

## 'Tip o' the Day'

### **Daily to Day**

#### **1. At the end of the day. (1)**

I always think the next day begins the night before. How important it is to have a good night's sleep. And the deeper the sleep the more refreshed we feel. Sometimes we can wake up early feeling particularly bright. A sure sign that our sleep has been peaceful. How then to prepare for sleep?

The best practice is to stop all activity at least half an hour before we intend to go to bed. First let us put the day to rest. Sitting quietly, allow the events of the day to come to mind. It's best to do it systematically say from morn till night. As those things arise that we don't feel too good about, put it right inwardly. Apologise where we feel we have harmed and forgive where we feel we have been harmed. When things arise that please us, where we feel we have acted wholesomely, rejoice in it and determine to develop the underlying attitude even more. When others have been generous towards us, thank them.

As you pass each event, put it away. File away the document, unless you wish to act upon it such as apologise to or thank someone. Make a note if so.

Then let the general outlay of the morrow come to mind. No need to be too specific. And consider briefly what your attitude and actions will be, for instance, the attitude and manner with which to go to work. Then leave that 'on the back burner' for tomorrow.

You may even think of writing it out as a dairy. It works even if you never read what you have written. This sort of end of day reflection brings peace to the heart and matures our wisdom.

Once we have cleared the day and set ourselves at ease for the morrow, we could do a little sitting, but at this time of night there is all the possibility of falling asleep. The evening sitting is best done before dinner. If you do wish to sit, make it short and beware of the first signs of sleepiness. There is also metta which is more a pro-active practice and therefore easier to stay awake. Or listen to some music. Plain chant or Buddhist chanting is the best because it comes out of silence and equanimity. It isn't 'emotional'. Any music that promotes calmness will do.

The overall objective is to rest all excitements and tribulations by stilling the body, quietening the mind and calming the heart.

## **2. At the end of the day. (2)**

Spiritual practice demands that we make every moment absolutely important, not just because it is actually the only moment we have since past and future moments don't exist, but because it is only in the present moment that we can effect change.

How then to bring that sense of importance into everyday routine tasks, the ones we repeat often mindlessly. Preparing for bed is a prime example. The toiletry, the undressing, nestling into the mattress. Often done at speed to get it out of the way. Or hurled through the process by the longing for oblivion. Or in a sort of semi-consciousness, exhausted from the day's stresses, sleep walking into bed.

But there is a way we can make spiritual capital out of habitual rituals, and that is to turn it into a meaningful ritual. And by ritual here I mean to imbue our actions with spiritual purpose.

Immediately, Right Mindfulness is brought to bear and with it the Right Intention and so on to Right Action.

It's time to care for the body. To remind ourselves of its preciousness. Herein is housed the enlightened-being-to-be. It is through the body that this awakening will take place. So let's care for it. Let us appreciate it as our most valued vehicle. Let's treat it with the same reverence we treat our cars, our mobiles, iPods and jewellery.

To bring the same attentiveness to those actions that we often care to disregard. To urinate and evacuate, such Latinate words disguise our disgust. But good old Anglo-Saxon - to piss and to shit – often reveals our true relationship. How can we overcome such negativity to what are natural and therefore neutral actions of the body unless we attend to them. When we attend to them with the Right Intention to care for the body, we can see the role of tanha - that deluded distinction we make between pleasant and unpleasant where we indulge the one and annihilate the other. But there is a transcendent way to be with both the pleasant and the unpleasant and that is the equanimity we find in open acceptance – this is the way it is. And the joyful discovery is that the pleasant and the unpleasant still exist and they are ok.

To bring our mindfulness to bear to the feel of things. The feel of warm water on our hands and cheeks. The taste of the toothpaste. The comfort of the mattress.

And so, to wash the face with the care a mother washes her baby. To brush our teeth as if we really treasured them, knowing how much we don't want dentures! To undress and dress for bed, treating our clothes as if they were the only ones we had. To lie on the cuddling mattress and for a moment bring to mind how lucky we are to live in such comparative luxury.

How many are the men, women and children who, this night, have no soap but a stone, no clothes but rags, no bed but a pavement! Let us send them our metta.

### **3. At the end of the day.**

Finally we are in bed and we want to enter into a deep sleep. Hopefully we have cleared a lot of the day's debris with an evening sitting, the metta practice and our end of day recollection. And we have prepared for bed in a mindful and calm way.

So there we are, ready to 'disappear'. But even now we can be disturbed by memories, images and thinking. They may be negative – sadnesses, irritations, anxieties and so on. Or they may be positive – thinking around planning, achieving, romance and so on. We must keep up that effort to be focused and yet relaxed. Sometimes the word concentration is used, but this I feel brings with it tension by way of association with school or work. Focused here means one-pointed. The thinking mind steadied on one object. The obvious one is the breath.

Again the breath may have become associated with striving in our meditation. But here to develop the calmness for sleep we need rather to feel the breath just for the purpose of contacting neutral feelings. We need to cultivate a taste for the neutral, the unexciting and begin to see this is our default position. Once this has been cultivated we can contact it easily throughout the day.

To help us do this we can recall a time or place where we have felt calm and peaceful, on a beach, in a park, in our garden. And then contacting the feeling of tranquillity in the body we can sense it in the gentleness of the breath. This is a way of developing samatha, serenity.

Another way is to practice metta. It is best to choose someone whom we feel grateful towards and have no or tiny bad feelings towards. If we find it easy, we can also direct metta towards ourselves, alternating between the two. Keep the phrases short and simple. 'May you be safe, well and happy.' In this way we develop a mental state saturated with loving feelings. Good, restful sleep is one of the benefits of metta practice that the Buddha pointed to.

Another way is to offer metta to the body. Start from the head and go down body blessing all the parts. After you reach the toes, start again from the top of the head. Coming up the body can lift energy. Keep the blessing simple. 'May you be healthy and strong'. You may find this creates exquisite gentle feelings. The cellular life enjoys a good watering of metta. This can be very powerful if you feel very restless. If you do feel restless, try putting yourself into a comfortable position and refuse to move and scan the body with metta.

We sleep in one and three-quarter hour waves, passing through four levels. The first three and half hours are the most important since it is only here that we sleep at the deepest level. Most articles I've read seem to say seven or eight hours is enough. If we live meditative lives, this is quite sufficient and you may find yourself sometimes waking complete refreshed after five or six hours.

Finally make a firm determination to wake after seven or eight hours. You may be surprised to find you wake up on time. Even so don't forget to put the alarm on!

#### **4. Upon Awakening.**

An alarm clock is all well and good, but it is often a rude awakening. Consider how you wake up when, on holiday perhaps, you don't put the alarm on. One wakes into a presenting mood. But the jolt of the alarm creates a shock wave in the mind and heart, and we wake into that reaction. This is hardly a good start for the day. If you can quieten the waking alarm by smothering the clock a little or go to the expense of one with a rising alarm that is the better way to waken oneself. You can always put a second alarm clock which, should you fail to wake, is guaranteed to blast you out of bed.

So we awake into a presenting mood. It may be pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. Should it be neutral, that is a peaceful start to the day. Should it be pleasant, the mood will grab an idea from the mind's library and create a reverie. It will do the same should the mood be unpleasant. These opening moments to the day offer us an immediate practice.

To turn these opening gambits to our advantage, we have to be wide awake upon awakening. We will do this if we have made that resolute resolution to wake with the bell. It may take a little practice, but it is not so difficult to develop. We centre that immediate wakefulness into the body, especially attentive to that area in the mid-chest where we distinguish our emotional life. As soon as we recognise the mood, we acknowledge it and practice vipassana. And as in sitting meditation, we become equally aware of our reaction.

Should we wide-wake into a peaceful state, rest there and acknowledge it, grateful for this gift. Develop a taste for it. See it as a default position and make a resolution to return to this peacefulness as often as we can throughout the day.

Should it be pleasant, from excitement as to what the day beholds, to a flowering romance, to a joyful memory, whatever the cause of the happy mood, be wakeful enough not to be transported into the dream world. But again we acknowledge the state. We see the danger of a make-believe world and we wait, if possible, until it quietens, hopefully into an inner glow. This is to take the attachment out of joy. And we make a resolution to maintain this quiet joy.

Should the mood be unpleasant, from depression, to anxiety, to anger, whatever the cause of the unhappy mood, we prevent it from hurling us into a mental maelstrom. So again we acknowledge the state. We see the danger – how the mood uses the mind to wind itself up. Bury the attention into the feeling of the mood and wait at least until it begins to subside. In this way we take the sting out of these unpleasant states. And we make a resolution not to allow negativity to hold sway.

This is where the snooze button comes into its own. Here, not simply for the purpose of reminding us of time passing, nor to appease the base desire to exercise one's sloth, but the very opposite, to guard us from such indulgence of dire consequence! Such is the noble duty of the snooze button.

## **5. Morning Meditation (One of Four) : Ritual**

The next four Tips are concerned with the morning meditation. This sitting at the beginning of the day is something stressed by all my teachers. And it became a regular practice for me from the very start as Zazen.

It is the time of the day when we set the position we hope to maintain throughout the day. And it always seemed to me to be a little rushed and unprepared to just plonk myself in posture and start meditating. But like all important occasions there is a 'ritual' we perform to set ourselves in the right mode. Even going to work, there is the preening to be done, the last glance in the mirror. So it is with a sitting practice.

We need to remind ourselves of the importance of what it that we are about to do. A simple lighting of a candle may suffice. The candle is probably the best symbol of the spiritual path: the light symbolising the path in insight and wisdom; the heat, the path of love and devotion; the flickering of the flame, the path of action.

I recommend bowing. So difficult for us! It is an act of surrender, of yielding. The Dhamma is always going to ask us to do what we (those self-serving selves) don't want to do. It is a very strong body language for 'I shall follow the Teachings'. If you find this too bruising (the self always tells you it is silly, pointless - 'I don't do bowing.' 'If I bowed, it wouldn't be me.'). you may find it useful to bow inwardly and find for yourself a phrase which express the desire to follow the Path.

If you get this far, you may even want to take the Refuges and Precepts. (If you want the chant and the literature, you can download it from the website.) We have to make sense of these practices for ourselves. Taking Refuge in the Buddha traditionally is the historical personage, putting out trust (not blind faith) in the teacher, but it is also having confidence in the Buddha Within – that which is seeking liberation. Taking Refuge in the Dhamma is traditionally the teachings of the Buddha, but in this post-modern era you may wish to include all the teachings that you find useful. And taking Refuge in the Sangha is again traditionally only those who have entered one of the Four Paths and Fruits and intuited Nibbana. For them all doubt as to the truth of the Buddha's teachings has gone. But considering how important the Buddha taught that good companionship was, we may wish to include all our spiritual companions for their confidence and practice is a great support to us. And finally the Precepts are simply the basic training rules of the spiritual life.

We have to prepare ourselves mentally for any important task. So find a way – and a way that will help you overcome any negativity or unwillingness to do the practice.

## **6. Morning Meditation : Default Position: Abiding in Calm Open Attentiveness.**

Having performed a ritual, small or otherwise, to enter into the meditation, which I would like to call establishing the right attitude, we need now to establish the right awareness.

When we look at the Seven Factors that lead to Awakening, we see that awareness sits on its own, but is supported by three factors that are passive and three that are active and they pair each other: calmness with interest, effort with concentration and equanimity with investigation the Dhamma.

In the Discourse on How to Establish Right Awareness, the Buddha starts by asking us to observe the breath in a gross way, then to use it to calm ourselves and then to turn on the curiosity and observe the characteristic of impermanence.

This exercise develops the passive qualities and it is best done standing, though you can change it to suit a sitting posture.

Feel the sensations in your feet and how they are changing. Then slowly come up the body both inside and on the surface feeling whatever sensations there are. When you get to the top of the head, feel all the sensations that arise on the scalp. Then turn your attention outward to hear sounds, see colours, sense the atmosphere of the room and so on. Once that outward awareness is established, bring into it the feelings in your feet, the breath and so on. In this way a very spacious awareness is developed whereby the boundary between inside and outside becomes softened.

Our attitude meanwhile is to develop calmness of the body and mind, by relaxing in the posture; a steady attention (the noting is very helpful) which is our concentration; and receptivity. That's the equanimity. Equanimity means that we are coming from a place of 'don't know' or 'not sure' and so stops concepts and opinions from distorting our experience.

Once this is established we can repeat to ourselves: Achieving nothing. (To achieve means we are always doing something now for some future result. But here we are just standing. Standing for standing sake.) Going nowhere. (Since we are in the present moment in a total way, we are right here. No planning needed.) Being nobody. (Since we are in silence and only in receptive mode, we don't have to perform, become a personality. No hope of celebrity here!)

Once this open awareness with the attributes of calmness, attentiveness and equanimity is the default position within which we can switch on the curiosity and begin to investigate the Three Characteristics of Existence – impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self.

A further importance of this is that we can return to it at any time of the day and in later Tips I shall go into more detail. But if you keep dropping into this default position throughout the day, you yourself will see the benefits.

## **7. Morning Meditation : Vipassana – 1. Developing a steady attention.**

Why is it so important to sit in the morning before we start 'doing'? It is simply because when we sit in vipassana we enter into more sensitive level of awareness, which means we find ourselves in a different relationship to the world than the relationship that a non-vipassana awareness has with the world.

You know from your own practice that different principles and attitudes come into play when we develop this level of consciousness. And just in case we then feel superior, it is good to remind ourselves that even when we are sitting we rarely keep this up, never mind during daily life. More often than not we slip back down into greed, hatred and delusion. In fact, only a fully liberated person could maintain an unbroken vipassana awareness.

That said, we should begin our sit with a firm resolute determination to establish right awareness. Using the noting, a deliberate noting, to keep the intellect tethered to the object, we place the attention on the feelings cause by the rise and fall of the abdomen. (Should you be feeling the breath at another point, please adjust these directions accordingly.)

The easiest way to establish a steady attention is to the pleasant and subtle feelings of these neutral sensations. To taste their gentleness and to notice how the calm rhythm also calms the mind. To acknowledge this soft breath and calm mind as a resting place, a peaceful place. It sometimes helps to bring to mind a time or place where you feel such calm restfulness – perhaps while sitting in a park or in your garden or indeed in your armchair.

Now, just because we have made a resolute determination to stay on the breath, it very rarely happens. The day-to-come impinges on us. Our worries, aversions and excitements don't seem to obey our will! Then we may feel tired or restless. Yet we keep noting these states and gently turning away from them back to breath. And – most important – when we go back to the breath, to repeat that resolution.

This resolution is not hard or harsh as if we are going into battle, but more an encouragement, a cajoling, as we might tempt a child away from some obstinate rebellion. For the monkey mind (the Buddha's description), is, alas, beyond our control such are its unwholesome conditionings. But it does offer us an opportunity to develop gentle patience and calm persistence!

We keep doing this until we feel 'somewhat concentrated' – a favourite phrase of main Mahasi teacher, Sayadaw U Janaka. What that means in practice is left entirely up to the mediator. And how long it takes depends on the frame of mind we are in. The more restless or the more sleepy, the longer it may take. But hopefully the preparatory practices of some small ritual and the 'default position' of abiding in calm attentiveness will have helped. But as soon as we know ourselves to be sort of steady, then we can bring in the quality of investigation.

## 8. Morning Meditation : Vipassana 2. – Developing Insight

So now having developed ‘somewhat’ three of the Seven Factors of Awakening, namely calmness especially of the body; steadiness of attention, sometimes called concentration which I think makes people tighten up, so I prefer this other phrase or steady focus; and equanimity, openness, a passive receptive attitude. Awareness, the controlling Factor, is presumed!

Now as it were we raise a question mark in the mind which arises out of a desire to know, to understand. This is wonder, the emotion of the philosopher within us, a curiosity. This curiosity is not looking for something, but looking at something with the attitude of, ‘Am I seeing, feeling, experiencing this *as it really is*’. This juices up the joy of interest.

And it raises effort, another Factor. Effort is already there, of course, supporting the quality of awareness and steadiness of attention, but checked by calmness. When we introduce curiosity, however, one can often feel the energy rising. Should at this point any idea of attaining something, achieving something sneak into the process, it will corrupt. We will find ourselves getting tight; feeling bored since our desire is not being fulfilled; feeling exhausted since the wrong energy does not replenish but keeps drawing on the reserve.

So we need to have the Right Attitude, second on the Noble Path. That attitude is to have faith in the ‘Buddha within’, this very intuitive intelligence (*panya*) which is but the active side of awareness (*sati*). All we have to do is *to watch, feel, experience whatever arises and passes away that draws our attention within the field of awareness*.

This Right Attitude also includes the intention to investigate the Three Characteristics of Existence. The first, impermanence, is best seen in the breath. Each inbreath, each outbreath arises only to pass away. Seeing impermanence is to undermine our attachment to what we thought was permanent or continuous.

Secondly, we explore the role of a desire based on the understanding that this transient world can deliver true happiness. This desire expresses itself in meditation in indulging what it finds pleasant such as when we plan, daydream of love fulfilled and so on. And it also expresses itself in resisting any experience it finds unpleasant such as anxiety and guilt. Here lies the psychological reason for our suffering and feelings of unsatisfactoriness.

And thirdly, not-self. This is not a metaphysical proposition. ‘There is no self!’ But a teaching tool. As we experience whatever draws our attention it becomes ‘an object’. The Knowing knows ‘it’. There’s a feeling of distance from the object. Instead of – I’m in pain, we note ‘pain’ - there. There, not here! This separation of the knowing from the known is the beginning of understanding that everything we experience is ‘not me, not mine’.

We can prime this curiosity by purposefully seeing one of these characteristics. The Buddha suggests we see the impermanence of the breath. Then we can just watch, just feel, just experience whatever draws our attention. That’s enough!

It really is as simple as that. We don’t believe it. We always think we have to *do* something. Just sit back and watch the show with the curiosity of a child.

(See meditation mp3 on website and related talks and essays for further clarification. Should you have questions about your practice do email me.)

## **9. Morning Meditation : Metta : Developing Goodwill – the Theory.**

Let us first understand the importance of metta practice.

One of the problems that can occur with vipassana only practice is that the inner onlooker, the observer becomes too detached. That detachment is necessary for clear comprehension and close investigation of the Three Characteristics, but the equanimity there soon degrades into indifference once we take this position into the world of action.

A woman told me that after practising vipassana her husband found her cold and unresponsive. I suggested she practice metta. The last report was positive.

That's what metta is all about. Re-engagement. It's there in the Eightfold Path. After Right Understanding comes Right Attitude. Whatever wisdom we gain from our practice remains sterile unless translated into an attitude and then with both this understanding and attitude we can progress through to Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood.

However, this re-engaging must also not be confused with other forms of love. Metta is not attachment. It's not that in our present deluded state we can love, especially those close to us without attachment, but it's important to know that metta isn't that. It's not erotic love either. And it's not an emotion!

Metta is an attitude. The heart may indeed respond with warm and delicious feelings, but that's not metta. That's why I prefer the translation of goodwill as opposed to loving-kindness, though it is also that.

Metta is all the virtues you would ask of a good friend. And sometimes a good friend may tell you something you don't want to hear. Metta allows people to be truthful with us. Likewise we should treat those who dislike us or whom we dislike with the same impartial goodwill. This is the meaning of 'love your enemy'. You don't have to 'love' someone to treat them with metta.

In this way metta is the basic relationship we should have towards everyone. Indeed all beings. It can even affect the way we treat objects. How often have you closed the fridge door gently and kindly? Metta is the default position in our relationship to the world. From this the other two qualities of compassion and joy arise naturally. Would it not be perfectly normal to want to help friend in distress? And goodwill makes it easy for us to rejoice in a friend's success.

These attitudes – metta, compassion, joy – are called Illimitables. Their development is indefinite. For there are innumerable number of beings and the depth of development is unfathomable. Like a number, no matter how big it is, you can always add one.

These are underpinned by equanimity, the other Illimitable, which here means non-attachment or non-prejudice. And all together these four are known as the Brahmavihara – Dwelling Place of the Gods. In other words, they create the bountiful heart and beautiful mind.

How often should we practice? All sittings, no matter how long, should end with some metta. At least five minutes. You will find a five minute metta at the end of both the Detailed Guided Meditation and Metta on the website. <http://www.satipanya.org.uk/audio.htm>

But the Buddha's advice is to practice it all the time! Whether standing, walking, sitting or lying down. Whenever there is 'nothing to do' – sitting on a bus, waiting at the traffic lights, climbing stairs – that's the time to practice. If we were to use up all the minutes when we are 'doing nothing' with metta practice, just that would change our lives radically. For metta is the only true revolutionary force.

## Discourse on Metta

If you are wise and want to reach the state of peace,  
you should behave like this:

You should be upright, responsible, gentle and humble.  
You should be easily contented and need only a few things.  
You should not always be busy. You should have the right sort of work.  
Your senses should be controlled and you should be modest.  
You should not be exclusively attached to only a few people.  
You should not do the slightest thing that a wise person could blame you for.

You should always be thinking: May all beings be happy.  
Whatever living beings there are, be they weak or strong,  
big or small, large or slender, living nearby or far away,  
those who have already been born and those who have yet to be born,  
may all beings without exception be happy.

You should not tell lies to each other.  
Do not think that anyone anywhere is of no value.  
Do not wish harm to anyone, not even when you are angry.  
Just as a mother would protect her only child at the risk of her own life,  
So you should let the warmth of your heart go out to all beings.  
Let your thoughts of love go through the whole world with no ill-will and no hate.  
Whether you are standing, walking, sitting or lying down,  
So long as you are awake you should develop this mindfulness.

This, they say, is the noblest way to live.  
And if you do not fall into bad ways, but live well and develop insight,  
And are no longer attached to all the desires of the senses,  
Then truly you will never need to be reborn in this world again.

## 10. Morning Meditation : Developing Goodwill – the Exercise

There are many ways in which we can develop metta. The chanting of the metta discourse we do in the morning and this evening chant taken from a commentary, the Visuddhimagga, are two of them.

The traditional blessings can be whittled down to four:

- May you be safe  
(from dangers outside and within ourselves)
- May you be well (free from all sickness and disease).
- May you be happy (free of all mental distress).
- May you enjoy ease of living.  
(May you live contented and in harmony with the world – alternative.)

The sequence of offering starts with :

- our benefactors  
(with gratitude goodwill arises naturally)
- those who are near and dear
- friends and co-workers
- a neutral person  
(someone we see, but don't know)
- towards myself
- a difficult person
- those around us
- those in the neighbourhood  
(you can 'relocate' to where you live)
- all in our country
- all in Europe
- all people on earth
- all beings in all directions

### Developing Forgiveness

Asking for forgiveness: bring an event or person to mind. Experience the arising states of mind – guilt, shame, remorse, self-justification. Acknowledge how we have caused our own suffering : reflect on the unwholesomeness of these states : apologise : determine not to behave in this way again.

Forgiving: bring an event or person to mind. Experience the arising states of mind : hurt, revenge, spite.

Acknowledge how we have caused our own suffering : reflect on the unwholesomeness of these states : offer forgiveness : determine to forgive in future.

Forgiving oneself: Bring events to mind where we have harmed ourselves : consider the meaning of ignorance and delusion and how they manifest : accept that to suffer the consequences of past actions is enough, no need to punish oneself : determine not to repeat the same folly.

May All Beings Be Happy!  
Sabbe satta sukhita hontu (x3)  
Sadhu, sadhu, sadhu  
Well done!

## 11. Morning Meditation : Resolution

The final part of the morning practice is the act of resolution. Resolution, resolve, determination are all part of the second step of the Eightfold path – Right Attitude or Right Intention.

If vipassana brings Right Understanding and Metta turns that into Right Attitude, then the act of resolution reinforces both and commits us to a day of determined commitment to Buddhaddhamma. I say a day, because one day at a time is quite enough. To determine something for a week is possible, but for a month that resolve dissolves unless reinforced. And to determine for a year can be depressing! One day, this day, is feasible. Take care of the pennies and the pounds will take care of themselves!

It is often the case in our lives that we take on certain commitments and then fail to reinforce their intentions. The situation begins to move away from us and we lose it. A marriage vow given to witnesses lasts that day. From then on presumption leads to laziness and carelessness, and disagreements and annoyances may grow to wither the original vow. Our commitment to the work we do unless reinforced with daily commitments allows original enthusiasm to slip into apathy. Even more so with the Dhamma, for the Dhamma is constant in its demands and relentless in its labours. It's no easy thing to grow spiritually. The Buddha warned us this is a 'gradual path'.

What is a resolution then? To understand the role of intention, an intentioned intention, we need to understand Dependent Origination and how we create our own conditioning and kamma. An intention is an idea or thought laced with desire. It may be wholesome or unwholesome, but at the point of intention no karmic act had been performed. To hold an intention long enough so that we can determine its ethical value is to give us the only real choice we have. I say 'choice' tentatively for who in their right mind would choose to do something that leads to unhappiness.

Once we have agreed to make that choice we have identified with it. This is what 'I' am going to do. There is still no karmic act. Only when that choice manifests into action of sustained thought, speech or deed, do we create a kamma (the technical Pali word in Theravada). What was it that made manifest a desire, that brought something out of potential into the actual. That force is the will and that is what the Buddha calls kamma.

Now the original intention will have a lot of stored up energy depending on habitual action or indeed addiction. Anything compulsive - eating, watching TV, talking and talking - are all habits that are hard to tame because of their accumulated energy.

On the other hand it may be that acts of generosity, of service, of truthfulness, of commitment are weak in energy because they have not been developed through beneficial habit. So a habit in itself is not the problem. It's the purpose and content of the habit that we need to be clear about.

And of course it is a collection of these habits that we call our personality and character and it is this that determines our destiny. So if we see we are going in the wrong direction, we need to undermine those unskilful, perhaps immoral habits and if we see ourselves following a wholesome, virtuous way then we should reinforce those habits.

That re-enforcement begins with the resolution. And a good time to make a resolution is just then at the end of our morning practice. One should be to further our virtue and the other should be to undermine unskilful habits.

'Today, just this day, I will practice ... live mindfully ... with a good heart ...'

'Today, just this day, I will not ... won't go down that road ... refuse to ...'

And, of course, one has to repeat these as often as one can throughout the day, but definitely when occasions arise to demand your resolution.

Make them easy to attain so that you can congratulate yourself every evening and you will slowly grow from strength to strength. This is especially true of New Year Resolutions! And don't be put off by the occasional collapse into old ways. As Ginger Rogers admonished Flatfoot Fred in *Swing Time*, 'Take a deep breath, pick yourself up, dust yourself off and start all over again!'

## 12. Developing the Perfection of Determination

Determination is one of the Ten Perfections. It is exemplified in the relentless search the Bodhisatta Siddhartha Gotama made to become a Fully-Self -Enlightened Buddha. And especially so when he sat beneath the Bodhi Tree and determined with resolute resolution that he would either find the answer to his quest or die.

To help us strengthen our commitment, we need to contemplate these four areas: our capability (can), our responsibility (ought), our aspiration (want) and our determination (will) to undermine what is unwholesome and develop what is virtuous.

We can determine to overcome an unwholesome conditioning.

Bring to mind a trait within yourself that you see is not wholesome, skilful or virtuous.

1. I am able to, I can resist this temptation.

This has to be repeated until there is a conviction of this ability.

2. I ought to for my own benefit and the benefit of others.

This has to be repeated until the heart is moved by it.

3. I want to.

This has to be repeated until an enthusiasm arises.

Where there is resistance, it is spoken kindly to cajole the heart into acceptance.

We need to develop ways of encouraging ourselves.

4. And I will resist this temptation whenever it arises.

This has to be repeated till one feels the determination in the gut.

In the same way we can determine to develop a virtue.

Bring to mind a virtue you would like to develop.

1. I am able to, I can develop this virtue.

2. I ought to for my own benefit and the benefit of others.

3. I want to.

4. I will develop this virtue whenever the occasion arises.

This exercise is best done every morning. Such practice has an immediate but not a lasting effect.

So one has to keep repeating it. The more often the better. We can do this every time an unwholesome or wholesome desire arises we go through this process, even if speedily.

Just like the practice of vipassana, metta and constant mindfulness, this practice cannot be stopped until we are fully liberated.

That's the way it is!

### 13. Breakfast at last!

If you have a young family or for some other reason you cannot practise this mindful eating, then do make sure you have that quiet cup of tea, just by yourself, you with your body. And of course, it can be done whenever we have a drink or eat, though that first break-fast is a special time for it sets the attitude for the day.

Consider the importance of the body especially so that the Buddha pointed to this form of existence as the best to attain liberation. Here we have joys and woes and the intelligence to seek and find the escape. Let us remind ourselves that we cannot be here without a body, that through the body we come to receive knowledge, that we can communicate, relate, take part in society, create good kamma and practise meditation. To feed the body is to nourish a space, sacred specifically to ourselves. The Buddha says that this fathom long body is the world, and it is here we can find the causes of suffering and the end to it.

So, having made your cup of tea and holding it before you, now is the chance to reinforce your commitment to the Path of Dhamma. Here at Satipanya we have devised a reflection based on the one the Buddha gave to the Sangha.

Wisely reflecting, I eat this food not to indulge sensual pleasure or to seek comfort. Being mindful of every mouthful, I shall undermine unwholesome habits and develop appreciative joy.

I eat only to sustain and nourish the body, thinking thus: I will allay hunger without overeating so that I may continue to live blamelessly and at ease.

This offering brings me health, long life, strength and happiness. May the merits of my practice support the happiness, health, long life, rebirth in the heavenly realms and ultimately Nibbana of those who have kindly provided this food.

The final paragraph is a grateful acknowledgement of the efforts of thousands of people and plants, and the sacrifice of animals if you are not a vegetarian, that have brought this food to our table.

Even if we only do the following exercise once a day and that with just a cup of tea, it will keep alive within us the spiritual practice around food. To continue:

- Closing the eyes, contact the body and get in touch with feelings of thirst or hunger.
- Acknowledge that some of those feelings will be natural appetite, the body manifesting its needs. But that insidiously intermingled are those feelings of greed.
- Making a very clear resolution to nourish the body, take the first sip or bite and simply sit back within yourself and observe, feel and experience the arising and passing of different tastes, the action of tasting and chewing, all the while mindful of arising delight.
- Purposefully intend the action of swallowing, follow the beverage or food and stay with whatever feelings arise. Momentary satisfaction of appetite insidiously intermingled with the gratification of greed!
- Wait till 'More!' arises and repeat the process.
- At some point there will be feelings of 'Enough' coming from the body and here it may be that greed steals quietly from its hiding place. Go on, just this once. Just that one more piece of toast! Just sitting till that sensual desire passes, means we have got the better of the habit of indulgence. Our self-discipline has been strengthened. Our body is healthier for putting its needs first.
- When the 'More' passes, there may arise contentment – the heart without greed. Discerning the difference between contentment and gratification is crucial. One leads to Nibbana, the other to Realm of Hungry Ghosts! And that realm is right here manifesting as a feelings of unsatisfactoriness, of never enough, nagging compulsions and dictatorial addictions.

Buon appetito!

# Work

## 1. Work

What does that word conjure up for you? Is it a warm glow? Or do you feel a great weight descend on the chest? Do find yourself filled with bright energy? Or is it the hot, burning energy of stress, frustration and anxiety?

Right there in the Eightfold Path, the Buddha places Right Livelihood. That's how important he felt it was. He could have included it in Right Action, but no, he gives it its own importance.

In a broader sense, we need to ask ourselves, what am I doing with my life. My life, for heaven's sake! How serious can a question be? Do I feel I am wasting my life? Do I feel I am wasting my life at work? For most of us that's around 40 hours a week – and our most energetic time.

There is within us a spiritual calling. Something within us that demands to be, to be developed. These days we think of spiritual calling as something to do with becoming a religious, a nun or monk. But in the Christian Middle Ages, it was understood that God had called you to a profession or skill, usually what your family was already involved in. It is the modern separation of the secular from the spiritual that has caused so much of our malaise. For once the accent is put on the secular then we are into the 'things of this world' – riches, fame, power and pleasure. A life devoted to these must necessarily end in disappointment if only because it will all pass away. When we put the spiritual back into secular, the whole world of work takes on a completely different place. It becomes a spiritual work shop.

How does the spiritual manifest in Right Livelihood? In some people it is so strong, it is felt to be a calling, a vocation. I knew a child of five who told me she was going to be a doctor and that's what she became. For others, it's not so strong, but a general feeling of doing what they were meant to be doing with their lives. Then there are those who live in confusion as to what they should be doing and wait for inspiration, to be told, in hope that something will turn up. And there are those who have no hope of making sense of their work life. It is a means to earn money so they can do what they want to do after work.

A great deal of our work life is, of course, dependent on society and the economic situation. We may very well have experienced all four types just mentioned. At one or other time inspired, feeling content, depressed and lost about our work situation. Indeed we may suffer these very same swings in the very job we are doing – even in one day!

So the first thing we have to do, if you have not already done so, is to make a determination to turn our present work, no matter whether we enjoy it or not or whether we think it is meaningful or not, into a spiritual practice.

How would you go about doing that?

The following Tips will centre on work and if there is some area you would like us to explore, do email.

## 2. Success and Failure : Trial and Error

I am not sure I should be confessing this, but my life is a catalogue of failures. Failure, of course, is what happens when you don't succeed. It's a pretty depressing state. As the realisation of failure dawns on you or hits you between the eyes, there's that shock moment when your stomach sinks. And then the nausea. Then there's the anger and hatred towards those or the system that beat you, succeeded where we failed. Then there's the soul searching, the self-recriminations, followed by the further woundings of guilt and shame and into the yawning chasm of despair. Indeed, failure is always a painful experience. We shouldn't be surprised at this. After all it's a mini-death. And it can at worst lead to suicide, such the French chef who did not get his Michelin stars.

When we come to define failure, it is always a measurement against success. Always a comparison to how it ought to have been. But what did we set ourselves? If you're a sanguine character, you tend to overreach. Even the most circumspect and morose often expect what is beyond their capabilities or the capabilities of the situation to deliver.

In Christian spiritual language, however, this failure is known as a humiliation. Not a humiliation in the belittling sense, but a sharp correction to 'the way it is'. To be humble did not mean to be weak and worthy of beating, it meant to know oneself. Humility is another word for 'know thyself'.

Aiming at success will always be in danger of overreach because it is the self trying as always to accumulate. And the more it has, the safer it feels whether riches, power, fame or simply pleasures. It invests itself in the project and defines itself by its success. You'll always find these three factors : over-aiming, emotional attachment and identity. When we fail, we suffer to some extent an identity crisis, emotional turmoil and loss. In despair we may give up, become despondent. And life stagnates. Is there another way we can approach our goals for we do not want to lose our aspirations, be it relationships, work, spiritual aims?

Suppose we change the language. Suppose we look at life as a challenge and an exploration, rather than success, competition and possible failure. Suppose we talk of trial and error. Surely now the world changes. We are no longer in a world of conflict. We are working on a hypothesis like any scientist. We are co-operating with the world to see if our idea will work or not. It may work out, it may not. No matter.

Samuel Becket is renowned for his sayings and the one I truly like is: Fail. Fail better. (I'm presuming Becket is here using the word 'fail' as in trial and 'error'.) Writing is an exacting art. Indeed so is all creative pursuit. One never quite expresses what one wants. True art is all trial and forever error, for the real never meets with the ideal, not that a piece of work may not give satisfaction. Yet try again we must. The Buddha tried in so many ways to express the Dhamma. People were forever misinterpreting his words. He tried all sorts of ways depending on who he was talking to. Yet we say all the teachings are just pointing the way. The finger points to the moon. There's nothing to be gained by looking at the end of the finger!

Seeing life as trial and error excludes us from the pains of failure. Once the error has played itself out, there often follows a fallow period. I say fallow for this was a time when fields were left to regenerate. I do not say barren! And that former desire to explore possibilities arises again. Creativity is natural to all nature. Nature isn't into success and failure. Nature is about finding growth in any given situation. We are embedded in a world that is forever creating. How foolish not to join the party!

### 3. Creating Space (1)

We live in a society that puts a price on time. It was not always so. But that's how it is at the moment and we have to not simply live with it, but live wisely with it. The growing demands of efficiency and productivity strain the last ounce of energy each moment has. And that energy is ours. In fact it's our life-energy. Our work can demand the better part of our energy resources at the expense of personal welfare, our family and our social life. If this rings true for you to any extent then you will need to see how you can conserve energy. Try creating space, temporal space.

Here is one of my favourites quotes. It comes from Ajahn Thate, acknowledged of high attainments, whom I met in Thailand. He summed up the spiritual life:

***Take it easy. Make it simple. Stay with the one who knows.***

**Do one job at a time.** It's not that we can do two jobs at the same time. It's just that we try to. Have you ever found yourself having a conversation with someone and filling in a form and/or writing up a piece of work and/or working on the computer? You can sometimes get away with it with an automatic manual task, but it's still taxing the brain. Even if we are expert multi-taskers, it's still necessary to actually fully attend to what is being done. Failing to do this is one reason mistakes are made and accidents happen.

So we need to do one task at a time. That means paying attention to what we are actually doing. The effect is to increase our focus and span of attention. That is, *our concentration is enhanced*.

#### **Create a pause between every task.**

How do you react when the phone rings? Do you launch yourself at the phone? Have you noticed how mobile calls trump everything else? This sort of compulsive behaviour simply increases our agitation. And agitation is wasted energy.

When you come to the end of a task. STOP. Reflect on what you have done. Acknowledge it. And 'put it aside'. Take a breath and relax. Let this be as long as it takes to feel inwardly calm. Most often it's less than a minute. And then intend the next task and remind ourselves of our Dhamma intention (see below).

Take the phone call for instance. Surely most people will wait for three to five rings. At the first ring, just acknowledge where you are with your work. At the second, stop and breathe, at the third calmly pick up the phone. Should the caller ring off, call the person back.

If we can begin each task with a mind uncluttered, with clarity, *our efficiency is increased*. That should make the powers that be happy!

#### **Take a silent break.**

Tea breaks and lunch breaks are times to really establish that quiet, equanimity and still mindfulness that the morning meditation put us in touch with. Again, it doesn't have to be long. Five minutes may be enough before we join others.

It's also so refreshing to get away from the work place for a while. To sit in the local park, or just quietly walk the streets, or as I used to, sit in the local church.

#### **Go with the flow.**

I once received a card with a fish floating in a river. It said only dead fish go with the flow! But we won't be dead so long as we are aware. We're as if dead if we lose our sense of present mindfulness. If the river happens to be in torrent or in flood, then we will surely be lost if we don't exercise some still awareness.

Going with the flow means to be able to let go of what we are doing when something needs to be attended to. That phone call again, that colleague approaching, at home the child calling for attention, can all seem unwelcome interruptions, in which case they become irritations. And any form of anger is wasted energy.

**A Dhamma intention.**

This could be anything. For instance before I answer the phone I might remind myself to speak kindly, openly and appropriately.

So there we have. Three simple tips that help us work better, feel better and conserve our life energy.

Easy weasy peasy?

## 4. Creating Space (2)

Apart from creating temporal space, there is emotional space, by which I mean to be able to drop back into a spacious heart, the state of equanimity. This is the more important, the greater the emotional upsurge.

### **When we are in a rush, stop! Let it all subside.**

Have you ever failed to hear the alarm and found yourself speed washing, gobbling breakfast, running to the bus stop or driving with hands clenched to the steering wheel? Even if you arrive in time for work, does that anxious rush career you through the day. Sometimes it is as if we have put ourselves on a roller coaster and don't quite know how to get off.

This is where a shot of vipassana comes in most useful. Just finding those few minutes to sit down, close the eyes and let everything calm down. Even to others around, you can say, 'I just need a few minutes to collect myself. To chill out!'

This had a great affect on me when I was working as a teacher. I would often find myself in the mode of rushing. Trying to get things done! I got in the habit of just stopping even if only for a moment. And I also found it useful to talk myself down.

Down to what? Equanimity which is stillness of the body, calmness of the heart, silence of the mind and an attitude of openness. From here we can bring in metta, some goodwill intention, and start again calmly.

### **Working with a persistent mental state.**

When we stop the rushing and still ourselves, we often encounter a deeper mental state such as anxiety, boredom, depression and restless energy. These sorts of emotional states can hang around all day sometimes. For some people, they are virtually a constant. Here, is one way of handling them when we don't have the time to do vipassana.

It is a case of putting them to the side. This is not the same as suppression, because suppression presumes negativity towards them. We simply ignore them because we don't want to feel. But by putting them to one side, we are acknowledging them and intend to deal with them at a more appropriate time. In this way we don't add aversion to the problem. Indeed, we can do this with kind gentleness as if bandaging a sore knee and yet we keep walking.

Then, of course, it is important to find a time in the day when you can work with them. And this is better as soon as you get home from work before you eat, even if only for twenty minutes.

Something to pin on the wall, place on the desk. Adjust according to personal experience.

One Job at a Time  
Intend New Action  
Make Dhamma Resolve  
Steady Attention, Season with Care  
Bring back Wandering Mind with Gentle Insistence  
STOP  
Let Reactions Subside  
One Job Well Done!

## 5. Creating Space 3

### **After a disturbing event or encounter, wait for the reaction to subside.**

When we sit in vipassana, we are instructed to watch, feel and experience anything that draws our attention. We're meant to be both focused and yet loose, not attached or caught up in any particular object. So if we are experiencing pleasant states and pain in the knees starts, it is simply something else to turn our attention to. If our calm concentration is such that we are locked onto the breath and someone sneezes, we're not supposed to desire the annihilation of that person's nose, but to observe, 'hearing, hearing' and also to note any reaction that might come up'.

Why can't we be like this all the time - and at work? We happen to be 'getting on with job', feel a bit pressured even, and someone comes. They may come calmly and excuse themselves, but often they come loudly, or in a rush or in some sort of irritated state. What is our reaction? Are we irritated? Do we feel panicked? Do we despair!

Why not bring the lesson of vipassana directly into our lives. Even when we are working under considerable pressure, or working with enthusiasm and don't want to be disturbed, we can still be relaxed. All we have to do is remind ourselves that someone may come and ask for our attention.

When that someone comes, we only need say , 'Just one moment' and acknowledge where we are, most important acknowledge what mood the person is. It may demand patience! And turn our attention entirely to the person. No fuss. No wasted energy.

This turning our attention towards someone is to be completely open to what they are offering. Should it be anger, anxiety or some other unpleasant state, we need to feel it and listen to what they are saying. Their emotional state can resonate strongly within us and we need to hold steady instead of reacting with equal impatience or anxiety. I have found it most helpful to listen to what they are saying more than attend to what they are feeling. That way I find it easier to remain equanimous. And then to genuinely answer their concern.

If, of course, they have come quietly and calmly, then it's good to note how that brings the best out in us. So that if we should find ourselves irritated and rushing, we can remind ourselves, that if we want to get the best out of someone, this is not the way to approach them. So we need to attend to our own state and wait till it calms down.

Should we fail to behave skilfully or if we lose it somewhere in the middle, then whatever mental state has arisen from an incident or encounter, we need to give it time to subside. If not the emotional state tends to escalate through constantly revisiting the event in thought and imagination. And if it starts to do that, to keep stopping, contacting the emotional feeling and a give it time to burn out even if only a little.

This way of bringing the practice into our daily life increases our sense of *calm and equanimity*.

## 6. The Limits of Power and Mission Creep

There is nothing that makes the self feel more comfortable than more – of anything. This is especially so of power – which means, ‘I am in control’.

Every job has its boundary. It has a job description. When we go for the interview we want to know what is expected of us and at first we are satisfied with just doing the job. Although the job may be taxing, after a little time we begin to feel on top of the work – that is to be in control. We enter a period of ease.

Then something starts to creep in. We see possibilities. And with all the good-will in hearts we do something that is not in our job description. And we are astonished how it causes such hurt and anger.

Jack starts to work for a charity as an accounts person. Before long he gets to know how the firm works and realises that the website could be better. He knows someone who designs websites whom he thinks is very good and invites them to come and meet the boss. The next morning he tells the boss what he has done – without prior consultation. The boss is visibly angry, but out of good will sees the designer. Nothing comes of it. Jack feels snubbed. For days there is a distance between Jack and his boss. Again without anything being said, things sort of smooth over. But has Jack understood that his good-will was seen as mission creep, that it encroached on another’s work, that it took no account of the position of the boss?

I must confess I was very good at this sort of thing and my manager accused me of wanting her job! And I didn’t. Honestly. It cost me an apology and box of chocolates. As things turned out, when she moved up, I was offered her job – by which time, of course, I did want it. So I must have got something right.

In the same way if you are in charge, mission creep undermines others. I always think it is a good idea at some point before I start work to remind myself what my job is. Since I have set up this centre, this has become all too important, since I am the sort of person who has the tendency to do everything themselves. This undermines those whom we have asked to help and generally puts them off offering us assistance in the future.

So here we have a basic manifestation of the self as power. It wants to be in control. It gives itself any good reason, but never really takes into account the other, save in that the other serves its purpose. Remember no matter how good-willed the self is, it always turns the other into an object of its desire as a means to achieve an object of desire

To understand the reaction of others to our good-will mission creep, we need to ask ourselves how we feel when someone does that to us.

And really, what harm is there in consultation?

## Miscellaneous

### 1. New Year Resolution

Resolution comes from the Latin which means literally to 'solve again'. And that's what the New Year offers us. An opportunity to reflect on the past year, indeed our lives and consider how we can do better. The key is in that reflection. One of the Buddha's constant exhortations is *yoniso manasikara* – wise reflection.

There are many ways in which we can and indeed should reflect on our lives. The meaning of our work and our leisure time, our relationships and our community, city life and nature. How we spend our wealth and our time.

Some of our reflections may be pragmatic, artistic, social and so on. Here we are concerned with the spiritual life.

It is not that we can split off the spiritual life from any other part of our lives. It is more how to imbue everything we do with spiritual meaning. And by spiritual here, we mean in the main ethical, for it is in the motivation with which we behave that manifests our wisdom or lack of it. Our objective, of course, remains liberation from all mental distress and awakening into a different relationship with ourselves and the world, free of strife.

What we do arises out of intentions and our intentions are present expressions of our attitudes. And our attitudes arise from our understanding. In reflection we can correct any misunderstanding that has arisen and in unsure cases a spiritual confidant can be very helpful.

When we behave in an unskilful way that causes others to suffer, we also create suffering for ourselves. The guilt and shame we may feel manifests a measure of compassion. For if we did not love and care, we would not feel guilt or shame. So whenever these two mental states arise in our reflections, we know that we have acted unskilfully, but we also know that we have the compassion and love to do something about it. This is what leads to remorse. And remorse compels us to put right what we did wrong. Asking for forgiveness is a salve that facilitates reconciliation.

And so does forgiving. It is in acknowledging the suffering of the one who has done us harm and the suffering we cause ourselves by holding on to our grudge that leads to the desire for reconciliation. No matter how painful that may be. And it is worth it. For such pain is the pain of healing.

In the same way we need to develop that same attitude of forgiveness towards ourselves.

What ease there is in a heart free of guilt and shame! What ease when free of grudge and revenge! What ease when free of self-hatred and self-recrimination! Seeing the suffering caused by unwholesome thoughts, words and deeds, how easy it is to resolve to guard our thoughts, speech and actions.

But we must go further and that is to develop virtue. The Ten Perfections and the Four Illimitables offer us ways we can strengthen our characters and yet soften our hearts.

And finally, to reflect on the absolute necessity of our practice. We have been initiated and empowered into a practice, *vipassana*, that leads to liberation. We access a level of consciousness that rises above the mundane and prevents us from entanglements and bewitchments. This in itself is a purification.

Here is one of the Buddha's best known aphorisms:

Put an end to hurtful behaviour.  
Do what is good for ourselves and others.  
Purify the heart.  
This is the teachings of all the Buddhas.

Dhammapada

The success of a good resolution lies in humility. And humility is to see ourselves as we really are. One resolution taken to heart and practised is better than a thousand we fail to accomplish. The path to hell is paved with good intentions. Therefore, we need to resolve what we know we can do. Start small. Do what we are sure is do-able. This leads to success and success breeds success.

Surely in 2010, our resolutions will bear great fruit!

You may find the following on the website of some use:

On Reflection:

<http://www.satipanya.org.uk/audioLinks/xmas07.htm> New Year Reflections

If you want take the theme of forgiveness further, you may find Towards the End of Forgiveness helpful:

[www.satipanya.org.uk/essays/angulimala.htm](http://www.satipanya.org.uk/essays/angulimala.htm)

For some ideas on Perfections and Illimitables:

<http://www.satipanya.org.uk/audio.htm> and click on The Perfections Turned Inward and The Illimitables

## 2. Neighbourly 'Sounds'

You would be lucky person if you have not had to bear with 'sounds' coming through the wall. It might be sound of the base line pounding though the wall paper or the periodic flush or the muffled conversation of the TV or loud conversation.

No doubt, you have your own way of managing such a situation. If not, here are some tips that might help.

The first is to become aware of the aversion. And how aversion makes the ears glue themselves to the wall. Then to remind oneself that this is suffering, not the sounds. It is aversion that labels them as noise.

It may also help to recall when we have been neighbourly nuisances. It will cool our righteousness.

Then – and this is the hard bit - always start with accepting the situation as it is. 'This is the way it is'. Keep repeating it gently in the heart until the heart lets go of, 'This is not the way it ought to be.' You may find the suffering disappears with the aversion.

Then ask, 'What can I do about the situation?' If there is something you can do, of course, do it. If not, just get on with what I have you have do, as best you can. And as the aversion keeps raising its snarl, repeat the exercise. It's surprising how the mind can blanket out sounds once it has accepted them as normal audial back ground.

When I was a student we rented a house right next to a rail line. The house shook with every passing. After a day or so, it never woke me up. But then the beer might have helped! Every time I returned to the east I had to used to all the sounds. At Kanduboda it was the squirrels and other wild animals. In Yangon, it was the traffic and the dogs. Two or three days down the line, and I didn't 'hear' it.

But if it truly becomes invasive, then we can approach the neighbour and we will always get a better result if we are calm and equanimous, if we explain why the sounds are disturbing. Throw it gently back to them, 'I'm sure you wouldn't like it either if I played loud music'. Hopefully it works.

I had a neighbour who played Elvis – a lot. I was trying to prepare work for my classes. I gave up, mainly because I like Elvis and couldn't stop myself singing! I asked her to turn it down a bit. She bellowed, 'I pay my rates'. I answered so did I, but it didn't include an Elvis disco. She did turn it down – after explaining and appealing to her better nature. I was lucky.

If the situation becomes unbearable (and there are such situations, especially if the sounds interrupt sleep), then it is best to make a long term strategy to move away, put it out there as an aspiration and work gently towards it.

May your neighbours be quiet, gentle and peace-loving!