

# **Part I**

## **Fundamentals of Practice**



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## ***Introduction to Part I***

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If you didn't read the Prologue and Warnings, then do so now.

The Buddhist path is often called a “spiritual” path, and this use of religious language inspires some people. The Buddhist path can also be thought of in terms of a scientific experiment, a set of exercises that the Buddha and those who have followed him have claimed lead to specific, reproducible, verifiable effects, effects that they deemed worthwhile. Using this kind of practical language can also inspire some people.

To inspire a wide audience, throughout this book I will use both spiritual and practical, or technical, language when discussing the Buddhist path. However, my own preference is generally for the practical language. You could throw out all of the spiritual trappings on the Buddhist path, after all, and still have a set of basic practices that lead to the expected effects. You could also keep all of the spiritual trappings, do the basic practices, and produce the same results, assuming, of course, that you had the extra time and resources necessary to do both.

In this pragmatic vein, a movement has arisen, inspired by numerous occurrences and promoted by many people, called *Pragmatic Dharma*—which I hope one day will be called something more welcoming of those thrown by words such as *dharma*. This movement has tended to embrace a worldview that includes the following ideas:

- We can definitely improve the way our minds function and the way they perceive and process reality, in numerous skillful ways.
- What works is key. Specifically, it doesn't matter at all where we draw useful approaches from, so long as they are effective, meaning that they provide the specific benefits sought.
- Innovating, extracting key useful elements from various traditions, and combining these elements to construct a personal practice is encouraged, as is pursuing traditional goals in traditional ways, so long as the approach works.

This book follows the general spirit of pragmatism and innovation while avoiding any extreme that would preempt practices of great value from the old traditions.

Part I covers the basics of practice, except that these basics are actually really deep fundamentals that not only form the basis of the spiritual path, but, taken seriously enough, also apply just as well throughout the whole journey. Many may presume Part I to be mere introductory content that beginners should learn but more advanced practitioners may blow off in favor of Part III, “Mastery.” This presumption would be an error: The frameworks and techniques in Part I are what make enlightenment possible; therefore, Part I is for *you*, regardless of where on the path you think you are.

Chapter 1, “The Three Trainings,” introduces morality, concentration, and wisdom (see DN 10, “Morality, Concentration, and Wisdom”). The Three Trainings encompass the sum total of the Buddhist path. Thus, as is traditional and for good reason, they will be used as the conceptual framework for this book. The Three Trainings involve skills that we as practitioners consciously and explicitly try to master.

Each training has its own specific set of assumptions, agendas, practices, and standards for success. These differ from training to training, and all kinds of problems can arise if we mix them up and use the assumptions of one training when pursuing the others. Each training also has its common pitfalls, limitations, and “shadow sides,” and these are rarely made clear, a failure that has caused much confusion.

Chapter 2, “The Three Characteristics of Experience,” presents the basis of progress in one of the Three Trainings, *wisdom*, which is the training that leads to the permanent perceptual shifts known as *enlightenment*. This basis is the Three Characteristics of everything that we experience: (1) impermanence, (2) suffering, and (3) the lack of stable, separate, continuous self. Investigating sensate reality to discern these Three Characteristics is the work of meditation that produces fundamental insights. Over time, accrued insights directly enable the practitioner to stop fundamental ways that we misperceive experience. With this ending of ignorance comes liberation from all-pervasive suffering—the suffering caused by the false sense of a dualistic divide between perceiver and perceived. In addition to supplying the theory of the Three Characteristics, Chapter 2 offers specific insight meditation instructions.

Chapter 3, “Three More Excellent Lists,” contains some traditional lists that were taught by the historical Buddha and relate directly to spiritual training. They make important and practical points concisely. These teachings were made compact and portable on purpose so that people could remember them and use them. Their very simplicity is what makes them so practical and down-to-earth. I, however, am going to take these compact teachings and go on and on about them. It turns out that the Buddha sometimes made his points so simple that we are left wondering what the heck he was talking about and how to do something useful with his succinct list items. Thus, my expansions are designed to help practitioners get in touch with their reality in ways that will make a real difference to their practice and their lives. These pages will also help practitioners avoid some of the common pitfalls on the spiritual path and, more generally, in life. I recommend that practitioners frequently check in with these lists to gauge whether some emphasis in their practice is out of balance and, if so, to review how to reestablish balance. If you find yourself in trouble with some of the concepts, terms, maps, ideals, and the like in the later parts of this book, the answer is probably not found there but back here, in Part I, even if it doesn’t seem so initially. You might be surprised how simple reminders sometimes sort out complex situations.

Chapter 4, “Practical Considerations for Practice,” provides practical and logistical advice for starting and advancing along the path. It addresses meditation objects and postures, retreats, teachers, and resolve.

Part I, like much else in this edition, now has a somewhat different emphasis than it did in the first edition of *Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha: An Unusually Hardcore Dharma Book* (MCTB1): With regard to the practitioner’s application of effort, this revised and expanded edition strives to more emphatically balance energy, technique, and goal-orientation with the necessities of surrendering, trusting experience, and settling into what is going on right now. This additional emphasis on balance is based on more than a decade of readers’ feedback about their interpretations of MCTB1 and the results of practice based on those interpretations.

Many readers of MCTB1 did miss statements made plainly and often numerous times throughout that edition. Although such partial attention is normal and perhaps to be expected, there has been a concomitant decrease in the importance of poetry to our society. It has been said that our desire for more information, faster images, and quick sound bites is increasing. We are searching faster and faster,

perhaps at the expense of looking more deeply. Mobile phones, Twitter, and the like are making our attention spans even shorter than they historically were.

Rather than sitting with a Shakespeare sonnet for a few minutes, just pondering the beauty and meaning of it, we might read ten sonnets quickly and then feel a bit befuddled. Similarly, we might read though a dense work like this one without stopping to ponder each paragraph along the way and thus perhaps get little out of it. Similarly, we may be constantly trying to find the next teacher, book, spiritual scene, technique, incense, mantra, costume, or doctrine that will get us the Big E. It is sometimes hard for people to believe that right there in their experience is what they are looking for. It is right here, right now, in your own experience, in your own heart, mind, and body. It is these sensations right now that are just soaked with the truth. Quick results are actually possible, although no one can make promises about the speed of progress. Real progress will come only when we settle into the basics, into this moment, and go deep.

The lists that compose the first three chapters of Part I are good sources of the basic teachings sufficient to do the trick. They are designed to point you back to your immediate experience and situation so that you relate to it clearly and skillfully. Go deeply into these teachings, or find them in another form, perhaps in another tradition, and go deeply into them. Unfortunately, people will often pick up on the decorations of a tradition, the specific terms used, the cultural trappings, and miss the fundamental points it is trying to make. Slow down. Settle into these simple truths, reflect, and then practice with diligence! You must do the work yourself, regardless of tradition. You must understand, and then you will have to do so again and again. Get used to it, for walking this path can be quite an adventure.

Sure, there is a lot of junk spirituality out there, but there is also much that is really good. Again, each tradition has its strengths and weaknesses, and some may have cultural trappings and ornamentation that you like or don't like, but don't make a big deal about them. Instead, keep the basics in the front of your mind. Each valid tradition can help us gain further insight into the truth, and perhaps we will resonate with one teaching or tradition at one time and another sometime later. Alternately, we can pick one tradition, not be sectarian about it, and go deep into it, into the simplicity and clarity of its basics, using its extrapolations, elaborations, and interpretations to go back more deeply into the simple truths presented here in Part I. We can engage with the ordinary world, with the truth of this moment, and this engagement will empower us and may well awaken us.



The more we practice being kind and compassionate, the more we connect with the fundamental nature of our hearts and the better our conventional lives will be.

The more we practice being clear and equanimous, the more we connect with the true nature of our mind and the healthier our minds will be.

The more we practice understanding the Three Characteristics of all the little sensations that make up our reality, the more we penetrate into the fundamental nature of reality and the closer we are to awakening and to freedom from fundamental suffering.

May this writing be of benefit to you and all beings, and may you and all beings realize the simple truth of things in this lifetime.



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# 1. *The Three Trainings*

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At the highest level from which we may overview the Buddhist path, the Three Trainings are the conceptual framework. Throughout this book, these trainings are called *morality*, *concentration*, and *wisdom*. Anything we do on the path can be thought of in terms of one these three general categories of development. It is crucial to your success as a practitioner to understand the differences among the three and not to confuse the assumptions informing one with those informing either of the other two.

## **Morality—The First and Last Training**

The original Pali word for the first training is *sila*, which I am translating as *morality*. People translate it in various ways. Regardless of the word we choose, it is likely to have both positive and negative connotations. If the word *morality* bothers you because of associations that it brings to mind, then take a look at the assumptions, agendas, and practices of this training and come up with your own word for it. I don't think that it is so important what we call it; however, I do think that we should give some attention to living it.

In my view, training in morality has as its domain all of the ordinary ways that we live in the world, meaning every single aspect of life that is not explicitly meditative. When we are trying to live the good life in a conventional sense, we are training in morality. When we are trying to work on our emotional, psychological, and physical health, we are training in morality. When we philosophize, we are training in morality. When we exercise, we are training in morality. When we try to take care of others or ourselves, we are training in morality. When we try to defend the environment, reform the government, or make this world a better place, we are training in morality. When we try to find a helpful job, try to build a healthy marriage or raise healthy children, or shave our heads and move to a remote desert, we are training in morality. Whatever we do in the ordinary world that we think will be of some benefit to others or ourselves is part of this first training.

The other two trainings, that of developing deeply concentrated mind states and that of developing fundamental wisdom, have limits, in that you can take them only so far. The wisdom training can be fully mastered, interestingly enough. However, there is no limit to the degree of additional skill that can be brought to how we live in the world. There are too many ways we can develop and no obvious ways to define what 100% mastery of even one of these ways would be.

Thus, morality is also the last training, the training that we will have to work on for the rest of our lives. We may be able to attain to astounding states of consciousness and profound insight into reality, but what people see and what is causal are the ways that these abilities and insights translate into how we live in the world. For reasons that I'm unsure of, some who read through MCTB1 came away with the false impression that I think morality is unimportant. Let me be perfectly clear: Morality is extremely important!

### **Supportive Assumptions**

Some basic assumptions are helpful when you are undertaking training in morality. It is helpful to assume, for example, that a basic moral code will enable you to get along in this world and, therefore, that training in morality confers on you some practical benefit.

It is also helpful to assume in a loose, nondogmatic way that the more good we do in the world, the more good there will be in that world, and therefore the more good will happen to us and all other beings—in other words, ordinary suffering will be reduced. It is also worthwhile to assume the converse: that the more harm we do in the world, the more harm will condition the world for us and for all beings—in other words, ordinary suffering will increase.

### *Moral Codes as Opposed to Hyperintellectual Paradigms*

These assumptions are not unique to Buddhism, nor are they in any way extraordinary, which brings me to an important aside about the spiritual traditions in general: Most religions have codes of conduct that are generically useful but that they have attempted to “brand.” In their extreme form, followers of a faith may come to believe that something like morality is unique to their religion rather than an essentially universal good idea. The corollary of this fallacy is that people not of their religion are unlikely or perhaps incapable of being moral, when, in fact, societies and traditions throughout the ages and around the world have advocated that we find a place in our lives for the general assumptions underlying morality.

It is worthwhile to realize that defining *bad* and *good* is often a matter of perspective. In the face of this realization, however, some will retreat into the semi-dysfunctional and often self-serving position of pure moral relativism, according to which one decides that morality is reducible to one’s own point of view. Others will gravitate to the flip side of this fallacy: that morality is arbitrary and thus useless to try. Paradigms that are less intellectual and more grounded in common sense can help one avoid falling into the paralyzing trap of imagining that it is useless to try to train in morality—however relative or arbitrary it may seem. It is better to try to do your best and seemingly fail than to not try at all.

### *Personal Empowerment*

Thus, we are assuming that our thoughts, words, and actions have consequences. When undertaking training in morality, we are assuming that we can control what we think, say, and do and that we therefore create consequences that are beneficial. Rather than accepting our current level of intellectual, emotional, and psychological development as being beyond our power to change, we consciously and explicitly take the empowering view that we can work with these aspects of our lives and change them for the better. We assume that we can change our world and our attitudes toward our world. We take responsibility for our actions and their consequences.

Furthermore, as a part of our empowerment, we assume that the more of our resources and abilities we bring to this training, the likelier we will be to succeed. We have a body, we have our reason, we have our intuition, we have our heart, and we have the ability to learn and remember. We have a community of others with wisdom to share, we have books and other media that contain advice for living the good life, and we have our friends and family. We can draw on all of these resources and more to try to live a good life, a life in which our thoughts, words, and deeds reflect as closely as possible the

standards we have consciously adopted and defined for ourselves. The more consciously engaged we are with our task, the more likely we are to be successful.

Crucial to the control of what happens in our lives is our intent. Thus, training in morality places much emphasis on intent, the basic assumption being that the more our intentions are kind and compassionate, the likelier we are to manifest kind and compassionate thoughts, words, and deeds.

It is helpful to assume that training in morality requires us to pay attention to what is happening in our lives. When we are not paying attention to what we are thinking, saying, and doing, we will not easily be able to craft thoughts, words, and deeds in a way that fits with the assumptions of this training. If we are not, in turn, paying attention to what the consequences of our thoughts, words, and deeds are, both in the short term and the long term, we are unlikely to gain enough experience to be able to guide our training in morality successfully.

It is also helpful to assume that training in morality will help us when we begin formal meditation practices, the next two trainings of concentration and wisdom. Morality provides a foundation of good mental and physical habits that can support those practices: We encounter our ordinary mind when we sit on the cushion, and our ordinary mind is conditioned by how we behave in the world. Meditation is much easier when the mind we encounter has a clear conscience, a well-developed sense of kindness, and basic psychological health, all of which are supported by training in morality. Consequently, even if for some crazy reason we have little interest in being moral because of the direct benefits doing so can bring, if we are interested in obtaining the results of the other two trainings, we should still engage in training in morality.

These assumptions naturally lead to the specific agendas we have for what happens when we undertake training in morality. We consciously aspire to have the acts of our body, speech, and mind fit the assumptions of this training. In short, we have standards for our physical, mental, and emotional lives, and we try our best to live up to those standards. When we are training in morality, we consciously cultivate thoughts, words, and actions that we deem kind and compassionate. By *kind*, I mean that we work to promote the happiness and welfare of others and ourselves. By *compassionate*, I mean that we work to relieve the suffering of others and ourselves. Thus, our agenda is for our intentions to be kind and compassionate; for our minds to be aware of what we are thinking, saying, and doing; and for our experience to tell us as best it can how to craft our life to reflect our good intentions.

### ***Pitfalls and Benefits***

Training in morality at its best is grounded in a theoretical or direct appreciation of one more assumption, that of interconnectedness. *Interconnectedness* at this level of practice means an appreciation of the fact that we are all in this together and that we all share the wish to be happy. When we take into consideration our own needs and the needs of those around us, we are more likely to be naturally kind and considerate of others and ourselves. Thus, we cultivate the habit of trying to take into account the feelings, opinions, and welfare of those around us. The obvious trap here is to simultaneously fail to take into account our own needs. Work on balancing both in a way that is sustainable and healthy.

There are countless other pitfalls we can run into when we are training in morality, for it is such a vast area of work. In Part II, I will detail some of the more common side effects and shadow sides of training in morality, but realize here at the outset that it is an endless subject. By *shadow sides*, I mean those unfortunate aspects of our character and psyche not clearly illuminated by helpful wisdom, those that cause us trouble often without our even really being aware of them.

### *Wise Remorse as Opposed to Guilt*

One pitfall that must be addressed here because it is so common, however, is that of guilt. We in the West are often conditioned to be extremely hard on ourselves, to cause ourselves astounding amounts of pain to little good effect. We will be much better able to train successfully in living a good and useful life if we can learn to substitute wise remorse for guilt, a remorse that simply says as follows: “Well, that action didn’t work, which is unfortunate. I should try my best to figure out why and do something better next time.”

Some people seem to think that the primary message of training in morality is that they should continuously cultivate the feeling that they have taken up a heavy yoke of responsibility and self-oppression. In fact, some people seem to revel in that unfortunate feeling. Those more fortunate will think, “It is so much fun to try to live a good, healthy, and useful life—what a joy it is to find creative ways to do so!” Few measures are more helpful on the spiritual path and in life in general than a positive attitude.

Thus, the all-too-common pitfall related to guilt is that people stop having fun and trying to be successful in worldly terms. There is absolutely no reason for this self-deprivation. If you can have fun in healthy ways, then have fun! It’s not just for breakfast anymore. Likewise, success is highly recommended. Pick a flexible vision of success in the ordinary sense for yourself and go for it: Play to win! This is your life, so make it a great one. There is no reason to avoid trying, so long as you pursue your success kindly and compassionately. The spirit that all these dimensions of life are fun, a magnificent adventure in learning and growing, an opportunity to have all kinds of remarkably interesting experiences, a fascinating experiment in what is possible in this life—this attitude makes a huge difference in all of the various trainings we will discuss here.

### *Poise, Dignity, and Stability*

A great benefit of the first training is that it really helps with the next training: concentration. So here’s a tip: If you are finding it hard to concentrate because your mind is filled with guilt, judgment, hatred, resentment, envy, or some other difficult thought pattern, also work on the first training, kindness. It will be time well spent. Furthermore, if and when you start more intensive training, you will quickly realize that whatever good mental and psychological habits you have will be a great support, and whatever unskillful mental habits you bring will definitely slow you down. So do spend your nonretreat time cultivating a healthy mind, a healthy body, and a skillful, mature set of coping mechanisms.

I was on a retreat in 2003 with a guy named Sayadaw U Pandita Jr.—so named to differentiate him from Sayadaw U Pandita, an older monk who was one of the direct successors to Mahasi Sayadaw and author of *In this Very Life* (1991), and *On the Path to Freedom* (1995), both of which I recommend. Sayadaw U Pandita Jr. gave this long talk on the Pali word *danta*, meaning *tamed* or *restrained*, but he explained it more in terms of *poised*, *dignified*, and *stable*. Practicing with a sense of oneself as dignified, mature, capable, balanced, poised, and able to be comfortable in one’s own skin while doing simple activities such as sitting and walking—this way of working and seeing yourself is of great benefit all around.

## **Lists and Resources**

Training in morality tends to be discussed in terms of what one shouldn't do and what one should do. The standard Buddhist short list of actions that one should avoid, called the *Five Precepts*, is as follows:

- Killing,
- Stealing,
- Lying,
- Taking mind-altering substances that can lead to heedlessness, and
- Using sexual energy in ways that can cause harm.

Obviously, these precepts are not unique to Buddhism. They seem to be the basic set of standards for behavior that societies and cultures throughout the ages have found to be helpful and practical. The standard list of what one should try to do includes being

- Kind,
- Compassionate, and
- Appreciative of the successes of others.

Wrestling with the question of how we can meet these fairly reasonable standards and yet honor where we are and what is going on around us is the practice of this first training. When we are trying to work on this first training, we will make all kinds of mistakes that can be educational; if you mess up, remember to be kind to yourself!

There are many great techniques for cultivating a more decent way of being in the world, but no magic formulations. You must figure out how to be kind to yourself and all beings in each moment. Because training in morality takes into account all of the ordinary ways in which we try to live a good and useful life, it is so vast a subject that I couldn't possibly give anything resembling a comprehensive treatment of it here.

Some have criticized MCTB1 for not thoroughly delineating the specifics of morality. It is perhaps a fair criticism, but this training is one that many other sources have already treated thoroughly and well. For elaboration on the basics of training in morality, see the following works and search for others that inspire you to take care of yourself and the world around you:

- *For a Future to Be Possible: Buddhist Ethics for Everyday Life* (Thich Nhat Hanh 2007)
- *A Heart as Wide as the World* (Salzburg 1997)
- *Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness* (Salzburg 1995)
- *Light on Enlightenment* (Titmuss 1998)

- *A Path with Heart* (Kornfield 1993)
- *Start Where You Are: A Guide to Compassionate Living* (Chödrön 2001)

### **Axes of Development**

We now have a good list of items to work on, actually a quite lengthy list—so begins the list of the *axes of development*. I used to play a game called *Dungeons and Dragons* back in the day (geek much?); it was and still is a fantasy role-playing game in which one takes on the role of a character who has specific attributes. In the old version of the game that I played, one would have various degrees of Strength, Intelligence, Wisdom, Dexterity, Constitution, and Charisma, with standard humans having values for each of these categories, ranging from 3 to 18, with 3 being the lowest possible level and 18 being as high as humans could normally achieve. For instance, one might have a character with the following attributes: Strength 13, Intelligence 18, Wisdom 9, Dexterity 17, Constitution 11, and Charisma 4. This character would be exceptionally smart, not very wise, quite dexterous, extremely uncharismatic, and average on other attributes.

Just because a character had one of these qualities developed didn't mean he or she had the other ones developed. In this game, these qualities were generally fixed unless something unusual happened; however, in this “game” that we are playing in the real world, we are assuming that the various qualities that we wish to develop are not fixed, inherent qualities that we can't improve on, but instead can be developed, perhaps to a degree beyond what we ever imagined.

### **Practice—Creation of a Character Sheet**

If one were to draw up a character sheet for one's progress in the Three Trainings in their various complicated aspects and track it over time, then one might notice that various abilities improved with time in some generally upward trend as one gave them attention, realizing that the inevitable declines and setbacks that come with time may happen also. So, let's say that we wanted to create the part of our own character sheet that addressed some simplified axes of development of the vast training that is morality: We might come up with something like the following:

- Kindness to oneself
- Kindness to others
- Written communication ability
- Spoken communication ability
- Ability to skillfully support oneself
- Ability to skillfully support others
- Generosity
- Patience
- Gratitude

- Persistence
- Honesty
- Integrity
- Dedication to service
- Support of bodily health (diet, exercise, sleep)
- Scholarly development
- Intellectual understanding of models of mature and healthy human development
- Emotional maturity
- Development of ethics
- Sense of humor
- Enjoyment of learning
- Common sense
- Skillful relationships with people
- Skillful relationships to mild-altering substances
- Skillful relationship to power
- Skillful relationship to sexual situations
- Skillful relationships to money and possessions
- Skillful relationship to community and national politics

This list I have come up with is arbitrary and woefully incomplete; it is meant to serve as a general example of a concept, not a definitive guide. I would encourage you to take time to consider what your own list would look like and how you have done over the years, as well as what you aspire to in the future, because these explicit goals and frameworks help galvanize and direct energy for progress. Writing out the list and revisiting it periodically is a helpful, pragmatic way to support your practice, so I urge you to do so.

### *No Package Deals*

A point that will be repeated again and again in this book is that success along one of these axes doesn't necessarily guarantee success along the others. Moreover, what one person considers success someone else might not. When it comes to all of these trainings and axes of development, this separation is an essential concept often insufficiently understood: Strength in one skillset of development doesn't

necessarily translate into strength in the others, and just because you have developed it to a degree and in a way that suits your ideals, that doesn't mean anyone else will hold that view. Too often, models of spirituality assume that just because you have one skillset down you will necessarily have some others, an assumption that I call the *package model*. Although some people do gain some benefits as a package, there are at least just as many exceptions.

Although learning certain skills can help us learn other related skills more easily, as when people who play the violin well learn guitar more rapidly, plenty of skillsets don't translate to other areas of our life. This principle applies not only to you but also to your dharma companions and teachers. The most common example of relevance is that just because someone may speak well, look good, be well educated, be a dharma scholar, or even have strong meditative abilities, these skills do not mean he or she will necessarily have a skillful relationship to power, money, or sex. Although distinguishing among the Three Trainings is important, moral means for addressing difficulties that arise during formal practice of the other two trainings is a topic that will reemerge throughout this book.

## **Concentration—The Second Training**

*Concentration* is the ability to steady the mind on whatever you wish and attain unusual and profound altered states of consciousness. Training in concentration relates to formal meditation practice, although some of these states can arise spontaneously during other activities. The second training is also called training in *samadhi* (meaning “depths of meditation”), or sometimes *samatha* (Pali) or *shamatha* (Sanskrit) practice. Concentration practice involves working at a level that might be considered unusual, particularly as contrasted with the ordinary level of training in morality. Training in morality is something to which everyone can relate. Training in concentration is easy to relate to only if you have attained to unusual states of consciousness or at least have faith that they can be attained.

The essential point about meditation is this: To get anywhere in meditation you need to be able to steady the mind and be present. That's just all there is to it, and it is largely a matter of just doing so. There is an important shift that happens in people's practice when they commit to developing concentration and follow through on that commitment. Until one does so, not much is likely to happen in one's meditative practice.

It should be mentioned here that there are various types of concentration, with the distinction of relevance here being *continuous* concentration as opposed to *moment-to-moment* concentration. Both types develop concentration, but they have different feels. In this section, I am talking about continuous concentration, the concentration that feels steady, smooth, and analog, rather than the ability to investigate individual sensations moment after moment, which will be addressed when I discuss insight, the third training.

### ***Access Concentration as the First Goal***

The first formal goal when you are training in continuous concentration is to attain *access concentration*, meaning the ability to stay consistently with your chosen object with relative ease and to the general exclusion of distractions. This is the basic attainment that allows you to access the higher states of concentration and also to begin the path of insight (the third training), so, if you've not attained access concentration already, make doing so your first goal in your meditative practice. The first edition of this book said, “You will know it when you have it,” but I have since realized that I was wrong in this

regard: I underestimated how varied people's standards are for what they consider access concentration. Regardless of the range of standards, for the sake of this discussion assume that when one can stay with the object of meditation second after second, minute after minute, with few distractions, but before any interesting, blissful, or unusually steady alteration of perception happens, this attainment is what I call *access concentration*.

Those who wish to define *access concentration* some other way, please go ahead, but realize that we are beginning to have a problem here, this case being the first of what I call *term wars*. Term wars are those instances in which there really should be multiple qualifiers on a term, or even multiple terms for various experiences; however, we have for this whole range of accomplishments only one term from the sanctified past, so we end up with various factions' struggling to control the meaning of that Sanctified Single Term instead of simply acknowledging that we actually need more terms, or at least qualifiers of disputed terms.

Until you can gain access concentration, you ain't got squat. Therefore, pick an object, practice well and often, learn to attain to access concentration, finish reading this book, and then progress should be straightforward. At that point, to review descriptions of the specific concentration attainments, see Part III; once you gain access concentration, attaining the states described in Part III will be relatively easy.

### **Practice—Basic Instructions**

When you decide to do a concentration practice, stay on that object like a rabid dog until you have enough stability and skill to let the mind rest on it naturally. The object you choose should be one on which you will be happy to steady your mind. Training in concentration has had thousands of pages dedicated to it, and there are probably thousands of concentration exercises. Some commonly used objects of meditation are

- The breath (my personal favorite),
- One's posture,
- A mantra or koan,
- A colored disk,
- An image,
- A candle flame,
- Various visualizations,
- Feelings like compassion, and
- Even the experience of concentration itself.

The essential formal concentration practice instructions are as follows:

1. Pick an object (the list above is a great place to begin).

2. Find a place to practice where you are as free from distractions as possible.
3. Pick a sustainable posture (it doesn't really matter so much, but for this training it helps if it is somewhat comfortable).
4. Focus your attention on the object as completely and consistently as possible for the duration of that practice period, allowing as few lapses in concentration as possible, and learn to stabilize all of your attention on that object.

The more you practice and the better your practice habits, the better your concentration will become. Find the balance of effort and steadiness that works for you, as will be discussed in detail in Part III. Practice again and again until you can attain access concentration. Tune in to anything smooth, flowing, and nice about what you are concentrating on and experiencing. Although this paragraph may seem trite or sparse, it does constitute the formal instructions on beginning training in concentration.

If you need someone to tell you how long to practice, then start with 10 minutes a day and work up to an hour or two each day as your life allows. If you can learn to hold your attention completely on your chosen object for even one solid minute, then you have some strong concentration skills. This said, you may have 10 hours a day to devote to practice. Don't let me hold you back! If you can go on retreat and do this practice for 16 or more hours per day, then that time allocation is even better: You would be amazed at how, in just a few days of that kind of high dose, many people can enter fascinating meditation territory if they practice well. How long it will take you to develop access concentration depends on numerous factors, including practice conditions, your natural and cultivated concentration ability, the strength of your drive to succeed, and how much you practice.

### ***Jhana and Other Advanced Skills***

Sharpening your concentration may help almost everything you do, and can provide a mental and emotional stability that can be useful, translating to many other areas of ordinary life. Concentration can also lead to some very nice states called *jhanas*, as well as other names. These states of mind can be extremely blissful and peaceful. Being able to access them can be ridiculously enjoyable and can increase steadiness and stability of mind. These states are of value in and of themselves and also serve the important function in the Buddhist tradition of providing a disposable foundation for insight practices, the third training.

The world of concentration is quite vast, containing within it numerous skills that can be developed to remarkable degrees. Because the number of objects that we can master is great, and the various ways that we can tune our minds are so remarkably complex, it is hard to delineate a simple, manageable, but inclusive list of all that we can learn from concentration. However, I start with the following:

- The speed with which we can enter into altered states of awareness, or *jhanas*;
- The depth to which we can enter each of these states;
- The number of different objects that we can use to enter each of these states;
- The stability of these states in the face of external circumstances; and

- The various ways we can fine-tune these states, such as paying attention to and developing various sub-aspects of them.

### **Shadow Sides and Limitations**

Now, it must be said straightaway that concentration practices, like all practices, have their shadow sides. For instance, pleasant and unusual experiences can become seductive and addictive, causing them to receive more attention and focus than they deserve. They can also lead to people's becoming otherworldly and ungrounded, much the way that the aftereffects of hallucinogens can lead one to the same sense of ungroundedness. They can cause the ordinary world to seem harsh by comparison, tempting one to retract back into the world of concentration states. They can also bring up much of one's psychological "stuff." This last limitation can be a benefit if one is in a mood to deal with this stuff.

Perhaps the most important limitation of concentration practices is that they do not lead directly to the insights and permanent understandings that come from training in wisdom, as much as some meditators might like them to.

## **Wisdom—The Third Training**

The third training in the list is *wisdom*, a special kind of wisdom that I will often call "ultimate" or "fundamental" wisdom. It may also be rendered as *understanding* or *insight*. The whole trick to this training is to understand the truth of all of the sensations that make up our present experience. The great meditators from all traditions have reported that there is something remarkable and even enlightening about our ordinary experiences if we take the time to look into them carefully. Those who undertake training in wisdom have decided to run the experiment and see for themselves whether these reports are true, or whether those dead old dudes and dudettes were just making them all up.

### **Supportive Assumptions**

The first assumption that must be made when you enter this training is that there is some understanding that is completely beyond any ordinary understanding, even beyond the altered states of consciousness that can be attained when you train in concentration. The next assumption is that specific practices exist that can lead to that understanding if you simply do them. The third and perhaps most vital assumption is that we can do them and be successful.

The assumption that is rarely stated explicitly but often implied is that we must be willing to maintain moment-by-moment concentration on a sensate level, at the level of the actual sensations that make up experiences, if we wish to gain the insights that are promised. The corollary of this assumption is that we must be willing to set aside periods of time during which we abandon the ordinary way of working in the world, which is training in morality, and abandon even the unusual way of working with altered states of consciousness, which is training in concentration. We assume that the teachings on wisdom point to universal truths, truths that can be perceived in all types of experience, without exception. In other words, we assume that, if we can simply know our sensate experience clearly enough, then we will come to understand these truths for ourselves.

### **Practice—Basic Instructions**

There are many wisdom traditions and many styles of insight practices. I will lay out many explicitly and hint at many others in the chapters that follow. When choosing an insight tradition, look for

a tradition that is tried and true, meaning that it is either ancient and well tested, or contemporary but demonstratively consistent in leading to unshakable realizations. I can verify that the specific practices I will present can lead to the effects I promise if they are applied as recommended. Even better—you should verify them for yourself.

The primary agenda for doing insight practices is to increase our perceptual abilities so that the truths mentioned by skilled meditators become directly obvious to us. Thus, rather than caring what we think, say, or do, or caring about what altered state of consciousness we are in, when we train in wisdom we actively work to increase the speed, precision, consistency, and inclusiveness of our perception of all the quick little sensations that make up our experience, whatever and however they may be.

The essential formal insight meditation instructions are as follows:

1. Find a place where the distractions are tolerable,
2. Pick a stable and sustainable posture, and
3. For a defined period of time, notice every single sensation that makes up your reality as best you can.

As with concentration practices, more time and more diligence pays off. These simple instructions can easily seem overwhelming, vague, or strangely trivial to many people, so in Part III I am going to delineate in detail numerous empowering concepts and more structured practices that have helped countless practitioners over thousands of years to follow these basic instructions. This said, given here are the key instructions.

## **The Separate Scopes**

Although the Three Trainings contain some similar elements, some important contrasts must be made between them:

- The gold standard for training in morality is how kind and compassionate our intentions are and how well we lead a useful, moral life.
- The gold standard for training in concentration practices is how quickly we can enter into highly altered states of consciousness, how long we can stay in them, and how refined, complete, and stable we can make those states.
- The gold standard for insight practices is that we can quickly and consistently perceive the true nature of the numerous quick sensations that make up our whole reality, regardless of what those sensations are, which enables us to cut to a level of understanding that goes utterly beyond specific conditions but includes them all.

It is absolutely vital that the differences between these gold standards be understood. Considered this way, these gold standards do not overlap and may even seem to contradict one another. The distinct scope of each of the Three Trainings is an essential practical assumption. Because these distinctions can be extremely difficult to explain clearly, I will make this basic point repeatedly throughout the various contexts that compose this book.

So, having mastered enough morality to be temporarily free of excessive negative mind states, and enough concentration to steady the mind somewhat, look into the bare truth of the sensations of this moment. This is called *insight meditation*, as well as some other names, and it is designed to produce wisdom.

This practice sounds simple, and although it is, it also isn't. There are many types of insight that we may derive from experiencing the world. Usually, we think of wisdom as having to do with relative issues, those concerning how to live our lives. In this sense, one might just try to be wiser: Perhaps we could skillfully reflect on something that went badly and see if perhaps in the future some wisdom gained from that experience might change the way we live our life. This form of wisdom is ordinary, so the insights that we derive from such reflections and observations are insights into the ordinary world.

These kinds of reflections can take us only so far: To really "get" what the Buddha was talking about, we need to venture far beyond these conventional definitions of *wisdom* and attain to ultimate insights by engaging specifically in insight practices. Many people try to make insight practice into an exercise that will produce both insights into the ordinary world and ultimate insights. We should not count on ultimate teachings to illuminate our relative issues or vice versa; therefore, it is extremely important to keep the relative and ultimate wisdom teachings separate. Failure to do so causes continual problems and makes progress on either front more difficult rather than easier. Throughout this book, I will differentiate those practices that produce ordinary wisdom from those practices that fall within the third training and lead to ultimate realizations independent of our relative insights.

A brief note of caution is in order here: Occasionally, when people begin to engage with spirituality, they may become fascinated with it and may forget some of the useful relative wisdom they learned beforehand. Caught up in "ultimate wisdom" and their "spiritual quest," they can sometimes abandon conventional wisdom and other aspects of their "former life" to a degree that may not be wise. They falsely imagine that by training in insight they are also mastering or transcending the first training, that of living in the ordinary world. We awaken to the actual truth of our life in all of its conventional dimensions by definition, so make sure that yours is a life you will want to wake up to.

### **Happiness**

Happiness can be considered in the context of the scopes of the Three Trainings. Because training in morality is such a vast subject, the ways we can find happiness within the moral scope is also a vast subject. These ways become interesting primarily in comparison with the other two scopes, those of concentration and wisdom. The common denominator of the concentration attainments, with regard to happiness, is that we learn to enter into states of consciousness that are some mixture of blissful and peaceful, as well as increasingly spacious and removed from our ordinary experience. These states can be a source of happiness that is far more intense and reliable than the happiness found in the ordinary world. Being able to access as much happiness and peace as we wish when we wish reduces our anger at the world for failing to provide us with them, making us less needy and greedy. There is also the happiness that comes from directly penetrating the true nature of the sensations that make up our world and thus attaining to stages of realization, or enlightenment.

### **Renunciation**

Three areas of renunciation correspond to the scopes of the Three Trainings. With regard to the scope of morality training, we can renounce parts of the ordinary world by simply abandoning them: We

can quit our job, leave our relationship, stop smoking crack, and shave our head. We can try to be less angry or fearful. We can work on our communication skills, trying to avoid lying and maligning others. Some of these options may be easier than others, and some of them may be helpful and some not, but the important point here is that these forms of renunciation are, for better or for worse, renunciation of aspects of the ordinary world within the context of the first training's scope. We can also renounce these renunciations and instead do the activities otherwise renounced; therefore, from a certain point of view, renunciation is an arbitrary concept when applied to the first training, but generally we know what we mean by *renunciation*.

Renunciation also comes by way of the training to attain the temporary concentration states. We are willing to spend some time removed from the ordinary experience of the world and its concerns and enter into states where the ordinary world becomes more and more removed from us. It is usually not hard to convince people that occasions will arise when being able to renounce the ordinary world in this way for a period of time can be advantageous. We can all imagine taking a little bliss break and finding it helpful in some appropriate context.

Renunciation also supports insight practices, in that the practitioner is willing to break from the gross conceptual way of working that is helpful for the scope of the ordinary world, break from the more restricted and refined conceptual way of working that is necessary to attain stable altered states of consciousness, and move to perceiving the true nature of sensations individually and directly. However, from a perhaps predominant viewpoint, insight practice is a radical antithesis to renunciation, for it involves a radical commitment to being here, in this body, in this space, in this life, at this time, and to making this radical commitment again and again and again.

This renunciation that is associated with insight practices is a much more subtle, sophisticated form of renunciation than the other two. Consequently, it is not always easy initially to convince people that the option of being with reality is a good one. Although the general idea of “enlightenment” sounds appealing, it suddenly sounds strange when placed in its proper context of seeing all sensations for what they are: utterly transient, a source of pain if we continue to make artificial dualities out of them, and not having or belonging to any self.

People often mix up the three kinds of renunciation, the most common error being that they imagine that they must “give up” the benefits of the first two trainings—a happy life and fun concentration states—to practice the renunciation that insight practice requires. Actually, though, insight requires discernment into the true nature of the sensations that constitute those benefits, not rejection of them. Many wrongly imagine that they must give up their job or relationship in order to see its true nature, or imagine that they must not enter into higher states to see their true nature. This basic conceptual error causes many of the problems that people encounter on the spiritual path, which brings us to the three forms of suffering.

### ***The Three Forms of Suffering***

The Buddha identified three forms of suffering. Understanding the distinctions among the three helps us match the correct training to its corresponding form of suffering.

The first is the form that the Buddha is most famous for addressing: ordinary suffering. The standard list includes birth, sickness, old age, death, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair. These are ordinary forms of suffering in the conventional world. We can mitigate them as best we can by ordinary methods—by working within the scope of the first training. Understand, however, that these ordinary

forms of suffering can be only partially reduced, because, having been born and regardless of enlightenment, human beings will suffer sickness, death, and most or all of the rest of the kinds of ordinary suffering that the Buddha addressed. I am a big fan of trying to find worldly happiness, so long as we do not neglect the other two trainings.

The form of suffering related to the scope of the second training comes from our being limited to our ordinary state of consciousness, with our only ways out generally being sleep, extreme experiences, or the use of chemical substances. We yearn for bliss that is not so bound up in conditions like whether we get a good job—for experiences like those found by means of the concentration states. Our minds have this potential, so the inability to access these states when doing so would be helpful and healthy is a source of bondage. I am a big fan of being able to attain these wonderful states, so long as we do not neglect the other two trainings.

There is also the suffering that comes from our making artificial dualities out of intrinsically nondual sensations—with all of the unnecessary reactivity, misperceptions, distortions of perspective and proportion, and basic “blindfulness” that accompanies this process. This kind of suffering, which is addressed by the scope of training in wisdom, is not touched by the first two trainings: It forms a background level of suffering in our lives and therefore potentiates suffering in the other two scopes. This form of suffering is gradually relieved by the successive levels of enlightenment, as fewer and fewer aspects of reality have the capacity to deceive the mind in this way. I am a big fan of awakening, which eliminates this all-pervasive form of suffering, so long as we do not neglect the other two trainings.

The suffering of the ordinary world can be extremely unpredictable, and working to relieve it is a complex business, the work of a lifetime. The suffering related to inability to access refined altered states of consciousness is mitigated by simply taking the time to learn the skills necessary and then refining them until they are accessible at will. Practically, these states have some limits, so they can be mastered within a lifetime—even within a few years or perhaps months by those with talent and diligence. The progressive levels of enlightenment are permanent—or as permanent as anything can be for a mortal being—so, once they are attained, the all-pervasive form of suffering is forever eliminated and never arises again. This elimination can be accomplished by those who take the time to learn the skills necessary to notice individual sensations clearly and are willing to work at that level of the sensate.

These basic understandings can help us plan our quest for happiness and the reduction of the various forms of suffering in our lives. We can direct our studies, direct our training, and work on specific skills that lead to specific effects and abilities in the order we choose, within the limits of our life circumstances and the resources available to us. For example, it might make sense to learn concentration skills early in life, because they cultivate so many of the skills necessary for the other two trainings and can increase ease and well-being: Rather than popping a cold beer at the end of a hard day, we could bathe our body and mind in as much bliss and peace as we can stand for as long as we wish. If we master concentration practices, then we have these kinds of options.

It might also make sense to work on insight practices early rather than later so as to reduce the amount of lifetime spent with the fundamental, all-pervasive suffering caused by the illusion of duality.

There is only so much we can do to prevent ordinary suffering for ourselves and others, although doing what we can is always helpful. Consequently, it is helpful to realize that, by learning the two basic styles of meditation, we can reduce or eliminate the other two forms of suffering more easily than we can the ordinary kind.

By seeing deeply into the truth of our own experience, we find that profound and beneficial transformations of consciousness are definitely possible. You guessed it: We're talking about *enlightenment*—the Big E, awakening, freedom, Nirvana, the unconditioned. The arising of this understanding is the primary focus of this book, although typically many interesting insights occur even before that awakening. There is no magic formula for producing ultimate insights—except for the Three Characteristics of experience, the subject of the next chapter.

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## 2. *The Three Characteristics of Experience*

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The Three Characteristics are so central to the teachings of the Buddha that it is almost inconceivable how little attention the vast majority of so-called insight meditators pay to them. They are impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and no-self. I cannot stress enough the usefulness of trying again and again to directly discern these three qualities of all experience. They are the stuff from which ultimate insight at all stages comes, pure and simple. They are the marks of ultimate reality. Every single time I say, “Understand the true nature of things,” what I mean is, “Understand the Three Characteristics.” To know them thoroughly and directly is to be enlightened.

Somehow, this exceedingly important message typically doesn’t get through to insight meditators, so they spend much time doing anything but looking precisely, moment to moment, into the Three Characteristics. They may be thinking about something, lost in the stories and tape loops of the mind, trying to work on their stuff, philosophizing, trying to quiet the mind, or doing who knows what. These diversions can go on year after year, retreat after retreat, and then they wonder why they don’t have more insight yet. This is a tragedy of monumental proportions, but you do not have to be part of it: You can be one of those insight meditators who knows what to do, does it, and finally “gets it” in the grandest sense.

The big message here is this: Drop the stories, find a physical object like the breath or body or pain or pleasure or whatever, and look into the Three Characteristics precisely and consistently! Drop to the level of bare sensations! This practice is *vipassana*, *insight meditation*, the way of the Buddhas. All the “opening to it,” “just being with it,” “letting it go,” and the like are quite important, as you will learn later, but insight meditators must—I repeat, *must*—look into the Three Characteristics.

### **Impermanence**

All phenomena are impermanent. This observation is one of the most fundamental teachings of the Buddha. His penultimate utterance before he died emphasized it: “All phenomena are impermanent! Work out your salvation with diligence!” In his last words, he said everything you need to know to do insight practices. Things come and go. Nothing lasts for even an instant! Absolute transience is truly the fundamental nature of experiential reality.

### ***Supportive Assumptions and Definitions***

What do I mean by *experiential reality*? I mean the universe of sensations that you actually experience. There are many gold standards for reality. However, when you are doing insight practices, the *only* useful gold standard for reality is your own sensate experience. Conventionally, things are thought to exist even when you can no longer experience them; therefore, they are assumed, on only circumstantial evidence, to be somewhat stable entities. Predictability is seen as implying continuity of existence.

For conducting our day-to-day lives, this assumption of stable existence is adequate and often useful. For example, you could close your eyes, put down this book, and then pick it up again from where

you left it without opening your eyes. From a pragmatic point of view, this book was where you left it even when you were not experiencing it in any way.

However, when you do insight practices, it just happens to be much more productive to assume that things are there only when you experience them and not there when you don't. Thus, when you engage in insight practices, the gold standard for reality is the sensations that make up your reality in that instant. Sensations not then present do not exist; only the sensations arising in that instant do exist. In short, most of what you usually assume to make up your universe doesn't exist most of the time, from a pure sensate point of view. This is the point. Directly penetrating this point leads to freedom.

For you philosophers in the crowd—I am not addressing the question whether the rest of the universe is “really” there in some sophisticated philosophical sense when you don't experience it. For these practices, it simply helps to be a pragmatist: When training in insight, assume it isn't there when you don't experience it. When doing basically everything else, assume it is. These separate sets of assumptions lead to better outcomes, and better outcomes are our primary concern.

Regarding impermanence—yes, you would do well to reflect on death and loss, common reflections in many traditions, particularly Buddhist ones, for death and loss are inevitable. These kinds of reflections are on ordinary reality and thus training in morality; commonly, they are used to develop motivation to train in insight. However, far better than spending the time to reflect on death would be to perceive even one sensation arise and pass away.

### *Physical Sensations as Vibrations*

What do I mean by this? I mean that sensations arise out of nothing, do their thing, and vanish utterly. Gone—utterly gone. Then the next sensation arises, does its thing, and disappears completely. “That's the stuff of modern physics,” one might say. “What does that have to do with practice?” It has everything to do with practice. We can experience it, because the first set of vibrations we have access to isn't actually that fast. Vibrations—that's right, *vibrations*. That's what this first characteristic means: that reality vibrates, pulses, appears as discrete particles, appears like TV snow, appears like the frames of a movie, appears like a shower of vanishing flower petals, or the like.

Some people can interpose complex wave or particle models here, but don't. Just look into your actual experience, especially something nice and physical like the motion and sensations of the breath in the abdomen, the sensations of the tips of the fingers, the sensations of the lips, the sensations of bridge of the nose, or the subtle tingling on the scalp. Instant by instant, try to know when the actual physical sensations are there and when they aren't. It turns out that they aren't there much of the time; even when they are there, they are changing constantly.

### *Mental Sensations as Echoes*

Typically, we are quite sloppy in distinguishing sensations that are physical from those that are mental—mental ones being those that include memories, mental images, and mental impressions of other sensations. These two kinds of sensations actually oscillate back and forth, composing a back-and-forth interplay, with one sensation arising and passing, and then the other arising and passing, somewhat quickly but quite penetrably.

Being clear about exactly when the physical sensations are there will begin to clarify the slippery counterpart that helps create the illusion of continuity or solidity: flickering mental impressions. Coming directly after a physical sensation arises and passes is a separate pulse of reality that is the mental

knowing of that physical sensation, here referred to as *consciousness* (as opposed to *awareness*, discussed in Part III). By *physical sensations* I mean the five senses of touch, taste, hearing, seeing, and smelling. To this list you could add *proprioception*, the perception of movement and spatial orientation arising from within the body, and perhaps a few others, but let's stay with the five senses. This habit of creating a mental impression after other sensations is the standard way the mind operates on phenomena that are no longer there—even on other thoughts, intentions, and mental images. It is like an echo, a resonance. The mind takes a crude impression of the object, and this impression is what we can register, remember, and variously process. At this point, a thought or a mental image may arise and pass, and then, if the mind is stable, another physical pulse.

Because I just used this dangerous term the *mind*, I should quickly mention that it cannot be found. I'm certainly not talking about the brain, which we have never experienced, because the standard for insight practices is what we can directly experience. As an old Zen monk once said in his extremely thick Japanese accent, "Some people say there is mind. I say there is no mind, but never mind. Heh, heh, heh!" However, I will often use this dangerous term—or, even worse, *our mind*—so think the following to yourself when you read it: "He's just using conventional language, but really there are just utterly transient mental sensations. Truly, no stable entity called the *mind* can be found! By doing insight practices, I will come to fully understand this truth!" If you are able to do this much, then we'll get along just fine.

### *Alternation of Mind and Body*

Each one of these two sensations (the physical sensation and the mental impression) arises and vanishes completely before the other begins; therefore, with a stable focus dedicated to consistent precision and to not being lost in stories, sorting out *mind* from *body* is possible. The instant that you have experienced a sensation that is physical, it isn't actually there anymore, and whatever is there is a new sensation that that is mental and that will be gone in an instant. There are typically many other impermanent sensations and impressions interspersed with these, but, for beginning insight practice, this description is close enough to what is happening to be a good working model.

Engage with the preceding paragraphs. They are the stuff upon which great insight practice is based. Because you now understand that sensations are vibrating, pulsing in and out of reality, and that, in terms conducive to insight practice, every sensation is followed directly by a mental impression of it, you now know exactly what you are looking for. You have a clear standard. If you are not experiencing it, then stabilize the mind further, and be clearer about exactly when and where there are physical sensations. Spend the time to meet this standard, as long as it takes. The whole goal is to experience impermanence directly—things flickering—and what those things are doesn't matter one bit!

How freeing! Interpretation is particularly useless in insight meditation, so you don't have to spend time interpreting experience when you are on the cushion. Throughout this book I will recommend reflecting on spiritual teachings and ways to bring them to bear on your life—but not on the cushion. Thoughts, even supposedly good ones, are usually just too slippery and seductive, even for advanced meditators, although, if you can avoid becoming lost in their content, then they are as valid a stream of sensate objects as any other. Try to limit yourself to no more than a few minutes of skillful reflection per hour of meditation. This amount of reflection time should be more than enough, because there are simply no substitutes for momentum in actual insight practice. If you can reduce that time to no minutes at all, so much the better.

Impermanence is a true mark of ultimate reality, so experiencing it clearly again and again can suffice to drum it into our thick heads, debunk the illusion of continuity, and free us. Doing so can be a subtle business, so be patient and persevere. Remember all three trainings. Following flickering sensations, as well as understanding the other two characteristics of suffering and no-self that they manifest, can be a powerful and direct cause for deep insights and awakening.

### **General Practice Technique—Noting**

Although I want to avoid advocating one specific insight tradition or technique over any other, there is an exercise that you might find helpful when you are trying to accomplish this sorting of mind from body, or trying to pay attention to any sensations or patterns of sensations. It is commonly called *noting*, and it has its origins in the Pali Canon, in the sutta “One by One as They Occurred” (MN 111), and in the “Satipatthana Sutta,” usually translated as the *Four Foundations of Mindfulness*, or the *Four Frames of Reference* (MN 10). It also appears in “The Greater Discourse on the Four Foundations on Mindfulness” (DN 22). Noting is practiced primarily in the Mahasi Sayadaw insight tradition from Burma, although related exercises are found in various Zen traditions, notably Soto Zen and Korean Chan, and probably in Tibetan Hinayana traditions, as well.

Noting is the practice that got me the most breaks and insights in my early practice, particularly when coupled with retreats, so my enthusiasm for it is understandably extreme. I still consider it the foundation of my early- to middle-phase practice, the technique that I fell back on when things became difficult or when I really wanted to push deep into new insight territory. Thus, of all the techniques and emphases I mention in this book, take this one the most seriously, and give it the most attention, especially early in your practice. Its simplicity belies its astonishing power.

Basic noting practice is as follows; these instructions can be considered the insight practice instructions fundamental to most of the sample practices delineated in the rest of this chapter, specifically all those not adopting the “Alternatives to the Rates-of-Vibration Technique”:

1. Make a quiet, mental one-word note of whatever you experience in each moment. For example, try to stay with the sensations of breathing, noting these quickly as “rising” (as many times as the sensations of the breath rising are experienced) and then “falling” in the same way.
2. When you find that your mind wanders, notes might include “thinking,” “feeling,” “pressure,” “tension,” “wandering,” “anticipating,” “seeing,” “hearing,” “cold,” “hot,” “pain,” and “pleasure.” Note these sensations one by one as they occur and then return to the sensations of your meditation object, such as breathing.
3. When walking, note the movement of your feet as “lifting” and “placing,” or as “lifting,” “moving,” and “placing,” as you perceive each of the many sensations of these processes, noticing other sensations as they arise, and returning simply to the sensations of the movement and contact of the feet as you walk.

For details of this practice, see Mahasi Sayadaw’s *Practical Insight Meditation: Basic and Progressive Stages* (1991), available online at various sites and in book form for very little money. I highly recommend that you read this book; it is short and to the point. Put another way, failing to read *Practical Insight Meditation* about five times would be basically crazy if you care about gaining insight.

It is my favorite dharma book of all time. I simply followed the instructions in it, and great things happened.

Following are some valuable tips for successful noting:

- Don't become neurotic about whether you have the precisely correct word for what arises. Stick to simple labels and move on.
- Note as consistently and continuously as possible, perhaps one to five times per second. Speed and the ability to keep noting no matter what arises are important.
- Note aggressively and fearlessly anything that derails your noting practice the next time it arises. Note honestly and precisely: So long as you note whatever arises, you know that you were mindful of it.

Noticing each sensation and those that follow, you will see their true nature. Seeing their true nature, you will gain profound insights directly for yourself.

What the sensations are doesn't matter one bit from the perspective of noting practice. What is important is that you *know* what they are. The difference between these two perspectives should be clearly understood. This practice is directly related to koan practices, which ask "What is it?" It is only loosely related to breathing exercises where you count breaths from 1 to 10.

One of my best insight meditation teachers, a monk named Sayadaw U Rajinda, would hold interviews every two days while I was on my third retreat at a beautiful center in Penang, Malaysia. These interviews were conducive to practice. I would come in and describe all sorts of experiences that I was all excited about, and he would simply listen calmly to me go on and on and then finally ask, "Did you note it?" This was almost all he ever said.

It was amazing how easy it was to forget that simple instruction, and it was equally amazing how extremely useful it was when I remembered to follow it. He didn't seem to care about anything other than that I get to know my reality as it was with great precision and consistency. I knew little theory then, but during those two weeks I practiced noting quickly all day long and made the fastest progress I have ever made in my life, coming all the way to the brink of first awakening in a mere 14-day retreat. Since that time, I have been a big fan of this particularly direct and down-to-earth method.

There are many techniques for waking up to the truth of our experience, of which noting is just one. I have found noting to be extremely powerful and fast, but each person must find what works for himself or herself. The goal is to get to know one's reality as it is, and what techniques one uses to do so do not matter much so long as they work, bring results. What is meant by *results* will be clearly spelled out in Part III, "The Progress of Insight."

### **Guidelines for the Rates-of-Vibration Technique**

For five years of my practice I was mostly a One-Technique Freak, and that technique was noticing—or noting—how sensations flicker. I would do so as often as I could—basically whenever I didn't have to be doing something that required concentration on the specifics of my life. I would be riding an elevator, just trying to see when I could feel each foot, or lying down to sleep and noticing how many times I could experience the sensations of my breath in each second. I also tried to notice this quality of experience for every single sensation that occurred during my formal practice. I used many

objects, usually those that were presenting strongly at that time, and, to keep myself from getting stuck, would use some variations on the techniques given here, as well as some others that I will mention shortly. The aspect of my world that I tried to notice—things flickering—was always the same. I found that, by making this commitment to understanding one of the most basic assumptions of insight practices, I was able to make fast progress and gain the ultimate insights I was looking for.

How fast are things vibrating? How many sensations arise and vanish each second? This is exactly what you are trying to experience, but some general guidelines can provide faith that it can be done and perhaps point the way. Begin by assuming that we are initially talking about one to ten times per second. This rate is not actually that fast. Try tapping five to ten times per second on a table or something. It might take two hands, but it's manageable, isn't it? You could experience sensations at that rate, couldn't you? That's the spirit!

Not good at counting beats per second? Here's a quick trick: If you count aloud "one one thousand" at a steady pace, the rate is about one second per "one one thousand." Notice that the counting phrase has four syllables. So you are counting at four syllables per second, or 4 Hertz, which is the unit of occurrences per second. If you tapped your hand each time you said or thought a syllable, then that would be four taps per second. Try it! Count "one one thou-sand," and tap with each syllable. So you now know that you can experience at least eight things in a second! You experienced the four syllables and the four taps that accompanied them. You probably experienced much else during that one second, such as sights, sounds, and other physical sensations. Yeah! This is insight practice. You are already up to at least eight sensations per second. Yeah, you!

Now, let's say you tapped twice per syllable. That would already be up to at least 12 things you perceived in a second, the four syllables and the eight taps. This rate actually isn't that hard to achieve. Try it now! Yeah! You are already fast enough to really bust out some insight practices. Great job! Investigate reality this fast, and you will learn some seriously cool things about it. There are faster and slower vibrations that may show up, some very fast, maybe up to forty times per second, and some very slow although actually composed of faster vibrations. But let's just say that one to ten times per second can sometimes be a useful guideline in the beginning. Once you get the hang of it, the faster and slower vibrations are no big deal.

I highly recommend this sort of speed in practice not only because it is how fast we have to perceive reality in order to awaken, but also because trying to experience one to ten sensations per second is challenging and engaging. Because it is challenging and engaging, we will be less prone to getting lost in thoughts rather than practicing insight meditation. Our minds have the power to perceive things extremely quickly, and we actually use this power all the time to do such things as read this book. You can probably read many words per second. If you can do this, then you can certainly do insight practices.

If you can perceive one sensation per second, try for two. If you can perceive two unique sensations per second, try to perceive four. Keep increasing your perceptual threshold in this way until the illusion of continuity shatters. In short, when doing insight practices, constantly work to perceive sensations arise and pass as quickly and accurately as you possibly can. With the spirit of a race car driver who is constantly aware of how fast the car can go and still stay on the track, you are strongly advised to stay on the cutting edge of your ability to see the impermanence of sensations quickly and accurately.

One note of caution is in order here, although I will address it and possible solutions in more detail in Part II: Because this kind of practice is designed to increase the speed at which you perceive, and because some people already prone to neuronal hyperexcitability may therefore find themselves

“naturals” at it, a few of these people may quickly find it destabilizing. If you suffer from migraine, seizure disorders, or certain psychiatric disorders, for example, engage this practice with caution and with earnest consideration of your specific tolerances. Back off at the first signs of trouble, and work on concentration practices first instead, which is actually the recommendation for all people in many traditions, because concentration practices provide a calm foundation for later investigation of sensations; or try alternatives to this insight technique, as explained in the next section.

### ***Alternatives to the Rates-of-Vibration Technique***

If you have already developed or find you prefer a more receptive style of practice, then simply conceiving of the vibratory nature of sensations as a shower of raindrops, a pointillist painting in motion, or a three-dimensional TV snow might help. Reality is quite rich and complex, so the frequencies of the pulses of reality can be somewhat chaotic; however, they tend to be more regular than you might expect. Moreover, there are no magic frequencies. Whatever frequency or pulsation rate you are experiencing at that moment is the truth of that moment! This said, in the beginning you should try to attend to faster vibrations over slower ones; later in your practice, you will need to attend to wider ones over those that are narrower.

Don't worry if things look or feel solid sometimes. Just be with the solidity clearly and precisely, but not too tightly, and it can start to show its impermanence. Be aware of each exact moment in which you experience solidity, as well as its beginning and ending. Remember that each experience of solidity is a separate, impermanent sensation!

Many people begin practicing by trying to solidify something like the breath, thinking that, if they can make it stable and solid, then they can pay attention to it. They then may become frustrated when they can't find the breath or some other object. The reason that they can't find it is not that they are bad meditators, but that they are having direct insight into how things actually are! Unfortunately, their concentration-practice-influenced theory of what is supposed to happen involves perceiving something solid and stable, so they become frustrated. You should now be able to avoid a lot of that frustration and begin to appreciate why knowing some theory is important.

It is also worth noting here, as with the counting technique, that the frequency, or rate, of these vibrations may change often, becoming either faster or slower, and that it is worth trying to see clearly the beginning and ending of each vibration or pulse of reality. The beginning and the ending are at least two different sensations! It is also useful to check out exactly what happens at the bottom, middle, and top of the breath if you are using the breath as an object, and to examine whether the frequency stays stable or changes in each phase of the breath. Never assume that what you have understood is the final answer! Be alert! Explore carefully and precisely with openness and acceptance! Doing so is the door to understanding.

As with the rates-of-vibration technique, looking into vibrations can be much like any other sport. It can be thought of the way we might think of surfing or playing tennis, and this sort of game-like attitude can help. “We're out to bust some vibrations!” as my old friend Kenneth would enthusiastically put it. You don't know quite what the next return or wave is going to be like, so pay attention, keep the mind on the pulse of the sensations of your world, just as you would on the wave or ball, and keep playing!

I now will relate four of the many little exercises that I have found useful for jump-starting and developing insight into impermanence. They will demonstrate how we can be creative in exploring our

reality precisely, but I hope that they will not be seized on dogmatically: These objects and postures are not in themselves that important; directly discerning impermanence is.

### ***Practice 1—Sensations of Each Index Finger***

I have found this to be a useful practice for developing concentration and debunking the illusion of continuity. You can pick any two aspects of your experience for this exercise, be they physical or mental. I have generally used my fingers only because, through my own experimentation, I have found that it is easy for me to perceive the sensations that make them up. The exercise is as follows:

1. Sit quietly in a quiet place, close your eyes, put one hand on each knee, and concentrate just on your two index fingers.
2. Basic dharma theory states that it is definitely not possible to perceive both fingers simultaneously, so, with this knowledge, try to see in each instant which one of the two fingers' physical sensations are being perceived.
3. Once the mind has sped up a bit yet become more stable, try to perceive the arising and passing of each of these sensations.
4. Continue this exercise for half an hour or an hour, just staying with the sensations in your two fingers and perceiving when each sensation is and isn't there.

This activity might sound like a lot of work, and it definitely can be until the mind settles into it. It really requires the concentration of a fast sport, like table tennis. This is such an engaging exercise and requires such precision, however, that avoiding being lost in thought is easy if you apply yourself.

### ***Practice 2—Sensations of the Front of the Head and Back of the Head***

A related exercise is useful not only for gaining insight into impermanence, but also for developing concentration and debunking the illusion of a continuous, separate self. It goes as follows:

1. Understand that the illusion of a separate perceiver is partially supported by one impermanent sensation's incorrectly seeming to perceive an earlier impermanent sensation.
2. Sit quietly in a quiet place, with eyes closed, and concentrate on the sensations of the front and back of your head.
3. Notice as the sensations in the back of the head incorrectly seem to perceive the sensations of the front of the head, which they follow. Try to be really clear about these sensations and when they are and aren't there.
4. Try to be clear whether the sensations in the head are from the front or the back of the head, in each instant.
5. Try to experience clearly the beginning and ending of each individual sensation.
6. Continue this exercise for a half hour or an hour.

This practice also requires a table tennis–like precision. Half an hour to an hour of this activity can be quite a workout until the mind speeds up and becomes more stable, but this effort pays off. When engaged with this practice, you will find little room to be lost in thought. Note that a few have reported that this exercise makes them nauseated or dizzy, which is from applying too much effort and not gently allowing these sensations to just show themselves easily and naturally, so if these symptoms happen to you, be gentle and let the sensations of the front and back of the head show themselves to you.

### ***Practice 3—Sensations That Make Up the Breath***

In another exercise, which is common to many meditation traditions, the breath is taken as the object. You don't need to worry about how you are breathing, because it is not the quality of the breath with which you are concerned, or even what the sensations are, but the ultimate nature of these sensations: their impermanence, their arising and passing away. You also don't need to care much about exactly where you are experiencing the breath, for the breath is experienced in many places from nose to back and pelvis. (Some traditions are picky about where you notice it, so if you want to give one of those traditions a try, then don't be held back by my bias toward finding the breath wherever you may.) When I am really engaged with bending the mind to this exercise of following the many rich and varying sensations of breathing, there is little room to be lost in thought. I have found this practice useful for developing moment-to-moment concentration and penetrating the illusion of continuity:

1. Sit quietly in a quiet place, close your eyes, and concentrate on the breath.
2. Beyond just concentrating on it, know that the sensations that make up the concept “breath” are each impermanent, lasting only an instant. With this knowledge, try to see how many individual times in each part of the breath you can perceive the sensations that make up the breath.
3. During the in-breath try to experience it as many times as possible, and try to be quite precise about exactly when the in-breath begins and ends.
4. Beyond experiencing as many moments of the in-breath as possible, try to perceive exactly and precisely when each sensation of motion or physicality of the breath arises and passes.
5. Follow the same instructions for the out-breath, paying particular attention to the exact end of the out-breath and then the beginning of the new in-breath.
6. Continue this exercise for a half hour or an hour.

### ***Practice 4—Sensations That Make Up Thoughts***

In the fourth exercise, you take on thoughts directly. I know that the sensations that make up thoughts can reveal the truth of the Three Characteristics to me, so I have no fear of them; instead I regard them as more glorious opportunities for insight. It is absolutely essential to try to figure out how you experience thoughts; otherwise, you will simply flounder in content. What do thoughts feel like? Where to they occur? How big are they? What do they look like, smell like, taste like, sound like? How long do they last? Where are their edges? Take on this practice only if you are willing to work on this level, the level that tries to figure out what thoughts actually are rather than what they mean or imply.

As with the others, this practice requires steadiness and determination, as well as precision. When you are really engaged with this work, there is no time to be lost in the content of the thoughts, because you are trying too hard to be clear about the beginning and ending of each little flicker, squawk, and pulse that makes up thought. This practice can be especially fun when difficult thoughts are distracting you from a physical sensation. You can turn on them, break them down into meaningless little blips, little vibrations of suchness, and then they don't have the power to cause any trouble. They just scatter like confetti. They are seen as they are: small, quick, and harmless. They have a message to convey, but then they are gone. The exercise is as follows:

1. Sitting quietly in a quiet place, with eyes closed, turn the mind to the thought stream.
2. Rather than paying attention to the content of your thoughts, as you usually do, pay attention to the ultimate nature of the numerous successive sensations that make up thoughts, to their impermanence.
3. If you wish, try to make your thoughts more and more intense, just to get a good look at them.
4. If your thoughts seem somewhat auditory, then begin by trying to perceive each syllable of the current thought and then each syllable's beginning and ending.
5. If your thoughts seem somewhat visual, then try to perceive every instant in which a mental image presents itself.
6. If your thoughts seem somewhat physical, such as the memory of a movement or feeling, then try to perceive exactly how long each little sensation of this memory lasts.
7. If you are doing this practice to break down thoughts that distract you from physical objects, then you can return to physical objects and their arising and passing; however, taking on the sensations that make up thoughts is in itself another useful exercise for developing momentary concentration and penetrating the illusion of continuity.

This investigation can be fairly easy to do, yet it is quite powerful. It can also become a bit odd quickly, but don't worry about that. Sometimes thoughts can begin to sound like the auditory strobing section of the song "Crimson and Clover," where it sounds like the musicians are standing at a spinning microphone. Sometimes the images in our head can begin to flash and flicker. Sometimes the very sense of attention can begin to strobe. This is the point: The sensations that imply a mind and mental processes are discontinuous, impermanent!

It doesn't matter whether thoughts taken as objects of insight meditation are "good" or "bad," because all mental sensations, like physical sensations, are dripping with ultimate truth that is just waiting to be discovered. Consequently, you can proceed in your investigation with confidence, regardless of what arises. Whether we penetrate our illusions by using physical sensations or by using mental sensations is irrelevant; however, from another point of view, it is good to be skilled at doing both. That result comes with practice.

## Suffering

The next characteristic of experience is *suffering*, or *unsatisfactoriness*. It sounds grim or pessimistic at first, perhaps deservedly so in one sense, but it is also a powerful statement that our moment-to-moment experience will not ever permanently satisfy. It will never happen. Why? Because everything is impermanent—that's one reason! I have discussed how nothing lasts, meaning that, with dedicated attention, you can directly experience everything that you normally think is a solid world arising and passing, instant to instant. So what could last for even the blink of an eye to satisfy? Nothing!

The point is not to be a radical, pessimistic, nihilistic cynic. The point of penetrating suffering resides not in discovering some position or thing that will help, but in understanding our fundamental relationship to all things. There is no thought or mind state that will eliminate suffering. This is not to say that conventional day-to-day wisdom, such as taking care of ourselves and others, isn't quite important: it very much is. Remember that awakening is not a thing, a mind state, or a thought; it is an understanding of perspective without a separate perceiver.

Moreover, there is a great relieving honesty in the truth of suffering. It can validate the actual experience of our life and therefore give us the strength to look into the aspects of life that we typically try to ignore and run from. Some profound and useful insights can be distinctly unpleasant, contrary to popular belief!

### **All-Pervasive Suffering as the Illusion of a Self**

There is more to this truth, and it relates to the third characteristic, no-self. We are caught up in this bizarre habit of assuming that there is an "I." Yet the definition of this seemingly permanent thing has to constantly keep changing to maintain the illusion in an impermanent world. This self-maintenance takes up a lot of mental time and is continually frustrating to the mind, requiring constant, if habitual, effort. This process is called *ignorance*—the illusion of an "I" and thus that everything else is "not I."

This division is the illusion of duality, and the illusion of duality is inherently painful. There is just something disconcerting about the way that the mind must hold itself and the information it must work to ignore in order to maintain the sense that there is a permanent, continuous self. Maintaining it is painful, and its consequences for reactive mind states are also painful. It is a subtle, chronic pain, like a vague nausea, like a mild headache. It is a distortion of perspective that we have grown so used to that we hardly notice it most of the time. The suffering caused by continually trying to prop up the illusion of duality is *fundamental, all-pervasive suffering*. This definition of suffering is the one that is most useful for insight practices.

To actually feel, moment to moment, this quality of reality can be hard to do, not because suffering is so hard to find—it has been said to be the easiest of the Three Characteristics to tune in to—but because doing so takes bravery. Nevertheless, it is so well worth doing. If we finally wake up to this quality of suffering, then we will effortlessly let it go, drop it like a hot coal that we have finally realized we have been holding. It really works: Letting go in this way means being free.

### **Practice—Sensations of Attraction, Aversion, and Ignorance**

Investigate your experience to see whether you can be open to the fundamental aspect that is somehow unsettling, unpleasant, or unsatisfactory. In these experiences, you will find something disconcerting in how your mind reacts to phenomena through the illusory lens of a *this* and a *that*. These

three basic types of reactions may be classified as *attraction*, *aversion*, and *ignorance*, generally known as the *kilesas* in Pali or *kleshas* in Sanskrit, or, somewhat dramatically, the *three defilements*, *corruptions*, or *poisons*. In terms of relative reality, they can manifest in various emotional “flavors” of *greed*, *hatred*, and *delusion*. However, the ultimate, non-story-based sensations of attraction, aversion, and ignorance can be found to some degree in every instant, regardless of whether that instant is overtly pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

Once you have some mental stability, you can even look into the bare experience of the sensations that make up the stories that spin in your mind and see how unsatisfactory and unsettling it is to pretend that they are a self or the property of some imagined self. If we continue to habituate ourselves to this understanding, moment to moment, then we may get the illusoriness of any “self” into our thick heads and finally awaken.

My favorite exercise for examining suffering is as follows. A half hour to an hour of this sort of consistent investigation of suffering is quite a workout, particularly because we spend most of our lives doing anything but looking to these kinds of sensations to gain insight from them. However, I have found that this investigation pays off in ways I could never have imagined before I began practicing:

1. Sit quietly in a quiet place, with eyes closed, and examine the physical sensations that make up any kind of desire, be it desire to get something (*attraction*), get away from something (*aversion*), or just tune out and go to sleep (*ignorance*).
2. Try to experience exactly how you know that you wish to do something other than simply face your current experience as it is. Moment to moment, try to find those little uncomfortable urges and tensions that try to prod the mind into fantasizing about past or future, or into stopping the meditation entirely.
3. For a half hour to an hour, at a rate of one to ten times per second, make these sensations your prey and nourishment, opportunities to understand something extraordinary about reality; do your best to let none of them arise and pass without your perceiving the basic sense of dissatisfaction in them clearly, as it is.

In investigating many different kinds of sensations for attraction, aversion, and ignorance, you can do the following:

- Turn on the desire to attain results.
- Turn on the pains and unsettling sensations that make the mind contract.
- Turn on boredom, which is usually aversion to suffering in disguise.
- Turn on the sensations of restlessness that try to make you stop meditating.
- Turn on anything with fear or judgment in it.
- Turn on any sensation that smacks of grandiosity or self-loathing.

In short, totally turn the tables on the sensations that typically derail meditation and instead make them the meditation objects, so the hunter becomes the hunted.

Looking into unsatisfactoriness may not sound as concrete as investigating vibrations, but I assure you that it is. Even the most pleasant sensations have a tinge of this type of unsatisfactoriness to them until the knot of dualistic illusion is untangled, so look for it at the level of bare experience. Pain is a gold mine for this exercise. I am absolutely not advocating cultivation of pain, as there is already enough there. Just knowing in each precise instant how you actually know that pain is unsatisfactory can be profound practice. Don't settle for just the knee-jerk answer that "of course pain is unsatisfactory." Know exactly *how* you know this fact in each moment, but don't get lost in stories about it. This is bare reality, ultimate reality, we're talking about. Just be with it, engage with it, and know it as it is, simply and straightforwardly.

## No-Self

The last and perhaps most misunderstood of the Three Characteristics is *no-self*, also rendered as *not-self*, *egolessness* (a terribly problematic term) or *emptiness*. *Emptiness*, for all its mysterious-sounding connotations, in this particular context means specifically that reality is empty of a permanent, separate self or essence. The emphasis here absolutely must be on the words *permanent* and *separate*. It doesn't mean that reality is not there, or that manifestation is illusion! Solidity is an illusion, permanence is an illusion, that the "watcher" or perceiving subject is a separate thing is an illusion, but all of *this* is not an illusion.

Sure, all experience is utterly transient, ephemeral, but this is not to say that everything is an illusion. There is just a habit of reading too much into everything and drawing the false conclusion that all of it means that there is some separate, permanent us. Reality is fine just as it is and always has been, but a deeper understanding of it is called for.

## Concept and Theory

Let's discuss this concept of no-self and how the illusion of a self is created in the first place, before we talk about how to use this powerful and profound concept in simple ways in practice. Some theory can be useful to the practice because the reality behind theory can be known directly once one has some stability of mind and some insight into what is *mind* and what is *body*, and when each is and isn't there, as the practices on impermanence will show.

We have this notion that there is a permanent "I." We might say, "Hello, I am . . ." and be quite convinced that we are referring to a permanent, separate thing that can be found. However, if we are just a bit more sophisticated, we might ask, "What is this 'I' that we are sure of?" We have grown so accustomed to the definition's changing all the time that we hardly notice the constant shifting, but the point of insight practice is to notice it, to see in each moment just what we are calling "I."

We may begin with the obvious assumption: We are our body. This assumption sounds fine until we say something like "my body." Well, "my body" implies that, at that moment, whatever it is that owns the body isn't the body. Suppose someone points to our toenails. They surely seem to be "me," until we clip them, and then they are "not me." Is this body really the same body we were born with? It isn't even made of the same cells, yet it seems to be a permanent thing. Look more closely, at the sensate level, and you will see that, moment to moment, it isn't. At the level of actual experience, all that is found is flickering stuff. So impermanence is closely related to no-self, but there is more to the notion of *no-self* than impermanence.

Perhaps thoughts are the “I.” They may seem more like the true “I” than the body does. But they come and go too, don’t they? Can we really control these thoughts? Are they sufficiently solid that we can assume that they are an “I”? Look closely, and you will see that they are not. But again, no-self is more profound even than this.

There also seems to be something that is frequently called the “watcher,” that which seems to be observing all this, so perhaps this is really the “I” in question. Strangely, the watcher cannot be found, can it? It seems to sometimes be our eyes, but sometimes not; sometimes it seems to be images in our head and sometimes something that is separate from them and yet watching the images in our head. Sometimes it seems to be our body, but sometimes it seems to be watching our body. Isn’t it strange that we are so used to this constant redefinition of ourselves that we never stop to question it? Question it! This odd sense of an unfindable watcher to which all of this is happening yet which is seemingly separate from all that is happening, which sometimes seems in control of “us” yet sometimes seems at the mercy of reality—what is it, really? What is going on here?

One of my teachers once wisely said, “If you are observing it, then it isn’t you, by definition!” Notice that the whole of reality seems to be observed. The hints don’t get any better than this one. Here are some more points of theory that are very useful for insight practices and one’s attempts to understand what is meant by *no-self*:

- There are absolutely no sensations that can observe other sensations! (Notice that your experiential reality is made entirely of sensations.)
- There are no special sensations that are uniquely in control of other sensations.
- There are no sensations that are fundamentally split off from other sensations occurring at that moment.

To begin to unravel this mystery through the development of better perceptual skills is to begin to awaken. Simply put, reality with a sense of a separate watcher is delusion; unconditioned reality, reality just as it is, is awakening. With systematic use of insight practices to debunk the illusion of some sense of a permanent, separate self, we naturally learn to perceive things as they are, and this way becomes our baseline.

### ***Experience and Discernment***

It is at first strange, awkward, seemingly vague, or nebulous. It seems like we couldn’t retrain our minds to experience in a totally different way, to come to a totally different conclusion based on the same data. It may seem like there is no end to the identification, no limit to the tricks the process of identification can throw at us, but the tricks have their limits, and there are only so many categories of sensations. When we become good at seeing them all as they are, then the whole thing can flip around, and suddenly all the sensations that seemed to be self are automatically perceived as just sensations—natural, causal, transient, and not a self or permanent thing at all, just as the theory always said.

It is in some ways much like the famous 1915 W. E. Hill drawing, *My Wife and My Mother-in-Law*, which can be viewed two ways, either as a young woman or as an old woman. Whichever you see first tends to stick in your brain, and then it can be tricky to see the other one until someone points out the features that make up various parts of the other face. Then suddenly you see the same set of lines in a

totally different way. Insight practices create effects very much like that: same sensations, totally different implications.

A quick point is in order here: People can use the truth of no-self to rationalize all sorts of strange behaviors because they misunderstand it as nihilism. “It’s all illusion, anyway,” or “I don’t even exist, so why bother?” they might say. It absolutely isn’t all illusion: Causality still occurs, so bothering is a really good idea. No-self can be understood at the level that makes the difference only by simple, clear, precise practice, so just keep at it.

Similarly, *ego* is a process of identification, not a thing in and of itself. It is like a bad habit, in this case a habitual misperception, but it doesn’t exist as something that can be found beyond a shifting pattern of more sensations. This understanding is important, because this bad habit can quickly co-opt the language of egolessness and come up with phrases as absurd as, “I will destroy my ego!” Not being a thing, it cannot be destroyed; however, when we know our bare experience more clearly, then the process of identification can stop, and by *identification* I mean *misperception*.

Any thoughts with “I,” “me,” “my,” and “mine” in them should be understood to be just thoughts, which come and go. Those thoughts are just more qualities of manifestation, like flavors of ice cream. It is not that chocolate is good and vanilla is bad: All of the flavors of experience are just flavors. Sometimes the flavor of the moment is “I,” “me,” “mine,” and the like, but those flavors don’t constitute a real “I,” “me,” or “mine.” So, if these qualities arise, just notice them come and go like everything else. They never were an “I,” “me,” or “mine,” and they never could be. Just paying attention to these empty flavors of experience reveals that freshness, that each-one-is-new-ness, that lack of solidity, and that lack of continuity—directly. I have spent a lot of time in practice, thinking the thought “I” and then seeing what it felt like, what sensations arose and vanished, so as to get a handle on what those rapid little sensations were and to get used to seeing the truth of them. I found such practice useful. Various Vedanta-influenced practices that take on the sense of “I” directly can be similarly useful if we notice the true nature of the sensations that make up those experiences.

A commonly heard comment is, “I am always identifying with things, and I am always attached to things,” with the implication that there is actually someone who is “bad” for “doing” so. Try to avoid this sort of story making, this sort of unmindful mental spinning, but be kind to yourself if it happens. The sensations that make up these thoughts are just selfless in the best of ways. Initially, in practice people often spend much time trying to get certain experiences to arise and others to go away or not happen, but as practice improves, we begin to learn that all qualities of experience, all manifestation, everything we think is us and not-us, all of it, is just part of the natural, causal way that the universe is happening. Consequently, it is actually just this that needs to be perceived clearly rather than in a fundamentally modified way. In this way, reality settles into further clarity about itself, aligns with itself, comes into its own realization of what it is and isn’t.

So who is it that awakens? The question is based on a false assumption—namely, that something needs to be permanent or separate to awaken. Instead, one could perhaps say that it is all of this transience that awakens. Even better, we could say that a process of misperception just stops. We don’t have to sort this all out at once. We can begin with simple steps and the rest will fall into place if we are diligent and skillful.

### **Practice—Sensations of Self as “Over There”**

So, now that I have made the possible seem mystical and abstruse, I hope to make it seem entirely attainable. The big practical trick to knowing no-self is to tune in to the fact that sensations arise on their own, *over there*, naturally and causally—including even “our” intentions. This is a formal practice instruction.

This practice may sound hard until you think about it, and then perhaps it may become so obvious that it may seem trite. But it isn't, and completing it, again and again, moment to moment, can bang the truth into us; if we fully get it, then we will be free. The practice is as follows:

1. Start and perhaps remain with obvious sensations, like physical ones. They just show up and check out *over there*, don't they? Tune in to this truth.
2. Allow this quality of things' arising and passing on their own to show itself.
3. Notice that whatever is observed isn't “I.”
4. Notice again and again and again at a rate of one to ten times per second, for a half hour to an hour.

That is all there is to it. See, that wasn't so hard!

### **Effort and Surrender**

I realize that most people go into meditation because they are looking for stability, happiness, and comfort in the face of their own existence. I have spent many years cultivating extreme experiential instability, careful awareness of the minutia of my suffering, and the clear perception that I don't even exist as a separate or continuous entity. Why these activities would be a good idea is a very complex topic that I will continue to address, but I can honestly say that these practices are without doubt the sanest actions I have ever taken in my life.

A useful teaching is to conceptualize reality as six sense doors: touch, taste, seeing, hearing, smelling, and thought. It may seem odd to consider thought as a sense door, but this is actually much more reasonable than the assumption that thoughts are an “us” or “ours,” or in complete control. Just treat thoughts as more sensations coming in that must be understood to be impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not self. In this strangely useful framework, there are not even ears, eyes, skin, a nose, a tongue, or a mind. There are just sensations with various qualities, some of which may imply these things for an instant.

For day-to-day reality, the specifics of our experience are certainly important, but for insight into the truth of things in meditation they largely aren't. Said another way, these specifics are neither the object of meditation, the causes of the object of meditation, nor the significance of the object of meditation. It is the truth of the sensations that make up that “object” which must be understood. So don't get lost in the drama and stories, but know this: Things come and go, they don't satisfy, and they ain't you. This is the truth, and it is just that simple. If you can avoid enmeshment in the content and know these simple, fundamental truths, moment to moment, some other wordless and profound understanding may arise on its own.

Thoughts, the breath, and all of our experience don't quite seem to be in our control, do they? That's it! Know this, moment to moment. Don't struggle too much with reality, except to break the bad habits of being lost in stories, having poor concentration, and lacking understanding of the Three Characteristics of experience. Allow vibrations to show themselves, and tune in to the sense that you don't have to struggle for them to arise. Reality just continues to change on its own. That's really it. Investigate this way again and again until you get it. Notice that this arising, this change, applies to each and every sensation that you experience, including all of the core ones that we think are really "us," such as effort, those associated with the process of attending itself, analysis, investigation, and questioning.

Bare experience is just dancing, flickering color, form, energy, and space. Try to stay close to this level when you practice, the level of the simple, direct, obvious, literal. Whenever you are instead lost in interpretation beyond this level, that ain't insight meditation, as much as people would like it to be. Have I said this enough yet? Okay, then.

Although we can direct the mind to penetrate into phenomena with great precision and energy, we can also sit quietly and allow reality to just show itself as it is. Both perspectives are important and valuable, and being able to draw on each along the way can be helpful. Said another way, we can realize that reality is already showing itself, settle quietly into this moment, and be clear and precise about it. Note well: Numerous people will totally miss these last paragraphs, get all into powering into their experience with everything they have, and just keep plowing on that way like mad bulldozers or rabid oxen. But really this practice is about noticing that everything shows itself on its own naturally, without any effort on the part of anyone, so any effort finally must lead to this quiet, easy, natural understanding.

There is a seeming paradox here relating to effort and surrender. In many ways this paradox is at the heart of the spiritual life. A lot of advice is available on this point, but in terms of insight meditation practice, I say this: If, when meditating, you can perceive the arising and passing of phenomena clearly and consistently, then you are exerting enough effort. Once you can tell what is *mind* and what is *body*, then that extent of effort is, for the most part, enough. Allow the reality to show itself naturally, and surrender to it. If not, or if you are lost in stories, then some teachings in subsequent chapters may help. Part of your job is to figure out how gentle you can be and still perceive things extremely clearly. Doing so takes fine-tuning and usually in the beginning entails some overshooting, but remember that part of your goal is this efficiency, this delicacy, this subtlety.

Here is one more little carrot: It is rightly said that to deeply understand any two of the Three Characteristics simultaneously is to understand the third, and this understanding is sufficient to cause immediate first awakening



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## 3. *Three More Excellent Lists*

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Having a few little lists to review as we walk our path can refresh our perspectives and keep us from getting stuck. In fact, as I will remind you repeatedly throughout this and other chapters, if you find yourself in trouble, then the diagnosis and solution is likely found here, not in Part III. Even intermediate and advanced practitioners would do well to regularly check in with these lists from the Pali Canon of the Buddha's teachings. For renderings close to the source, see Bhikkhu Bodhi's *In the Buddha's Words, An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon* (2005).

### **The Five Spiritual Faculties**

The Five Spiritual Faculties (SN 48:18) are said to be like a cart with four wheels and a driver. If any of the four wheels is too small or wobbly or not in balance with the others, then the going on the spiritual road will be rough. If the driver is not paying attention, then there will likewise be problems. The four wheels symbolize faith, wisdom, energy and concentration. The driver symbolizes mindfulness.

This little list is quite a fine teaching. The trick is that faith and wisdom must both be made strong and kept in balance, as must energy and concentration. Mindfulness may always be increased, so for this faculty the sky is the limit—just don't be obsessive about it.

This list sounds simple and perhaps obvious, but there is quite a lot here. While on the spiritual path, we would do well to check up on ourselves regularly and ask whether the first four faculties are all strong and in balance and whether we can be just a bit more mindful. Later, in Part III, if you find yourself caught up in all the progress maps and stages to attain and having problems, remember to return to Part I and reread these sections: The answer to your difficulty is probably found here, not in Part III!

#### ***Faith and Wisdom***

Let's start with faith and wisdom. Faith at its best produces deep gratitude for life in all its richness, for its lessons, for both difficulties and blessings, and for the chance to awaken. It provides excitement, galvanizes energy, supports us in times of trouble, and allows us to proceed without holding anything back. Faith allows us to trust that our actual experience now is the ground of awakening. Wisdom at its best comes from deep, direct perceptual investigation of life as it is, right here and right now, far exceeding the reach of reason and rational thought, and transcending the paradoxes that reason inevitably creates. In the end, wisdom and faith converge.

A deficiency of faith can lead to the following symptoms:

- Half-hearted effort,
- Cynicism,
- Defeatism, and
- Bitterness.

Faith in excess can lead to the following symptoms, among many others:

- Blind adherence to dogma,
- Sectarian arrogance,
- Disappointment when one's teachers are seen to be human, and
- Inability to realistically examine and revise approaches to spirituality when necessary.

A deficiency of wisdom can lead to the following symptoms:

- Stupidity,
- Blindness,
- Gullibility, and
- Foolish interpretations of the teachings.

Wisdom in excess can lead to the following symptoms:

- Harmful cleverness,
- Vanity about one's insights,
- Overemphasis of knowledge and study over practice and direct experience, and
- Desperate attempts to think one's way to enlightenment (excluding Zen koan training at its best).

You can see by comparing these lists that an excess of wisdom resembles a lack of faith, and an excess of faith resembles a lack of wisdom. When wisdom and faith are balanced, there is a heartfelt steadiness, a quality of balanced and genuine inquiry, an ability to persevere, and a certain humility.

How do we apply this teaching? Most of us will suffer from imbalances of wisdom or faith with some regularity. So if something in your practice seems a bit off, just check in with the Five Spiritual Faculties and ask, "Could I perhaps work a bit on strengthening wisdom, strengthening faith, or bringing them into balance?" This question is powerful. If we are willing to be honest with ourselves, it can correct many errors on the spiritual path.

Another good way to apply this teaching is to review the symptoms of imbalance just listed and ask yourself whether perhaps some of them apply to you. This kind of review is an easy way to see what might need some attention. If you start obsessing about the stages-of-insight maps presented in Part III, by the way, then wisdom is in excess, and you should cultivate faith that simple techniques relating to this moment, applied again and again, will bring progress.

## **Energy and Concentration**

Energy and concentration work the same way as faith and wisdom: They must both be strong but must also be in balance. When this balance is right, the posture is straight and steady but not rigid, and the mind is bright and focused steadily on objects and their back-and-forth interplay. A willingness to play around with various combinations of energy and concentration produces the necessary personal experience to figure out what helps and what is too much or too little. Many of the problems in practice that meditators come to ask meditation teachers about relate directly to balancing energy and concentration, so engage with what imbalance might mean, and try to apply this little teaching to help you see clearly.

As with faith and wisdom, so issues of balance go for energy and concentration. Too much energy is related to a lack of concentration, and vice versa. When energy is deficient there is

- Sloth,
- Dullness,
- Torpor, and
- Tiredness.

When energy is in excess, the mind and body may be

- Restless,
- Jumpy,
- Strained, and
- Irritable.

When energy is in excess, one may even be unable to focus at all because effort itself is being overemphasized at the expense of the objects of meditation. When concentration is deficient, the mind won't stay with an object and tends to become lost in thought. When concentration is in excess, one may become lost in one's objects or be focused too narrowly and tightly for reality to "breathe."

It is common for people to forget these simple guidelines and forget to look back at these simple lists for help. Again, if after reading Part III you have trouble, reread this section and see if it helps. Simply pay attention to how your practice is going and adjust the levels of energy and concentration accordingly, knowing that balance takes time to find and may require regular readjustment. Sometimes it is helpful to be very gentle with our attention, as if we were trying to feel the wind on our skin from the flapping of a nearby butterfly's wings. Other times it is helpful to use our attention like a machine gun. Often we do just fine somewhere in between.

As the balance of energy and concentration matures, strangely it may feel like there is little energy or concentration. Reality may be clearly perceived naturally, with little effort. Experience may seem quite wide and inclusive rather than focused and concentrated. This change surprises many people, and they may cling to the immature phase of developing concentration, which feels narrow, and the

immature phase of developing energy, which feels effortful; but, when these faculties mature, the feel is wide and easy, natural and clear, gentle and broad, and rich and subtle: Everything is just showing itself all the way through, on its own.

As we apply effort to practice and build our concentration, the mind will strengthen, which in general is positive, but I should mention a downside: However we are when our mind is more energetic and concentrated is written more strongly into the brain. Thus, when you cultivate an energetic and concentrated mind, guard it well and direct it to skillful practices and skillful ways of being so that skillfulness is written deep into the mind. Do not allow it to go down unskillful tracks and channels for longer than it takes for you to recognize that it is doing so; otherwise, those unskillful mental habits and tendencies will be written on your mind with that same power. Moreover, when energy and concentration begin to come online before mindfulness is strong, the mind may be prone to obsessive thinking fueled by the strong energy and concentration, so watch for this pattern and generally stay grounded in physical objects until some more skill is developed.

A cultivated mind is like a fire. The hotter the fire, the more rapidly it can help accomplish all kinds of useful ends, like cooking food or melting iron for forging. However, the hotter the fire, the more rapidly it can also get out of control and burn things down if not properly monitored and tended to. Thus, when practicing, particularly on retreat, but even in daily life, be careful and respectful of the power of an energetic and concentrated mind. Use it skillfully, just as you would any powerful tool. Imagine that a really strong mind is like an acetylene cutting torch. It is really useful for cutting through obstacles, such as delusion, but it can also cause hurt if not directed properly. Keep this analogy in mind, and your practice will likely fare better.

### ***Mindfulness***

Mindfulness is in a category all by itself because it can balance and perfect the four other faculties. This does not mean that one shouldn't be informed by the other two pairs, but that mindfulness is really, really important. *Mindfulness* means knowing what is, as it is, right now. It is the quality of mind that knows things as they are. Really, it is the quality of sensations manifesting as they are, where they are, and on their own. If you are trying to perceive this way, then you are balancing energy with concentration, and balancing faith with wisdom. Because of energy, the mind is alert and attentive; because of concentration, it is stable. *Faith* here may also mean acceptance, and *wisdom* here is clear comprehension.

Notice that this definition has nothing to do with a vague spacing out driven by the wish that reality would go away and our thoughts would never arise again. I don't know where people get the idea that vague aversion to experience and thought is in any way related to insight practice, but the idea seems to be a common one. Mindfulness means being clear about our human, mammalian reality as it actually is. It is about being here now. The ultimate truth is found in the ordinary sensations that make up our world. If you are not mindful of them or reject them because you are looking for "progress," "depth," or "transcendence," then you will be unable to appreciate what they have to teach and be unable to practice insight.

So, if you know things just as they are, then this knowing is mindfulness. We just keep coming back to this one directive, don't we?—but from many different angles. A specific one of these angles might be useful to you at a specific time.

### **Another Sequence as Applied to the Three Trainings**

The Five Spiritual Faculties have also been presented in another order that can be useful. In this order, they apply to each of the Three Trainings, as a narrative:

1. Faith
2. Energy
3. Mindfulness
4. Concentration
5. Wisdom

#### *Training in Morality*

We have *faith* that training in morality is a good idea and that we can do it, so we exert *energy* to live up to a standard of clear and skillful living. We realize that we must pay attention to our thoughts, words, and deeds in order to do this, so that we try to be *mindful* of them. We realize that we often fail to pay attention, so we try to increase our ability to *concentrate* on how we live our life. In this way, through experience, we become *wiser* in a relative sense, learning how to live a good and useful life. Seeing our skill improve and the benefits it has for our life, we generate more *faith*, and then begins a reinforcing new cycle of the narrative.

#### *Training in Concentration*

We also may have *faith* that we can attain to high states of consciousness, so we sit down on a cushion and *energetically* try to stabilize our attention. We realize that if we are not paying attention, not being mindful, then this stabilization is impossible, so we work on *mindfulness* of our object and of the qualities of the state we wish to attain. We develop strong *concentration* on an object, stabilizing more consistently. We attain to high states and thus gain an understanding of how to navigate in those territories and the uses of doing so—*wisdom*. Our success creates more *faith*, and so we apply *energy* to further develop our *concentration* abilities.

#### *Training in Wisdom*

We begin to think it might be possible to awaken—we have *faith*—so we *energetically* explore the sensations that make up our world without exception. With an alert and energetic mind, we explore this heart, mind, and body just as it is now, with *mindfulness*. Reality becomes more and more interesting, so our *concentration* grows, and this combination of the first four produces fundamental *wisdom*. *Wisdom* leads to more *faith*, and the sequence goes around again.

The teaching of the Five Spiritual Faculties has also been explored at great length in many books, and there is much to them. In the simple form given here, you can easily apply the teaching, and it can really help sometimes. Balance and strengthen; strengthen and balance: Such are the cycles we go through with these faculties, and there is no limit to the level at which they can be mastered.

Something else is accurately said of the Five Spiritual Faculties as they apply to insight training: When they are balanced and perfected, they are sufficient cause for awakening.

## The Seven Factors of Enlightenment

The Seven Factors of Enlightenment (SN 46.14) are as follows:

- Mindfulness
- Investigation of the truth
- Energy
- Rapture
- Tranquility
- Concentration
- Equanimity

Notice that we have three concepts from the Five Spiritual Faculties and four that seem new but have actually already been touched on to some degree. The order here is actually closely related to the stages of something called the *progress of insight*, which is like a map of standard stages through which diligent insight meditators pass repeatedly, in cycles. This connection is a fairly advanced topic that will be explored in Part III.

With regard to progress through the stages, the Seven Factors of Enlightenment might be imagined as a pyramid, with mindfulness as the base and each factor supporting and helping create the successive higher one. However, every factor is important at every stage, as well, so we will now look into each of these factors and see what they can tell us.

### ***Mindfulness***

Mindfulness has already been discussed as one of the Five Spiritual Faculties; however, in terms of practice, I will add that mindfulness can be useful in sorting out what is *mind* and what is *body*, as mentioned on the section on impermanence in Chapter 2. You might want to read that section again, for it will help you practically apply the first two factors of enlightenment: mindfulness and investigation of the truth. Basically, we need to know the sensations that make up our world. This knowing is the crucial foundation of insight practice. Not surprisingly, the first classic insight that leads to the others is called the *Knowledge of Mind and Body* and arises when we learn to clearly distinguish between physical sensations and mental impressions as they occur.

I am no fan of the popular coinage “mindfulness meditation,” because mindfulness is essential for both concentration practices, which lead to temporary bliss states, and insight practices, which lead to fundamental freedom. The crucial difference between these meditation practices is that insight practices also stress investigation of the Three Characteristics, whereas concentration practices emphasize stabilizing in the illusion of solidity and continuity while ignoring the fact that the sensations that make up these states are all impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not a self. I hope that one day the modern meditation world drops this confusing term in favor of more precise language.

So with mindfulness you need to sort out what is physical, what is visual, what is mental, what is auditory, what is pleasant, what is unpleasant, what is neutral, and more, as you learned from basic noting instructions and the sample practices delineated in Chapter 2. You can know the following:

- What is a mental sensation and what is a related physical sensation,
- What specific mental and physical sensations make up your emotions and where they occur,
- Each thing and the mental impression of it that follows it,
- The intentions that precede actions and even thoughts, and
- Where sensations are in relationship to each other—exactly when they occur and how they change during their very brief stay.

We can do this sorting, and we should do it as best we can. Be patient and precise. Become fluent in all the sensations and the patterns of them that make up your reality. This paragraph contains formal insight practice instructions, so perhaps reread it a few times.

### ***Investigation***

Once we start to know what our objects are, what our actual reality is, then we can get down to the good stuff: knowing the truth of these things, a process called appropriately *investigation of the truth*, also called *investigation of the dharma*. *Dharma* just means truth. So, once mindfulness has made things a bit clearer, we can know that things come and go, don't satisfy, and ain't us. Hey, the Three Characteristics again! They are the truth; the sooner we understand this, the better; and nothing helps us understand them like noticing them again and again.

In addition to the categories of sensations just listed in the “Mindfulness” section, one could also consider consistent investigation of all sensations that seem to have to do with

- The direction and movement of attention,
- Questioning,
- Wanting,
- Application of energy, and
- Investigation itself.

These are interesting objects of investigation, as are the *hindrances* to meditation.

### ***The Five Hindrances***

Traditionally, books on meditation spend much time discussing the possible hindrances to meditation. I will not. The hindrances are an important topic, but they can easily begin to seem more ominous than they really are. The hindrances are formally listed as

- Sensory desire,

- Ill will,
- Sloth or torpor,
- Restlessness or worry, and
- Doubt.

If you need more advice on them, consult any great book on insight meditation, such as Bhante Gunaratana's *Mindfulness in Plain English* (2011), or Jack Kornfield's *A Path with Heart* (1993). To simplify, hindrances are anything of which we were not mindful and of which we did not investigate the truth. Now that we know to be mindful and investigate the Three Characteristics of all moment-to-moment experiences, there will be hindrances only when we forget to do so. If we remember, then there will be no hindrances. No phenomena are inherently hindrances unless we do not understand them.

If we do not understand at least one of the Three Characteristics of each of the sensations that make up a phenomenon, then no matter what the phenomenon is, it is a hindrance. Remember that the content of reality is not our concern in insight meditation: The ultimate truth of the sensations that make up experiential reality is. So whatever seems to be in the way of your practice, remember that the experience of *that* moment *is the practice* and contains all the truth you ever need! All phenomena are of the nature of ultimate truth. When we know deeply that these are all of the nature of ultimate truth, phenomena cease to be a fundamental problem. Specifically, noticing the many little rapid sensations that make up sensory desire, ill will, sloth, torpor, restlessness, worry, and doubt *is* insight practice. Sometimes noticing what these really are is more profound and useful than noticing our primary object.

### *The Sage Analogy of Shootin' Aliens*

The Buddha was a master of teaching through analogies that were easily accessible to those listening to him. I am certainly not in his league in this regard, which fact will be clearly demonstrated by the analogy I am about to offer. However, my analogy has its points to make; so after much consideration, I include it here.

The Buddha gave his analogies names, and I have named this one the *Sage Analogy of Shootin' Aliens*. Bear with me here! Just about all of us in this day and age have at least seen, if not played, video games involving the shooting of aliens. As the game goes on, the aliens come in faster and faster, some requiring multiple hits to kill. Some of these games penalize us for wasting ammunition, prompting us to focus on exactly where and when these aliens are arising so that we may shoot them precisely when and where they arise, as efficiently as possible, before they shoot us.

A few of you may already be thinking, "Get that bloody and violent analogy out of this book of wisdom!" However, if you would bother to read the old texts, then you would quickly realize that they depict the Buddha himself using many similarly edgy and even gory analogies. One of the Buddha's analogies that happens to come immediately to mind (AN 4.111) concerns a horse trainer (*teacher*) who kills horses that simply will not be broken (*stops teaching unreachable students*). Thus, you pansy critics can all drop dead.

So to continue, in this analogy the aliens are all of the little sensations that make up experience. Shooting them is paying attention to them and seeing their true nature, perhaps with the aid of noting practice (*a gun with a laser sight*). The aliens' shooting us is what happens when we fail to notice their

true nature: They become a hindrance, binding us in misperception for the duration of our inability to shoot them. Some may even take us out of the game (*cause us to stop practicing entirely*). The seemingly huge aliens that take multiple hits to kill are our Big Issues, those things that are difficult for us to break into their composite sensations—termed “Bosses” in video game parlance. Being penalized for shooting wastefully happens if we note sensations that we didn’t actually experience because we fell into repetitive, imprecise, mantra-like noting habits.

Furthermore, the speed, precision, and playful attitude required for video game mastery is exactly the feel of accomplished insight practice. If you watch a kid play a fast alien-shooting game, then you will notice that the kid is really going for it. He or she is shooting rapidly, definitely not thinking about anything but doing that. This is exactly the dedication and passion that helps with insight practices. I have met numerous adults who might arrogantly criticize some skilled gamer for wasting time in playing video games when that same critical adult couldn’t come anywhere close to matching the gamer’s skills in rapid recognition and moment-to-moment sustained concentration. Be the gamer, not the critical adult. Have fun with your reality and blaze!

When your mindfulness and investigation are on hair trigger, being aware of every little sensation that arises and passes, you are bound to win sooner or later. To keep practicing precisely without becoming lost in stories, adopt the motto, “Note first—ask questions later.” Again, off the cushion the stories can have some reflective value if not taken too seriously. On the cushion, take no prisoners: “Note ’em all, and let God sort ’em out!” This advice sounds extreme; nonetheless, it is powerful and profound advice. Do not dismiss so hastily the Sage Analogy of Shootin’ Aliens.

Where the analogy breaks down is that all these aliens want is attention, recognition, understanding, and acceptance. Who could blame them? They come to us so that we will greet them clearly and openly, but if we fail to do so, then they can become troublesome. Their little alien hearts are broken when we don’t get to know them as they are. They then become mischievous, causing trouble to try to trick us into paying them more attention. Sure, it’s a bit childish of them, but not all aliens that we meet with can be mature and well adjusted.

Thus, rather than killing our aliens by shooting them, we give them what they want by noticing or noting them. We don’t invite the pretty ones to stay with us forever, nor do we ignore the boring ones. We don’t kick the ugly ones from our door, either. Like a politician on the campaign trail, we extend a hand to each, say hello, and then quickly do the same for many others down the line. When we meet, greet, get to know, accept, and even love them, then they go away happy.

I realize that my analogy just slid from excessive violence to downright sentimentality. Nonetheless, somewhere in this mix is what insight practice is all about. We are destroying the illusion of a self, yet we are getting to know and accept ourselves—simultaneously. Fun stuff! This particular video game is the most exciting, intimate, relevant, and amazing one I have ever played, so I highly recommend it. For those not yet thoroughly familiar with it, it is called *reality*.

I have already delineated numerous possible exercises, perspectives, and emphases that you may use as you explore your reality in order to awaken. More will follow; however, I recommend that the foundation of your practice be investigation of the Three Characteristics of the sensations that make up your reality. If you find investigation of all Three Characteristics at once too complicated, then I recommend quick, precise investigation of impermanence. If this practice seems too difficult, try the simple practice of noting rapidly. Doing so is more than sufficiently powerful for gaining clear, direct insights into your reality. Whenever you find the numerous instructions and avenues of inquiry I present

overwhelming, remember this paragraph and return to these simple but profound practices: When in doubt, note it out!

### **Energy**

So we diligently investigate the ultimate truth of our experience, and doing so can be invigorating once we undertake investigation in earnest. Just as playing video games can be exciting, we find that we have lots of sensations arising all the time that are just screaming to be understood. When we rise to this challenge, everything can really begin to jump.

Once we have sorted out what is mind and what is body—which is the first stage of insight, as will be detailed in Part III—and once we have begun to discern the Three Characteristics, this amount of insight in itself can produce much energy, the third of the Seven Factors of Enlightenment. This surge can be somewhat scary until we become used to how quick and powerful our minds can be. As mentioned in the Five Spiritual Faculties, energy is beneficial, as it energizes further practice. We can almost always call up just a bit more energy when we need it, which is helpful to realize. However, simply being mindful and investigating diligently—the first two factors—can also increase energy. Consequently, you have more than one way to strengthen energy, thanks to the Seven Factors of Enlightenment!

Too much of a good thing, however, can be trouble. I personally was blessed with an abundance of natural energy, and this reserve, coupled with periods of pushing myself hard in practice, showed me that one can definitely hyper-energize practice to one's detriment. A later factor, *tranquility*, is the natural counterbalance to energy; in "Tranquility" and the subsequent sections, I will discuss balance, realizing that it will be a moving target. If you are on the runway to crazyland from jacking the energy too high, learn to gently settle into what is arising naturally on its own, rather than continuing to pour energy into practice. Reality is showing up constantly in amazing detail; if your mind is receptive, then all that detail will show itself without your having to do much of anything. This receptivity is actually the best kind of energy: energy that doesn't really feel like energy, but gets the job done nonetheless.

One of the keys to mobilizing energy is *motivation*. If you find that energy is lacking, remember why you are doing all this work. The major motivating reasons are as follows:

- You are suffering and want to end what suffering can be ended by skillful mental and perceptual development.
- You really want to know how your mind works, who you are and aren't, what you can learn to do with your mind, and the like.
- You want to help others and so wish to transform yourself, your understanding, and your abilities so as to make that service to the world easier to fulfill.
- Challenges inspire you, as in,
  - Q: "Why did you climb that mountain?"
  - A: "Because it was there!"
- You can envision the better life to come from transforming your mind in specific ways related to practice—peace and happiness as motivation, the positive take on ending suffering.

- The process of awakening has already started in some way, so you wish to finish.
- Exploration of your mind and reality is just so totally cool!

Any and all of these reasons may mobilize energy in practice. Reconnecting with them when the energy is low can help.

### **Rapture**

When energy comes online with mindfulness and investigation, it can produce something called *rapture*. Rapture has two general meanings, the first of which relates to deep joy, pleasure, and enthusiasm. These are valuable spiritual qualities, so Ye of Dark Puritanical Inklings, take heed! The spiritual path will be much easier going if you are generally enthusiastic about what you are doing.

The usefulness of rapture should be no surprise, but somehow it is often overlooked. I'm definitely not advocating hedonism here, but to walk the spiritual path with a sense of joy, a sense of wonder, a bit of a smile, and especially a sense of humor is really good for you and everyone who has to be near you. Sure, there will be hard times and difficulties that can have good lessons to teach you, but be open to what joy and happiness life can bring.

Natural wonder helps many things, including specifically *investigation*. Reality is simply amazing! Our minds are amazing! The vast intricacy of what happens in each moment is truly remarkable. When you sit, sit with amazement at what is going on, like a vast, complex, rich work of moving, fluxing art. When you walk, walk with a sense of the wonder of all the little facets of movement, of balancing, of the body that is moving through the air, through a changing landscape, with all the little facets that make up that changing landscape. When tasting, smelling, hearing, seeing, and feeling—and thinking, speaking, eating, and doing anything else—really tune in to how fascinating it is to perceive it all. This natural curiosity, this enchantment with the ordinary world, is total gold.

Practitioners that incorporate natural wonder into their practice will do much better, have a much better time, and be much more fun to be around than those who don't. Reconnect with that effortless wonder that children have about themselves and their world. If things get dark, difficult, painful, dull, lifeless, heartless, frustrating, edgy, or boring, then reconnect with this meaning of the word *rapture*. Find something amazing about every moment: You will be glad you did.

Spiritual practice can also produce all kinds of odd experiences, some of which can be intense, bizarre, and far out. This kind of experience is the other connotation of the word *rapture*, commonly referred to as *raptures*. Some of these might be really pleasant, some may be just weird, and some might completely suck. All the strange physical sensations, pains, pleasures, movements, visions, lights, perceptual distortions, energetic phenomena, muscle tensions, and the like, which may or may not show up as a result of spiritual practice, are all just raptures. Repeat—*just raptures*. Don't get hung up on them or make stories out of them, as compelling as they can be, and don't think that they are required: They aren't. The sensations that make them up come, go, ain't you, and don't satisfy. Most are just byproducts of meditation and strong concentration. Many produce no wisdom. Some, of course, can provide deep insights into the truth of things, but don't become stuck on them. Many of these lessons show up once and never again.

Some people become so serious and fixated on suffering that they fight the pleasant raptures and even cling to the difficult ones. Do not do so! The joy and pleasure that may arise in meditation have wonderful healing effects, and can lead to deep tranquility, concentration, and equanimity. Don't cling to

pleasant states, either, or you will be stuck and frustrated when they end, which they always do. In general, if you try to fight or cling to raptures you will get stuck; conversely, if you can accept them as they are, then they will be of benefit. For more connections with rapture in this regard, see the section on the factor of equanimity here, as well as the expertly written Chapter 9 of *A Path with Heart* (Kornfield 1993).

This is a good place for me to mention the concept of *vedena*, a Pali word that relates to the degree of pleasantness, unpleasantness, or neutrality of a sensation. We have no similar word in English (and probably not in whatever other language you might be reading this in), so perhaps we should just use the word *vedena* as it is. As one of my important meditation teachers, Christopher Titmus, helped me understand, if you pay too much exclusive attention to sensations that are either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, while ignoring the other sensations also going on, then you will likely miss many opportunities for insight: Preoccupation with pleasant sensations can cause one to become a vapid bliss junkie; preoccupation with unpleasant sensations can cause one to become dark and depressed; preoccupation with neutral sensations can cause one to become dull and emotionally flat.

The take-home message here is that rapture and raptures are to be understood as they are and related to wisely, with acceptance of all sensations that make them up—be they pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Learn when to put the brakes on practice if the difficult raptures are teaching you their important lessons a bit too fast for you to keep it together, and learn how to open to the wonderful joy and bliss that spiritual practice may produce. Our experience tends to be a complex mixture of many flavors of sensations. They are all quite worthy of investigation. Becoming fluent in the vast range of your experiences in all their varieties will make meditation so much more interesting, workable, and broad than it would otherwise be. Moreover, this fluency across the full range of experience is actually required to pass the final examination, as it were.

### **Tranquility**

Joy, bliss, and rapture are relatively satisfying feelings, and this satisfaction can produce tranquility. We can associate being peaceful with tranquility. Focusing on tranquility and a more spacious and silent perspective in the face of difficult raptures can help you ride them out, and just sitting silently and observing reality do its thing can be powerful practice. There are actually whole schools of spiritual practice dedicated to this emphasis. Thus, tranquility helps in meditation. We may think of great spiritual masters' being internally tranquil, and although this characterization may or may not be true, there are reasons that we associate tranquility with spirituality. A mind that is not tranquil will have a harder time concentrating and being balanced. It is just as simple as that. Being kind and moral can foster tranquility, for doing so lessens the harsh thought patterns in our minds.

That tranquility aids concentration does not mean that excited or even disturbing moments are not “spiritual” or that we must adopt a restrained and artificial flatness. Remember, all types of sensations, mind states, and actions are valid phenomena for investigation because they are real. Real tranquility comes from a deep understanding of *all of this*. All too often, an idealized notion of tranquility becomes a dehumanizing exercise in passivity. By contrast, real tranquility often comes naturally, although you may skillfully cultivate it, as well—say, by just tuning into that quality of calm abiding, or more formally by cultivating deep concentration states of stillness and peace, the afterglow of which can be useful for investigation if we can then rouse a little energy and interest. Cultivating the factor Equanimity helps

cultivate tranquility, as does deepening pure concentration practices, the second spiritual training. Tranquility, concentration, and equanimity are intimately interrelated.

### **Concentration**

Concentration you have seen discussed twice already, and Part III will present it again in much more detail, so I will give it brief treatment here. One of the challenges posed by deep tranquility is keeping the mind concentrated. This statement may seem to directly contradict what I just said about tranquility as an aid to concentration, but in some stages of practice too much tranquility can make the mind dull and hard to focus. In other words, just as tranquility is good for concentration and acceptance, too much may impair energy. Remember—balance and strengthen; strengthen and balance.

Because this list comprises the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, these factors as discussed here apply directly to insight practices, training in wisdom. Thus, the concentration being referred to here differs significantly from that used for attaining high concentration states. It is called *momentary concentration*. In the context of insight, *concentration* means being able to consistently investigate each sensation that arises, one after the other, second after second, minute after minute, hour after hour. When we can practice moment after moment, sensation after sensation, but have not yet shifted into the stages of insight as detailed in Part III, it is called *access concentration*. You will remember that access concentration was suggested as the first goal of practice in Chapter 1. Here, specifically as a factor of enlightenment, it is achieved with a different set of emphases, which will lead directly to the stages of insight. Applying access concentration in this way, you have a stable ability to investigate, in that you can apply it again and again without interruption, but you are not trying to attain stable states or anything else.

### **Equanimity**

As mentioned, concentration can produce great stability and consistency of mind, which can lead to equanimity. *Equanimity* is that quality of mind that is okay with everything, or balanced in the face of anything, even a lack of equanimity. This last possibility may sound strange, but it is well worth considering. Equanimity relates to a lack of struggle even when struggling is happening, to an effortlessness even in effort, to peacefulness even when there is not tranquility. When equanimity is really well developed, one is not frightened of being afraid, worried by being concerned, irritated by being irritated, pissed off at being angry, or the like. Phenomena do not disturb space or even fundamentally disturb themselves from a certain point of view. I have cried yet been equanimous about crying, to clarify what I am talking about. Equanimity is sort of a meta-perspective on everything else.

There are whole spiritual traditions that involve just tuning into this basic truth. There can be great value in learning to include space around things, rather than just being caught up in the things themselves. A useful phrase from one of these traditions is “cultivating space-like meditative equipoise.” The more we habituate this way of being, the more we connect with the truth of our minds. Real equanimity has spaciousness to it, openness, a volumetric component that is important.

### **The Benefits of Softer Styles of Practice**

There are also some really excellent teachings, especially from Zen and Daoism (also spelled Taoism), that relate to equanimity, such as the teachings about “no defilements, no enlightenment,” or those stating that practice is enlightenment, that there is nothing to perfect, that there is nowhere to go, and the like. Checking in with some of these teachings can be helpful. They are the important

counterbalance to spiritual striving and gung-ho practice that can become excessively future-oriented if done incorrectly. I will talk more about both the dangers and uses of such perspectives in Part III. In the end, even if you have all kinds of insights, if you don't have equanimity, you will be beating your head against a wall, and it might actually feel like that or worse.

After receiving feedback on MCTB1, I myself realized that when I wrote it I had benefited from access to many written and living examples of softer styles of practice and skillful yet non-gung-ho perspectives, a few of many examples being Achaan Chah's *A Still Forest Pool* (1985) and Shunryu Suzuki's *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* (1973), as well as the gentle, settling, heart-centered, down-to-earth, and non-map-based styles of meditation teachers such as Sharda Rogell and Yvonne Weier. If you don't have the opportunity to sit with them, you can find their talks (and many other great meditation talks) for free on [www.dharmaseed.org](http://www.dharmaseed.org). Even more important than the remarkably important things they say is something in the energy of how they say them. Pay attention to that. Looking back, I feel that balancing practice perspective in this way helped me, as it facilitated a necessary settling into what was happening naturally, which would have been harder to come by without my exposure to that quality of being—or nonbeing, if you prefer. These gentler influences helped me with the equanimity part of the equation, so I recommend that you find something for yourself to serve in that role and to counterbalance my generally more energetic take on practice.

Once again we return to knowing this moment just as it is. This “just as it is” quality is related not only to mindfulness, but also to equanimity. In the end, we have to just accept the truth of our lives, of our minds, of our neuroses, of our “defilements,” of impermanence, of suffering, and of egolessness. We have to accept all this. This acceptance is what people are talking about when they say to “just open to it,” “just be with it,” “just let it be,” or “just let it go.”

### *The Importance of Progression and Balance*

From a pure insight practice point of view, *you* can't ever fundamentally “let go” of anything, so I sometimes wish the popularity of this misleading and indifference-producing admonition would decline, or at least be properly explained. However, if you simply investigate the truth of the Three Characteristics of the sensations that otherwise seem to be a solid thing, you will come to the wondrous realization that reality is continually “letting go” of itself! Thus, “let it go” at its best actually means, “Don't give a bunch of transient sensations an excessive sense of solidity.” It does *not* mean, “Stop feeling or caring”; nor does it mean, “Pretend that the noise in your mind is not there.”

If people start with “just open to it” yet don't develop strong mindfulness, look into the Three Characteristics, and gain deep insights, then their practice may be less like meditation and much more like psychotherapy, daydreaming, cultivated passivity and denial, or even self-absorbed, spiritually rationalized, neurotic indulgence in mind noise. It was noticing the high prevalence of this activity and the absurd notion that no point existed in trying to awaken that largely demolished my former vision of being a happy meditation teacher in some mainstream meditation center somewhere.

Psychotherapy can be a fine undertaking, but it is a completely different endeavor from meditation and falls squarely in the domain of the first training, though it can definitely benefit from the skills developed by the insight practitioner: awareness of what is happening in each moment, the ability to feel bodily sensations just as those, and the ability to see emotions arise and vanish as just aspects of experience rather than being something that we blindly contract into. I do not, however, advocate wallowing in self-absorbed mind noise, and anyone who has been to a small group meeting on a

meditation retreat knows what I am talking about. It is what happens when people don't ground the mind in the object of meditation, even if that object is something so inclusive as all sensations just as they are.

On the other hand, even if you gain all kinds of strong concentration, look deeply into impermanence, suffering, and no-self, but can't just open to these characteristic, can't just let them be, can't accept the sometimes absurd and frightening truths of your experience, then you will likely be stuck in hell until you can, particularly while in some specific higher stages of insight practices.

Reflect on the previous three paragraphs now and often, because many, many errors on the spiritual path come from not understanding the points made therein. Too often there is an imbalance between the first three factors (*mindfulness, investigation, and energy*), and the final three (*tranquility, concentration, and equanimity*). The vast majority of aspiring insight meditators are, to be honest, way, way, way too slack about the first three. Just so, some gung-ho meditators get into trouble when they don't cultivate enough acceptance, balance, and peace related to the second three. When people focus for too long on only the middle factor, *rapture*, they become vapid bliss junkies. When they fail to include rapture in their practice, they often become darker and darker despite otherwise good effort. In short, all seven factors are crucial.

The order here is important. Start with good technique, mindfulness, and investigation, and work on the others along the way. In other words, you must have both insights and acceptance, and each perspective can and should help the other along the way. They are actually one and the same, after all. Said yet another way, if you are getting nowhere and not much is happening, then you probably need more of the first three factors. If you are frying yourself on the path of insight, as evidenced by your becoming tight, wound up, reactive, angry, frustrated, edgy, or nervous, then chill out, learn concentration practices, back off, take it easy, and cultivate the skillful aspects of the later three factors, as well as perhaps a bit more rapture in the "stop and smell the roses" sense. Many hardcore meditators will ignore this advice to their detriment, assuming that it is only by being plugged into 1000 volts and throwing the big switch that they will see anything good happen. Numerous points throughout this book should help elucidate the markers of progress, signs of being stuck, and ways to reestablish balance.

### *The Near Enemy—Indifference*

One last word about equanimity: Its near enemy, its deadening impostor, is *indifference*. Real equanimity is accepting of the full range of the heart and experience, whereas indifference is dry, flat, and heartless. Real equanimity is extremely honest about what is going on. It is human, down-to-earth, full-spectrum, and in most ways ordinary. This point is frequently misunderstood. On the other hand, being accepting of the full range of the heart doesn't mean always acting on whatever impulse comes up. Act only on the impulses of the heart that seem skillful and kind. Real equanimity is even accepting of and okay with the fluxing sensations that make up flatness, strangely enough, but it is more honest about them. It is a fine line, but the point remains.

Plenty of people have been taught to create some objectification of all feelings and sensations that holds those sensations at arm's length and cultivates some immunity to them, some passivity toward them, with the ideal of "letting it all come and go without attaching any importance to any of it," which sounds so very nice yet has the effect of cultivating denial, repression, a stabilized illusion of some split-off and distant observer, and indifference—not equanimity. Beware of this trap, for it is a really common one and is actually the exact opposite of insight practices, being largely a dressed-up exercise in aversion and ignorance rather than a careful investigation of this real human life.

### **Balance and Perfection**

To balance and perfect the Seven Factors of Enlightenment is—you guessed it—sufficient cause for awakening. Thus, checking in from time to time with this list and seeing how you are doing and what might need some improvement is a good idea, and just having this list in the back of your mind somewhere can be helpful.

It is important to note that only one of the seven factors, namely *investigation* of the Three Characteristics, separates training in concentration from training in fundamental insight. When purposefully training in concentration, we decide to be mindful of a limited and specific concentration object, such as the breath or even a rarified state of consciousness. We do not, however, *investigate* the individual sensations that make up that state, because doing so would break apart the state under investigation and instead produce insights. If we are not looking for ultimate insights at the time of a particular practice session, then we should avoid investigating the Three Characteristics of that state.

However, six of the Seven Factors of Enlightenment are cultivated by training in *concentration*. We apply *energy* to stabilize our concentration, and this energy produces *rapture*, a characteristic of the early concentration states. We also cultivate *concentration* itself strongly, as well as *tranquility* and *equanimity*, which help us stabilize early concentration states and attain to higher ones. Consequently, concentration is often recommended as a preliminary training before training in insight.

Training in morality also cultivates some of the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, although in a less formally meditative way. In order to work well in the ordinary world, we will find it helpful to be *mindful* of what we are thinking, saying, and doing, as well as what effects these acts produce in the world, so that we can consciously work to craft the life we want to lead as best we can. It is helpful to exert *energy* as we craft our life this way. With regard to that life, we can cultivate the *rapture* that maintains a natural, fun curiosity about the remarkable fact of experience itself. We can also cultivate *tranquility*, the ability to not take life too seriously, to relax, to find that balance of focus and ease that makes for a good life. We can learn to stay on track with our aspirations, goals, and tasks, although in this usage *concentration* is more like a form of discipline than the concentration of formal meditation. Even so, the discipline of mind, speech, and action is vital for the other two trainings, concentration and wisdom. Finally, we can learn that, because we cannot flatten all the bumps along the way, having the shock absorbers of *equanimity*, the ability to stay spacious and accepting of whatever happens—including our honest, human, and understandable reactions to whatever happens—also helps us craft a good and healthy life.

### **The Four Noble Truths**

These Four Noble Truths are fundamental to the teachings of the Buddha:

- The truth of suffering,
- The truth of its cause,
- The truth of its end, and
- The truth of the path that leads to its end.

He was fond of summarizing his whole teaching in terms of them. Actually, when asked to be concise, he would say the first and third: the truth of suffering and the truth of the end of suffering. These were what he taught. Like the other little lists here, the Four Noble Truths open onto great profundity, on many levels, and are worth exploring in depth.

### **Truth 1—Suffering**

The first truth is the truth of suffering. Hey, didn't we just see this truth in Chapter 2, "The Three Characteristics of Experience"? Yes! Isn't that great? We will also see it in the final section of this chapter, "The Three Trainings Revisited." There must have been something important but not immediately obvious about suffering for it to be Truth 1 of something called the *Four Noble Truths*.

#### *As Motivation*

Well, why do we practice? Suffering—that's why! It is just this simple. In fact, why do we do anything? Suffering! Plenty of people balk at this truth, saying that much that they do is for reasons other than suffering. I suppose that, to be fully forthcoming, I should add as reasons *ignorance* and *habit*, but these "reasons" are intimately connected to suffering. This connection is worth investigating in depth. Perhaps on first inspection many people miss all that this first truth enfolds, as it is a deep and subtle teaching. Actually, to understand this first truth is to understand the whole of the spiritual path, so take the time to investigate it.

The gist of the truth from a relative point of view is that we want things to be other than they are, and this wanting causes pain. We want things that are nice to be permanent. We want to get what we want and avoid what we don't want. We wish bad things would go faster than they do. All these wishes are contrary to reality: We all have conflicts, age, suffer loss, get sick, and die. Restless, we seem to be constantly running to get something (*greed*), get away from something (*hatred*), or tune out from reality altogether (*delusion*). We are never perfectly happy with things just as they are. These are the traditional, relative ways in which suffering is explained, but these definitions can take us only so far toward liberating investigation.

At the most fundamental level, the level that is the most useful for practicing insight, we wish desperately that some separate, permanent self existed, and we spend huge amounts of time and energy doing our best to prop up the illusion that one does exist. To do so, we habitually ignore lots of otherwise useful sensible information about our reality and give our mental impressions and simplifications of reality much more importance than they are necessarily due. It is this illusion that makes the normal and understandable ways that we try to attain happiness so problematic. We constantly struggle with reality because we fundamentally misunderstand it—*because reality misunderstands itself*.

"So what's new?" one might ask. Good point! It isn't new, is it? This misunderstanding has been the whole of our life! The more actionable question is this: "Is there some understanding that makes a difference?" *Yes*, or we wouldn't be bothering to ask, seek, read, and practice. Somewhere deep down in our being, a little voice cries, "There *is* another way!" We can find this other way.

#### *As an Object of Insight Practice*

Connecting with the truth of suffering can strongly motivate spiritual practice. Most traditional talks on the Buddha's teachings begin with this point. Beyond merely motivating spiritual practice,

however, this tuning into suffering *is* spiritual practice! Many people start meditating and then become frustrated with how much suffering and pain they experience, not knowing that in such experiences they are actually starting to understand something key. They cling to the ideal that insight practices will produce peace and bliss, yet much of what they find is suffering. They don't realize that the tone of experiences on the cushion tends to worsen before it improves. Thus, they reject the very truths that they must deeply understand to obtain the peace that they have been looking for, so they get nowhere. They reject their own valid insights, which they have obtained through valid practice. I suspect that this is one of the most common stumbling blocks on the spiritual path.

The flip side to suffering, which can help, is *compassion*—the wish for there to not be suffering. *Wherever there is suffering, there is compassion.* Most of the time, the compassion in the suffering is somewhat twisted by the confused logic of the process of identification and separation, which is based on poor perception. More on this connection follows, as it leads directly to the Second Noble Truth, the cause of suffering.

### **Truth 2—The Cause of Suffering**

The Second Noble Truth is that the cause of suffering is desire, also rendered as *craving* or *attachment*. We want things to be other than they are because we perceive the world through the odd logic of the illusory split of the perceiver from the perceived. We might say, “Of course we want things to be great and not unpleasant! What do you expect?” The problem isn't actually quite in the desire for things to be good and not be bad; the problem is, in fact, just a bit subtler than that.

The nature of the problem is a slippery business. Many people can get all into craving for noncraving and desiring nonattachment, which can be useful if done wisely. In fact, desire is all we actually have to work with. If common sense is ignored, however, desiring nonattachment may produce neurotic, self-righteous, repressed ascetics instead of balanced, kind meditators. A tour of any monastery or spiritual community will likely expose you to clear examples of both sides of this delicate balance. So, don't make too much of a problem out of the fact that one must desire something in order to seek it. This paradox will resolve itself if we are able to experience reality, in this moment, clearly.

#### *Desire for Refuge in a Separate and Permanent Self*

*Craving*, *attachment*, and *desire* are some of the most dangerous words that can be used to describe something that is actually much more fundamental than these words seem to indicate. The Buddha did talk about these conventional forms of suffering, but he also talked about the fundamental suffering that comes from some deep longing for a refuge that involves a separate or permanent self. We imagine that such a self will be a refuge, so we desire such a self; we try to make certain sensations into such a self, and we cling to the fundamental notion that such a self can exist as a stable entity and that this stable identity will somehow help create or maintain something useful, but it totally doesn't, and instead creates endless problems. The side effects of this process manifest in all sorts of needless exacerbations of unskillful mind states and emotions that are emphatically not helpful, but these are side effects—not the root cause of suffering that the Buddha was pointing to.

As mentioned already, a helpful concept here is compassion, a heart aspect of the practice and reality related to kindness. *You see, wherever there is desire, there is suffering; and wherever there is suffering, there is compassion—the desire for suffering to end.* You can actually experience this. So you

can know how desire, suffering, and compassion are tightly interrelated. This is heavy but good stuff and worth investigating.

### *Fundamental Attraction, Fundamental Aversion, and Fundamental Ignorance*

We might conceive of suffering as compassion's having gotten caught in a loop, the loop of the illusion of duality. It is like a dog's tail chasing itself. Pain and pleasure, suffering and satisfaction, always seem to be *over there*. Thus, when pleasant sensations arise, there is a constant, compassionate, deluded attempt to get over there to the other side of the imagined split. This is *fundamental attraction*. You would think that we would just stop imagining there is a split, but somehow that is not what happens. We keep perpetuating the illusory sense of a split even as we try to bridge it, so we suffer. When unpleasant sensations arise, there is an attempt to get *away* from over there, to widen the imagined split. This is *fundamental aversion*. This strategy will never work, because the split doesn't actually exist, but the way we hold our minds as we try to get away from that side is painful. When boring or unpleasant sensations arise, there is the attempt to tune out altogether and forget the whole situation, to pretend that the sensations on the imagined other side of the imagined split are not there. This is *fundamental ignorance*, and it perpetuates the process, for it is precisely by ignoring parts of our sensate reality that we create the illusion of a split in the first place.

These strict definitions of *fundamental attraction*, *fundamental aversion*, and *fundamental ignorance* are very important, particularly when I discuss the various models of the stages of enlightenment, or *paths*, in Part III. Given the illusion, it continually seems to us that these mental reactions will somehow resolve something permanently. Remember, however, that the only action that will fundamentally help us is to understand the Three Characteristics to the degree that makes the difference between remaining caught in the loop and being liberated by seeing its true nature. The Three Characteristics are manifesting right *here*.

### *Compassion—The Ultimate Aspect of Desire*

Compassion is a good thing, especially when it involves oneself and all beings. It is sort of the flip side of the Second Noble Truth. The problem, however, is that “misdirected” compassion—compassion that is filtered through the process of identification, solidification, and those related mental, perceptual, and emotional habits—can produce enormous suffering and often does. Remember how, in the opening paragraph on the First Noble Truth, I stated that suffering motivates everything we do? We could also say that everything we do is motivated by compassion, which is part of the fundamentally empty nature of reality. Our being motivated by compassion doesn't mean that everything we do is skillful; skillful means is an altogether different issue. It is easy to think of many people, for example, who are searching for happiness in the strangest of places and by doing the strangest of things. Just read any news feed. My take-home message to you is to search for happiness where you are likely to actually find it.

We might say that compassion is the ultimate aspect of desire, or think of compassion and desire as residing on a continuum. The more wisdom or understanding of interconnectedness there is behind our intentions and actions, the more they reflect *compassion* and the likelier it is that the results will be beneficial. The more greed, hatred, and delusion—or lack of understanding of interconnectedness—there is behind our intentions and actions, the more they reflect *desire* and the likelier suffering is to result.

This patterning is sometimes referred to as the *Law of Karma*, where *karma* is a word that involves our intentions, our actions, and the causal workings of reality. Some people fixate on specifics of this law that cannot possibly be known—for example, they may speculate that if they kill a bug then they will be reborn as a bug and be squished. Don't. The law of cause and effect, also called *interdependence*, is just too imponderably complex. Use the general concept of karma to look honestly at what you want, why, and precisely how you know this. Examine what the consequences of thoughts and actions might be for yourself and everyone, and then take responsibility for those consequences. It's a tall order and an important practice to engage in, but don't obsess about it. Remember the simplicity of the first training—training in kindness, generosity, honesty, and clarity—and gain balance and wisdom from the other two trainings as you go.

Sometimes looking into suffering and desire can be overwhelming. Life can sometimes be extremely hard. In these moments, try looking into the heart side of the equation, that of compassion and kindness. Connect with the part of your heart that just wishes the suffering would end and feel that deeply, especially as it manifests in the body. Just this can be profound practice. Many other good techniques exist for cultivating a spaciousness of heart that can bear anything, such as formal loving-kindness practices. See, for example, the practices designed to help us connect to the heart in *Loving-kindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness* (Salzberg 1995). Finding these techniques and practicing them can make the spiritual path much more bearable and pleasant; these effects, in turn, can enable us to persevere, gain deep insights, be able to integrate them into our lives, and use them to benefit others.

The takeaway message is to use the energy of the desire to be happy and free of suffering to take skillful actions, those that can actually make happiness and freedom happen, rather than staying caught in old unexamined patterns of searching for happiness where you will not find it. The Three Trainings—morality, concentration, and wisdom—are skillful and can inform the whole of our life. By following them, we may come to the end of many forms of suffering and be in a much better position to help others do the same.

### **Truth 3—The End of Suffering**

This examination into the cause of suffering brings us nicely to the Third Noble Truth, the end of suffering. There are three types of suffering pertaining to the scope of each of the three trainings. Traditionally, the Buddha talked about the end of suffering in terms of mastering the third training, insight, and thus awakening. The first point to understand is that mastery and awakening can be done and are done today by meditators like you from many spiritual traditions. Yes, that's right: There are awakened people walking around, and not just a rare few who have spent 20 years in a cave in Tibet. This point is really important to understand and have faith in.

The other point is that, with the end of fundamental desire, which we will render here as the end of the filtering of compassion and reality through the odd logic of the process of illusory dualistic perception, there is the end of fundamental, all-pervasive suffering. That's it: "Done is what has to be done," and "Gone, gone, gone beyond"—all of that. All beings can do it, and there is, to make bit of a mystical joke, no time like the present.

### **Truth 4—The Noble Eightfold Path to the End of Suffering**

The Fourth Noble Truth is the Noble Eightfold Path (SN 45.8) that leads to suffering's final end. Another list! I hope that you have come to like these little lists by now so that one more will be seen as

another manageable little guide on how to find the end of suffering. Luckily, we have already seen the whole of the Noble Eightfold Path in other parts of some of the other lists, and it is summarized in the Three Trainings of morality, concentration, and wisdom:

- Morality
  - Skillful action
  - Skillful speech
  - Skillful livelihood
- Concentration
  - Skillful energy
  - Skillful concentration
  - Skillful mindfulness
- Wisdom
  - Skillful understanding
  - Skillful intention

The morality training is broken down into three specifics: skillful action, skillful speech and skillful livelihood. *Skillful* means conducive to the end of suffering for us and for all other living beings. Be kind, honest, clear, and compassionate in your whole life, in your actions, speech, and work. Notice that nothing is excluded here. The more of our lives that we integrate with the spiritual path, the better. Simple to remember and also a powerful guide. These practices are designed to eliminate what ordinary suffering we can in this ordinary life by ordinary means.

The concentration section contains three items we saw in the Five Spiritual Faculties and the Seven Factors of Enlightenment: skillful energy, skillful concentration, and skillful mindfulness. These teachings are designed to help us access jhanas and eliminate what suffering those temporary but really nice states can.

The wisdom section has the two last parts of the path: skillful thought, or intention, and skillful understanding, or wisdom. These two are often rendered in different ways, but the meaning is the same: Understand the truth of your experience, and aspire to kindness and wisdom in your thoughts and deeds. These eliminate the fundamental, all-pervading type of suffering that comes from fundamental ignorance.

Three types of suffering, three trainings to address them. Again, simple but powerful.

## The Three Trainings Revisited

The Three Trainings provide a great framework for spiritual work, a framework that can help us maintain a clear, empowering way of thinking about what we are doing. It is therefore worthwhile to review the Three Trainings—in particular, the completely nonoverlapping scope of each training:

- The scope of the first training, morality, is the ordinary world, the conventional world, the world that we are all familiar with before we even consider more specialized topics such as meditation. The goal is to act, speak, and think in ways conducive to your own welfare and others' welfare.
- The scope of the second training, concentration, is to focus on very specific, limited objects of meditation and thereby attain to specific altered states of consciousness.
- The scope of the third training, that of insight, or wisdom, is to shift to perceiving reality at the level of individual sensations, to perceive the bare truth of sensations, and thereby attain to profound insights into the nature of reality and realize the stages of enlightenment.

### **Enlightenment**

There are three ways in which words such as *enlightenment* tend to be used, and these ways may also relate to the scopes of the Three Trainings; however, using the term loosely and interchangeably this way conflates the separate scopes and is therefore a dangerous habit. I strongly advocate using *enlightenment* and similar words to refer only to ultimate insights, meaning the stages of awakening in the high and traditional sense. Although we may hear people speak of committing “enlightened” actions, or of thinking in “enlightened” ways, for spiritual training we need either to take care to explain that these are conventional and relative definitions of *enlightenment*, or, better yet, to altogether refrain from such lexical confusion.

Some traditions confer an ultimate status on the higher concentration states. I also advocate strongly against this practice, as did the Buddha. For some people, these states are so compelling and seductive that they imagine they have awakened to nonduality, when they are merely temporarily states that are, for example, profoundly unitive or involve periods of deep yet sensate *unknowing*—the latter being experiences too lacking in specific qualities or intensity to be clearly known. Thus, I strongly suggest that such attainments never be associated with the language of enlightenment, or awakening, in any way.

I define *enlightenment* as the permanent elimination of the perceptions that either duality or unity defines the nature of reality—in other words, the attainment to permanent nondual realizations that are unshakable. It has nothing whatsoever to do with ontology, and it has everything to do with the immediate experience of manifestation-awareness as nondual. Part III will elaborate on this definition of *enlightenment*.

Precise definitions and delineations can also be useful for examining common issues, such as thoughts of past and future, which people tend to encounter when they first enter the practice of meditation. Confusion arises when the associated advice is applied outside of the scope for which it is meant. For example, when working on our ordinary lives—within the scope of the first training—the content of our thoughts on past and future is helpful, in fact absolutely necessary. With experience, we generate a body of memory of what in this world leads to what. With our predictive ability, we can use this body of memory to craft a well-lived life, however we define it. However, when we are working on training in concentration, such thoughts are generally ignored or suppressed by deep concentration on another object. When we are engaged in insight practices, by contrast, it doesn't matter so much whether thoughts of past or future arise, so long as we ignore their content, notice that they occur now, and notice the true nature of the individual sensations that make up those thoughts.

All too commonly, people try to apply one set of practice advice to a scope for which it was never intended; for example, they may try to stop thinking when trying to cope with their daily life. This sort of practice promotes only stupidity, and there is already more than enough of that in the world. In short, when evaluating or applying spiritual advice, make sure that you understand the specific context for which it was designed.

### ***A Postmodern Morality Play***

I thought it would be fun to envision the Three Trainings as three separate characters, have them critique each other, and then have them discuss the ways that they might reinforce each other—a kind of postmodern morality play. Although I have exaggerated and polarized their issues with each other for effect, each of the points made has some validity. I hope you will see through the humor to the important points being illustrated.



*Curtain opens. Morality, Concentration, and Insight are sitting in a bar, having a discussion. A large stack of empty shot glasses appears in front of each character.*

#### MORALITY

You navel-gazing, self-absorbed, good-for-nothing twits! I go out and work hard all day long to make this world fit to live in while you two sit on those sweat-covered cushions, cultivating butt-rot! I go out and make good money, keep food in our mouths, keep a roof over our heads, deal with our “stuff,” and you go out and spend our money up at that freak-house you call a meditation center when there is important work to be done. I want to work on my tan!

#### INSIGHT

Who are you calling “self-absorbed?” I can’t be self-absorbed by either or both definitions! If it weren’t for me, you would be so completely stuck in dualistic illusion that you wouldn’t know your ass from your elbow, you conceptually fixated, emotionally mired, bound-up-in-manifestation-looking, twelve-sandwich-eating . . .

#### CONCENTRATION

Yeah! And by the way, Ms. Oh-So-Worldly, you should learn to lighten up sometimes! Work your fingers to the bone, whadda’ya get? *Bony fingers*—that’s what. And that goes for you, too, Mr. E! If you didn’t have my skills, you’d be shit out of luck, unable to focus, and deadly boring to boot! Who brings up the deep joy and wondrous mind states around here? I do, that’s who, so you two should just chill out.

#### INSIGHT

Oh, yeah? Well, Mr. La-la Land, if it weren’t for me, we’d be so addicted to your transient highs that we might just get arrested on the way to your next fix. Somebody call the Law! You two are so easily sucked into blowing things out of proportion that without me you would have all the perspective of a stinking dung heap!

MORALITY

Dung heap? You'd be lucky to have a dung heap if it weren't for me, you emptiness-fixated, I'm-oh-so-nonconceptual vibration junkie. What good is having perspective if you don't go out and use it?

CONCENTRATION

Yeah! And speaking of *perspective*, I give you guys more perspective than you have any idea of. Not only do I provide a bridge between our resident Save-the-World Poster Child and the Void-Fixated Flicker-Boy, I help you two get your twitchy little mind right! I help Girl Scout's Honor here gain insights into her screwed up emotional world and "stuff" than she ever could have on her own, and if it weren't for me, Mr. Ultimate would just be spinning his wheels in the parking lot! And, furthermore, I am fun, fun, fun!

INSIGHT

Yeah, maybe, but you don't know when to stop, you otherworldly space-case! If Relative Man over here and I hadn't pulled your head out of the clouds, you'd still be lost in some formless realm, thinking you had half a clue about an actual way out. I'm the one with the clue! There ain't *nothin'* in the world like what I know, and without it, you two's whole pathetic little sense of identity would lock you in a world beyond your control. I am your salvation, and you know it.

MORALITY

Beyond my control, my ass! I am the one who makes things happen in that world, great things! I'm the one who really gets us somewhere! I make a difference! Who cares if there is no self when people are starving in Africa?

INSIGHT

*Who* cares? Precisely. You will find no separate, permanent self that cares!

MORALITY

I know *you* are, but what am *I*?

INSIGHT

Exactly.

MORALITY

Jerk!

CONCENTRATION

See? You guys gotta chill out, get some balance and peace in your life. Take a few moments and just breathe! Leave your worries and cares behind, and fly the friendly skies! It's free, legal, and oh-so-recommended. You can quit whenever you like! All your friends are doing it! Come on, just relax!

MORALITY

All right, Fly Guy, and when are we going to actually deal with our issues, huh? When are we going to save the world? We can't just go on vacation forever.

INSIGHT

Your problem is that you can't see the sensations that make up these "issues" as they really are, so you make such a big friggin' deal out of them. I mean, I see your point, but you are so reactive and blind that you are hardly the one for the job. You solidify these things into huge monsters, forget you have done this, and then freak out when they come running after you. You need a clue, you confused little shrew!

MORALITY

Oh, yeah! Don't think that just because you can see the true nature of the issues that make up your reality that you won't still have stuff to deal with! Now, *that's* delusion!

INSIGHT

It's even more deluded to think that you can really have a completely healthy perspective on anything without me, you Monster Maker!

CONCENTRATION

Dudes, do you see those angels floating through the wall?

MORALITY

Where in the *Hell* did I find you freaks?

INSIGHT

Short memory, eh? You found us when you realized you couldn't do it on your own. You needed us to really be able to do the job you wanted to do, to really make a difference and be as happy and effective as you could be.

MORALITY

Yeah? And so when can I finally be *rid* of you?

CONCENTRATION AND INSIGHT

When you have mastered us completely. Jinx!—one two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten!

MORALITY

Bartender. . . .

THE END



If you find that you have now arrived at the moment when you cannot laugh at your own path, stop immediately and figure out why. I hope that you have found this little, irreverent dialogue entertaining. Although a bit ridiculous here, these sorts of tensions can continually arise until we really have a secure grasp of each training. When we have it, they will work together harmoniously, as they were meant to do.

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## 4. *Practical Considerations for Practice*

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Having discussed the theory and techniques necessary to begin the path and reach awakening, we now can turn some attention to the practical and logical considerations that you will likely encounter as you begin and continue your practice.

### **Time, Place, and Duration**

The best time to meditate is when you can, as in, “Get it while you can!” The best place to meditate is where you can, and the best duration is for as long as is available or as necessary for you to get what you wish out of practice. This advice may seem pat, but people can sometimes get it into their heads that certain times are better than others and thus not meditate when that seemingly sacred time period is unavailable or interrupted. They may feel that certain places or special circumstances (special cushions, noise levels, props, or the like) are oh-so-necessary, and if these are not available then they may feel frustrated and unable to practice. They may feel that a certain minimal duration of meditation time is necessary, and thus find themselves unable to make use of what time they may have.

If you have two hours each day for meditation, great! If you have two jobs, have six kids, and just can’t find more than ten minutes each day for meditation, then make good use of what you have. There have been times in my life when I was grateful that I had twenty hours a day to practice. On the other hand, when I have only had ten minutes a day, I have been grateful for the sense of how precious those ten minutes were. Skillful urgency and well-developed gratitude for a chance to practice at all can allow us to use limited slots of time to their fullest.

If you can take off a month each year for intensive retreats, wonderful. If a weekend retreat once a year is all you can do, go for it. In short, honor where you are and what you can realistically accomplish, given your current circumstances. If they are not entirely to your liking, and you want to take more time for practice, work on rearranging things a bit in a way that leaves you with a life that you still find fulfilling if you later decide to practice less.

Luckily, meditation is an extremely portable endeavor. You don’t have to lug around special equipment, have other people around, or schedule an appointment. There are no fees, waiting lists, or red tape. Reality happens. Sensations arise. If you’re paying careful attention to them, really feeling exactly what it is like to be here now, then you’re doing it! It’s just that simple.

Although I have definitely come to appreciate “ideal” meditation conditions and their obvious benefits, I have also had profound insights and extraordinary experiences in places that would hardly be considered ideal—such as the break room at work, or at the sink while brushing my teeth. Although I definitely appreciate the additional depth of long periods of uninterrupted practice, I am certain that being able to make use of little bits of time here and there has done much to move things along.

I sometimes meditate when reclining before sleep, when reclining in the morning before I have to get up, when I wake up in the middle of the night, before catnaps on the couch, during boring lectures and meetings, and in the school lounge before afternoon classes. I have come to the conclusion that five

minutes of really engaged, clear, and focused practice in poor circumstances can often produce more benefits for me than an hour of poor, vague, and distracted practice in “optimal” conditions.

I have also come to appreciate the value of timed sits, where I vow to sit and pay attention for a defined period of time. I used to use a little alarm clock but now use my smartphone’s timer. I vow to sit for a predetermined space of time, usually from 30 minutes to 1.5 hours. I have found that, during untimed sits, I tend to get up when I run into difficult territory, mild pain from sitting, or other circumstances that I don’t want to acknowledge and investigate clearly. A timed sit makes it much more likely that I will be able to sit in the face of difficulties and therefore develop more confidence and discipline, as well as the insights that come from persistent investigation.

## **Postures**

The four postures for meditation that are mentioned in traditional Buddhist practice are those of reclining, sitting, standing, and walking. Obviously, people other than Buddhists also assume these postures, so there is nothing particularly Buddhist about them. Each has its own set of benefits and drawbacks, and each may be useful at one time or another. Looked at another way, this means that we can meditate in just about any position we find ourselves. We can be aware of where we are, what we are doing, and what our experience feels like all day long. Which posture we choose doesn’t really matter from a pure insight point of view, but there are some practical reasons that we might choose one or the other for formal practice. Posture choice is mostly about finding one that works in our current circumstances and complements our current energy level.

### ***Reclining***

Reclining practice has the advantages of being extremely sustainable, not requiring attention to maintaining a posture, being relatively free from pain, and really allowing the attention to turn to subtle sensations. It has the distinct disadvantage of quickly putting many people to sleep, so most people prefer sitting. A few people, such as me, are so naturally wired that they can meditate clearly when reclining most of the time and may sometimes find sitting just a bit too intense and edgy. Reaction to the energetic quality of a posture varies with the individual, the phase of practice, and practical considerations such as prior sleepiness and hunger. It usually doesn’t take much experimentation to discover whether reclining will work for us.

### ***Sitting***

Sitting is the classic meditation pose, but it is not as special as some would make it out to be. I will use the phrase “on the cushion” often in this book, but I do so because I find the phrase catchy and not because there is something magical about the sitting posture. When I write “on the cushion,” I am actually referring to formal meditation in any of these four postures.

Sitting has the quality of being more energy-producing than reclining and less energy-producing than walking and standing. It can also be very stable once we learn to sit well. However, many people find that learning to sit well is a whole endeavor in and of itself. There are lots of postures even within the category of sitting—for example, in a chair with back off the backrest or with back on the back rest (a totally reasonable option for those with musculoskeletal issues that prevent sitting for long periods of time in other postures); in lotus position; in half-lotus position; in “Indian” style with legs crossed; in the

Burmese, or “friendly,” position, which is like the cross-legged position except that both feet are on the floor one in front of the other; or in a keeling position with or without a bench.

Many traditions make a big deal about exactly how you should sit, some being particularly macho or picky about such details, but in the end it doesn't matter so much. What seems to matter most is that you be able to sustain the posture, that your back be fairly straight so that you can breathe well, and that you not permanently hurt yourself. Aches and pains are common in meditation, but if they persist for a long time after you rise from sitting, particularly in your knees and back, seriously consider modifying your sitting posture.

### **Standing**

Standing is an even more energy-producing posture than sitting, with the obvious advantage being that it is even harder to fall asleep when you are standing. It seems to increase the intensity of a meditation session even more and can be useful when energy is low. The downside is that standing's intensity can be quite a lot for some people, with burning in the feet, back pain, shoulder tension, and other annoyances, until one becomes used to it and even sometimes thereafter. I recommend standing with the eyes open to avoid falling over, although some people can do just fine with their eyes closed. If you are sitting and finding that you simply cannot stay focused and awake for whatever reason, try standing for a bit. It is much more skillful than falling asleep and snoring in the meditation hall, which definitely happens.

### **Walking**

Walking is the most energetically active of the four postures and provides a nice stretch for the joints and back after we have been doing a lot of sitting. Its strengths are its weaknesses, in that the moving around can make it easier to stay present but also lead to a lack of stable concentration. Some people consider walking practice to be secondary to sitting, but I have learned from experience that walking meditation should be given just as much respect as sitting meditation. Whether we walk fast or slow is really not so important; what is important is that while walking we investigate all the little sensations that go into walking. In my own practice I started out walking very slowly and ended up walking relatively fast later on, but you must find what works for you. In general, in the beginning there is something to be said for slowing down and carefully tuning in to the feet.

Walking is a great time to check out intentions and their relationship to actions, because walking involves a complex and interesting interplay of intention and action. Deconstructing how the sense of a doer is created is directly related to noticing how intentions arise on their own and lead to actions that arise on their own, and this set of sensations is something that walking is really great for. If you are having problems staying grounded when walking, I recommend staying primarily with the physical sensations in the feet and legs, particularly the sensations of contact between the feet and the ground or floor. Be careful on the turnarounds if you are walking back and forth, and also when going through doors if there are doors, because people tend to space out at these points—don't! These are unusually good times for insights to happen. I tend to mentally prepare for turnarounds about two steps before they begin, ramping up the awareness so as to not to be lost on them, and have found that this preparation helps.

Walking practice should not be underestimated. Most people who go on retreats involving walking practice totally blow it when it comes to the walking, because they consider it less useful than sitting, but in this they err. Walking has so many obvious, clear, strong, complicated, full, and rich

sensations coming in that it would seem hard to screw it up, yet, because people's effort at moment-to-moment concentration and investigation can paradoxically fall off in comparison to that of sitting, this break in the continuity of mindfulness can cause people to regress in their practice and throw away many easy opportunities for insight. Of all the insights I ever had in my whole practice to date, the most important one happened while I was walking. Take walking seriously, and you will maintain and increase your hard-earned momentum from sitting. Slack off, and you will lose much momentum and fail to learn all the really cool lessons that walking practice can offer.

## **Objects for Insight Practices**

As mentioned, there are many insight traditions, and each has its favorite meditation objects. Although from the point of view of pure insight the object of meditation doesn't matter, as with postures some practical considerations relate to our particular abilities and the current phase of our practice. It should be noted here at the outset that no objects are inherently objects for insight practice as opposed to concentration practice. The difference between the two practices is whether we investigate the Three Characteristics of the object, or ignore the individual sensations composing it to artificially solidify it and tune in to pleasant qualities of experience. Thus, you could use any of the objects mentioned in this section, as well as many others, for either type of practice.

### ***Choiceless Awareness or Structured Agenda***

The first question is whether or not one has a particular agenda for what kind of sensations or focus one wishes to include in the practice—whether one wants to do choiceless awareness practice, for example, or a more structured practice.

#### ***Practice—Choiceless Awareness***

*Choiceless awareness* practice, in which one investigates whatever arises, without a specific focus, has the advantage of being inclusive and “natural.” Nonetheless, some people can easily become distracted and ungrounded when they don't take a more structured approach. I put “natural” here in quotes because even all of the sensations that make up things like the sense of having a choice, the sense of exerting effort, and the sense of applying a technique are actually just as natural as remaining “choiceless,” because they are simply causal happenings, just like everything else. Still, in relative terms, choiceness awareness does feel more natural. Following are some basic choiceless awareness practice instructions:

1. Pick one of the four postures, or do this practice during more complicated activities.
2. Allow all sensations of all six sense doors to show themselves clearly as they arise naturally.
3. Allow attention to move as it will, but add in the insight component, which is careful attention to the Three Characteristics of whatever arises.

#### ***Axes for a Structured Agenda***

For those taking a more structured approach to the meditation, some of the axes one can move along are as follows:

- The degree to which one includes physical sensations, mental sensations, or both;
- Whether one focuses narrowly or uses a more open field of attention; and
- Whether one moves the attention around or keeps it fixed in about the same place.

### ***Physical Sensations or Mental Sensations***

The main advantage of focusing primarily on physical sensations—such as the breath, the sensations of walking, the points of contact with the floor, or the sensations of the physical body in general—is that they are much less seductive than mental sensations. Mental sensations tend to trap us in content and stories, as anyone who has ever tried to meditate knows all too well. The more mental sensations we include in our practice, the more of our emotional and psychological stuff we will encounter. This entry into our emotional or psychological stuff can be a mixed blessing. If our practice is strong, we can enter such territory yet still see the true nature of all of the sensations that make it up. Doing so can be truly transformative in good ways. If our practice is not so strong, however, we will simply be swamped, lost in the habitual patterns of thinking associated with our stuff.

Thus, physical sensations help us ground ourselves, and mental sensations open us up to plunging into the depths of mental life or getting lost in it. From a pure insight point of view, neither one is more holy or more of a source of truth. However, when we do the experiment we will quickly realize what works for us, “works” in this case meaning that we can keep seeing the true nature of the numerous quick sensations that make up our reality.

Numerous other types of physical objects may be investigated, including sounds, sights, and even smells and tastes. Some people have a natural proclivity for investigating the sensations of a particular sense door. There is a monk in Burma who recommends that his students use the high-pitched tones in the ears as an object, and sometimes I have found them useful and interesting. Rather than seeming to be a continuous tone, we can hear each little individual sensation of ringing as a discontinuous entity. We may also take sights as object, such as the colors on the back of our eyelids or, if our eyes are open, whatever visual sensations present themselves. These are also impermanent, and if we are good at noticing this, then we may even see our visual world present itself as the frames of a movie or a complex, flickering organic patchwork of shifting impressions.

### ***Narrow Focus or Wide Focus***

Another consideration is whether to use a narrow or broad focus of attention. The advantage of a more narrow focus of attention is that it may exclude many distractions. We may become good at noticing selected types of objects, such as the sensations of breathing in the abdomen or at the tip of the nose; this is just fine and even a good idea. Such one-pointed practice is routinely recommended, and some people, such as me, have a natural inclination toward this style.

Others find that this narrow focus makes them too tight and irritable. They find that they do much better with a wider, more inclusive field of attention. These preferences vary with the person and the situation; if we are honest with ourselves, we will be able to know what is working for us and what is not. The advantage of a wide field of attention is that we need to put less effort into staying focused and can be more present to whatever arises naturally. The downside is that we may become very lazy meditators and become lost in thought. These tradeoffs must be assessed, and as time goes on we may adjust the

width of our practice many times, depending on what is happening. Width of attention will be addressed in more detail in Part III, as it is a fascinating topic.

There are practices, such as body sweeping from the tradition of U Ba Khin and popularized by S. N. Goenka, that keep the attention moving all the time. Movement can be helpful, because it keeps us engaged with new and interesting sensations. In addition, it may keep us from thinking that we are staying with new sensations when really we are just in a rut of remembering old patterns. However, these practices have the downside that they can sometimes lack the real precision of honest attention that comes from staying with more restricted areas of focus. We can end up giving more attention to keeping our attention moving than to clearly investigating what our attention reveals. Again, some people do well with moving attention practices and some seem to thrive on keeping the attention in one general area.

### ***Self-Control and Discipline***

It should be noted that we may not always know exactly what is best for us. We may pick practices that feel good to us precisely because they don't hit too closely, don't allow us to clearly investigate the disconcerting truths of impermanence and suffering, don't hit at our sense of identity in a way that really cuts to the bone. We might also pick traditions that are grueling and painful for us because we imagine that this sense of struggle and endurance is what is important, even if such traditions do not facilitate clear investigations of the truth of our actual experience, the settling in and opening up that would actually help. Thus, working with good teachers who can advise us and help keep us from resting in our delusions is recommended. This said, some teachers teach only one practice, usually the particular one that worked for them. If that practice is also a technique that genuinely works for us, then we are set. If not, we may wish to investigate other traditions and techniques.

On a related note, although I have advocated that you figure out what works for you by considering how you are built and where you are, I do recommend moderation in this regard. For instance, if you sit down to meditate and then decide that you are just a bit sleepy, then you stand up, and then you settle down a bit, so a few minutes later you sit down again. Then a minute later you decide you really don't like that little pain in your knee, so you lie down, and so it goes. Such practice is likely to be of little benefit to you, so try to pick a posture and stick with it within reason. The same applies to objects of meditation, particularly when you are starting out. There is a lot to be said for cultivating this basic level of self-control and discipline. Without it, you can end up shifting your practice habits every time your investigation begins to hit close to home.

### **Retreats**

The world of retreats and monasticism contrasts with the world of "daily life," or the life of a "householder," who, for those not steeped in Buddhist stuff, is anyone who is not a monk or nun. Each sphere has its own set of issues, but many of them overlap, and the differences may be more a question of degree than of dichotomy.

Now, it is true that the battle is not always to the strong, nor the race to the swift, but that's the way to bet. In other words, those who do lots of practice in daily life, go on more and longer retreats, are more consistently able to concentrate and investigate quickly and precisely, pay attention more often during their daily activities, and have their morality trip more together are, on average, much more likely to make fast progress.

When on retreat, people have the opportunity to practice nearly all day in settings that are usually designed to be conducive to clear, precise inquiry and depths of meditation. Why so few people actually take advantage of these circumstances when they go on retreat is beyond me, and I will spend some time ranting about such waste of opportunity in Part II. The point here is that going on retreats provides opportunities for much faster and deeper practice to those who choose to really practice. Said another way, if you go on retreat, make good use of that precious time.

### ***Benefits of Momentum***

There is a great difference between the experiences of people who do retreats halfway and people who really follow the instructions all day long. In my experience, there is no comparison between retreats I have done in which I really powered the investigation from the time I awoke until I went to sleep at night, causing fast and profound progress, and those in which I took breaks here and there to think about my issues and meditation theory, generally causing moderate to slow progress. Although many people think that retreats are for more advanced practitioners, a few retreats early in one's practice can really jump-start progress, allowing one to then make much better use of meditation time off retreat. I started Buddhist meditation practice with a nine-day intensive retreat, and I am glad I did because it taught me much and prevented much wasted effort.

I often think of the momentum that retreats generate in terms of rolling a boulder over a hill. If you get a long running start, pushing hard the whole way, you are more likely to get the boulder rolling fast enough that it rolls over the hill in one straight shot. If you push intermittently or half-heartedly, then the boulder is likely to roll back when you get to the steep part of the hill, although you have worn the hill down a little bit, and you may also be a bit stronger for the exercise. Thus, it is possible to wear down the hill, given enough time, but it is much faster to simply power over it the first time and move on to the next hill. I know of no special benefits owing to a slow practice that fails to gain some early footholds in the territory of concentration or insight.

Those who take the wear-down-the-hill approach may eventually lose faith and interest, having done much work to little effect. Those who really apply themselves and cross a few hills early on through focused and consistent effort, such as retreats or really solid daily life practice, will have more of a sense of accomplishment and empowerment, and may even put in less total time and effort than those who tried to wear down the hill. This irony should not be lost on those who want to be smart about developing their meditative skills.

For example, let's say that you could allocate 365 hours out of one year to formal meditation practice. Given a choice, I would be more inclined to take half of those hours, about 182, and do a ten-day retreat, practicing hard and consistently 18 hours a day with minimal breaks at the beginning of the year, and then spend half an hour meditating each of the other days. I would be much more likely to cross into some interesting territory early on and overcome some of the initial hurdles than if I spent one hour each day for that year practicing well. The amount of time and effort is the same, but the effect is likely to be quite different.

Another thing about momentum is this: It builds slowly and fades rapidly. What does this mean? Imagine that you were running at 7 miles per hour on an extremely long moving walkway, like one you would find in a gigantic airport, but the long moving walkway itself was moving the opposite direction at 6 miles per hour. Thus, for each hour you ran, you would gain a mile. However, if you stopped running for ten minutes, then you would end up a mile behind. This is how meditation on retreats is. If you want

to build momentum, don't take pauses in the practice, for they will cost you way more than you think they will. Stopping for ten minutes to slack off after an hour sit might cost you all the momentum you gained during that sit and perhaps more. Be mindful every second, from the moment you get up to the moment you go to sleep and in all transition periods: arising from the cushion, brushing your teeth, walking to the meditation hall, eating, bathing, and dressing. Those who utilize all of those periods will make vastly more progress, on average, than those who don't, all other, more formal walking and sitting sessions being equal.

### ***Logistics and Facilities***

Retreats tend to have a semi-predictable rhythm to them. Realizing this allows us, if we have the time and resources, to choose how long a retreat we want to meet our meditative goals. Even if we are practicing well, the first few days of a retreat tend to be mostly about adjusting to the place, the posture, the routine, the technique, the food, the people, the local customs, the schedule, and other conditions. Similarly, the last day or three of a retreat tend to bring up thoughts of what we are going to do next after we leave the retreat. Thus, to ensure some time in the middle when you are not dealing with these distractions as much, I recommend retreats that last longer than five days. It is not that benefit can't be derived from shorter retreats, but there is something about those middle days between the first few and the last few that tend to make strong concentration and good practice easier to attain.

Every retreat center and tradition has its neurotic shadow aspects and downsides. These sides are inevitable, but by identifying them you can avoid having them slow down your investigation. One center where I have spent a bit of time is prone to attracting very serious, scowling people who trudge around in their walking practice like the slightest sound or glance from anyone around them might set them off like a bomb. I have been to another center where sometimes I have been the only meditator there, which required me to have more self-motivation and discipline. Another monastic center I have visited has the whole male hierarchy thing going on, which can cause all sorts of reactions from retreatants—both women and men.

Then there are always neuroses around nearly everything concerning facilities. For example, there is food—a huge topic, of which vegetarianism as opposed to nonvegetarianism is just the tip of the iceberg. (I personally don't think that eating meat is likely to interfere with most people's meditation abilities, but it certainly is not great for the animals or the environment.) There are also almost always issues around bathrooms, quarters, showers, hot water, washing clothes and dishes, cleaning duties, heating and cooling (one place has cantankerous wood stoves in some buildings for heat, and another in a tropical setting has open windows that let the mosquitoes swarm in), clothing (for example, some centers have people wear white, others won't tolerate skimpy or revealing outfits, and some don't care), fragrances, chemical sensitivities, incense, morning wake-up bells (too quiet, too loud, someone forgets to ring it at all), schedules, roommates (particularly those that snore, smell, are noisy or messy, or are otherwise bothersome), strictness of silence, eye contact or the lack thereof, etiquette around teachers (for example, whether to bow, whether to ask challenging questions, limits on access time, their personalities and neurotic stuff, whether they speak our language, and so forth), etiquette of entering rooms with icons (for example, whether to bow three times or not), and the presence of icons or not (and which icons). And then there are the issues of the orthodoxy of ritual, dogma, posture, hand position, eating rituals, chanting, vows, and so on.

That list missed the nearly perennial issues of corruption, cults of personality, crushes, romances, affairs, miscommunications, vendettas, scandals, drug use, power plays, politics, money issues, cliques, and all the other behaviors that can show up anywhere there are people. In short, whatever you imagine that you or other people might have issues around is bound to show up sooner or later if you spend enough time in spiritual circles or retreat centers. Although solo practice is an option, it doesn't prevent all of these issues and has its own set of downsides. Most people practice more diligently in group settings, as is human nature: It is like going to a gym as opposed to working out at home.

The crucial realization is that great practice can occur in conditions far from perfect, particularly if we realize that all the sensations that make up these inputs and our reactions to them are all worthy of investigation and thus as much a source of ultimate—and often relative—wisdom as any other sensations. I have rarely had what I considered perfect practice conditions, but I have done well and so can you. This said, some centers, particular retreats, and teachers are better than others, so exploring and asking around are worthwhile. The quality of retreat centers and teachers can change over time, adding to the confusion. All these considerations can be particularly distracting and distressing for a first-time retreatant, who often harbors some naïve hopes, however unacknowledged, of walking into the Garden of Eden, sitting with the Buddha, and hanging out with the most evolved fellow practitioners one could imagine.

One of the reasons for monasticism is that the practitioner's commitments become his or her practice, but there are plenty of people who have figured out how to live in the world and use retreats and strong daily practice to achieve essentially the same effects. In fact, at this unusual time in history, there are plenty of places to sit for little money, where you can get great support for practice without having to deal with all the ritual, dogma, and other hassles that are involved in ordination.

Some of my favorite places to go on retreat are as follows:

- Insight Meditation Society (IMS), Barre, Massachusetts, <http://www.dharma.org>;
- Bhavana Society, Highview, West Virginia, <http://www.bhavanasociety.org>;
- The Malaysian Buddhist Meditation Centre (MBMC) in Penang, Malaysia (teachers vary, check before going), <http://www.mbmcmalaysia.org>; and
- Gaia House, Totnes, England, <http://gaiahouse.co.uk>.

Also worth mentioning are the Mahasi centers in Myanmar (Burma) such as Panditarama Shwe Taung Gon Sasana Yeiktha in Yangon (formerly known as Rangoon), <http://www.panditarama.net>, and particularly Panditarama Lumbini Vipassana Meditation Center, Lumbini, Nepal, <http://www.panditarama-lumbini.info>, to which I haven't been but know many people who have.

For those who are really into Mahasi Sayadaw style practice as I am, the Three-Month Retreat at IMS, or a few weeks to months at a place like Panditarama Lumbini or some of the Thai or other Asian Mahasi centers are highly recommended. It is amazing what we spend our time and money doing. As my friend Kenneth once said, "If you had to flip burgers for 13 years to get up the money to do the Three Months at IMS, it would be well worth it." I prefer more pragmatic centers because of various cultural considerations, but IMS has helped many, including me. Burma is a great place to go for the real deal, but issues involve the government, the oily food, the culture, the water, the heat, the parasites, and the malaria-carrying mosquitoes, which should be strongly considered. I personally haven't been to Burma,

although I have been to plenty of places with similar issues; if you can avoid those issues, you may just live a bit longer than you otherwise would.

### ***Adherence to Instructions and Honesty toward Teachers***

I should also mention that it is common these days for logistical and financial reasons for practitioners to go on retreats at centers and with teachers who teach a technique different from the one the practitioner decides to actually practice once there. For example, people may go on retreats in the Goenka tradition (involves meditation on the breath for three days, followed by body scanning, generally a standard ten-day package, wide availability, and financial accessibility for many) and do some other practice, such as noting. Or a practitioner may go to an IMS or Spirit Rock retreat with a gentle teacher who is advocating a more relaxed version of practice than one might get out of a book such as this one, but, instead of following along with that center and teacher's vibe and instructions, the practitioner uses a really hardcore attitude involving rapid, blazing investigation. Here are some of the problems with this approach:

- If you are doing something other than what the teacher is telling you, following a path that is probably pretty different from the one he or she followed, then that teacher might not know the territory you are likely to get into and the potential traps and side effects of that practice. They know the territory of the path they are advocating, so you reduce the chances that you will receive good guidance if you run into anything interesting, complex, difficult, or destabilizing.
- If you are not telling the teacher what you are doing, instead making up something about your following the instructions when in fact you are not, then not only is this strategy deceptive, meaning not a good idea, but it can be very confusing to everyone involved. You may not be able to tell if the advice the teacher gave you was based on whatever lie you told, or on something more general about your mood, way of being, or some other aspect of how you presented to them. Said another way, the teacher may pick up on something imbalanced in you that has nothing to do with whatever lie you told, but you can't hear that perhaps skillful and beneficial advice, because you think that the teacher is going only on what you said. You therefore dismiss something that might have been useful. Specifically, if you are frying yourself and the teacher can tell and is trying to convince you to chill out, that teacher just might know what he or she is talking about.
- If you do tell the teacher that you are using techniques and frameworks that differ from what is being taught, then at best that teacher will likely be annoyed, and at worst he or she can become really pissed off, although how much of that anger will show is anyone's guess. The teacher may not even know what the heck you are talking about, or might have opinions of those techniques, maps, models, and attitudes that are contrary to yours. Sorting all that out in the very limited time usually given to daily or every-other-day interviews is unlikely to occur, because those discussions generally take much longer than the interview time available.

This ill will and complexity then get back to those who might have advocated that you use those preferred techniques, attitudes, maps, models, and the like, such as me and my fellow hardcore practitioners, because the world of high-end meditation practice is a pretty small one. Conversely, if someone were to come on a retreat with me and blatantly not follow my advice, not listen to my instructions, not attempt to use a common set of terms and concepts that would allow us to communicate

subtle points of practice, and not heed my warnings and the like, I would not be amused. I know for a fact that the teachers in other traditions have similar reactions. Thus sown are discord, prejudice, disharmony, tension, disconnection, resentment, bitterness, and the like—phenomena already way too plentiful, ironically, in the small and incestuous world of meditation.

For all of these reasons, I ask that you avoid this behavior. Although logistics, finances, and scheduling issues may make you think that it is a really good idea, there are these significant downsides. I recommend that you try to find places to practice that embrace the style you like, the attitudes you bring, and the techniques and concepts that you use. That way, your retreat will be much better, and the world of meditation will be happier.

On the other hand, if you have access to retreats where they are doing something other than what you generally do but that is still reasonable and time-tested, then give that a shot. You might just be surprised by what happens. Although there is something to be said for cross-pollination and mixing things up, at this point the meditation world is not in most cases there yet, so instead of harmony the chances of bad feelings and possibly bad outcomes are increased. I learned from all kinds of teachers, some of whose styles were very different from mine. In Part III, I will give an example from my own practice of how failing to follow the advice of someone not into practice maps was a bad idea. However, I could also tell numerous stories from other people about what went strangely or poorly when they tried to mix things up in this way.

### ***Schedules and Reminders***

Some people will go on retreats on their own or with friends, which can be good if done well. For those practicing on their own who haven't done a retreat, I include here a sample schedule that resembles one you would see at a Mahasi center. This is a slightly modified version of something that was posted on the wall for some people doing a residential retreat:

4:30 a.m. Awaken, wash, brush teeth, use bathroom  
5:00 a.m. Walk  
6:00 a.m. Sit  
7:00 a.m. Breakfast  
7:30 a.m. Walk  
8:00 a.m. Sit  
9:00 a.m. Walk  
10:00 a.m. Sit  
11:00 a.m. Lunch  
12:00 p.m. Rest, wash, or walk  
1:00 p.m. Walk  
2:00 p.m. Sit

3:00 p.m. Walk  
4:00 p.m. Sit  
5:00 p.m. Walk  
6:00 p.m. Sit  
7:00 p.m. Walk  
8:00 p.m. Sit  
9:00 p.m. Walk  
10:00 p.m. Sit, perhaps do metta practice  
10:30 p.m. Recline

You can modify this schedule to suit your needs if you are creating your own retreat, but it provides a good example of what the schedule on retreats can be like for those who haven't been on them. Not all styles have schedules this intense, but this intensity does tend to make for rapid progress.

While on retreat, do your best to follow these important reminders:

- Don't indulge in your stuff!
- When in doubt or struggling, note those things and everything else.
- If you have a question, find the answer in the Three Characteristics.
- Be mindful during transitions between activities.
- Guard against analysis; it is not the same as practice.
- Practice at all times when awake.
- When nobody is around, practice just as hard; this time is for you, not them.
- Remember how precious these moments are.

When off retreat, you can still make progress, particularly if you have used retreats to clear some of the initial hurdles (hills) and gain a few tastes of what is possible. Do not underestimate the value of careful and honest awareness of what you are doing during life off the cushion. I know a few exceptionally solid practitioners who did it all in daily life, with strict technique every second they could spare, together with excellent time management skills and some inborn talent. On the other hand, if you want to significantly increase your chances of tasting the fruits of the path, do your best to make time for retreats in a way that honors your spiritual goals, as well as your other commitments.

## **Teachers**

Just like many other skillsets, meditation is usually easier to learn from people who are good at it. Thus, we come to the topic of teachers.

### **Relying Foremost on Oneself**

There are many types of teachers out there, from many traditions. Some seem ordinary, and some seem to radiate spirituality from every pore. Some are nice, some are indifferent, and some may seem like sergeants in boot camp. Some stress reliance on one's own efforts, whereas others stress reliance on the grace of the guru. Some are available and accessible; some may live far away, grant few interviews, or have so many students vying for their time that you are rarely able to talk with them. Some seem to embody the highest ideals of the perfected spiritual life in their every waking moment, whereas others may have many noticeable quirks, faults, and failings. Some live by rigid moral codes, whereas others may push the boundaries of social conventions and mores. Some may be old, and some may be young. Some may require strict commitments and obedience, whereas others may hardly seem to care what you do at all. Some may advocate very specific practices, stating that their way is the only way or the best way, while others may draw from many traditions or be open to your doing so. Some may point out your successes, while others may dwell on your failures.

Teachers differ in terms of the formality of the teaching arrangement. Some teachers may stress renunciation or even ordination into a monastic order, whereas others seem relentlessly engaged with "the world." Some charge a bundle for their teachings, whereas others give theirs freely. Some like scholarship and the lingo of meditation, whereas others may never use or may even openly despise these formal terms and conceptual frameworks. Some teachers will speak openly about attainments, and some may not. Some teachers are remarkably predictable in their manner and teaching style, while others swing wide in strange and unpredictable ways. Some may seem tranquil and mild-mannered, while others may seem outrageous or rambunctious. Some are great communicators, and others have real difficulty putting together coherent sentences. Some speak calmly and slowly; others spit out the dharma at a zillion words a minute (guilty). Some may speak our language, and others obviously don't. Some may seem to listen well; others definitely may not. Some may seem extremely humble and unimposing, whereas others may seem particularly arrogant, or at least presumptuous (again guilty). Some teachers may be more like equals who just want to help you learn something they happened to be good at (my favorite model), like a friend who just sits around jamming on guitar and sharing a few new chords and scales with you, whereas others may be all into the role, status, and hierarchy of being a teacher. The degree to which power and responsibility align in any of these cases is usually suboptimal: Welcome to the reality of dharma teachers.

Teachers differ in terms of traits and personality. Some may seem to have serious personality disorders, such as those of the perennially trouble-producing *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* Axis II, Cluster B disorders—specifically, borderline personality disorder, antisocial personality disorder, histrionic personality disorder, and narcissistic personality disorder. Others may seem highly self-actualized (in the Maslovian psychological sense), sane, and mature. Some are charismatic, while others may be distinctly lacking in social skills and charm. Some may readily give us extensive advice, and some just listen and nod. Some may really "look the part" with robes, hats, and whatever hairstyle you might associate with a guru, whereas others look more like something that was just dragged out of a dive bar, prison, mental institution, or corporate boardroom. Some seem the living embodiment of gentleness and love; others may piss you off regularly. Some may be playful and lighthearted, some rigid and serious, and some all over the place. Some may respect and also enforce strict personal boundaries, and others will walk all over personal boundaries in a skinny minute. Some

teachers may instantly click with you, while others just leave you cold. Some teachers may be willing to teach you, and some may not.

So far as I have been able to tell, none of these characteristics of teachers or their styles of teaching is related in any way to their meditation ability or the depths of their understanding. This is to say, don't judge a meditation teacher by his or her cover. This warning issued, you are basically guaranteed to judge meditation teachers by their covers; therefore, recognize this common tendency and try to do otherwise. What is important is that a teacher's style and personality inspire *you* to practice well, to live the life you want to live, to find what it is you wish to find, and to understand what you wish to understand. Some of us may wander for a long time before we find a good fit. Some of us will turn to books for guidance, reading and practicing without the advantages or hassles of teachers. Some of us may seem to click with a practice or teacher, try to follow it for years, yet get nowhere. Others seem to fly, regardless of particular teacher or resource. One of the most interesting things about reality is that we get to test it. One way or another, we will see what works for us and what doesn't, as well as what happens when we do certain practices or follow the advice of certain teachers, and what happens when we don't.

Remember well: We don't have to become our teacher to learn about how to investigate reality and to become great meditators and great people. We can take what is good, leave off what is bad, and take responsibility for our own actions and way of being in the world. Even for those using more devotional models, the vast majority of what predicts our success or failure is what we personally do with our bodies, thoughts, words, and attention all day long.

### ***Assessing Teachers as Unsuitable***

As you look into potential teachers, realize that those in teaching roles may now personally be doing practices very different from the ones they are teaching, and coming at things from a perspective that has been transformed into something very different from the one you are coming to the practice with.

### ***Distance from Your Practice Level***

Sometimes people can be in places and doing practices that are in fact very different from the ones even they started with—or different from those that they are known for because of a past book or talk. The last time I did formal noting, for example, was probably sometime in 2001 or so, and that would have been only briefly, and the last time I practiced noting a lot was sometime in 1996 or so. If a teacher has profoundly transformed his or her perception of reality and been changed this way long enough, it can be somewhat hard for that teacher to relate to those who are facing the problems and issues that arise earlier in practice.

In fact, it seems to be somewhat common for teachers far down the path to start teaching a way of practicing that makes sense if you are way down the path like they are, but might not be anything like the practices they did to get to the point where that way of teaching and those practices and perspectives make sense. Because of this tendency, the teacher's current practice or take on practice might not make much or any sense for where you currently are. For instance, I have added emphases to this book that I had no access to or appreciation of when I was just starting out on the path and that might be more appropriate or useful for relatively advanced practitioners and just confusing for beginners—examples being some of the Mahamudra (Sanskrit for *Great Seal*) perspectives that are somewhat more prevalent in this second edition. They may well have confused me back then, although it is hard for me to tell while looking back twenty years or so. You may do much better if a teacher teaches you the basics and the

techniques that led to his or her early breaks, although the teacher may not have done those practices in years or decades.

Furthermore, even for those who do teach the practices that worked for them, it takes personal discipline to keep remembering that, although they may have repeated some basic foundational concept hundreds of times to others, they may not have said it to you. For those who teach a lot, some burnout can set in, which can cause them to forget to keep presenting concepts and practices in a logical, straightforward, complete way—meditator after meditator, dharma talk after dharma talk, retreat after retreat, year after year. Imagine making a professor of high-level calculus go back and teach kindergarteners to count: Some can do so well, but plenty can't. Such is normal human behavior, however disappointing.

The converse raises an apparent paradox: Those who are closer to where you are on the path may make better teachers. If they just recently mastered what you are trying to master, just dealt with whatever you are dealing with, then their fresh and easily remembered exposure to those particular challenges may be more helpful to you than the perspective of someone who hasn't had to personally address those challenges in a long time. Although teachers who are far down the path can be inspiring, the people sitting on the side cushions somewhat off of center stage may give you more helpful advice.

### *Arrogance and Fixation on the Role of Teacher*

The specific form of this situation that I find most unfortunate involves the teacher who spent years doing some practice requiring all sorts of technique, discipline, study, and hard cushion hours who gains some degree of insight and now realizes to some degree that there is nobody to become enlightened, nothing to do, and nobody to do it, and that reality from that point of view is fine as it is. The problem is that they then tell their followers so, and, of course, those followers do nothing and predictably get nowhere but are totally impressed with the teacher anyway. In fact, I can think of numerous modern examples of teachers who teach perspectives and techniques that, ironically, are nothing like what helped them actually arrive at that perspective.

There is also this subtle (or perhaps overt) form of what I will loosely term *arrogance* on the part of some teachers who now teach from some impressively high perspective just to highlight what they have attained, even though the perspective they are currently teaching from isn't one that would have helped them when they were coming up in the practices. They do so because it now is at the forefront of their way of perceiving and experiencing reality, is compelling, and is perhaps even fascinating. Never underestimate the mind's ability to grab onto the fruits of practice and use them to cause trouble.

If such teachers were able to return to when they first started practicing and tell themselves what their current perspective is like, would it do the earlier version of themselves any good? Would they themselves have gotten the insights they currently have by following the advice they now give? I suspect not, although the experiment can't be conducted. Regardless of inability to run this experiment, be skeptical of those who advocate a totally different path from the one that got them their current insights.

Realize, too, that as the practices of those in teaching roles develop and change, they may go off in directions different from the ones we expect or want them to. The common scenario is that they see from their point of view that they may stand to gain something from some other tradition and so shift in the direction of those practices, and perhaps in the direction of accompanying concepts, terms, and even trappings. Meanwhile, we, from our vantage point, still think that what would serve us best is for them to stay interested in the teachings or practices for which we came to appreciate them. This situation can

cause much confusion and resentment in those who don't appreciate that we each are developing and attempting to modify our minds and our hearts to fit with our vision of what we think is possible and skillful. This need to continue developing applies equally to people we think of as teachers or dharma friends.

Similarly, it is not uncommon these days for teachers or role models to declare that something that they previously said with such certainty they now no longer believe to be totally or even partially true, be it something about the nature of reality, practice, or their own attainments. This scenario also predictably can cause much confusion, anger, and resentment. Those more advanced practitioners who understand and are sympathetic toward the confusion face the dilemma of what to do about it.

All too commonly, the people who have now changed some view simply keep quiet about it, sort of skip over it, or even keep making statements that they don't currently believe, in order to avoid the chaos that can follow on the heels of truthful disclosures that also happen to be reversals or substantial modifications of previously stated views. This is a bad sign. It is a sign that they have too heavily bought into the role of being some fixed authority who must stick to their story, regardless of their changing paradigm or perspective, and that the rewards for now being dishonest outweigh the rewards for being straightforward and open. It takes a lot of courage to say that we were wrong or that we are changing our mind. I hope that more mature meditation communities will develop an acceptance that some of this changeability is actually a positive sign of people's development and growth rather than some vile inconsistency that must be punished. This point about the desirability of openly admitting that we were wrong will apply even more so once we start discussing various levels of attainment, some of which are easy to overestimate when they first arise.

### ***Screening Potential Teachers***

Teachers know only what they know. If we use the scopes of the Three Trainings to examine this truth, we may find that some teachers have a good grasp of some of these scopes and a poorer grasp of the others. In fact, mastery in any area guarantees nothing about mastery of the others. It is worthwhile being realistic about this fact. Said another way, it is easy to imagine that, because someone may have meditation skills in one specific area, they might magically have other knowledge and skillsets. I'm intensely skeptical of such assumptions.

More to the practical point underlying the trouble people run into with teachers, it is easy to imagine that, just because they are moral, they have some understanding of deep wisdom; conversely, it is easy to imagine that, just because they may have some deep wisdom, they will be moral. It is this last assumption that causes most of the chaos, because it is a totally dangerous assumption. Beware assuming that those who know ultimate reality to whatever degree couldn't possibly have some unskillful relationship to money, power, drugs, or sex. Call me a prude, a traditionalist, or whatever—and not to presume to tell anyone else how to live his or her life—but I assert that, in general, it is best to avoid having sex with your dharma teachers, and this goes doubly if it is done in secret or with someone who generally claims celibacy. Following this simple advice will save you and them all sorts of trouble. There are lots of people out there to have sex with. Those who claim that it will lead to special wisdom are just selling something. You have been warned.

### *Specific Goals and Explicitness*

When we interact with teachers, we may wish to also consider which of their bodies of knowledge we wish to draw on, which of the Three Trainings we want help with. In fact, I think that it is crucial to be explicit about which training is on offer so that, when we talk with a teacher, we can ask questions from the correct conceptual framework and fit his or her advice back into the correct framework. If we ask a teacher about how to attain to some high state and they mention tuning into boundless joy, and if we then try to do so while driving to work and crash into the rear end of the car of some poor commuter, we have not followed the teacher's advice properly.

Similarly, we may wish to explicitly ask our teachers if they are skilled in the aspect of the specific training we are interested in mastering and also to what level. While you cannot always trust them to tell the truth, because of either their own self-deception or the desire to fool you, if they do say something like, "No, I don't know enough to speak on that level, as my own abilities are not that strong yet," then at least you know to seek advice elsewhere. I have much more respect for a teacher who once told me that he didn't feel qualified to teach me than for the numerous teachers who were not qualified to teach me but who either didn't realize that fact, or pretended otherwise.

I recommend making your goals for your life and practice specific. For instance, you may wish to get a job as a dishwasher so that you can continue to feed yourself. You would then go to the meditation teacher and say, "I want to get a job as a dishwasher, so do you know how to do this?" They may say, "Yes"—to which you could reply, "How do you know this?" They could just as easily have said, "I have no idea, for I am a meditation teacher, not a career counselor or restaurant manager."

The same conversational pattern could be repeated just as easily for the other two trainings. For instance, you could ask a meditation teacher, "I wish to learn how to enter the early concentration states, so you know how to do this?" You could also ask, "I wish to attain to the first stage of enlightenment, so do you know how to do this?" If the teacher says "yes," then the next question would be, "What are the specific steps that will likely produce that result?" This straightforward approach to spirituality is extremely pragmatic and empowering. Furthermore, it makes interactions with teachers more fruitful.

### *Pragmatism and Personal Empowerment*

This said, for reasons that still baffle me, not all teachers like everything to be straightforward, honest, empowering, and pragmatic. Part II will elucidate these matters in more detail, but take this as a warning that to attempt to interact this way that I advocate may be considered rude, rebellious, and inappropriate by numerous meditation teachers and communities. If that situation is what you find in your community, then you have some tough choices to make. It is hard to give generic advice that will likely apply well to everyone's specific situation, but, if you find yourself in this kind of situation, I wish you and your community well in addressing these issues.

As for when to end a student-teacher relationship, or how many teachers to consult at any given point in time, again needs and solutions will vary from person to person, and perhaps from time to time. At times, I had multiple teachers; at other times I had no teachers beyond books, my own practice, and a few friends. What I relied on depended on what I was looking for and what was available at what cost—with *cost* including travel time, long-distance phone bills, plane flights, retreat fees, lost work and school time, and lost relationship time. For most of my serious dharma questing days, in the 1990s, I lived on little money, and few dharma teachers and retreat centers existed in the United States. Although scarcity

limited my options back then, it is an entirely different universe now, with a large array of meditation centers and teachers available around the world. Nonetheless, in an overriding spirit of self-reliance, I recommend that you formulate and revisit your specific goals and then work from there within the means available to you.

### ***Interacting and Taking Responsibility for Results***

With regard to interaction's being fruitful, teachers can generally tell whether you are serious and whether you have clearly thought through what you want. For instance, it takes about ten seconds of someone's asking a meditation teacher for advice on their emotional stuff for the teacher to realize that this person is interested in working on conventional happiness, not in learning insight practices. Not all teachers or communities will agree with that strict demarcation of psychological issues and insight practices, although, hopefully, by the end of this book you will have some idea of why the point of view that holds them separate may have value. Similarly, it takes a teacher few conversations with a student to figure out whether the student is following the advice, so don't try to fool the teacher. If you don't like the advice, it is better to tell the teacher so and why so that the teacher can address the problem, either by modifying the advice, or by further explaining why following the advice might be helpful.

Furthermore, if you follow some of a teacher's advice but change parts, or select parts and add on other elements, and then find that this way of working has not produced the desired results, be careful about criticizing the teacher or the method: You have not done the experiment that the teacher recommended. For example, if someone told you to stabilize your attention on the individual sensations that make up the experience of breathing so clearly that you could see the beginning and ending of every single sensation consistently for an hour, and instead you do something else or stop the practice before you can do so, then don't blame the teacher if results are not as promised. Barring insurmountable external circumstances, the choice not to do the work was clearly yours, so you should accept personal responsibility for your own failure. I am not trying to be harsh, but simply realistic. I am a firm believer that people should take responsibility for what happens in their lives and practices. Not doing so is tantamount to disempowering yourself.

Teachers are obviously somewhere on their own path, dealing with their own lives, coming at practice from their conditioning, and filtering everything through the place where they find themselves, just as everyone else is. There are cycles in our bodies, our lives, and our practices that can significantly color our approach and interpretations, and this truism applies to meditation teachers as much as to, or perhaps sometimes even more than to, everyone else. So, if you have some odd interaction with someone in a teacher role, it might be that she just received some really bad news about their sibling's being sick, just began coming down with some stomach bug, or just started having bad menstrual cramps when she is scheduled to have an interview with you. Or you may remind the teacher of an ex-boyfriend or ex-girlfriend. Something in your own practice, your face, your story, your way of speaking, or whatever might contain some psychological trigger that is particular to the teacher and his or her history. A teacher's own practice might be in a strange or difficult place; he or she might not be able to fully control the bleed-through from that place.

So, if something seems off in an interview or interaction, kindly ask what is going on. The teacher might not tell you and might not even know or be able to identify the reason for the difficulty then or ever. The difficulty may just reflect how the teacher is, but asking at least shows that you have sufficient meta-perspective to come up with a broader assessment of what is happening at that moment. What

personal, meditative, psychological, or other conditions were going on that influenced each part of this book as I wrote it? I am certain I couldn't tell you everything that influenced the tone and presentation of each part. Similarly, in person in real-time my self-assessment would probably be just as inaccurate. For more fascinating information on how we try to explain our behavior and simply make explanations up, see Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink* (2005).

Although all of this advice on practices and teachers may seem overwhelming, reconnecting with the basics, the simple practices of the spiritual life, is always highly recommended. It is your practice that will help you in the end. Here is reality. Here you are. Inhabit this reality and engage with it directly.

## Resolve

I strongly recommend developing the freedom to choose what happens in your life, a freedom that comes from discipline. Although people often think of discipline as being contrary to freedom, I equate the two in many ways. Discipline and resolve allow you to make choices about what you do and stay strong in the face of difficulties. Thus, I recommend that, when you set aside a period of time for a particular training, you resolve that for that period you will work on the specific training you have set out to work on, and that you will work on it wholeheartedly.

Without discipline, without formal resolve, you may easily find yourself in something resembling the following situation: You sit down on the cushion with the vague intention to do some insight practices and begin trying to investigate, but soon you find yourself thinking about how you really should be paying your bills. Then your knee begins to hurt, so you tune in to the low-level jhanic bliss that you have managed to cultivate the ability to find, and then you feel hungry, so you get up and fix yourself a sandwich. You then think to yourself, "Hey, what am I doing here eating this sandwich? Wasn't I doing insight practice?"

You are not free. Instead, you are floundering. Without discipline, without resolve, you are unlikely to overcome some of the difficult hurdles that stand between you and success in any of these trainings.

I have found it extremely valuable, particularly when sitting down to do formal meditation, to state to myself at the beginning of the session exactly what I am doing, what I hope to attain by doing it, and why that attainment is a good idea. I do so formally and clearly, either aloud or silently to myself. Having done practice with and without them, I have come to the definite conclusion that formal resolutions can make a huge difference in practice. One of my favorite resolutions goes something like this: "I resolve that for this hour I will consistently investigate the sensations that make up reality so as to attain to liberating insights for the benefit of myself and all beings."

Resolutions such as this one add much focus and consciousness to practice. They galvanize energy, make plain intentions, and seem to work at some more subliminal or subconscious level to keep one on track. I have also found that I can use resolutions in my daily life to good effect. For instance, when I was studying for a medical school exam, I might resolve, "For this hour, I will study this hematology syllabus so that I will increase my knowledge and skill as an aspiring doctor and thus be less likely to kill patients and more likely to help them."

Such resolutions might seem overly formal or perhaps even goofy, and they sometimes seem this way to me, but I have come to appreciate them anyway. If I make resolutions that do not ring true, I can feel it when I say them, and this awkwardness helps me understand my own path and heart. If I am lost

and wondering why I am doing what I am doing, these sorts of resolutions help me to consciously reconnect with what is important in life. They also somehow trigger parts of the brain to get it together in ways that are hard to explain. I suggest that you try making these resolutions in your own life, at least so that you can see whether they are useful for you. I am a big fan of formal resolutions, but you should do the experiment to see their utility for yourself.