritually refreshing like a still, clear pool. It nourishes. It heals. It is the essence of the spiritual dimension of

our Being that transcends all form and all content. The purpose of mindfulness practice is simply to connect with *sunnata* so that it becomes our refuge and our source of strength, balance and wisdom. The cultivation of a conscious relationship with *sunnata* provides a strong foundation that allows the development of true equanimity (*upekkha*) as we relate to the chaos and demands of daily life. In the refuge of *sunnata* we are free from the grip of the reactive ego and the living death that is *samsara*. *Vipassana* meditation is the primary tool for discovering the resonating still spaciousness of *sunnata* at the center of our being. From this vantage point we can engage with all that arises in the mind, all the *sankharas*, whether pleasant or painful and be fully present for each with compassion and openness whilst remaining free of their seductive power. From this secure base of *sunnata* we can relate to life without fear. Fear is borne of attachment and identification, the reactions of the ego (*atta*). If there is no attachment (*upadana*), then there is no self (*anatta*). If *anatta* permeates our conscious relationship with all the ups and downs of life then we are living the essence of *sunnata* and there will be no place in which *dukkha* can proliferate.

## 20 THE PERFECTION OF THE FREE MIND

*Bodhicitta* arises when the mind lets go of habitual reactivity and conditioning and responds to the experience of the world with *satisampajanna* and *satipanna*. This flowering of wisdom and intelligence naturally leads towards the more wholesome qualities of humanity, just as ignorance inevitably leads towards suffering and violence. The awakened Buddha mind is characterized by ten spiritual perfections called *paramis* that work together to produce wholesome and skillful actions of body, speech and mind. The Path of Mindfulness is a journey that has the perfection of the ten *paramis* as its goal and in the awakened mind, these *paramis* define how we relate to our experience in the three principal domains of Self, Other and the World. The ten *paramis* are generosity (*dana*), morality (*sila*), renunciation and non-clinging (*nekkhamma*), wisdom-intelligence (*panna*), energy and vitality (*viriya*), patience (*khanti*), dedication to truth (*sacca*), resolute determination (*adhitthana*), loving-kindness (*metta*), and equanimity (*upekkha*).

At the conventional level of understanding, we can do much to cultivate these ten qualities through the actions of the thinking mind, based on insight and good intentions. However, it must be remembered that thinking is always limited to some degree by reactive conditioning. Therefore, to develop these noble aspirations into *parami*, or spiritual perfections, we must go beyond thinking and the limitations of the fragmented ego. To go beyond the conditioned, we need to cultivate *satisampajanna* through the practice of mindfulness. Non-reactive and objective awareness allows *satipanna* to arise and it is this intuitive wisdom-intelligence that will guide us towards the perfection of the *paramis*, much more effectively than aspirations based on thinking alone. As we free ourselves from compulsive reactivity we create the right conditions in which these *paramis* will arise and mature in a natural and holistic way from the deepest level of the psyche.

The path for developing these virtues is mainly about removing the obstacles that stand in the way, rather than by trying to create them through thinking and planning. Rather than forcing ourselves to be truthful, compassionate or generous, we

will be better served if we work to remove the obstacles of habitual reactivity that inhibit the natural expression of these qualities. If you unblock the logjam, then the river will flow naturally and this is how we should approach the perfection of the *paramis*. The *paramis* are not abstract ideals, but natural states that flow from the enlightened and awakened mind, the Buddha mind of *bodhicitta*. The mind that is free to change and adapt under the influence of *satipanna* will naturally move towards the perfection of these qualities for the simple reason that they support the path towards the cessation of suffering. Under the guidance of *satipanna* the psyche will always move towards greater stability, well-being and happiness (*sukha*), which is another way of describing the cessation of *dukkha*. This same principle also applies to the other dimensions of personal relationships and relationship to the physical world. Just as the resolution of personal suffering leads to greater stability in the mind, so the perfection of the *paramis* will promote greater stability in the home, in society and in how we relate to material objects and the environment.

Before you can perfect these noble virtues in your outer relationships, you must begin by cultivating these qualities in your internal relationship with yourself. The *paramis* have to become integrated into your whole psyche as you relate to both your personal suffering and your happiness. The path begins when you cultivate generosity, morality, non-attachment, intelligence, effort, patience, truthfulness, determination, loving-kindness and equanimity towards all the ups and downs of your moment-to-moment experience. As you cultivate these virtues in your own life, then you will gain the direct experience that will allow these noble virtues to spread outwards into your relationships with others. Therefore, any work that you undertake to purify your own mind and heart is beneficial for all humanity and working towards your own liberation is working towards the liberation of all. There is no separation between the two paths. There is a Chinese proverb that expresses this beautifully,

If there is light in the soul, there will be  
beauty in the person.

If there is beauty in the person, there will  
be harmony in the house.

If there is harmony in the house, there  
will be order in the nation.

If there is order in the nation, there will be  
peace in the world.

All ten *paramis* depend on each other and work together as a unified force for beneficial change. Above all, the *paramis* are tempered by the four primary colors, the *brahmaviharas*, or sublime abodes that accompany mindfulness. These are *metta*, *karuna*, *mudita* and *upekkha*. *Metta* is the courageous response of opening the mind and heart to all that we experience with genuine friendship and caring. *Karuna* is compassion for suffering, wherever it arises, internally or externally and *mudita* is awakening to everything that is wholesome, beneficial and life supporting. *Upekkha* is the perfection of non-reactivity and non-attachment that creates the spaciousness in which *panna* will arise. These four noble qualities arise through the practice of mindfulness and provide the foundation for the cultivation and perfection of all ten *paramis*.

## DANA

*Dana* describes the spirit of generosity and kindness that comes from the heart and is expressed in actions that directly benefit others as well as self. *Dana* is the natural expression of *metta*, *karuna*, *mudita* and *upekkha*. The foundation for true generosity is a pure mind that is not consumed with selfishness and for this there must be order in the mind and heart (*citta*). A mind that is consumed by the reactivity of greed, hatred and delusion is closed and contracted and in this state of disorder and conflict it is difficult to cultivate heart-felt generosity. In essence, the greatest gift you can give the world is to liberate your own mind from the grip of greed, hatred and delusion. With freedom from reactivity comes the spaciousness and freedom to discover the natural source of generosity within the heart. As you develop the direct experience of *dana* within, it will naturally radiate outwards and you will become more inclined to be generous to others. The Buddha beautifully expressed this principle in the following passage:

Thousands of candles can be lit from a single candle,  
and the life of the candle will not be shortened.  
Happiness never decreases by being shared.



There is something quite beautiful in the quality of generosity: it brings light and warmth to the heart of everyone that it touches.

As always, we can try to be generous or try to be kind, but these creations of the ego-mind are likely to be superficial, especially if your mind is in a state of disorder and suffering. True generosity needs to arise from within and the best way to cultivate *dana* is to investigate what prevents you from naturally expressing generosity and kindness. Mindfulness practice allows you to become aware of the inner fears and emotional contractions that create these obstacles. Through *vipassana* meditation you can investigate these emotional contractions and allow them to resolve themselves through the action of *satisampajanna* and *satipanna*. As the obstacles are dissolved through the healing contact of mindfulness, the heart will naturally expand and *dana* will flow naturally from this expansiveness.

Generosity is a spiritual quality that comes from a heart that is open and exquisitely sensitive to the needs of each moment and this is exactly what we develop through the practice of mindfulness. Then generosity and kindness become the natural outward expression of the liberated mind of *bodhicitta*. The Dalai Lama described Buddhism as the religion of kindness,

There is no need for temples, no need for complicated philosophies. My brain and my heart are my temples; my philosophy is kindness.

In all that we do and throughout our practice, we should always aim to create the right conditions in which kindness and caring are dominant. We begin with kindness to ourselves, to our pain and suffering and then allow that attitude to permeate outwards to wherever it is needed. This is one of the signs of a mature practice, where kindness is the dominant feature, inspite of all the conflicts and strife of living in a chaotic world. If that kindness is not there, then our path is clear: cultivate kindness for that reactivity that prevents the natural expression of the *parami* of *dana*.

## SILA

As Rumi, the thirteenth century Persian poet so eloquently expressed it,

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,  
there is a field. I will meet you there.

*Sila* refers to virtue, morality and ethical conduct and society depends on various codes and rules designed to promote harmony and cooperation. The Buddha expressed this in the Noble Eightfold Path as the practice of Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood, collectively called *sila*. However, to reduce *sila* to a set of rules and commandments is to fall into the same old trap of blind attachment to form, to *sankharas*, which is likely to result in more suffering for yourself and others.

Attachment to rules and codes is a very powerful force, because it gives the illusion of order. However, blind attachment inevitably creates division between the observer and the observed and this breeds violence. The observer reacts to experience according to attachment to his beliefs of what is right and wrong, good and bad, moral and amoral. Ideals are fine, but they are always limited, because they are abstract fabrications that are not grounded in the reality of the present. This leads to error in the form of assumptions and generalizations, and actions that are conditioned by the past and do not embrace the needs of the present.

Blind attachment to ideas about *sila* also leads to conflict between people with different beliefs, and creates conflict internally between our different needs and expectations. For this reason, the Buddha warned against blind conformity and attachment to rules and conventions (*silabbatupadana*). In fact, the first stage of the spiritual path of enlightenment outlined by the Buddha involves letting go of the three classical fetters of personality-belief, sceptical doubt and attachment to rules and conventions. This does not mean that we should abandon conventions and ethical rules, but that we should remain open to discover what is the right action in the here and now. This is all that really counts and everything else is abstract speculation based on ideals and assumptions. Rules and conventions can provide a guide, but can never substitute for awakening to the

concrete needs of the present moment, which is ever changing and, therefore, requires fresh solutions in every moment.

From the Buddhist point of view, what differentiates moral and amoral actions of body, speech and mind is whether those actions lead to the resolution of *dukkha* and the promotion of stability, well-being and happiness. True *sila* comes from awakening to the Four Noble Truths in the here and now and this should be our guide in all matters. We must always be open to discover for ourselves what actions lead to order and stability and the resolution of *dukkha* in each present moment and what actions do not. This means having the flexibility and willingness to engage with the details of real life, rather than blindly following prescribed rules and dogma dictated to us by family or political and religious authorities. It stands to reason, therefore, that the first requirement for ethical behavior is awakening to the First Noble Truth of *dukkha*, the state of instability and suffering, as it exists. Simply following rules, while ignoring the underlying conflicts that exist in society, family or in your own heart is simply a form of repression and *avijja* and this is not what is meant by the perfection of *sila*, as taught by the Buddha. What is needed is attention to the actual reality of the present moment, which is always changing and which demands new solutions relevant to the needs of each new situation. True morality must, therefore be tempered by mindfulness and wisdom, by *satisampajanna* and *satipanna*, because only non-conditioned awareness can allow us to discover what is truly appropriate for the needs of the present moment. This is living by the authority of *Dhamma*, rather than by the authority of man-made rules.

Virtue, morality and wholesome action provide the cornerstone of the spiritual path to freedom and *sila* is the outward expression of the perfection of spiritual development within. The most basic teaching of the Buddha is described in the formula:

Refrain from doing evil deeds,  
perfect good deeds  
and purify the mind.

From the Buddha's perspective, *sila* is a living process of discovery. *Sila* becomes a *parami* when there is a personal commitment to discovering what constitutes Right Action, Right Speech and Right Livelihood in the ongoing reality of moment-

to-moment living and this requires mindfulness to all the movements of experience, both internally and externally.

To practice *sila*, requires the cultivation of the two fundamental principles of non-hatred (*abyapada*) and non-violence (*aviihimsa*). As we dissolve and resolve reactivity based on hatred and violence, then we open the way for the cultivation of all the manifestations of kindness, generosity, patience, loving-kindness and benevolent action. *Sila* is a path to be cultivated, not through following beliefs, but through awakening to what is wholesome (*kusala*) and what is unwholesome (*akusala*) in each moment. Seen this way, the path that leads to the purification of the mind is to know each mind moment with complete mindfulness and complete absence of reactivity so that we can know one from the other.

By awakening to what purifies the living present we set the conditions that will purify the next moment and the forward momentum of this purifying energy will transform everything in its path. Therefore, we must not only contemplate what is virtuous, but also become very familiar with what is not virtuous. To perfect love, you must open your mind to fully embrace evil and not resist it with aversion, but greet it with non-reactive mindfulness. Evil feeds on ignorance and aversion and both reinforce each other. What transforms evil, is the light of awakening through *sati* and the wisdom-intelligence of *satipanna* that naturally leads to the resolution of dissonance and *dukkha*. To embrace evil means that you investigate the detailed structure of evil so that no part of it remains outside of conscious awareness and then you create the therapeutic space in which it can transform itself under the direction of *satipanna*.

You cannot solve the problem of evil by fighting it with idealized beliefs and taboos, but rather through the methodical path of attending to each moment with mindfulness. This is the approach of loving-kindness and compassion, which is the only reliable antidote to evil. By purifying the mind through mindfulness you will discover the true meaning of what it is to do good and to refrain from doing evil in each moment of life.

## NEKKHAMMA

*Nekkhamma* is usually translated as “renunciation,” although this does not quite capture the true meaning of the term. The root of

the word actually means, “to go forth” and conveys the action of letting go of the conventions and habits of the past to discover something better. The word also conveys the sense of simplifying life and letting go of those things that do not assist you on the path towards liberation.

*Nekkhamma* means different things depending on the context. For a monk, renunciation takes the more conventional form of giving up the life of the householder and giving up worldly possessions and worldly pursuits. However, there is a deeper meaning to *nekkhamma* that can be described as the path of non-attachment and non-clinging. In the words of the well known American Zen teacher, Aitken Roshi,

Renunciation is not getting rid of the things of this world, but accepting that they pass away.

This is clearly rather different from the common understanding of renunciation in the West as the practice of self-sacrifice. Self-sacrifice and self-denial are only of value if they are accompanied by wisdom (*panna*) and this specifically means that the act of renunciation must lead to greater happiness, greater stability, greater freedom and greater compassion. If it does not, then the act of renunciation becomes little more than another manifestation of the ego trying to control the mind, which is not the path of *Dhamma*.

At the spiritual level of understanding, the perfection of *nekkhamma* means the path of letting go of the familiar habitual reactivity of the self, the ego, that we have become attached to through ignorance and unawareness. The path to freedom must involve letting go of the familiar habits of the past so that we can transform and grow. This actually requires a great deal of courage and resolve, because giving up the familiar can be quite scary. In the words of W.H. Auden,

We would rather be ruined than changed;  
We would rather die in our dread  
Than climb the cross of the moment  
And let our illusions die.

Therefore, *nekkhamma* must be coupled with the *paramis* of wisdom-intelligence (*panna*), courageous vitality (*viriyā*), loving-kindness (*metta*) and great patience (*khanti*).

Renunciation is simply the path of purification of the mind and heart by letting go of anything that corrupts the spirit and perpetuates suffering. When we remove these corruptions, then the mind begins to open and what is revealed is the natural and innate purity of the awakened mind (*bodhicitta*) and this will naturally purify our actions. As the Buddha said,

Who so has turned to renunciation,  
turned to non-attachment of the mind,  
is filled with all-embracing love  
and freed from thirsting after life.

Renunciation becomes a skillful and natural response when we awaken to suffering and to the underlying blind attachments that generate suffering. Ultimately, *nekkhamma* is the path of non-attachment (*anupadana*) that comes about when there is truthfulness and mindfulness.

Now it is extremely important to look deeper at what we mean by “letting go” or “giving up.” The central question to ask is, “Who is doing the letting go?” If the thinking ego-mind is directing the show, with all its beliefs and prejudices, then you have fallen into the familiar trap and your actions cease to be *nekkhamma*, but simply the reactivity of the ego trying to control and manipulate the psyche. Learning to let go of a habit is not a matter of thinking, following a belief, or exercising willpower, but comes from opening a space around the underlying attachments through mindfulness. The transformational space of pure knowing, or *satisampajanna* allows *satipanna* to arise and this will direct the actions of *nekkhamma* so that what results will be natural and holistic letting go, arising from the greater intuitive dimension of our conscious experience. True letting go and non-attachment happen when there is a relationship based on freedom and full compassionate engagement, which can only happen when the mind is silent and free of thinking, judging and the compulsion to control. In this state of non-reactivity, *nekkhamma* becomes the mind letting go of itself, without the intervention of a controlling ego trying to fix things or trying to manipulate things according to some idea or belief.

## PANNA

*Panna* (*prajna* in Skt.) is derived from the root *na*, which means “to know” and *pa*, which means “completely and thoroughly.” It is often translated as wisdom, but this does not quite capture the essence of the term. In the West, we think of wisdom as profound knowledge about something, whereas *panna* describes an active quality of intuitive intelligence that comes from relating to phenomena in the present moment as they are unfolding. *Panna* is not the fixed wisdom of theories and beliefs, but a living intelligence that evolves in response to the reality of the present moment. Knowledge is static, whereas *panna* is continually changing and adapting to changing conditions.

Perhaps a better translation of *panna* is the wisdom-intelligence that arises from awakening to the objective reality of the present moment. The word *vipassana* also has the roots “*pa*” and “*na*” and is often translated as experiential insight gained through seeing things in their totality and in fact *vipassana* meditation is the primary means through which we develop *panna*. In addition, *panna* has a very precise and pragmatic meaning in Buddhism that makes it different from general wisdom knowledge. It refers specifically to the wisdom-intelligence that leads to the resolution of suffering (*dukkhanirodha*) and that promotes happiness and well-being in the living present.

*Panna* depends on mindfulness, which allows us to awaken to the here and now with *satisampajanna*. When this pure awareness is established, then wisdom-intelligence can arise. *Satipanna* arises in the very same moment when there is *satisampajanna* and when we establish mindfulness, it triggers the process of transformation that leads to the resolution of *dukkha* quite spontaneously, and for as long as we remain mindful. *Satipanna* is the very active face of *panna* that leads to liberation from reactivity and the resolution of *dukkha* in the here and now. This is not liberation based on wisdom knowledge, not knowing *about* things and not psychological insight about your past, but liberation as a living process of direct awakening to the innate and intuitive intelligence of each moment of experience in the present. Ultimately, *panna* means relating directly and mindfully with experience such that there is complete harmony and alignment with *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anatta* in each present moment.

*Anicca* informs us that existence is a dynamic process of change and that any system, including the psyche, needs to continually change and readjust to changing conditions. *Anicca* describes the entire process of birth, growth, existence, decline and death. Thoughts and emotions arise, exist for a while and then fade away. To live in alignment with *anicca* means that we establish an equally dynamic relationship with experience, based on mindfulness that allows change to occur under the influence of our intuitive intelligence. When we live in harmony with *anicca* we become a dynamic living process in which our intuitive intelligence guides us like a beacon towards the resolution of *dukkha* and towards well-being and happiness. This is in stark contrast to a mind that is dominated by habitual reactivity. Such a mind is constrained by its reactivity and unable to respond in skillful ways and the change that results will be chaotic and likely to increase instability and disorder. To allow change to flow in an intelligent direction that leads to greater stability, we must be free of reactivity so that we can discover new responses. Reactivity imprisons the mind like a bird in a cage and this leads to the death of the inner spirit and great suffering. It is only in the state of complete freedom that the mind can change and grow in harmony with the innate intelligence of what needs to happen to restore stability and peace.

This brings us to the second mark of existence, which is *dukkha*, because *dukkha* is the symptom of a mind that is not living in harmony with *anicca* and not allowing inner experience to change and resolve itself under the direction of *satipanna*.

Blind attachment and identification with the habitual reactivity of the ego paralyzes the psyche and prevents it from changing in a beneficial direction. Under ideal conditions, the psyche continually moves between states of instability and stability in a dynamic flux around a state of equilibrium. However, blind reactivity places constraints on this system and prevents this natural movement towards equilibrium. If we are to harmonize with *anicca*, then we must fully harmonize with *dukkha* and establish a mindfulness-based relationship with whatever is unstable and in conflict in the mind. This is to establish *satisampajanna* and the pure knowing of our suffering that is free from reactivity, judgement and aversion and from the delusion that keeps us attached to our reactivity. This means living in harmony with *dukkha* as it arises in the here and now and establishing a space around the suffering in which we can be fully present.



*Panna* is not simply knowledge about *dukkha*, nor is it insight knowledge about *anicca* that we gain through meditation and then use to control the unruly mind. *Panna* is much more than such conventional knowledge-based wisdom and is best defined as the direct and living intelligence that arises from being fully present with *dukkha* and this comes from the direct intuitive awareness of *satisampajanna*. We choose to establish the right conditions in which *dukkha* can change and change in a beneficial way that leads to its resolution.

*Anatta* informs us that there is no permanent self (*atta*) behind our experience, because everything that we experience is in continual flux. We are a living process and not a static entity that can be defined. Any such definition can be nothing more than a linguistic convention that is both abstract and illusory. Living in harmony with *anatta* means that we do not identify with the subjective reactions of the illusory self, but learn to see them as simply objects that arise in our field of experience. If a reaction arises that creates *dukkha*, we understand that we are not the hurt, anger, sadness, frustration, fear or any other *sankhara* that has arisen in the mind. Similarly, living in harmony with *anatta* means that we cease to attach and identify with our reactions of craving (*lobha*) or with our reactions of aversion (*dosa*). We come to see our true identity as *anatta*, which is free to engage with all experience with wisdom and compassion. Living *anatta* is living with freedom from the *knower* and freedom from the *known*. It is the state of non-attachment in which our identity is as the *knowing* of sensory experiences, and this includes both the *knower* and the *known* and is completely free from attachment to either.

Living in harmony with *anatta* is simply another way of describing the experience of liberation from the conditioned world of form. It is the experience of freedom in the here and now in which we are free from all the constructs of the mind that try to tie us down. We become the sky, rather than the objects that fly through the sky or the ocean, rather than the fish that dwell in its depths. Being free from the contents, the world of form, thoughts, emotions, beliefs and reactivity, we find that we can relate to all such form with complete presence. When there is complete presence, then and only then can there be complete compassion. Reactivity inhibits presence and limits compassion; mindfulness restores presence and compassion flourishes into limitless possibilities.

Spiritual transformation is not simply about learning clever ways of fixing our emotional problems, but describes a path of transcending the whole reactive process that produces them. Problems may still arise, but our attitude will be completely different when it is based on *panna*, rather than reactivity and ignorance. When there is *panna* we stop feeding the secondary reactivity that sustains *dukkha*. With *panna* we open to the therapeutic space of *sunnata* in which transformation of primary reactivity can occur in a natural and holistic way under the guidance of *satipanna*. We let problems resolve themselves in their own way, without the intervention of an observer who reacts with greed, aversion and delusion to the problems of the mind. We allow the psyche to do its own housecleaning and find its own natural equilibrium through psychological homeostasis, without the intervention of an ego that tries to control and manipulate the mind.

When we see things as they really are with *satisampajanna* and remain in a relationship of mindfulness and stillness, we provide the right conditions in which *dukkha* will resolve itself. It is not that *we* make things change by applying psychological insights, but that *satipanna* allows things to change by themselves and we simply witness this change happening. The direction of such experiential transformation is always towards greater energetic stability and homeostasis, which is restored with the resolution of *dukkha*. When we open our eyes, ignorance evaporates and without *avijja*, reactivity has no power. If we don't feed reactivity, then the underlying attachments dissolve and wither away, just as a fire burns itself out if not fed with more wood. This is the transformation that comes about when there is spiritual freedom to know *Dhamma*, which means the total freedom of the psyche to know itself, free from the narrow perspective of the controlling ego.

## VIRIYA

*Viriya* is often translated as energy, but with the added quality of vigour, vitality and aliveness. In fact, all these words have the same prefix *vi*, which means "heroic and courageous." Clearly, the perfection of spiritual vitality and life energy is essential for overcoming the powerful forces of *avijja* and *tanha*. Not surprisingly, the lion is often used to symbolize *viriyā* and the

resolve to follow the path of liberation is described as the lion's roar. The importance of *virīya* is repeated many times throughout the Buddha's teachings. It is one of the five spiritual powers needed to bring about freedom and the third of the seven factors of awakening that describes the stages of the awakening process.

*Virīya* refers to the spiritual energy of the psyche that permeates everything and gives meaning to experience and provides the power behind our actions, good or bad. In many ways, we can look at the psyche as a movement in energy, the emotional energy that drives the whole process. When this energy is free to move where it is needed, then we experience emotional health and harmony. Often, the energy of the psyche becomes trapped in the form of patterns of reactivity and attachment. This trapped energy creates inner stress and *dukkha*. In many ways the process of transformation, healing and liberation can be described as the process of releasing trapped energy and restoring the freedom in which this energy can move to where it is needed. When we describe the perfection of *virīya* as a *parami*, we are referring to the process of restoring complete freedom for this energy, our life essence, and this is the characteristic of the Buddha mind, the awakened and enlightened state of being. To be a fully authentic human being, to be truly alive, it is necessary that there be complete balance and freedom of *virīya* within the psyche.

One of the key factors of the Noble Eightfold Path is Right Effort (*sammavayama*), which is the application of *virīya* in a balanced way to energize all the other parts of the Eightfold Path. However, Right Effort is not the same as willpower, which is a superficial concentration of energy by the ego in an attempt to control the mind. Right Effort must be accompanied by *panna*, which means that the effort is applied for the development of the other *paramis* and for the resolution of suffering. Traditionally, Right Effort means applying energy in four ways. These are the effort to stop unwholesome reactivity that has arisen in the present; to remove the underlying attachments that may cause negative reactions to arise in the future; to develop wholesome states as they arise in the present; and to cultivate the conditions that will lead to positive actions in the future. As always, wholesome and positive actions are defined as those which bring an end to *dukkha* and which liberate the psyche so that it can discover stability, well-being and happiness for self and others.

Blind attachment (*upadana*) and compulsiveness (*tanha*) consume a great deal of energy. It takes energy to maintain our

patterns of habitual reactivity and this drains the psyche, leading to fatigue, depression and apathy. We experience this energy drain as *dukkha* and *dukkha* can be defined as psychological or spiritual energy that has become trapped in the inner mental structures, or *sankharas* to which we have become attached. These *sankharas* freeze emotional energy in place and prevent the free flow of energy in the psyche. The *sankharas* are the icebergs of the mind that freeze spiritual energy in place and inhibit freedom. One of the primary effects of mindfulness practice and *vipassana* meditation is to release this frozen energy and allow it to flow again. This is analogous to illuminating the icebergs with the gentle warmth of the sun, allowing the ice to melt and release the water trapped inside. As you dissolve the core attachments through the process of experiential transformation, energy is released and becomes available for re-integration back into to the psyche. This restores freedom and mobility in the psyche leading to increased vitality, enthusiasm and spiritual aliveness. In the fully liberated mind, the psychological and spiritual energy of *viriyā* is completely free to move like water.

For the perfection of *viriyā*, or life energy, there must be complete order and stability in the psyche and the only way to achieve order and stability is by giving complete attention to disorder and instability. This is another way of describing the First Noble Truth of *dukkha*, which informs us that the only effective way to liberate the mind from suffering is to direct our full attention to the reality of suffering. *Dukkha* is disorder, instability and the state in which energy is trapped in the unconscious mind and it is only when we direct our mindfulness to this trapped energy that it can be released back into the psyche, restoring order and stability. Mindfulness is the process of awakening to *dukkha* and it is this awakening that leads to transformation. Krishnamurti expresses this beautifully in the following passage:

Now the very attention you give to a problem is the energy that solves that problem. When you give your complete attention - I mean with everything in you - there is no observer at all. There is only the state of attention, which is total energy, and that total energy is the highest form of intelligence. Naturally that state of mind must be completely silent and that silence, that stillness, comes when there is total attention, not

disciplined stillness. That total silence in which there is neither the observer nor the thing observed is the highest form of a religious mind.

*Satisampajanna* is the stillness of pure awareness, of pure knowing. It is through a relationship of mindfulness with disorder in the mind, that the whole field is transformed. This is non-dualistic knowing, without an observer, because there is no one judging, thinking or reacting to the observed. There is no observer, just the *observing*. In this total silence, which is the creative ground of *sunyata*, the psyche is completely free to receive and to respond with intelligence and compassion. *Satipanna*, the innate intuitive intelligence arises in this relationship of pure knowing and directs the whole process of transformation. Therefore, the very action of sustained mindful awareness is by itself transformational. It is not the observer who transforms disorder into order, but the action of observing itself. With mindfulness, *satisampajanna* arises and illuminates the whole field of our inner dissonances. This illumination of the truth allows *satipanna* to arise and this naturally leads to transformation and the release of energy from the deep recesses of the mind. The release of this energy revitalizes and nourishes the whole system of body and mind. Whenever you direct mindfulness onto an emotional knot or place of inner tension, then in that moment of contact the ego releases its grip and the mind begins to soften and becomes malleable. In this spacious state of freedom, experiential transformation and resolution occur.

The movement of energy from a state of instability and conflict to a state of stability and harmony is a positive experience, accompanied by feelings of happiness and well-being, called *upekkhasukha*, the happiness born from balance in the mind. The combination of *sati*, *satisampajanna* and *satipanna* will always direct change towards greater stability and happiness, because this is the natural state for the psyche. The psyche will always try to move towards stability if given the freedom provided by *satisampajanna* to change.

In the language of the Buddha, the cycle of liberation through *panna* is called *pannavimutti* and is described as the gate to the deathless (*amatapada*), whereas reactivity and *samsara* is the gate to death. This gate to liberation, inner stability and happiness is always open to us and whenever we touch experience with mindfulness, we enter through this gate into the

realm of the deathless, which is *sunyata* and the realm of total freedom.

## KHANTI

*Khanti* describes the quality of patience, forbearance and endurance that comes from realizing that we have a whole lifetime of conditioning to overcome and there are no quick fixes. Therefore, the perfection is an essential part of the Path. Patience is the expression of genuine kindness and love (*metta*) towards yourself and others. As the Chinese philosopher and founder of Taoism, Lao Tzu said,

I have just three things to teach: simplicity, patience,  
compassion. These three are your greatest treasures.

Certainly, to follow the Path of Mindfulness requires the courage of a lion and the perfection of *viriyā*, but this must be balanced with a lightness in the way you walk on the path. If you strive too hard, you may lose the spontaneity and flexibility that are so much a part of the path. Your journey is not a war against evil, but a path of opening the heavy curtains of ignorance to let in the light of pure knowing. The spirit of *khanti* is the spirit of tenderness, gentleness and a lightness of being that infuses all aspects of how you relate to the experience of yourself, the experience of other beings and the experience of the physical-material world. The Path of Mindfulness is not intended to be a struggle, but a dance in kindness.

We need to develop patience, because the Path of Mindfulness is essentially a path of continually encountering failures. Mindfulness practice is analogous to riding a bicycle, which is fundamentally a process of falling and catching yourself before you hit the ground. The art of learning to ride a bicycle involves letting go of the controlling mind, so that you can respond intuitively and intelligently with *satipanna* to each wobble as it arises in the present moment. What leads to success is the ability to stay mindful of these wobbles; your intuitive intelligence will do the rest. It is the same way with the Path of Mindfulness and liberation, where we practice intuitive awareness and trust in the wisdom-intelligence that arises in each

moment. Mindfulness is the process of catching yourself before you fall into habitual reactivity.

The journey can be very frustrating until you realize that this dance with failure is both the path to freedom and the perfection of freedom. Freedom, awakening or enlightenment is not an esoteric state of consciousness, but an ongoing process and dance with life in which you are a conscious participant. It is our nature to wobble, but when we choose to fully engage with all the manifestations of reactivity with mindfulness, kindness and patience, then we are living the Path of Freedom. Through practice, you will experience for yourself moments of freedom as you engage mindfully with anxiety or anger or other habitual reactivity. Each moment of mindfulness is a significant event and each change brought about by *satipanna* is a real victory. The dance of mindfulness will build momentum in the same way that a small trickle of water becomes a stream and then grows into a mighty river until it finally reaches its ultimate union with the ocean. All that is required is that you allow the dance to unfold in its own way. Trust in the dance, be patient and greet each movement of life with kindness and an open heart.

## SACCA

Ultimately, the Path of Mindfulness is the pursuit of Truth (*sacca*). In the words of the Buddha,

Three things cannot be long hidden: the sun, the moon, and the truth.

There are two levels of truth: the conventional, subjective level of truth, called *sammutti sacca* and the absolute, objective level of truth, called *paramattha sacca*. Concepts, labels, beliefs or any representations produced by the thinking mind are examples of *sammutti sacca*. They have a utility as tools to point to reality, but they are not themselves the reality they represent. What we see from moment to moment are our internal representations of reality, which are not the same as reality itself.

Whatever we experience in the mind is only a superficial representation of the surface structure of phenomena. The reality is hidden in the deep structure, which we rarely see and can never know in its entirety. All that we are left with is a rather

unsatisfactory abstraction that is fundamentally wrong and which depends on ignorance (*avijja*) and not choosing to look too closely at reality. Absolute truth does not exist as an entity but as a dynamic process (*anicca*) and any representation of that process is unsatisfactory and in conflict with absolute truth (*dukkha*). Because of this, truth has no definable identity (*anatta*) in the absolute sense. These are the three marks of existence that constitute *paramattha sacca*.

The Path of Mindfulness and *vipassana* meditation is a method of progressively letting go of the surface representations of the mind that constitute *sammutti sacca*, so that we can directly experience the objective truth of *paramattha sacca*. Mindfulness stimulates a progression from the superficial to the inner depth; from the gross to the subtle; from the abstract to the specific; or simply, from illusion to reality. When we focus mindfulness on the experience of an object, the conventional level of subjective thinking falls away and we are left with the *knowing* itself that is *satisampajanna*. It is through this knowing in the present that we encounter *paramattha sacca*. We may never know the ultimate truth of things and in reality we can never know absolute truth, because it can never be represented in a form that can be known. What is much more important is that we are committed to the journey towards that truth and this journey is essentially one of progressively letting go of the known, of ideas and opinions. Truth is not a destination; it is a journey and mindfulness is the vehicle that takes us on this journey.

As we let go of *sammutti sacca* through mindfulness, we are simultaneously learning to live in harmony with *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anatta*, not as concepts, but as a living process that describes how we relate to objective phenomena. Essentially, we allow phenomena to change, without resistance and according to the innate intelligence inherent in the phenomenon. Living *anicca* is allowing this natural process of change to take place. To resist *anicca* means that we cling to a static and false view of the world of phenomena and this results in conflict with reality. That conflict and dissonance is *dukkha*. To live in harmony with *dukkha* as a living reality, means that we choose to be mindful of the movements of resistance in the mind and relate to them as objects to be surrounded with mindfulness. To live in harmony with *anatta* means that we choose to relate to our attachments and the resulting conditioned reactivity of the mind as objective phenomena to be known fully through mindfulness.



When the mind is empty, which is to be in harmony with *anatta*, truth is revealed; when the mind is crowded with attachments, which is the nature of the reactive mind, there is no room for truth. Therefore, to receive truth, we need a mind that is not consumed by attachments and the reactivity based on attachments. This is the heart of meditation. In the words of Krishnamurti,

Meditation is freedom from thought and a movement in the ecstasy of truth. Meditation is the explosion of intelligence.

Truth is not an entity and cannot be captured and contained in the form of a thought or a belief. Meditation is the process of letting go of surface appearances and representations and opening to the larger dimension of existence. When we hold on to a thought or belief, the mind becomes dull and contracted; a breeding ground for ignorance and reactivity. When we let go of thoughts and ideas, then what we are left with is an undefinable vastness and this is the nature of absolute truth. When we make this spaciousness, or *sunnata* our refuge, then the thoughts and beliefs that emerge will be purified and refined like hot metal worked by a blacksmith. In this spaciousness *panna* arises, described by Krishnamurti as the “explosion of intelligence.” Truth and *panna* are one and the same and they have to be discovered afresh in each moment of living. Neither truth nor wisdom can be held on to as a certainty, because after only a few minutes, that certainty will be out of date and redundant. Therefore, truth is revealed only when the mind is completely open and when there is *satisampajanna*. The Path of Mindfulness takes us to this place of knowing by progressively stripping away the layers of delusion.

Because, truth can never be adequately represented in the form of an idea or belief, we must learn to trust in our own unique experience. In the words of the Buddha,

Therefore, be ye lamps unto yourselves, be a refuge to yourselves. Hold fast to Truth as a lamp; hold fast to the Truth as a refuge. Look not for a refuge in anyone beside yourselves. And those, who shall be a lamp unto themselves, shall betake themselves to no external refuge, but holding fast to the Truth as their lamp, and holding fast to the Truth as their refuge, they shall reach the topmost height.

The “lamp” refers to the intuitive wisdom-intelligence of *satipanna* that arises when there is *sati* and *satisampajanna* and the Buddha urges us to take refuge in the pure knowing of experience. We have to find the Buddha in our own experience in the here and now and this is central to the spiritual path. The Buddha is more than the historical person of Siddhattha Gotama and points to the truth of the awakened state of knowing that exists at the center of our being. Taking refuge in the *Dhamma* simply means that we choose to open our mind and heart to receive the reality of existence as it unfolds in our experience. No one can do this for us.

Understanding the nature of our experience in terms of relative and absolute experience has tremendous practical implications for working with our emotional suffering, because it immediately alerts us to the illusory nature of first appearances. We feel depressed, anxious, frustrated or angry and more often than not we slavishly accept these emotional reactions as true, not realizing that what we see is simply a partial abstraction, a superficial generalization that is not real. Such abstractions are very ephemeral like clouds in the sky and impossible to change. However, understanding that what appears in the mind is only relative truth, we let go of this surface structure and begin the path of investigation into the deep structure of the emotion with mindfulness. As we do this, the surface structure clears away like a fog and the emotion becomes malleable and begins to differentiate into a rich collection of more subtle content and inner structure. This is equivalent to taking the back off of a Swiss watch and examining the intricate mechanism that is the reality of the watch. As we penetrate into the absolute reality of an emotional complex, we successively let go of the superficial surface layers, which is the transformational process that leads to freedom and resolution. The solution to our suffering lies in the conscious awareness of the detailed inner structure of emotional suffering (*dukkha*), which is a journey towards absolute truth. It is this journey towards absolute truth that heals, transforms and liberates the spirit and the psyche.

## ADHITTHANA

This *parami* describes the quality of determination and resolution to travel the path of *Dhamma*, The Path of Mindfulness, the path of Truth, compassion and wisdom. The perfection of *adhitthana* means never losing sight of the purpose of our practice, which is to realize the perfection of all the other *paramis* so that we are best able to bring an end to suffering, internally and externally, for self and others. Our first resolution must be to liberate our own mind and heart, not just for our own happiness, but so that we can best help others find theirs. In fact, when we begin on the path of self-liberation through mindfulness, we simultaneously begin a path of helping others on their path to freedom. Suffering is universal and as we develop compassion through awakening to our own suffering, we change our relationship to the suffering of others.

It takes courage and determination to free the mind from the chains of *upadana* and *avijja* and the world of habitual reactivity that is *samsara*. When the Buddha sat under the Bodhi tree in preparation for meditation, he expressed a tremendous resolve to attain liberation from *samsara*,

In this very seat let my sinews and bones waste away,  
let all their flesh and blood in my body dry up, but  
never from this seat will stir until I have attained  
supreme Buddhahood.

However, this resolution to liberate the mind and spirit is by a path that is unfamiliar to most of us, because it is not a path of action so much as a path of letting go (*nekkhamma*) and trusting in the intuitive level of consciousness that arises from the emptiness of our existence. In a verse by Zen master Maezumi Roshi,

In studying ourselves,  
we find the harmony that is our total existence.  
We do not make harmony.  
We do not achieve it or gain it.  
It is there all the time.  
Here we are, in the midst of this perfect way,  
and our practice is simply to realize it and then  
to actualize it in our everyday life.

It is through the determination to pursue a path of discovery that we find total harmony. True harmony does not arise from what we discover, but in the ongoing relationship between the knowing awareness that is *satisampajanna* and the world of phenomena. This pure awareness includes both the *known* and the *knower*. The *known* is the world of phenomena and the *knower* is the reactive ego. The accumulated reactivity of the ego can never create total harmony, because any form of reactivity is inherently divisive. The *knower* does not *know* the *known*, but reacts to the *known*. When we take refuge in *satisampajanna* we are neither the *knower* nor the *known*, but the container of pure *knowing* in which both exist. The nature of this “container” is pure non-reactivity and complete harmony. This is the ultimate purpose to our practice: to develop the mind that knows total harmony and total freedom. From this place of freedom, we can proceed with wisdom and determination to bring freedom and happiness to others.

## METTA

*Metta* is most often translated as loving-kindness and has the quality of friendliness, openness and goodwill. It is the attitude of embracing all, without exclusion. The word *metta*, or *matri* in Sanskrit, is derived from *mitra*, the word for “sun.” Like the sun, *metta* bathes everything with life-giving warmth and gives comfort to all beings, without distinction. *Metta* is the energy that heals internally and externally, wherever there is suffering. *Metta* describes the quality of our relationship to all phenomena; how we cherish and hold them with love and affection, just as a mother holds her baby and attends to its every need with complete devotion. The perfection of *metta* as a *parami* means that we relate to all that we experience, whether generated internally as thoughts, emotions, memories and other subjective reactions or perceived externally as we relate to people and other living beings and to the external world of physical objects.

*Metta* is the universal energy that supports all of the four sublime abodes (*brahmavihara*) of *metta*, *karuna*, *mudita* and *upekkha*. *Metta* expresses itself as *karuna*, or compassion towards suffering, wherever it exists, internally or externally. *Metta* also expresses itself as *mudita*, the quality of relationship that

cherishes the happiness and the conditions that promote happiness both internally and externally. *Metta* is also the perfection of non-reactivity, objectivity and equanimity, called *upekkha*, that allows us to relate to all that we experience, pleasant or unpleasant, without being overwhelmed or becoming reactive. In the awakened mind of *bodhicitta* these four qualities permeate our relationship with the three primary domains of Self, Other and the World. The Buddha described *metta* as follows:

There, o monks, the monk with a mind full of loving-kindness pervading first one direction, then a second one, then a third one, then the fourth one, just so above, below and all around; and everywhere identifying himself with all, he is pervading the whole world with mind full of loving-kindness, with mind wide, developed, unbounded, free from hate and ill-will.

*Metta* describes the quality of relationship with all dimensions of experience, with anything that enters consciousness, whether arising externally as a sensory experience or internally as a thought, a memory or an emotion. *Metta* does not discriminate, but receives all with equal love and care. For this reason *metta* is described as a boundless state (*appamanna*) and this universal quality also applies to the other *brahmaviharas* of compassion, delight in well-being and equanimity. *Metta* does not depend on any conditions or discriminations imposed by the ego and has no hidden agenda, wanting nothing in return and so *metta* is the perfection of unconditional love.

Before we can discover what it is to express this quality of love towards the experience of Self, Other and the World, the mind must be free to receive, which means that there must be an absence of the reactions of greed, hatred and delusion. However, the reality of the mind is that we are continually embroiled in reactions of *lobha*, *dosa* and *moha*. Whenever we perceive Self, Other and the World, there will be some form of subjective reactivity based on our past conditioning. This reactivity inhibits the expression of *metta*, because reactivity takes our attention away from the present and *metta* depends entirely on the complete presence of mind. Therefore, to develop *metta* we must first develop *sati*, the mindfulness of both the object of our experience and the subjective reactions to that object. If we wish to develop *metta* towards our inner pain, then we must also

include *metta* towards our reactions of resistance to that pain. If we wish to cultivate goodwill towards those who have hurt us, then we must also cultivate *metta* towards our reactions of hatred or indifference to that person. If we wish to cultivate *metta* towards physical objects, then we must have *metta* for our reactions of greed, aversion and delusion in relation to those objects.

### *Metta towards Self*

It is easy to think of *metta* as the expression of love towards others, but *metta* is much more inclusive than this and begins with the expression of love, openness and respect towards yourself. In the words of the Buddha,

You yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe deserve your love and affection.

It is through building a foundation of love towards the suffering in our own hearts that we can develop genuine love for others and for our world. To ignore or dismiss the self in favor of others is not the perfection of *metta*, because to ignore any form of suffering, wherever it occurs, is to cultivate ignorance and hatred, which are the roots of violence.

We do not like the painful emotions that arise in the mind and we react against them by grasping at something more pleasurable or we react against them with avoidance and aversion. Both the primary reaction and the secondary reactions against that experience contribute to our suffering and therefore we must establish *metta* towards both. We need to have *metta* for the sadness, the inner fear and all the expressions of the hurt child within, but we must also have *metta* for the anger and resentment that arise in reaction to these core feelings. No part of the equation is to be left out. *Metta* includes the hurt of the abused child and the anger at being abused. *Metta* includes the pain of failure and the reaction of disappointment at failing. The art is in detecting each and every manifestation of primary and secondary reactivity and to respond to each with *metta*, to hold and cherish each and surround all with a caring spaciousness.

## *Metta towards Others*

*Metta* is often thought of as the deliberate act of cultivating kind thoughts of goodwill and love as a kind of prayer for the well-being and happiness of all. Traditionally, *metta* meditation begins by first directing *metta* towards yourself, followed by directing *metta* towards a good friend or member of your family. Next, we cultivate *metta* towards someone less well known to us for whom we have neutral feelings. After this, we undertake the more difficult task of cultivating warm feelings towards someone we dislike and from there we progress to expressing *metta* for people who have done us harm. This is the practice of “loving thine enemy,” which is an important teaching in most of the world religions, including Christianity as in the following passage from the Bible:

Ye have heard that it hath been said: Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you. Matthew 5:43.

To cultivate love for our enemies does not mean trying to forget the hurt done. That would be a product of the conditioned ego, which is the same ego that harbors thoughts of anger and revenge. We may have the purest of intentions and a genuine heart-felt desire to forgive those who have hurt us or abused us, but to do this successfully we must embrace all of our inner pain and emotional reactivity. If we wish to perfect *metta* we must face all of our reactions of aversion, hatred and ill-will to which we have become attached. Only when we cultivate *metta* towards all of our reactivity, will we be able to make peace with our enemies. It is not the efforts of the thinking mind that leads to forgiveness, but rather the product of extending care and love to embrace *all* suffering, internal and external. To forgive another begins when we make peace with our internal suffering and create the space in which *metta* can heal internally as well as externally. Then we will be ready to reach out to our enemies and those who have abused us.

## *Metta towards the World*

Besides the relationship towards Self and Other, *metta* can also purify our relationship to the natural world and our environment. Through *metta* we learn to care for our environment and develop a deep involvement in everything that manifests in the physical world. However, *metta* is not the product of beliefs about why we should care about our environment, but the natural love and caring that comes from opening our hearts to receive the extraordinary richness of the natural world.

When *avijja* is dominant we see very little: a fly becomes nothing more than a bug; a stream is simply moving water; a sunset is just the end of another day. But, when we experience the world through the eyes of mindfulness, then we develop the qualities of *presence* and *engagement* with whatever we are observing. There is a quality of deep involvement and rapture that comes about from being fully tuned-in to experience. This is described as *sensory enrichment* and is one of the natural consequences of the practice of mindfulness. A fly becomes a miracle of engineering; a stream becomes a dance of moving light and sound; a sunset becomes a symphony of colors that inspires us. Even mundane material possessions such as a car or computer become wonderful gifts that we can appreciate and enjoy to the full when we relate to them with mindfulness. As the thirteenth century Zen master Dogen said,

Enlightenment is intimacy with all things.

When our relationship with the World, with physical objects and the natural environment is based on the sensory enrichment that comes from mindfulness, then *metta* naturally shines forth. The more fully we experience the natural world, the more connected we feel. This feeling of connection naturally feeds *metta* just as ignorance and unawareness feed hatred and indifference. If you take the time to fully know a fly, a stream, a sunset through the care and attention of mindfulness, then you will discover love in that intimacy. This applies to the physical world, your relationships with others and your relationship with yourself. All benefit from the enlightenment of intimacy.



## *Overcoming the obstacles to metta*

You cannot separate *metta* from the suffering that exists within your own heart. Therefore, you must begin by acknowledging the reactions of aversion, wanting and delusion that prevent *metta* from arising. The way to do this is by directing mindfulness and *metta* onto those very obstacles and to care for each of them and hold them with the same care and attention that you would have towards a child in pain. As the thirteenth century Sufi poet, Rumi expressed it,

Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek  
and find all the barriers within yourself that you have  
built against it.

Another term used interchangeably with *metta* is *adosa*, which means “without hatred.” Seen this way, *metta* is what is left behind after all traces of hatred and aversion have been resolved. *Adosa* means *everything other than* hatred, which conveys a very expansive definition of love and one that is not restricted to views and opinions and the limited *sankharas* of the conditioned mind.

*Metta* is the boundless state of positive regard that remains when all other restrictions have been removed. Therefore, to develop love for your enemies requires that you actively search for every reaction of hatred that stains the heart. What is needed is to apply mindfulness at the deepest level to discover and dissolve whatever hinders the natural expression of the boundless state of loving kindness. In this way we place our attention not on loving-kindness itself, but on the obstacles that prevent us expressing *metta*. If we want to discover *metta* we must first attend to the enemies of *metta*, the dissonance and conflict within. In order for love to develop, we must attend to the ill-will and hatred and inner violence that stand in the way. As we remove the obstacles, one by one, we open the mind to discover the expression of true *metta* in each present moment. In other words, the path to *metta* begins with the First Noble Truth, which is awakening to the reality of *dukkha* with mindfulness. Through mindfulness, we create the right conditions and space in which *dukkha* will resolve itself and as *dukkha* resolves itself what remains is the ground in which true *metta* can arise.

*Metta* is also *alobha*, which means *everything other than* compulsive wanting and blind attachment. *Metta* is unconditional love in which there is complete freedom to be. Love is often

confused with attachment, but love exists only when there is freedom from attachment and bondage. Attachment, or *upadana* creates division between the observer and the object of love, because attachment generates reactivity. The observer is not free to experience and know love, but condemned to react out of habitual conditioning to the object of desire. There must be freedom from attachment and this means freedom from self, or *atta*. For love to exist, there must be complete harmonization with *anatta* so that there is nothing that can obstruct the giving and receiving of love. This realization of *anatta* happens, not through the action of will, but through mindfulness. When we surround our subjective reactions of wanting and compulsive desire with the spaciousness of mindfulness, they are rendered harmless and cease to obstruct the expression of *metta*. When *satisampajanna* arises, then in that very same moment, *atta* becomes *anatta* and reactivity is replaced with the compassionate responsiveness of *metta*.

Above all, *metta* is *amoha*, which means that it is free from delusion and ignorance. *Metta* is not blind love, but love based on the clear perception of reality through *satisampajanna*, coupled with the compassionate wisdom-intelligence of *satipanna*. True love exists when there is complete openness to the reality of life, rather than the shortsighted and distorted perceptions that come from blind idealism and fantasy. In order to discover love, we must let go of all our preconceptions and conditioning. We must let go of our expectations and demands. This does not mean abandoning our needs, which is simply another form of reactive aversion, but that we learn to surround our needs with the compassionate space of mindfulness. We need to move away from the superficial first appearance of our wants and dislikes and investigate the deeper reality of these mind states. In the silence of each moment of mindfulness, in which there is no movement of identification, a space opens up and in this space we discover what is wholesome and skillful. We come to know what supports love and move in that direction under the guidance of the innate wisdom of *satipanna*. It is only when *satipanna* is free to operate that we effectively discover how to meet the needs of the situation and of each person in the relationship. Love is a movement in subtlety, a dance in which there is freedom and careful attention at the intuitive level, and this is brought about by mindfulness and the replacement of ignorance and delusion with clear knowing, or *satisampajanna*.

## UPEKKHA

*Upekkha* describes the relationship of equanimity, which is the foundation for the development and perfection of all the other *paramis*. Without balance, we are at the mercy of habitual reactivity and the extremes of indulgence (*lobha*) or aversion (*dosa*) and our actions will be dominated by ignorance and delusion (*moha*). *Upekkha* is perhaps the most important quality that is developed through mindfulness practice and *vipassana* meditation, because it is the embodiment of freedom and the perfection of objectivity and this combination allows wisdom-intelligence (*satipanna*) to arise. *Upekkha* is perfected during meditation as the Buddha described to his son, Rahula:

Rahula, develop meditation that is like the earth, for then agreeable and disagreeable sensory impressions will not take charge of your mind. Just as when people throw what is clean and unclean on the earth - faeces, urine, saliva, pus, or blood - the earth is not horrified, humiliated or disgusted by it; in the same way, agreeable and disagreeable sensory impressions will not take charge of your mind when you develop meditation like the earth.

The word “equanimity” is a good translation of *upekkha*, being derived from the Latin roots *aequus*, “even or equal,” and *animus*, “mind or spirit.” The whole purpose of mindfulness practice is to cultivate freedom from habitual reactivity so that we can fully experience whatever arises in consciousness, whether externally through the physical senses or internally as thoughts and feelings.

The experiential insight knowledge (*nana*) of non-reactivity in relation to the fabrications that arise in consciousness, the *sankharas*, is called *sankharupekkha-nana*. When there is *sankharupekkha-nana*, then we can recognize a thought or an emotion as it arises and simply know it as it is. In this way we develop a stability of mind, the inner stability of *samadhi* that protects us from being seduced into our subjective reactivity. The direct and immediate consequence of *upekkha* is that we become fully present and fully engaged with whatever we are experiencing. Therefore *upekkha* enriches our experience just as

*avijja*, or unawareness, leads to inner stagnation and spiritual death.

*Upekkha* does not mean indifference, which has a negative and dismissive quality and is a form of reactive aversion (*dosa*). On the contrary, *upekkha* means that we fully embrace experience with great care and attention. Similarly, *upekkha* does not mean detachment, which is also a subtle form of aversion and lack of engagement. In fact, *upekkha* is the perfection of being fully present and fully engaged with your experience. The perfection of being fully present and engaged can only happen when the mind is not reactive, because any hint of wanting, aversion or delusion, will distract attention away from the object of experience. If you react to a pleasant sight with wanting, then the wanting distracts you from the full experience of the pleasant sight. If you react with aversion to something that is painful, then you cannot fully experience and engage with the source of the pain. If you react to fear with anger, then you will experience the anger and not the original fear.

Such distraction from the direct experience of phenomena is *avijja* and this diversion away from direct experience inhibits beneficial change and prevents the arising of *satipanna*. *Avijja* also leads to the repression of our primary reactions, causing them to become frozen in the dark recesses of the mind. Unseen, this unresolved emotional energy will fester and continue to generate *dukkha* and further reactivity. Therefore, the perfection of *upekkha* means the perfection of non-reactivity and this means that the mind is free to respond to whatever it experiences, rather than react out of habit and conditioning.

If the mind is in pain, then equanimity means being fully present with the pain. If the mind is full of joy, then equanimity means being fully present for the joy. Besides developing *upekkha* internally towards our thoughts, beliefs and emotions, we also cultivate the same attitude externally towards people, events and in fact, anything that we perceive through the senses. The strength of equanimity allows us to maintain balance in a world that is uncertain and changing and to do this with wisdom, patience and compassion.

Equanimity implies the freedom to engage fully with all aspects of life, whether internally or externally without being compelled to react with greed or aversion. In the language of the Buddha, equanimity exists when there is no clinging to anything as “me or mine.” *Upekkha* is the embodiment of the Middle Path (*majjhima patipada*) prescribed by the Buddha and which is a

guiding theme in all his teachings. The teachings on the Noble Eightfold Path (*magga*) are essentially the practice of *upekkha* in all aspects of moment-to-moment living: views and beliefs, thinking, speaking, action and behavior, livelihood, effort and the practice of mindfulness and concentration. All are perfected by wisdom and equanimity as the antidote to the corrupting influence of the reactivity of greed, hatred and delusion.

### *The Eight Worldly Winds*

We are continually bombarded by ups and downs as conditions change. These are traditionally described as the “eight worldly winds” of changing worldly phenomena (*lokadhamma*). They are:

Pleasure and pain (*sukha* and *dukkha*)  
Gain and loss (*labha* and *alabha*)  
Fame and defame (*yasa* and *ayasa*)  
Praise and blame (*pasamsa* and *ninda*).

Conditions change, and the test of our spiritual practice is when we can respond to change with equanimity and calmness. At its most fundamental level, *upekkha* exists when we are able to embrace *anicca*, without any trace of resistance and fully engage in the dance of life. True spiritual joy is to be found by moving with great intelligence within the realm of change. To resist change is *dukkha*; to avoid change is *dukkha*. To embrace change is the happiness of the free man.

Can we enjoy our possessions without greed? If we are bound by greed, then we will be driven by aversion-reactions (*dosa*), such as the fear of losing our possessions or the feeling of disappointment when things change. It is only when we have complete freedom from greed (*lobha*) that we can fully enjoy and appreciate our possessions. The same applies to success and failure. To fully enjoy our success and achievements we must be free from *lobha*, otherwise we will live in fear of failure and of losing what we have achieved. The Buddha wanted us to enjoy life to the full and not live consumed by fear and worry and this is why he taught us to pay very close attention to our attachments and fixations. Through mindfulness, we can tune-in to the inner suffering produced by clinging and recognize it when it arises. Through mindfulness, we also create the right conditions of freedom that allow the mind to let go of its clinging. Finding

freedom from wanting and craving is not produced by the thinking mind telling us to let go, but by the letting go that arises spontaneously when there is mindfulness. Mindfulness allows us to both identify and solve the problem simultaneously.

Learning to recognize and resolve our reactions of wanting and aversion and then resolving the compulsive emotional energy that drives them is an essential part of the art of cultivating *upekkha*. However, there is another primary defilement, or mental affliction, that we must also attend to. This is the reaction of delusion (*moha*) that comes about when we blindly identify with our habitual subjective reactions that arise when external conditions change. The more we identify with our reactions, the more we put ourselves at the mercy of external conditions and the more we will suffer. The fundamental problem is not pain, loss, failure or criticism, which are an inevitable part of life, but the way we become blindly attached to our conditioned reactions to change. This is what converts the normal pain that comes from loss into suffering, or *dukkha*. Disappointment, loss, failure and criticism are painful, but the intensity of our suffering is determined by our conditioned negative reactions to this pain. We compound the problem and amplify the pain many times over through our uncontrolled negative thinking.

Therefore, to develop balance and equanimity we must learn not to be seduced by our conditioned knee-jerk reactions to gain and loss, pleasure and pain, success and failure. To put it bluntly, there is absolutely no law that says that we have to feel bad when we fail or feel grief after the loss of something dear to us. These reactions are learned and if we are to find balance, then we must resist their pull. As before, the path is The Path of Mindfulness, where we learn to recognize our reactions to pleasure and pain, gain and loss, success and failure, praise and blame and respond to these reactions by surrounding them with the spacious quality of mindfulness. Then we can heal the emotional tension beneath and resolve the deeper attachments beneath.

### *Upekkha and Equilibrium*

*Upekkha* describes the state of equilibrium in which there is maximum stability, order and harmony in the psyche, not in isolation, but in relationship to whatever arises in our experience. This is the perfection of the Path of Mindfulness and *vipassana* meditation. We don't meditate to become calm; we meditate to

liberate the mind from the reactivity that causes stress and suffering. What is left after liberation from reactivity is a calmness and happiness that exceeds anything that we can achieve by the application of relaxation techniques or positive thinking.

In the end, it is all about the quality of relationship that we have with our experience, internally and externally and *vipassana* meditation is the process of refining this relationship until there is complete equanimity in all our relationships. Following the liberation of the mind from reactivity comes a spaciousness that allows the mind and our whole being to change in a dynamic and intelligent way guided by *panna*.

The great sixth century Chinese Buddhist scholar Seng-Ts'an left us with a beautiful poem called *Hsin Hsin Ming*, The Mind of Absolute Trust. In one passage he writes,

If the eye never sleeps, all illusions will naturally  
cease.

If the mind makes no discriminations,  
the ten thousand things are as they are, of single  
essence.

To understand the mystery of this One-essence is to  
be released from all entanglements.

When all things are seen equally,  
the timeless Self-essence is reached.

The Path of Mindfulness cultivates the eye that never sleeps, the perfection of *sati* and *satisampajanna*. The mind that never sleeps is free from *avijja* and attachment to the illusions of the mind, the *sankharas* created through reactive conditioning. The mind that is free from blind subjective reactivity does not grasp at these discriminations made by the ego. It is free from prejudices and free from the reactions of greed, hatred and delusion that come from blind attachment to beliefs. With the absence of delusional reactivity we are free to engage with all aspects of life, with “the ten thousand things,” with balance and *upekkha*. Instead of reacting to phenomena, we respond intelligently to them with the *satipanna* that naturally arises when there is complete objectivity and non-reactivity. The One-essence of all phenomena is their objective reality; they do not belong to anyone; they arise due to conditions and pass away as conditions change in the dynamic flow of life. When we can dance in harmony with arising phenomena, without grasping and attaching to what we

experience, then we will discover the Self-essence of pure knowing, the unconditioned and deathless consciousness that knows, but is not attached to the known. This is the dance of perfect equanimity and the perfection of the way of *Dhamma* and the Path of Mindfulness and *vipassana* meditation.



## GLOSSARY OF PALI TERMS

<i>Adhitthana</i>	Determination, resolve.
<i>Ajahn</i>	Teacher (Thai).
<i>Anapanasati</i>	Mindfulness of breathing as an exercise for developing <i>samadhi</i> .
<i>Anatta</i>	Not-self. Whatever we experience does not constitute a permanent self.
<i>Anicca</i>	Impermanence. Everything is in flux as a process of arising and passing away.
<i>Anupadana</i>	Non-attachment.
<i>Avijja</i>	Ignorance, unawareness. The condition that leads to attachment, mental reactivity and suffering.
<i>Bhavana</i>	Cultivation of the mind ( <i>citta bhavana</i> ) and intuitive wisdom ( <i>panna bhavana</i> ). Another name for meditation.
<i>Bhikkhu</i>	Buddhist monk.
<i>Bodhicitta</i>	Awakened mind-heart. Awakened state of consciousness in which wisdom and compassion manifest.
<i>Citta</i>	Mind, heart, state of consciousness.
<i>Citta sankhara</i>	Mental reaction.
<i>Cittanupassana</i>	Contemplation of mind with mindfulness.
<i>Dana</i>	Generosity of spirit.
<i>Dhamma</i>	Objective reality, without any corruption by subjective reactivity; the teachings of the Buddha that point to this reality (Skt. <i>Dharma</i> ).
<i>dhamma</i>	Objective mental phenomena.
<i>Dhammanupassana</i>	Mindful contemplation of the objective reality of mental phenomena.
<i>Ditthi</i>	Belief, opinion, view.
<i>Dukkha</i>	Suffering and unsatisfactoriness. The inherent instability of conditioned phenomena and the mental anguish produced through blind attachment and reactivity.
<i>Kammachanda</i>	Indulging in sensual desire.

<i>Kamma</i>	Action and reaction of body, speech and mind. The theory of cause and effect (Skt. <i>Karma</i> ).
<i>Khandha</i>	Aggregate, compound formation. All experience and existence is a composite of five aggregates in continual flux: form ( <i>rupa</i> ), feeling ( <i>vedana</i> ), perception ( <i>sanna</i> ), mental formations ( <i>sankhara</i> ) and sense consciousness ( <i>vinnana</i> ).
<i>Khanti</i>	Patience and forbearance.
<i>Kayanupassana</i>	Mindful contemplation of the body.
<i>Kilesa</i>	Mental defilements based on greed ( <i>lobha</i> ), hatred ( <i>dosa</i> ) and delusion ( <i>moha</i> ) that result from reactivity and attachment (Skt. <i>Klesha</i> ).
<i>Kusala</i>	Wholesome and skillful action that lead towards the cessation of suffering. Opposite is <i>akusala</i> .
<i>Lobha</i>	Greed, wanting. The sense of attraction, in the way that a magnet attracts iron.
<i>Magga</i>	Path. Generally refers to the Noble Eightfold Path, which is the Fourth Noble Truth.
<i>Mana</i>	Conceit and self-centered view.
<i>Mara</i>	Personification of <i>avijja</i> and <i>tanha</i> , the compulsive and seductive forces of ignorance.
<i>Metta</i>	Loving-kindness with an open heart.
<i>Nama</i>	Mental aspect of experience and existence.
<i>Nanadassana</i>	Insight and awakening into the Four Noble Truths in the present.
<i>Nekkhamma</i>	Renunciation, letting go of conventions.
<i>Nibbana</i>	The complete liberation from suffering due to mental reactivity (Skt. <i>Nirvana</i> ).
<i>Nirodha</i>	Cessation of suffering. The Third Noble Truth that can be realized in the present moment through the application of mindfulness.
<i>Panna</i>	Wisdom and intuitive intelligence through direct insight and awakening to objective reality in the present (Skt. <i>Prajna</i> ).

<i>Paramattha sacca</i>	Ultimate, objective truth, independent of an observer.
<i>Parami</i>	Spiritual perfections that arise through wisdom and mindfulness. They are generosity, morality, renunciation, wisdom, effort, patience, truthfulness, determination, loving-kindness and equanimity (Skt. <i>Paramita</i> ).
<i>Paticasamuppada</i>	Dependent origination, with ignorance as foundation, leading to rebirth and suffering.
<i>Piti</i>	Rapture, intense absorption and interest.
<i>Rupa</i>	The physical components of experience and existence, the body.
<i>Sakkayaditthi</i>	Personality. The collection of habitual conditioned subjective reactivity.
<i>Samadhi</i>	Concentration and mental stability that arise from meditation practice.
<i>Samatha</i>	Calm and tranquility that arise from meditation and the release from agitation and mental reactivity. <i>Samatha</i> meditation has this as the primary objective.
<i>Sammutti sacca</i>	Conventional truth. The subjective reality of labels, beliefs and language as distinct from ultimate objective reality ( <i>paramattha sacca</i> ).
<i>Sampajanna</i>	Intuitive awareness free from conditioned reactivity. Pure knowing and clear comprehension. See <i>satisampajanna</i> .
<i>Samsara</i>	The wheel of existence, perpetual reactivity and suffering due to ignorance and attachment. The word means “perpetual wandering.”
<i>Samudaya sacca</i>	The Second Noble Truth of the cause of suffering due to blind attachment.
<i>Sankhara</i>	Conditioned mental formation and the process of mental fabrication based on ignorance. Reactivity.
<i>Sankhata citta</i>	Conditioned mind, reactive mind. The opposite is <i>asankhata citta</i> , the unconditioned and non-reactive state of consciousness.
<i>Sanna</i>	Perception and recognition.

<i>Sati</i>	Mindfulness. The mental quality of presence and non-reactivity.
<i>Satipatthana</i>	The establishment of mindfulness in the four domains of experience: body, feelings, mind and <i>dhammas</i> .
<i>Satipanna</i>	Intuitive wisdom and intelligence that arise when there is mindfulness.
<i>Satisampajanna</i>	The pure knowing that arises in the present moment when there is mindfulness. Non-delusional awareness and clear comprehension.
<i>Sila</i>	Moral and virtuous actions that lead to the reduction of suffering and promotion of harmony.
<i>Sukha</i>	Happiness. Well-being and ease of mind that arise with the cessation of suffering and mental reactivity.
<i>Sunnata</i>	Emptiness, creative void.
<i>Sutta</i>	A discourse of the Buddha (Skt. <i>Sutra</i> ).
<i>Tanha</i>	Compulsive-obsessive force of craving based on ignorance that leads to attachment and suffering.
<i>Upadana</i>	Attachment based on obsession and ignorance.
<i>Upekkha</i>	Equanimity. The state of non-reactivity in relation to changing conditions.
<i>Upekkha sukha</i>	The happiness and well-being that arises when there is equanimity.
<i>Vedana</i>	Feeling. The felt-sense and feeling energy that gives meaning and power to experience.
<i>Vedanupassana</i>	The mindful contemplation of feelings.
<i>Vimutti</i>	The liberation of mind ( <i>ceto vimutti</i> ) and liberation through wisdom ( <i>panna vimutti</i> ).
<i>Vinnana</i>	Sense consciousness.
<i>Vipassana</i>	Experiential awakening and insight that leads to the cessation of suffering ( <i>dukkhanirodha</i> ). The practice of <i>vipassana</i> meditation, or insight meditation leads to this awakening in relation to mental phenomena.

*Vipallasa*

Perversions and distortions of perception (*sanna vipallasa*), beliefs (*ditthi vipallasa*) and mind (*citta vipallasa*).

*Viriya*

Energy, state of vitality and vigor.

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