

BEING NOBODY, GOING NOWHERE



Meditations on the Buddhist Path

Ayya Khema

WITH A NEW FOREWORD BY
ZOKETSU NORMAN FISCHER

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WISDOM PUBLICATIONS • BOSTON

Wisdom Publications
199 Elm Street
Somerville, MA 02144 USA
www.wisdompubs.org

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First published in 1987

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Khema, Ayya.

Being nobody, going nowhere : meditations on the Buddhist path /
Ayya Khema.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-86171-198-X (alk. paper)

1. Spiritual life—Buddhism.

BQ4302.K44 2001

294.3'444—dc21

2001026782

ISBN 0-86171-198-X
eBook ISBN 978-0-86171-972-3

14 13 12 11
9 8 7 6

Cover design by Graciela Galup. Interior by Gopa&Tedz, Inc. Set in Diacritical Gar-
mond 11.25/14 pt. Cover image © 2001 PhotoDisc, Inc.

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Printed in Canada.



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FOREWORD

AYYA KHEMA WAS A VERY UNLIKELY PERSON. A round little woman with a large-featured face topped with a carpet of close-cropped snow white hair, she embodied naturally and oddly all the contradictions of the twentieth century. She was an internationally known Buddhist teacher, and also a Jew who fled Nazi Germany. She was a San Diego housewife and grandmother, and also the founder of Dharma centers on several continents. She was a wandering hippie-vegetarian mom who had traveled all over the world in her Landrover. But she was also one of the few fully ordained Western Buddhist nuns and wrote scores of books on Buddhist meditation. Despite all this, in person, she was not awe inspiring. I think she did not see herself that way, and she did nothing to create an aura around her, although she was never shy about acknowledging her spiritual accomplishments. I always enjoyed her company and felt happy in her presence. Although she was my mother's age, she reminded me of my grandmother, another small round woman from Europe who had seen the world turn upside down. Maybe it was because of all this contradiction, all this breadth of living, that she seemed immune to the snares of orthodoxy and idealism that religious practitioners so often fall prey to. She had an enormous quality of cutting through: cutting through flattery, cutting through preconceptions, cutting through confusion, doctrine, desire, verbiage, complications. Maybe it takes a grandmother, a holocaust survivor, to appreciate what's really important and necessary for our lives, without sidetracks. Theravada Buddhism, with its practical emphasis on happiness, liberation from suffering, and technical path, was Ayya's perfect vehicle. She seemed made for it.

The Western Buddhist movement is already several steps down the road from its naive beginnings, in which alienated Westerners strove mightily to replace their own painful conditioning with an idealized Asian perspective. Along the way, many complications have necessarily been introduced. How could they not be? Along with an ever increasing body of new translations of and commentaries on traditional teachings, we have also now a considerable body of interpretative and critical material, so that now there is no Western Buddhism without reference to psychology, ecology, feminism, social action, science, critical philosophy, all our postmodern insight and trouble.

While I am sure that all of this is necessary and helpful, it also makes things murky sometimes. Ayya was never murky. She was definite, clear, precise, discriminating, and she had very little patience for anything extra. I think she felt she did not have the time for it. Certainly she had no interest. Having seen and suffered as much as she had, with such a cheerful and enduring spirit, she just wanted to get on with things. She always cut to the chase, without whining or poetic elaboration. Her teaching was pungent and to the point, as this book attests. Here she takes up the most important basic teachings in a fresh and direct way, without traditional trappings, but with the original spirit intact: What does this actually mean? How can it actually help? In what way can it be put into practice? To protestations of the difficulty and hardship of practice Ayya always responds, “It’s simple; it’s clear; you can do it. Yes it takes discipline; yes you have to be serious—there’s no escape from that. But you can do it, and when you do, you will be grateful for it.”

I met Ayya late in her life, when she already had cancer and knew her days were numbered. She spoke about this, as about almost anything that would come up in conversation, freely and without mysteriousness. Death would be fine when it came; there was no problem about that. And meanwhile there was much work to be done. Peacefully and without worry. Why Dharma students were so complicated and confused about so many things she simply could not understand. She was patient with it but I think never stopped marveling at it, uncomprehendingly. The teachings are so clear and straightforward, so easy to put into practice. What is all this fuss about?

Ayya was a person who had, by force of circumstances, always moved on. Because of this she had had from her earliest years, a powerful appreciation

of impermanence and nonattachment. She embodied these qualities authentically and spoke of them convincingly. Even after her ordination as a nun and her establishment as a teacher, she continued to be a person on the move, always on to the next event, the next place, the next student, the next teaching, the next moment. That she is gone now is therefore no surprise and no tragedy. She saw leaving simply as the next step in the process. We, who do not yet seem to be gone, are lucky to have her written teachings, which are so useful and so bracing. Through them her voice lives on.

Zoketsu Norman Fischer
San Francisco, California

PREFACE

THIS IS A SIMPLE BOOK for ordinary people who want to find greater happiness and contentment in their lives by following a spiritual path. The Buddha's path is simple and meant for ordinary people; anyone with goodwill and determination can follow its steps toward freedom of heart and mind. Both heart and mind have to be involved in this journey toward liberation from the "self." The mind understands and concludes, connects and discerns, whereas the heart feels.

When our feelings become free of emotional reactions and dwell in love and compassion as their natural abode, our mind will be open to the great truths of universal significance. And the more we refer to these truths, the closer we will get to spiritual emancipation. Hopefully this book can help to point out some steps on the way, according to the Buddha's teaching, and facilitate the journey.

A ten-day meditation course in Kundasale, Sri Lanka, was the venue for the talks that are published here. Although my name appears as the author, this book could never have been assembled without the help and support of many people, each making their own special contribution.

The students on the course provided the impetus for the talks, and their questions occasioned many of the points mentioned. Stanley Wijegunawardena was the manager and convener of the course and without him this book would not have been possible.

Barbara Raif transcribed the tapes and Sister Sanghamittā typed the first edited version. Sister Vayāmā proofread the manuscript. Katja and Amāra looked after my physical well-being, and Helga gave me massages and moral support.

All the supporters in Sri Lanka, especially Mr. Arthur de Silva, made

it possible for me to have the peace and quiet in my hut to attend to this book.

How can I show my gratitude? If this book helps even one person to find their path to freedom, the effort will have been amply rewarded.

Ayya Khema
Parappuduwa Nuns Island
Dodanduwa, Sri Lanka
October, 1985

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MEDITATION—WHY AND HOW

WHY IS MEDITATION SO IMPORTANT? You must have realized that it is, otherwise you wouldn't be reading this. I'd like to emphasize that meditation is not just something extra to be done in our spare time, but is essential for our well-being.

One of our human absurdities is the fact that we're constantly thinking about either the future or the past. Those who are young think of the future because they've got more of it. Those who are older think more about the past because, for them, there is more of it. But in order to experience life, we have to live each moment. Life has not been happening in the past. That's memory. Life is not going to happen in the future. That's planning. The only time we can live is now, this moment, and as absurd as it may seem, we've got to learn that. As human beings with life spans of sixty, seventy, or eighty years, we have to learn to actually experience living in the present. When we have learned that, we will have eliminated a great many of our problems.

How simple it sounds; how difficult it is. Anyone who has been trying knows that. Those of you who haven't tried yet will certainly find out. Such a simple premise and not at all easy to do. There's no other way to learn to live each moment except through meditation. Meditation has other aspects and facets that also help us to do that.

We are all quite able and efficient in looking after our bodies. We wash them at least once a day, probably even more often. We go out with clean clothes. We rest our bodies at night. Everyone has a bed. We wouldn't be able to stand up to the strain of living if we didn't also rest. We have a house where we shelter the body from rain, wind, sun, the heat, and the cold. We wouldn't be able to function well otherwise. We

feed the body with healthy nourishment, not with anything that we would consider poison. We give it the food we consider good for us, and we exercise it. At least we walk. If we didn't, our legs would atrophy and we could no longer use them. Exactly the same has to be done for the mind.

In fact it's even more important because the mind is the master and the body is the servant. The best servant in perfect condition, young, strong, and vigorous, having a weak and dissolute master who doesn't know what to do, will not be able to work satisfactorily. The master has to direct the servant. Even when the servant isn't so strong and vigorous, if the master is efficient and wise, the household will still be in order.

This mind and body is our household. If this inner household is not in order, no outer household can be in order. The one we live and work in is dependent on the order that we have created in our own inner household. The master, the one in charge, has to be in the best possible condition.

Nothing in the whole universe is comparable to the mind or can take its place. Everything is mind-made. Yet we all take our minds for granted, which is another absurdity. No one takes the body for granted. When the body gets sick, we quickly run to the doctor. When the body gets hungry, we quickly feed it. When the body gets tired, we quickly rest it. But what about the mind? Only the meditator looks after the mind.

Looking after the mind is essential if life is to grow in depth and vision. Otherwise life stays two-dimensional. Most lives are lived in the realities of yesterday and tomorrow, good and bad, "I like it" and "I don't like it," "I'll have it" and "I won't have it," "this is mine and this is yours." Only when the mind is trained can we see other dimensions.

The first thing we need to do with the mind is wash it, clean it up, not only once or twice a day as we do for the body but in all our waking moments. In order to do that, we have to learn how. With the body it's very simple, we use soap and water. We learned to do that when we were small. Mind can only be cleansed by mind. What the mind has put in there, the mind can take out. One second of concentration in meditation is one second of purification because, luckily, the mind can only do one thing at a time. Although, as the Buddha said, we can have three thousand mind-moments in the blink of an eyelid, we don't usually

have that many and we don't have them all at once. Mind-moments follow each other in quick succession but only one at a time.

When we concentrate, the five hindrances, our defilements, don't get a chance to arise because the mind can only do one thing at a time. And as we get better at enlarging our periods of concentration, the mind gets cleansed of its rough spots.

Our mind, that unique tool in all the universe, is the only one we have. If we owned a fine tool we would obviously look after it. We'd polish it and remove any rust. We'd sharpen it, we'd oil it, and we'd rest it from time to time. Here we have this marvelous tool with which everything can be accomplished, including enlightenment, and it's up to us to learn to look after it. It won't function properly otherwise.

During meditation we learn to drop from the mind what we don't want to keep. We only want to keep in mind our meditation subject. As we become more and more skilled at it, we start to use the same faculty in our daily lives to help us drop those thoughts that are unwholesome. In this way our meditation practice assists us in daily living and our attention to wholesome thoughts in everyday life helps our meditation practice. The person who becomes master of his or her own thoughts and learns to think what he or she wants to think is called an *arahant*, an enlightened one.

Don't be surprised if this letting go of thoughts doesn't work all the time; it will surely function some of the time. It is an immense release and relief when one can think, even for one moment, what one wants to think, because then one has become master of the mind instead of the mind being the master of oneself. Being involved in whatever thoughts arise, unhappy or happy ones, in constant flux and flow—this is what we learn to drop when we manage to stay on the meditation subject.

Our second step is exercising the mind. An untrained mind is like a wavering, fluctuating mass that runs from one subject to the next and finds it very difficult to stay in one spot. You have probably had the experience when reading a book of coming to the end of a page and, realizing you don't know what you've just read, having to read the whole page over again. The mind has to be pushed to stay in one spot, like doing push-ups, like weightlifting, developing muscles in the mind. Strength can only come from exercising the mind to do exactly what one wants it to do, to stand still when one wants it to stand still.

This also creates power in the mind because it's connected with renunciation, with letting go. All of us, not being arahants, have sizeable egos. The "me" and "mine" syndrome and "if you please, I'll keep it and you stay out" attitudes create all the world's problems. We can only be sure that the ego is affirmed when we're thinking, talking, reading, seeing a movie, or using the mind in the interests of ego. The great renunciation that arises in meditation is to drop all thoughts. When there's nobody thinking, there's no ego confirmation.

To start with, dropping thoughts will only be possible momentarily, but it is a step in the right direction. The spiritual path is all about letting go. There is nothing to achieve or gain. Although these words are used frequently, they are only ways of expressing ourselves. In reality a spiritual path is a path of renunciation, letting go, constantly dropping all we have built up around ourselves. This includes possessions, conditioned habits, ideas, beliefs, thinking patterns. It is difficult to stop thinking in meditation because that would be like renunciation, and it is a moment when the ego doesn't have any support. When it happens for the first time, the mind immediately reacts with, "Oh, what was that?"—and then, of course, one is thinking again.

To be able to keep the mind in one spot creates mind muscles, gives the mind strength and power. The teaching of the Buddha is profound and extraordinary, and only a profound and extraordinary mind can actually understand the inner vision of what he meant. Therefore we need to train the mind toward that goal.

The body's strength makes it possible to accomplish what we set out to do with the body. The mind's strength makes it possible to do the same with the mind. A strong mind does not suffer from boredom, frustration, depression, or unhappiness—it has learned to drop what it doesn't want. Meditation practice has given it the necessary muscles.

The mind, being the most valuable and intricate tool in the universe, also needs a rest. We have been thinking ever since we were very small and innumerable lifetimes before that.

All day we think, all night we dream. There isn't a moment's rest. We may go on holiday, but what goes on holiday? The body goes on holiday. It might go to the beach, to the seaside or the mountains, or to a different country, but what about the mind? Instead of thinking about

the work one has to do at home, one thinks about all the sights, sounds, and tastes at the new place. The mind isn't getting a holiday. It just thinks about something else.

If we didn't give the body a rest at night, it wouldn't function very long. Our mind needs a rest too, but this can't be had through sleeping. The only time the mind can have a real rest is when it stops thinking and starts only experiencing. One of the similes used for the mind is a blank screen on which a continuous film is shown without intermission. Because the film—the constant play of thoughts—is continuous, one forgets that there has to be a screen behind on which to project it.

If we stop that film for a moment in meditation we can experience the basic purity of our mind. That is a moment of bliss—a moment that brings the kind of happiness not available anywhere else, through anything else, a happiness that is independent of outer conditions. It's not unconditioned, but conditioned only by concentration. It's not dependent upon good food or climate, entertainment or the right relationships, other people or pleasant responses or possessions, all of which are totally unreliable and cannot be depended upon because they are always changing. Concentration is reliable if one keeps practicing.

Once verbalization stops for a moment, not only is there quiet but there is a feeling of contentment. The mind has at last found its home. We wouldn't be very happy if we didn't have a home for this body of ours. We are equally not very happy if we don't have a home for the mind. That quiet, peaceful space is the mind's home. It can go home and relax just as we do after a day's work when we relax the body in an easy chair and at night in a bed. Now the mind, too, can take it easy. It doesn't have to think. Thinking is suffering, no matter what it is that we think. There is movement in it, and because of that, there is friction. Everything that moves creates friction.

The moment we relax and rest the mind, it gains new strength and also happiness because it knows it can go home at any time. The happiness created at the time of meditation carries through to daily living because the mind knows that nothing has to be taken so seriously that it can't go home again and find peace and quiet.

These are the main reasons why life can never be fulfilling without meditation. It may bring outer conditions that are enjoyable, but the fulfillment that one gets from inner conditions has more scope. The

letting go, the renunciation, brings insight, namely the understanding that the ego is constantly wanting and therefore also wanting to think. When the ego stops wanting, it doesn't need to think. When the ego stops wanting, all unsatisfactoriness vanishes. This is why we should meditate. Now we'll look at the "how" of meditation.

We're going to employ mindfulness of our in-breath and out-breath. This is ideally experienced at the nostrils. Breath is wind, and, as it hits the nostrils, there's a feeling. That feeling helps us to focus at this small point. In the beginning it is difficult to do so.

Breath means life, and it is ideally suited as a meditation subject because we always have it with us, and we can't leave it anywhere else. Yet we take it for granted. We never take a good look at it unless we lose it—unless we choke, or drown, or suffocate. Then all of a sudden breath becomes important. But as long as we have it, we never think of it. Yet it means life, which is the dearest thing each one of us has. Breath is directly connected with the mind. When one is excited or in a hurry, the breath goes fast. When the mind becomes calm and tranquil, the breath becomes equally soft and tranquil. When the breath becomes so fine we can't find it, that's the moment when we actually enter into a concentrated state. Having the breath as one's meditation object is the training period for that. It's the only bodily function that is both self-regulating and subject to intention. We can make it deeper, longer, or shallower and even stop it altogether for some time.

There are many other methods of paying attention to the breath. We can follow the breath as far in and as far out as we become aware of it. Don't make the breath anything special, but just follow its course. This provides a wider base of attention. It is not as exact as keeping the mind at the nostrils, and therefore it's a little easier.

Or you can use breath plus a word, for instance, "Buddha." "Budd" on the in-breath, "ha" on the out-breath—breath plus syllable, both together. It's very effective for people to whom "Buddha" is meaningful.

You can also count the breaths: one on the in-breath, one on the out-breath, two on the in-breath, two on the out-breath—no less than five, no more than ten. When you reach ten, start at one again. Every time the mind wanders, start at one. In the beginning it doesn't matter if you don't get any further than one.

All minds are alike. You don't have to think: "I am especially unsuited for this." Who's "I" anyway? It's just an untrained mind as opposed to a trained one. Anyone who enters a marathon can run well and quickly if they have trained for it. It is silly to think, "I'm useless, I can't run fast," if you haven't trained for it.

Counting, saying "Buddha," attention at the nostrils, observation of the breath as far in and out as possible: find which method you feel most comfortable with and then stick to it. If you have practiced attention on the rise and fall of the abdomen and you have managed some concentration, then continue with that. Keep your legs in a position you can stay in for some time. The back should be straight but relaxed. Shoulders, stomach, and neck should be relaxed. When you find yourself slumping forward, sit up again. The same goes for the head. When you're aware of the head going down, bring it back up. Slumping and letting the head fall forward are postures of sleepiness, or at least drowsiness, the very opposite of meditation. Meditation needs total awareness.

You will probably find that the mind just won't stay on the breath no matter what you try, whether it's "Buddha" or "one-one, two-two" or whether you concentrate at the nostrils or follow the breath in and out. The mind just will not do it unless you've been practicing for some years. The thoughts—the projected movie—will be there. The way to work with that is to quickly label the thought, but if that is too difficult, just call it "thinking" or "confusion" or "remembering" or even "planning" or "nonsense." It doesn't matter. The minute you give it a label, you are stepping back to look at it. Unless you do that, you become the thinker and are totally distracted. You are at home worrying about the cat that might have gotten locked in the bedroom or about the children not getting their proper dinner. Whatever it may be, you're thinking and worrying about it, and it's all rationalized in the mind as "Yes, but I have to think about that." One doesn't have to think about anything when meditating. Life keeps on happening and doesn't need us to think about it. It's constantly arising and ceasing every single moment.

When thoughts arise, look at them, give them a name. Whether it's a correct label or not doesn't matter. Any label during meditation means the thought needs to be dropped. When you have learned to label in meditation, you will be able to label thought as wholesome, profitable, skillful, or otherwise, in daily living also. When you know it's not skillful

or wholesome, you can let go of it. You learn to think what you want to think and when one learns that, one need never be unhappy again. Only a fool becomes voluntarily unhappy.

This is the usefulness of labeling in everyday life, but in meditation it means that you have become mindful. This practice is all about mindfulness. The Buddha said: “The one way for the purification of beings, for the destruction of unsatisfactoriness, for entering the noble path, for realizing freedom from all suffering, is mindfulness.” Knowing “I’m thinking,” “I’m not meditating,” “I’m worrying,” “I’m anxious,” “I’m dreaming about the future,” “I’m hoping, wishing”; knowing only—then returning to the breath. If you are having a thousand thoughts, then give them a thousand labels. That is the way to real mindfulness. Knowing the thinking process as well as the contents of the thoughts. These are the foundations of mindfulness in action, the only way to liberation—when actually practiced.

Feelings of discomfort will arise because the body is sitting in a position it is not used to, but mainly because we are trying to keep the body still. The body never likes to be still for any length of time. Even if you have the most expensive mattress and are able to sleep well, the body moves many, many times during the night. It will not stay in the same position because it wants to alleviate its discomfort. The body is uncomfortable and so it moves, even though the mind is only dimly conscious during sleep. When we sit in meditation, the same thing happens. Discomfort arises. Instead of immediately trying to change one’s position, which is our habitual, spontaneous, impetuous reaction to pain, to all discomfort that arises, examine the situation. Become aware of the fact of how this has arisen. There is contact with the pillow, the floor, or with the other leg. From contact comes feeling. From feeling comes reaction. (This, by the way, is what keeps us in the cycle of birth and death. Our reactions to our feelings are our passport to rebirth.)

There are only three types of feeling: pleasant, neutral, and unpleasant. This one is unpleasant, so the mind says—“Ah, this is an unpleasant feeling called pain. I don’t like it and want to get away from it.” This is how we live every single day of our lives, from morning to night. We either run away from or push away whatever feels unpleasant, or we try to change the outer cause—anything to get rid of discomfort. Yet there is no way of getting rid of it until we have also gotten rid of craving.

Whatever we do with our bodies, whichever way we move them, there is sure to be discomfort again, because we're always craving comfort.

Watch the sequence: contact, feeling, reaction—"This is pain. I want to get away from it." Instead of trying to get away from it, put your full attention on the spot where the feeling is and become aware of its changing nature. The feeling will either change its location or its intensity. You may be able to become aware that in itself it's moving. It's not solid.

Please become aware of the fact that this body does not have suffering, but that it is suffering. Only then can we begin to fathom the reality of human suffering. It is not that we have some discomfort sometimes, but that this body consists of suffering. It can't sit or lie still without becoming uncomfortable. Know the impermanence. Know the unsatisfactoriness, which is inherent in the human body. Know the fact that the feeling has arisen without your invitation. So why call it "mine"? Learn these lessons from the unpleasant feeling and then move, if necessary, but don't move spontaneously. Move only after having examined why you are doing it. Move gently, mindfully, without disturbing yourself or your neighbor.

Sitting here, gritting your teeth and thinking, "I'm going to sit here, even though it's terrible. I hate it, but I'm going to do it" only creates a dislike for the whole situation and for meditation. It's just as much a reaction of the wrong kind as moving spontaneously. One is the greed for comfort and the other is the aversion to discomfort. They are two sides of the same coin. The only thing that makes any sense is insight into oneself and one's own reactions, and that brings results. Work with the feelings and thoughts as they arise. Watch both of them being totally impermanent. They arise and disappear, so why do you call them yours? Have you asked them to come? Surely not. You really came to meditate, didn't you? Yet there are all these thoughts. Do they belong to you? Isn't that suffering?

Impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, nonself are the three characteristics to be found in all that exists. Unless we identify them within ourselves, we will never know what the Buddha taught. Meditation is the way to find out. The rest are just words. This is the action.

MEDITATION AFFECTS OUR LIVES

THE CLEANING-UP PROCESS, the purification process I have talked about, takes place in the mind. But you will also find you need to remove some old debris that has accumulated in the body because of our psychological responses.

Imagine a person has been living in a room for the past twenty or thirty years and has never bothered to clean it. All the leftover food, all the dirty clothes, all the rubbish that's accumulated now reaches up to the ceiling. Trying to live among that rubbish is extremely unpleasant. But the room's inhabitant doesn't even notice it, until one day a friend comes along and says, "Why don't you clean up?" So together they clean up a little corner. Then our imaginary person finds that it's far more comfortable and easy to live in that clean corner. Now they start to clean out the whole room until eventually they can look out of the windows and get a better view and also find room enough to move. Feeling more comfortable, the person can use the mind freely without having to attend to any bodily discomfort.

The house we live in is our body. It doesn't matter how many times we move from town to country, from apartment to home, from home to a room, or even from one country to another. We take this body with us until it completely deteriorates, decays, and becomes a heap of bones, and then only dust. Until that happens, we carry it along with us wherever we move. It's this house that we need to make a little more spacious and at ease.

The psychological accumulation of obstructions and blockages has been deposited by our emotional responses. Mind has put them there, so mind can also remove them. In our meditative procedure this means "knowing the feeling, not reacting, then letting go of it."

As its second feature, the meditation practice incorporates nonreaction. This is a most important aspect of reaching peace and harmony within ourselves, otherwise our reactions will always be wave motions that overwhelm us, and we'll never see the path clearly. It will remain obscure to us. We may hear about it. We may have an inkling what is meant, but we'll never see it ourselves because seeing is "in-seeing," the inner vision. This inner vision is obstructed by reactions—our emotional responses.

When we observe feelings and sensations during meditation, there's no need, and usually no inclination, to react. So it is possible to abstain from reacting: we're actually doing just that! We can take that nonreaction into daily life with us. Whatever emotion turns up, we can see it as just a feeling that has arisen and that will pass away. If we learn this from our meditation practice, we're learning one of the most valuable lessons on how to handle ourselves.

It's a common misconception that because we're alive we know how to live. This is one of our human absurdities. Living life is a skill, and most people take a headlong fall at least once or twice in their lives. They call it a tragedy or "my" problem. It's just that the skill hasn't been perfected.

The third but equally important aspect of our meditation practice is the personal experience of impermanence. Unless we know it personally, impermanence is going to remain a word only. Words alone can never liberate. The experience is needed. The Buddha's path aims at liberation—complete and total freedom—and this has to be a personal experience. In meditation the experience of impermanence is quite direct: when you attend to your breath, you know that this breath went in and then it went out. It's not the same breath any more. The feeling arises and already it's gone. Then there's a feeling in another spot; such an assortment of feelings and sensations and then there are none left. A pain in the leg—it's moved, it's gone. Feelings come and feelings go.

With a little more meditation skill, the impermanence of feeling is easily seen, but we also gain insight into the impermanence of this body of ours. Everybody knows about that. There's no thinking person in the whole world who doesn't know that his or her body and all other bodies are impermanent.

Yet we all live as if we were permanent and grieve about those bodies

that have already submitted to the law of nature, as if it were something unexpected.

This is obviously faulty thinking and doesn't make much sense, does it? It's due to the fact that we close our vision to the realities. We try to look at that which is pleasant. That we are also constantly confronted with the unpleasant is a fact for which we try to blame someone else. Some people go as far as blaming the devil. It doesn't really matter who one blames, whether one's neighbor or the devil. The reality of life is total impermanence, and we have to accept and experience it in order to live accordingly.

When we learn to penetrate more deeply, we'll become aware that there is constant movement in every cell of the body. We all learned this law of nature in school. We might have been eleven or twelve at the time when we were told that all the cells in the body are renewed every seven years. I distinctly remember trying to figure out whether every cell of the body was going to fall out after seven years and whether I'd get a new lot coming back in. Since that didn't seem feasible, I gave up on it. I couldn't figure it out. Now we can understand what is really happening. It means that after seven years all the cells will have deteriorated and been renewed—a constant movement.

Obviously there must be a way of becoming aware of this. With meditative concentration we can become aware of the movement of the skin and under the skin. Then we will have a different outlook on ourselves and on the rest of the world, because now we know with direct knowledge that there is nothing solid or static, least of all this body.

Scientists have proved that there is no single, solid building block in the whole of the universe. Everything in existence is made up of energy particles, which move so quickly—coming together and falling apart—that they create the illusion of solidity. The Buddha said the same two and a half thousand years ago when he referred to such particles, but he didn't need a laboratory to test and prove it. He experienced it himself. This resulted in his enlightenment. Our scientists know all about it, but I dare say they haven't become enlightened. What they must have missed is the personal experience.

We can know for ourselves that there's nothing solid anywhere. Even logic—just plain, intellectual logic—proves that if there were anything solid or static, there couldn't be a human being, there'd be a corpse. But

that's just intellectualizing, which isn't enough. It has to be felt. When it's felt in the meditative experience, then one knows. What one knows from experience, nobody can dispute. Even if everybody in the world were to say to you, "No. This isn't so. Why don't you think you're solid? Why don't you touch the body? It is solid, isn't it?"—you wouldn't want to argue or be swayed. When people dispute what the Buddha was teaching, he didn't argue. He wasn't defending a viewpoint. He was talking about his own experience.

With greater concentration and deeper penetration we will notice constant movement in ourselves. The mind realizes that if there's constant movement inside, it must be outside too, so where can any solidity be found? The mind may say, "If there's constant movement, where is the 'I'? The feelings have all changed. None are left of a moment ago. The body is moving. There isn't anything I can hang on to. The thoughts are moving, so where am I?" Then, of course, people do find some imaginary possibilities where they can find themselves, such as in a "higher self," an essence, a soul, and so on. But investigated a little further, it too is shown to be another illusion. Impermanence has to be experienced.

Another aspect of our practice is one of the meditation techniques the Buddha mentions in the discourse on the foundations of mindfulness, the meditation on the four elements: earth, water, fire, and air. That feeling of solidity in the body is the earth element. We can also feel the solidity of the meditation cushions we're sitting on. The earth element is everywhere. The earth element is also in water, otherwise we couldn't swim in it or propel a boat over it. The earth element is also in the air. Otherwise birds couldn't fly and neither could an airplane.

The fire element—temperature—is in everything too. We can feel it in ourselves if our attention is directed to it. Usually we're only aware of the fire element when we're freezing cold, or very hot, or think we've got a fever. But temperature is always there. It's in every living being and in all matter.

The water element in us can be felt in the blood, in the saliva, in the urine. The water element is also the binding force. When you have flour and you want to make dough, you have to add water to keep it together. Water is the binding element to be found in everything. Without it all those constantly moving cells would fall apart. There wouldn't be any-

body sitting here if we didn't have that binding element to hold us together.

All this is very interesting, isn't it? But it's useless unless it's experienced. Until then it's just another intellectual pastime that one may discuss with friends. Yet, when it is experienced it becomes an inner vision of how things really are. Knowledge and vision of things "as they really are" is a description frequently used by the Buddha.

We can add space as the fifth element. There are spaces—openings—inside us, in the mouth or in the nose. The interior of the body has open spaces. The universe is space. If we realize this in ourselves and connect to the fact that sameness is found everywhere, we will lose some of our separation technique—"This is 'me' and I'm going to look after 'me,' the rest of the world may get on as best it can. May the rest of them live long and happily, but don't let them come too near." When we realize that we're nothing but energy particles coming together and falling apart, nothing but the five elements, then what is the "me" we are so zealously protecting? And what is the rest of the world that seems so threatening?

Meditation is aimed at insight; insight is the goal of Buddhist meditation. The techniques are the tools. You use them in the best possible way. Everybody uses tools a little differently. The more skillful we become with them, the quicker and easier the results will be. But full attention must be on the use of the tool—not the result. Only then will the skill and the ease develop.

CALM AND INSIGHT

THERE ARE MANY DIFFERENT MEDITATION TECHNIQUES. In the *Path of Purification*, forty of them are mentioned, but there are only two streams, two directions, and these are the two directions one has to take: calm and insight. They work hand in hand. Unless we know the direction we're going, it's highly unlikely that we'll get to our destination. We have to know which way to go.

Both directions, calm and insight, need to be practiced in order to obtain the results that meditation can bring. Most people want calm. Everybody's looking for some peace, for that feeling of blissful contentment. If they can get a glimpse of it in meditation, they're quite happy and try to get more of it. With a fair bit of it, many would be contented and satisfied with that alone. But that's not what meditation is designed to do—it's a means to an end. Calm is the means. Insight is the end. The means are essential and necessary, but they must never be confused with the end. And yet, because it's so entirely pleasant, a new attachment arises.

It is our constant difficulty that we want to keep what is pleasant and reject what is unpleasant. Because we make that our purpose in life, our life really has *no* purpose. It's impossible to get rid of everything unpleasant and to keep everything that's pleasant. As long as we have that as our direction, we have *no* direction. The same applies to meditation.

So how are we going to obtain some calm, and what does it actually do for us? By keeping the attention on the breath, there will be some calm eventually. The mind may stop thinking for a moment and will really feel quite at ease. A mind that is thinking is never at ease because thinking is a process of movement, and movement has irritation in it.

But there may come a moment of ease and we may be able to prolong that moment, and as we practice longer there is no reason why we can't do it. It's not that difficult. It may seem difficult in the beginning, but all that is needed is patience, determination, a bit of good *kamma* (see chapter 7), and a quiet place.

We must all have a bit of good *kamma*, otherwise we wouldn't be sitting here. People who make a lot of bad *kamma* don't usually come to a meditation retreat, and if they should come, they don't stay. So the good *kamma* is already there.

As to patience, we are more or less forced into that by remaining here. One thing you'll have to add to that, the one ingredient needed for this mixture, is determination. When you first sit down make a resolution: "I'm really going to stay on the breath now, and every time I slip off I'm going to come back." It's a balancing act, like walking on a tightrope. Each time you slip off you have to bring yourself back onto it. So determination is needed.

When that calm and pleasant feeling arises, the feeling the Buddha called a pleasant abiding, and then disappears again—which it must, because whatever has arisen will disappear—the first reaction that has to come to mind is knowing the impermanence; not, "Oh dear, it's gone again" or "That was nice. How am I going to get it back?"—which is the usual way of reacting.

Living according to Dhamma, experiencing according to Dhamma, is an unusual way. It's the other way around from what the crowd does. It's an individual understanding. When the Buddha sat under the *bodhi* tree, before his enlightenment, Sujata brought him milk-rice in a golden bowl and said he could also have the golden bowl. The Buddha threw the bowl into the river behind him and said that if it swam upstream against the current, he'd become enlightened. And of course it did. Can a golden bowl swim upstream? What this story means is that when we live according to Dhamma, we have to go against the current of our natural instincts and inclinations. We have to go against what is easy, comfortable, and done by everyone. It's much more difficult to go against the stream than to go with the current.

The pleasant abiding, the pleasant feeling, which is first physical then also emotional—first it's pleasure in the body, then it's pleasure and happiness in the emotions, then it can become very, very peaceful—

that, too, has to vanish again. We must see its impermanence, and only then are we using this pleasant abiding for a purpose. If we don't see the impermanence, we are using it only for our own comfort. What we are using for our own comfort is self-directed and not directed to losing self, which is the essence of the Buddha's teachings.

The whole of the Buddha's teachings are directed toward losing self. He said, "There is only one thing I teach / and that is suffering and its end to reach." But that doesn't mean that suffering in the world is going to stop. It means that if there's nobody here to react to suffering, there is no suffering. Self will stop. If there's nobody here to have a problem, how can there be a problem? Having pleasant abiding for one's own comfort, one goes in the wrong direction.

Going back to the breath again and again will lead us toward the attainment of calm. The eighth step on the noble eightfold path, right concentration, means meditative absorption. Trying to stay on the breath will lead us in that direction, but nobody goes into the meditative absorptions by wishing to do so or by just sitting down in meditation once or twice. It takes time. So all that arises while trying to stay on the breath needs to be used for insight. Any thought that arises is not a bothersome intruder, nor an indication that one isn't suitable for meditation, nor that it's too hot, or too cold, or too uncomfortable, or too late, or too early—none of that. Thought is not an intruder trying to bother us. It's a teacher to teach us. In the final analysis we are all our own teachers and our own pupils and that is as it should be. But we need to know what to look at in order to be taught by it.

Each thought is a teacher. First of all it teaches us about the unruliness of our mind, that our mind is not reliable and dependable. It thinks thoughts we don't even want to think, when we would much rather be totally calm and collected. The first thing we can learn about our mind is that it isn't such a wonderful part of us as we might have imagined just because we have learned, can remember, and can understand certain facts and concepts. It is an unruly, unreliable mind, not doing what we want it to do.

The second thing to understand is that we don't have to believe our mind. We don't have to believe all these thoughts that come up. They have come without our invitation, and they'll go away again by themselves. They have little purpose, especially during meditation. Some of

them might be twenty years old. Some of them might be pure fantasy. Some might be rather unpleasant and some might be dreams. Some might be like will-o'-the-wisps that won't even appear properly. They all come so quickly that there's hardly time to label them. So why believe all the stuff that one usually thinks?

In meditation we have the opportunity to get to know the mind—the thinking that's going on—and learn not to get involved in it. Likewise why should we believe and get involved in all that thinking that occurs in everyday life? We believe it when our mind says, "This man is awful" or "This woman is a liar." We believe it when our mind says, "I'm so frustrated. I'm so bored" or "I have to get that thing" or "I have to go to that place." We believe it all—but why should we? It's exactly the same process in meditation. Thoughts arise, stay a moment, and cease again with no rhyme or reason.

The first time we can really grasp this, we'll actually be able to change a thought that's in the mind to one that we would like to have. That's what can be done when we don't believe what the mind says any longer, but just observe its thought processes. It's the same with this air around us. We don't grab hold of it and say it's ours, and yet if it wasn't there we couldn't live. It's just there. Thoughts are like that. The thinking process is natural to the mind, and because we are alive the thinking process goes on and on, but it's neither reliable nor believable. On the contrary, most of the thoughts the mind produces would be much better dropped.

There is something else we can learn about our mind. When we sit in meditation and the concentration doesn't happen but the thinking does, when we feel drowsy, or there is lack of attention, then we can learn this about ourselves: that without having some entertainment in the mind, we go to sleep. The mind wants to be entertained. It wants to read a book, watch television, visit the neighbors, do some work, anything to be occupied and entertained. It cannot be happy and contented just on its own. This is an interesting new bit of understanding about oneself.

Imagine being in an empty room by yourself for a week, just you. People consider this dreadful punishment, and it is, because the mind can't handle it. It wants to be fed all the time. Just as the body wants to be fed, the mind does too. It needs input because it's not content with

itself. This is another important new revelation about ourselves that we get when we sit in meditation.

Thoughts are very impermanent. They arise and they go; they don't stay—just like the breath. If you pay good attention you may be able to notice their arising. You certainly notice their vanishing; that is easy to see; the arising is a little more difficult. But you can't keep any of those thoughts, can you? They are gone, aren't they? All the thoughts that you have had during the past hour, all have disappeared, haven't they?

Impermanence and nonownership: you don't really want to own all these thoughts, do you? They're not really worth it, are they? There are hardly any that would be worthwhile, so why try to own them? Why try to think, "This is me?" Why not see that they are just a natural arising and vanishing; that's all. Similarly, with this body—is it really me? It's a natural arising through conception and vanishing through death, a law of nature, a fact of nature, which our ego-conceit does not allow us to grasp.

Ego-conceit does not necessarily mean that we are conceited people. Ego-conceit means that we are not enlightened. Conceit has been eliminated only in arahants. It means that we are seeing the world and ourselves from the standpoint of "me" and when we do, the world is often threatening and so are other people because "me" is fragile and can be easily hurt and toppled.

All our thoughts that arise in meditation will give us an insight into ourselves, into the impermanence of this phenomenon, of body and mind, into the nonownership of it. If we really owned our thoughts why wouldn't we own something that was worth having? Nobody likes to own rubbish. All of us try to make our possessions worthwhile. In meditation the thoughts are found to be not worthwhile.

The third aspect we can learn from all that thinking is that this is *dukkha*. Dukkha doesn't only mean suffering; it also means unsatisfactoriness, which is a much wider term and embraces everything we experience, even the most pleasant things, which we experience as unsatisfactory because of their impermanence. The unsatisfactoriness of our thinking process becomes very, very clear during meditation, because we actually want to concentrate and yet here we are sitting and thinking.

We gain insight into impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and nonself through personal experience. Nobody knows these three unless they

have seen them for themselves. They are very nice words, which most of you may be familiar with, but you need to realize them through direct inner knowledge. Although we experience them every single moment, we're not usually paying enough attention.

We are also dying every single moment, but we don't pay attention to that either. It takes precise mindfulness, which we are trying to learn through the meditation process. Look carefully and see the unsatisfactoriness of the thinking process as its inherent quality.

We can all experience reality—the way things really are—if we expand our awareness to the point where we can actually see it. We are experiencing exactly what the Buddha talked about, but we have to penetrate its meaning. It's no use sitting there and thinking, "I wish I weren't thinking," or "I wish I could concentrate," or "I wish it weren't so difficult," or "I wish my right leg wouldn't hurt so much." Those are dreams. Those are hopes. We can't afford to dream and hope if we want to get to the bottom of what ails us.

The Buddha said that we are all sick and that the Dhamma is the medicine. He was sometimes called the Great Physician. But just as with any medicine, it is of no use just knowing about it or merely reading the label. Reading the label is what's been done for so many thousands of years now. Let's stop reading the label and swallow the pill. It's not so difficult once we know the difference.

When unpleasant feelings arise from sitting in one position the mind immediately rejects and resists that. The mind immediately says, "I don't like it. This is most unpleasant. I'm not going to last ten days. I need a chair," or "Why sit like this? It's silly," or "It's not worth it. Meditation can't be worth all this discomfort," or whatever else the mind tries to tell us. It has the ability to tell us anything. It can talk about any subject and it can see any side of the subject. It's an accepted debating technique to talk first about the advantages of a subject and then turn around and debate its contrary aspects. Any mind can do it. Our minds can slip this way and that.

Don't sit there and think, "I don't like this, my right leg, or my back, or my neck"—or whatever it may be—"is very uncomfortable." No! Use the arising of feeling as another way to insight. Feeling is our basis for living. The way we react comes through the contact we make through our senses. We see, we hear, we taste, we smell, we touch, and,

of course, we also think. (The Buddha talked about the mind, the thinking process, as the sixth sense. We also sometimes refer to our thoughts as the objects of a sixth sense.) If we were blind, for instance, the world would appear differently to us. If we were deaf our world would be different again. The same holds with all the other senses. But here we have all our senses intact; we are making contact through them and from that contact come feelings. That cannot be helped. We can't help but make contact. An arahant also has feelings—three kinds: pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Everybody has them. The neutral ones are those we are not aware of because we're not attentive enough. We haven't gotten enough mindfulness yet. But we are certainly aware of the pleasant feelings and we revel in them and try to devise ways and means of keeping them. The whole economy of this globe of ours is geared toward creating pleasant feelings and making people want more of them. If everybody were to reject this, most of the economy would collapse. Pleasant feelings are induced by fans, refrigerators, hot water, cold water, different kinds of food, better mattresses, and all the rest of it.

Feelings, everybody has them—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. They arise in quick succession. Most people spend their life trying to hold on to the pleasant feelings and get rid of the unpleasant ones. We are fighting a lost cause. It's impossible. Nobody can keep the pleasant feelings. Nobody can permanently get rid of the unpleasant ones. As one gets older—as some of you may have noticed—the body has more unpleasant feelings than it used to have. Nobody is exempt. It's the law of nature. Death is certain and very often connected with very unpleasant feelings. But these unpleasant feelings are not confined to old age and death. The youngest, strongest people have unpleasant physical feelings and unpleasant emotional feelings.

If we resolve to keep still for a moment, finally to take a look, to no longer run away from the unpleasant and no longer grasp at the pleasant—maybe for just one meditation session—we will have learned an enormous amount about ourselves. Watching the unpleasant feelings that arise while sitting—and for most people this happens—is another way to insight into one's own reactions. One wants to change the feeling, wants to get away from it. There is a spontaneous, impetuous reaction to the unpleasant feeling by moving to get rid of it as quickly as possible.

In daily living, we try to get rid of unpleasant feelings by getting rid

of the people who trigger them in us, by trying to get rid of situations, by blaming others instead of looking at the feeling and saying, “So, it has arisen. It will stay awhile and it will pass again. Nothing remains the same. If I watch it closely enough I’m using mindfulness rather than reaction.”

This reaction of ours, trying to keep the pleasant and trying to get rid of the unpleasant, is the reason for our continual roaming around the realm of birth and death, because there’s no direction to it. It’s a circular movement. We can’t get out that way. It is a merry-go-round. It doesn’t have a doorway. We go around and around and around trying to keep the pleasant, trying to get rid of the unpleasant, a never-ending circle. The only opening leading out of that merry-go-round is to look at the feeling and not to react. If we learn that in meditation, even for one moment, we can repeat it in daily living to great advantage.

Everybody has some unpleasant experiences in his or her life. People say things we don’t want to hear. People do things we don’t want them to do. People don’t appreciate us, love us, praise us. People go away when we want them to stay. People stay when we would like them to go away. It happens to everyone. The Buddha himself was abused. The Buddha experienced situations that created unpleasant feelings, but he didn’t react.

There is only attention to the feeling. So when an unpleasant feeling arises in the body because of sitting still for longer than usual, don’t blame anything or anyone. There’s no one to blame for the feelings that arise. These are just feelings that arise and cease. Watch the feeling and know. Unless you stand back and look at an unpleasant feeling and not dislike it, you will never be able to effect a change. It has to be done once somewhere along the line. This is the ideal situation, to know that the unpleasant feelings are just feelings. They don’t need to be owned because they weren’t invited by us. We didn’t ask for them. Why do we think they are ours?

Unless we realize what is going on in our mind, when these feelings arise, we will fall into our old-established habit patterns over and over again. What we think constantly, what we react to over and over again makes grooves in the mind. Like a muddy driveway on which the car goes back and forth, and the ruts get deeper and deeper, the same thing happens in our mind. The ruts get deeper and deeper until in the end

they become so deep it seems impossible to move out of the ruts and to go forward.

Here is the right situation, here is an occasion, an opportunity to look at the reaction in one's mind toward unpleasant feelings. Don't rationalize—"It's bad for me, my blood circulation, I shouldn't do it, the doctor always says"—nothing like that. Just watch the reaction in the mind. The mind is clever and manipulative. It can do anything. We call it a magician, which is a good word for it. It can pull a rabbit out of any hat. It can rationalize to the point where we are always right and everybody else is wrong.

This is something we must learn through meditation—that it is impossible to be absolutely right. Most of the time all we are doing is defending a viewpoint, which is based on our own ego. Because we have this ego, the "me" delusion, all our viewpoints, all our opinions are colored by that. They can't be anything else. It's impossible. If there is a red tinge on the window, everything on the outside looks red.

When we get to know our mind and its reactions through the meditative process, we can be more accepting of the fact that while we're thinking one thing, four billion other people are thinking something else. How could it be possible that we are right and the other four billion are wrong? We are defending a viewpoint, which may at times have validity, but only to the point where it relates to ourselves. The only one who can be totally, completely right is an arahant, who does not have the ego delusion.

All these steps are ways to gain insight, to be used not while the mind stays on the breath but while it is reacting to feelings or thinking. Every moment can be used to gain insight and from that calm arises. A bit of insight creates a bit of calm. When we see that we don't need to pay any attention to our thoughts, it becomes easier to drop them. When we see that we don't have to react to feelings, it is much easier to drop the reaction. A bit of calm also creates a bit of insight, and both have to be used.

The teaching of the Buddha goes against the current of our own instincts and is not easy to understand. The mind that can grasp it is a mind that has been trained. Ordinary minds usually argue about it—it's just another pastime, it doesn't have any results. To actually experience inside oneself what the Buddha talked about needs a mind that has

become calmer and more concentrated than usual, and has seen itself for what it is, just arising and passing phenomena.

All this can happen while sitting here and trying to watch the breath.

Calm and insight. Insight is the goal. Calm is the means. As long as there is no calm in the mind, there are waves, waves of like and dislike. The waves obscure our vision. One cannot see one's likeness in a pond in which waves are rising high. The water has to become smooth and calm. Likewise the mind has to become smooth and calm, then the vision that arises is clear. We can see with clarity and penetration.

Walking meditation is going in exactly the same direction. As we really become mindful and stay on the movement, calm arises. If the thinking process is there, we use it in order to know what goes on in our mind.

The labeling is another way to know what one's mind is doing, and if we can label in meditation, we can label in daily living. Any person of goodwill would drop a thought labeled "greed" or "hate." This is the way to purification. Calmness of the mind is dependent upon purification. Purification arises also through insight, through knowing oneself. Labeling shows us what is going on in the mind. In meditation all labels, all thoughts need to be dropped. In daily living it is the unprofitable, unskillful thoughts that have to go. Once we learn to do that, purification can take place.

The path of purification leads to the end of all suffering.