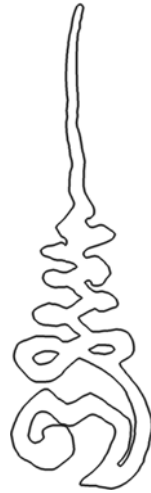


A Small, Steady Flame

*Seven Dhamma Talks
On the Basic Steps of Breath Meditation*



Thanissaro Bhikkhu
(Geoffrey DeGraff)

for free distribution



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Introduction

The daily schedule at Metta Forest Monastery includes a group interview in the late afternoon, and a chanting session followed by a group meditation period later in the evening. The Dhamma talks included in this volume were given during the evening meditation sessions, and in many cases covered issues raised at the interviews—either in the questions asked or lurking behind the questions. Often these issues touched on a variety of topics on a variety of different levels in the practice. This explains the range of topics covered in individual talks.

I have edited the talks with an eye to making them readable while at the same time trying to preserve some of the flavor of the spoken word. In a few instances I have added passages or rearranged the talks to make the treatment of specific topics more coherent and complete, but for the most part I have kept the editing to a minimum. Don't expect polished essays.

I would like to thank Bok Lim Kim for making the recording of these talks possible. She, more than anyone else, is responsible for overcoming my initial reluctance to have the talks taped. I would also like to thank the following people for transcribing the tapes and/or helping to edit the transcriptions: Paul and Debra Breger, Richard Heiman, Dhammattho Bhikkhu, Gunaddho Bhikkhu, and especially Khematto Bhikkhu. May they all be happy.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

Metta Forest Monastery
July, 2004

A Small, Steady Flame

July 2002

The breath is where the mind and the body meet. We often have a sense that the solid part of our bodies is the part we know best, and the breath is something that just comes in and goes out through the solid part. But when you close your eyes, what do you actually sense of the body? There's a shape defined by the area where there's energy flowing back and forth. And that energy is actually our most direct perception of the body. We tend to overlook it and focus on other things, but our primary sensation is right here.

So, as we meditate we're learning to get back in touch with that primary sensation so that eventually we can use it as a mirror for the mind. Because, as I said, it's where the mind and the body meet: the part of the body the mind is most sensitive to, and the part most immediately sensitive to the mind. The way you breathe is very much affected by the states of your mind. When you're worried about things, you breathe in a certain way. When you're happy about things, you breathe in another way. When there's anger, still another way of breathing. If you keep at certain ways of breathing, it's going to have an effect on other aspects of the body as well. Certain ways you hold your body are really shaped by the breath. And it's through the breath that so many mental states can cause physical disease, particularly stress diseases.

So one of the first things we have to do as we meditate is to work through the breath energy in the body. Find some spot where the breathing feels comfortable. It might be at the tip of the nose, the middle of the chest, around the abdomen, the base of the throat. Actually it can be anywhere in the body where you feel that the sensation of in-breathing feels good and the sensation of out-breathing feels good. Then you train yourself to stay with that sensation.

In the beginning the sensation may not be all that impressive, just a simple, comfortable feeling, a neutral feeling sometimes, but you find that if you stick with it, it gets more and more relaxing, more and more comfortable.

Like a fire. In the beginning a fire starts as just a tiny little spark, which you have to shelter against the wind. It takes a long time for the fuel to catch fire, but

once it does then the fire begins to spread to the different parts of the fuel. It's the same with the body and the breath. You find one spot that seems small and not all that impressive, but it feels okay. But you stay with it, and the consistency of your attention is what gives it strength. Once it feels more solidly established, then you can start allowing it to spread to different parts of the body.

The word *jhana*, or concentrated mental absorption, is related to a verb, *jhayati*, that means "to burn." Pali has lots of different words for the word "burning," and *jhayati* is used to describe a steady flame, like the flame of an oil lamp. The word for "burning" used for other types of fire--like a raging bonfire, a wood fire, or a forest fire--is something else entirely. The word for a steady, constant flame: That's *jhayati*, which relates to *jhana*. And as we practice concentration, that's the kind of consistency and steadiness we're trying to develop.

Our focus starts as a small, steady flame, and then you try to allow that steadiness to flow through the body. But first you have to establish that comfortable spot. If you go around the body adjusting the breath here, adjusting the breath there, without a real sense of comfort, then sometimes you make things worse. You're just messing things up. So, it's important that you get this sense of ease first, and then allow things to spread so that your awareness fills the whole body, and your sense of comfortable breath energy fills the whole body as well.

Think of it as a healing process. Many times, as soon as the mind gets a little bit still and the breath gets comfortable, you think, "Well, what's next?" But before you can move to the next stage, a lot of healing has to be done in the body--all the areas of tension and tightness and discomfort that you've allowed to get established within the body. The breath has to very gently massage them, very gently heal them, and sometimes this takes time.

Just like a wound. You can't just say, "Poof," and it's gone. You have to put the medicine on and let it stay there for hours. The healing process takes time, so be patient with the breath. When things get still, stay with it. And even though things may not seem to be happening, there's a slow, steady process of healing going on in the body.

This is why patience is such an important part of this skill. When they talk about putting an effort into the meditation, the word for "effort" really means persistence. It's this stick-to-it-iveness that's going to make all the difference. The continuity of your focus, the steadiness of your persistence: Those are the qualities that make the breath a solid foundation for the mind.

One of the problems in teaching meditation to people in America is that very few of us have learned any skills requiring that kind of steadiness, that kind of patience. If you sharpen a knife, you just run it through the knife sharpener – zip,

zip – and it's done. Over in Thailand, though, when I had to sharpen a knife I was given a big stone and a knife and told, "Okay, be very careful that you don't try to be in too great of a hurry, because if you get impatient you may ruin the blade." So, you have to be very consistent, very steady, and very patient as you work the blade over the whetstone. And you learn all the mental skills that go along with being patient: how not to get bored, how not to give up, the kind of conversation that goes on in the mind to keep it going. If you have any skills like that, think back on how you've talked yourself into being patient, consistent, persistent, and then apply those skills to the breath.

So, work with a sense of comfortable breath. Allow the breath to get comfortable, allow it to be easeful, and then allow it to spread through the body. When it begins to spread through the body and it starts working through patterns of tension, you come to a more intense sense of absorption. Stay with that. Learn the skills required to stay right at that point of balance where you're not pushing it too hard and not being too lazy or lax - just the right amount of interest, the right amount of attention and intention to keep things going - so that the breath can have a chance to heal the wounds in the body, soothe the mind, and bring both the body and the mind to the stages of practice where the concentration gets stronger and your insights grow sharper, more subtle.

And again, it's important that the groundwork be done. As for the question of how soon you can move on to the next step: don't ask. Just keep on doing the work. Things will develop.

Just like waiting for a plant to grow: You can't sit there and pull it up, up, up to make it grow faster. If you do that, you uproot it, and that's the end of the plant. What you have to do is just keep watering it, applying fertilizer, removing the weeds as they come, and your patient effort will pay off as long as you focus that effort in the right spot, which is the persistence, the attention, and the intention you're bringing to the practice. As long as these are consistent, you can expect results. Whether they're fast or slow doesn't matter. What matters is that they're solid.

So, stick with it. We've got a whole hour right now to be with the breath, and don't stop with the end of the hour. Try to maintain that sense of ease and comfort, that sense of being centered inside as you bow down, get up and leave, go back to your meditation spot and continue meditating until it's time to go to bed. When you wake up tomorrow morning, try to be right here again, right here at the breath.

It's this consistency that makes all the difference.

Start Out Small

September 22, 2003

Focus on your breath. As for what's going to happen as you focus on the breath - put that question aside. As for where the meditation is going to take you and how it's going to take you there, put those thoughts aside as well. Be careful that you don't know too much, because what you know too much of is not really knowing. A lot of it's guesswork.

A lot of our preconceived notions come out of ignorance. That's precisely what we're trying to get rid of, but our ignorance shapes the way we practice.

So it's important that you try to clear away as many of those expectations as possible when you come in to meditate. Just be with the breath. When the breath comes in, know it's coming in. When the breath goes out, know it's going out. That's all you really have to know right now. As for what's going to happen with the next breath, or the one after that, well, wait until those breaths come.

Ajaan Fuang once noted that nowadays we have lots of books on meditation, lots of explanations, and in some ways it's a help. But in other ways it's a hindrance, a hindrance in that we take a lot of our perceptions, our memories that we've picked up from books and Dharma talks, and bring them in to clutter up the present moment. That actually gets in the way of seeing what's going on. The clutter then gets compounded with our general impatience. We want to see results fast, and so in order to make them happen fast we squeeze them too much in the direction we think they should go. A lot of the results that come in meditation, however, have to come from simply allowing the causes to do their work, to develop on their own, without your having to push them too much in the direction you think they should go.

So, if you see your thoughts leaning into the next moment, or what's going to happen further on in the future, just pull back until you're right here, right now. As Ajaan Lee advises many times in his talks, "Start out small." Notice where you feel the breath, and watch it. If it doesn't feel comfortable, you can nudge it into what seems to be a more comfortable direction. Don't be in too great of a hurry to go on to the next step.

We've got to come from a position of strength when we meditate. There's a passage in the Canon where the Buddha says that a person who doesn't have a basic level of happiness and goodness inside simply cannot do goodness. It sounds like a catch-22, but that's not the point. The point is that we all have a certain amount of goodness in our minds, so tap into that first. The goodness here means not only good intentions, but also having a good-natured attitude toward what you're doing, a good-natured attitude toward the people around you. That's why we chant the passages on goodwill every night, every night.

And bring some humor to the practice, the humor that allows you to laugh at your own mistakes. Without that, things start getting bitter, and when things start getting bitter inside then you start lashing out at the people around you outside. You start criticizing the technique - there are *all kinds* of things you can criticize. But if you can sit back for a bit and tap into your own good-natured attitude—and it's there inside all of us—try to bring that to the fore. Then work from that. It may be a small thing, but you've got to start small.

Start with what you know. The breath is going in. Do you know that? Yes, you know that. It's going out. Do you know that? Well, yes, you know that, too. Okay, know just that much. Don't forget that. Is it comfortable? You may not be sure. Could it be more comfortable? Well, experiment and see. Try to sensitize yourself to how the breathing feels. Without sensitivity, it all becomes mechanical, and when it becomes mechanical it becomes a chore. And when it becomes a chore the mind is going to start to rebel.

So, ask yourself, "What really feels good when you're breathing right now?" If you can't figure out what really feels good, just hold your breath for a while until the mind is screaming at you that you've got to breathe, you've got to breathe. Then when you breathe in, notice where it feels really good. Take that as your guide.

We in the West seem to be especially cut off from our own bodies. We're so much in our heads. The area of the body becomes unexplored territory, like those old maps from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. They would show the coastlines of continents with huge blank areas in the interior. "Here Be Tigers," they'd say. Who knew what was in there! It's the same with the body. We know a little bit about it, but there are huge unexplored areas inside.

So we take as our beachhead this one point where we know the breath is coming in, we know the breath is going out. We know whether the breath is comfortable or not, and we begin to get a sense of what adjustments can be made to make it more comfortable so that it feels really good just breathing in right here, breathing out right here.

As for the other steps in the meditation, put them aside for the time being. Make sure you've got this step well under control. The people who try to take on

too much at once are the ones who end up not mastering anything at all. Even if your progress is incremental, at least it's progress. You're building solidly, on a solid foundation. That's what matters. Otherwise the meditation is like a ladder that you lean up against a very unstable wall: You may be able to climb very high, but when the wall crumbles you're really going to be in bad straits.

Try to build step by step on what you really know. As for what you've heard about how the meditation is supposed to develop, or even if you've had experiences in the past where it's developed in interesting ways, put those aside for the time being. Don't let them clutter up your mind, because any progress in the meditation has to come from being very solidly in the present moment, fully focused on what you've got right here. If you've got a lot of expectations cluttering up your view, you're not going to see what you've got right here. Any progress that comes that way isn't genuine.

As Ajaan Lee says, "Be willing to be dumb about the meditation." Sometimes this is called "beginner's mind," but for me it's always been more effective to say, "Be dumb about it." There's so much you may have heard about the meditation, but how much do you really know? You know if the breath is coming in or going out; you know if your mind is with the breath or it's wandered off: Focus on being really clear about that, as continuously as possible. It's that state of continual clarity that actually develops the state of concentration you're looking for, the developed mindfulness you're hoping for.

It starts in these tiny steps. So whether the results come fast or slow, at least make sure you're getting the causes right. And they're simple: Be with the breath - all the way in, all the way out - *just this breath*.

If the breath is uncomfortable, you can adjust it. You're not required to breathe in a particular way. You're not required to be totally uninvolved with the breath. There has to be some involvement with the breath whether it's conscious or unconscious, so it might as well be conscious. You might as well learn to be sensitive to what's going on.

This simple exercise, if you allow it to do its work, will bring the results you want. In fact, it'll bring results better than you might expect. If you clutter up your meditation with your expectations, that's all you get: things that seem to fit in with your expectations. If you allow the meditation to be a little more open-ended, it creates the possibility for other things to happen as well, many times better things, more genuine things.

So have faith in the process. If you have the causes right, the results have to come. Even if what you're doing right here seems to be a small thing, remember that all the great things in the world had to start out small.

Coastal redwoods come from the tiniest little seeds imaginable. Even though the seeds may be small, don't underestimate their potential. The spot where

you're with the breath may seem to be a small thing, but as you get down into it you find that there's a lot there. In fact, the Buddha's teachings on causality have one big, consistent point: that whatever's happening in the universe, the basic pattern is something you can discern right here in the present moment. It's what in chaos theory they call "scale invariance." The patterns on the macro-scale are the same thing as on the micro-scale. Well, you've got the micro-scale right here.

On the macro-scale, you see that scientific theories keep changing, sometimes very fast. Many times they're not anything you can directly observe, because they're based on so many assumptions. But on the micro-scale—right here in the present moment, your mind with the breath—all the basic processes that you're going to need to know for Awakening are occurring. It's simply a matter of getting more and more sensitive right here. So, even though it may seem like a small spot, it's got a lot of potential.

It's like a kind of seed they have in Thailand. There's a particular plant whose seed has a diameter about that of a quarter. If you break the shell, stick it into about three gallons of water and come back a couple of hours later, you find that your three-gallon container is filled with what look like little vermicelli noodles. What was in the shell was just sitting there waiting to soak up water. This small spot in the present moment is like that. There's a lot to tease out in here, so don't be disdainful of its potential. Learn to start out small, and those small things are going to reward you.

Like that old fable of the mouse and the lion. The lion saved the mouse's life and later on the mouse was able to save the lion's life - even though the lion was originally pretty disdainful of what the mouse claimed it was going to be able to do. But it could. It could eat through that net.

So this little present moment that you've got right here: Don't step on it hoping that you're going to get someplace higher. Focus right here and really give it the space to open up. Whether it opens up slowly or quickly, that's not the issue. The issue is that you give it the space, you give it the time, you're patient and watchful enough to allow it to open.

When we say that big things grow from small things, it's not that they're going to grow in such a way that other people might notice. It's just a matter of whatever's there in the present moment becoming a lot clearer. The intricacies of what's going on become played out in a much larger perspective if you give them the time to develop.

So. Start out small. If you have to be small for a long time, that doesn't matter. What matters is that when the progress does come, it's solid.

Keep Things Simple

September 2001

When you meditate while listening to a Dhamma talk, don't listen to the talk. Focus on the meditation as much as you can. Give it ninety-nine percent of your attention. Leave only a sliver of attention for the talk.

The whole purpose of the talk here is not to distract you from the meditation but to act as a fence so that when the mind leaves the breath it runs into the talk and turns back to the breath. If anything in the talk is relevant to what you're doing in your meditation, it will come right in, echoing through your mind, without your having to try to pay attention to it. And if it's not relevant to what you're doing, you don't want it, anyhow. It may be relevant for somebody else. If it's not relevant for anybody in the room, it's probably for the speaker.

So leave the talk alone and focus as much as you can on the breath going in and going out. And put out of your mind all thoughts about how the last meditation went or yesterday's meditation went or how it was last week. Just focus on what you've got right here, right now. This is an important element in the practice: that you drop any concerns about how good or bad things have been in the past. Those concerns get in the way of the present moment. The same holds true for any anticipation about how you hope today's meditation will be. It gets in the way of what you're doing right now.

Meditation is a *doing*, you know. All too often we're looking for an experience. We want to experience this sense of ease, that sense of pleasure. But the Buddha's focus in the practice is on being skillful in doing - keeping mindful, keeping alert, being ardent in the practice, finding a sense of "just right." When they talk about the Middle Way, the middle-ness lies in the amount of effort that's just right for where you are right now, which sometimes may require a lot of effort, sometimes just a little bit. You supply whatever kind of effort is required: That's the kind of mental attitude you want to have. You're up for whatever is needed.

And you need to have a sense of what can be done right now. Sometimes you realize, okay, just a bare amount of concentration, a bare amount of mindfulness is all you can manage, so you stick with that. Don't throw it away simply because it's not up to your standards. As Ajaan Lee says, "Big things come from little things," and sometimes very tiny victories can add up. You stay with this breath and then with the next breath and then the next. And even though you may not feel all that settled or secure, it's better than getting upset and saying, "Well, gee, this isn't amounting to anything; this is horrible," and then spinning out of control.

Take things one step at a time, whatever the step that's required. If it requires you to step up high, okay, you step up high. If it's simply a step along smooth ground, okay, you can step along smooth ground. But you take whatever step is needed, and whether it matches your idea of where you'd *like* to be right now, that's not the issue. The issue is that you're here, you're doing what's required, you're doing the best that can be done in this situation.

And as you stay with these little, tiny steps, they begin to take on more depth, more strength, more solidity. If you measure them against your idea of how you'd like things to be, you tend to throw them away. If you keep throwing things away, what do you have left? Nothing at all. Concentration starts out in little, tiny bits and pieces, which may not seem like much, but they're better than nothing at all. A lot of the skill lies in learning how to stay with those bits and pieces. That's all you have to do, just stay with them. They may not be impressive, they may not have lots of flashing lights or whatever you've experienced in the past, but they're the beginning, they're the seeds. If you stay with them, if you nourish them, they grow.

That's the sign of a discerning person: You make the most of what you've got. It may be a lot or it may be a little, but it's what you've got. It may change from day to day, so be alert to that, be sensitive to that. Accept whatever difficulties there may be in the situation and do the best you can.

So take whatever concentration you have. If it seems like a little, don't berate it for being a little. Just work with it. Whatever sense of ease you can get out of the breathing, just stick with that. Even if it doesn't seem to be the most wonderful breath you've ever had, well, okay, work with what you've got because these things do develop. If you give them time, they develop. If you've got a fruit on the tree—even if it's just a little, tiny, hard, green fruit—you keep watering the roots, fertilizing the soil, looking after the causes, and the results will take care of themselves.

Try to keep your efforts right here. In other words, don't think about the past, don't anticipate the future. What you've got will then have a chance to grow. It's

a very simple principle but we tend to forget it. But it's by keeping things simple that the meditation works.

Look at the questions the Buddha has us ask. They're very simple questions. "Where's the stress right now?" And before you get to the stress, ask "Where can the mind settle down?" If the mind hasn't settled down, if it has no sense of ease, you can't see anything clearly. So sometimes the only place it can settle down is with an ordinary feeling of okay-ness someplace in the body. Stick with that and then as things begin to grow, as they begin to get more solid and still, stick with the simple questions: "Where is the stress here?"

It's a question a seven-year-old can answer. At least, a seven-year-old can get his or her mind around it. So work with that. There are stories of arahants at the time of the Buddha who were seven years old. They weren't dealing with any abstruse philosophical issues; they were just dealing very clearly with what was going on in their minds. The questions were simple enough for them to comprehend, and they were happy to stick with those simple questions. "Where is there stress? What are you doing that's unnecessary and contributing to that stress?" When you can see, just drop it. That way your powers of perception get more and more precise, more and more subtle. But the essential question stays the same on each level of subtlety.

So if we keep things simple, the meditation becomes a lot more manageable. And it's this simple sort of questioning that helps see through the mind's subterfuges. The mind sometimes has a tendency to get more and more abstract and to want to deal with really fancy-sounding thoughts. It's like the emperor's new clothes. The person who's willing to say, "I don't understand this; this doesn't make any sense," can usually rip right through a lot of subterfuge, a lot of denial.

The things we think we understand, the things we think we know or at least we want to give the impression that we know: We have to learn to look behind them. Ask those simple questions. "Is that really so? Do you really know that for sure? What does that really mean? Is that a really helpful way to think?"

Just keep asking these really simple, direct questions, and they'll help clear up a lot of confusion in the mind.

A Quiet Spot

July 2001

Time to let all your thoughts about the outside world just fall away. Whatever you've been thinking about, whatever places your mind has been scattered, just let them drop, and bring your attention right in, right here, right at the breath.

There's a lot of unfinished business out there in the world, but it's always going to be unfinished. One job gets done and another one comes right on it.

A lot of the problem is with the mind itself. There are days when things are perfectly fine, but the mind starts getting antsy. It can't help but think, "What's next there out on the horizon?" If you follow that particular tendency it never comes to an end. There's always going to be work to do. When people say they've finished the job it's because they just get too weak to do it, and so whatever's left has to stay left undone.

So for the time being just leave things undone. Let's create this little 'corner of quietness' in the mind. That's what Ajaan Suwat liked to call Wat Metta: a corner of quietness. But he also talked about meditation as a corner of quietness, this place where the mind can really be solid and settled down and have a firm foundation, even in the midst of all the things that are infirm and unsettled in the rest of the world. After all, when we talk about the world it's not just the world outside. The world inside the mind also has a lot of unfinished business. And the urge is to decide, "Okay what business needs doing?"

To decide, ask yourself: "What are the tasks that, when you do them, they really do get done, so that you really do have something accomplished in the mind?" This is why the Buddha was so particular about which questions he would answer and which ones he wouldn't, which issues were worth dealing with, which ones were worth just putting aside. You can't take on everything, so you have to focus on what's important. Have a sense of priorities, not only in your life at large but also in where you focus your attention, where you focus your energy, right here, right now.

So focus on the breath. There are lots of other things you could focus on right here, right now, but you limit yourself to the breath. See what the breath is doing. Is it coming in? Is it going out? Is it comfortable? Is it not comfortable? If the mind wants to analyze things, there's plenty to analyze right here. If it wants to settle down, just make the breath comfortable and allow the mind to settle down. But do your best to monitor what the mind is doing so that it stays alert and mindful and doesn't go drifting off other places. Keep it right here with the sense of the body breathing in, breathing out. As for everything else in the area of your awareness, just let it go. Take this as your beachhead: This is the spot that you're going to develop.

So you have your spot here in the body; you have this place of quiet and focus in the mind. And there'll be other things going on that you notice. There's chatter in the background in this part of the mind here, in this part of the mind there; this thought comes up, that comes up. And your ability to say, "No, thanks," and just come back to the breath: That's what helps develop this quiet center here.

And don't think that what you're doing is selfish. It's like the monastery: We create a little quiet corner up here in the mountains, away from the rest of the world, but don't think that it doesn't have an effect on the rest of world. It does. The more quiet there is here, the better it is for the rest of the world. And it's the same with your mind. The more quietude you can have in this one spot, the more stillness, the more steadiness you can get going here, the more the whole rest of the mind benefits.

And the people around you benefit as well. Once you've got this quiet spot going then, when you act, you act from this quiet spot; when you speak, you speak from this quiet spot; when you think, you think from this quiet spot. When intentions, when impulses arise in the mind, the observer standing in this quiet spot can look at them and see what's worth acting on, what's not worth acting on. And this way not only do you benefit but, as I said, the people around you benefit as well. They're no longer a victim of your unquiet, unfocused mind.

So once this quiet spot gets more settled, it begins to spread out to affect the rest of your mind. It's like starting a little fire. You may have a lot of brush to set fire to, but in the beginning it's just a little, tiny flame. And you have to be very protective of it because the wind and all sorts of other things will try to put it out. So you have to cup your hands around it, be very protective of it. But once it takes, then it'll spread.

When the Buddha described meditation he used the word *jhana*, which is related to the verb, *jhayati*, "to burn." But it's the burning, not of a wood fire, but of an oil lamp. It's a steady flame that you're trying to get going here. Once the steady flame gets established then it begins to spread, so there's a sense of

steadiness and brightness throughout the whole body. As the breath energy gets good in one spot, you allow it to flow to other spots. So the little spot begins to expand, expand, and you find that this still awareness fills the whole body. It feels like the background from which everything else comes and to which everything returns. But you don't come out or return along with anything. You're right there at the stillness, the sense of expansive awareness.

So even though in the beginning of the meditation it may seem that there's a little fence around the mind, there are restrictions on the mind, it's just for the purpose of getting things established. It's like your hands cupped around the flame that you're trying to light. Once the flame has caught hold of the kindling, then it begins to grow on its own and it grows larger and larger.

So it's not always going to be restrictive. In fact, when the sense of concentration gets solid and begins to spread out through the body you find that it's much more expansive than your ordinary states of awareness.

And it's all right here.

So we start out with this little corner, this little spot. Look after it. Make sure it's still. Make sure it's quiet. Make sure your attention doesn't wander away. If it does wander away, just bring it right back, bring it right back. Its wandering off is a sign that it was blown off by a gust of wind here or there, so you just bring it right back. And do your best to protect this little flame of stillness, this little, still flame you've got going here. Once it catches then it can expand. And the sense of openness and the sense of relief that come with that level of concentration: it's hard to find anything to compare.

But the important part in the beginning lies in doing the groundwork properly because that's where most of the dangers lie. Once those dangers are passed, then things begin to open up in the mind.

Of course, there will be other dangers, but the most difficult part in the beginning is just getting the mind to settle down, to become established with a proper sense of balance - not too little energy, not too much energy, just right. And until you get that sense of 'just right' there's going to be a lot of trial and error. Sometimes it seems like trying to balance a ball bearing on the end of a needle: It just keeps slipping off, slipping off. But, finally, once it gets established you realize that it's a lot more solid than you thought. Once you recognize it then you can keep coming back, coming back. You know that spot. This is how the concentration becomes more and more of a skill.

The Steadiness of Your Gaze

March 2001

Get your body back in place, into position to meditate: your back straight, facing forward, your eyes closed, hands in your lap.

And then get your mind into position. That's the more difficult part. Actually, putting it into position is not a problem. Just focus it on the breath. The breath is right there. You don't have to search around too much to find the breath. The difficult part lies in *keeping* it in position, trying to maintain a steady awareness. That takes some doing because the mind is used to *not* being steady. It's used to jumping around. It has a sense of there being some entertainment value in jumping around. You get bored with one thing, so you can jump to something else.

And for a lot of people, that's where their freedom lies: in their ability to think about anything they want to. But when you come right down to it, how much happiness comes from jumping around like that? Once you jump from one thing, you know you're going to have to jump to another thing and then to another. So no matter where you land, you start finding yourself immediately tensing up, ready to jump again, which leaves the mind constantly in a state of tension.

So when we meditate, we give it a good, solid place to stay, and then we remind it: You can stay there. You don't have to jump. And so the mind can begin to relax a lot of its tension and can actually dissolve into the object of the meditation. When you focus on the breath you want to become one with the breath. When you focus on the body, let your awareness become one with the body--not an awareness ready to jump someplace else, but an awareness that seeps into the body.

The steadiness of your gaze is what's going to help things seep into one another, to come together here in the present moment. So as you stay with the breath, try to keep your gaze - your focus on the breath - as steady as you can, as continuous as you can. The more continuous your focus, the more you see how things are actually connected, actually related to one another. If your gaze isn't steady, you have to connect things in your imagination.

It's like connecting dots. You play connect the dots with your mind. There's a little bit of awareness here, and another little bit of awareness, and then someplace else, and as for what was happening in between, you're not really sure. But you can guess, so you draw lines on your own. And whether those lines actually correspond to reality or not, you don't really know because you weren't there. You were off someplace else. And this is the way most people's knowledge of the world gets built up: It's a game of connect the dots, with are very few dots and a lot of lines.

So when we meditate we try to erase all the imaginary lines and make the awareness itself the line that connects things. The Buddha gained Awakening because he saw cause and effect and how they are connected. *When this is, that is. From the arising of this comes the arising of that.* That's how he described one of the insights in his Awakening. He directly saw these things as they were connected, and that was because his awareness was connected.

So we stay with the breath as a way of developing this continuous, connected, steady awareness. If you find yourself letting up in your focus, just come right back.

In the beginning, our awareness is like the phrases in music: There's a little bit of a phrase and then a pause, and then little bit more and then a pause. But what you want to do as you meditate is to develop an awareness that doesn't pause, that just keeps going, and going, and going, because the breath keeps going.

There may be a rhythm to the breathing, but underneath the level of breath energy with the in the in-and-out breath, there's another kind of energy that's continually there. It's like a background noise in the body. And to make your awareness continuous, that's what you want to focus on: this background energy. Sometimes you notice it as the energy in the body during the pauses between the in-breath and the out-breath and between the out-breath and the in-breath. There's a slight pause, and yet there's still energy in the body that lets you know that the body's sitting here. It doesn't totally dissolve away.

You want to be in touch with that level of energy, too. In fact, the more you tune-in to that level of energy, the less you need the in-and-out breath as your focus. The in-and-out breath becomes just one aspect of the breath energy that begins to grow more and more calm, more and more calm, because you're down on another level. You've tuned-in to another level that's more continuous, that can be used as a basis for insight. When your awareness is continuous, the breath is continuous, you just stay there together. That's what we're working toward.

So try to be sensitive to even the slightest lapse in your awareness. Don't wait until the mind has already left the breath before you register what has happened. Sometimes you feel a stirring in your awareness. You want to move. Things aren't as interesting as they were, or for some reason or another the mind begins

to let up a little bit before it actually moves on to something else. Well, learn how to detect that. Then work with the breath, work with your focus in a way that can get around that tendency to stir a little bit and move on.

This is why it's so important that the breath be comfortable. The more comfortable it is, the easier it is to stay with it. Once it's comfortable, then you have to watch out for the mind's tendency to lose its focus, lose its sharpness. That's why we work with spreading the breath energy through the body, being aware of the different parts of the body as a way of keeping ourselves awake and alert even though things are getting comfortable, because when we meditate we're here to do work, not just to zone out or have a little stress reduction.

We've reduced the stress so the mind can be more comfortable in the present moment because it's got work to do in the present moment. There are things it's got to figure out. It's got to figure out why it's causing itself suffering, exactly *where* it's causing itself suffering. The Buddha emphasized the whole issue of karma and intention, so we look to see: What intentions are there in the mind that make us suffer? Why don't we see them? Why do we feel that those choices are so necessary that we even forget they're choices?

Those are some of the big questions we've got to figure out. And the only way we can figure them out is if we stay right here continually, because usually those choices are made in the gaps, in the seams in our awareness when we're off someplace else. In fact, when there's a seam or a gap in your awareness, it's usually a sign that a choice is going to be made in the mind. It's the mind's way of fooling itself, of hiding all of its choices behind the curtains.

So when you sense that tendency to want to leave, remember: Something important's coming up and if you're not here to see it, you're going to miss it. Don't follow the same old pattern that you've been through who knows for how long, letting the mind hide important things from itself. Why is it hiding? Well, look into it. What is it embarrassed about? What is it ashamed to show itself? What is it trying to deny? When you're operating from a sense of steady comfort then it's easier to look into those issues and not run away.

So this issue of steadiness is very important. It allows you to see things that you otherwise wouldn't see. It plows right through the gaps in your awareness in which the mind is hiding things from itself, and it zeros in on the big issues in the mind: Why is the mind causing itself suffering? Why is it causing itself stress in ways that don't have to be there?

In the Three Characteristics, the Buddha does point out that anything fabricated is stressful, but in the Four Noble Truths he focuses in more on the issue of the stress of clinging and craving. The craving causes the clinging, and the clinging to the Five Aggregates is his basic definition of stress and suffering. That's what we've got to work on, because that's the part of stress and suffering

that's not necessary. Once it's taken care of, then the other stresses in the world are not an issue at all.

So what is this clinging? What is this craving? How do we hide it from ourselves? How can we learn to see through it? It's because of ignorance that these things can happen in the mind, and the only way to combat ignorance is to be as steady and consistent in your awareness as possible.

So the issue of being steady in your awareness is not just a matter of concentration practice. It's the basis for allowing discernment to arise. Because you're right there, and when you're right there watching what's happening, you can't help but see. The problem is we're all too often not here. Our gaze has been diverted. Our attention has slipped off someplace else.

So keep zeroing in on the breath, zeroing in on the breath. Don't let anything else pull your attention away.

Maintaining the Observer

May 2003

In Thai they often say there are two steps to getting started in the meditation. One is to get your body into position: right leg on top of the left leg or left on top of the right depending on what you find more comfortable, your back straight, facing forward, your eyes closed, your hands in your lap.

The next step is to get your mind in position. And that's more difficult because the mind doesn't usually want to stay in any one particular position. It's always running around here, running around there, always quick like a cat to jump at anything that comes along. Ajaan Mun once talked about 'the mind's song'. There are rhythms that go through the body, rhythms that seem to go through our awareness. And we start singing along with them without really realizing it, and then we're off someplace else. When we put the mind in position we stop singing along. We just watch what's going on.

So you bring it to the breath. It's a good place to get out of your head and down into the body. Give yourself a good comfortable place to stay and be aware of the breath coming in, aware of the breath going out. Notice how the breathing feels in different parts of the body, because the breathing is a whole-body process. If it's not a whole-body process, it's a sign that there's a blockage someplace that you've got to work with.

But first get a good rhythm going in any one spot where it's easy to watch the breath. It might be at the nose, the chest, the abdomen, the neck, the middle of the head - any place where all the different pressures of the breath coming in and going out and the pressures of your blood circulation feel right together. Focus there and allow the breath to find whatever rhythm feels good right there. If the mind wanders off, bring it right back. If it wanders off again, bring it back again. You're trying to put it in position. That means finding a good, comfortable posture for the mind, and then trying to stay there. It's the staying that makes all the difference. If you just get into position and then quickly jump away, you don't get the benefits of being in position.

And there are lots of benefits. One, you're giving the mind a place to rest, so that it can recover its strength from all that running around. And, secondly, when it's in position it can watch, because if you ever want to watch something carefully *you* have to be very still. If you're running around all the time everything is a blur. You snatch a little sight of something here, snatch a sight of something there, but you don't see anything continuously--which means you don't really understand it.

So we're trying to put the mind in a position where it can stay and watch. This position of the observer is a very important part of the meditation--the observer that doesn't go singing along with the different rhythms or thoughts that come through the mind, but watches them as events. When you're watching things as events, you can decide which things are worth following through with and which ones are not. Of course, you sometimes find yourself slipping off into your old habits of singing along with the mind, but you can catch yourself, stop, and come back to the breath, come back to this position of the observer.

Get more and more used to being here. This is where the mind can have a sense of being at home, where it can rest, and where it can watch the movements of the mind. Where are they running to? Are they going to a place you want to go? If not, then you just drop them, and whatever reality they seemed to have just will dissolve away. It's because you give them a reality that they became solid and imposing and can have power over you. But if you learn simply to watch them as events, then you can gain the upper hand.

So what you're doing here is developing both a place for the mind to rest and a place where, in resting, it heals itself. And in the watching it learns not to build up new diseases. As any doctor can tell you, there are two parts to having a good healthy life: One is taking the medicine when you need it, and the other is having a healthy lifestyle. If you want to be healthy, it's not good to eat unhealthy food, go around smoking, eating junk food and then coming to the doctor and asking for medicine. The medicine will help but it's not nearly as good as maintaining a healthy lifestyle where you're not putting the junk into your system to begin with.

And the same holds true of the mind. We come here to meditate to help heal the mind, all the damage it does to itself. We tend to think more of the stress coming in from outside, but actually *we're* playing along with the outside stress, we're singing along with the outside stress, which is why it gets into the mind.

So we come here, close our eyes, sit in a still position and give the mind a chance to wash out all the unhealthy energies it's picked up. This is a good thing to be doing, but it would be even better if we could maintain this position of the observer all the time. This is what you want to try to do as the mind gets more and more used to being settled at the breath. Not only when you're sitting here,

but also when you get up and start moving around, try to maintain this same inner position, this same inner posture of being the observer.

And try to notice when you lose it. That's a sign you've run across something important: one of those tricks the mind plays on itself to move someplace else very quickly; or it simply forgets itself and just starts singing along with whatever thought comes along, whatever mood comes along.

These things have so much reality simply because we sing along with them. But if you can maintain the position of the observer, you watch these things as they come, and you begin to see the damage they can do if you take them in. And you realize that you have the choice. You don't have to play along with them, you don't have to sing along with them, you don't have to take them in, because you're in a position where you can watch, where you can see these things simply as events rather than as the worlds that they can become once you start getting into them.

And in this way you find that the medicine of sitting meditation can go deeper and deeper and show even more effects than you might have imagined before. Up to now it's simply been a holding action: When things are bad you sit down, you wash things out of your system, you feel better, and then you go back to your old habits. And as a result, the meditation doesn't get a chance to really seep in deeply, to show itself as anything more than simple stress reduction or relief from all the suffering you're carrying around.

But when you can maintain the position of the observer, it becomes a lifestyle, a way of living in which you're not bringing in all those other things to burden the mind. No matter how the body moves, no matter how the mind moves, you maintain this position. If you can keep that up, then when you come to sit and meditate you find the meditation goes deeper, and deeper, and deeper, and you see that it can do more things than you might have imagined. It can address the more subtle diseases in the mind, the more subtle harm the mind is doing to itself.

It's like maintaining a yoga position or a stretch: The first couple of seconds are hard, and then you relax into the stretch and you find you can go further because you give it more time, more continuous time, to work its effects.

Meditation is not here simply for coping with the stresses and strains of life. It's for showing how we can ultimately go beyond causing any suffering or stress for ourselves at all, not only for ourselves, but also for the people around us. We learn to open up to a different dimension in the mind that lies outside of time, and outside of space, outside of all the worlds we can create for ourselves.

But to see that you have to give the meditation time, and you have to make it part of a lifestyle, a way of living--an inner posture, an inner position that you maintain--this observer who watches the moods come and go, watches the

thoughts come and go, doesn't sing along with them, doesn't cause itself the damage that it used to. And you find that the posture of the observer goes deeper and deeper and deeper. The observer can see more and more because you give it the time to develop, to become strong, to become your real home where you settle down.

So ideally, ultimately, when you meditate, it won't be a matter of getting in position. You get the body in position, but the mind is already in position. That's what you want, because it becomes your habitual position. Instead of running out after this, running out after that, singing along with this tune, singing along with that tune, you're stepping back a bit. You have a place to step back and simply watch these things. If there's any use to them, you follow through with them. If not, you just let them go.

This becomes the basic stance of the mind.

As I said, when you reach that, the meditation shows that it can do a lot more than you might have imagined. It can solve problems you didn't even know you had, eliminate levels of suffering and stress you didn't even know you were causing, because they were always there in the background.

Now that the mind is even more subtle and still, it can see these things. And it's only when you see things that you can let them go.

Natural Insight

November 23, 1995

Coming out to a quiet place like this is very important for the mind, because the mind needs time to get away from its day-to-day issues. The affairs of daily life are like wind blowing across the surface of water. When the water is ruffled, you can't see what lies beneath the surface. So you have to come out to a place like this where there are not that many issues going on, just the very basic issues of keeping the body alive - walking when you need to walk, sitting when you need to sit - so you can stop the wind from ruffling the water, and the affairs of the mind can come more and more to the fore. When the surface of the water grows clear and smooth, you can look down inside, into the mind.

And what the mind has to show, it's going to show at its own pace, in its own way. We may come with an idea that we'd like to deal with a particular problem, get something straightened out, or we're going to force the practice to go in certain stages and certain steps like we've read about someplace. But as Ajaan Fuang said, "The mind has its own stages, its own steps." Or as Ajaan Lee said, "The ways of the mind are so complex you could never put them into a book."

So to deal with these complexities we have a very simple technique: Focus on the breath. Be alert and mindful, and stay with the basic technique. And just by doing that over and over again, the things that are going to come up in the mind will come up, at their own pace. They'll reveal themselves bit by bit by bit. This is where patience comes into the practice. There are some issues you'd like to have dealt with right away, but they don't come up. The mind isn't ready to handle them. So you just chip away at the basic technique and see what *does* come up on its own.

When things come in their own way, it's like sanding wood: You polish the wood in order to bring out the grain that's already there. If you have preconceived notions of what you'd like the grain to look like and try to paint those designs on of the wood, you end up with something unnatural, and you cover up the grain that's already there. But if you simply polish the wood

without any preconceived notions beyond the act of polishing, the natural grain of the wood comes out. And the same with meditation: In the process of keeping the mind with the breath you learn a lot of important things already there in the body and mind, some of which you didn't expect.

This is why we always have to be open to whatever comes up in the course of the meditation - whatever insights, whatever realizations, whatever issues arise - because many times the things that come up are more valuable than what you thought you were looking for. If you're too busy looking for something else, you miss seeing what's actually there. So meditation is a training in learning to be very patient with the mind, and to be open with it and see - as you subject the mind to the training - what traits, what characteristics it shows to you. And you've got the basic technique to deal with whatever comes up.

We were talking last night about the different ways of bringing your mind back to the breath, back to the present, and there are a lot of important lessons right there in the process of bringing the mind back. Many times we get frustrated with it: "When is this problem going to stop?" Well, if it keeps coming back, it's an important issue. We've got to learn how to master bringing the mind back, because in doing so you learn an awful lot about the mind, a lot of unexpected things about how the mind slips off the breath, how it avoids certain issues, how it cooks up other issues to get in the way of seeing things it just doesn't want to see. And in the simple process of bringing the mind back, trying to be mindful, trying to be alert, you catch sight of things you didn't see before, that used to be in the blind spots, but now you begin to catch out of the corner of your eye.

As the Buddha said, learning how to deal with the process of distraction--when you've really mastered it, when you're really good at it--can take you all the way to arahantship. A lot of the Buddha's teachings are like this: just very simple techniques, very simple things to do with the mind, and the unexpected realizations that come up in the course of doing the technique.

This is one of the reasons why you can't map out the ways of the mind. At the same time, though, you can't think that simply following the instructions in the meditation is going to be enough. You've got to be as observant as possible, all-around. That's why we say sometimes, "You've got to play with the meditation." You need a sense of experimentation, because often times the things you catch out of the corner of your eye as you're working with a technique are the important realizations. Those are the things that make a real difference.

So when you sit down and meditate - even though you've seen the steps of the path laid out, you may have a general idea of what it's all about and where it's going - still, you've got to put that knowledge aside. We're here training the mind, and yet the mind is both trainer and trainee. The map is for the trainer, just

so you know where you're headed, where you're going, but when the mind itself is being trained you have to put the map aside and just see what's right there in the present as it comes up. And in the course of dealing with the practice, a lot of unexpected things do come up, and you have to be ready for them, to notice them as they come.

So stick with your basic technique, but keep your range of vision broad.

And don't try to define things too heavily in advance. The purpose of the meditation to become more and more familiar with the ways of the mind, and the kind of knowledge that comes with familiarity, though it goes very deep, comes in little increments. It's like getting to know a person. You can't just walk up to someone and smile and shake hands and become friends. You can be friendly at the beginning, but actually becoming friends takes time – to get to know the person's strengths and weaknesses, his sense of humor, the things you can trust him on, the things you can't trust him on. All these forms of knowledge come in a very indirect way. When unexpected events arise and you begin to see that person in a different light--how he behaves in an emergency, how he behaves when you're in trouble: This is how you get to know the other person. It takes time.

The same with the mind. You focus on the basic technique of keeping with the breath, and eventually you stumble over some really important veins in the mind. They may be veins of gold, veins of diamond, or an old layer of garbage that got laid down sometime in the past. But the basic technique is just being here, being observant, watching what happens, and the things will come out layer by layer by layer as they were laid down.

So when you meditate you can't sit down and say, "Okay, this particular session I'm going to understand this defilement or I'm going to attain that level of jhana. I'm going to understand dependent co-arising. I'm going to understand my childhood hang-ups." That doesn't get you anywhere. Just tell yourself, "For this breath I'm going to be right here. I'm going to be mindful. Alert. I'm going to try to settle down with the breath as much as I can."

There are parts of the meditation you can will, which is why the Buddha talks about them. For example, the range of your awareness: You can will to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in; you can will to be aware of the whole body as you breathe out. You can will to focus exclusively on a particular part of the body. You can will to let the breath grow calm. You can will to focus on pleasure or rapture or wherever you want to focus it in regard to the breath. Those are things you can will.

That's the difference between concentration and insight. Concentration is a matter of using your will. It's fabricated, as the Buddha says. But insight is something you can't will. Even though you tell yourself "I'm going to be very

carefully noting this and noting that," that's a very precise form of concentration. It's not *vipassana*; it's not insight.

The insight consists of the understanding that comes when you suddenly see things right in front of you, and many times it's not what you were told you were going to see. And the real test is if the understanding or the vision you have brings the mind to peace. Yet even if it is true insight, you have to let it go when it's done its work and just go back to the technique. If it's something that really makes a big difference in the mind, it can't help but make a difference in the mind. You don't have to memorize it. You don't have to jot it down or try to make yourself see things in that light from then on in. That's a false kind of insight, in which your perceptions cover up the possibility of any new insights arising right after them.

So whatever comes up in the practice, you take note of it and let it pass. If it's important, it'll shift the ground under your feet. If it's not, then why bother with it? Just let it go. Your one job is to stick with the basic steps of the practice.

This is why the Buddha's meditation instructions are so very simple. He focuses on how you breathe, where you focus your attention, what range of awareness you develop. That's pretty much all the instruction he gives. He gives a few warnings about some of the issues that may come up and how you should contemplate them. When some things come up, you have to immediately contemplate them as being inconstant, stressful, not-self, so you can let them go. At other times, some very delightful, exquisite sensations can come up and you've got to stay with them, let them develop, until you see where even they are stressful, even they can be a burden, and you can let them go.

If particular problems come up--things like lust, anger, delusion; sleepiness, restlessness, uncertainty--the Buddha has particular techniques for dealing with them. But then he has you get back here to the breath when the issue has passed, for this is your home.

The breath, he said, is the most refreshing form of meditation. He compared it to the first rain storm of the rainy season. If you've ever been in India or in Asia during the hot season, you know what it's like when the first rains come. There's been dust in the air for months and months, along with the oppressiveness of the dryness and heat, and all of a sudden the rain comes and cools everything off, washes the dust all away. The air is suddenly clear like it hasn't been for months. That's the image he gives for breath meditation. It's the topic of meditation that'll clear away all unskillful states, so you keep this as your home base. It may seem a little bit too simple, but that's simply the verdict coming from the part of the mind that's trying to plan things and arrange things and figure things out in advance.

So just stick with it, stick with it, stick with it. And what's going to come up is going to come up, and it'll come up in little bits and pieces. But it comes up as your own insight.

Using your own insight is a lot better than using the insight you get in books, because those insights are borrowed, prepackaged, like the advice in an astrology column. You can't be sure if it's right for you to use right now. But when the mind gets to the point where you've polished it with the breath, the insights that arise are just right for the time and place. It's a very natural process. It's a process that allows the mind to see clearly into itself, whatever is there. Just don't try to plan things in advance, because you have to remember that we're all operating from ignorance, and our plans and our designs on the practice come from ignorance as well.

So try the technique with a minimum of planning and a minimum of designing. When you stick with that, the things that couldn't come out before, that didn't have the opening, can arise within the mind, at their own pace, in their own time. And you're right here to catch sight of them.

Glossary

Absorption: See "Jhana," below.

Ajaan (Thai): Teacher; mentor.

Ajaan Fuang:

Ajaan Lee:

Ajaan Mun:

Ajaan Suwat:

Arahant: A person who has abandoned all ten of the fetters that bind the mind to the cycle of rebirth, whose heart is free of mental defilement, and is thus not destined for future rebirth. An epithet for the Buddha and the highest level of his Noble Disciples. Sanskrit form: *arhat*.

Awakening: See "Buddho" and "Nibbana," below.

Buddho (Buddha): Awake; enlightened. An epithet for the Buddha.

Canon: "Tipitika" - the Buddhist Canon; literally, the three 'baskets' - disciplinary rules for monks and nuns, discourses, and abstract philosophical treatises. Sanskrit form: *tripitika*.

Concentration: "Samadhi" - the practice of centering the mind in a single sensation or preoccupation.

Dhamma: (1) Event; action. (2) A phenomenon in and of itself. (3) Mental quality. (4) Doctrine, teaching. (5) Nibbana (although there are passages in the Pali Canon describing nibbana as the abandoning of all dhammas). Sanskrit form: *dharma*.

Five Aggregates: "Khandha" - literally, "aggregate," "heap," "pile." The aggregates are the basic building blocks of describable experience, as well as the building blocks from which one's sense of "self" is constructed. There are five in all: physical form, feeling, perception, thought-constructs, and consciousness. Sanskrit form: *skandha*.

Four Noble Truths: "Ariya-sacca" - literally, "noble truth;" specifically, the Four Noble Truths: the Noble Truth of suffering and stress; the Noble Truth of the origin of suffering and stress; the Noble Truth of the cessation of suffering and stress; and the Noble Truth of the Eightfold Path leading to the cessation of suffering and stress.

Insight: See "Vipassana," below.

Jhana: Mental absorption. A state of strong concentration focused on a single sensation or mental notion. Sanskrit form: *dhyana*.

Ignorance: "Avijja" - unawareness, obscured awareness, delusion about the nature of the mind.

Metta: Good will; kindness; benevolence; friendliness.

Middle Way, The:

Mindfulness: "Sati" - the ability to keep something in mind; alertness; self-collectedness; powers of reference and retention.

Nibbana: Literally, the "unbinding" of the mind from passion, aversion, and delusion, and from the entire round of death and rebirth. As the term also denotes the extinguishing of a fire, it carries connotations of stilling, cooling, and peace. (According to the physics taught at the time of the Buddha, a burning fire seizes or adheres to its fuel; when extinguished, it is unbound. Sanskrit form: *nirvana*.)

Pali: The name of the earliest extant canon of the Buddha's teachings and, by extension, of the language in which it was composed.

Perception: "Sañña" - label; allusion; act of memory or recognition; interpretation.

Thought-construct: "Sankhara" - The fashioning or forming of urges, thoughts, etc., within the mind. The forces and factors that fashion things, the process of fashioning, and the fashioned things that result; all things conditioned, compounded, or concocted by nature, whether on the physical or the mental level.

Three Characteristics: "Tilakkhana" - The three characteristics inherent in all conditioned phenomena: being inconstant, stressful, and not-self.

Vipassana: Insight, of such a type as is deep and effective in curing the habitual production of unwholesome states of mind. It is insight which arises from wisdom and is based on a clear and quiet mind.

Wat (Thai): Monastery.

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