



MINDFULNESS,
BLISS, AND
BEYOND

A MEDITATOR'S HANDBOOK

AJAHN BRAHM

FOREWORD BY JACK KORNFIELD

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—Sumi Loundon, editor of
Blue Jean Buddha: Voices of Young Buddhists

Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond

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A Meditator's Handbook

Ajahn Brahm

foreword by Jack Kornfield



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Foreword



YOU HOLD IN YOUR HANDS a truly helpful and sophisticated manual of meditation written by a monk with deep and wide-ranging experience. Ajahn Brahm is one of a new generation of Westerners who have studied, practiced, and mastered an important range of Buddhist teachings and now offer them to sincere practitioners across the modern world.

In *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond* you will find a thorough set of teachings for developing and deepening meditation, aimed particularly at attaining absorption, or *jhāna samādhi*, and opening to the insights that can follow from it. Ajahn Brahm offers a careful and subtle understanding of how to transform initial difficulties and how to incline the mind toward rapture, happiness, light, and the profound steadiness of *jhāna*. Then he turns this concentrated attention to illuminate the emptiness of self that brings liberating understanding. These are beautiful teachings.

While I acknowledge with pleasure the fruit of Ajahn Brahm's rich experience as a guide for meditators, Ajahn Brahm presents this way of developing *jhāna* and insight as the real true way the Buddha taught and therefore the best way. It is an excellent way. But the Buddha also taught many other equally good ways to meditate and employed many skillful means to help students awaken. The teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama, Ajahn Buddhadasa, and Sunlun Sayadaw are among a wide spectrum of masters who offer different and equally liberating perspectives. Together they comprise a rich mandala of living Dharma, of which Ajahn Brahm reveals one important facet.

So, those of you interested in the practice of jhāna and the depths of the Buddhist path: read this book carefully. And try its practices. Much will be gained from its rich and wise words and even more from the experiences it points to. And as the Buddha and Ajahn Brahm both advise, test them out, use them, and learn from them, but do not cling to them. Let them lead you to the liberation beyond all clinging, the sure heart's release. May these teachings bring understanding, benefit, and blessings to all.

With metta,

Jack Kornfield
Spirit Rock Center
Woodacre, California
2006

Abbreviations



Buddhist Texts in Pāli		Numbered by:
AN	<i>Aṅguttara Nikāya</i>	division & sutta no.
Dhp	<i>Dhammapada</i>	verse no.
Dhp-a	<i>Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā</i>	volume & page no. in Pali Text Society (PTS) edition
DN	<i>Dīgha Nikāya</i>	sutta, section, & verse no. in <i>The Long Discourses of the Buddha</i>
Ja	<i>Jātaka</i>	volume & page no. in PTS edition
Miln	<i>Milindapañha</i>	chapter & dilemma no. in PTS edition
MN	<i>Majjhima Nikāya</i>	sutta & section no. in <i>The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha</i>
SN	<i>Saṃyutta Nikāya</i>	chapter & sutta no.
Sn	<i>Sutta Nipāta</i>	verse no.
Th-a	<i>Paramatthadīpanī (Theragāthā-aṭṭhakathā)</i>	volume & page no. in PTS edition
Thag	<i>Theragāthā</i>	verse no.
Thig	<i>Therīgāthā</i>	verse no.
Ud	<i>Udāna</i>	chapter & sutta no.
Vin	<i>Vinaya</i>	volume, chapter, section, & subsection no. in PTS edition
Vsm	<i>Visuddhimagga</i>	chapter & section no. in <i>The Path of Purification</i>

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FIRST, I WISH TO ACKNOWLEDGE Cūlaka Bhikkhu (Dr. Jacob Meddin) who turned his tiny monk's hut into something resembling a third-world sweatshop, working long hours over many months, even though in poor health, to produce the first versions of these instructions for the Buddhist Society of Western Australia's in-house Dhamma Journal. My thanks also go to Ron Storey, who typed out the manuscript so many times that he must now know these teachings by heart, and to Nissarano Bhikkhu, who organized the index. Next, I convey long overdue appreciation to my first meditation teacher, Nai Boonman of the Samatha Society in U.K., who revealed the beauty and importance of jhāna to me while I was still a long-haired student at Cambridge University in 1970. But most of all, I express my infinite gratitude to the teacher under whose instructions I happily lived for nine years in Northeast Thailand, Venerable Ajahn Chah, who not only explained the path to liberation so clearly, but who also lived the path so totally, to the very end.

Last but not least, my thanks go to all at Wisdom Publications, including David, Rod, and my copyeditor John LeRoy, for all their hard work bringing this volume to completion. May their good karma give them good health so that they will be able to work even harder on my next book.

Introduction: The Big Picture



MEDITATION IS *the* way of letting go. In meditation you let go of the complex world outside in order to reach a powerful peace within. In all types of mysticism and in many spiritual traditions, meditation is the path to a pure and empowered mind. The experience of this pure mind, released from the world, is incredibly blissful. It is a bliss better than sex.

In practicing meditation there will be some hard work, especially at the beginning, but if you are persistent, meditation will lead you to some very beautiful and meaningful states. It is a law of nature that without effort one does not make progress. Whether you are a layperson or a monk or nun, without effort you get nowhere.

Effort alone is not sufficient. Effort needs to be skillful. This means directing your energy to just the right places and sustaining it until the task is complete. Skillful effort neither hinders nor disturbs; instead it produces the beautiful peace of deep meditation.

The Goal of Meditation

To know where your effort should be directed in meditation, you must have a clear understanding of the goal. The goal of this meditation is beautiful silence, stillness, and clarity of mind. If you can understand that goal, then the place to apply your effort and the means to achieve the goal become much clearer. The effort is directed to letting go, to developing a mind that inclines to abandoning. One of the many simple but profound statements of the Buddha is that “a meditator who makes letting

go the main object easily achieves *samādhī*,” that is, attentive stillness, the goal of meditation (SN 48,9).¹ Such a meditator gains these states of inner bliss almost automatically. The Buddha was saying that the major cause for attaining deep meditation and reaching these powerful states is the ability to abandon, to let go, to renounce.

Letting Go of Our Burdens

During meditation, we should not develop a mind that accumulates and holds on to things. Instead we should develop a mind that is willing to let go, to give up all burdens. In our ordinary lives we have to carry the burden of many duties, like so many heavy suitcases, but within the period of meditation such baggage is unnecessary. In meditation, unload as much baggage as you can. Think of duties and achievements as heavy weights pressing upon you. Abandon them freely without looking back.

This attitude of mind that inclines to giving up will lead you into deep meditation. Even during the beginning stages of your meditation, see if you can generate the energy of renunciation—the willingness to give things away. As you give things away in your mind, you will feel much lighter and more free. In meditation, abandoning occurs in stages, step by step.

Meditators are like birds that soar through the sky and rise to the peaks. Birds never carry suitcases! Skillful meditators soar free from all their burdens and rise to the beautiful peaks of their minds. It is on such summits of perception that meditators will understand, from their own direct experience, the meaning of what we call “mind.” At the same time they will also understand the nature of what we call “self,” “God,” “the world,” “the universe,” the whole lot. It’s there that they become enlightened—not in the realm of thought, but on the soaring summits of silence within their mind.

The Plan of the Book

Part 1 of this book, “The Happiness of Meditation,” is for those who want to meditate in order to relieve some of the heaviness of life but,

because of obstacles or disinclination, will not pursue meditation into the bliss states and enlightenment. Here I demonstrate that, even for the beginner, meditation when practiced correctly generates considerable happiness. Chapters 1 and 2 deal with the first steps of meditation in a clear and systematic way. They are a revised version of a little booklet of mine titled *The Basic Method of Meditation*.² Chapters 3 and 4 identify the problems that can occur in meditation and show how these obstacles, once recognized, are easily overcome. In chapters 5 and 6 I explain mindfulness in a unique way and then extend the meditator's repertoire by presenting three more methods of meditation, all supportive of the path to inner peace. Then in chapters 7 and 8 I bring into play some of the classic teachings of the Buddha, namely, the discourses on *ānāpānasati* (mindfulness of breathing) and *satipaṭṭhāna* (focuses of mindfulness), in order to validate the instructions so far and enrich them with the insightful descriptions of the Buddha himself.

The second part, "To Bliss and Beyond," is a guided tour through the world of timeless Buddhist rapture. It describes how meditation literally implodes into the supreme bliss of the *jhānas* and how such states of letting go lift the veil of our five senses to reveal the awesome world of the mind, the magic inner garden where enlightenment is reached. Chapters 9, 10, and 11 cast open the world of the pure mind with a detailed account of the experience of *jhāna*, giving precise step-by-step instructions on how to enter these amazing states. Next, chapters 12 and 13 continue the ascent of the peaks of spiritual experience by narrating how insight based on *jhāna* unlocks the gates to the orchard of wisdom. Then in chapters 14 and 15 I describe how the task of life is brought to a grand finale, giving precise and authentic details on what enlightenment is and how it is achieved.

The conclusion, "Letting Go to the End," is the book's "reentry vehicle" that returns the reader from the otherworldly realms of *jhāna* and *nibbāna* back to ordinary life—although not without a final leap toward the unconditioned as a sort of memento of our journey.

How to Use this Book

This book has three purposes. First, it serves as a course in Buddhist meditation. Meditators who read the book carefully and carry out its instructions conscientiously will receive a progressive and complete course in meditation, one ultimately based on the traditions and sometimes even the actual words of the Buddha himself. These profound, time-honored teachings are presented here in a manner that is compatible with Western thought.

Second, this book is a troubleshooting guide. It is structured to help surmount specific problems in practice. If, for example, ill will is an obstruction, the reader can turn to chapter 3, “The Hindrances to Meditation I,” where one finds the advice to practice loving-kindness meditation (*mettā*) to overcome ill will. Other problem-solving advice is less common—even rare and hard to come by. Chapter 5, “The Quality of Mindfulness,” is a good example. The details of how to set up a “gatekeeper” to both monitor and protect your meditation are invaluable instructions.

The third function of this book is to enable readers to explore aspects of Buddhist meditation that they know little about. It provides information that may be hard to find. Chapters 9–12 on the deep states of meditation bliss (*jhāna*) are a good example. Although the *jhānas* are fundamental to the Buddha’s meditation instructions, they are generally not well understood these days.

It was with some trepidation that I sent this book to the publisher. When I began to practice meditation in London during the late 1960s, a visiting Japanese Zen monk told me, “According to the law of karma, anyone who writes a book on Buddhism will spend his or her next seven lifetimes as a donkey!” This had me worried. Whether it is true or not, it is my conviction that anyone who follows the instructions in this book will escape all rebirth, not only rebirth among those with long ears.

In the *Mahāsaccaka Sutta* (MN 36) the Buddha relates, “I considered:...‘Could that [*jhāna*] be the path to enlightenment?’ Then, following on that memory, came the realization, ‘That is the path to enlightenment.’”³

Part 1
The Happiness of Meditation

The Basic Method of Meditation I 1



IN THIS CHAPTER we will cover the four initial stages of meditation. You may wish to go through the initial stages quickly, but be very careful if you do. If you pass through the initial steps too quickly, you may find that the preparatory work has not been completed. It's like trying to build a house on a makeshift foundation—the structure goes up very quickly, but it may come down too soon! You would be wise to spend a lot of time making the groundwork and foundations solid. Then, when you proceed to the higher stories—the bliss states of meditation—they will be stable.

Stage One: Present-Moment Awareness

When I teach meditation, I like to begin at the simple stage of giving up the baggage of past and future. You may think that this is an easy thing to do, but it is not. Abandoning the past means not thinking about your work, your family, your commitments, your responsibilities, your good or bad times in childhood, and so on. You abandon all past experiences by showing no interest in them at all. During meditation you become someone who has no history. You do not think about where you live, where you were born, who your parents were, or what your upbringing was like. All of that history you renounce. In this way, if you are meditating with others, everyone becomes equal—just a meditator. It becomes unimportant whether you are an old hand at meditation or just a beginner.

If we abandon all that history, we are equal and free. We free ourselves

of some of the concerns, perceptions, and thoughts that limit us, that stop us from developing the peace born of letting go. Every part of our history is finally released, even the memory of what happened just a moment ago. Whatever has happened no longer interests us, and we let it go. It no longer reverberates in our mind.

I describe this as developing a mind like a padded cell. When any experience, perception, or thought hits the wall of this cell, it does not bounce back. It just sinks into the padding and stops. The past does not echo in our consciousness. Some people think that if they contemplate the past, they can somehow learn from it and solve their problems. But when we gaze at the past we invariably look through a distorted lens. Whatever we think it was like, in truth it was not quite like that at all! This is why people argue about what happened even a few moments ago.

It is well known to police who investigate traffic accidents that two different eyewitnesses, both completely honest, may give conflicting accounts of the same accident. When we see just how unreliable our memory is, we will not overvalue the past. We can bury it, just as we bury a person who has died. We bury the coffin or cremate the corpse, and it is done with.

Do not linger on the past. Do not keep carrying around coffins full of dead moments. If you do, you weigh yourself down with heavy burdens that do not really belong to you. When you let go of the past, you will be free in the present moment. As for the future—the anticipations, fears, plans, and expectations—let that go too. The Buddha once said, “Whatever you think it will be, it will always be something different” (MN 113,21). This future is known by the wise as uncertain, unknown, and unpredictable. It is often useless to anticipate the future, and in meditation it is always a great waste of time.

The Mind Is Wonderful and Strange

When you work with your mind, you find that it is so strange. The mind can do wonderful and unexpected things. Meditators who are having a difficult time achieving a peaceful state of mind sometimes start thinking, “Here we go again, another hour of frustration.” But often something

strange happens: although they are anticipating failure, they reach a very peaceful meditative state.

Recently I heard about a man on his first ten-day retreat. After the first day, he was in such pain that he asked to go home. The teacher said, “Stay one more day and the pain will disappear, I promise.” So he stayed another day, but the pain only got worse. So again he wanted to go home. The teacher repeated his instruction, “Just one more day and the pain will go.” He stayed for a third day, but the pain was even worse. Every evening for each of the first nine days he would go to the teacher and ask to go home. And the teacher would say, “Just one more day and the pain will disappear.” To his complete surprise, on the first sit in the morning of the final day, the pain disappeared and it did not come back. He could sit for long periods with no pain at all. He was amazed at how wonderful this mind is and how it can produce such unexpected results. So you cannot know the future. It can be so strange, so weird, so completely beyond what you would expect. Experiences such as this man’s can give you the wisdom and courage to abandon all thoughts and expectations about the future.

When you think during your meditation, “How many more minutes are there to go? How much longer do I have to endure this?” that is just wandering off into the future. The pain could disappear in a twinkling. You simply cannot anticipate when that is going to happen.

During a retreat you may think that none of your meditations were any good. But in the next meditation session you might sit down and everything becomes so peaceful and easy. “Wow!” you think. “Now I can meditate!” But then the next meditation is as awful as the first ones. What’s going on here?

My first meditation teacher told me something that at the time sounded quite strange. He said that *there is no such thing as a bad meditation*. He was right. All those meditations that you call bad or frustrating are where you do the hard work for your “wages.” It’s like a person who on Monday works all day but gets no money at the end of the day. “What am I doing this for?” he thinks. He works all day Tuesday and still gets nothing. Another bad day. All day Wednesday and Thursday he works, and still nothing to show for it. Four bad days in a row. Then along comes

Friday. He does exactly the same work as before, and at the end of the day the boss gives him his wages. Wow! Why can't every day be a payday?

Why can't every meditation be a payday? Do you understand the simile? During the difficult meditations you build up your credit, the reason for your success. In the hard meditations you build up your strength, which creates the momentum for peace. Then when there is enough credit, the mind goes into a good meditation, and it is a payday. But you must remember that it was in the so-called bad meditations that most of the work was done.

The Past and Future Are Burdens

In one retreat that I gave, during an interview a woman told me that she had been angry with me all day, but for two different reasons. In her early meditations she was having a difficult time and was angry with me for not ringing the bell to end the meditation early enough. In the later meditations she got into beautiful, peaceful states and was angry with me for ringing the bell too soon. The sessions were all the same length, exactly one hour.

When you anticipate the future by thinking, "How many more minutes until the bell rings?" you torture yourself. So be very careful not to pick up the heavy burden of "How many more minutes to go?" or "What should I do next?" If that is what you are thinking, you are not paying attention to what is happening now. You are asking for trouble. You are not doing the meditation.

In this stage of meditation keep your attention right in the present moment, to the point where you don't even know what day it is or what time it is. Morning? afternoon?—don't know! All you know is what moment it is *right now*. In this way, you arrive at this beautiful "monastery time," where you are just meditating in the moment. You're not aware of how many minutes have gone or how many remain. You cannot even remember what day it is.

Once as a young monk in Thailand, I had actually forgotten what year it was! It is marvelous to live in the realm that is timeless, a realm so much more free than the time-driven world we usually live in. In the timeless

realm, you experience *this* moment—just as all wise beings have been experiencing *this* moment for thousands of years. You have arrived at the reality of now.

The reality of now is magnificent and awesome. When you have abandoned all past and all future, it is as if you have come alive. You are here. You are mindful. This is the first stage of meditation, just this mindfulness sustained only in the present. Reaching this stage, you have done a great deal. You have let go of the first burden that stops deep meditation. So it is important to put forth a lot of effort to make this first stage strong, firm, and well established.

Stage Two: Silent Present-Moment Awareness

In the introduction I outlined the goal of this meditation: beautiful silence, stillness, and clarity of mind pregnant with the most profound insights. You have let go of the first burden that stops deep meditation. Now you should proceed to the even more beautiful and truthful silence of the mind.

Silence Means No Commentary

In discussing stage two it is helpful to clarify the difference between experiencing the silent awareness of the present moment and thinking about it. The simile of watching a tennis match on TV helps. You may notice that two matches are occurring simultaneously: the match that you see on the screen and the match that you hear being described by the commentator. The commentary is often biased. If an Australian is playing an American, for example, an Australian sportscaster is likely to provide a very different commentary from an American one. In this simile, watching the TV screen with no commentary stands for silent awareness in meditation, and paying attention to the commentary stands for thinking about it. You should realize that you are much closer to truth when you observe without commentary, when you experience just the silent awareness of the present moment.

Sometimes we assume it is through the inner commentary that we know the world. Actually, that inner speech does not know the world at all. It is the inner speech that spins the delusions that cause suffering. Inner speech causes us to be angry with our enemies and to form dangerous attachments to our loved ones. Inner speech causes all of life's problems. It constructs fear and guilt, anxiety and depression. It builds these illusions as deftly as the skillful actor manipulates the audience to create terror or tears. So if you seek truth, you should value silent awareness and, when meditating, consider it more important than any thought.

It is the high value that one gives to one's own thoughts that is the main obstacle to silent awareness. Wisely removing the importance that one gives to thinking, and realizing the greater accuracy of silent awareness, opens the door to inner silence.

An effective way to overcome the inner commentary is to develop a refined present-moment awareness. You watch every moment so closely that you simply don't have the time to comment about what has just happened. A thought is often an opinion on what has just happened: "That was good." "That was gross." "What was that?" All of these comments are about the previous experience. When you are noting or making a comment about an experience that has just passed, you are not paying attention to the experience that has just arrived. You are dealing with old visitors and neglecting the new arrivals.

To develop this metaphor, imagine your mind to be a host at a party, meeting the guests as they come in the door. If one guest comes in and you start talking with this person about this or that, then you are not doing your duty of paying attention to every guest who enters. Since a guest comes in the door every moment, you must greet each one and then immediately greet the next. You cannot afford to engage even in the shortest conversation with any guest, since this would mean missing the one coming in next. In meditation, experiences come one by one through the doors of our senses into the mind. If you greet one experience with mindfulness and then start a conversation with it, you will miss the next experience following right behind.

When you are perfectly in the moment with every experience, with

every guest that comes into your mind, then you simply do not have the space for inner speech. You cannot chatter to yourself because you are completely taken up with mindfully greeting everything just as it arrives. This is refining present-moment awareness to the level that it becomes silent awareness of the present in every moment.

In developing inner silence you are giving up another great burden. It is as if you have been carrying a heavy rucksack on your back for thirty or fifty years continuously, and during that time you have wearily trudged for many, many miles. Now you have had the courage and found the wisdom to take that rucksack off and put it on the ground for a while. You feel so immensely relieved, so light, and so free, now that you are unburdened.

Another useful technique for developing inner silence is recognizing the space between thoughts, or between periods of inner chatter. Attend closely with sharp mindfulness when one thought ends and before another thought begins—*there!* That is silent awareness! It may be only momentary at first, but as you recognize that fleeting silence you become accustomed to it. And as you become accustomed to it, the silence lasts longer. You begin to enjoy the silence, once you have found it at last, and that is why it grows. But remember, silence is shy. If silence hears you talking about her, she vanishes immediately!

Silence Is Delightful

It would be marvelous for each one of us if we could abandon all inner speech and abide in silent awareness of the present moment long enough to realize how delightful it is. Silence is so much more productive of wisdom and clarity than thinking. When one realizes that, silence becomes more attractive and important. The mind inclines toward it, seeks it out constantly, to the point where it engages in the thinking process only if it is really necessary, only if there is some point to it. Once we have realized that most of our thinking is really pointless, that it gets us nowhere and only gives us headaches, we gladly and easily spend much time in inner quiet. This second stage of the meditation, then, is *silent present-moment awareness*. We may want to spend much time developing just these first two stages, because if we can reach this point, we have come

a long way indeed in our meditation. In that silent awareness of “just now,” we experience much peace, joy, and consequent wisdom.

Stage Three: Silent Present-Moment Awareness of the Breath

If we want to go further, then instead of being silently aware of whatever comes into the mind, we choose silent present-moment awareness of just one thing. That one thing can be the experience of breathing, the idea of loving-kindness (*mettā*), a colored circle visualized in the mind (*kasiṇa*), or several other less common focal points for awareness. Here I will describe *silent present-moment awareness of the breath*.

Unity versus Diversity

Choosing to fix one’s attention on one thing is letting go of diversity and moving to its opposite, unity. As the mind begins to unify and sustain attention on just one thing, the experience of peace, bliss, and power increases significantly. Here we discover that the diversity of consciousness is another heavy burden. It is like having six telephones on your desk ringing at the same time. Letting go of this diversity and permitting only one telephone (a private line at that) on your desk is such a relief that it generates bliss. The understanding that diversity is a heavy burden is crucial to being able to focus on the breath.

Careful Patience Is the Fastest Way

If you have developed silent awareness of the present moment carefully for long periods of time, then you will find it quite easy to turn that awareness onto the breath and follow that breath from moment to moment without interruption. This is because the two major obstacles to breath meditation have already been overcome. The first of these two obstacles is the mind’s tendency to go off into the past or future, and the second obstacle is inner speech. This is why I teach the two preliminary stages of present-moment awareness and silent present-moment awareness as a solid preparation for deeper meditation on the breath.

It often happens that meditators start breath meditation when their minds are still jumping around between past and future, and when awareness is being drowned out by inner commentary. Without proper preparation they find breath meditation difficult, even impossible, and give up in frustration. They give up because they did not start at the right place. They did not perform the preparatory work before taking up the breath as a focus of their attention. However, if your mind has been well prepared by completing these first two stages, then when you turn to the breath you will be able to sustain your attention on it with ease. If you find it difficult to attend to your breath, this is a sign that you rushed the first two stages. Go back to the preliminary exercises. Careful patience is the fastest way!

It Does Not Matter Where You Watch the Breath

When you focus on the breath, you focus on the experience of the breath happening now. You experience what the breath is doing, whether it is going in, going out, or is in between. Some teachers say to watch the breath at the tip of the nose, some say to watch it at the abdomen, and some say to move it here and then move it there. I have found through experience that it does not matter where you watch the breath. In fact it is best not to locate the breath anywhere. If you locate the breath at the tip of your nose then it becomes “nose awareness,” not breath awareness, and if you locate it at your abdomen then it becomes “abdomen awareness.” Just ask yourself right now: “Am I breathing in or breathing out? How do I know?” There! The experience that tells you what the breath is doing, that is what you focus on. Let go of the concern about where this experience is located. Just focus on the experience itself.

The Tendency to Control Breathing

A common problem at this stage is the tendency to control the breathing, and this makes the breathing uncomfortable. To overcome this difficulty, imagine that you are just a passenger in a car looking through the window at your breath. You are not the driver, nor a backseat driver.

So stop giving orders, let go, and enjoy the ride. Let the breath do the breathing and simply watch.

When you know the breath is going in or going out for about one hundred breaths in a row, not missing one, then you have achieved what I call the third stage of this meditation, which involves sustained attention on the breath. This again is more peaceful and joyful than the previous stage. To go deeper, you aim next for full sustained attention on the breath.

Stage Four: Full Sustained Attention on the Breath

The fourth stage occurs when your attention expands to take in every single moment of the breath. You know the in-breath at the very first moment, when the first sensation of inbreathing arises. Then you observe as those sensations develop gradually through the whole course of one in-breath, not missing even a moment of the in-breath. When that in-breath finishes, you know that moment. You see in your mind that last movement of the in-breath. You then see the next moment as a pause between breaths, and then many more moments of pause until the out-breath begins. You see the first moment of outbreathing and each subsequent sensation as the out-breath evolves, until the out-breath disappears when its function is complete. All this is done in silence and in the present moment.

Getting Out of the Way

You experience every part of each in-breath and out-breath continuously for many hundred breaths in a row. That is why this stage is called full sustained attention on the breath. You cannot reach this stage through force, through holding or gripping. You can attain this degree of stillness only by letting go of everything in the entire universe except for this momentary experience of the breath happening silently. Actually “you” do not reach this stage, the mind does. The mind does the work itself. The mind recognizes this stage to be a very peaceful and pleasant place

to abide, just being alone with the breath. This is where the doer, the major part of one's ego, starts to disappear.

One finds that progress happens effortlessly at this stage of meditation. We just have to get out of the way, let go, and watch it all happen. The mind will automatically incline, if we only let it, toward this very simple, peaceful, and delicious unity of being alone with one thing, just being with the breath in each and every moment. This is the unity of mind, the unity in the moment, the unity in stillness.

The Beginning of the Beautiful Breath

The fourth stage is what I call the “springboard” of meditation, because from it one may dive into the blissful states. When we simply maintain this unity of consciousness by not interfering, the breath will begin to disappear. The breath appears to fade away as the mind focuses instead on what is at the center of the experience of breath, which is awesome peace, freedom, and bliss.

At this stage I introduce the term “beautiful breath.” Here the mind recognizes that this peaceful breath is extraordinarily beautiful. We are aware of this beautiful breath continuously, moment after moment, with no break in the chain of experience. We are aware only of the beautiful breath, without effort and for a very long time.

Now as I will explain further in the next chapter, when the breath disappears, all that is left is “the beautiful.” Disembodied beauty becomes the sole object of the mind. The mind is now taking the mind as its own object. We are no longer aware of the breath, body, thought, sound, or outside world. All that we are aware of is beauty, peace, bliss, light, or whatever our perception will later call it. We are experiencing only beauty, continuously, effortlessly, with *nothing* being beautiful! We have long ago let go of chatter, let go of descriptions and assessments. Here the mind is so still that it cannot say anything. One is just beginning to experience the first flowering of bliss in the mind. That bliss will develop, grow, and become very firm and strong. And then one may enter into those states of meditation called the *jhānas*.

I have described the first four stages of meditation. Each stage must be well developed before going on to the next. Please take a lot of time with these four initial stages, making them all firm and stable before proceeding. You should be able to maintain with ease the fourth stage, full sustained attention on the breath, during every moment of the breath without a single break for two or three hundred breaths in succession. I am not saying you should count the breaths during this stage; I am just giving an indication of the approximate span of time that one should be able to stay in stage four before proceeding further. In meditation, as I indicated earlier, careful patience is the fastest way!