

# *Tips O' The Day*

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#### 01. 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.

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## 02. 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 it's 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.

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

Finally we are in bed and we want to enter into a deep sleep. Hopefully we have a 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 negative – sadnesses, irritations, anxieties and so on. Or they may 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!

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#### **04. 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.

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## **05. 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.

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## **06. 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.

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## **07. 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 caused 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 my 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.

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## 08. 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.)

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## **09. 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. Its 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.

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## 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 ( '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!

This accompanies the Heartcare (metta) mp3 on  
website <http://www.satipanya.org.uk/audio.htm>

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## **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!'

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## **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!

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### 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!

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#### **14. Traveling to and from work.**

How do we spend our time travelling? Do we see it as an opportunity to practise or as a time to get through.

If we are in a car, do we turn on the radio, play music?

If we travel by public transport, do we do the same or read?

If we are on a long journey, do we do the same?

And how much do we daydream?

Whatever we put our attention on, that becomes a means of conditioning. We are creating or reinforcing a habit.

The question then is: what sort of habits do we want to develop? I think we would have little objection to wholesome, skilful, virtuous habits.

In which case, daydreaming is out, for when we daydream we are being carried along by some unwholesome attitude. The thought stream may be beautiful. We may be saving the world from ecological disaster, but it won't bear upon reality. It will be dreaming. So whatever thought we wish to have, we need to make it constructive, deliberate, purposeful thinking. A book helps. Or if travelling with a companion some mutually interesting topic.

Of course, when travelling with someone the danger of daydream turns into useless speech. We find it hard to be silent in company. So at least make the conversation beneficial.

Listening to the radio or listening to mp3's presents us with the same question. What sort of mental state does what I am hearing develop? If we know the input is going to do harm, no matter how little, then we need to find the strength to stop it. It helps if we can replace it with something wholesome.

But the important point is that these times are precious moments for practice. Why waste them? Apart from developing wholesome mental states through reading, listening and conversing, especially when we on public transport, we can practise metta, vipassana or just abiding peacefully in the present moment.

It's the continuity of practice that will bring results. One of the most favourite words of the Buddha was appamādo – diligence! It doesn't take all that much effort to decide to do something wholesome. Otherwise it's a case of one step forward, two steps back. No wonder we sometimes feel we are getting nowhere.

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## **15. Back Home**

Back home after a day out, whether at work or for some other reason. It depends on what sort of day it has been. But for sure the worse it was, the less we want to sit.

And what is it we are coming home to?

So many imponderables. Yet to sit quietly for a while, no matter how hard, can truly re-energise the system. For it is a rare day we arrive back suffused and suffusing calm equanimity. And if we were, we would want to sit and deepen the state.

You may be lucky as I was to take public transport. It does allow you to sit and rest. Instead of looking mindlessly out of the window, we can sit and let the breath calm or energise us. I have to confess I fell asleep most times and on occasion missed my stop. But I always felt the better for it.

If you are returning to a quiet home, then take some refreshment, but make time to sit quietly. It may not be in a formal sitting posture. Let the day run through your mind, from the time you left the house till you arrived back. And see what you have brought home. Is there some anxiety there, some irritation? Was it an overly busy day, but exhilarating and there is lots of restlessness? Disappointing and exhausting? Or do you feel it was a fulfilling day, satisfying?

If you don't take time for meditation then there is the risk – the near certainty – that whatever you have brought home will strengthen dukkha. Unattended disappointment can so easily spiral downward into depression while exhilaration may fool us into grandiose plans and expectations which will eventually come crashing down in exhaustion. Very sad.

Whatever state you are in, use the techniques you know to level everything off towards equilibrium. Wait till calm equanimity begins to rise.

If you are returning to a busy home, then suggest everyone sit together quietly for a moment. Or if this isn't possible, then perhaps you could ask to be allowed a few minutes' meditation and then find a place of quiet for yourself.

And do end with metta no matter how short. It is so important to re-engage with the right attitude. Then make resolutions as to how you will spend the evening skillfully.

The Buddha reminds us, 'Life is uncertain. Death is certain' Let's not waste even a moment.

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## Miscellaneous

### 01. 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 to reflect wisely.

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 confident 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

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## 02. 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 through 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!

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### 03. Sickness

Sickness was one of the 'messengers of the gods', an awakening call that set Siddhatha Gotama on the path to an astounding spiritual discovery.

When sickness befalls someone we know - a dangerous illness, a crippling accident - it comes as jolt. It's happening around us all the time, but now it's in our face. But still we rarely 'get it'.

When such misfortune happens to us, it's a shock. Depending on the circumstances, it may drive us to despair. A young policeman, all-body paralysed by a shot, chose to commit suicide.

Even though it is happening all around us, we continue to live as if it won't happen to us. If we reminded ourselves, every day, of how vulnerable the body is, it would take away the tinsel armour of ignoring, of self-deception. Should we have to suffer, it won't be such a shock.

But a shock it will be, because so much of who we are, the Self, is tied up in the body. Sickness is a mini-death. It tears us away from what we love - 'the things I do; the friends I see; the job I have' - and offers us what we don't want - the discomfort, the pain, the disability. The mind works on this and offers a future of horror, of terror.

Yet, here lies a gateway. An opportunity of escape. Escape from the delusive world we have conjured up within ourselves and take for real. The escape cannot be yesterday, drowning in nostalgia. It's gone. Nor tomorrow, a world only in dreams. It hasn't arrived. The answer must be present. Right here. Right now.

That was the Buddha's astounding spiritual discovery. Through developing right mindfulness, we can stand back within ourselves to discover an unassailable place. Even as the objective observer, the feeler, the experiencer, whenever it is stabilised, we've already found a haven. Indeed, when we have been patient enough to let all fear and aversion subside, this haven tells us there is physical discomfort or pain and disability to smaller or greater degree. And that's all!

There is no denying that is not an easy task. Indeed depending on the severity of the illness, it can be a great struggle. So let's start with the easy ones. Next time you are ill, even a cold, try saying to yourself. 'There is this discomfort or pain and this illness prevents or hinders me from doing this. That's all.'

This sort of acceptance helps to establish patient forbearance which is uncomplaining and a realistic optimism which sees possibilities.

Here are some daily reflections to prevent us living in a make-believe world of continuous health:

This body is subject to disease.

This body is of a nature to fall ill.

This body has not gone beyond sickness.

Such reflections act on the heart as toothpaste on teeth. If we want to free the heart from the accumulation of plaque from fear and anxiety, each day we need to face such possibilities. We get in touch with these unpleasant mental states and in accepting them, they manifest and evaporate. Far from glooming our lives, such reflections, undermining

the constraining effects of fear and anxiety and have the opposite effect of allowing our lives the more to bloom.

Recognising the body's paramount importance in human existence and that this life form the Buddha tells us is the best for liberation, we need then to turn our loving-kindness, metta, towards the body.

May you be free of sickness and disease.

May you be well and strong.

I determine to look after my body.

Such blessings transform the energy of fear into care.

(There is a longer Bodycare mp3 <http://www.satipanya.org.uk/audio.htm> )

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#### **04. The Tough Nut**

I'm sure you know what your own 'tough nut' is.

I know a little about 'tough nuts' since I took a couple of cars apart in those halcyon days when I had nothing better to do. You have to apply WD40 and sometimes a bit of welly.

There's usually habit – unwholesome, of course – we retreat to when things go bad or even a bit off. It could be around eating or sex or drugs or sleep or alcohol or any number of more or less unwholesome pursuits.

But we begin to realise that it doesn't deal with the original problem and it becomes an obsession and addiction and so a problem in itself. It can become an escape route so entrenched that it will probably be the last to be filled out and transformed.

There are many self-help books, therapies and systems such as the Twelve Steps that are used for alcohol and drug addiction. But here I'm addressing a more 'normal' level of addiction. Even though I say normal it can be equally tenacious. Even giving up that extra piece of toast can bring tears to the eyes.

As meditators we know that the key lies in tanha, wrong desire and craving. It's catching the moment that it arises, before it gets a head of steam in action. That is the key to overcoming it. Once we've even budged a foot towards the biscuit tin, it's difficult to pull back. 'Just one!' We're easily fooled.

This is why that bright mindfulness is so necessary. It catches the arising of a desire. Right mindfulness is accompanied by calmness. So there's no rush. There's time. We can inwardly stop, watch and feel the energy rise and wait patiently till it subsides.

When we know the conditions for such desires to arise; when we know when, where and/or with whom; that's when we prick the inner ears, gather the inner resolution and stand firm.

It is also good to have some ploy to remove oneself from the scene of possible folly. Some wholesome distraction. Listen to music, read a book, watch good TV, call a friend. Of course, there is the danger of suppression, if we don't find time to investigate it in meditation. Perhaps the best ploy is to take the 'dog' for a walk. It gets us away from the object of desire and allows us to 'vipassana' the mental state.

And should we find ourselves dashing along the addictive escape route, let's at least not be routed! What then is required? Persistence! Dogged perseverance!

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## **05. Impulsive or Spontaneous.**

When we act impulsively, we do so out of habit. A thoughtless reaction. There's no reflection involved. And the word impulsive suggests that it is not skilful. We often regret what we have done.

Somebody asks us to come and help in the garden. And we find ourselves saying, 'Yes, I'd love to!' And immediately comes that sinking feeling that we really didn't want to do it. And that we don't have the time. We would prefer to be doing something else.

It scratches on the mind and we think of excuses.

It can lead to fibbing. 'Woke up feeling terrible. I've got a job to do. Someone I must see. Forgot all about it.'

Of course, we are prolific in our apologies. But it leaves an uncomfortable feeling. That's the dread of being found out. The shame of it.

There's a Mullah Nasruddin story. He is tired of his neighbour asking for the use of his donkey. So on the next request, he tells him the donkey is being used by someone else. Just then the donkey brays. And when his neighbour raises his eyebrows, he asks, 'Who are you going to believe? Me or my donkey?'

We all want to be spontaneous. It suggests skillfulness and joy. And we think that spontaneity should arise spontaneously! But it's hard work to train ourselves towards a genuine, unaffected naturalness about what we do. Consider sport! How many times do tennis players practise their shots? And in the immediacy of the game their strokes are spontaneous. Not that they are always as accurate as they would want them to be. Consider performance artists whether actors or musicians. Although their performance seems so natural, there has been an enormous amount of practice beforehand.

So it is with virtues. We need to consciously develop them – goodwill, generosity, patience and so on. And then every so often we shall surprise ourselves at our spontaneous, wise and joyful response.

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## 06. Joy!

It's spring and the daffodils are out. So I am hoping there is a sense of joy in the air for you. Joy is one of the Illimitables along with love, compassion and equanimity. And just like them it can be developed without boundary, limitlessly.

Often in a rushed and overly busy day or in a slow, dull one, our attention fixates on the downers. But notice that there are times when some form of happiness does arise. Often if we are used to excitement we miss out on the sweetness of a quiet joy. Excitement is the subtle enemy of this joy for it is an expression of that desire to be happy in an overly emotional way. High!

Quiet, peaceful joy often arises, but because we are so used to joy as excitement we miss it and fail to appreciate it. Perhaps it comes when, after some engagement, you have a quiet cup of tea; or while walking from here to there in a park or along a quiet street; or stopping and resting from what you are doing for a moment. When you notice this calm joy, say to yourself, 'I am feeling a calm joy'. Sit with it and appreciate its qualities. And notice how you feel gently energised by it, not just physically but mentally.

Then when you are settled in it and have drunk your fill, offer the cup to others and to all beings. 'May you be joyful and may your joy increase!' After all a joy shared is a joy squared, for now you are happy because others are happy.

Then there's the power of 'positive thinking'. The Buddha is very much into this practice. Even when you feel down, you can note that. Offer yourself a blessing: 'May my unhappiness decrease. May my unhappiness come to an end.' After a little while, offer the same blessings to all beings. And then as it were, put it to the side. And start offering joyful blessings to yourself, something sympathetic to oneself. As you begin to lift, offer it to all beings.

This is a much better strategy than one offered by self-pity and resignation. 'I am depressed. I am so depressed. May all beings be depressed!' Or at work: 'I'm bored. I'm so bored. May all beings die of boredom!'

So throughout the day, train yourself how to lift the heart with goodwill intentions of joy and see how you feel at the end of the day.

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## 07. Thankyou

What a heart-warming, heart-delighting virtue is gratitude!

But how often do we contemplate the blessings of what we have received?

How often do we consider the graces and fortunes that have fallen our way? Many unasked for. How often has a thankyou been heartfelt and not just a social nicety?

Anyone who has entered the Dhamma, reflecting on the supreme gift of this life form, the most advantageous for liberation, cannot but feel an aching gratitude towards one's parents. Many may harbour grudges about their upbringing. But do we imagine our parents to be awakened beings? One person said to me that it was only when he became a parent did he stop complaining about his parents! The Buddha said, even if we were to carry our parents on our shoulders all our lives, we would not have repaid the gift of life they gave to us. Thankyou!

And what about the gifts we have received from our society? Our whole early education is paid for by others. Both the education system and the National Health system arose out of a desire to educate and heal. They arose largely out of the ideals of egalitarianism and compassion.

What about the police? Do we ever feel gratitude when we see a policeman or a police car? Or are we still teenagers, hating authority figures still!

And our politicians? Do we really expect them to be saints? Most enter with idealism. They really do want to do something for society – no matter how misguided we may think they are. Would we do any better?

It's not that gratitude should blind us to faults, but more that it balances our more 'natural' tendency to criticise, moan and complain. What about a bit of appreciation? A bit of praise?

So thankyou!

What about the gifts of friends, of workmates, of countryside and parks, museums and libraries and a myriad other things. Thankyou!

And our practice even allows us to see those who dislike us and even do us harm as our teachers! Thankyou!

Even when things go wrong. We lose our spouses or partners, our friends, our jobs, we can see this as 'an opportunity for growth' – even if we say it through bared teeth. Thankyou!

And there are things. Things encapsulate the imagination, the skills and the work of hundreds of people. Next time you are holding your mobile, just think how many people were involved in getting the basic materials, in design, in manufacture, in distribution. We can do it with food, clothes, the humble door-stop. An eternity of thankyou!

And what about the body that carries us around all day. The mind that can be so clear and precise. The heart that can fill our interior with such delight. Let's not dwell on the empty half of the bottle. Thankyou!

Gratitude engenders a generous heart. And when our gifts do not carry the heavy labels of 'me' and 'mine', then truly we are renouncing what time and wealth we could have spent on ourselves. So we also develop the virtue of renunciation.

In this simple way the virtuous circle of gratitude, generosity and renunciation twirl us gently towards liberation. This is also a path in itself.

Meister Eckhart the 13<sup>th</sup> Century mystic said to say thankyou all the time would be enough.

If gratitude is not something that comes easy to you, try spending a day saying thankyou to everyone and everything and see how you feel by the end of it.

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## **08. Need, Sufficiency and Greed.**

On the positive side, the national debt now laid upon us offers us an opportunity to consider our relationship to consumer goods, indeed everything we spend money on. Some of us, who will have to bear with unemployment, will sadly be forced to do so.

So what do we really need? The Buddha defined Four Requisites without which it would be impossible to live the monastic life.

Monastics should be happy with the food that is offered to them. But from a lay point of view, what does the body need. Tiramisu? I'm not arguing against tiramisu, you understand. Heaven forbid. But when we look at our eating habits, what do we actually need for nourishment and a healthy body. It is actually surprisingly little and what is more good fresh food is untaxed and therefore, comparatively cheaper than other consumer goods. But it does mean we have to cook for ourselves.

As for shelter, the foot of a tree. Well, that's ok in the tropics, but what do we need but a roof over our heads and basic heating. Do we need the fine furnishings? Do we walk around our house in mid-winter in a tea shirt? There was a time when you could buy house coats.

Then there's clothing. Monks are to be content with clothing sewn together from rags. Just open up to the fullness of your wardrobe and shoe rack. Make sure you have a glass of water handy.

Finally, medicine. The Buddha asked his monastics to be content with fermented cow's urine. I think I'd have to be pretty desperate to go for that one myself. But consider what a wonderful communal gift the NHS is, especially in this day when a sense of compatriotism, of citizen communion is so lacking. Do we take it for granted? Do we find nothing but fault?

Supposing we were suddenly given 5 minutes to evacuate because of a tsunami. What would you take with you? Presuming one has considered this before, I dare say we would take only what we really do need.

Then there is the idea of sufficiency. This is a bit more lenient. It's the old adage of 'moderation in all things'. We need clothes for work, clothes for leisure and clothes for pottering about. Food is often a case of conviviality and celebration. Shelter is also home. And we should try to get medicine best to cure our ill health.

This is not an exhaustive list of 'consumer goods'. One obvious exception is transport. And this reminds us that sufficiency isn't only about a personal struggle with greed, but also about our relationship to the earth and so to other people.

If we approach sufficiency from need, we probably have a better measure of moderation.

And then there's greed or if you prefer – retail therapy!

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## 9. What values govern our lives?

What values do we have and how do we rate them in importance?

How much of our lives is motivated by success in other people's eyes? If this is where most of our energy goes, it will be given to gaining such totems of success as power, riches and fame.

When the self is involved in self-aggrandisement, only caring for or overly caring for one's social image, then we are in conflict with the world, for our aim is to accumulate whether it's power, riches or kudos. This puts us into areas where others also seek the same. Conflict, whatever intensity, brings a hardness to the heart for it doesn't care for the rival. This loss of empathy, when generalised, leads to uncaring attitudes towards such areas as human rights – 'Just as I have to fight my gains, so should you!'; and nature, 'Why should I stop plundering the earth until everyone else stops?'

Furthermore, in fighting for what we want in order to look good, we have to learn the tricks of winning such as manipulation, deceit, and making sure we know how to take advantage of hierarchy.

And it puts us into a judgemental position, constantly rating others, measuring ourselves against others, leading to pride, envy, jealousy and outright hatred.

However, the problem does not lie in power, riches, fame or any other signal of celebrity success. If you want to change the world for the better, you need to have either influence or power. If you happen to have a good commercial idea or a special international skill, money flows towards you.

We **may** have some talent which lots of people want to enjoy. We would be the poorer society without politicians (beware the cynic!), entrepreneurs and artists.

The problem as always is how we relate to this. How do we gain our self-worth without these negative consequences? The answer is to make sure we are coming from the right place: the right understanding and the right attitude.

Luckily, there is an easy way to recognise that we are acting out of wrong understanding and attitude. It's when we become aware of our negative and conceited thoughts and any other unwholesome reactions.

It's when we don't 'feel appreciated', 'praised enough', 'valued'. When people don't 'show the respect owed to us' and so on.

This is why the Buddha asks us to reflect wisely.

For the best spiritual results we need to imbue what we do with such virtues as generosity, service, respect for others, appreciation of others' work, integrity, loyalty – the list goes on.

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## **10. Values in mine own eyes.**

Generally speaking, we have part of us that seeks our values dependent on what society calls success in order to make us feel good about ourselves. But there is also a part of us that is self-accepting.

The more we are self-accepting, the less we will feel the need for others to praise us. So we don't care so much for the trappings of 'success'. Our work in itself and our life-style are self-satisfying.

Because we are not so caught up in how we look in others' eyes, we can open up to the other. We relate not from a position of 'what should you do for me to make me feel good' or 'what should I do to make you think highly of me, so I can feel good about myself', but 'what can I do for you', 'What can we share'. We will find ourselves more interested in the other, more caring.

When this is generalised we begin to care about the environment, about human right issues, about other people's sufferings.

Because we don't seek praise, since self-acceptance brings joy-in-oneself, we can admire others and rejoice in their success.

Because we don't *need* friends for our psychological well-being, we can enter into generous friendships.

Because our relationship with our family is based on love rather than psychological need, we care for them without a feeling of imposed obligation or demand – even should they be demanding or try to make us feel obliged. We are willing to put ourselves out to do what we can for the sick and elderly. We don't experience them as a burden.

When this is generalised, we may find ourselves more involved in society as a whole, perhaps in some charity work.

Because we don't set our values by the standards of others, we can be more objective about social standards and we find we can form standards that are true to ourselves. They need not necessarily be any different, but they arise from within us. We don't impose them on ourselves because we want the admiration of others.

How to develop these qualities?

As usual, we have to be aware of our motivations. Many are by now so habitual they are subliminal. We are not always aware of them. It is by way of the reaction we have that tells us what the original motivation was. Should we notice any painful or unwholesome reaction, we can stop and reflect, and thereby see any unwholesome aspect of our original motivation.

Why are we upset when someone doesn't say 'thank you'? Or why do we feel so belittled when someone criticises us? Or why we do feel bored or averse to what we are doing when we were once very interested and engaged?

Once we become aware of unwholesome intentions, we can make sure that when we do something similar or meet the same person again we approach with the right motivation.

As always, the trick is mindfulness and wise reflection – and Right Intention.

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## **11. Living in the Now : Planning for the Future**

There are so many times when we have to plan for the future. Marriages have to be organised; children's schooling has to be sorted; and always the shopping list and the shopping – and what will I do when I retire.

How can we live in the here and now, if we are forever planning a future?

Future planned events impact upon the present.

You wouldn't be getting up so early but for the budget flight at an ungodly hour that happens to go to the place we've decided to visit -Acapulco.

For this to have materialised there was a time in the past when the initial idea came to mind.Perhaps it grew from a love of Mexican art - you really want to see those murals by Diego Rivera. And you are interested in Mexican food. And there are miles of beaches and the possibility of scuba-diving in sea laced with tropical fish, shipwrecks and even an underwater statue of the Virgin! The idea, laced with desire as such ideas usually are, soon evolved into a plan. Information was gathered. Decisions were made and the flight was booked. But we did not let desire confound us into a daydream. We have good purpose to go there – to appreciate the art, the food, the sea.

Let's take different tack. Leafing through a magazine, there's an advert for Acapulco. There it is, everything dreamed of. Beautiful bodies on the beach soaking up the sun, glitzy nightlife, gorgeous restaurants, dancing till dawn. The adventure, the food, the romance. Waking out of the reverie, the tea has gone cold. No matter, Acapulco it is.

The first planning was realistic and purposeful. The second, ungrounded, pie in the sky. The first should allow us to land with an open mind, exploring what has to discovered. The second is mired in expectation. When we get there it rains, there's a nationwide strike and no-one turns up remotely attractive.

The first returns you home contented with the fruit of open-minded experience. The second dumps you back home disappointed, disconsolate and that awful feeling of having wasted hard earned money.

The first planning was living in the now, planning for the future. The second was, while planning, living in a daydream and on arrival unable to live in the here and now!

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## 12. Music

Music is the language of the heart and therefore can change our moods or deepen them, both negative and positive. No-one doubts the power of music over the heart whether it be pop songs, patriotic marches or symphonies. So just as it is important to know what we put into our minds by way of adverts, reading matter, visual entertainment and so on, so it is important what we put into our heart by way of sounds.

The sounds of nature be it the trill of a bird or the bark of a crow; the rustle of wind through grass or the clash of thunder, all create resonances within the heart. And where there is emotion there is the body so that our emotional life also affects our physical well-being or lack of it.

In all monastic forms music plays an essential role. The chant offers the heart the ability to develop devotion. Even chanting Dependent Origination, which is none other than a list of physical and mental properties that show how suffering arises and ceases, becomes something more when chanted. It is imbued with feeling. It may be peacefulness or praise or thankfulness. This swells the heart with joy, welcome relief if the heart is otherwise weighed down with the worries and cares of life. This is more so if we chant the Metta Sutta, the Discourse on Loving Kindness. And there are many other auspicious chants to lighten the heart and fill it with quiet joy.

Here is a way that sound can be used to heal the heart of its negative states. Sitting with a negative mood, say anxiety, we bury our attention into the feel of it, not allowing it to escape into the mind and create stories. (Remember it is through thought and imagination that the heart develops its attitudes both unwholesome and wholesome.) Feeling an emotion or mood as simply a physical feeling, allows us to see it for what it is - just a form of energy. Indeed if we sink into it, we can describe its contents - agitation, nausea, heat, and so on.

Holding our position steady there, should we now listen to some peaceful music - I suggest Allegri's Miserere Me (Oh pity me!) - see how the music creates another mood.

Holding this mood in attention while not losing the feel of anxiety, sink that peaceful, loving mood into the agitation, the nausea, the heat.

This can never be a complete healing, of course, until the Three Roots of Acquisitiveness, Aversion and Delusion are eradicated. Indeed, until they are, unless mindful, we will continue to develop unwholesome states of mind.

But even so, music and the sounds of nature can be a balm to a burdened heart.

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(You may be interested in this website: [www.collegeofsoundhealing.co.uk/](http://www.collegeofsoundhealing.co.uk/))

### **13. Dignity**

Just for a moment before you read this, sit in a way in which you feel dignified. A way in which it expresses the word, 'dignity'.

Can you describe to yourself the physical qualities? How does the heart feel? What happens at the thought level?

We associate the word with royalty and there is a danger we confuse it with superiority. That's when the little devil of comparison sneaks in. 'All comparison is odious'!

Is there not a feeling of self-worth? A worthiness that doesn't seem to be attached to status, wealth, fame, beauty?

There was time we had 'dustbin men'. I remember as a boy watching them pick up the heavy metal bins, slinging them onto their shoulders and heaving the rubbish into an open truck. Their leather backs mired with slops and filth. They seemed embarrassed. They didn't like me looking at them. Didn't want to be noticed. They preferred the dark winter mornings. I didn't get the sense even then that they were happy with what they were doing. They were at the bottom of the 'working class'. My dad used to leave them a fiver for Xmas.

These days, it is clean, motorized and most wear official clothing and they are 'refuse collectors'. They are part of the growing importance of recycling. Most own their own house. The ones that service us are happy to have a chat. They might even think of themselves as 'middle class'.

However, when our dignity arises dependent on social conditions, it is fragile. Should those conditions change, our dignity feels damaged. But when our dignity comes from within, only we can damage it.

True dignity sits beyond our social status. The most menial worker can have the dignity of a king.

When King Bimbisara of Maghada first saw the Buddha on alms round, he was greatly impressed by his bearing. That was the beginning of a life long friendship as disciple and supporter.

This inner sense of dignity? Is it not based on goodness? Is there not with it a sense of self-worth?

Sitting in a dignified manner, is the body upright? Floppy? Tense or relaxed?

Repeating the word dignity to oneself, is the heart troubled, restless, dull? Or gentle, calm, serene? Is the mind agitated or silent?

Walk about bit. Get the feel of 'dignity' - not superiority!

Can you take it to work?

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## 14. Time

What is time? Objectively it is a way of measuring the distance between events: morning to evening, the passing days and years, between dentist appointments, work and vacation.

But this is not how we experience time. Sometimes time is so slow : at others we wonder where it's gone.

So how do you feel about time? How do you experience the passage of time? And how does your relationship to time, make you use time?

Do we want to dominate it? Be in control. Are we frustrated when we don't get the things done we ought to have got done in a certain time? Don't feel there's enough time to get all the things done that have to be done? Time as a perpetual rush. Crying out for more time!

Or is time fulfilling only when we are spending time with others. Time on my own seems pointless, boring, unfulfilling.

Or is time a bore unless there is something exciting going on. The greater the emotional intensity - the romance, the joy, the success - makes time worth living.

Does time have to be useful? Always doing something. Doing nothing brings a hopelessness, even a despair. What's it all about if it's *not* about doing something, anything.

Do I feel I have all the time in the world? If it doesn't get done today, tomorrow will do. Why force this whole liberation thing. Meditate, meditate, meditate!!! Crazy. Relax. We're not going anywhere. There's nothing to achieve. Progress! For heavens sake, lets just be happy with the way things are. Let me rest. Let me sleep.

I once watched a clock second finger ticking round and round for two hours. I was pleasantly surprised that by the end of it, I felt calm and equanimous. But the time spent to that time was full of a feeling of 'wasting time'.

Now if time is a measure between events, our task is a way of being with events in a basically equanimous way.

Just as the ocean has a deep, steady flow and the surface is full of movement, so we need to find this deep steadiness and yet stay with the surface movement.

So here by time we mean living, we mean life as lived. But it also suggests awareness. For without awareness we will be tossed hither and thither by the waves.

Time as flux : time standing still. To be still in the flux, that's the discovery - and the attainment.

Or to put it another way – 'go with the flow'.

But then we must beware! As one wit pointed out – only dead fish go with the flow!

(Christian mystics talk of *nunc stans* and *nunc fluens* – the still now and the flowing now.)

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## 15. Our Daily Breaks.

If at home or at work and alone, we decide to have a cup of tea, herbal or proper, or coffee - with a biscuit. How can we turn that into a Dhamma practice?

First of all there is the intention. Always, the intention needs to be investigated. It may not be a physical thing. The body does not need tea and definitely not coffee. Nor does it need a biscuit. In fact bread and water will do. Is it just greed, then?

How do we feel if we say – yes it is greed? Sad? Sad at losing those little delicious moments that brighten up the day. Sad, knowing at the same time that we simply can't renounce tea and biscuits and that this may very well be *the* great stumbling block on our way to Nibbana?

Tea or Nibbana, is that the question?

First, let us remember that the Buddha did not teach 'self-mortification'. In other words, he did not say that pleasure in itself was unwholesome, unless unethical of course. Taking pleasure in pinching someone else's biscuit - *and* eating it, is surely 'taking what is not freely given'.

Now pleasure brings happiness. It affects our mental state. Happiness, born of pleasure that is not by way of indulgence, has in turn a good effect on the body.

So let us use this occasion to establish a wholesome state of mind. To do everything deliberately and with a sense of ease, we stop and make clear to ourselves our intention - to turn this tea break into a delightful ceremony.

Having chosen the beverage, why not stand sentinel at the kettle and wait for it to boil, continuing to let go of any agitation. Wait till the boiling has all but stopped. Take time to make the drink. Stir the drink gently and quietly as an expression of our mental state.

Sit comfortably and gaze upon the tea and biscuit. Contemplate all the labour and expense involved - and the wonder of nature. We pay full attention to the process, to the tasting. We feel the bodily pleasure. We experience the mental state. Sip after sip, nibble upon nibble, we bring delight to the body, delight to the mind. Sip after sip, nibble upon nibble, we take the opportunity to share our joy with others. Family, friends, colleagues ... all beings. May you be joyful! May your joy increase!

We sit with the empty cup and the plate, dotted with crumbs. How do we feel coming to the end?

Are we still aching for more, just one more biscuit? Was there some subliminal desire that now arises as unsatisfactoriness? Are we suffering the consequences of not acknowledging our indulgence? Does an existential angst arise at the thought that all good things also come to an end?

Or is there a quiet joy arising from an act well completed? Or perhaps we are sitting with a heart aglow with gratitude?

Or simply at ease. The body still, the heart calm and the mind silent and spacious. Ready and open to the next moment. Let this be our aspiration: Oh, may my life end like this!

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## 16. On the Virtue of Visiting a Cemetery

(Best in Spring! No better time than to contemplate our mortality.)

Every city, every town, every little village, they all have cemeteries. They are ubiquitous. They are everywhere where there is human habitation. And it's because people die. In fact everyone who has lived has died.

Pretty obvious?!

Yet even so we need to remind ourselves that life *is* short: 'life is hard and then we die'.

At first this seems so negative. We love life. We want to live. Why talk about death, for heaven's sake. We all know death comes. We don't need to rub our noses in it.

In medieval times it was thought good practice to have a *momento mori*, some object that reminded you of death in the house. The skull was thought to be especially beneficial.

In Buddhist understanding too, death acts as a reminder of deeper truth. The Buddha said that there are those who wake up even on the mention of death, others not till someone famous dies, still others not until someone close dies, and there are those unfortunates who don't wake up till it is their turn to die.

Fat lot of use making sense of our lives on the point of death!

So there's a deep wisdom to be had in walking around the local cemetery. We see the same surnames cropping up. Stones dating back two, three hundred years. Here they all are, our forebears. Their actions made our history.

Now at this very moment I am also making history and there will come a time when it stops and this body will join them in some field, or its ashes scattered into water or into the wind - somewhere here on this earth.

'The way they came, I must also go. As their body is now, mine will also be.'

'Life is uncertain : death is certain.'

There's a certain comfort in knowing others have trod the same path. There's a relief in embracing a certain fate. 'This is the way it is.' But such reflections may bring a poignancy into our lives, may lead to resignation and eventually hopelessness.

However, our path is imbued with a transcendent understanding. The Buddha taught there is a 'sphere of experience' where there is no birth and no death.

How can the contemplation of death and dying help us to experience Nibbana?

It is by contemplating death, we enter directly into the monster's jaws. Feel the terror, hold firm, knowing it is but a chimera. When the roaring ceases, we find it to have been but our own poor, sweating self.

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## 17. Pity, Sorrow and Compassion

Pity - feeling sorry for: I'm using this term in its negative sense. When we hear ourselves say, 'I pity Jack', how does this 'I' define itself? There may be a genuine sorrow for the person and their situation, but somehow this 'I' stands apart from it. It is saying to itself: he does deserve it; he's such an idiot; I'd never get myself into that situation; thank heavens I'm not like that. There may be somewhere a smug satisfaction. Indeed, there could be there, quietly ignored, a feeling of schadenfreude, a sense of joy in another's suffering.

Just because we are not aware of these subliminal feelings, doesn't mean they don't have effect. I'm sure we've heard that false tone in another's voice, that overly affectation of sorrow on the face. But are we aware when we also 'pity' someone.

It's often a case that in vipassana, if we honestly note what the mind is thinking, that we wake up to these hitherto quietly suppressed attitudes which don't fit into our esteemed self-definition.

Sorrow is a genuine feel for the suffering of another. It can actually be felt as a direct resonance of the other's pain, both psychological and physical. I know someone who felt the pain of her daughter when she broke her arm. She had to have her arm in a sling. The daughter felt nothing. This sort of 'sorrow' is very rare of course, but all of us are touched when we see someone suffer, especially if it is a child or animal, for their innocence and vulnerability add poignancy to the situation.

I was once in Calcutta and as I turned a corner there was a little girl, squatting in the dry, dirt road sucking on a black-brown desiccated banana skin. To this day I can still feel the shock in my heart. But did it move me to do anything?

That to me this is the difference between sorrow and compassion. Compassion is the desire to alleviate suffering. It moves one to do something. Anything – even if it is only to try to influence someone else to do something.

I'm sorry to say I did nothing to help that little girl. And I'm left with an unrequited sorrow. That is the penalty when sorrow does not transform into compassion.

So, since the delusion of self is always active, how might we proceed? It is to acknowledge the conceit of pity, but not denigrate oneself for it. It's enough to acknowledge it and determine not to act on it. To feel instead the genuine sorrow and to act on that. In this simple way, our pity diminishes and our compassion increases.

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## **18. Why are we asked to observe *anicca*- impermanence.**

First as we become aware of how everything we are experiencing is simply a flow of events, coming and going, this slowly percolates through the system and changes our relationship to beings and things. As the Buddha says: nothing in the world is worth holding on to. Why? Because nothing remains anyway.

This is how clearly perceiving impermanence undermines the *dukkha* - suffering and unsatisfactoriness of attachment.

However, in Mahasi vipassana we are asked to look more closely, more minutely. This is why we make the great effort to slow down. Slowing down the body, slows the mind. Stopping and noting intention brings us back into an awareness of momentary moments.

As this gathers in focus, time collapses into minute moments of arising and passing away. We are not seeing the world out there arising and passing away, but individual acts of cognition. The amazing thing is that when a moment of cognition comes to an end, still there is awareness.

This is how we come to realise that we are not acts of cognition, which include all the *khanda*. The Aggregates of our physicality, perceptions, feelings, mental states and acts of cognition are not me, not mine, not a substantial self.

This is how by perceiving impermanence helps us to realise anatta- Not-self.

The corollary is to experience what we are – that awareness. Awareness is the deathless.

This is momentary dropping of the fetters of ignorance and delusive desire. A moment, like a flash of lightning into Nibbana.

So it is through the observation of impermanence that both suffering/unsatisfactoriness and anatta not-self are comprehended. But more, we come to realise that awareness, sati, is itself the One Who Knows, Buddho!

How can we bring this sort of observation into ordinary daily life? Very simple. Whatever you are doing, when it finishes, STOP! Acknowledge that that action of thought, speech or deed has come to an end and will never happen again.

It may be that the emotional attachments begin to rise there and then – nostalgia, grief, disappointment and so on. If we can wait for these to pass, all well and good. Otherwise recall the incident at the evening meditation and let them burn out there.

In this way, in ordinary daily life, we become aware of impermanence, of how attachment causes suffering and in allowing it all to rise and pass away, we realise it was all not me, not mine.

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## 19. Sublimation

Sublimate comes from the Latin, *sublimare* : to lift up. It's used in science to describe the action of a solid turning into a gas without becoming a liquid. Ice, for instance, has to turn into water before it vapourises, whereas naphthalene, the smelly bit in mothballs, vapourises without turning into a liquid.

In the second step of Eightfold Path, Right Attitude, the Buddha lists three sublimations: from selfishness to generosity, from aversion to love and from cruelty to compassion. There's no in-between state. We might use the word transformation, but sublimation gives the idea of rising to something higher – indeed towards the 'sublime'.

The Four Illimitables, since there is no perceived extent to which they can be developed are: love, compassion, joy and peace. But they are also termed Brahmavihara, The Dwelling Place of the Highest Gods, i.e. the most sublime of exalted states.

The important insight is to see that it happens naturally. In Zen they say: *with wisdom compassion arises naturally*. As we purify the mind of its delusion and the heart of its negativity, all that is negative sublimates into its opposite.

Vipassana has a key role to play here for when we are in contact with the raw feelings of an unwholesome emotion or mood, we are allowing it to sublimate. The real insight is the realisation that *we don't have to do anything!* It happens all on its own. This is also another insight into not-self, not me. What we have to do, of course, is to bear patiently with it, feel it, observe it. We have to attend to it. For sublimation can only happen within awareness, otherwise negativity remains suppressed. Therefore, we need to open up to our inner 'demons'.

This doesn't mean that we should not actively develop virtue. The Buddha tells us in the Metta Sutta, the Discourse on Goodwill that we do need to develop all the attitudes associated with love. He uses a mother's love for her children to illustrate this:

Just as a mother protects with her child at the risk of her own life,  
So one should cherish all living beings.

We can understand metta here to be love in the widest sense of that term. Love as to how we develop our connection with all beings and the world as right relationship. And the sublimation of negative, unwholesome states is a necessary part of this process.

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## 20. Righteous Anger : Plain Anger

There's no such thing as righteous anger in the Buddha's teaching. All anger is unwholesome and unskillful. You may get what you want, but there'll be a price to pay.

We talk about assertiveness and aggression. This is such a useful distinction to make. Assertiveness arises out of equanimity, compassion - and righteousness.

We seem to have forgotten the old maxim to count to ten before you do anything when angry. For anger will always distort in some way, mainly by exaggeration. Allowing the anger to calm, we get a balanced view. We can actually see the situation from the other's point of view. This means we are equanimous, that is, impartial.

To see the other's point of view is an act of love, of compassion and it allows the other to be heard. When someone is heard, their anger usually subsides.

And there *is* a right view about things. And we should stand by our understandings, but not in a tight way. It may be the other has something to say which modifies our view, if only a little.

When we are angry, should we be mindful, we will feel the heat arise in the chest. We shall feel a tightness - the first signs of attack! We shall see the beginnings of angry intentions. At that point, relax the body. Breathe in deep and breathe out slowly. No need to make it obvious! If the situation is too much, it's often best to excuse oneself.

But what if someone is angry with us? Before you react with anger, take your attention to *what* they are saying, not *how* they are saying it. Give them all the time they need. When they have finished, indicate that you have been listening. Then answer appropriately in a calm voice. 'You've got the wrong person.' 'Are you sure ... ?' 'Sorry, I didn't realise ...'

My first job was as a rep for a company making audio-visuals for school. At one school a teacher came blazing at me, accusing us of illegal practices. I remember I quickly apologised if this were true. I asked to phone the boss who said there had been a misunderstanding or mistake and all monies would be repaid. The teacher went out of his way to introduce me to other members of staff.

What if you work in an office and abuse spews down the phone? Same as above, but I hear so much about this, that maybe it's time for zero tolerance. Try this: let the person express their anger. Then remain silent. They should come back with something along the lines - 'Are you listening?' or 'Are you there?' Then to say calmly, 'I understand what you're saying. And I can understand why you are angry. But can I ask you to phone back when you are in a calmer mood so that we can talk about this rationally?' Or some such indication that you are not prepared to talk in the teeth of anger and put the phone down. *(If you try this, tell me how it goes - thanks.)*

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## 21. A Pet's Endgame (Preliminary Thoughts)

This essay came about because someone got in touch with me about their poorly cat. They decided in the end to attend to her until she died.

Western understanding of animals begins with Aristotle. He argued that animals have no moral responsibility and therefore no rights. But then slaves also had none – and women!

St. Thomas Aquinas, the great Christian philosopher of the middle ages, then declared they did not have souls. That means that they are temporary creations by God who annihilate on death, for only souls are eternal.

The final nail in the coffin took away sentience from animals. Descartes said they were simply machines, automata – they cannot reason or feel pain.

<http://www.animaethics.org.uk/descartes.html>

The Buddha on the other hand, as do the other religions of India, declared that animals are sentient beings. Anyone who has owned a pet intuitively knows when their dog or cat is suffering just as we do when another human suffers. (After all we only take their word for it. We cannot feel another's pain!)

Again the Buddha taught that all sentient beings have tanha – unwholesome desire, but also that all beings could act virtuously.

### Do Animals Have Morals TED

And that they also take rebirth! And that it was their ethical actions, just as for ourselves that was the determinant factor as to how they would fare on. This only makes sense if we define ethics in the broadest terms as relationship.

It seems, therefore, that we ought to treat dying animals as we would humans. We should try to take as much pain out of their dying process, make them as comfortable as we can, and let nature take its course. If the pain cannot be relieved, then to end their lives maybe the compassionate thing to do.

This brings into sharp relief what might our personal intention be to put an end to a suffering animal's life?

Is it because we ourselves can't bear to see them suffer?

Or is it because it will cost too much to keep her going and she will die anyway. It may, of course, be too costly.

Or because we are not acknowledging that we don't want the bother of caring for an old or sick animal and rationalise the killing.

Such motivations are unwholesome, and will not improve our own karmic fruit. The one wholesome motivation would be compassion for our pet and the wish to relieve their suffering.

Supposing now we have various intentions in the mind – a situation we find more often than not. When the time comes to make a decision, we make sure that the right intention is the fully conscious one by repeating it to ourselves. This means that intention has been empowered and not the other ones.

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## 22. Downers.

There was a time when depression was not so psychologised and medicalised. People talked of being 'under the weather'. It was seen as part of life. Sometimes you were 'a bit down'. You were told to 'pull your socks up' and 'get on with it'. These downers are to be distinguished from mental illness.

So long as we are feeling 'a bit depressed', the big problem is we get depressed about it. Or angry about it. Even anxious about it. That's what can drive 'a bit depressed' into a serious depression.

My first teacher was my mother. She would now be considered to suffer from some degree of clinical anxiety driven depression. She ended up with a concoction of pills so beloved of doctors. But she that age group and complained of lacking energy, an anxious stomach and headaches. She told me later in life that what kept her going was her mothering of four children.

That was the first lesson. Just keep doing what you have to do - and do it with love.

She was a sanguine type and enjoyed a slapstick type humour. She'd stick a needle in your bum while watching TV. And she transformed when she was with friends. No matter how she felt, she engaged and found happiness and fun in their company.

That was the second precious lesson. You've got to laugh!

These two strategies I believe kept me from going under, but they did not tackle the problem at root which was my relationship to my 'downers'. It was not until I began to meditate that I was able to really grapple with them. The Buddha asks us to really confront these feelings. Not in an aggressive way, but in a welcoming, kind, open-hearted way. He has a way of expressing this intimate embrace. He instructs us to 'feel feelings *in* feelings', to experience 'mental states *in* mental states'. In other words no barriers caused by aversion or fear. For when we do not want to feel them, we seek distraction. Anything will do. Watch TV. Eat chocolates. And worse! And if these poor strategies fail, then we truly begin to go under.

It takes a lot of trust to open up to these dark whirlpools. At times we may feel overwhelmed. That's when we need the teacher or the therapist. But as we persist we see we are creating a different relationship towards aching states of mind and harrowing emotions. This is one of radical acceptance: this is the way it is; equanimity: open-hearted, open-minded, no resistance; and patient forbearance: a willingness to bear with mental pain. When we discover this new relationship of non-aggression and non-fear, something magical begins to happen. It is as though all that dark, oppressive turbulence is allowed to express itself fully and in so doing exhausts itself. Slowly these moods no longer hijack our lives. They become less dense and don't hang around so long.

Then we begin to realise we have found the way not simply to bring depression to an end, but all suffering. This is the gift of Dhamma the Buddha gave to humanity - the understanding of how *we create suffering for ourselves* and how we can bring it all to an end.

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## 23. Discipline : Self-discipline

**Dolphin** <http://understanddolphins.tripod.com/dolphintraining.html>

Discipline is one of those Victorian words we don't like the sound of. It stings with 'corporal punishment'. But that's not where the word began.

It's always interesting to go back to the root word and see how it transforms with usage and time. *Disciplina* in Latin means instruction and knowledge and the one who wanted this was called a *discipulus*/a disciple. By the Middle Ages it had come to mean 'mortification by scourging oneself'! In other words a rather harsh way of developing self-discipline. It now has the meaning of 'the practice of training people to obey rules or a code of behaviour, using punishment to correct disobedience'.

There is no punishment in any of the Buddha's teachings. And he found self-mortification to be just more suffering. Yet, he demands of his ordained Sangha, the highest level of self-discipline. And of the lay Sangha a set of training rules which when followed diligently, lead to a base of purification.

So how can we develop self-discipline without beating ourselves up? Or getting someone else to beat us up?

First of all, we need to find a definition for discipline which encapsulates our aim. Our spiritual aim is twofold. We want to abandon unwholesome habits and develop beautiful ones. And we want to develop the inner strength to do this.

Here, the way dolphins are trained may be of some help. When a dolphin fails to do a trick such as jumping through a loop, the trainer does not criticise, but as it were ignores the mistake. Instead they renew their encouragement. On completion of the trick a present is given. It's known as 'positive reinforcement'. It works just as well on human beings!

There's not much gained in blaming oneself, in harsh self-criticism, in self-recrimination, in threatening oneself. When we do something unwholesome, it's good to rest with the inner consequences. These may be a sense of failure, shame, guilt, remorse, anger and so on. Bearing with this is the 'punishment'. There's no need to pile on further misery. What is more, the action was done. We determine to bear whatever consequences equanimously. That's enough. And putting right what was wrong where possible. That's all that's asked of us. Then a firm decision not to do that again.

Finally, consider how we might give ourselves a treat whenever we overcome a temptation. No matter how many times we fall back into the old habit, we keep repeating this process until slowly but surely, old unskilful habits lose their power.

There is a touching discourse where the Buddha teaches his young son, Rahula, who took the lower ordination, samanera, at the age of seven, about the dangers of lying. He is gentle and progressive, always appealing to Rahula's better nature. You do not hear the Buddha calling him a bad boy or denouncing his action as those of a devil. This is how we should talk to the child within us. In time, Rahula became fully liberated.

You can find the Ambalattika-Rahulovada Suttanta (The Ambalattika Exhortation to Rahula.) in this BPS Wheel Publication No.33 : <http://www.bps.lk/olib/wh/wh033-p.html>

When we do something wholesome, in the same way we accept the inner consequences of some form of joy and delight. This is our just reward, our treat. Of course, we have to

be careful not to do something wholesome in order to feel good, but putting aside this error, we accept that our inner atmosphere, the heart's delight, is the treat we receive from wholesome actions. That's enough. Whatever praise or gift comes our way, let that be a welcome consequence of reciprocal joy and gratitude, but never the purpose.

Again the Buddha delights in another's success. Witness his exclamation when Kondañña achieves first Path and Fruit of Stream Entry after the first discourse, The Turning of the Wheel of the Law.

'Then the Blessed One exclaimed: "Truly Kondañña knows. He really knows." And that is how Ven. Kondañña acquired the name Añña-Kondañña — Kondañña, the one who knows.'

Again you can find various translations:

BPS Bodhi Leaf 1 <http://www.bps.lk/olib/bl/bl001-p.html>

Or <http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn56/sn56.011.than.html>

In the same way, we can assume the character of the Buddha within us, and gently coax ourselves towards a consummate, gentle self-discipline and rejoice in our development of virtue.

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## 24 Fairness and Equality

Children often have an acute sense of fairness. 'It's not fair!'. They feel they've been treated unjustly. There's indignation and anger and often tears. And we take this into adulthood. But what do we mean by fairness in a world that is manifestly differentiated.

We talk about equal opportunity. But that presumes that we are all starting on the same line. In the hundred metre dash, it would not be 'fair' if the starting blocks were unevenly spaced; if in the 1500 metre race the curves were not taken into account. But that's not real life. We manifestly don't all begin on a 'level playing field'.

Consider our educational system; banking system; the pays awarded in the celebrity system and indeed now to CEO's of charities; the whole capitalist system.

That's when the doubt gives us some idea that fairness has also to do with some understanding about equality. This morphs into we should all have the same, even though we are not the same.

It seems the concept of equality came about in the West with the idea of an all-powerful, but ethical God. Although he made everyone different, i.e. not equal, in His justice we are all equal. And this is enshrined in our law – we take into consideration mitigating circumstances. After all that's only fair.

There is something about fairness that strikes true for it is such an enduring concept.

In the Buddha's teaching as to why things happen, there is the concept of unknowability and uncontrollability. Things happen because of causes from the past and in the very present which we could neither foresee nor influence. Life is a series of happenings. A series of events over which we do not have total control, or only minimal control and sometimes no control at all. Sometimes we win a jackpot and at others we get hit by a kipper – out of nowhere.

However, the Buddha does point to a fundamental justice, a fairness, an ethical law – the law of kamma. When we think, speak or act with harmful intent, we do harm to ourselves and others and there are consequences. And *vice versa* - goodness will produce goodness. This law applies equally to all.

But this tells us nothing about how consequences unfold. For whenever we think, speak or act, we do send a force into a matrix of relationships both out into the world and inwardly into our interior world. Eventually, though it might not seem so at first, our virtuous empowered intentions will begin to manifest in better inner and outer worlds. But our final goal is a happiness not dependent on these inner and outer worlds, Nibbana. And that also is equally available to us all.

Fair enough! But it does mean we have to tread carefully, wide awake and ready to take spiritual advantage of the unexpected, both fortunate and unfortunate.

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## 25 Unforgiveness

Unforgiveness is yet another form of hatred. We have been injured in some way. We feel hurt. We are angry with and hate what the person did and we are angry with and hate the person who did it.

Sometimes we would be happy to forgive, if only they would say sorry and we can see that they mean it. Sometimes we are happy for them just to voice it.

Sometimes this won't do, because we want some show of genuine contrition. We want them to offer reparation – an offering in kind, a small gift. Anything will do so long as there is a gesture.

Sometimes this won't do either. The anger and hatred we feel demand compensation equal to the wrong doing, but more. We say we don't want to take revenge. We just want them to know how much they made us suffer. And it might just teach them a lesson. We often call this justice.

Sometimes the suffering as punishment we impose on someone may gratify, whether it be withdrawal of support, or favour, or friendship, and in some cases of freedom or even of life. But more often it doesn't because anything done out of anger and hatred simply feeds that attitude. We don't feel they have suffered enough.

'Justice has been done.' But justice is a malleable concept. There is no universally accepted punishment for a crime. For similar crimes, some societies hang people, maim people. Other societies call this barbaric. The leniency of some societies is seen by others as weak and ineffectual.

It may not be just those people whom we are in contact with and have 'injured' us, no matter how slightly, that we need to forgive, but the big players also – politicians, corporations, bankers, 'them'.

And there are those who say, 'I can't forgive'. But this is a child's 'can't'. They are really mean 'won't'.

Now when it comes to actual pain or damage to the body whether slight or severe, that is one thing, but any negative, unwholesome reaction to it is the suffering. Even so we can justly claim compensation for harm done.

And although there is a sorrow that comes from any pain or loss by way of any form of violence to oneself or to the other (broken limbs, acid in the face, murdered relative), grief is a measure of attachment. Sorrow is the sadness at the needless pain or loss of life that should move us towards compassion, even for the perpetrator and further afield to undermine the causes of violence. Knowing the difference is crucial to bring closure. All grief, anger and revenge are reactions by the aggrieved.

Forgiving, then, begins by refusing to act out of anger and hatred. It is made easy once we realise that the hurt and grief we feel is self-generated and needs time and vipassana (insight) to dissolve. It is we who injure our own hearts. When we realise this, we don't need even an apology from the other in order to forgive.

Here's the Buddha:

'He abused me, he hit me, he overpowered me, he robbed me.'

Those who indulge such thoughts do not rid themselves of anger and hatred.

'He abused me, he struck me, he overpowered me, he robbed me.'

Those who do not indulge such thoughts rid themselves of anger and hatred.

If you want to go into the Buddhist psychology of forgiveness, have a look at my effort. You will also find multiple exercises there.

Towards the End of Forgiveness. Download from: [Towards the End of Forgiveness](#) or get a copy from <http://www.wisdom-books.com/ProductDetail.asp?PID=23660> Pay postage only.

If you have read a book or heard a talk which you consider useful to those who may find forgiving difficult, do email me.

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## 26 My body is Mother Earth

(Sorry to *preach* to the converted! I just need to make the link between body and nature.)

The abuse of nature did not really begin till the Industrial Revolution. These days it has been given a quantum burst with the doctrine of Consumerism with its dominant dogma that the growth of possessions, whether things or pleasure giving services, equals purpose of life – a belief held worldwide.

Ever since humans have become truly self-conscious they created the other, be it the minerals of the earth, the plants and animals and have set about working with nature to make life safer and happier, alas virtually always for themselves. And the usual suspects– greed, aversion and fear – were soon manufacturing tools as weapons, grew food for warrior lords and trained animals for war.

This was true for the time of the Buddha.

However, where minerals were once extracted by hard labour, making them precious, giant machines now excavate in abundance and make them valueless. Where crops only grew by the sweat of the brow, giant machines now till and harvest and make food cheap and undervalued. Where once humans lived close to animals, smelled their sweat and knew their pain and valued their work, giant machines have replaced them. Now, save for working dogs, we keep them as sentimental pets (few pet owners acknowledge the huge slaughter of other animals to feed them) and, of course, we eat some with disarming indifference.

How do we return to a relationship where we truly value minerals, plants and animals?

One way to contact nature is through our very bodies. The Buddha asks us to contemplate the Four Elements. The Earth : the quality of weight, pressure; fire: the quality heat, cold and temperature; water: the quality of cohesion and fluidity; and air: the quality of movement. Sitting, standing or walking especially outside, find these qualities in the body and nature. The hardness of bones and brick or stone; the warmth in our bodies, of the sun or the coolness of the wind; the elasticity of the chest breathing or a branch swinging; the feeling of movement as the body walks or the flight of birds. This is how we actually experience the physical world, our earthiness.

The wisdom that grows from the realisation that we are in and of nature, leads to a heart connection - nature as Mother Earth.

We need only contemplate the minerals that make up the body, the food that keeps it alive, the air we breathe and the living beings, some that feed us, others that pollinate and those who make such glorious company – and all the microbes that live in our very bodies that manifest this symbiosis.

We need to let it be deeply digested into the heart how mothering earth, moment after moment, gives birth to this body and how this body is utterly dependent on mothering earth. We are but one breath away from death! Truly this body is Mother Earth.

I've tried to make myself more aware of this with a simple reminder derived from the verse about kamma:

'This body is born of Mother Earth, dependent on Mother Earth, fed by Mother Earth. However I treat Mother Earth, it will be to my own benefit or harm.' (The Kamma Verse: I am my own kamma, I am a heir to my kamma, I am born [in this life] from my

[kamma](#), I am the kinsman of [my kamma](#), I am protected by [my kamma](#). [Whatever kamma-s](#) I shall do, [kalyāṇa-s](#) or [pāpaka-s](#), I shall become [their](#) heir.

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## **27 Dealing with Intense Emotions and Moods in Ordinary Daily Life**

Let's recall how we create more misery out of misery.

Often in daily life we have to deal with intense and painful emotions. They may last but a while or they can carry on for days, for years.

I remember once I walked across a bus station and the station master set upon me. I was in no mood for a fight so I meekly listened to his criticisms. I remember he went on about how drivers weep when they back into people and injure them. I had thought myself in private with him, but when I turned to go, there was a quite a queue in the shelter who had overheard the whole one way conversation. The look of breathless pity an elderly woman gave me said it all. Well, that shame hung around for years!!! And so did the replays of my indignant retorts. What the French call 'esprit d'escalier' – staircase wit or repost!

And there are moods too. Those longer lasting emotional states that seem to run subterranean and surface every so often like horror ghouls - the usual culprits of depressive, anxious and aversive moods.

The first thing to remind ourselves is not to let the mind start off on the story ... yet again. For we can be sure that it's cranking up the emotion all over again and adding a little more power to it. It's the path to despair, suicide or murder. If we catch ourselves lost in the same old narrative, we must come out of it at once and sink into the body and stay with the feeling.

But there are occasions when there's no time to do that. Or there are times when they so persist, we need a break from it all. That's when we tend to fall into the error of suppression. We let aversion or fear push it out of our minds and we seek distraction. But the more we push it away, the more energy we unwittingly give it for now it has the energy also of our aversion. It's similar to pushing a spring down. When we let go, it springs back with more force than it had when uncoiled.

But there is a way we can 'park' an emotion or mood. We can talk to it and say, 'I will attend to you later, but now I need/would like to attend to this.' Notice the word attend which can mean to pay attention to and to wait upon. And gently put it to one side and turn our attention to something else.

Even should we sense it lurking in the background, we can occasionally turn a gentle smile towards it and assure it that we will attend in time.

Then, of course, we have to find the time to attend.

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## **28 How much pain, physical or mental should we suffer?**

The question as to how much pain and suffering we should bear needs to be referred back to primary aims – the one to purify and strengthen the heart, the other to bring an end to delusion by way of insight.

If the pain and suffering is bearable, it becomes a vehicle to develop patience, equanimity, affectionate awareness and insight. Once we feel, if only temporarily, that we have reached that limit, then it seems wise to find a way to bring an end to the pain, or at assuage it.

For instance, in sitting meditation aching knees are well documented. Unfortunately, the knees don't bend that way and relief comes only when the tendons at the top of the legs lengthen. In the meantime, we have to deal with the pain. So long as the pain is bearable we can continue to investigate, but when it becomes so painful that all the effort is to endure, then at least we are developing forbearance. But there may come a point when the pain is just too much and then it seems wise to change the posture and not grit the teeth and clench the jaw and be praised for our heroic stance against pain? Our unshakeable endurance! And find we have damaged our knees. This has happened. In fact, I began to have a loose cartilage myself at one point in early Zen practice.

But when circumstances completely undermine the process of spiritual investigation, what point is there in suffering them – save, of course, to build up that quality of endurance. Even here we have to be careful.

A meditator once told me he had a very bad tooth ache. I asked why he did not take an aspirin until he could see a dentist. He said he was building up the virtues needed for greater suffering. I asked him: suppose there will be no greater suffering for you?

It seems to me we should match endurance with the quality of investigation. Not to do so may indeed be an act of pride. 'I'm bigger than pain'. Such an attitude leads us into self-mortification which the Buddha found to be meaningless torture. Rather endurance should be balanced with care of the body.

For those in dreadful pain, there may arise the option of suicide. Of course, what is considered to be bearable or unbearable is subjective, always personal and individual. The topic of suicide is a delicate one. Suffice here is to say that it is generally understood that only those who are fully liberated can take their own lives without some unwholesome karmic consequences. But this has been questioned.

However, it is important to remind ourselves that understanding how suffering and unsatisfactoriness (dukkha) arise, we need to know that the given, be it physical or mental pain and illnesses may have a multitude of causes, but our relationship to them of aversion, fear and despair is self-generated. To investigate how we create suffering and unsatisfactoriness is a path to liberation by way of understanding the Second Noble Truth – the Cause of Suffering is Unwholesome Desire, tanha.

(I'll have another go at euthanasia – a good death again sometime. I had a shot at it with <http://www.satipanya.org.uk/essays/Assisted%20Suicide.pdf> )

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## 29 Judging or Judgemental?

There can be a lot of confusion around judging. It gets bad press in the practice. We're supposed to note it – day and night as 'judging, judging'. But if we don't judge, how do we come to decisions? How do we know what's skilful or unskilful and so on?

We note 'judging, judging' when we hear ourselves criticising. And we love to criticise: it makes us feel grander than others and better about ourselves. When daggered towards our selves, what sweet wounding it is to beat ourselves up for we know we deserve it!

These sorts of injuries rise out of the usual suspects – selfishness, hatred and fear in all their varied forms. And the delusion is that it is for the victim's good.

However, the fact is that the truth of the judging may be so. If we perceive someone as deceitful, we may balk at the judgement. But they may very well practise deceitfulness. For fear of 'judging', we do not guard ourselves against their deceitfulness. Surely this is folly.

If I judge myself as lazy – which I do! I might dismiss that as hateful self-judgement. But I am lazy! (Sometimes.)

In civic life, when it is time to vote, we have to judge which party we are going to support. If we call it judging, we will find it difficult to come to a decision – if at all.

So where does this judging go awry. Can we distinguish when we are judging and when we are really being judgmental?

Surely that's where the confusion lies. And to be judgemental is to judge the person rather than the act, the politician and party rather than the policy. To come from a position of pride, aversion and so on.

The judgemental is a product of conceit. Better than, worse than or equal to. It's always about me and other. Even when it's about me only, it presumes the standard of the other.

The old adage: hate the deed not the doer, sounds easy. But I was deceived by *that* person and to separate the deceit from the person is no easy thing.

One way, perhaps, is to phrase what has happened in terms of what was done or received and how we were affected by it.

'I was told to come to party at 10 Baker St. I found there was no such place. It was cruel joke at my expense. I feel hurt. I feel vengeful. I shall wait till equanimity arises. And decide what to do then. But for sure I won't be deceived again. I shall double check.'

As I said, no easy thing. But try we must.

In our meditation, of course, it shouldn't mean we stop noting 'judging', but rather that we clearly see it is 'judging, judging' and that's ok. When we can discern there is 'judgemental, judgmental', then we should note that and know it to be unskilful. The distinction is difficult to see, but unless we do so, we will cause unnecessary suffering for ourselves.

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### **30 The absurd and the Sublime : A Mid-summer Contemplation**

In the end there is an absurdity to it all. By absurdity, I am suggesting a meaninglessness with a twinge of the ridiculous.

That life, consciousness and all we have experienced, have understood and come to love should come to end, makes for uselessness. Life as a pastime.

To say, 'Well at least I enjoyed most of it. And I achieved this and that.' is to hide the absurdity beneath a pathetic self-indulgence and self-importance. To say, 'My life is dedicated to the happiness of others.' knowing their lives also lack the same meaning, is a sorry attempt to make our lives meaningful.

Because of this all human endeavours: science, politics, heroism, philanthropy and so on are all useless. And art too! What point to try to express anything when everything in itself has no intrinsic meaning? A piece of art is glued to its time and place, of interest to art lovers and art historians, but in the long run is veneer. It treats with beauty and subjects personal, social and even cosmic, but rarely treats with the real problem. The sheer absurdity of creating anything about something that is inherently meaningless.

Yet paradoxically this is the game we must play. A game is a useless pastime. It need not be unwholesome in itself, but it is mere entertainment, save for the professionals, the fanatics and the financial managers who give to sport the meaning of their lives. How absurd is that!

When the Buddha-to-be realised at the end of youth what he was heading for, he suffered an existential crisis. It wasn't that he wanted to leave his family and all he treasured. It was that he had no choice. Capturing the full meaning of the four Devadhuta – Messengers from the Gods (Ultimate Truth) – the sick, the ageing, the dead - he realised that this was his destiny as a human being. The fact that he believed this would continue rebirth after rebirth simply added to the horror. The fourth was an ascetic sitting under a tree. It was this gave him an inkling of hope.

It is the horror of meaninglessness that drives us to seek comfort in the pleasures and joys of life and causes us to fight off and flee from anything that turns us towards these dour Messengers.

By the time the Buddha sat beneath the Bodhi tree and made the Great Determination not to move until he had explored this meaninglessness or die, he had the invincible courage of someone who knows he has nothing to lose. If life was just a pastime after all, then all there was left was to enjoy it as best one can. Such was and is the position of annihilistic materialists. If it did turn out to have meaning after all, then that would be the end of the despair of absurdity.

His realisation was an actual experience. He called it Nibbana. Although this word has been given various meanings, they revolve around non-attachment and liberation. Non-attachment was his new relationship to the world. Nothing mattered. Liberation was how he experienced this. 'Something' was set free. That something was intuitive awareness, Satipanya. Upon this realisation, everything mattered.

For he realised that that the purpose of life was to bring this Satipanya to its own realisation. It was a rite of passage. A passage from ignorance and all the suffering towards Buddha realisation.

Questions as to why this should happen in the first place are deemed irrelevant. This is the way it is and this is the way we must go.

And again all that seemed absurd, now take on profound meaning.

Our lives - personal relationships, work, even pastimes - take on the same meaning, journeying towards the same sublime destiny

And art takes on the task of attempting to communicate the inexpressible. It will never succeed, but try it must.

Seeing the delusive state of other people and knowing their potential, the Buddha had no choice but to teach. There he found meaning in his existence as a human being. And there he found the flowering of his personal joy into the joy of helping others make their way to their own sublime destiny.

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### **31 If there is no self, who bears the karma?**

Every moment arises dependent on past and present conditions. This is no less true for the self, the sense of being a *person*.

Nowhere does the Buddha say – there is no self. It is patently obvious to all that there is a self. What he says is that it has no substance; it does not last more than a moment. There is only the process of I-making (ahamkara).

There is, therefore, a ‘person’, conscious and sentient arising and passing away all the time – even in sleep there is a sliver of consciousness and sentience or the alarm bell would not wake us.

The self or person is but a collection of habits and the body and a consciousness of it all. There are also moments of self-consciousness where the person perceives and feels themselves to be a person.

Karma has become everyday speak for consequence. The consequence within a person is the habits they have formed, both wholesome and unwholesome.

Now a person can only be in the present moment. Yet past editions of persons of both today, all our yesterdays and even before that, have created acts of thought, words and deeds - all of which have continuing consequences.

If this person now feels unhappy, it's to a greater or lesser extent because a past person did something and this person now is bearing the consequences. There is also this person now making acts which may make for worse consequences for a future person. Similarly should this person now experience happiness, because of right intention, this will determine happier persons in the future.

On the presumption that I will continue to arise as a momentary person for some time yet and possibly after death, if I want the future person whom I shall be, although only for a moment, to be happy, I have to start doing and creating habits now that will make for future happiness.

This is loving oneself. When I'm happy, I really love being me!

Because a lot of this happiness is also dependent on my outer circumstances, I have also to try to steer that towards happiness. That means I engage with people and the environment in whatever way I can to enhance the happiness of myself and others. Depending on the situation, I shall want to express my empathy in joy, compassion, love, patience and so on.

This is loving the other.

So it is that an ethics born out of the desire to make oneself happy is developed. And you can't do it without a self, without being a person.

Our task as human beings is to develop a continuous flow of happy selves. And help others do the same.

An added consequence: it's so much easier to make spiritual progress when we are happy.

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## 32 Overwhelmed by All the Violence in the World?

What to do when we feel overwhelmed by the stories and videos coming from the seeming endless conflict between Israel and Palestine and the terrible images and slaughtering by Islamist fundamentalists – to mention two main areas of conflict.

Here are some ways to undermine overload, unrequited compassion, despair and burn out.

First it's a case of humility.

**Power:** We need to accept what we can do and can't do. And let go of trying to do something about a situation that we know we can't do anything about.

Consider this modern koan/paradox: What can we do when we've done everything we can do?

**Influence:** We need to know what we can and cannot get other people to do. And let go of trying to have influence where we have none.

Secondly, we need also to take the long term view.

Look at Europe and its 1000 years of internecine wars. That's how long it took, with every bit as horrible events as in the Middle East, until we finally agreed to live peacefully together. Of course, there is also the carrot of the benefits of peaceful co-existence.

Thirdly, we need to do what we can always do – send our goodwill messages of love and compassion. Even if we don't think it has any effect beyond ourselves it makes us feel we are doing what we can. In the Buddhist Tradition, it is understood that metta/karuna blessings will have an effect no matter how slight.

There are also donations that can be made to the various charities that deal with such situations.

Fourthly, we also need to come to a place where we know enough and enough is enough! Stop feeding the heart and mind with horror stories. Why stop at Israel/West Bank, Islamic State?

Finally we need to accept that this is samsara. This is where delusion will always play itself out, but also where it is possible for individuals to liberate themselves. This is the training ground.

Do you have other suggestions? Please email and I shall add to next Newsbyte. Thanks.

### Comment by Sally Lever

You asked for additional suggestions. What I'd like to offer and share is something I've noticed in myself when faced with so much atrocity, particularly the senseless killing of innocent civilians, including children. When I started my first job after finishing with Uni, I had a very inspirational and caring boss. When he noticed us criticising others, he would say something like: 'When you see yourself pointing a finger at someone else, take a moment to look at your hand and notice who the other fingers are pointing to.' So I quickly learned to check things out internally with myself first before projecting my grievance onto others. Having been practising this for another 30 odd years since then, I still manage to criticise others and to be aggressive towards them from time to time, although I think my level of awareness is improving, thank goodness!

So, returning to violence in the world, in addition to all the suggestions you've made, I also reflect on how what I'm witnessing externally might be reflecting anything internally in me or externally in relation to my behaviour. For example, I found myself feeling particularly upset learning about children being killed. I asked myself what I might do with my behaviour towards children. Where am I being aggressive towards them? I remembered myself speaking harshly to both my sons, to my niece and to the neighbour's children - aagh! I remember your enthusiasm for setting a daily intention, so when I feel upset about others harming children, I set an intention to behave peacefully with them myself. Bit by bit, it does seem to help me and maybe, like metta bhavana, the effects will ripple outwards?

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### 33. Legal : Moral : Ethical

Words are important. The Buddha was careful about his use of words. He had difficulty in expressing his new understanding in the conventional language of the time. Hence coining the word, anatta – not-self.

We are often confused by what is legal as opposed to moral. It's legal to drink alcohol and smoke cigarettes, but is it moral? What the Buddha means by sila/morality are those actions and speech that are skilful, wholesome, virtuous towards ourselves and others. Plainly there are many laws that make unwholesome actions legal.

This is a consequence of our liberal society which takes 'religion' out of politics. It prefers to leave moral questions of a more personal nature to the individual. If government interferes with our personal behaviour, they are accused of creating a nanny state, or worse authoritarianism.

Unfortunately, making immoral behaviour legal takes the sting out of our immoral actions. 'Well, it's legal. So it can't be that that bad.'

Ethical has a lot of 'currency' these days – it's very fashionable in business and finance to give them greater kudos. While the word 'ethics' looks to the positive side of morality, the word 'morality' still carries Victorian undertones of guilt and shame.

Not that the Buddha was not clear fudged the question of which actions about those actions we should avoid – the Five Training Rules (sikkhāpada)\* and he also encourages us to restrain the senses. This is balanced by the need to develop the qualities of friendship, compassion, reciprocal joy and so on.

If we accept ethics to mean both of these – the negative and the positive side of our moral lives – then what we are really accepting is that our delusion or wisdom is expressed through our actions of speech and deeds – and in our thoughts. And it is all to do with relationship.

However, it's rarely a case of black and white for ethical decisions have to take into account situation and context.

One of those dilemmas arises with abortion. It was once thought horrific and criminal. Making it legal, softened the moral sting. In Buddhist understanding consciousness arises at conception, no matter how dimly. The potential is there. It is always going to be a difficult ethical decision for those who see the foetus as a human being.

A similar dilemma arises concerning armed intervention. (See my essay for some thoughts about this: [Is Armed Intervention Ever Justified?](#))

As always, a given decision is rooted in intention. Our responsibility is to make sure that our intentions, given context and situation, are for the benefit or the greater benefit of ourselves or others or both ourselves and others.

Sikkhāpada: Training Rules (often translated as Precepts.)

- ☒ To refrain from killing sentient beings
- ☒ To refrain from taking what is not freely given
- ☒ To refrain from abusing our senses (usually limited to sexuality, but the word kama is sensual desire. That is not to indulge.
- ☒ To refrain from wrong speech – lying, slander, coarse language and useless talking.
- ☒ To refrain from taking drinks or drugs that cloud the mind.

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### 34. The Consumer in Us All.

Have we really noticed how insidious the now world-wide 'religion' of consumerism has become?

We all know how advertisers create false 'needs'.

All adverts suggest what you are buying - a product, a service - is a bargain. Money well spent.

They tell us it will make us especially happy. We will be so gratified – immediately!

And we don't have to do anything – or at least it will take such little effort. In fact if all you do is tick this box, go onto this loan plan. You won't even notice the money leaving your bank account. And you can win a prize!

Consequence of greed manifest:

<http://themoneycharity.org.uk/money-statistics/>

*Total personal debt (2014) in the UK currently stands at £1.46 trillion.*

*The average household debt in the UK is £7,975 (excluding mortgages).*

*Based on September (2014 trends, the UK's total interest repayments on personal debt over a 12 month period would have been **£59.8 billion**. (Never mind the rest of the world!)*

This habit of greedily seeking a bargain insinuates itself into our lives so much so that the behaviour becomes automatic and is never questioned. It seems so natural. Well logical. Surely it's been with us ever since bartering began.

But as a generalised attitude to life this becomes truly cancerous to the good heart. For the consumer seeks to take as much as they can, while giving as little as possible. They are always on the lookout for that bargain.

Of course, it's just another manifestation of our good friend, greed, but in these new clothes it takes on the air of ethical correctness. It's confused with self-care. 'Greed is good.'

But how does it affect our spiritual lives? Some reflections:

Are we looking for the pristine technique! The one that really was taught by the Buddha. The one that is going to deliver the goods and fast with least possible effort.

Are we looking for that famous teacher everyone is talking about?

What do we expect of the teacher? That they are actually going to get us to Nibbana?

Do we expect them to be entertaining, exciting?

Will they be able to give us the immediate gratification we are looking for? All those vipassana knowledges – the *ñāna*, shouldn't they come quickly. I have read about them. They all seem pretty straight forward to me! Why haven't I attained them? It can only be the teacher, the method.

And if I have to listen to that talk again, I'll go mad. It's become so boring! Same old jokes.

And is my spiritual practice all about me. What about dana – generosity. It is said in giving we receive. Are we giving in order to receive?

I don't know where I got this quote (If you know, please email me):

*The One, or Oneness, as we might say in Zen, never tries to turn a profit from anything at all. It wouldn't even make sense. We, on the other hand, are always trying to turn a profit from every human exchange. We are always trying to get something—admiration, love, recognition, praise, acknowledgment, even just staying connected. Think how we manipulate and bargain and negotiate to turn a profit from every interaction. Much of this is subtle, unconscious habit. Even when we give, or serve, or love, or pay attention, we're trying to get something. Sometimes it's just to get back some of what we give.*

Unfortunately the spiritual life asks almost exactly the opposite to our speedy, consuming society. It demands a long-term commitment – over lifetimes if you are open that. It demands dogged perseverance. Although there are highlights and wonders on the way, they are merely short stops on the Path. The Path is a constant 'struggle' against Mara, our unwholesome habits - the Five Hindrances, the Defilements and the subtle, unconscious Latent Tendencies that we don't know are there or we don't know how powerful they are until a situation drags them out hiding.

Why were these the last two words of the Buddha – apamadena sampadetha – with diligence strive/work hard. 'Strive diligently for your liberation!'

*If you see other ways in which the speedy, consumer affects our outlook, injurious to spiritual life, do email.*

Still a classic: *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* by Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche

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### **35 Barriers or Boundaries**

What is it about the self that creates such a mess? Is it not the hard lines it draws around things, people and events?

We go to a restaurant and we 'know' what apple pie and custard should taste like. When we taste the one we have bought, we are disappointed. Now it may be that the pie is not so good. I once had apple pie, years ago now, and when I put my fork into it, the crust was so hard it broke into pieces and some flung themselves off the plate. I didn't think the cook would appreciate my pretend interest by asking how much cement went into the crust. But it was difficult to enjoy. Looking back, if it had been the first apple pie and custard I had tasted, I no doubt would have thought it should be like that and thoroughly enjoyed it.

What about our politics? We draw hard lines around our views. I would never vote for ... Now we may not vote for that party. But what point the hardness around it. It stops us acknowledging that there is some good in all parties. The undecided floating voter is considered weak and no political party likes them.

Relationships too. Do we not draw comfort lines around our friendship group. Closed groups are cosy, but they are closed and self-serving.

Such can be viewed as barriers. It suggests hardening, inability to change even though change is all around us.

How do we know when barriers are being breached? When threats arise to the status quo, fear and aversion arise. We react to protect, maintain. Unless we can be mindful of our aversive reaction, There cannot be a creative response. We defend our positions sometimes at great cost.

Boundaries are more fluid. The beach is sometimes the land and sometimes the sea. It's not that boundaries allow everything. They don't have to be porous. One can create conditions, but they allow us to be flexible.

How do we know when boundaries are being breached? An amorphous discomfort. A feeling of invasiveness. At worst a loss of personal dignity.

When I became a monk, I kept up my friendly, easy going relationship with people. This was fine, except when someone became 'familiar'. Suddenly it was a slap on the back and 'how are you doing, Bodhi?' I felt I was at fault by trying to be a 'mate' and it was not quite in line with the dignity the Buddha would have his monastics behave. So that's when I asked people to address me as Bhante. This keeps a respectable distance between myself and the person I am talking to. It also stopped me behaving sloppily - at least in public!

I was lodging with a friend and I told him I expected a phone call at a certain time. Just before the allotted, he received a call. As the allotted time came for my call, I called out to remind him. Unfortunately he heard my reminder as a command. I got an earful which reminded me that hosts have their boundaries and I needed to respect these.

[Barriers or Boundaries - is it just human nature? Have a look!](#)

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### **36. Isolation, Loneliness and Solitude**

Feeling isolated is quite different to loneliness. It comes from being unable to commune with those who we feel close to or affiliated to.

I, myself, here at Satipanya, live isolated from the Sangha. As a monastic, I feel at home in the company of other monastics – of whatever creed. This is the same as anyone in the trades or professions. Anyone in the building trade feels at home with their mates. Anyone in the professions does so with their colleagues. In the same way we can feel isolated from our friends and families when we don't have enough or easy communion with them, but we don't necessarily feel lonely.

These days this should not be such a problem especially with skype.

Loneliness can be a very painful state. It can come after the death of a loved one, a loss of a friend, when we move into a new area and don't seem to know anyone and so on. And whenever we feel loneliness, it dips deep into those times we have felt lonely, perhaps unloved and even abandoned in childhood.

Loneliness tells us we are dependent on someone to feel worthy, loved and wanted.

Sitting quietly with our feelings of loneliness, arising for whatever reason, can allow old buried and unresolved feelings to arise. And they usually centre around a belief we have of ourselves that we are unlovable.

The heart longs to divulge her secret pain, but finds no-one to trust. And in that vulnerability, touches upon the fragile nature of her existence.

To sit with loneliness is to discover many things about ourselves. It can be an eye-opener. It's a healing process. And we need to wait until all feelings of loneliness disappear. What then arises?

Solitude is of a different order. It is often what we seek when we have had enough company, enough excitement. It's 'such a relief' sometimes to be on your own. But this is poor solitude. It doesn't last very long. As soon as we have rested, we get fed up with ourselves and off we go into the helter-skelter of excitement seeking.

Solitude, at its true spiritual depth, is to have found one's home within. As a Latin saying goes: never less alone than when alone. This is the gift of a heart no longer in 'need' of the other. A heart that is content.

I wonder if you can catch this solitude, an inner sense of a self-embracing all-one-ness, when you've sat in vipassana with a bout of loneliness and waited patiently for it to sublimate.

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### **37. Envy, Jealousy and Appreciative Joy**

It's ok to say, 'I envy you'. It's a way of praising someone, but also showing that we would like what they have. I know a monk who was an abbot and retired from that position. When he told me, he brought out in me a desire to lessen my teaching rota and spend more time on retreat and study. When I told him that I envied him, there was no 'coveting' for what he had, but I saw it a spur to move in the direction I wanted to. But the problem comes when we 'covet' what the other has. That's the 'keeping up with the Jones's' compulsion. And that's all to do with proving oneself equal or better than the other. It's a fool's game.

The antidote is to be grateful for what we have. To discern what we need rather than what we want. This allows for a greater contentment. Not that we cannot better our situation, but it is not done in comparison to someone else.

Jealousy is a darker state. Here there is not only wanting what the other has, but hating them for having it. This aversion can disguise itself as righteous criticism of the other. We can be dismissive of their achievements, their possessions. But there is a deeper comparison here, not of possessions, position and so on, but of egos. At worst the person nurtures a revenge for the shame they feel the other causes them - and yet be oblivious to their own jealousy!

To accept we are jealous is to realise we are defining ourselves as inferior! That's hard on self-esteem. Indeed, we can even be in such denial that we project our jealousy onto them and fool ourselves into thinking that they are the ones who are jealous of us!

One of the blessings of the noting technique in our practice is that it can make us acknowledge this difficult attitude.

The antidote to all of this is appreciative or empathetic joy, *mudita*. First, as soon as we catch ourselves indulging our jealousy, we stop the thinking and imagining and see if we can feel the emotional value of the attitude in the body. If we can, if there's time, we stay there feeling and acknowledging its unwholesome and very unpleasant feelings.

If there is no time or we cannot wait till the feelings exhaust themselves, then we put them to one side. Remember this is not suppressing them, but simply not identifying with them, not indulging them.

And we then rejoice in the successes of the other. When we feel envious of what another has or achieves, we can praise their work, rejoice in their luck. When jealousy is aroused, we can praise not just what they have achieved, but their abilities and characters. And then wish them greater success - even through gritted teeth!

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### **38. Unwholesome Karmic Results as Fate.**

Yung : *The psychological rule says that when an inner situation is not made conscious, it happens outside as fate. That is to say, when the individual remains divided and does not become conscious of his inner contradictions, the world must perforce act out the conflict and be torn into two opposite halves.*

How true!

The Buddha talks of anusāya, latent tendencies. These are lying underneath the obvious kilesa, defilements. We are not often aware of these subliminal attitudes and intentions.

One tell-tale that something is being acted out by us of which we are not totally aware or not aware of at all is when we fall repeatedly into a similar unfortunate or painful situation.

Consider the do-gooder who consciously wishes in her heart to do only good for you, yet is not aware that she is controlling the situation. That she actually only wants to do the good she wants to do for you because that is what makes her feel worthy and so happy. She is shocked at the ingratitude of the person she is helping who only feels constrained, not-heard and even bullied. She doesn't understand why the person gets so angry when all she is they are trying to do is help.

A man came on a retreat of mine while at Gaia. He came with a whole set of garden tools! It was difficult for the co-ordinators at the time to stop him doing what *he* wanted to do to the garden.

Consider the person who is always falling in love and a few months down the line finds himself dumped! What's really happening is that, after the honeymoon period, he starts to criticise and be cruel, unaware that when the relationship becomes too close he finds it smothering. Yet he is madly in love. Not being fully conscious he blames the other for oppressing him.

Not acknowledging that we feel insecure or angry or inferior we become sarcastic. Our sarcasm is actually funny to everyone else but the victim. Making people laugh gives us back our self-worth, but mysteriously friends begin to avoid us.

If we look into our lives and see negative patterns, it may be time to have a hard look at our attitudes instead of blaming others or the situation.

In meditation, using the noting technique, if we remain sharp and perceptive we may catch surfacing into our day-dreamings these very latent tendencies.

In this way we can bring the fate of inner contradictions, so clearly expressed by Yung, to an end.

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### 39. Ideology leads to strife.

The Buddha had this to say of opinions: a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a writhing of views, a fetter of views. MN 2.8

When Master Kaccana was asked by a Brahmin why ascetics fight ascetics, he answered:

'It is because of attachment to views, adherence to views, fixation on views, addiction to views, obsession with views, holding firmly to views that ascetics fight with ascetics.'

(AN 2:iv,6 - Bhikkhu Bodhi: In the Buddha's Words.

A view in this sense is a tightly held belief, substantiated by personal experience and rational thinking. And it has three components which make it rock like.

The first is the wrong view itself - *ditṭhi*. Take the three predominant ones of the previous century. The science of eugenics which pointed to the purification of the race, a central tenet of Nazism; the revolution against capitalism and rise of the doctrine of the ownership of the means of production by proletariat giving rise to communism; the present politico-economy of neoliberalism of a free market driven by 'natural' forces, with its stress on privatization, deregulation, fiscal austerity and free trade, that has led to the recent and ongoing economic collapse.

Added to this is the conceit - *māna*. I am right and everyone else is wrong. In fact, they are so wrong they need to be annihilated or at least ignored. When the 'I' becomes a 'we', social upheaval is in the making.

And the emotional attachment to it – *tanha*. Such is the devotion to a view that one is prepared to give up one's life, sacrifice one's own spouse and children for the cause.

All in all this is ideology. And you see it in all religions. The examples I gave above were all secular, but the present day worst religious example of this is Islamic fundamentalism.

What is the escape from this continual strife?

First, as to views and opinions, the Buddha did not say we should not have them. He had very clear view of what would help humanity, namely the Four Noble Truths.

However, whatever views or opinions we hold, let them be held lightly as perspectives that can be changed and nuanced by others. We don't need to identify with them or own them. It's just one view or opinion amongst many.

This demands humility which undermines conceit, for we may have misunderstood or only partially understood.

Although the Buddha pointed to a single 'right view' in terms of how to overcome suffering, as regards the practical matter of living in the world, some have said that he was a true pragmatist. **Whatever** works.

We can see this in how the Rule (Vinaya) for the Sangha was developed. He does not seem to have come from some sort of preconceived ideal, but as time passed and the behaviour of monastics seemed inappropriate, rules were established.

To give but one example. Lay people complained that monastics were coming at all times of the day on alms round and sometimes more than once! The Buddha established the rule that an alms round could only be done once in the morning and that all food had to be eaten by midday.

There is also the celebrated change of mind concerning women joining the order. He had refused the request from women of his own family and court. Ananda asked him if women could become liberated and if so should, should they not be given the same opportunity as men to join the order. The Buddha relented.

It's an interesting exercise to list all our views and opinions around religion, society, economy, and politics.

Then ask what makes me so sure I am right and the other is wrong?

How do I react when someone disagrees with me?

Have I really listened to the other with an open heart?

And, if you find you have no strong views, to ask: Do I need to put more energy into clarifying the beliefs that are guiding me through life? How might I do this?

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/Bitter Lake>

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#### **40. The Sacred: It's Meaning and the Role of Free Speech**

The Sacred is that which gives life its profoundest meaning. It tells us why we are living and – why we must die. For myself, this is the Buddhadhamma, the teachings and practice as taught by the Buddha. These provide my core values.

It is symbolised in the Wheel – originally a cart wheel. And the founder, teacher, exemplar and archetype is Siddhartha Gotama to whom we give the title, Buddha, the Awakened One. At first he was symbolised by a tree, an empty chair or footprints. But after 500 years, the Greeks who were the first Westerners to be converted to Buddhadhamma began producing statues.

The Sacred itself should not be confused with the way it is expressed through the speech and actions of human beings. For we are all deluded and our expressions are conditioned by history, culture and our personal experience.

Free speech and its companion, free expression have never been absolutes. Political correctness protects minorities and any expression inciting violence is illegal.

However, there are those who say that this freedom includes the right to insult. It is one thing to express our disagreement with another's views and actions with the intention to insult them. And another to follow the Buddha's own advice about Right Speech, that it should be kind, truthful and spoken/written at a suitable time. The purpose would be to persuade the other to change their minds. So rather than coming from the heart of angry arrogance raising only angry resistance from the other, the Buddha asks us to approach with humility - first understanding the other's position, then pointing out the errors and suggesting a different view.

The Prophet Mohammed is the founder, teacher, exemplar and archetype for over a billion Muslims. As in early Buddhism, his depiction in form is seen as a sacrilege – an offense against the Sacred. Whatever means cartoonists and political satirists have to lampoon, satirise and ridicule Islamists, turning the Prophet into a figure of fun does nothing but insult all Muslims. Not distinguishing the Sacred and its symbol from how it is used in this case has cost lives and it could even be argued that it is incitement to violence and therefore unlawful.

Buddhadhamma disavows all recourse to violence such is the commitment to harmlessness, though one is allowed to defend oneself. Even so the figure of the Buddha is often abused. At Bamiyam, the great statues were exploded by the Taliban. At a more banal level is the use of the image for commercial reasons. The Buddha in the lying posture used to advertise BA flights to USA that now offer beds. There is also a Buddha Bar and, of course, Buddha statues as pretty garden gnomes. And Buddha statues have even been used in pornography. There was a case of this in Thailand which scandalised the whole country.

Here Buddhists may feel somewhat constrained. To complain may seem an expression of attachment and to get angry a sign of weakness. But I see no problem in asking people to respect what others consider sacred. Respect after all is but a facet of love. Only the most cynical materialists will fail to respond, paradoxically wanting their own views to be respected.

So this is a good moment to ask ourselves:

What does 'the sacred' mean to me?

Do I hold anything sacred?

How should I respond to someone who shows no respect for what I hold sacred?

Personal Experience:

I was in a new-agey nick-knack shop and a small statue of the Buddha was on the floor by the door. I told the assistant who I was and how offended Buddhists would be to see a Buddha statue on the floor where it could be kicked even inadvertently. I suggested he could place it up on a shelf. When I went in next time it had been moved.

We bought some toilet cleaning material it had the Buddha image on it. I phoned Tesco. The assistant said she would contact the manufacturers.

Even if the statue was sold and the assistant simply raised her eyebrows and put the phone down, slowly but surely the message might get across that there are somethings that need to be respected.

An excellent book on this which I found most useful, covering all sensitive issues is the small:

Free Speech: A Very Short Introduction (Very Short Introductions) by Nigel Warburton

## Work

### 01. 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.

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## 02. 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!

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### 03. 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?

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#### **04. 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!

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## 05. 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*.

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## 06. 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?

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## Seeking True Happiness

### 01. Not an Emotion

When you say you are happy, what do you mean?

However you define happiness, are you referring to a mood or emotion?

A mood would be a present disposition and it stays around for a while. It may be caused by some good fortune that has come your way. A distant relative has died and to your surprise has left you quite a bit of money. Or it may be that something you had been striving or hoping for had actually materialised. You had applied for a job and you had succeeded.

An emotion is something more transient. To cheer yourself up, you go for a walk in the country towards a pub (for tea, of course!) or local park where they serve teacake and decent coffee. You are feeling good so you visit someone. You want to do something exciting so you take flying lessons.

But there is obviously a great flaw in this for it cannot be maintained. It is by nature transient, impermanent and, therefore, unreliable.

But worse! For when I say 'I' am happy, that is how I am defining myself. So that when 'I' am *not* happy, I start wondering why. I start blaming myself or others or society for my inability to be happy.

I may feel that happiness is how I ought to be, that it's how everyone ought to be. That it's 'natural'. That it's 'unnatural' to be unhappy. Suddenly it's writ large in national declarations and international treaties – the 'pursuit of human happiness'. It's become a 'right'!

Unfortunately this just adds more striving with the potential of more frustration. The happier we *try* to be, the more unhappy we seem to get!"

Happy moods and happy emotions are all right in themselves. But will they ever give the sort of substantial happiness that our hearts seek?

If we can appreciate these transient experiences and not try to re-create them or better them, then they will stand on their own as delightful times to be delighted in.

To be able to say goodbye to a happy mood or emotion is to liberate ourselves from a psychological dependency.

When there is no psychological 'need' for such states, we will enjoy them the more. This is the meaning of non-attachment.

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## 02. Relationships

Our lives are spent mainly in the company of the others *and doing things*. If we can rate our happiness by our relationships, perhaps we are on a surer footing.

When people enter into a relationship, it always has some purpose beyond the present gratification. It has a long term aim. It may be a simple friendship – friends who meet to shop, to walk, to talk. Some may form a partnership to set up a business, or a charity. It may be quite a small enterprise or just getting together to help someone.

We may form deeper relationships as partners and spouses, as parents and guardians of children. These are much longer term commitments.

Such relationships are never ‘happy’ from start to finish. After the first flush of joy, the work starts to ‘make it work’. And at times it can be very difficult as we find the other has different ideas, different aims and so on. When it comes to marriage, two out of three fail. Some may judge this as a measure of our ‘broken society’. But considering how difficult it is for individuals to be together, we should instead marvel that so many continue lifelong.

Working with the other through difficult patches makes for a deeper relationship. The deeper our relationships, the more nourishing they are.

The Buddha tells us that sometimes we do things that are good for ourselves, at other times, good for others and at others good both for ourselves and others.

On a visit to a small group of three monks, the Buddha asks the head monk how it is they live so peacefully with each other. Ven. Kassapa replies that every morning he says to himself, ‘What if I put aside what I want to do and do what the others want to do.’

We can see the wisdom in this approach. It allows us to loosen our grip on tightly held plans and ideas and allows the other to feel free to express theirs. Of course, for this to work, all involved must have the same attitude.

This is such a wonderful skilful means the Buddha offers us. To put aside what we want to do until we have found out what the other/s wants to do, is an act of generous love.

Even at times when we have to agree to differ, this attitude supports co-operation and undermines resentment.

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### 03. Being Good rather than Being Good At

It seems as though obituaries have changed. Where once they would talk of a person's qualities with examples, they now only mention what the person 'did'. Achievements rate the person rather than character. The consequence is that we come to believe that those who have been successful in the world – fame, riches and power – are necessarily *good* people. Yet we know today's culture favours the bully, the callous entrepreneur, the ones who can muscle their way to the top.

Whether we like it or not, it will affect the way we think about ourselves. If we have to judge ourselves by our achievements, the work we do, our status, then I should think very few of us are satisfied. We are into the game of comparison. This leads to great effort to 'prove oneself'. This, in turn, leads to envy and jealousy of others. In all, we may end up being successful in the eyes of the world, but our hearts will be in turmoil.

If our hearts are polluted with all the negativity that comes from aggressive competitiveness, keeping up with the Jones' and so on, this cannot be conducive to happiness, to an inner sense of worthiness. We never feel ourselves to be quite good enough.

In the Discourse on Blessings, the Mangala Sutta, as well as such social qualities such as being 'well educated and skilled, a highly trained discipline', the Buddha lists such qualities as: generosity, ethical conduct, blameless actions, reverence, humility, contentment, gratitude, patience, gentleness self-discipline ... these are the Highest Blessing.

*Whose mind does not flutter by contact  
with worldly contingencies, theirs is sorrowless, stainless, and secure.*

It's not that what we do doesn't matter. Far from it. What we do is an expression of our attitudes and the intentions that arise out of them.

However, if we put the accent on our attitude and intention, making sure they are wholesome, and then do the deed, that deed will enhance our feeling of goodness. And the deed, no matter how well done, will not carry negative undertones.

If a person is skilful in doing something, and yet they carry about with them a negative attitude, they may very well be chosen to do the jobs, but they won't make many friends.

So if we want to feel good about ourselves - and want people to feel good about us – all we need do is get the attitude right.

Next time you are doing something whether for yourself, for a friend or at work, just stop before you do and ask yourself, 'What is the underlying attitude that is accompanying the work?' If it's negative, put it to the side. Park it. And put a wholesome attitude into your heart. If it feels false, that's ok. It can take a while for the emotional heart to catch up. Then do the work.

Hum the old song - T'ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it. (Ella Fitzgerald)

Right Attitude leads to Right intention, leads to Right Action, leads to a feeling of goodness within which is also a form of happiness.

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#### **04. What's wrong with a bit of attachment!**

Attachment is one of those hackneyed words that crop up over and over again in Buddhist literature. They used to talk about being 'detached', but that sounded really hard and cold. So now you will read 'non-attached'. The word they are referring to is *taṇha* which is usually translated as 'clinging'. It all refers to a type of relationship we have with the world. The world as we experience it through the senses and the mind.

Now we always have to remember that the Buddha's teaching is only concerned with suffering and unsatisfactoriness and the end of it. The end of it is happiness. So we could say that the Dhamma is all about attaining happiness. But that would be wrong. Indeed that's what the Buddha, before his liberation from suffering was trying to do, either by way of ecstatic mental states or self-mortification.

But the fact of the matter is that happiness is always there. It simply needs to be discovered. That thick sticky layer of attachment has to go and lo and betide, there's happiness – and it has been there all the time.

Happiness here refers to any amount of quiet joy, resonating compassion, warm love or sublime equanimity. And for this to appear from beneath the suffering and unsatisfactoriness of life all we have to do is drop the attachment. Yes, of course, easier said than done. But we will do it once we realise that is *the* cause of suffering. The Buddha's the Second Noble Truth: the cause of suffering and unsatisfactoriness is *taṇha*.

Attachments mean that we believe that our happiness is dependent on something or someone. It causes us to cling to it and defend it against loss. While we are indulging ourselves, there's no problem. It's a sensual Nibbana. Consider how we 'lose ourselves' in a film, in a hobby, in our work, in food, in sex and in romantic love.

But what happens when we can't get what we want? Is there not frustration? Is there not grief should we lose our delight? Is there not an abiding anxiety of possible loss, of fear of someone or something taking it away? And there's the compulsive need, the overbearing habit demands gratification. We are truly enslaved. And then we get fed up with it. We get bored and then have to go in search of another excitement. If greed fuels the consumerist society, the escape from boredom is the unacknowledged accelerator.

So the first thing to do to rid ourselves of this suffering is to contemplate these facts till they really sink in. And even then keep contemplating them.

Then at the beginning and end of every delightful experience, acknowledge it has arisen and passed away and will never return. It is more dead than Monty Python's parrot.

And finally, the Buddha advises us to develop the attitude of 'no preference'.

'How do you like your tea?'

'As it comes.'

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## **05. Sacrifice : the more we give, the greater the return.**

Sacrifice comes from two Latin words – sacer : sacred and facere : to make. One sacrifices to a god to propitiate the deity or to ask a favour. At the time of the Buddha, there were huge ritual slaughters of horses and cattle in the King's sacrifice. Abraham offered his son to the harsh desert God who softened. Christ is said to be the 'blood of the lamb', the sacrifice of his own life for the benefit of all human beings. Sacrifice then is an offering of something we treasure for a higher cause. It is the point where generosity demands great courage and conviction. 'No greater gift has man than to offer his life for another'.

It is said of arahats, those who are fully liberated, that they engender an inestimable field of merit. The power of their goodness is limitless. This is the meaning of puñña, merit. Just the very fact that they have arrived at that station of non-suffering, Nibbana, makes real the aim for all. Once Everest was conquered, it becomes climbable. To become fully liberated we have to give up everything - eventually. And we are asked to give up everything on a promise. We don't know what the outcome will be. We trust on hearsay. However, we do gain confidence as the Path becomes clearer through our practice. But it is always going to be in the end a leap of faith. A faith that sacrificing everything we treasure will bring a boundless return.

Few have the qualities it takes to go give up everything immediately as did the \*Bodhisatta when he left home. This is why it is called the Great Renunciation. And it is so called because it was a personal quest. However, at the point of the Great Doubt, as it is put metaphorically, Mara, the Evil One, approached and asked him who he thought he was to seek such a goal as full liberation. When the Bodhisatta then called upon the Earth Goddess to witness his right, it was the Parami, the Perfection of Generosity she says that gave him the right to seek full liberation. What had been Renunciation now became Sacrifice for he was no longer doing it for himself but for all humankind.

So let's start small. There are so many causes in the world that we can give something up for. There are all the spiritual charities that aim to heal our deepest dis-ease. There are all the social charities to alleviate suffering. There are all the charities that try and do something about the enormous suffering we cause animals by way of greed. And there's mother earth. What will we sacrifice for her?

Letting go of something we really treasure is hard. It may be wealth or time. Even the situation we are in at present may call upon us. Parents are often called upon to make sacrifices for their children. Children called upon to look after ageing parents. These are also paths to liberation.

Every time we give something that demands a sacrifice we are preparing ourselves for the greatest of all sacrifices: letting go of any hope of achieving a lasting happiness in the sensual world. Only when we have accomplished this can the greater happiness arrive.

There's a saying in Italian 'che va piano va lontano' – who goes slow, goes far.

\*Bodhisatta in Theravada Buddhism is someone who determines to become a fully self-enlightened Buddha. There are said to be four such monks in Sri Lanka at this present time.

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## 06 Not what we believe, but how we live.

The Buddha warned his followers not to get caught up in 'debates'. In his day, these were very popular it seems. Every full moon, in the bright glow of the cool tropical evening, people gathered at the shrines to hear religious teachers.

Their views conflicted. There were materialist annihilationists, much as the atheists of today, and there were eternalists, much in the same way as present day 'believers'.

Talking about speculative beliefs, whether it is the materialist atheist who reduces everything to chemicals or the religionist belief in life everlasting, he warns us not to get caught up in 'a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a vacillation of views, a fetter of views.' M.2.8

The debates between religion and science tend to be about provable facts.

Neurobiologists say that because certain parts of the brain light up and certain chemicals function as we experience emotions, that therefore these *are* emotions. But no-one experiences emotions as electro-chemical happenings. Believers and the Buddha talk of a soul, a subtle body, the mind-made body. Only those who have had such an experience can be sure of it. And then how are they going to prove it?

If religion is about beliefs, statements of facts, then all we will do is repeat the well-worn arguments of 'experts'.

In the Sutta Nipata, one of the earliest collection of the Buddha's Sayings he says 'The one who is full of rigid views, puffed up with pride and arrogance, who deems himself 'perfect' (expert), becomes anointed in his own opinion ...' SN IV.12.12

When I became interested in Buddhism, I wasn't in search of a belief, but of a methodology that would help me out of the hole I'd got myself into. What was said, of course, made sense. But it was what I 'did', that led me to commit myself to Buddhadhamma. Such questions about rebirth and Nibbana weren't important to me. I left them to stew. Maybe in time I'd find out. What mattered was how the practice of meditation and moment to moment mindfulness was revolutionising my life. And this of course meant to understand how I was creating my own suffering.

The Buddha eschews philosophical or metaphysical questions. He's not concerned as to *why* we suffer. I think it would have been of little interest to him to know about Darwin's theory of evolution. How does it make life more meaningful, knowing we are biologically descended from early mammals? It may as well have been a potato. Or knowing that our psychology is based on early human experience as hunter gatherers? Since when did life become any safer?

Religion is about how we live. This is dependent on our understanding. But it's what we do that gives this understanding an experiential meaningfulness. Knowing all about mountain climbing is one thing. Actually climbing one is something else.

So the question is, 'What am I *doing* that is making my life more meaningful; what more meaningless?'

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## **07. Towards the Greatest Happiness.**

Very occasionally when I talk to someone about the Buddha's teaching and how it's all about bringing an end to suffering, they will say, 'But I am happy!' What they don't see is that their happiness is dependent on conditions and circumstance.

Someone said to me once, when we were talking about spiritual happiness, that he got it all from music. I didn't ask at the time, and I regret not doing so, 'What happens if you go deaf?'

The Buddha points to a way of being which is a happiness not dependent on conditions or circumstance. He calls this Nibbana (in Sanskrit Nirvana). And he says we are in its presence or in its vicinity when we are mindful! In other words, Nibbana is staring us in the face, but we don't see it.

This is the importance of vipassana practice. Every time we sit in meditation in this way, we make an object of everything we are experiencing. This means the locus of the self, that self-awareness, feels itself to be other than what it is experiencing.

If it is other than what it is experiencing then it can't *be* the sensations and feelings that come from the body, nor the emotions and moods the heart offers, nor the thoughts and images that pop into the mind.

What's it like when we are hovering like this amidst the all – all that we are experiencing? This is something we can reflect upon within a sitting and at the end of it.

What we might say to ourselves is, 'So what?' It's not pleasant or unpleasant. It's not exciting in any way. It's dull. In fact I don't want to be like this all the time. I want to have some fun!'

These thoughts belong to Mara, the Enticer. This is our delusion in action. We are still bewitched by the kaleidoscopic pleasures of the sensory world. We still don't see the danger of it and the consequent suffering of attachment and indulgence.

In order to wean ourselves off the intoxication of 'the world', we need to develop a taste for stillness, for peacefulness – for silence.

In the country, nature is the great teacher, but in the city we need to make do. Sit by the window and watch the clouds, or take a walk at a quiet hour in the park or even down a road. Or just sit in position for no other reason than to allow the sensations of the breath to calm, to quieten, to develop our taste for serene stillness.

When that also loses its taste, we shall naturally seek the greater happiness – Nibbana.

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## Relationships

### **01. Relations, Friends, Acquaintances and Spiritual Companions**

#### **Cultivators of Patience.**

Our friendships rarely collapse in a moment. It takes time for the rot to creep in.

Look back now on a friendship, whether with a close relation, friend, acquaintance or spiritual companion, that went off or worse.

What were the initial strains? Where did the antagonism begin? Were we fully aware of it then? Or had it mushroomed unexpectedly into an argument? And after the argument was there an attempt at reconciliation? Was that really heart felt? Or was it a patch? A patch through which in time the sore began again to fester.

Had you put yourself out for someone and they had not returned the favour when you needed them? Or was it you who had not come to their aid?

Had they spoken a sharp word, a judgement, a dig which you took in good part? But they kept doing it. Little snidey remarks that finally got under your skin. Or were you the one doing that and didn't realise that your sarcasm was actually hurting, because they laughed.

Was it a growing clash of opinions that at first were agreeing to differ, but then got a little edgy until excuses were made and meetings stopped?

Was there envy which over time gathered an aversion towards the person and progressed into jealousy? Were you aware that it was jealousy and not that you just didn't like them anymore? Or was it that they were jealous of you and that you knew it, but didn't know how to work with it?

Did a friend overstep a boundary, become too familiar? Presume. How did you react? Were you brusque? Did you get angry with them? Or was it you suddenly finding yourself 'told off'.

I was once lodging with a longtime friend. He was on the telephone to his daughter. I had told him I was waiting for a phone call. As the time got closer, I shouted to remind him. Unfortunately, maybe because of my anxiety around losing the call, it sounded like a command. Well, that took a while to iron out. I

What about your spiritual teacher? Did you have a bad time with them? Are you still blaming them? Or if you took the role of guiding someone, are you truthful about the role you played in the breakup?

Contemplating lost friendships is important for we are creatures of habit and tend to make the same mistakes over and over until we 'wake up'.

Once we recognise what the mechanisms in us are that undermine friendships, whether they are our own characteristics or our reaction to such characteristics in others, we can become aware of the first signs and train ourselves to stop – even in mid-sentence – establish the appropriate attitude of goodwill.

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## **02. Contemplating Relations, Friends, Acquaintances and Spiritual Companions**

### **Fountains of Joy.**

How varied our relationships are! And how we change in the presence of others according to how we feel the circumstance demands. And if we accept the limitation of certain relationships, they are all causes for joy.

Relations can be difficult. There is often family history to contend with. Just because we happen to share genes doesn't mean we will get on. There are so many other factors. But contemplating that shared family history may give relations a depth even deeper than close friendships. I was surprised how close I felt to a cousin of mine dying from pulmonary embolism even though we had hardly seen each other since childhood. The closer the relation – parents and siblings as opposed to cousins and distant cousins – the deeper can be our commitment to their well-being.

Friends, from close lifelong companions to social, political, work related, hobby co-enthusiasts and so on – all fill important roles in our lives. They help us develop our personalities and characters as we meld with their varied personalities and characters in the process of sharing the interests that drive us.

And on the outer reaches, our friendships shade into acquaintances which given circumstance can grow into friendships.

But of all friendships it is spiritual friendship that is to be most treasured and celebrated for they are helping us to realise the deepest goals of our lives.

Ananda, the Buddha's companion for the last twenty years of his life, would often have only partial understanding. One day, he offered the opinion that good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship is half the spiritual life. Good here does not mean like. One of the liberating qualities of a spiritual friend is that you don't have to like them!

No, no, the Buddha tells him. It is the entirety of the spiritual life. For if we have good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship, then we can expect to cultivate the Eightfold Path because of that support. (SN 45:2)

How important is that!

So after each meeting with a relation, a friend, an acquaintance or a spiritual companion, pause for a moment, appreciate the treasure, allow gratitude to arise and savour the joy.

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### 03. Intimate Relationships: The Erotic, the Romantic and Love

The erotic is truly pleasurable. There is something about fleshy pleasures – eating, drinking, sex, swimming and so on which have a groundedness that is palpable in a way that mental states are not. So much so that the erotic can be isolated from romantic feelings and love. It is choosy and wants only what conventionally conforms to physical beauty or as near as can without slipping into disgust. It becomes self-seeking and in so doing turns the other into an object to gratify its lust. Lust is sexual greed and like greed consumes the other or wishes to be consumed. The other as commodity. Hence obsession and pornography and when mixed with darker motives sexual crime, some of which sinks into insanity.

Romance is the eroticism of the heart. It is the touching of two personalities. It is equally choosy, but unlike sexual activity which is usually too short, the flight of romantic feelings can tinge days with kaleidoscopic delight. To be in the beloved's company, indeed to even bring them to mind, jets the lover into the seventh heaven. And such is the sweetness of it, that this also becomes a self-seeking aim. Again the other becomes an object, a commodity, to be consumed in or by. And it blinds to the fuller personality of the beloved, which when it peaks through the gossamer veil, punctures and often utterly deflates. If unrequited, it then turns vengeful, at times crimes of passion or despair to suicide.

Love roots itself in the personhood of the other. In their humanity in all its fullness. Their beingness. It reaches beyond the pleasurable or the delightful to a commitment that may demand sacrifice. For better and *for worse*, for richer and *for poorer*, in health and *in sickness*. And it has no time restriction. *To love and cherish till death do us part*. Indeed, time passing is not important, only time present. So no matter what the relationship – girlfriend, boyfriend, partner or spouse - it is a renewed commitment from moment to moment. Difficult!

It is only when both are embedded in love can the erotic and romantic play their roles of full-filling at times the whole intimate relationship with physical pleasure and heart's delight.

So it doesn't matter what sort of relationship you are in – boyfriend, girlfriend, partner or spouse.

## Celibacy

To coin a Churchillian phrase: some are born celibate, some have celibacy thrust upon them and some grow into celibacy. (Churchill had said this of greatness.)

In more religious times and even now in Buddhist countries, a woman may boast she is still a virgin. And a man is not considered any less a man who joins the Sangha as a child or young teenager and never has any sexual encounter throughout their lives.

How strange to a Westerner. Sounds even perverse. A life without sex! But we fail to remember that the 'sexual revolution' of the 60's is not that long ago. And such has been the sexualising of our society – with easy pornography – that even children are caught up in lust - and themselves lusted.

No-one *needs* sex. It's not like food. And since sexual desire is probably our greatest driver, can you imagine the relief when you are no longer hounded by sexual cravings as someone with OCD may feel when relieved of their compulsion.

And can you imagine the energy released for other purposes?

For those who find themselves temporarily celibate, take the opportunity to find out how it feels when you let go of lustful thoughts. As with all acts of renunciation, you have to resist the fantasies and suffer the desire, feel it in the body, till the compulsive need exhausts itself completely to feel the release, the relief and the joy of liberation – even if only once!

And there is romance which blossoms often into an intimate relationship. This is also forsaken in celibacy. To someone seeking a greater love, such love is confining.

There are also all the other loves - parent and child, friend with friend, even spiritual friendships and so on – all will have some psychological dependency. This 'attachment' is not to be seen as evil, but unskilful. It has unwanted consequences. Such loves cannot be universal by definition.

True universal love arises when there are no particulars. And this can only be arrived at through relinquishing particulars.

The Buddha says our love should go out to the whole world, ourselves included, without any hatred or preference. In other words, whoever we meet within that given moment, whether we like them or not or whether they like us or not, they are focus of our goodwill.

Such will not be perfectly possible to do till the delusive sense of self which creates fences is taken down. But we can begin the process of dismantling them.

When we are with someone, let us give them our full attention with the desire to know where they are coming from, how they feel, what they are saying. And at the same time to be aware of the background of reactions and responses that arise within us. To develop an affectionate awareness. And respond from the heart of goodwill.

In this way we can all in given moments, unhindered by erotic, romantic or specific loves, be 'celibate'. For this is the reason for celibacy – to develop unhindered love.

Difficult!

*Ponderings:*

Why do you think the Buddha did not return to his family and the household life after his Enlightenment?

Why did he create a celibate institution, the monastic Sangha?  
How might you practice celibacy within a relationship?

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