

VIPASSANA

Preparation

Vipassana is natural, it is the observation of your body and mind as they are right now. It is mental development, cultivation of your mind, your heart. Your heart is your life. Do you like your heart the way it is? Are you happy with yourself and your life? If so and you feel content, you are very fortunate indeed, because most of us have anger, fear, frustration, problems, stress, worry and many other natural but somewhat unpleasant states of mind that we would be much happier without.

How is the state of your heart, right now? Can you **know** your feelings while you are experiencing them in life? Like an airplane pilot who checks all of the instruments at the same time she is flying the plane. Monitoring the situation while still functioning normally. I am referring to mindfulness, awareness and attention on your mind, the state of your heart, your emotions, as you go about your life. Learning by observing the nature of your mind and allowing it to balance, naturally. Keeping a check on the positive and negative elements of mind, so as not to go to any extremes and cause stress and suffering to yourself and other living beings.

Most of us are out of balance, the heart is swinging, left to right, high and low, peace is much sought after by all beings.

Buddha teaches 'The Middle Way' ...

Imbalance in the present is due to imbalance in the past. We did things wrong, made mistakes, hurt other living beings, even the ones we love, by our actions, speech and thoughts. We didn't know the right way, we lacked understanding, we were ignorant and foolish. Often this is what leads people to find the truth, they feel something inside is not right, not complete or perfect, there is something missing.

We come to vipassana with all of our 'baggage' - 'emotional baggage', it is natural, we all have it and take everywhere we go. For some people it has risen to the surface of their mind and they can't see past it. There is a big problem or many problems in their life and they can't think about anything else. That is where we have to start! We need to clear up the mind, even if only a little bit, enough to see the reality of the present moment. If your mind is scattered with problems, emotions, anger and fears from the past then you won't be able to concentrate on the present, where the key to the answers of life lie. Let's look at the predominant mental states in your heart now. Here's a good question; Why do I want to meditate? Think about it, it is so important for you to know. Share it with your teacher and get proper guidance but as long as *you* know the answer, that's the main thing.

Forgiveness

This is one of the best ways to start meditation practice and a meditation retreat. It allows us to let go of the past and start afresh from now, the present.

Find a peaceful place, sit comfortably, relax by mindfulness of breathing in and out, gently, naturally. After a few minutes, begin by reciting the first sentence repeatedly;

In many ways, intentionally or unintentionally, I have caused harm and suffering to other beings.

Reflect on one occasion when you caused harm and suffering, mainly to people but any beings. Were you greedy / selfish or angry, or simply confused? These are the three most common states of mind, everyone has them most of the time, they are natural. Try to realize that, at that time you were ignorant, foolish and you didn't know better. If you know that now, you feel sorry and you wouldn't do it again because you are older and wiser, then you may forgive yourself and wish compassion for them:

I forgive myself.

May they be free from their suffering.

You may repeat these words, try to feel them, try understand them. Can you really forgive yourself? Can you let it go? If not, try again from the beginning, do it repeatedly with that same situation but if you get no results, change to another time another incident and repeat the first line ... then forgiveness and compassion. Can you forgive yourself and let it go? If so, how does that feel? How does it feel to be forgiven? If you did it properly, it feels wonderful, you feel light and free. You have the power to forgive yourself.

That is the basis of forgiveness practice. Usually, we try to forgive others first but it doesn't always work. We are often advised to 'Forgive and forget!' Nice words, nice gesture but can we really do it? Sometimes, we hear the response, "I will forgive but I won't forget!" What's that?! Not forgiveness. Here we have a technique, a systematic approach to developing forgiveness and it begins with the most important person in your life, YOU.

You must experience forgiveness for yourself, in your own heart. We can't wait around for others to forgive us. This is an internal practice, the unbinding of the heart. When you really feel forgiveness for yourself, by yourself, it is so good that you naturally want to share it, you want everyone, all beings to feel as free and light as you! That's beautiful!

We may repeat just the first phrase for five or ten minutes, an hour, a day or even a week or more, until you feel satisfied with it. Remember, working on yourself first is the true key to unlocking your heart.

Then try the second phrase repeatedly, in the same way as the first.

In many ways, intentionally or unintentionally, I have caused harm and suffering to myself.

Now this is a little bit tricky ... "How did I harm myself?" We always blame others for harming us but we don't understand that it is our own lack of understanding, our own ignorance and delusion that makes us suffer. We get angry by ourselves, because we don't understand the other person or the situation. You don't have to be angry. Awareness make the difference.

**Wise people don't get angry ...
they just know!**

We harm ourselves with greed, anger, fear, pride, jealousy, foolishness, etc.. It is all our own stuff and nobody else's. This is what is meant by ignorance, face it, you don't know why you get afraid or impatient, guilty or sad. Yes, there is the external situation or person or people but no matter what happens externally, it is our inner reaction that causes the suffering.

I forgive myself.

May I be free from my suffering.

Try this practice for yourself. When we understand the way the mind is working and how to unravel it by way of forgiveness for oneself, then we're ready to forgive others, which is the hardest of them all.

Now we know what it feels like to be forgiven, and that it is ignorance that makes us selfish, angry and confused, then we can understand that when others have used and abused us, it is because they suffer from the same mental illness as we have, ignorance. They are unwise, foolish, they don't know that they are harming others and themselves at the same time. If they did, if they knew the pain in themselves and admit to their own emotional suffering, they wouldn't hurt a fly. They would be remorseful and repentant. They too would ask for forgiveness.

**We have harmed others,
just as others have to you,
if you can forgive yourself,
you can forgive the others too.**

Finally, the third phrase. Even those who harmed you, yes they were wrong, but they were deluded too. Also, they have suffered for doing harm to you. They have thought about it and probably regretted it, if not yet, they will in the future, it is the natural way of kamma / karma.

In many ways, intentionally or unintentionally, I have been harmed by others, I forgive them.

May we all be free from our suffering.

Wisdom understands the past and it fades away. These phrases are practiced in order of, 1,2,3.

Forgiveness can be a general daily practice. Whenever you remember or if a situation arises, you can use it to see the reality of a situation and to forgive and let go of troublesome feelings and emotions. Don't carry this stuff around with you. That's why we get stressed, because we put this unfinished problem in our 'bag' and carry to the next place and get another problem and put it in the bag too and off we go, from place to place, from person to person, collecting and carrying all of our unfinished dark and heavy emotions and problems.

Maybe you don't remember your past or feel much strong emotion now but I can guarantee that when you spend some time in meditation, especially on a long retreat, sitting still with your eyes closed, then your past stuff is going to come flooding back to you. Things you thought you had forgotten or forgiven but they're still in the bag, the 'emotional baggage'. So you can use this

practice, phrases 1,2,3 in order each time, to remedy that restlessness, remorse, stress and anger. You're on the right track!

Phrases for Forgiveness

1. In many ways, intentionally or unintentionally, I have caused harm and suffering to other beings. I forgive myself.

May they be free from their suffering.

2. In many ways, intentionally or unintentionally, I have caused harm and suffering to myself, I forgive myself.

May I be free from my suffering.

3. In many ways, intentionally or unintentionally, I have been harmed by others, I forgive them.

May we all be free from our suffering.

A good practice is to finish off each forgiveness session with at least a few minutes of metta, loving kindness, firstly for yourself, then others. Then refresh the five precepts and share your good deeds, your merits with departed relatives, family, friends and / or all beings.

Its a bit like an operation;

Starting with breathing to calm the mind is like anaesthetic,

forgiveness is like opening up a wound to remove something harmful,

metta is like healing,

the five precepts are like prevention from it happening again,

and sharing merits is like rejoicing and feeling good after the operation.

'A SUCCESSFUL RETREAT'
VIPASSANA
INSIGHT MEDITATION
MINDFULNESS DEVELOPMENT

Here I want to explain in detail the technique of vipassana meditation which will make the rest of this book easier to understand.

There are two basic ways of developing mindfulness; specific and general.

Specific mindfulness refers to the moment by moment, continuous observation of body / mind processes as they really are. We do this in the retreat situation or whenever we have to time to pay close attention to our own body and mind.

General mindfulness means to use the training of specific mindfulness in our daily life so as to continue our practice and awareness wherever we go and whatever we do.

This section on 'A Successful Retreat' is about specific mindfulness, general mindfulness is explained later.

Vipassana is known in English as insight meditation which means to gain wisdom and understanding through direct observation of your mental and physical processes in the present moment. It is also known as mindfulness meditation, which I call mindfulness development. I like this term because that is exactly what we are doing, developing, sharpening, increasing our mindfulness, our attention.

Some other ways to say vipassana are; introspection, reality observation, objective awareness, acknowledging and momentary experiential learning. It's important to know what insight meditation is not and what it is ...

It's not just relaxation.

It is realization of the natural processes in your body and mind as they appear to you now. The mind is alert, sharp and clearly aware but the body is relaxed and not tense or rigid.

It's not just stress relief.

It is identifying, observing, understanding and the subsequent reduction of stress causing factors, not only in the present but also for the future.

It's not blind faith.

It is practical and personally experiential. We give you the advice, if you do the work with the right attitude and an open mind, then you can gauge the results for yourself. It is an experiment.

It's not absorption, fixed or deep concentration on one single object, such as the breath, visible or visualized object, recitation or mantra, recollection or reflection on a concept or profundity.

It is developing the mind's ability to observe many changing processes with a light and wieldy concentration, that with continuity can become strong enough to penetrate the superficiality of our existence.

It's not a selection of objects according to one's own desires or a teacher's instructions.

It is choiceless awareness, a non-judgmental observation of all things as they really are. It is living in the present moment.

It's not trying to destroy, change or get rid of things that you dislike.

It is simply observing whatever process is predominant just now in order to understand the true nature of it.

It's not selfishness.

It is understanding oneself well before helping others in a wise and meaningful way. Preparing and making yourself strong first.

It's not idol worship, magic, prayers, sacrifices, divinity or even religious.
It is just you with your natural abilities and your desire to reduce and become free from all kinds of suffering.

It's not something separate or outside of your life.

It is a momentary look at the very real, present moment nature of your existence as it is without any opinion, criticism or alteration. This is reality.

It's not the instant rise to some lofty heights on the spiritual path. It is in fact a return to earth, back to basics and the simplicity of living within the space of your own body and mind.

THE PRINCIPLE

Very Important

The principle of Vipassana is to observe,
any mental or physical process that is predominant
within the present moment.

Please commit this to memory.

The three operative words in this principle are, **observe, any and predominant.**

We are simply acknowledging, observing, we're not changing, eradicating or destroying.

Any, not just one single, permanent, continuous object but anything that arises naturally.

Predominant, strong, obvious, objects in your natural field of awareness, your six senses, your body and mind, that's all. If ever in doubt, just remember

the principle. Try reciting this principle three times at the beginning of each sitting, just to set your mind in the right direction.

MENTAL LABELING

Also known as noting and naming, this means to say the word in your mind of that which you are experiencing in your body or mind within the present moment.

The words that you use are not as important as the mindfulness itself. If you are able to be aware of any process without analyzing, comparing, judging or thinking, you may drop the labeling and observe with bare attention. We label objects / processes as long as they are predominant. We use only single words.

Reasons for noting;

Initially directing the mind to the object.

Preventing the mind from wandering away from the object – not thinking about something else.

The mind is engaged in wholesome activity, refraining from negativity.

Objectifying our awareness. Not subjective, without opinion or judgment.

Clarifying and confirming the single object that is being observed, not being confused with anything else, just this.

Supporting the on-going observation as long as that object remains predominant.

Change your observation and labeling when ...

The object is displaced or replaced by a more predominant object.

The object has changed into another process.

The object has disappeared.

The object becomes faint or dull or you become disinterested in it.

What happens if the objects are too fast, too many or there doesn't seem to be any predominant object to label?

We can do one of three things;

1) Label, "confused, confused", "worrying" or "thinking" until the mind clears. Continue with the next process that arises.

2) Stop labeling and just observe the 'busyness' with a quiet mind and bare attention until something becomes predominant or clear.

3) Choose one object and label it, such as breathing or 'rising and falling'.

Objects that we don't label;

1. The heartbeat.
2. Pain in the chest.
3. Pain in the head.

Why? Because sometimes when we concentrate on something it may seem bigger or more intense. Also because these are our major organs and systems, we easily worry and panic about them. RELAX!! We just observe them with a gentle label like, "fee~ling, fee~ling, fee~ling" or with general mindfulness, without labeling.

Remember, you don't have to label an object until it disappears, it may not.

Don't use mindfulness and labeling as a weapon to destroy things that you dislike. For example, a pain may be labeled continuously for half an hour or so. A desirous thought might be labeled twenty or thirty times before it fades away. If there is a long continuous noise like a motor or fan you need not label it but observe and label the next most predominant object.

Don't concentrate on the labels.

The labels are just to direct your mind to the present moment process without thinking or judging.

Mindfulness is first, labeling is second.

Imagine that mindfulness is in the foreground close to the object being observed and labeling is in the background.

Continuity of mindfulness is very important.

Continuous labeling confirms that your mindfulness is continuous.

Continuous mindfulness means that your concentration is sharp.

Sharp concentration cuts delusion and penetrates into reality, that is insight.

Insight means wisdom.

Wisdom displaces delusion.

Wisdom is the cause of peace.

Peace is the natural wish of all living beings.

SITTING

Mindfulness of sitting

This is just an introduction to sitting mindfully. It may be used as a guideline for beginning the practice but it is not yet comprehensive as many more details will become clear to you as you read and practise more.

Find a quiet place and sit down comfortably. Find a position that is suitable for you to sit at least ten or fifteen minutes without moving. You may try sitting 'cross-legged', maybe with your bottom raised on a mat or cushion to make your back straight and to relieve any tension or pain in your back. This position will lower your legs to the floor. Try to put your legs parallel to one another, putting the heel of one foot up into your groin. Or put one foot on the thigh of the other leg (half lotus position) or put both feet on the opposite thigh (full lotus).

You may also sit in a chair or on a stool but don't lean back as you lose your energy and fall asleep. Adopt a comfortable, balanced and upright

posture with your back straight and your shoulders square, not too rigid, not too lax. Don't lean on or touch anything. Keep your head straight, lower your chin slightly, gently close your eyes and keep them closed, rest your hands, one in the other, in your lap and sit still.

We may begin with mindfulness of breathing just to centre and calm the mind. This is not exactly vipassana, it is **samatha** because we fix our attention on only one object but it is useful to start this way to relax the body and the busy mind. As you breathe in, find a place in the nostrils where you feel the air passing in and out. Use that sensation as a point of focus to start the meditation. As you breathe naturally and normally, try labeling as, "breathing in", "breathing out", keeping your attention on the feeling. Similarly, you may observe the sensation of the air passing through the length of the nose or the whole breathing process, labeling as, "breathing in", "breathing out". If your breath is long, you know it, if it is short, you know it. Relax as you mindfully breathe in and relax as you mindfully breathe out. Relax the whole body.

We may observe for just a few breaths or a few minutes, its up to you. When you feel the mind is concentrated and calm, change to the awareness of the 'rise and fall' of the abdomen.

An effect of the in-breath when our lungs and chest expands is that our abdomen (stomach) expands outward and upward and as we breathe out, our abdomen contracts inward and downward. This movement is best observed behind the navel or lower abdomen. Don't observe the diaphragm (breathing muscle) high in the abdomen because there is a tendency to force the breathing and push and pull the diaphragm, resulting in pain, tension and fatigue. Just breathe naturally. We label this movement as, "rising" and "falling". If the breath is long, label consecutively as, "rising, rising, rising, falling, falling, falling", not slowly as, "ri~sing, fa~lling" or else you may fall

asleep! If the breath is short, we label, “rising, falling”. So you should label it consecutively, momentarily, as you experience it, if it is long, you label it many times, if it is short, label it only once. According to our tradition, the rising and falling movements are one of the main objects of attention. If ever you get lost in the meditation or don’t know what to observe, just come back to the breath or ‘rising and falling’.

Sometimes, for some people, the movement is too faint or light, then you may observe the breathing but don’t stick to it, this is vipassana, we observe anything that is predominant in our body and mind. Don’t give up on the rising and falling though, sometimes it will be clearer and stronger than others. It is a good meditation object.

As we sit still, there are many naturally arising sensations in the body, such as pain, pressure, tension, numb, itchiness, cold, hot, smelling, hearing, we simply observe and call them by their name. Although these sensations are arising simultaneously, we can only be aware of them individually. As they become predominant, we observe and label them. When they change, disappear or another becomes more predominant, our observation and label changes with that new sensation.

ANY sound we hear is only labeled as, “hearing”, we don’t label, “dog”, “car”, “bell”, they are external, our mindfulness is concerned with the internal process. We usually don’t label “listening” because that means you intentionally want to hear a sound. Hearing happens whether we want it to or not. Because we have ears and there are sounds, we hear.

Then as you feel anything, such as numb, you label it “numb, numb” until it changes or something else replaces it. The same with pain, itchy, hot, cold, even thinking and sleepy too. More about that later. Just acknowledge and label what happens naturally and don’t react to it. Only if your posture

has slouched, just label, “slouched”, “bending” or “leaning” and gently straighten up again, labeling, “straightening, straightening”.

You might like to start your sitting with a determination by repeating the principle three times or reminding yourself of what you’re doing by asking, “Why am I sitting here?” Metta / Loving-kindness meditation for 5 or 10 minutes is also a good way to start a sitting.

Sitting cross-legged for a long time isn’t important, the degree of pure mindfulness is important. Even five minutes of intensive mental labeling and clear comprehension is more important and beneficial than dreaming, thinking and sleeping for an hour, two or three! Having stated that, by gradually extending the sitting times, naturally you will get new and interesting experiences.

Don’t just jump up because you feel bored, sleepy or painful. Before finishing a sitting, you should ask yourself, “Why am I getting up now?” Then observe and label the answer, you might go through a ‘barrier’ and sit longer or get up mindfully with a fresh mind.

MENTAL STATES

**Observing and labeling mental states,
including thoughts and emotions,
is the most important aspect
of this practice.**

Thinking is subjective and seductive. If thoughts are not observed attentively, objectively and labeled energetically, the mind will quickly and happily be swept away by any story. Sometime later mindfulness arises, but perhaps along with guilt, self judgment and criticism due to your

heedlessness. Should these arise, please be careful to observe and label them too, it's part of the purification and mental development process.

Another excellent reason for labeling thoughts is because of their calming, pleasant, entertaining and enjoyable nature, they induce sleep and laziness. The labeling objectifies the mind and interrupts the flow of thought thus our mindfulness may become clear and continuous.

We label such mental processes as planning, remembering, imagining, sleepy, anger, impatience, irritation, boredom and so-on until they are displaced or disappear. Even if they come and go quickly, it's still good practice to label them once or twice as they disappear.

Remember, we are neither rejecting nor accepting thoughts,
we are attempting to acknowledge them
and understand their true nature.

When the mind is dreaming, fantasizing and wandering off, we don't bring it straight back to breathing or the rising and falling of the abdomen. We label, "dreaming, dreaming", "fantasizing, fantasizing" or "wandering, wandering", until it disappears or is replaced by a more predominant object. Then we observe the next most predominant object which could be any process of body or mind.

Black or Blank? This is not uncommon for vipassana meditators. Although it can be nice and quiet, it is a rather unproductive and useless state of mind, label it energetically so as not to get *stuck* in it, "black, black" or "blank, blank" or even, "nothing, nothing, nothing", see how it changes and observe what happens next. It can also be boring or sometimes even scary as the yogi doesn't know what happened, its like someone turned out the lights. Relax and label how you feel, "boring", "afraid" or even "calm".

Peace is a natural mental state which must be labeled seriously as, “peace”, “calm”, “tranquil” or if you’re getting attached to it, “enjoying”, “desire”, “wanting”, etc. not to make it go away and not to indulge in it but to objectively view it as a present moment mental process and understand its true nature. If you don’t, you’ll get stuck in it too and you won’t make any progress. Vipassana isn’t just about feeling peaceful, it’s about realizing the truth.

Remember, as long as you attach to or grasp at any experience, “good” or “bad”, you will remain at that stage and not make any progress.

If you are expecting something good, special or amazing, you must label that expectation, “expecting, expecting”. Maybe you’re expecting past experiences to happen again - not good, you’re missing the point, you’re missing the present moment. Don’t look for anything, just see what is here and now, that’s how to make progress.

Expectation is yogi poison!

If you are projecting and speculating, label them seriously too!

Expectation

can lead to disappointment;

Openness

leads to insight and delight.

Concentration - Don’t force it! Relax!

Don’t be greedy for concentration, don’t even search for it or worry about it, it is a common mental faculty that can arise at any time. It will naturally arise once your attention is on an body / mind process. So you already have it, now use it gently and wisely to observe how your present moment experiences are naturally unfolding.

SLEEPINESS

The BEST way to deal with sleepiness is with pure mindfulness.

Here are eight traditional ways to 'see through' sleepiness.

1. Be aware of the thinking that causes the sleepiness. Label "thinking, thinking" attentively. Or observe the sleepiness directly and label it energetically as, "SLEEPY! SLEEPY! SLEEPY!" to try to see its true nature. Label it until it disappears, then you may label, "fresh, fresh" or "awake, awake".
2. Recall and reflect on some Dhamma (teachings), like the last Dhamma talk that you heard. Remember and repeat the principle of vipassana meditation. Remember at least three of these suggestions for seeing the end of sleepiness.
3. Recite some Pali verses that will inspire you and arouse effort for meditation.
4. Mindfully and slowly massage or press on some parts of your body. You could try twisting your ears and pulling them! Or maybe just a pinch here or there.
5. Imagine a bright light in your mind and label it as, "seeing, seeing" or "light, light" just long enough to make the mind alert.
6. Open your eyes a little bit, just enough to wake you up and then close them again. Try opening your eyes and staring at a light or the Buddha Image's face. Or look as far off into the distance as possible. Stare at a bright light and label, "seeing".
7. Get up from sitting, slowly and very mindfully and do walking meditation. If you must walk slightly faster, you may do so away from other meditators. Try walking backwards, carefully!

8. This one is the most difficult for a *real* yogi and that is to go and lie down but that doesn't necessarily mean sleep! Try to meditate in the lying posture as instructed in later in this book.

Our teacher says,

"Sleepiness must be labeled attentively,
energetically and somewhat quickly".

More remedies - one of these has to work for you!

Remember; try to understand sleepiness in its true nature.

Sleepiness is usually preceded by thinking. Yes, even that sudden nodding/jerking movement is sleepiness, caused by the mind slipping into a comfortable and subtle thought or by automatic or superficial labeling.

*Try to 'see' the sleepiness, try to find it in the mind, look directly at it, concentrate your attention on it. What characteristics does it have? How does it feel? Heavy? Light? Dull? 'Cloudy / misty'? Where is it? Where did it come from? Where does it go? Why does it arise, why does it disappear?

WHAT IS SLEEPY? In vipassana, we don't ask ourselves these questions as such but observing sleepiness directly, we may find the answers.

* Catch thinking as it arises and avoid sleepiness.

* You could try to shout in your mind as you label,

"SLEEPY!, SLEEPY!, SLEEPY!"

But don't shout out loud, you'll wake up the other yogis!

* If you detect any other associated mental states such as anger, boredom, desire, enjoying, lust, wanting or lazy, label them energetically too. This is very effective.

* If sleepiness keeps coming back after it has disappeared, try labeling how you feel about that, "aversion", "disappointed" or "frustrated".

* Label the physical feeling of sleepiness such as the heaviness, pressure or tension in the body, head or eyes.

* There are thousands of physical processes, feelings and sensations in the body, try to label as many as you can.

* Take three deep breaths and label them attentively.

* Do Metta, loving-kindness meditation towards yourself, fellow meditators and/or all beings.

* Start with a determination like these;

“I will try to label sleepiness as soon as it arises.”

“I will try to see the true nature of sleepiness.”

* Try sitting very close to a wall or maybe a curtain so that if your head falls forward it will touch something and wake you up, it's very effective but please be careful!

* Sit without a cushion or in an uncomfortable position, like the full lotus or by tucking your legs underneath you.

* Try sitting in a windy, noisy, cold or hot place.

* Let the mosquitoes bite you!! If there is no danger of disease.

* Walk barefoot on stones, grass or a wet, cold or hot surface.

* Choose three or five of your favorite techniques listed here and memorize them. When sleepiness arises, recite them in order in your mind. That recitation will make the sleepiness disappear. If not then apply number one, just do it! If it doesn't work, try number two and so on.

* Confront it, try to 'see' sleepiness, look at it 'right between the eyes', stare it down. Rather than let it come to you, you go to it!

Once, I was so sick of sleepiness, I dared it to put me to sleep. I said, "Come on sleepiness ... put me to sleep, I dare you!" It 'ran' away!

Try not to just give in to sleepiness, it is just a temporary mental state that can be easily over powered by mindfulness. Try not to reject it or get rid of it, just label it, patiently, sharply observing it until it disappears, this is the middle way. If you really can't label it and 'see through' it, get up slowly and mindfully and practice specific awareness of daily activities or walking meditation. If you have to walk slightly faster, do so outside or away from slow walking and sitting meditators.

PAIN

Pain is natural and a very good teacher. Most people are afraid of it but if you can make friends with it by getting to know it and observing it closely and in detail, you will understand it, both physically and mentally. With wisdom, there is no fear, pain won't be a problem any more. It has it's 'mechanical' or physical characteristics to be observed but then relax and check the mental and emotional states that arise with it too.

We are simply acknowledging pain, we're not making it go away. We are observing it objectively so as to understand its various natural characteristics. We are not just being patient with it, we are examining and investigating it. No need to hold on to it but don't just give in to it either, experiment with it. If it is too painful, you will know when to change your position, slowly and mindfully, letting the pain go and labeling, "changing", "moving", "relief" or "happy, happy".

Five ways to see through pain.

1) Directly observe the physical sensation by labeling it as, "pain, pain, pain" or you can use more specific words such as, stinging, burning, aching, throbbing and so on. You may also just observe it without labeling but often thinking arises, if it does, that must be labeled. Don't pay attention to or label

the position of the pain like, “pain in the back” or “pain in the knee” or “knee pain”. We just label in single words. Concentrating on a pain may seem to make it worse but don't worry, it's an illusion, you are just seeing it more clearly, that's good!

2) Observe the associated mental state or emotional feeling that arises with the pain. You have aversion to it which stops you from seeing the pain in its true nature, so we label it as, “aversion, aversion” until that disappears and we continue to observe the pain as it is. Also, you want to get rid of it, so label that wanting or desire. Often we are worrying about the pain as it has been in the past and we worry about it being here in the future, so we label the worrying, remembering or speculating until that disappears and then label the pain as it is. Are you analyzing the pain, trying to find the cause? “Analyzing, analyzing”.

Maybe you are judging or criticizing yourself, label that too.

Other useful words to label with are: agitated, fear, frustrated, impatient and restless. Label them all until they disappear and keep watching to see what happens next.

3) A fact - pain is physical but it is felt / perceived by the mind. Mind and matter are two separate processes.

RELAX!! Just 'sit back' and watch from a distance by putting a 'safety zone' between you and the pain, like as if it is about one metre away from you. You can try putting up an imaginary glass shield so that the pain seems disconnected from you but you can still see it clearly. You may imagine it to be concealed in a clear bubble. Another way is to look at it as if it's on TV, like a documentary. Imagine it is not yours, not inside but outside or as if it belongs to somebody else.

4) Concentrate and penetrate into the centre of the pain with your minds 'eye'. Like a huge rocket ship going towards the sun, it gets smaller and smaller as it disappears from view but it gets hotter and hotter (the pain seems more intense) and then it's just a pinpoint and disappears from view. But if you're expecting the pain to disappear please label, "expecting, expecting", it may not!

5) Look at the mental image that arises with the pain. How do you see it in the mind? Does it have color, shape, movement or any other characteristics? Label it as seeing or imagining until it disappears or changes or another object becomes more predominant. Even if pain does go away, it can always come back, or another one will take its place, try to make friends with it.

* If there are many pains, no need to label, just sit back and watch their behavior, their characteristics and learn from them.

* If pain does disappear, don't let your mindfulness disappear too. Continue to observe the next most predominant object, especially mental states, such as happy and relief.

When we can welcome pain, like any other object or process to be observed, it is no longer a problem.

Like all things...

IT WILL PASS.

The Most Venerable Chanmyay Sayadaw

Always reminds us of the three P's;

Practice

Patience

Perseverance

WALKING

Mindfulness in Motion

First we need to know what walking meditation is not and what it is.

It's not purely freestyle vipassana.

It is a little bit like samatha because we select and concentrate only on the movement of the foot.

It is not purely samatha.

It is more like vipassana because we are observing different movements and sensations within the step. Also we may observe anything else that distracts us from the step, such as thinking, pain or hearing a loud sound.

It's not just physical exercise.

It is a mental exercise, a method of keeping the mind concentrated on common, presently changing mental and physical processes.

It's not just a break from sitting meditation.

It is a serious method of practice that can produce very strong concentration and clear insights into the body / mind processes.

It's not just a casual stroll.

It is a disciplined and determined observation of movements that we usually take for granted. It's like learning to walk all over again.

Let's walk!

Choose a quiet place without distractions.

We don't walk a long way in one direction or around in circles, only back and forth.

The walking place should be between 3-10 metres, ideally about 6 metres.

Don't look around, look straight ahead with eyes cast down about 1-2 metres ahead.

Hold your hands in front or behind.

Don't do anything else while you walk, for example, scratching or opening an umbrella, etc. If you want to do something, stop! Move slowly and observe and label that first, then continue. One thing at a time.

Don't lift the foot too high and don't over exaggerate the step. I know it's not natural to walk slow but this is walking meditation, we're not going anywhere, so it doesn't matter. When you go home you can walk as fast as you like, this is to get some new experience, it is training, sharpening your mindfulness and concentration.

The step should be smooth and as natural and relaxed as possible, not broken into parts like a robot.

Don't try too hard, don't stress your body or your mind. Check and relax your face and shoulders.

For beginners, walk about 30 minutes and only three parts of the step. Then as you slow down and develop strong and continuous concentration, you may walk for one hour or even up to two hours for long term or advanced meditators BUT it's not important how long you walk, it's the degree of mindfulness that counts.

If you get bored, lazy, doubtful, impatient, tired, etc. stop and observe and label those mental states until they disappear.

Sleep walking! Sometimes we can't stay awake even when walking, be careful! Go and wash your face with cold water or walk a bit faster away from the sitting and slow walking yogis, noting, "walking", "sleepy" and "thinking".

Standing

Walking meditation naturally starts with standing meditation so we stand still with our hands by our sides and label, "standing, standing" as many times

as you wish, just feeling the whole body standing, like a tree. You may also label 'rising and falling', breathing, hearing, pain, pressure in the feet and legs or any other predominant sensation.

Begin by walking and labeling each step, casually and naturally, such as: "left", "right" or "stepping, stepping", "touching, touching" or simply "walking, walking". When you reach the other end, STOP and label "standing" a few times, then "turning" and "standing", again a few times and ready to return to the other end. Repeat this for about three or five minutes or until your mind settles down. This is called, **one part of the step**.

Turning

The simplest way is to stop with your feet together, then lift and turn one foot 90° and label "turning", then the next foot, "turning" and your feet are together again. Repeat that and you should be facing the opposite direction - 180 degrees. The feet turn 4 times, 90 degrees each time.

Two parts of the step: "lifting" and "placing". As your foot lifts, you say in your mind, "lifting", as it drops, "placing". Do this for about 10 minutes or until you feel yourself concentrating better. When turning, you should label, "turning, turning".

If you are thinking while walking, STOP where you are and note it until it disappears. The objective here is to be mindful of anything that is more predominant than walking. The same if itchiness, painful, hearing, etc., take your attention, STOP and note it, then start walking again.

Try closing your eyes as you stop, stand, turn around and stand again but **not as you're walking!** If you feel giddy, keep your eyes open.

Repeat two parts of the step for about ten minutes until you feel more concentrated and walking slowly is easy and comfortable. Now slow down some more.

Three parts of the step: “lifting”, “moving”, “placing”. So as you slow down your pace, you can feel the foot moving forward after lifting and before placing. If you want to go slower, you may note each part 2 or 3 times like, “lifting, lifting”, “moving, moving, moving”, “placing, placing, placing”. That keeps your mindfulness sharp, no time for thinking. When turning, you should label, “lifting”, “turning”, “placing”.

Walk with mindfulness on three parts for about fifteen minutes.

For beginners, walk one part for about five minutes, then two parts for about ten minutes and three parts about fifteen minutes. Walk for about twenty five or thirty minutes (no need to watch the clock), then go slowly and mindfully to sit.

These three parts are the basic instructions for walking meditation, there is no need to do four, five or six parts until you feel comfortable with the first three. Take your time, ‘slow and steady’... there is no race.

Four parts of the step: “raising”, “lifting”, “moving”, “placing”. When we walk much slower, we feel that the heel raises first, then the toes lift so we note the movements as they unfold moment by moment. When turning, you should label, “raising”, “lifting”, “turning”, “placing”.

Five parts of the step: “raising”, “lifting”, “moving”, “dropping”, “placing”. The placing breaks up into two parts. OR if you don’t feel the dropping because your foot is not high, you may note, “touching” and “pressing”. When turning, you should label, “raising”, “lifting”, “turning”, “dropping”, “placing” (or “touching” and “pressing”).

Six parts of the step: “raising”, “lifting”, “moving”, “dropping”, “touching”, “pressing”. Because we’re going really slow, we can feel that the placing movement first drops, then touches and then presses. If you’re going very

slow you might note each part two or three times. When turning, you should label, “raising”, “lifting”, “turning”, “dropping”, “touching”, “pressing”.

Walking meditation is an ideal opportunity to develop an invaluable meditation skill that can be practiced anywhere, anytime, during your life.

A very good practice is to develop mindfulness and concentration in walking meditation and continue it right into the sitting.

Try to walk first – then sit. Good advice!

EATING

Have you ever heard of the Japanese Tea Drinking Ceremony? It is where two people sit down to drink tea together for about two hours, they don't speak, they move slowly and deliberately, helping each other and sharing tea together. It is a very intimate experience. The silence and slow purposeful movements highlight all of the fine details of drinking tea and life as it is in the moment. In vipassana, we eat in much the same way, sometimes with may sit with others but it is always an individual practice.

Most of us are too impatient to do this practice properly or take it seriously. Please don't overlook or underestimate this delicate operation. For me, it has provided many insights, in fact I'm still getting new insights when eating, because every new mouthful has never happened in the history of the world - enjoy! Enjoy the food, enjoy the awareness!

As we approach the eating area, we are mindful of and labeling walking, seeing, hearing, smelling, all of our senses are heightened, because we are hungry! Instinct!

Naturally we may have to prepare the food, do so as mindfully as you can, helping others but not getting involved in their meal, try to be courteous and mind your own business.

While eating, try to do it all one handed, it is easier to concentrate on one movement, one hand at a time.

In mindfulness of eating we label,
“seeing” the food,
“wanting” to eat,
“reaching” for the spoon, fork etc.,
“touching” / “grasping”
“scooping” / “moving” the food,
“lifting”, “bringing” the food to your mouth,
“opening” your mouth,
“putting” the food in,
“closing” your mouth
but NOT CHEWING YET!
“lowering” your hand,
“releasing” of the spoon,
“resting” your hand,
“closing” your eyes (to concentrate better)

and continue to note the various processes as they appear to you naturally and predominantly, “chewing”, “tasting”, “liking”, “swallowing”, “opening” your eyes, “seeing”, “wanting” and so-on, labeling every single process.

Step by step, one thing at a time. In vipassana, we do one thing at a time, there is no confusion, no stress but clear awareness, focusing in the present.

Pay attention to the movements of chewing and the tongue. Tasting is very obvious and various, it is changing all the time, watch it evolve.

During eating, we usually think a lot but we are unaware! Try to label thinking, watch your mind, your judgments and emotions. You may even feel self conscious or embarrassed to eat slowly, that’s OK, be aware of that too.

In daily life we can't eat so slowly, but we can eat mindfully. Remember, this slow and detailed observation is to get some new experience, a new perspective to create the opportunity for insights and understanding.

LYING

Horizontal mindfulness

Everyone needs to rest but it doesn't mean to switch off the mindfulness. In fact lying meditation is excellent for resting the body but keeping the mind very alert. People who are sick or old or have to lie down a lot, can use this technique. It saves us from boredom and develops concentration and wisdom.

There are two ways of mindfulness of lying; **Systematic** and **Freestyle**. The posture is the same for both; lie flat on your back on a firm surface with a thin cushion for the head, not a pillow. Make your body straight and don't touch anything except the floor. Rest your hands by your sides with the palms up. Try not to get too comfortable — unless you want to fall asleep!

Systematic. This is more like samatha meditation because we are directing the mind towards selected points but it is still vipassana because we don't fix on one single object, our attention is changing.

Feel the places where the body touches the floor, called, 'touching points'. Start with the right heel, then the right calf muscle, the right buttock, the back of the right hand, the elbow, the shoulder blade and the back of the head. Then down the left side of the body at the same six places, thirteen points, altogether. At each point, stop and feel whatever sensation is there naturally and label them as, "touching" or "feeling". Then we feel and label the rise and fall of the abdomen twice or thrice and then from the top of our head, we sweep our mind down through the whole body, back to the right heel and

label, “lying”. So we meditate by labeling the touching points thirteen times, then ‘rising and falling’ two or three times and then the whole body lying. That’s the system. If you start thinking, just label it and go back to the system where you left off or start again.

Freestyle. The same instructions as sitting meditation, we just label whatever happens naturally and predominantly; breathing, ‘rising and falling’, hearing, thinking, touching, lying, sleepy, etc.

Mindfulness of lying is excellent for stressed out housewives, students or busy people who want to take a rest but not to fall asleep. If you wish to remain alert, you must label sleepiness very well, if not, go to sleep peacefully. At night, don’t just crash out but go to sleep mindfully and wake up feeling fresh.

DAILY ACTIVITIES

After the awareness of thinking, the awareness of daily activities is the most important aspect of insight meditation. This means that our mindfulness must extend into every action and movement. Another way to say this is:

Meditation never ends.

Our great teacher, Chanmyay Sayadaw says that

**“Without the awareness of daily activities,
your meditation is hopeless!”**

The ‘**Satipatthana Sutta**’ (discourse on mindfulness development) taught by the Buddha, contains a section especially describing the awareness of daily activities. The Buddha included such fine details as being fully alert when;

going somewhere and returning

looking towards something and looking away

bending and stretching the limbs (arms and legs)

carrying anything
eating and drinking
urinating and defecating
the four postures of sitting, standing, walking and lying
going to sleep and waking up
talking and remaining silent.

That covers our entire life! Even if you could just be aware of bending and stretching the limbs, you would be very mindful and alert for the whole day.

Insights can occur at any time so we must continue the mindfulness and mental labeling whilst getting up and down for sitting, whilst moving between activities, while we are dressing, making the bed, cleaning, washing and even when going to the toilet. These aspects of the practice are indispensable.

What we are trying to do is develop our level of mindfulness to the point where it becomes second nature. On retreat, no mental, physical or emotional process slips by without awareness but at home at least we must have general awareness.

The best way to achieve this is by slowing down all actions and movements. Only when things are done slowly can they be seen in fine detail, as in the walking meditation.

**When on retreat,
the slower, the better.**

By constantly observing and labeling our slow physical movements in detail, we are sharpening our skills of attention, then applying it to the more elusive and subtle emotional and mental states.

Don't worry, it's only while you're on retreat, you don't have to slow down in your daily life. It is training, mind training. It also is great for impatient and impulsive people, they learn a lot.

'TAKE AWAY' MINDFULNESS

Outside of the retreat situation, one cannot do things slowly, however, that does not mean that the mindfulness disappears.

Moderately and mindfully.

You may on occasions still apply the mental labeling, both specifically, when you have time and generally, when you're busy. You can even label, "busy, busy, busy", "rushing, rushing".

The experiences of the intensive, moment to moment observation during the 'protected environment' of the retreat give us necessary insights into the ordinary and mundane events of our daily life and sheds new light on previously unseen and unknown processes of body and mind, that is insight. Back at home we are much more skilful at detecting and avoiding negative, unbeneficial, unwholesome and volatile mental states and situations. Also gaining some balance in our emotional lives, thus living more wisely with a new-found peace and harmony.

The observation of emotional states such as anger, fear, frustration, loneliness, impatience, sadness and so on in their true nature, whenever they occur, is of paramount importance to the one who wishes to be free. Anytime just ask yourself;

"How do I feel now?"

"What's happening now?"

"What's the reality here?"

Examples: We have to walk everyday, even if just to and from the car, you can label generally as, "walking", "thinking". Nearly everyone has to go up and down stairs in their daily routine, there is nothing else to do at that time, so apply the mental labeling, "stepping", "pain", "aversion", "lazy", "thinking", "planning", etc., etc.

Driving the car, again, label generally (not specifically all the actions and movements, you might crash!) and particularly the mental / emotional states such as, impatience, frustration, anger, fear, worry, sleepy!

“Compu-dhamma” while you are waiting for the computer to connect to the internet or find some long lost file, don’t sit there complaining, label “impatient”, “waiting”, “bored”, “dissatisfied” or whatever you feel. By the time it’s ready for you, you can continue peacefully.

Sometimes we feel ashamed or guilty about not meditating enough. So just label, “ashamed, ashamed” or “guilty, guilty, guilty”, now you’re meditating without shame and guilt but with balance, objectivity and peace.

You see, meditation is about life as it is. No need to take time out or meditate sitting cross-legged or in front of a Buddha image, do it anywhere, just do it now!

If your body is sick, don’t let the mind be sick. If you’re injured, label the pain, frustration and worry, the reflecting and projecting, knowing that it is changing, fluctuating. If you have a disease that is not going to go away, then asking, “Why me?”, complaining or worrying won’t help.

**Everything has its cause,
without a cause there is no effect.**

All things that come to be, cease to be.

This is the natural law of Kamma / karma.

Be fully and objectively aware of your changing, present moment experience and everything is OK just the way it is. Even if you don’t feel OK, it’s OK not to be OK. You’re OK just as you are. Relax and live in the present.

**Don’t expect 100% mindfulness;
expect about 5%,
and you won’t be disappointed**

THE END

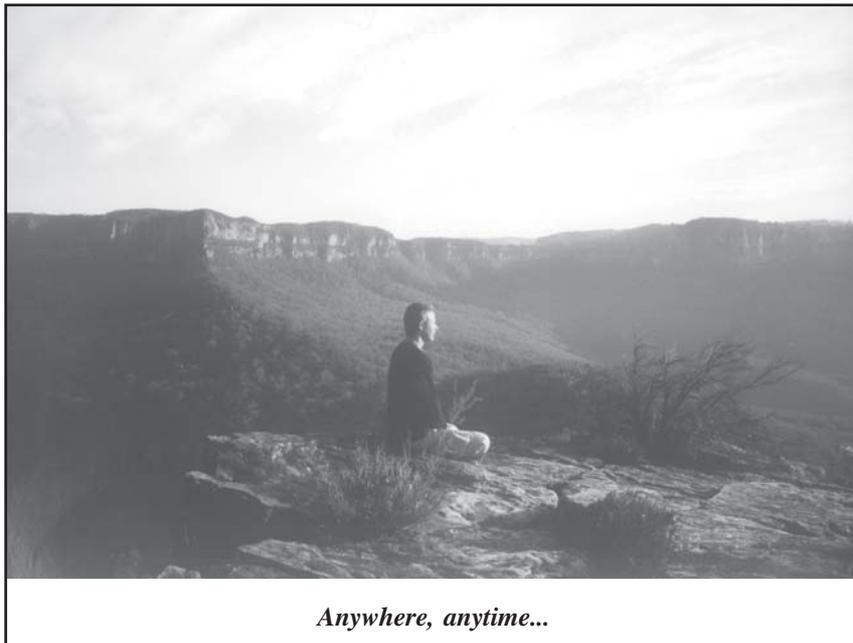
The purpose of all of this is to displace delusion by developing wisdom and compassion, to lessen and remove suffering in ourselves and all beings...
EXCELLENT!!!

SOME MAIN POINTS

Awareness of thinking

Mindfulness of daily activities

Continuity of mindfulness



THE FOUR ELEMENTS IN VIPASSANA

Introduction

In my early days as a Buddhist monk in Burma / Myanmar, I had a Burmese monk friend who used to like to speak English with me. One day we were talking, about what, I can't remember but I said something and he remarked, "Oh, the Four Elephants!" I didn't know why he said that, so I thought he must have been referring to an ancient story from the Buddha about four elephants. I was keen to hear the story, so I coaxed him, "The four elephants?" He said, "Yeah, you know, earth, wind, fire and water!" ... So we had a quick English lesson!

This section on the 'Four Primary Material Elements' is a natural continuation from the previous section. What I have covered so far are some of the main points on the intensive or specific practice of vipassana meditation in the retreat situation.

Having read the first section, the reader will have a good understanding of the overall technique of vipassana. Here I will be elaborating on the practice of specific mindfulness, dealing mainly with the observation of the specific characteristics of physical phenomena.

This is one of my favorite subjects to talk about to new comers to meditation and Buddhism. I find it is really simple, true and experiential. Anyone can understand this, children, old people, non Buddhists, anybody. Even if they don't practice meditation along the path to freedom from suffering, they can still reflect and contemplate the wisdom and hopefully become more in tune with themselves and the world around them.

This is truly age-old wisdom. It doesn't belong to me, or the Buddha nor anyone else, it doesn't belong to humans or angels or religion, it is just natural, that's why I like it.

In the **Satipatthana Sutta**, (mindfulness development discourse), the Buddha taught there are four groups of phenomena that we must be mindful of if we are to attain to **nibbana** (enlightenment).

They are; mindfulness of the body, feelings, mind and **Dhamma** (natural law / Buddha's teachings). Here we will only be dealing with mindfulness of the body, 'stay tuned' for more information on mindfulness of feelings, mind and Dhamma.

In mindfulness of the body, the Buddha taught six categories to be mindful of;

Awareness of breathing, Four postures - sitting, standing, walking and lying, Daily activities, Thirty two parts of the body, Four elements and Contemplation on Death. These may be practiced step by step, as they seem to progress from the very basic and simple to the more complicated and difficult. Right from the beginning, to have a good teacher to guide you is very important, don't practice on your own, it doesn't matter how clever you think you are.

In 'A Successful Retreat', I have given some explanation of mindfulness of breathing, the four postures and awareness of daily activities. The parts of the body is more of a reflective and contemplative practice that is not so suitable for an intensive vipassana retreat, however we naturally get some insights into it during our practice. One may reflect and think about it in daily life, after the retreat.

When you have some basic experience with aforementioned sections of mindfulness of the body, you are ready to learn about the four physical

elements. Although this teaching is quite basic it is also very profound and if we can deeply understand this, it has far reaching affects on our life.

The four elements

At the time of the Buddha, people were not highly educated, nor were there the modern technical terminologies that we know today. Therefore he had to share the Dhamma in a way that everyone could understand. Most people lived off the land, farming, fishing, hunting and gathering food from the forests and wild places. Even the cities were made from all natural materials. So the people were in tune with nature, with the weather and the seasons, the elements of nature.

I'm sure you have heard of, Earth, Wind, Fire and Water. I remember it because there was a famous band from the sixties called, 'Earth, Wind and Fire'.

Now, these elements of earth, wind, fire and water are not as they seem. They all have their own individual characteristics. For example earth is not just the ground, soil or dirt but it has the characteristics of hard, soft, rough and smooth (texture). Wind doesn't only refer to the breeze, air or gas, its characteristics are movement, vibration and support. Fire is not flames and burning nor just heat but refers to temperature, hot and cold, warm and cool, boiling and freezing. Water isn't only H₂O but it has the characteristics of fluidity, wet and sticky.

These four elements exist in our natural material world. We may call them intrinsic properties of the universe. They are also known as inseparable or indivisible from one another. That means, if you investigate one, you will find the other three are also present. For example earth, soil or dirt also has gas, temperature and moisture. Wind carries dust, has moisture / humidity and

temperature. Fire needs fuel (earth), oxygen and makes vapor / moisture. Then there is water, which has dust, gas and temperature.

These elements and their characteristics can be found in everything, either natural or man-made, yes, even buildings, cars, food, animals and you. You are made up of these four elements, you breathe them, eat them, exude them and pass them down the toilet. So this body too is an intrinsic and inseparable part of this universe. It is like a four elements recycling factory. This body came from the four elements, it exists with them and when we die, the body goes back to them. Actually, there is no separation between this body and the universe. Our skin is 'breathing' and interacting with the atmosphere, the body doesn't stop here and the universe starts there, no division or boundary, it is all the same.

It is our ego and our ignorance that makes it seem that we are disconnected or separate or in some cases better than everything else but it is an illusion because it is impossible. This body is an intrinsic and inseparable part of the universe. You don't own that body, it's on loan from the universe. Actually, we *can't* own it, whether it is beautiful or ugly, fit or fat, healthy or diseased, works well or not, it's not yours, it never was and it never will be.

An interesting point arises here, if this body is inextricably a part of this universe and it has all of the characteristics of the physical universe, then it must be like a DNA of the universe. Whatever exists out there, also exists in here, this is the same as that, not different. So, if I want to discover the true nature of the entire universe, I need not have a rocket ship nor a space probe, I don't need a telescope or a microscope and I don't need to go anywhere, it is all right here! All I really need is mindfulness and concentration, right here, right now and all will be revealed. So life becomes an on-going scientific experiment – no need for a white coat or a laboratory, all I need is to pay

careful attention to any natural process that arises in my body in the present moment, no matter where I am or what I am doing. Wow! The university of life has no buildings, no classrooms, no walls, no teachers, no tests, no right and wrong, no reward and punishment ... just this ... awareness of body and mind.

This leads me to a brief explanation of **specific and general mindfulness**. What is explained here is pertaining mainly to specific mindfulness and the more intensive practice of vipassana in a meditation retreat situation. In fact, the four elements are referred to in Pali as **sabhava lakkhana** (specific characteristics [of physical phenomena]). These specific characteristics need specific attention, close, clear and continuous attention, which will lead one to the realization of the true nature of these phenomena, thus dispelling delusion and liberating the mind from the bondage of ignorance. This is what we attempt to achieve, at least to some extent, on an intensive vipassana meditation retreat. 'Intensive' sounds heavy, I know but it doesn't have to be. Intensive means you're not doing anything else but developing mindfulness in everything you do and you have good continuity of awareness.

General mindfulness of specific characteristics can happen in our daily life while we are doing anything, riding on a bus, washing dishes, playing with children, eating food, walking the stairs and so-on.

The **samannya lakkhana** in Pali, refers to common or general characteristics of both mental and physical phenomena. These are the three characteristics of **anicca**, impermanence, **dukkha**, suffering (imperfection) and **anatta**, the impersonal nature of mental and physical processes. I call them the three 'Imp's', impermanence, imperfection and impersonal. Everything in life is subject to these three natural characteristics, especially the mind. There will be more on that later in this book.

One more scientific fact is that of atomic nature. As we now know, or at least other people have told us so, all physical phenomena are made up of fine, unseen particles. We can see that the material things around us are made up of smaller parts, fine grains, threads, fibers, etc. and if you look veeerrry closely at your own skin, you can almost see the cellular composition. If we use a microscope we can see cells and molecular structures. Then all of these very tiny things in our body and outside our body are made up of atoms. An interesting point here is that the Buddha had a word for these minute particles of physical phenomena, he called them, **kappa**. How did the Buddha know about them when there were no microscopes? Because of the extreme clarity and power of his mind. The extent of the power of the Buddha's mind is unfathomable. Actually, when anyone's mind is highly concentrated, it has the power to 'see' anything that needs to be seen or to know anything that needs to be known.

Not only are there tiny atoms but they may be broken down to protons, neutrons and electrons. And these may be broken down into quarks! And, these may be broken down into gluons ... and you're probably not going to believe this but they have found something so tiny that it has no mass – a massless particle! How can it be a particle if it has no mass?! How do you even know it is there?! Well, it seems like nothing to me. In the Buddha's teaching, we find the teaching of **sunnyata**, emptiness. Many great Buddhist monks across the world have taught that when we break down this body and mind there is nothing beyond it. You can believe it or not, for now it's only what other people say. Through vipassana we get many insights into the true nature of physical phenomena, which can completely change the way we view the world and life as we know it. Are you ready?

Now here comes the interesting part, how we ourselves can experience and fully comprehend the true nature of these elements and their characteristics that make up such a large part of our life.

The characteristics are not only part of the physical make up of our body, like hard things, bones and teeth, etc., (earth), gases and oxygen (wind), temperature (fire) and liquids (water) but they are also feelings, sensations that can be experienced, 'seen', known and understood by the mind.

Sitting

For example, when we are sitting, especially cross-legged on the floor in the traditional pose for meditation, (you can sit in a chair or on a stool or any way) we can feel hard or soft where the body contacts with the floor. By sustaining some attention and concentrating only on that contact point, we can fully experience a little bit of reality. Yes, this is reality. The fact that there is hardness and contact and the awareness of it, all amount to experiencing reality. Now this may not seem very exciting for you but it is *real*. Yeah, movies, TV (even reality TV!), music, traveling, love, sex, eating, etc. may be exciting but they are concepts. The reality lies in the experience, listening to music is just a series of vibrations. The vibrations are real, music is a concept. Take eating as another example; the reality is not 'Chinese or Italian', its not 'food' or 'eating', its not even 'flavor', they are all concepts, the reality is the sensation that you can experience. The texture, movement, temperature, moisture and the various tastes, sweet, bitter, spicy, these are all experiences, they are not 'flavor' or 'food' as such.

Mental or physical?

There is a fine difference between flavor and taste. Flavor is external, taste is internal or flavor is physical and taste is mental, because we have a tongue and there is flavor, we taste it. Taste is the experience, flavor is just a material

object or we can say a concept, you can't personally experience 'flavor', you can only taste. Another good example is hearing and sound. We may feel a vibration but we can't experience sound, it is external and physical, it cannot become mental, it can be perceived by the mind but then it is perception, a mental state, no longer sound, a physical process. Mental and physical are two separate phenomena, which cannot be the same, they can only work together but cannot come together and be one. Therefore we have a mind / consciousness, which perceives through the senses when there is contact with external physical phenomena. You could say that we live only in our mind. What I like to say is;

Matter doesn't matter,

Mind matters!

Interesting stuff huh?

Anyway back to the sitting, we feel hard and soft, the floor and our bones are hard, the cushion and our flesh are soft, we can perceive these sensations and know them as they really are. No arguments, nothing to discuss, nothing to be confused about – hard is hard, right? Here, your mind has contact with a present moment phenomena, it perceives it and knows it as it is, the mind is calm, settled into a reality, no stress, fear, worry, anger, etc., just awareness and knowing ... "Ah, that's nice!" Welcome home! Welcome back to reality! A quick reflection here, how often do you *really* feel something, I mean with bare attention, like this? When do you just feel heat as heat or smooth as smooth? Yes, you feel it but usually there are a whole bunch of concepts, subjective thoughts, judgments, opinions, likes and dislikes, which means you don't live connected with reality, you live in concepts and ideas. It is empty, void of substance, all your ideas, judgments and opinions can be popped like a pin

bursting balloons, they are like steam on a hot and windy day, like peeing in the ocean or like cookie crumbs in the desert - insignificant!

It's easy to see how we get separated from reality because we have to perceive everything with our own mind, which is basically deluded (limited wisdom) and it personalizes reality with its own opinions and views. Therefore, it corrupts reality, manipulates it, distorts and makes it the way it wants it to be. Then it believes everything it creates, it makes concepts out of reality and even takes concepts to be reality and so we live in an illusion with delusion.

We need to learn how to differentiate between concepts and reality. This is really fundamental human knowledge that seems to have been largely overlooked by just about everyone. I wanted to know why my Mom and Dad didn't teach me this stuff when I was a kid? Or my teachers, my society? Now I know, because they didn't know because nobody taught them, we just go on and on in this life believing the illusion that we see, which become delusions of the heart and thus we're lost. It's time to wake up and tune back into that which can be purely experienced without any thinking, ideas or judgmental subjectivity.

Back to sitting, as we sit, we can feel some textures against our skin, rough or smooth (earth element). Our skin can be smooth or rough, as can our clothes and the floor. Again, with contact arises feeling and perception, we can know that feeling as it naturally occurs. No lies or deception here, simply the truth. If someone tells me that the floor is smooth, I can believe them, I can trust them but I still don't really know until I feel it, experience it for myself. Most of what we 'learn' in life is second hand information, like this, what I'm writing now is not your experience – yet - it is just seeing, perceiving, thinking and so on. At least this information is leading you to reality, most of what we read in life, newspapers, magazines, textbooks, religious scriptures, etc., expect us to

blindly believe or they lead us away from reality, such is life. This is not a criticism, merely an observation.

Still sitting, we may experience the characteristics of the wind element as we feel some movement or vibration in the body. Even though we sit still, there is movement, such as breathing, heartbeat and pulse and the fact that our body is supposedly made up of 75% liquid, then it simply doesn't stay perfectly still. Like any 'body of water', it is always moving. However it is supported, kept up straight by our intention to stay upright but also our physical energy and the structure of the body. This nature of 'support' is also attributed to the wind element.

We feel temperature all the time. Different parts of the body have different contact and thus feel varying degrees of temperature. As we sit, there may be heat behind our knees, under the arms or under the clothes. The exposed areas may feel cool or cold as they are touched by the atmosphere or other material objects. We may feel cold through the floor or heat from the sun.

The water element may be experienced as the feelings that arise from the liquids in the body such as tears, saliva, sweat and internal liquids. There is a feeling of flowing or fluidity, stickiness and there are the wet or moist feelings that we may experience.

All of these characteristics should be felt, acknowledged, observed and in our meditation technique, we mentally note or label them, we name the object as long as it is naturally predominant. When it changes or disappears we observe and label the next most predominant object, in this way we develop mindfulness by observing present moment arising realities and learn from our observations.

In our tradition of vipassana – the Mahasi Sayadaw tradition of Myanmar, we are taught to observe the 'rise and fall' of the abdomen as a 'primary'

object. It doesn't mean that it is more important than any other object but you can always come back to it if there is nothing more predominant in your body or mind.

Anyway, as we observe the movements of rising and falling, we find that here too are the characteristics of the four elements. Even though it is a movement and therefore the wind element, we may still detect even smaller movements, vibrations within that movement. Other characteristics such as warmth, tight or hardness or a sense of stickiness or fluidity may be felt too. Try to observe in fine detail any process that becomes predominant and you may find that it is not simply as it seems.

There are a myriad of physical processes that may be observed and labeled during mindfulness of sitting. Such feelings and sensations as itchy, numb, pain, pressure, heavy, light, but they may all be categorized by the four elements, just different aspects of the same basic phenomena.

Pain for example; when we observe very precisely the nature of pain, we find that it may have the characteristics of heat, vibration or movement, hard or tight / pressure. Then if we focus only on the heat, where is the pain? What is pain? All you know at that moment is heat, pain is a concept! Wow, that's cool! No more pain – for a moment. While you are concentrated on the heat, you lose the concept of pain and there is only heat. Similarly if you focus on any other specific characteristics, if you can have continuity of concentration, you don't feel pain at all, your mind is otherwise engaged with the intensive observation of a reality. When your mind is engaged with a present moment reality, it doesn't shake or worry, it is steady, firm, strong, clear and peaceful. Only when your concentration fades, weakens or is broken, do the concepts come flooding back bringing along with them pain and suffering – interesting, huh?

So whatever physical process you detect or identify in the present moment, by paying attention to it, focusing only on it and developing strong concentration only on it, you will experience a new-found clarity of mind, peace of mind and in fact some realization, some insight or wisdom will arise from that. The mind must be open and receptive to anything that arises naturally.

In brief, while sitting we should observe and label any physical process that becomes predominant, such as; “hot, hot, hot”, “hard, hard”, “pain, pain, pain”, “itchy, itchy”, “pressure, pressure”, “touching, touching”, or if you don’t know what to call it, “feeling, feeling, feeling”. The number of times you label, depends on how long the process is predominant. In this way we can focus our specific attention on any process that arises naturally, knowing its true nature and watching it change and disappear. A Pain may not just disappear as such but if you look at it closely, it is changing and it will eventually disappear.

In vipassana,
we are not trying to get rid of things that we don’t like,
we are objectively, acknowledging
anything that arises naturally,
in order to understand its true nature.

We don’t label, “earth, earth”, “wind wind”, “fire ... and so – on
We observe and label the characteristics that we *experience*.

During an intensive retreat or formal practice,
there is no need to think about or reflect upon the four elements.
If you do, you should note, “thinking, thinking”, “reflecting, reflecting”.

Standing – the same principles apply for mindfulness of standing posture. Firstly, find a quiet place with few distractions. Then stand with your feet shoulder width apart and your hands by your sides. Relax your whole body, especially your shoulders and back. Breathe in and relax, breathe out and relax, be mindful of the breathing process. Then open your attention up to whatever is predominant in the body. One thing we feel is the pressure in the feet, this is often accompanied by heat and if you concentrate you may even feel very fine movements and vibrations as you balance your weight. Actually, as we stand for sometime, depending upon the surface, sweat and moisture, stickiness will become evident. We may acknowledge all of these as they become predominant, labeling them by name, “hot, hot”, “pressure”, “moving”, “sticky” or simply “feeling”. Here are the characteristics of the four elements only in the feet, how about the rest of the body? As we feel the body standing, we may be aware of swaying in the body as we attempt to keep upright and balanced. The keeping of the body upright is the wind element, as is the movement. We may note, “swaying” or “moving”. If your eyes are closed, you may feel dizzy or giddy, it is quite normal, just open your eyes for a while and close them again or leave the eyes open but just look at the ground so as not to be distracted by external things. You may observe the movements of breathing or rising and falling or you may feel tension or pressure arising somewhere in the body. Whatever you feel predominantly, observe and label it, see it’s nature.

Walking – is a natural part of life but how often do we *really* experience it? We take it for granted, its only when we are injured or sick that we realize how important it is to us. Unless of course, you practice vipassana and do mindfulness of walking. With regard to the four elements and their specific characteristics in walking, it naturally begins with standing. Then comes the

raising of the heel and the lifting of the toes. During this process we feel the movement and a cool sensation as the foot leaves the floor, wind and fire elements. Then the foot moves forward, we may feel swaying or vibrating, and then the lowering, touching the surface of the floor which has texture and temperature and then the pressing of the foot on the floor, we feel hard, soft, heavy or pressure. Again, here in just one step we meet all of the characteristics of the four elements without exclusion. Every step you take in your life has many experiences, one step finishes and passes away into history while a new one arises, no two steps are ever the same, each one is a part of your life, a part of your journey.

Lying – is a great posture to develop mindfulness... as long as you can stay awake! Lying posture has much the same characteristics as already mentioned above, except there are more touching or contact points with the floor. Surprisingly enough, even though we lie still and don't move, the wind element is very obvious in the many movements and vibrations that may be observed. The pull of gravity is strong as we feel the weight of the body on many points, which can actually become quite painful if we stay still for a long time. Natural pain arising from the elements and contact. All of these can be observed and labeled.

Eating – Now this is good! We get to do something we enjoy and be mindful at the same time. But be mindful of *enjoying* too! Eating is a step by step process that definitely has it's beginning, middle and end. That is, a series of cause and effect relative processes that arises consecutively, in sequence. We observe and label every **single** thing that we do and feel. Do only one thing at a time... When you eat, just eat! You can see for yourself the different elements and their characteristics in the whole process of eating. Even in one mouthful, when the food contacts the mouth and tongue, there is

texture, temperature and moisture. When we chew, there is movement, texture, temperature, sticky, until the whole lot is swallowed. Here we see the presence of all four elements.

Daily activities – means the ordinary things that we do everyday. In vipassana, we observe these mundane processes in the same way as the four postures explained above.

Often, everyday, we have to hold things with our hands. They have different textures, temperatures, we move them, they may be wet or sticky - four elements. Making the bed, folding clothes, dressing, cleaning, washing, and even going to the bathroom all have their own unique combinations of the specific characteristics of the four elements.

As for the physical composition of the body, if we were to remove each element one by one, what would be left? Nothing, beyond these four elements in the body there is nothing. As for the specific characteristics, well, they are actually experiences in the mind, we feel them. They are real experiences but once they have arisen, they instantaneously dissolve, not even lasting one second nor a fraction there of.

This body, governed by natural, universal laws, is largely beyond our control. It seems to me to be like the weather, it does what it wants to, we try to change it and we complain about it or we love it but at the end of the day (which is another conceptual illusion), it is just the way it is. It all changes by itself, naturally. Perpetual motion, perpetual lives, perpetual striving for satisfaction...

The body and mind are of the same basic nature, no substantial core, nothing permanent, not lasting, becoming and decaying. Where does the soul

abide? Where amongst these processes is the self? What is spirit? More unproven concepts, illusions that delude the heart. Oh give me reality any day!



Earth, Wind, Fire and Water

THINKING

“If you are thinking, you are not meditating.”

“Remember, we are not trying to get rid of thinking,
we are merely trying to understand its true nature.”

Now that you have had so much fun reading about the technique of vipassana and the four elements and I have filled your head with all sorts of wonderful information ... It is time to let it go. This is when we really get down to the heart - the heart of vipassana practice and down to the bottom of *your* heart. I believe this is what vipassana, the Buddha's teachings and life are really about - the heart.

That is where our happiness, sadness, love, fear, our wisdom and our ignorance all live together in disharmony, in discord. That sounds harsh but if life was all happiness and peace and love, it would be wonderful, we wouldn't need to read a book like this and I wouldn't bother writing it! But the sad truth is that at the bottom of our hearts, there is some disarray, some scattered and fragmented pieces of our lives that aren't coming together, that aren't in harmony, aren't in tune with nature and the beautiful flow of life.

We go against the flow... because we don't know.

Here are my thoughts on thinking...

Thinking is perfectly natural. Before we come to meditation, we don't know that we spend most of our time thinking. We just think, naturally. But when it comes time to meditate, we are told that thinking is not useful in meditation. So how should we go about this meditation, considering that we are thinking all the time?

We need to understand this thinking in its true nature. We need to understand what the thinking process is, how it arises, how it exists and how it changes and disappears. How it comes and goes, what its causes and effects are and so on.

Here, I am just going to explain more about what the thinking process is. Of course this is not a precise psychological breakdown of the thought process nor is it complete or conclusive but it will give you some more information, some direction, pointers and hints to look for in your own investigation of thinking and your mind. I will also be referring to the practice of vipassana / insight / mindfulness meditation. In fact, these notes are mainly instructions for the practice.

Notes on noting

To begin with, I want to explain in more detail the technique of labeling that we use in vipassana, this will help you to understand the rest of the information below.

I use the words, mindfulness, attention, awareness, observation and acknowledging in much the same sense. They are all very similar in meaning and highly appropriate and applicable to the technique and practice of vipassana. My favorite word is acknowledging, which means to simply be aware and know that an object or process of body or mind is predominant now.

Actually, our mind, our attention goes naturally to anything predominant. We don't have to *do anything*, it does it automatically all day long, due to conditioning. The difference is knowing what the mind is doing. Mindfulness makes the difference.

Also I use the words, note / noting, label / labeling and name / naming, interchangeably because they all mean the same thing. But what do *they* all

mean? Good question! This is a meditation technique that *assists* in the observation of any process that naturally arises in your body and mind in the present moment.

In short, it means to say the word in your mind of that which you are experiencing right now. I also refer to noting as a 'tool'. That is, something that we pick up and use and put down again. Sometimes it is necessary and other times it is not. Some people don't understand why we have to label and not use bare attention, pure awareness. Well, we can and we should, however there is this problem called thinking. Included in the topic of thinking is analyzing, judging, criticizing, speculating, projecting and reflecting, just to name a few. Our mind is very rarely pure, bare attention is not our usual state of mind and quite frankly, most of us don't experience it or can't use it effectively. If you can, do it! But be very careful and know your mind well to make sure that you're not actually engaged in any of the aforementioned types of thinking because if you are then your mind isn't pure and you don't have bare attention. You THINK you have it - but you don't, that is only more thinking.

One big problem here is that we are so used to thinking that we don't even know we're doing it, can be so subtle and extremely fast. For example, in meditation we can experience a very peaceful, calm and quiet state of mind, it seems blank or empty and it's nice. It makes a pleasant change from our usual stressed out state of mind. But there's the trap, we enjoy it, we become relaxed and complacent, our mindfulness is lost and we start indulging in this peace and quiet, we think; "This is nice... Is this concentration? Is this emptiness? Am I thinking? I must tell my teacher about this..." Blah, blah, blah! You've lost it! As soon as you get something nice, the mind grasps it, attaches to it and enjoys it – no more mindfulness and definitely not bare attention.

Unless you have some technique for breaking up these thoughts and attachments, they will continue – that’s where labeling comes in.

Labeling is stating the facts, in single words that don’t have much meaning in themselves. **Labeling is not thinking.** How can one word constitute thinking? In fact that single word is so bland and objective that it interrupts and destroys the flow of any subjective thought and can bring the mind back to objective awareness, clarity and if you like, bare attention. We don’t have to *think* about the labels or words, we know what we are experiencing, we know the process that is predominant and that which we are observing just now. The word just comes up, if it doesn’t you can label generally; anything in the body as, “feeling” and anything in the mind as, “thinking”. So we call it by its name in order to not get attached to it, to not get lost in thought about it and to not fight or struggle with it. Just call it by its name (or not), see it as it is and watch it change and go.

Useful and useless

The Buddha gave a very interesting short discourse about ‘Two Types of Thinking’. Basically it refers to useful and useless. Simple, huh? If your thoughts are useful then continue to think and make something positive for your life. If it’s useless, drop it! All you need is the wisdom to know the difference. Similarly, useful thinking could be termed ‘positive’ and useless could be ‘negative’. Don’t mistake this for good or bad, right or wrong. It’s not a judgment as such, merely an observation, seeing thoughts as they are.

Other words for positive might be; wholesome, productive or beneficial, likewise, other words for negative may be unwholesome, unproductive and unbeneficial. When we understand that we are thinking in a way that is say, unwholesome or unproductive, then we note, “negative, negative”, “unwholesome, unwholesome”, “useless, useless, useless”. Then we wake up

to ourselves, “Hey! I’m wasting my time, my energy, I’m wasting my mind!” Then the thought becomes objective, you see its *uselessness*, and it breaks up and disappears. Then you are free from thinking and continue to observe the next most predominant object.

We could even label with words like, unnecessary or unwanted. That gives the mind a new perspective and thus more energy and brighter, the thoughts disappear instantly. Try to be creative with the labeling in an attempt to see the true nature of the thought and your attachment to it. The words that you use are like keys to discovering hidden motives or underlying causes for our prolific thoughts and all of their associated stories and pictures. Let’s face it, our minds are like movies... no! Worse still, they’re like TV! And not just one channel, we’re talking cable TV man! You name it, its there... we even think about things that we don’t know about, maybe no one knows about. In short, the mind is both amazing and quite mad. The Buddha said something to the effect that we are all crazy (until proven sane).

In Vipassana meditation, even if we are thinking in a productive and wholesome manner, we are not meditating. Our mind is not really *with* the object or *any* object of body and mind in the present moment. So we need to sharpen our mindfulness and we need to shine the light of mindfulness on to that thinking process, illuminate that thinking, be aware of that thinking. Ah, now you are meditating again. You are aware of the thinking process and you observe and label, “thinking, thinking, thinking” and soon it loses its strength, mindfulness becomes more powerful and the thought breaks up and disappears. Even if it is “positive” thinking ... during the intensive practice of vipassana, its not the time to solve life’s problems nor to reflect on the wise and profound Dhamma (Buddha’s teachings).

All thinking must be observed and noted objectively
until it changes or disappears and
then observe whatever arises
in your body or mind.

Continuity of
mindfulness

Present moment

Thinking process arises only in the present moment. It is neither past nor future; you can *only* think in the present. Sometimes when we are thinking about the past, we feel that our mind is actually *in* the past. Or likewise, if we think about the future, we think that our mind *is in* the future. This is incorrect, it is delusion. Actually the mind is always in the present and can only be in the present, therefore, thinking is also in the present. When thinking arises in the present, you should know that it is present. This is a simple form of realization meditation. In Pali, the ancient Buddhist scriptural language, it is called **Cittanupassana**, which means, mindfulness / awareness of the mind. When you are thinking in the present moment, you should be aware, you should know, that you are now thinking. Often when you have mindfulness of that thinking, it instantly breaks up, it changes and disappears. Then the mind may become clear, calm and quiet, at least for some time. That is also observed and noted.

Reflecting and projecting

Another way we can divide our thoughts is in to past and future. I like to call this, 'Reflecting and Projecting'. For thoughts about the past we can also use words like, recalling, remembering and reviewing. For the future there are words like, planning, and speculating, perhaps even dreaming or fantasizing. So, we may label the thoughts as we experience them, call them by the name

that comes to your mind or that suits the nature of the thought. Actually, I find this is a very easy and simple technique both in the intensive meditation retreat situation and in daily life.

Most people think too much which causes them all kinds of problems, especially stress and worry, also fear, anxiety, grief, remorse, frustration, just to name a few!

You might like to try this, just observing whether your thoughts are in the future or in the past. It is quite rare that we are thinking about something that is happening in the present moment. Or we may think about something that is happening in the present moment but we are thinking about it with regards to the future or the past. For example, I'm eating lunch now and thinking how nice it is but I start thinking about this morning's breakfast or tonight's dinner or how I'm going to tell someone about it or how I can cook it better next time, and so on and so on. So try this reflecting or projecting technique, split the thoughts up - Is it projecting or reflecting? Then label it and watch it go.

Often we are having conversations, talking to people in our own mind. It doesn't matter where you are, you could be sitting on the top of a mountain by yourself. You could be sitting in a meditation hall in a Buddhist monastery in Burma, surrounded by Burmese people, and you can't speak Burmese so actually there's no one to talk to but there you are, thinking, having a conversation with your mother or your friend or even planning your next interview with your meditation instructor. **IT IS NOT REAL!!** Actually, you don't even realize that you are thinking, you feel like you are really having this conversation, and you are so involved in it but it is delusion, absolute delusion. It is ignorance of the way things really are right here and now. So, we must note, "thinking, thinking", "imagining, imagining". Sometimes we may even label, "talking, talking" or even "hearing, hearing". Hearing, sometimes you

hear other people talking to you, in your own mind. This is not madness, its normal, it's the way of the mind. The mind is an incredible... I don't know how to call it - apparatus? Machine? Phenomenon? It creates its own stuff, it goes on by itself, it perpetuates itself. Like a computer that has been programmed to program itself. Our intrinsically deluded mind, continues to delude itself until we can interject, interrupt it with the clarity of mindfulness and we can realize the true nature of thinking. Realizing thinking is the arising of wisdom.

“Wisdom displaces delusion.”

When you label the thinking as, “thinking, thinking”, the delusion, the thinking, becomes less and less. The mindfulness becomes greater and greater, until eventually, the mind becomes completely objective with that thought and it falls away. When that falls away, we have pure mindfulness. The mind is clear and full of awareness, full of knowing. We understand the process of thinking. At that time our mind is ready to observe any other mental or physical process with clarity.

“Thinking is the most important object of Vipassana meditation.”

Our teacher, Venerable Chanmyay Sayadaw, always reminds us that thinking is the most important object of meditation. For many people this is very difficult to understand. I will repeat it, because it is so important.

Thinking is the most important object of Vipassana meditation.

Why? Because if you are thinking, you are not meditating, you are not truly mindful.

“If you are thinking, you are not meditating”

Some people call it the ‘enemy’ of meditation but I don't think it is the *enemy*, it's more like a friend, a teacher. Because by getting to know it and observing it's true nature you can come to understand the nature of the human mind, which is also the nature of life in general. Do you want to be wise? Do

you want to understand life as it is? Then, when you see or when you know that you are thinking, you must observe this thinking process, directly. Note it, label it, call it by its name. Say the word in your mind, “thinking, thinking, thinking.”

In this way, the mind is directed towards this thinking. Normally, that would mean to think about it but that is not what is meant here. Here we are simply being aware that there is a thought / thinking process and that’s all. Not getting involved in the story or the content but just being aware that *now in the mind, there is thinking*, you are aware that there is thinking in the mind.

Noting and observing thinking in vipassana

Now this labeling or naming process is in itself not thinking. In fact it is merely an assistant to the awareness, which helps to objectify the thinking process and detach from the thought. When the thinking process becomes objective, that is, an objective observation of the mental process as opposed to subjective, with the mind involved, we see it as just a thinking process, that’s all. We realize that we don’t need to be involved in it. In vipassana, thinking is not useful. So we observe it, we see it, we know it and we watch it go. By observing and labeling it, it becomes objective. When it becomes objective, we are no longer involved in it. When we are not involved, we loose our attachment to the subject. Then, when our attachment has been severed or at least loosened, then we see that process as a concept, an object and it breaks up, it fragments, it changes and usually disappears. When we **see the thought has finished**, then we must observe the next most predominant object according to the principle of vipassana. The next object to take our attention may be anything, physical or mental, yes, it may be another thought and often it is. You might think, “Aah beautiful, now this thinking has disappeared! Now my mind is clear and fresh!” But what is this? Now you’re thinking about how the mind has changed, so instead you should note the present moment

process again, “thinking, thinking” or perhaps, “clear, clear, clear” or “fresh, fresh, fresh”, and continue.

The thought may occur to you, “When I was thinking, I noted “thinking” and the thinking disappeared. When the thinking disappeared, my mind became fresh. Ah! This is a good process, this is a very good meditation technique!” Oh, oh! Now what are you doing? Be aware of that thought, repeat the same process, this time label, “analyzing, analyzing, analyzing” or “judging, judging, judging”, and continue. Or you might be thinking to yourself, “This is a new experience, I must tell my teacher about this.” What’s this? “Planning, planning, planning.”

In this way, you catch the very next object, be it mental or physical. Often there is a physical object, too. Maybe some pain in the body, perhaps hearing or breathing process or even the feeling of the rising and falling of the abdomen. Whatever object is predominant after the thought has disappeared, you must observe that object.

We note the thinking objectively until it disappears. When it has disappeared, then we observe the next most predominant object. Actually it is very simple, and it seems very clear, however, it is not very easy to practice. But once you are skillful at this technique, then you are really practising in the way of Vipassana.

First, we realize the concept, then we realize the reality.

First we see the story but then we realize that regardless of the content, it is just another mental process. I often refer to this meditation as ‘reality observation’. Thinking in the present is a mental process which is a present moment reality. So we are observing the reality of the present moment. As I said before, if you are thinking, you are not meditating but being mindful of thinking *is* meditating!

In vipassana, when you detect thinking in the mind, then it **MUST become the object of meditation**, the object of your attention. We do not cut the thoughts out of the mind and snap the attention back to the rising and falling of the abdomen or breathing, yet we observe that thinking. By labeling it as it is, “thinking, thinking” or “wandering, wandering” (this is when it seems like the mind has wandered off like a lost sheep or a cosmic backpacker!) or even, “imagining, imagining” (in the case of seeing pictures in your mind). However you experience it, you should note it. The way you note, the words you use, are up to you.

Often when a thought is stubborn and you note it several times as thinking but it doesn't seem to change or disappear, then maybe you have to examine that process a little more closely. By continuing to observe and label it, perhaps you realize that you *want* to think, you don't want to be mindful of it, you're attached to it and you don't want it to go away, you don't want it to become objective. It is already subjective and the mind is enjoying the subjective fun. Then perhaps you need to note, “desire, desire”, “wanting, wanting”, “enjoying, enjoying” or “indulging, indulging”. In that way, you are undermining or seeing through that thinking process and looking at the root cause for that thinking. This is getting a bit deep and psychological here but you may begin to understand that thinking is not just passive but is in fact inextricably interwoven in the fabric of our mind and therefore our life. Its important to understand how and why it works, not only that but, ‘the when’, ‘the who’ and ‘the where’ of this thing called, *mind*. More about that later.

So, we have just found out that thoughts finish by simply observing them objectively. Because the interest, the attachment to the subject of the thought or story has been weakened or broken, the thought itself crumbles, falls apart and you're left with some peace and clarity... Ah, that's nice! That's what we're

looking for! But don't stop the awareness! Continue to observe the next most predominant object that arises in your body or mind. In this way, we may begin to develop the ability to maintain our mindfulness, our awareness of things as they are unfolding, moment by moment. This too is wonderful, its like *really* living, really feeling what is happening in the body, really knowing the present function of the mind and relaxing in that awareness. This is mental power, we're developing the strength of the mind. With the absence of useless thoughts, we have the clarity to solve problems, review and learn from the past and plan the future to make it bright and right.

Causes for thinking

Six senses

Thinking is usually caused by contact at our five physical senses, seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching but also the mind itself causes and creates its own thinking. Some examples of how thinking is created by the mind are;

Whenever we hear something, we perceive the sound and may remember something about it and thus a thought is born. Especially if we have our eyes closed, and we hear a sound like a dog bark, a bell ring, an airplane or anything, a mental image arises because of what we have heard. When that image arises, we think about it, this is a natural process.

When we feel anything in the body, for example, when we feel cold, we may think of the reason why we feel cold, "Oh, the wind is cold." Or "The ground is cold." "I want to put my sweater on..." We are thinking about the reasons for the cold, thinking about the cold. Itchiness arises – then we're thinking about that. "Oh, is it a fly, is it an ant?" "Why is this itchiness here, where did it come from?" We even think, "I want to scratch it." Any other sensation in the body can cause thinking to arise, even the heartbeat, tension,

pressure, heat, shaking, all of these can create thinking. Especially if something is wrong, then worrying starts - big time.

If you smell something, you think about what you smell. If it is a sweet smell, you think, "Ah, that's beautiful". Especially if you smell food, then the mind goes right off on another track. You get hungry and start planning a meal. If you smell something bad or repulsive, then you think about that smell, how you want to get away from it or get rid of it. This is natural, natural thoughts arise due to that which we smell.

Naturally when you taste something nice, you like it, you want it, you think about it as it tastes now, you think about it as you have tasted it before and you think about how you want to taste it again in the future. As you can see, you simply taste something but then the mind races off and thinks about the thing that has been tasted. This is a major hindrance during the practice of mindfulness of eating. The yogis don't know that they are thinking, judging, comparing, reflecting and projecting. When they come for interview with the teacher, they can't give any details of what they observed and labeled during eating... because they weren't really mindful, **they were enjoying and daydreaming!!**

Also, seeing is one of our greatest attachments. Whatever we see, we get involved with it, even the mundane and ordinary things in life. When we see them we relate to them as, this is my environment, this is my house, this is the way I go to work, this is my life, and so on. Then we are involved in what we see. We like to look at beautiful things, beautiful people, beautiful scenery and pictures. So many things in the world attract our eyes, our eyes are attracted by beautiful things. This too is a perfectly natural process. Similarly with ugly, disgusting and dirty things. When the eyes see them, the mind gets the mental

image and thinks, "This is dirty". Then the mind is repulsed and a lot of thinking, judgment, criticism, aversion, etc., arise.

These thoughts are always arising because our five physical / material senses are always 'switched on'. In fact, there is no 'off-switch'. Those five material senses are functioning all the time. Thus we have some kind of sense contact all the time. With this sense contact arises thinking. It is no wonder we spend our lives thinking, considering that we are always hearing, seeing, tasting, touching and smelling. Even when we are sleeping, they're still working and often the cause for dreams.

However it is not just the physical contact but the mind also creates its own thoughts. **Thinking causes thinking.** The previous thought being the cause for the present thought. The present thought being the cause for the next thought... and on it goes. One thought, feeling or sense impression, causes another thought or emotion, which in turn causes another and on it goes. Because of what has previously arisen, the mind arises according to that. Cause and effect is an inescapable and perfectly natural fact of life, which the Buddha illuminated for us to become aware of within ourselves. Because of what arises in the present, there will be a future arising according to that which we experience just now, and thus it goes on perpetuating itself.

This cycle is known in Pali as, **samsara**. It also refers to the cycle of lives, birth, death and rebirth. This present mind moment perpetuates the next and the next and so on. This life perpetuates the next and the next and so on. This is like a form of bondage, we are bound to these cycles, spinning in the present, never stopping and going on forever. This is a form of suffering, there seems to be no peace from these cycles, this spinning, thus, the Buddha teaches how to escape this 'roundabout'.

When we first learn to meditate, one of the first things that the yogi comes to realize is how much thinking there is. Also how diverse and weird and wonderful it can be.

The mind can create anything, it can think about anything in the entire universe, it's unlimited. We can have gross, ugly, nasty or evil thoughts. We can have beautiful, angelic or divine thoughts. We can even have those two extreme thoughts arising back to back, one after another. We might have ordinary, mundane thoughts or even neutral, boring or nonsensical thoughts. We may have childhood memories that we had forgotten, we didn't know that we would think of those thoughts again, and they come up. We think of old songs, old TV shows and advertising jingles, so many things come up in the mind. Why do these things come up, these memories? They come up because of our contact with our six senses. Because of the sixth sense, the sense of mind, there is thinking in the mind, thinking causes thinking. Because there is a present thought, there is the next thought. Also because we have the five physical senses. Even we can get a little twitch in our finger, it may remind us of something from our childhood. We may smell something and it may remind us of something from long ago. We may get a mental image from that and when we see that picture in the mind, we create a story and off we go on a full-blown drama.

Most people think in pictures, imagining. So many images come to mind, so many images that we didn't even know we could imagine. Sometimes when we sit with our eyes closed, we get images in our visual sense or on what I call the 'screen' of the mind. Often when the eyes are closed, we can see some lights, patterns, some 'clouds', movements and shapes, forming in the mind. We don't ask to see these things, we don't invite them, they are just there, they arise due to natural causes. We see some lights and colors or sometimes

shapes looking like clouds and images form from that. This my experience, I have watched it happen. Just as we look at the clouds in the sky, we might say, "Oh it looks like a dinosaur!" Or a pig or something like that. Then, we may start to think about that image that we have seen or simply thinking about clouds. The same thing happens in the mind. When we close our eyes, we get those shapes and colors and from them arise all kinds of thoughts. As I said, thoughts are as vast and as varied as the universe itself. It could be anything. As a picture comes up and off you go on a tangent. This is how easily thinking can arise.

Thinking...

the universal hobby

that most of us don't even know that we're doing.

Let's face it, we have been doing it all our lives, it's our habit and even our hobby to think. It is probably the most common past time and occupation (or pre-occupation) of the mind for all human beings, all over the world. Then coming to meditate, all of a sudden we are told that thinking is not useful, so the meditator becomes frustrated, agitated and restless. They realize, "All I am doing is thinking!" In **samatha** meditation they try to pull their mind back to the object of concentration, a steady and single object like breathing or a mantra or something but it is quite difficult to get the mind to 'sit and stay'... like trying to train a little puppy. You tell it to sit and it stands, you tell it to stay and it runs away!

Is your mind like that? Most people refer to their mind as 'monkey mind'.

Vipassana meditation is different. We are often told to follow the rising and falling of the abdomen. It is an excellent object of meditation but when you are thinking, you cannot observe the rising and falling. So what must you do? You must observe that thinking. It is the most predominant process in your body

and mind in the present moment. So you direct your attention towards it, your objective awareness – it is just thinking, a mental process, that's all. You label it and when it dissolves, you come to understand what is thinking.

In Burma

When I was in Burma, during my second long term intensive retreat, about four months long, I was having a difficult time. I complained to my Sayadaw that all I was doing was thinking. I think it was a confession but also a complaint because I was getting fed up. Sit and think, walk and think, eat and think, ah – it was too much! So Sayadaw asked, as he had asked many times before, “Did you note it?” And I said; “Yes Sayadaw, I tried to note it but it is too much”. And Sayadaw said, “You must note all of the thinking”. And I said, “Sayadaw, if I noted all of the thinking, I would just be going around noting thinking all day long”. He said, “Right. That is what you must do.” I was not satisfied with that, I didn't like that answer. Basically because it was going against my nature. Little did I realize that I was creating the thinking, I was enjoying the thinking. I was creating my own problems, I was creating the hindrances in the meditation. So I went back to the meditation hall, and at first, I didn't know what to do, I wanted to give up and go home. Then I turned my determination towards Sayadaw's advice and I decided, “Alright then, I am going to observe thinking as soon as it arises!” It was really tough at first but I soon got the hang of it. Ah, what a beautiful thing! That was a major turning point in my meditation practice. That is when I realized that I had to note thinking, whenever it arose, as much as possible, all day long. It was like, “rising, falling, thinking, thinking, rising, thinking, rising, falling, thinking, thinking...” “Walking, walking, thinking, thinking, walking...” “Lifting, moving, placing, thinking, thinking, lifting...”, “chewing, chewing, thinking, chewing...” When I was walking and thinking, every time, I stopped walking, I noted

thinking and then continued to observe and label the process(es) of walking. I noted thinking while I was sitting, eating, while I was in my room, in the bathroom, in between rooms, in the toilet, everywhere!

It took a long time for me to understand what Sayadaw was trying to tell us. Sayadaw had told us many times, **“Thinking is the most important object in vipassana, you must note thinking.”** So, I am making a shortcut for you. Please observe thinking, it is the most important object in vipassana meditation. Regardless of how you note it or how you call it, please observe it.

Imagination

If it comes in pictures, you note it, “imagining, imaging” or “seeing, seeing”. It doesn’t matter what it is that you see. In fact, the subject or the image itself is irrelevant. It could be some beautiful thing. It could be something from your childhood that you loved dearly, maybe angels come and talk to you or you might see a dead body... you might even meet the Buddha in your meditation. It doesn’t matter, it is not important, it is still just imagining and seeing. This is created by the mind. Just note it, “Imagining, imagining, seeing, seeing”. Don’t trust this stuff, the content of imagination is like an illusion or delusion, it’s a magic trick, it’s not real.

This is quite an important point. Some people say or have heard that meditation makes you go crazy. Well, I can say that anyone who went crazy in meditation was either already crazy or they had the potential for it. There was a pre-existing condition, whether they knew it or not. Anyway, the problem begins when they start to believe in the stories, pictures or voices in their mind. It doesn’t matter what it is, just note it as “imagining” or even “delusion”, don’t get involved in it, don’t give it an audience, even ignore it and let it go. Unless you are clearly mindful and concentrated or you actually created something by purposefully designing, planning or thinking about it, then it is not created

by a wise mind, it is created by a deluded mind. Be careful. You won't go crazy, you will cure it!

See it, know it, and watch it go!

Don't hang on to anything, don't cling to anything.

If it's important it will come back;

if it's not, it doesn't matter!

If it is something important, then it will arise again later when you are not in intensive meditation. Then you can do what you like with it, you can analyze and criticize it, enjoy it, whatever! When we are engaged in the meditation practice, particularly when we are in retreat, you must observe this thinking process in its true nature. Thinking is the cause of a lot of our suffering.

Thinking is the problem.

Thinking is the problem in meditation but thinking is the problem in life as well. We waste so much time 'chewing over', old things that are gone, finished, unnecessary. We spend so much time stressing out and worrying about things that are beyond our control.

Often what we do is try so hard to think about a problem that we don't even see the problem anymore, we get lost in our thoughts or we go off on other tangents. This is like 'brain drain', our valuable mental energy leaking out, being wasted on useless thoughts that just go around and round in circles. Is this you? Does your mind do this, go around in circles, starting a new problem before the last one was finished? Never ending problems, merging into one another – life becomes a jungle of problems. **STOP!** Take one at a time, live in the present moment, be alive. What are you thinking about now? See it, know it and watch it change or disappear... **what's next?**

Sometimes we see the problem but we are *worried* about the problem. When there is worry in the mind, the mind is not clear. When the mind is not

clear; it can't solve any problems. So now you must note, "worrying, worrying, worrying". Note that worrying, focus on just the worrying, not the problem, not the story or what made you worried, just the worrying. Worry is separate from thinking, two different processes. See them one at a time and they will disappear. Call it by its name, observe the worrying until it breaks up and disappears. When it disappears, the mind becomes clear, then you can see the problem clearly. Then the problem becomes objective, and when things are objective, they are not a problem. **Your problem is not a problem.** The solution arises right there, because your mind is not engaged or involved in the problem, the story, or the worry. This is a beautiful process if you can master it. A very simple problem solving technique that can be applied by everyone, everywhere. Please try it, again and again.

The state of anger

Another example is when anger arises from a thought. We may be just sitting in meditation and we have a thought about someone or something and then anger arises. Then off we go, on a big angry trip; "Why did she say that?" "I didn't do it!" "They won't get away with it!" What's all this? Thoughts - imagining, stories, memories, projections, etc. At that time, you can note the thinking itself or better still you can tune in to this state of anger. You observe and label, "angry, angry" or "hating, hating" or "aversion, aversion". When you observe that, you see it as it really is, just another mental process. It breaks up and disappears. When it disappears, often the thinking or story has gone along with it. The mind becomes clear and fresh. Sometimes you realize, thinking is just thinking, a problem is just a problem, anger is just anger, you see all mental states objectively, and you realize that this is just the way it is, no need to change it, this is OK, I am OK. Or "I cannot fix the problem now, while I am sitting here meditating." And you skillfully put it aside and let it go.

Then you are free from anger and the thinking also passes away, due to mindfulness and wisdom. Often the cause for thought and the subsequent anger, worrying, fear, disappointment, pressure, loneliness, grief or whatever it is that arises from a thought, is basically delusion. When you see it, when you note it, when you observe it, you know it, and you watch it go – that is wisdom. **Wisdom displaces delusion.** That doesn't mean that you have stopped thinking forever or that the thinking won't come back.

Thinking does come back, and usually a lot sooner than we would like it to. But that is how we learn to be patient in this meditation and in life.

This practice is the practice of patience.

Everyone in the whole world needs more patience. If you don't think that you have to learn patience, I would say that you are not aware of your own mind very well. Because, we are all somewhat impatient, and this practice, especially going slow and repeatedly noting thinking can actually bring it out, our impatience can surface. So we must observe things as they are. When thinking keeps coming back, like waves one after another, we have to be very patient and keep noting, observing them. Remembering that thinking is the most important object of Vipassana meditation.

Many people think, that they cannot meditate properly because they are thinking. Alas! If you take thinking as your object of meditation, you can meditate easily, cool huh? Then you are on the right track again. For example, when there is thinking in the mind, let go of rising and falling of the abdomen or the breathing process and observe the thinking, remember, it is the most important object.

Walking and Thinking

In the retreat, many people are doing walking meditation but they just keep walking and walking and you can see that they are not really being observant

of the movement of the foot but they are just kind of dawdling, wandering and daydreaming. Their meditation is very dull because they are walking and thinking at the same time, which means that neither your mindfulness nor your thoughts are very clear. **Stop walking! Note the thinking!** When it breaks up and disappears, then come back to the movement of the foot. Then walking meditation becomes very clear and precise.

Also there is the fact that we **can and should stop** in the walking meditation many times. For example, if you are walking from one side of the room to the other, it doesn't matter if you have to stop twenty times or it takes you half an hour to get there. If you stop and note thinking every time, you will have good meditation because you are understanding the true and natural processes that are arising in the present moment. Many people think that because it is called 'walking' meditation, they must keep walking all the time. But the word 'meditation' is more important than the word 'walking'. Walking is just walking. Meditation means to develop your mind, it means to be mindful, it means to observe, any mental or physical process that predominantly arises in the present moment. You know the principle of vipassana now, right?

When we are walking, if thinking arises in the mind, we must stop and note, "thinking, thinking" or "wandering, wandering" or "fantasizing, fantasizing", "dreaming, dreaming", "speculating, speculating" or whatever it is, note it as you see it. However, if there is a quick thought, if one just pops into the mind and pops back out again, let it go, let it be, no need to stop walking, no need to label it. You just know, "That was a thought." However, if there is a substantial thought in the mind, stop, note it, observe it, until it disappears, then continue with the attention on the movement of the foot.

Samatha and Vipassana

One point that needs to be made here is the difference between **Samatha** (concentration) meditation and **Vipassana** (mindfulness) meditation. Samatha meditation or 'concentration meditation' has only one object of attention. It uses the method or technique of shutting out any thinking that enters into the mind. So whenever thinking arises in samatha meditation, one brings the mind back to the single and only object of meditation. In that way, the mind becomes deeply concentrated on that one object. In Vipassana meditation, we are not stopping the thinking, we are not getting rid of it, we are not cutting it out and not bringing the mind back to any one object — there is nowhere to bring the mind 'back' to. We observe whatever is there to be observed, naturally. In the case of thinking, we are observing the natural process without getting involved in the content, we are just observing the thinking as it is naturally occurring in the present moment. Some people with some psycho-analysis training might say that in order to unravel the problems of the mind one should think about the content of the thought and understand why the thought is coming up, where it comes from and what is the problem. However, that is psycho-analysis, that is the mind analyzing the thinking that has arisen within the present moment. A vipassana meditator doesn't need to do this. Through pure mindfulness and direct observation we can learn about the function of the mind and break the cyclic habits that cause us stress and suffering.

Thinking process

A vipassana meditator does not observe the content of the thought, she observes the thinking process. If you like, we can call it the vehicle upon which the content is riding. It's like a truck delivering Coca-cola, remove the truck and the coke doesn't go anywhere, it needs the vehicle. The coke is the story

and the truck is the thinking process. Similarly, if you remove the coke, the truck doesn't have to go anywhere. Remove the story and there is no thought process.

A better simile is like playing a DVD in a machine without a case or cover so you can see the machine working inside. Your favorite movie is showing on the monitor. If you look at the movie, you get absorbed, involved and lost in the plot. However, if you watch the disk or the mechanism going round and round, you would see the reality; this is just a process, it's boring, meaningless. No matter which movie you play, the machine just does the same thing, just looks the same, it's just a process. Then you become disinterested in it and do something else, you do something more constructive.

You see, the thinking process, as I have already mentioned, is actually just a process. **All** thoughts are processes, they're objective. The content, the story, the subject of the thought that rides along with the thinking process, is the thing that is causing the problem. The thinking process itself is not really the problem but arising with that process of thinking is the memory, the story, dream, fantasy, problem as well as its associated emotional states, such as, depression, sadness, grief, loneliness, fear, anxiety, whatever it is that is riding along with this process of thinking.

It's not all bad news of course, because as you know, we can think about beautiful things and have lovely emotions too. We may think with Loving-kindness towards all living beings, we can think about compassion, we can think about sympathetic joy, rejoicing in other people's happiness. We can think about equanimity, we can think about karma and the dhamma, we can think about beautiful things in the world, that are wise, not deluded, that do not lead us to suffering as such. However, in the meditation practice, these exalted subjects, should also be noted. Even thinking about meditation, which

in fact we do a lot of, then that thinking about the meditation must also be noted as thinking, analyzing, judging, doubting and so-on.

So we must note this thinking, regardless of whether it is positive or negative, future or past. Just observe the present moment process of thinking, don't get involved in the content or else you will be lost, you will continue to analyze and think and judge and so on. Then you end up somewhere down the track and you don't know how you got there. Then you will start analyzing and criticizing about how you got there and go on thinking about that for another ten or fifteen minutes. Its like, "I was thinking about that but why was I thinking about that?" "Oh, because I was thinking about that and before that I was thinking about..." and so it goes on, back and back down the track, trying to find out the cause for the first thought that caused all the other thoughts. I hope you can see here that it's like a dog chasing its own tail. If you find your mind reviewing all the thought processes that have just occurred recently in the last five – ten minutes, you again have to note, "reflecting, reflecting", "reviewing, reviewing", "analyzing, analyzing".

The train of thought

One thought leads to another thought, leads to another thought, just like train carriages that are connected to each other. And the train itself is moving, rolling along the track. So we jump on this wonderful train of thought and we enjoy in it, we indulge in it and have a lovely time. We are having so much fun that we don't know where we are. Then at some point, we realize that we missed our station and we are way, way down the track and we don't remember anything about the journey or how we got there. So, we need to realize, be aware that we are on this train of thought, just like you ride on any train, you need to know, realize and be mindful of where your station is. You need to get off at the right stop. In the mind we must be aware of the fact that

we are thinking so we are not getting lost in the thoughts. Yet, we are able to understand the true nature of thinking. We are not stopping this thinking as such, we are not cutting it out, getting rid of it or destroying it. It's like we get off it, step out of it, like a train. We are in fact just realizing that a thought is in process but this realization itself is a new mental state which distracts or disrupts the flow of the thought and its like we 'wake up', "This is not real, I'm just imagining, dreaming." Only by understanding thinking in its true nature can we really start to become free from its negative effects and make it positive. There is no need to fight with it.

Thinking Returns

Many meditators become quite frustrated by this thinking that keeps happening. You note this one and it goes and another one arises. Once you understand that it is just coming and going, coming and going, you start to relax. You develop some more patience and you are able to observe it. When thinking has gone but then re-occurs and you are annoyed or disappointed by it, then you must note, "annoyed, annoyed", "aversion, aversion", "disappointed, disappointed" and so on. Then your mind will relax and you are able to continue to be mindful without thinking.

Actually, we don't like the thinking coming back all the time, which is caused by the misconception that your mind should be clear, empty or blank... but who has a blank mind?! Sounds like brain-dead to me. An empty mind is peaceful but it's useless. How long are you going to sit there with an empty mind? Let's get real, the mind is a thinking machine and it works very well! So you better get used to this thinking stuff arising and re-arising. Like I said, if you don't like it, label that, if you want it to go away (very common) then note that! "Wanting, wanting, wanting..." until you 'see through' that, until that disappears and then continue to observe the next most predominant object.

Other states

In the same way, if you get frustrated, bored or restless with all this thinking, then label those mental states for a change, that's not boring, its new and its really important to get into the habit of knowing what is REALLY happening in your mind. This is in fact *cittanupassana*, mindfulness of mental states, including emotions. This is the link between the more physical and mechanical practice that we seem to do in the meditation retreat and our practice at home in daily life. At home, we can't slow down or label all of our actions and movements with an acute observation and attention but we can be generally aware of our mental states, especially thoughts and emotions. In fact, I think this is the most important part of the practice. Our mind is 'driving' our existence, our emotions shape our actions and our speech which in turn shape our relationships, which is a major contributing factor in our overall happiness. If we get on well with others, we feel accepted, loved and secure. If we can know our own emotions, we won't do or say anything harmful, careless or dangerous. Thus, we look after ourselves well and can look after others well too. Life is good.

So our basic practice of mindfulness of thinking, trying to know when thoughts arise in the mind, can lead us to realize the associated pleasant and unpleasant mental and emotional states, which in turn leads us to understand the nature of the mind well. This understanding keeps the mind in balance, providing the necessary peace of mind, which we all seek.

Sleepiness and thinking

Coming back to the practice. Many people experience a kind of sharp jerking or nodding movement of the head that happens during sitting. Sometimes it just happens out of nowhere, it seems like we are quite mindful, observing the rising and falling movement of the abdomen but then, 'whoop!'

As we are noting, “rising, falling, rising falling...”, it becomes rhythmical or automatic, the mind becomes complacent, disinterested and bored with it. As soon as the mind becomes bored with it, it slips into a nice little comfort zone, that is the ‘thinking’ zone, where the mind is comfortable and just wants to think as it is conditioned to do. When it slips into that, there is a further relaxing of the mind, and the mind falls asleep. When the mind falls asleep, the body instantly relaxes. At this point of relaxing, the body leans forward, as soon as the body leans forward, the mind wakes up again. The mind is alerted by the movement and it quickly jerks the head back up, this all happens in a finger snap! All we know is the jerking of the head back up, which is like a reflex action. Then the meditator says, “Wow, what was that?!” You see, the whole process happens within a second, we don’t see that we are thinking. All we see is that we were noting rising and falling of the abdomen and then all of a sudden this jerking thing happened. Why did it happen, where did it come from? Usually, the meditators are not satisfied when the teacher tells them that it is sleepiness caused by thinking. They think they were mindful and noting ‘rising and falling’. Yes, they were noting but they weren’t mindful, otherwise they would know what the jerking is. I can assure you, that the mind is extremely fast. It is so fast, that the Buddha didn’t give a simile for the speed of the mind because it is faster than all other things, there’s nothing to compare it to. If we understand that, and particularly if we can experience how fast the mind is, then we would realize; yes, it is possible, that I was noting rising and falling (without sharp attention) and that the mind was just automatically noting it. Even it appears that you can note rising and falling and think at the same time, which is very ‘*dangerous*’.

So we must be very careful with this **automatic mental noting**, but also with this, subliminal thinking that comes into the mind. When the mind experiences

this, it becomes comfortable. When the mind becomes comfortable then it relaxes. Once it relaxes, it zips into thought and then into sleep. Once it falls into sleep, the body relaxes and begins to 'melt' but then a spark of awareness jerks us upright again. So, if you experience this jerking of the head or violent nodding of the head and you don't know where it came from, you can try this as an explanation for that experience. Don't believe me, check it out for yourself. Immediately after the jerk happens, reflect back, "What was I doing before that happened? Was I sharp? Was I clearly aware of the object of attention?" See for yourself, know your own mind.

The same with the walking meditation, we can be walking and noting, "lifting, pushing, placing, lifting, pushing, placing," but actually you are thinking about something else and the mind is slipping in and out of attention on the foot and thinking. Once when I was doing walking meditation, I had stopped walking and I was standing still but my mind was still noting, "lifting, pushing, placing, lifting, pushing, placing"!

Can't sleep / Can't stay awake

Being unable to sleep is often caused by a restless mind, which also means thinking too much. If you can see thoughts as thoughts and not go into the content, they start to pass by, you don't stop and engage in them and they don't stick to you. Objectify them by calling them by their name. You could even label, "restless, restless" or "worrying, worrying", then you may see them as just processes without any meaning for you. Not 'MY thoughts' – just thoughts. Its difficult not to get sucked into the content, the story, but if you can be strong and disengage from them, they will pass.

I have found that if I can't sleep I sit up in my bed and practice mindfulness of sitting until I feel sleepy and then lie down again. Or I get up and do mindfulness of walking, sometimes I do it outside and a bit faster, stopping to

note the thinking. This clears the mind and burns up excess energy, so you can relax and sleep.

Too sleepy, can't stay awake? Usually caused by sneaky little 'delusionary' thoughts. Sometimes its like they are commandos! They wait for the right moment, when your mindfulness and concentration slip and then they strike! Often from behind, without warning, lightening fast and very seductive. Or they kind of drift through the mind, like smoke wafting through your house, while we're not being attentive and the next thing you know, your lost, either in thinking or in sleep. Once you start to get sleepy, you can try to label, "sleepy, sleepy" but sometimes it doesn't help, you could try shouting in your mind, "**SLEEPY! SLEEPY! SLEEPY!**" The most effective way is to catch the thoughts as they arise or just after they arise. This means to quickly or briefly check if there are any stray thoughts lurking in the background or we could say, check that your mindfulness and attention is pure. Actually, if it is pure, you know it, no need to check so it's only when you feel that its not pure, you can check your mind to see if there is a thought there. You may do this by simply labeling thinking once or twice, then return to the main object. Its kind of like a security check, you feel there's something not right or clear so you check and when its clear, you return to the main object of attention.

In vipassana, we only observe realities that arise naturally in the present moment. We don't look for things to observe or things that are not there. It's not a hunt-kill-destroy mission but simply seeing things as they are. In the example just given, you suspect a thought or sleepiness because your mindfulness doesn't seem clear, so you momentarily check your mind. If you can become skillful at this, in daily life it will become second nature to check your mind for useless thoughts, stress, negativities or unwanted emotional states. It's like monitoring and regulating the mind. For example, you're reading a book but

can't concentrate - quickly check the state of the heart, any troublesome thoughts? Or you are writing an examination or going for a job interview or listening to an important speech - can't concentrate? Why? Check it out! Troubleshoot the problem, observe it, see it's true nature, clearly. When the mind is clear, resume the task at hand. Train your mind well, look after it and use it wisely.

Satisfaction & progress

Often in meditation we get good experiences and we are satisfied and happy. We start thinking that we have actually made it, we've got it, we suddenly understand the meditation technique. Actually at that moment, you are still thinking and so you didn't really get anything at all, you just got more thinking. This is very tricky, we start thinking about meditation or we think about our good experiences. When we think about our good experiences, we are reflecting and enjoying the memories and we get lost in them, get swept away by them. We are not able to understand that we are swept away because we are enjoying our satisfaction from the meditation practice. So even when you are thinking about the meditation we must note that as thinking.

When we get a new experience, we like to think about it and analyze it - not good. Even though it is Dhamma, its still a waste of time. If you're just thinking about an old experience, you won't get any new ones.

Similarly, we are wont to think about progress. In fact this is a real danger to the one who wants to make progress. Thinking about it won't make it happen and in fact, it only hinders. This is related to expectation which I call 'yogi poison', because it kills the yogi, it kills the pure mindfulness. The mind is tainted with desire, greediness and it is searching for something 'good'. WRONG! STOP! In vipassana, we are not searching for anything, we only see

things as they arise naturally. If you are patient enough and just keep your attention on the present moment arising and passing away of mental and physical phenomena, sooner or later, you will come to see everything you need to see for life, you will know all you need to know. Relax and keep your mind open, alert and awake. Nothing to look for, nothing to get, nothing to change, things are OK as they are... see them, know them and watch them go. This is the formula for progress, just come back to the principle of vipassana.

What is progress anyway? In the teachings of the **visuddhimagga** in Buddhism, which is a commentary to the scriptures, there is what is known as the 'Stages of Insight', sometimes referred to as the 'Progress of Insight'. I think it can be like positive suggestion and the meditator thinks that she got stage one, then she's looking for stage two and if she gets that, she's looking for three and so-on. I have met many people who have self-confessed their own enlightenment due to these 'stages' and quite frankly, I don't believe all of them. Or it becomes a competition between meditators, "I got stage four, what did you get?" That's not vipassana. Do I have to repeat the principle again? Just see what is happening now, that's all. In the **Kalama Sutta** (Discourse to Kalama People), the Buddha mentioned something like; if you follow a teaching and it reduces your greed, hatred and delusion, it is good, you should follow it, if it doesn't, drop it. I like that. It is not so much which 'stage' you think you're at or even what your teacher told you, but you have to know for yourself the true quality of your mind and if you see any strong desire, anger or confusion / delusion, then, just keep on going. Don't delude yourself.

Once, I went to my teacher and asked him if I had reached the first stage of enlightenment, (basically because I had almost convinced myself I had) and my wise teacher said to me, "Even if you have (reached first stage), you're not an **arahant** (fully enlightened one) yet, so you have to continue your

practice.” Oh, at first I didn’t like that answer, I wanted confirmation! But later on, I realized that was the best answer, because it doesn’t matter what ‘stage’ I’m at, I have to know my own mind and if it is not yet pure, I’ve got more work to do - *Just Do It!* (Thanks Nike!)

Also with regard to expectation, I ask, “Expecting what?” You don’t know what is going to happen in the future but you would like to think you do. That’s just your proud ego that thinks it knows everything, it’s a puff of smoke, watch it go too. Or it’s your selfish, greedy ego that wants the best experience, it wants to be the best, wants to know everything right now, wants to show off to the teacher how good it is, how good I am!

Another experience that some people have, is the commentator! Like a sports commentator, reporting the action now to those who can’t experience it live. It happens a lot when we’re alone. We’re telling our family or friends about our experience or it is what we want to tell them in the future. Or we simply talk to ourselves or telling someone else (who is not there!) about the present experience. Especially if we get a good experience the ego wants to show off, it can’t wait for the future so it talks to itself now - crazy huh? I used to find myself talking to my teacher, giving him a commentary of this pain right now... that’s not mindfulness! It is ego, “ego, ego, ego”!

Sometimes there is an ongoing comparison or a kind of judging-competitiveness where the mind is always reflecting on something, bouncing off something, judging and comparing this against that. Whatever is happening now, we are reflecting on or comparing it to that which we have experienced in the past. Often we judge our own meditation, we are judging our practice. Sometimes it is positive and our pride and ego run away with it, enjoying it, “I’m a good yogi!” Or sometimes negative, “I’m hopeless”.

These aspects of expectation, commentator, competitiveness are attributed to the selfish, deluded ego and a desire for satisfaction and perfection. We are not yet satisfied, unfulfilled, therefore we suffer mentally. It is common and universal. Try to label these mental states, especially the desire for satisfaction and perfection. These arise due to being unsatisfied, which is the truth of life, we're never satisfied, always wanting a little bit more or something else. We can overcome this suffering by understanding the truth.

Self-conscious

This too is another form of suffering or we can say, as long as you are self-conscious, your mind is not peaceful. We may become very self-conscious in the meditation practice, particularly in walking meditation. There are times when other people may see us walking and so it is almost as if we are walking to impress them. I sometimes liken it to a model in a fashion parade, where people are definitely looking at you. We sometimes experience this in the meditation centre, especially if non-meditators are visiting and they've never seen someone doing walking meditation. Even if other people are not looking at us, we imagine that they are and we imagine that they are judging us too. Just as we are in the habit of looking at and judging others, it is automatic for us to assume that others judge us too. What we see in ourselves, we project onto others. We think for others and guess and imagine what they are thinking.

Now some people may feel self-conscious in a negative way and are not really able to walk well because they are feeling that other people are looking at them, and they become nervous and worried about that and feel that people would be judging them in a negative way.

On the other hand, there are those of us who have this positive self-consciousness, perhaps it is self confidence. In so far as we feel that we are doing this very beautifully, very majestically. We may be thinking that others

are thinking and saying, “Oh, she is so concentrated! So mindful! Look at the way she walks!” So we are walking nicely but without mindfulness and actually experiencing this pride, this ego, this self consciousness. It is very important to catch this. You can label, “pride / proud”, “ego, ego”, “self-conscious”.

One thing I often say to people on meditation retreats is, don’t look at other meditators. If you don’t look at anybody else while they are sitting, walking, eating or doing any other of the daily activities, then they will not be looking at you. So I tell all the meditators;

**“If nobody looks at anybody else;
then nobody is looking at you.”**

If nobody is looking at you, there is no need for you to be embarrassed, to be nervous, self-conscious or proud, and puffed up with pride about the way you are walking and doing things very slowly. We are not meditating for other people’s benefit. We are here, solely to develop our own mind, to undo, unbind this massive thinking and analyzing, worrying, fear and suffering that are arising in our mind. So, please remember that when you are feeling self-conscious or thinking how good or how bad you are in the meditation, you can observe and note in such terms as, judging, criticizing, pride, proud, satisfied and even imagining. That is, you imagine that other people are watching you, so you note, “imagining, imagining, imagining”. This is all very useful and important both for the meditation retreat and our daily life.

Creativity and planning

Often we get very creative thoughts coming up in the mind. Such as, poetry or we think about some lyrics for a song or about some way of promoting the Dhamma, how to share the Dhamma. We create all sorts of things, designing houses, jewelry, clothes, making new recipes for food, how to save the world, you name it, we are creating it. We are enjoying this

creativity in our 'quiet time' but however good it is, it must still be noted as, designing, creating, concocting, choreographing, planning, imagining, seeing and so on. When we do that, we see the reality of the present moment. "Ah, this is just imagining". Then we are seeing it as an object, seeing it as a process and letting it go.

When we let it go, we are able to be free from that creativity, which is only a plan or projection into the future in the present moment and the mind becomes free now. What I find happens is that we don't lose or stifle our creativity but you merely let it go whilst you are engaged in the meditation practice to gain clarity of mind in the present. That clarity of mind that continues to observe any mental or physical process, is actually very strong. Then later on, after you have finished your meditation retreat, you will be able to remember this thing that was so unique and so creative in the meditation. If it was important you will definitely be able to remember it. If it wasn't so important, then it doesn't matter anyway. Let it go, it will come back sometime. So I find that the clarity we gain from the meditation whilst we are engaged in intensive meditation is a cause for more productive creativity at other times. So whenever your creative mind jumps in, then please jump on it, observe it and know it and watch it go in the present moment – let it go. And then, when it comes back later on, it will be very, very good. I think even better than it was before.

Another point here is that in daily life, when we are trying to concentrate on something like a problem or work or even trying to be creative, then if useless thinking gets in the way, we can catch it quickly and easily let it go. Clearing the mind to focus on the task at hand – **one thing at a time**. Do one thing at a time and do it to the best of your ability and when its finished do the next thing in the same way. Theoretically our life can work this way but the mind gets cluttered with useless and unproductive *stuff*.

Another thing that we do on retreat is we plan our interview with the meditation teacher, which is often a big distraction. We spend too much time thinking about this. So you must catch it, just note, “thinking, thinking, thinking” or “planning, planning, planning”. What I find is, in the same way as I have just explained, this planning will take care of itself in the future. No need to plan the future. If you have clarity of the mind in the present, you will have clarity of mind when the time comes to talk. If it is important, you will remember it. If it is not important, then it was good to let it go. Good to let it go *then* and good to let it go *now*.

This is the practice of letting go.

A better way to say it is;

This is the practice of *watching* it go.

Then we may live without difficulties and suffering. When you find yourself planning something that doesn't really need to be planned, note it and watch it go. In daily life, when we are not engaged in meditation, yes, we do need to plan things, and at that time, you will also need clarity of mind in order to plan things carefully. Again, we develop clarity of mind and an understanding of what thinking and planning really are in the meditation practice but when we are not engaged in the intensive practice, our thinking and planning can become very creative, very precise and it becomes a more succinct process. So we are able to get our thinking and planning over and done with, very quickly and very carefully, when we are not engaged in the formal meditation practice.

The three common characteristics

There is a very profound teaching that comes from the Buddha, known in Pali as **samannya lakkhana** (common or general characteristics). When we are meditating in this vipassana style, when we are just observing any mental

or physical process that predominantly arises in the present, the main aim of this is to understand these three common characteristics to all mental and physical processes.

These common characteristics are:

Anicca - Impermanence, or change.

Dukkha - unsatisfactoriness / dissatisfaction or if you like, suffering.

Anatta - Impersonal nature of mental and physical processes.

I have already mentioned about the impermanent nature of physical phenomena in The Four Elements. Now it is quite easy to understand that thinking too is impermanent or another word is, changing. Thinking *appears* to be continuous, ever-present or permanent. However, we are thinking of different things and thoughts are changing all the time. Not only thinking, but all mental and emotional states are arising and passing away. There are many different modes, states or processes of mind and they are going on one after another. The mind is like the surface of the ocean, which has uncountable ripples arising and passing away. All of them different and individual, with one passing causing another arising, only lasting a moment, yet all of them are called the ocean. The mind appears to be one thing but is actually uncountable arising and passing away mind moments, with different states, emotions, perceptions, cognitions, memories, etc. Not staying the same even for a moment.

In that way, we can understand the changing mind. It is very useful to see that the mind is changing, particularly when we observe the thinking process just as a process. We observe and label, "thinking, thinking, thinking", and by becoming objective, not getting involved in it, we see that the thinking disappears, that it ends naturally. When it ends, we understand that this

thought is impermanent. If that thought was associated with anger, depression, sadness, fear or whatever, then we would also see that emotional state changing and passing away. When that passes away, coupled with the thinking, we are free from that and we experience some peace, and clarity of mind. Then we realize, "I don't have to live with these negative or unwholesome, unproductive mental states. I can actually be mindful and I see them as they really are and watch them go. Learning about them, understanding them in the present moment."

We are able to be free from these things due to the fact that they are always changing. We don't have to fight with them or destroy them or make them go away, they are already changing by themselves, according to the law of nature. So just relax and watch the nature of the changing mind. It is very important to understand the changing nature of the mind.

The second point is the suffering or the dissatisfaction that is caused by thinking. Actually a good term here is 'unsatisfactoriness' but it's an uncommon term for most of us. It comes from the fact that we are very rarely truly satisfied with our thoughts or our mind.

Sometimes we come to conclusions but even conclusions are '*dangerous*' things. Because we think we have solved the problem. We got to the point where we don't need to think about it anymore but then some new information arises and bang! we are back into thinking, struggling, trying to sort out the problem in the mind. I think it is better not to come to any conclusions at all. In fact I don't think that there is any such thing as a conclusion because there is always more information coming just around the corner. There is always something new to learn, some more news and information. Then if we understand that, we are able to let our conclusions and assumptions go. We are allowed to let our views and opinions go or at least make them flexible and