

# Wise Reflection

## The Importance of Wise Reflection in Meditation

by

*Steve Weissman*

Buddhist Publication Society  
Kandy • Sri Lanka

**The Wheel Publication No. 463**

Copyright © 2006 Steve Weissman. All rights reserved.

BPS Online Edition © (2011)

Digital Transcription Source: BPS Transcription Project

For free distribution. This work may be republished, reformatted, reprinted and redistributed in any medium. However, any such republication and redistribution is to be made available to the public on a free and unrestricted basis, and translations and other derivative works are to be clearly marked as such.

---

## Contents

<i>Abbreviations</i> .....	2
<i>Introduction</i> .....	3
Part 1. Meditation and Concentration.....	4
<i>Does concentration automatically lead to wisdom?</i> .....	4
<i>Is wise reflection a requisite for enlightenment?</i> .....	6
<i>Thinking can be meditating</i> .....	7
<i>Wise reflection in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta</i> .....	8
<i>How can we end dukkha?</i> .....	9
<i>It is all right to think in meditation</i> .....	10
<i>Does experience automatically lead to wisdom?</i> .....	11
<i>Four types of thoroughbred horses</i> .....	12
<i>Moral shame and moral dread</i> .....	12
<i>Yoniso manasikāra—wise reflection</i> .....	14
Part 2. Wise Reflection Meditations.....	15
<i>Eating and our relationship to food</i> .....	15
<i>Compassion and loving kindness</i> .....	15
<i>D/D (defusing and diffusing)</i> .....	16
<i>Waking up in the morning</i> .....	16
<i>How fortunate we are</i> .....	17
<i>Generosity</i> .....	17
<i>Dukkha</i> .....	17
<i>Impermanence</i> .....	18
<i>Death</i> .....	18
<i>Actions and their results</i> .....	18
<i>Balancing compassion and equanimity</i> .....	18
<i>The five daily recollections</i> .....	19
<i>The Four Noble Truths</i> .....	19
<i>The eight worldly dhammas</i> .....	19
<i>The ten perfections</i> .....	19
<i>Conclusion</i> .....	20
<i>About the Author</i> .....	20

## Abbreviations

DN	Dīgha Nikāya
MN	Majjhima Nikāya
SN	Samyutta Nikāya
It	Itivuttaka

(All references are to the Sutta numbers.)

## Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to explain the value of wise reflection, *yoniso manasikāra*, and to encourage readers to use their own thought processes for the growth of wisdom in their formal meditation practice. The majority of experienced Buddhist meditators whom I have met during thirty years of meditation and eighteen years of teaching were unfamiliar with formal reflective meditation. By way of this essay I hope to correct this lack of understanding.

The Buddha himself greatly stressed the importance of wise reflection. In an important discourse on the topic of wise reflection, the Sabbāsava Sutta (MN 2), the Buddha says:

“I say that the getting rid of anxieties and troubles<sup>1</sup> is possible for one who knows and sees, not for one who does not know and see. What must one know and see in order to get rid of anxieties and troubles? Wise reflection and unwise reflection.

For one who reflects unwisely, there arise anxieties and troubles that have not yet arisen, and those that have already arisen increase. But for one who reflects wisely, anxieties and troubles that have not yet arisen do not arise, and those already arisen disappear.”

What is *yoniso manasikāra*? *Yoniso manasikāra* is a Pali term that can be translated as wise reflection. This includes systematic attention, careful attention, reasoned attention, having thorough method in one’s thought, proper consideration, wise consideration, critical reflection, analytical reflection, or thinking in terms of causal relations or by way of problem solving. *Yoniso manasikāra* is a significant factor leading to the arising of insight or wisdom.

What causes our mental suffering? Simply stated, it is wrong thinking that produces our mental *dukkha* (suffering).<sup>2</sup> Right thinking will end our mental *dukkha*. Thus, it is important to use formal reflective meditation in order to develop right thinking.

In helping the reader to understand the importance of reflective meditation, much of this booklet is devoted to trying to correct meditation “myths.” By “myths” I mean certain misunderstandings that many Buddhists have acquired. These misunderstandings are widespread, and as a result, many meditators do not realise the importance of reflective meditation and may even doubt some of the things written here. To support my understanding, I have included several relevant teachings from the scriptures that emphasise the importance of wise reflection.

For any of you who may experience doubts concerning what is written here, I ask you to follow the Buddha’s advice to all of us, to seek the truth in order to dispel ignorance. If you are going to follow the Buddha in this way, then it is important that you stay open to what is presented. If you stay open, yet after reading find that you still have remaining doubts, feel free to contact me at the address at the end of this booklet. I welcome any wise discussion on anything presented here. I do believe, though, that if you are seriously interested in ending your mental *dukkha*, then what is written here will help you greatly.

---

<sup>1</sup>I have adapted this translation of the word *āsava* from the one by Venerable Dr. W. Rāhula in his book *What the Buddha Taught*. Regarding my general agreement his translation, I add his footnote: “The term *āsava* in this Sutta has wider senses than its usual psychological and ethical meanings such as ‘influx,’ ‘outflow,’ ‘defilement,’ ‘impurity.’ It is here used figuratively and embraces both psychological cares and physical troubles and difficulties as can be seen in the sequel.”

<sup>2</sup>It is assumed that the reader is already practising Buddhist meditation and is familiar with basic Buddhist Pali terms.

# Part 1

## *Meditation and Concentration*

Over thirty years ago I read my first meditation book—a yoga book. It was mainly about the physical exercises, but in the back was a small section on meditation.

At first I was not at all interested in the meditation part. As a typical young Western man, religion was not my interest and anything related to religion was a very low priority in my life. Yet as a professional swimming coach, I quickly saw the benefits of yoga exercises. I incorporated these into my own training sessions and also used many of them with my swimmers. They produced clear benefits. Having seen those physical benefits, my interest in the meditation section was stimulated. I tried it and it felt good. In fact, the very first time I did it, it felt more than good. Indeed, there was a very familiar feeling to it, as if I had done it before.

Thus my meditation practice began, but now I would like to discuss the word “meditation.” In some dictionaries, the definition of the word “meditation” is similar to this: “The emptying of the mind of thoughts, or concentration of the mind on just one thing.”

To me, at that time, meditation meant concentration. So for my meditation sessions, I practised how to concentrate. It seemed useful. After all, every great swimmer needs to be able to concentrate. Every great athlete needs to be able to concentrate. Every great musician and many other “greats” need to be able to concentrate. And so do “great” thieves and murderers.

This is a clear reason why the Buddha said, “right view comes first” in the Mahācattārisaka Sutta (MN 117). In fact, in that sutta, he said those words fourteen times! It takes about fifteen minutes to recite the sutta, yet the Buddha said, “right view comes first” fourteen times. Obviously, this statement is of great importance. I have often told meditators in retreats that if there is a thief who has been robbing homes, banks, etc. for fifteen years and has never been caught, then that person would probably have better concentration than all of the retreatants. The thief would have better concentration, which is sharper, stronger, super-focused and fully present; however the thief would not have right concentration. Why? Because *right* view is not present.

Right view includes the understandings of the Four Noble Truths and the Law of Kamma, that there are results of wholesome and unwholesome actions. These understandings are essential to our practice. To be a good meditator, to have right concentration, right view needs to come first, and is the most important condition for wisdom development. Unfortunately, many meditators don’t understand this. A huge percentage of meditators believe that if they can concentrate very well, empty the mind of thoughts, or concentrate on just one thing, then wisdom will automatically come later. I believed the same thing thirty years ago. This is a major wrong view that stands in the way of right view.

### *Does concentration automatically lead to wisdom?*

We only have to look at the account of the Buddha’s life to see how wrong this belief is. One of the main reasons many Buddhists believe this myth is that they have not carefully read a good biography of the Buddha. Nearly every biography, large or small, relates how the Buddha practised prior to enlightenment.<sup>3</sup>

When Siddhattha Gotama stayed with his first teacher he was taught how to concentrate to a very high level, called the base of nothingness—almost the highest possible. However, Siddhattha came to realise that this was not the way to enlightenment because sufficient wisdom had not developed from this high level of concentration. He had not yet fully let go of greed, hatred and ignorance. He then went to a second teacher who taught him the highest possible level of concentration. If very deep

---

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, chapter 2 of *The Life of the Buddha* by Ñānamoli Thera, published by the BPS.

concentration produces wisdom, then Siddhattha would have become enlightened at that time. Yet again, Siddhattha saw that this was not enough to give him the wisdom needed for enlightenment.

The Buddha's own account, in the suttas, of his struggle for enlightenment clearly demonstrates the fallacy of this myth, yet even many Buddhists who have read biographies of the Buddha still believe it. Why? The answer may lie with another even more important reason, that is the difficulty with correctly translating the Pali word *samādhi*. Most of the time it is translated simply as concentration. However, in certain contexts, *samādhi* has a much broader meaning.

An important example occurs in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (DN 16), which relates the Buddha's last three months, and how he went from village to village teaching a gradual training of *sīla* (morality) as being the basis for the development of *samādhi*, and *samādhi* being a basis for the development of *paññā* (wisdom). In this sutta, the phrase "*sīla, samādhi, paññā*" is used over twenty times. In two noted translations of the sutta, the word *samādhi* is translated as concentration, making the translation of "*sīla, samādhi, paññā*" to mean morality, concentration, wisdom.

The translation of *samādhi* as "concentration," both here and in other suttas such as the Samādhi Sutta (SN 22:5), has contributed greatly to the misunderstanding about how wisdom arises. In fact, *samādhi*, in Pali, is used in two ways, and I do not believe the phrase "*sīla, samādhi, paññā*" should be translated as "morality, concentration, wisdom." When the phrase "*sīla, samādhi, paññā*" is used, it indicates the Noble Eightfold Path divided into three sections. *Sīla* indicates right speech, right action and right livelihood. *Samādhi* indicates right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. *Paññā* indicates right view and right intention. Taken as a whole, these eight factors constitute the Noble Eightfold Path—the path for training the mind to develop the wisdom necessary for the ending of dukkha.

As "right concentration" is the widely accepted translation of *sammā samādhi*, the eighth factor in the Noble Eightfold Path, this demonstrates that the word *samādhi* is being used in two contexts; one to indicate the eighth factor of the Noble Eightfold Path and the other to indicate right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration working together as a group. Yet, often *samādhi* is simply translated as "concentration" in both contexts. This use of the word "concentration," to indicate these two different meanings, has occurred in many other translations as well.

So here is a question for every Buddhist meditator to contemplate: should the word "concentration" be used to describe the grouping of effort, mindfulness and concentration when it has already been used as one of three parts of the group? Some people will say, "Yes, why not? *Samādhi* is being used that way in Pali so we can do the same in English." But no, this is not actually the case and this is why when we translate *samādhi*, it is extremely important not to always use the one word "concentration."

"*Sīla, samādhi, paññā*" is a grouping together of three subgroups. When used together, it always means this grouping of, first, right speech, right action and right livelihood; second, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration; and third, right view and right intention. Therefore the term *samādhi* here is understood in the context of these three subgroups of "*sīla, samādhi, paññā*."

However, the use of the word "concentration" for the translation of the second of these three subgroups has led to the myth that if a person develops strong concentration, then wisdom will automatically follow. This myth is very important, because it often stops meditators from using wise reflection in even the most basic way.

The leading Thai scholar monk Phra Prayut Payutto has translated "*sīla, samādhi, paññā*" in a different way.<sup>4</sup> He uses "morality, mental discipline, wisdom."

Thus mental discipline covers right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration as a group. This brings more clarity to understanding "*sīla, samādhi, paññā*." *Sīla* (morality) is a basis for the development of *samādhi* (mental discipline); *samādhi* is a basis for the development of *paññā* (wisdom). So if we use the words "mental discipline" as a translation of *samādhi* when it is used in the context of "*sīla, samādhi, paññā*," this will help correct the wrong view that concentration automatically leads to wisdom.

---

<sup>4</sup>Dictionary of Buddhism, Phra Prayut Payutto, Bangkok 1985

No less than ten prominent Western scholars and translators have used “concentration” in this sense.<sup>5</sup> This has contributed to countless teachers doing so too. I hope teachers and scholars will now think deeply about this and stop using the word “concentration” when translating “*sīla, samādhi, paññā*.” If this booklet helps in only this small but important way to stop or prevent myths and misunderstandings, then much will be gained for many meditators.

As mentioned above, some people interpret “*sīla, samādhi, paññā*” to mean that wisdom is something that only comes after samādhi practice. However, wisdom is cumulative and begins with an intellectual understanding of cause and effect, and the Four Noble Truths. Also, without some degree of right understanding or wisdom, we will not know what is right speech compared to wrong speech, what is right action compared to wrong action, what is the right and wrong of anything. In this way, the initial right view will not be the deepest wisdom, yet it is a form of wisdom that is appropriate and necessary at that time in the practice.

Thus the eight factors of the Noble Eightfold Path are not a simple linear process of “do A, then B, then C.” Instead, they are most effective when working together as a team, in more of a cyclic process where the factors are intertwined. This teamwork effort is clearly pointed out in the Mahācattārīsaka Sutta (MN 117). In order to have correct sila, we need right view, and in order to have correct samādhi, we need right view. It is still possible to say, “morality is a basis for mental discipline, and mental discipline is a basis for wisdom;” while at the same time implying that all of the factors need to work together integrally.

### *Is wise reflection a requisite for enlightenment?*

Let’s look at another myth that tends to make many meditators believe that concentration produces wisdom. This is the belief that the Buddha’s enlightenment came from a concentration practice, such as mindfulness of breathing, *ānāpānasati*.

This myth is also false. Although the Buddha began his meditation with concentration practice on the evening of his enlightenment, this was not the actual technique he was using at the moment of enlightenment. Rather, he was contemplating dependent origination using wise reflection in order to develop the wisdom necessary for Buddhahood. He was reflecting on a very profound level.

So is wisely reflecting, using *yoniso manasikāra*, the prerequisite for enlightenment? Will enlightenment automatically follow the use of wise reflection? This is an interesting question that I cannot answer. However, there’s another important question that I think I can answer. Is wise reflection a prerequisite for enlightenment? According to the teachings, the answer is yes.

This is what the Buddha said:

“This is the forerunner and precursor of the rising of the sun, that is, the dawn. So too this is the forerunner and precursor of the arising of the seven factors of enlightenment, that is, wise reflection. When one is accomplished in wise reflection, it is to be expected that one will develop and cultivate the seven factors of enlightenment.” (SN 46:13)

And this is what Phra Prayut Payutto writes:

“*Yoniso manasikāra* is a mental factor that assists in the birth of wisdom and is consequently of great importance in *vipassanā*. In *vipassanā*, *yoniso manasikāra* is a singularly important step on the path to wisdom, and is thus an essential principle of Dhamma. *Yoniso manasikāra* directly precedes wisdom. It is that which paves the way for wisdom, or opens up a space in which wisdom can mature...

*Yoniso manasikāra* acts as a link between *sati*, mindfulness, and *paññā*, wisdom. It is that which guides the stream of thought in such a way that wisdom is able to get down to work and achieve results. It is that which provides wisdom with its method. It is the skilful means

---

<sup>5</sup>See, however, the entry *samādhi* in the *Pali-English Dictionary*, T.W. Rhys Davids and W. Stede, Pali Text Society, London.

employed in the efficacious use of wisdom. As the term is commonly used, it implies both reflection and wisdom. In other words 'wise reflection.'"<sup>6</sup>

So when we consider the practice, with concentration as one aspect and wise reflection as another, which is more important? This is another question I will sidestep. Let's consider the matter in a different way.

If meditators spend their time practising only concentration, without the assistance of the other seven factors of the path, will this guarantee any development of the understanding of right speech and wrong speech, right action and wrong action, right livelihood and wrong livelihood? No, it does not. But if meditators spend their time practising only wise reflection, will this guarantee any development of the understanding of right speech and wrong speech, right action and wrong action, right livelihood and wrong livelihood? The answer is yes, definitely, but if you have never practised wise reflection meditation you may not believe me.

At this point, I'd like to divert a little to discuss the Kālāma Sutta (AN 3:65), as this sutta, in my opinion, is a very important sutta in relation to our topic of wise reflection, and also in relation to the entire practice. If the Kālāma Sutta is ever lost, the decline of Theravada Buddhism will certainly be hastened. If you do not know what the Kālāma Sutta is, I wholeheartedly encourage you to find out as soon as possible.

For it is only those meditators, who adopt the approach outlined in the Kālāma Sutta, who will be open enough to investigate and understand the importance of wise reflection. Why do I make such a strong statement? Because every meditator I have met who believed that the development of concentration will automatically bring wisdom, did so as a result of hearing it from another teacher, or reading it in a book. This is not what the Kālāma Sutta teaches us.

To these meditators I have always mentioned the example above of the thief who has never been caught. Despite having strong concentration, the thief is involved in wrong action and wrong livelihood. This example has helped most of these meditators to quickly understand the falsity of this myth.

So, for those of you who may not yet believe me when I say practising wise reflection will guarantee developing the understanding of right and wrong speech, right and wrong action, right and wrong livelihood, I encourage you to try it, test it out and see for yourself—as the Kālāma Sutta teaches us. Then, when you know for yourself through experiential understanding, you will see the importance of wise reflection, wise thinking.

The word *vipassanā* was mentioned above. It is helpful to remove another wrong view that surrounds this word. As Theravada Buddhism is relatively new in the West, the word *vipassanā* is not always being used in the proper way. Some meditators wrongly believe that *vipassanā* meditation means a specific technique, such as sweeping the body, mental noting, etc., but this is not true. Rather, it means the resulting wisdom or insight that comes from using skilful techniques.

There are many different techniques taught which support the development of wisdom. Wise reflection is one of these. And if you look deeper, you may see that wise reflection is the basis of all skilful techniques.

### ***Thinking can be meditating***

If you practise wise reflections, you will dispel another big myth, which many meditators believe: "thinking is not meditating." This wrong view often stands in the way of understanding clearly that "right view comes first" and that wise reflection is a crucial tool that we all need.

Let's look again at the word "meditation." What exactly is meditating? Why would someone claim, "thinking is not meditating"? After all, the Buddha was contemplating dependent origination when he got enlightened. Again, part of the reason people believe this is because they are not aware of how

---

<sup>6</sup>"*Right Mindfulness*," Phra Prayut Payutto, Bangkok 1988.

the Buddha became enlightened. Another reason is that they believe they have to blank the mind of all thoughts, or get concentrated on a single object, keeping all thoughts suppressed.

Let's look more closely at the belief that one has to "blank the mind of all thoughts." One reason for this myth is the way in which translators use the word "mindfulness." This issue is similar to the one discussed earlier, that is, why *samādhi* should not always be translated as "concentration."

There are two main types of mindfulness and it is very important to know the difference: one is a "small/narrow" mindfulness and the other is a "big/broad" mindfulness.

In the Pali language there is the word *sati*, which is used both as a single word and in the compound *sati-sampajañña*, and although both are often translated as "mindfulness," this is not totally accurate as they have different meanings. In my understanding, "mindfulness," as *sati*, is just basic moment-to-moment awareness, knowing what you are doing in the moment. Yet, *sati-sampajañña* is broader than *sati* and better translated as "clear comprehension" or "wisdom in action."

Here is an example of the difference between *sati* and *sati-sampajañña*: Suppose I want to practise *sati* and I am sitting and moving my arm up and around, just feeling my muscles. I mindfully move my arm up and mindfully move my arm over to the right, all the way over, just feeling the muscles in the whole arm, just practising *sati* in the moment. Now, if somebody is sitting next to me on the right and I hit him or her in the face, then this is a "small/narrow mindfulness," not *sati-sampajañña*.

So, if I am sitting next to someone and wish to practise *sati* in a wise way, *sati-sampajañña* has to be there also. Thus I recognise, "Oh, someone is sitting next to me on my right, so okay, I am going to practise *sati* by moving my arm to the left." This is an example where our mindfulness is broader, understanding cause and effect. This is what I mean by "big/broad" mindfulness.

Another example of using narrow mindfulness is doing walking meditation in a retreat as compared to broad mindfulness walking along a busy roadside. In a retreat we can narrow down our mindfulness to only being aware of our footsteps, disregarding or simply noting distractions of sights, sounds, etc., and returning to just the footsteps. We need not even care what a particular sound actually is. But while walking along a roadside, we certainly do need to know the sounds of barking dogs, roaring motorbikes, or car horns blaring! So mindfulness can be narrow or broad.

It is also important to understand that narrow mindfulness does not guarantee wisdom. This is similar to what was said earlier about concentration. Many meditators who are very good at narrow mindfulness are also very good at suppressing thoughts. Even the technique of mental noting that can help us greatly to understand or let go of thoughts is often used to "shoot down thoughts" or simply "keep them at bay."

Unfortunately, many of the meditators who practise in this way, just suppressing thoughts, believe they are doing mindfulness meditation and think they are following the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta's teaching.

### ***Wise reflection in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta***

Let's now examine the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10) and see how, in this very important sutta, the Buddha teaches us to think wisely and use both narrow and broad mindfulness.

First, it is clear that the Buddha is teaching narrow mindfulness and this is certainly what most, if not all, mindfulness meditators incorporate into their practice. But why isn't every one of these meditators also practising broad mindfulness by using wise reflections both formally and informally, as also taught in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta? Consider this reflection from the sutta, which the Buddha wants us to use whenever we see a dead body:

"This body, too, is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate."

This sentence is repeated not just once, but nine times in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. Nine times the Buddha describes dead bodies and nine times he teaches us to reflect—to think wisely—when seeing a dead body. This brings more to our awareness than simply seeing a sight with colour and form, but actually deepens our understanding of the significance of the sight and how it connects to us. This

reflection helps us to gain deeper insight into the three characteristics of life; *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*, and helps us to let go of our attachment to our body.

The Buddha also teaches us to reflect about the four elements:

“And further, one reflects on this very body, however it be placed or disposed, by way of the material elements...”

About the thirty-two parts of the body, he says:

“And further, one reflects on this very body ... from the soles up, and from the top of the head-hair down, thinking thus, “There are in this body, hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin...”

With reference to the hindrances mentioned in the fourth foundation of mindfulness he says:

“One knows how the arising of the non-arisen sense-desire comes to be; one knows how the abandoning of the arisen sense-desire comes to be; and one knows how the non-arising in the future of the abandoned sense-desire comes to be.”

He speaks similarly regarding the other hindrances, as well as with the fetters, which arise dependent on the sense doors.

We are also taught, in reference to the seven factors of enlightenment:

“One knows how the arising of the non-arisen enlightenment-factor of mindfulness comes to be, and how perfection in the development of the arisen enlightenment-factor of mindfulness comes to be.”

The Buddha speaks similarly regarding the other factors of enlightenment.

How are we to follow these instructions unless we know how to think wisely, and deliberately bring up these discursive reflections in our minds? And why shouldn't we train how to think wisely in meditation? Let's do broad mindfulness training as taught in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta as well as narrow mindfulness. Let's use our moment-to-moment awareness as a springboard for developing wisdom about ourselves and the world, using the objects that our senses focus on for learning about cause and effect, and the nature of the world.

We don't just want to use mindfulness to feel relaxed, “be in the moment,” etc. We want to be mindful of life in order to understand life. In this way, it's always helpful to remember our practice is to centre on the Four Noble Truths.

### ***How can we end dukkha?***

Some meditators are very good at narrow mindfulness and watching things come and go, but fail to see the dukkha involved, and never let go of the causes of the dukkha.

So they may watch anger come and go, come and go. They know it is impermanent and again it comes and goes. And the anger continues to come and go, and often creates problems as well. They know it will pass but they fail to understand that the teachings, especially the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, teach us that we are to understand how anger will not come again in the future, not just watch it come and go. For this, *we need to know how to reflect wisely*.

There are many instructions throughout the suttas teaching us to reflect wisely: to reflect on our past generosity, to reflect on our past morality, to reflect on the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. These five are taught within the ten *anussati*, often referred to as the “recommended daily recollections” subgroup of the forty subjects of meditation (*kammaṭṭhāna*). Notice the translation used for the Pali: “recommended daily recollections.” How many meditators use these as reflections every day?

And what about the very important threesome of *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*? How many meditators sit in meditation and reflect for an entire meditation period about the constant changing nature of existence, impermanence, etc.? How many sit in meditation and reflect for an entire period about the unsatisfactory nature of life, suffering, pain, etc.? How many meditators sit in meditation and reflect

for an entire period about the impersonal nature of the body and thoughts, non-ownership, non-self, etc.? Can you see the benefit of reflecting in this manner? What would be the result of deepening our understanding of ourselves and the world?

Maybe you are one of the many meditators who has never tried these reflections for a whole meditation session because you didn't know that it is all right to think during meditation. It is not only all right to use thought during meditation, but over and over in the suttas the Buddha encourages us to do so. The point that has to be understood is that the thoughts are to be directed towards a Dhamma theme or the Truth. Then the contemplation becomes the investigation into Truth, which is one of the seven factors of enlightenment (*bojjhaṅga*).

### ***It is all right to think in meditation***

Why aren't more teachers teaching these meditation subjects? Why aren't more meditators using them regularly? Because many of them don't yet understand or appreciate the broadness of the wonderful Dhamma. They may not have been taught enough about wise reflection and its benefits. Yet the Buddha teaches us to reflect wisely, not only in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, but also in many other suttas.

Wise reflection helps us integrate the concentration and mindfulness developed during formal meditation into everyday life, and develop right view and right intention. This is especially so of right intention, which is described by the Buddha as thoughts directed towards renunciation, free from ill will and cruelty. This is the basis for developing right speech, right action and right livelihood.

Many meditators are very good at developing mindfulness and concentration while in retreat conditions, yet when they return to their normal life, they have difficulty applying the Dhamma to how they speak, act and work. On many occasions meditators have come to me who have practised ten, fifteen or more years, and have done many, many retreats, but have not found deeper happiness in their life through their meditation practice.

Here is one very sad example. A man, about fifty-five years old, came to our centre, staying about one week in between retreats. He was very experienced, having done six three-month retreats and many shorter ones, practising over ten years. In an interview, I asked him how his mindfulness and concentration was. He replied that in retreat he could get very strong mindfulness and concentration, and he could see the arising and passing away, the impermanence of phenomena very clearly. I asked him how well he could see dukkha. *He did not know what the word meant.*

I was quite surprised, he had done all this practice and yet he did not know what dukkha meant. After all, this is the first of the Four Noble Truths, which all meditators need to know in order to practise correctly, and develop right view about cause and effect on the most basic levels. I then taught him what it meant and how it is important to see not just impermanence, as he claimed he could do, but also to see dukkha. I also explained that it was even more important to be able to understand dukkha, as this is the core understanding of the Four Noble Truths.

Each day he would go for a walk after lunch down the hill, returning before the afternoon meditation period. After one week he said that he had to go for his visa trip and would return for a retreat with us. He asked if he could leave a small bag so he did not have to carry everything on the trip. We allowed it. Six months later, he had not returned, so we decided to open the bag and dispense with whatever was inside. We found illegal drugs. This man, who had done so much meditation, had stashed drugs at a monastery so that he would not be caught with them.

Although this meditator was experienced in doing retreats, he was not experienced in wisdom; he was not experienced in understanding dukkha, the cause of dukkha, the ending of dukkha and the way out of dukkha. *He did not know how to think wisely.* In retreat he could get very strong mindfulness and concentration, but he had not grown in wisdom or compassion, either for himself or others, in the way the Buddha wished us to.

On the other hand, there have been other people, addicted to drugs, who came to our centre and learned the meditation techniques taught here, including wise reflection. They made a commitment not to take drugs during the retreat. Many of them made the resolution after the retreat never to take

drugs again and kept to that resolution. This resolution did not come from the mindfulness practice, but from wise reflection on the suffering, dukkha, of using drugs, not only for themselves, but also for others. They gave it up through compassion to themselves and others. They may not have had strong concentration, but more importantly, they used their practice to develop their wisdom and compassion, changing their lives in a positive way.

Yet, many meditators are not using wise reflection in their formal meditation training because there are many teachers who are actually telling their students not to do it. Some are even proclaiming the myth “thinking is not meditating.” Why? Why are many teachers teaching something which is not true? Because they just don’t understand the broadness of the wonderful Dhamma. They have a limited view of what meditation is within Theravada Buddhism and they have not yet been taught enough about wise reflection.

The Buddha teaches wise reflection throughout the suttas, and, most important—it works. It works to help us end dukkha. And if it is a wonderful tool to help us end dukkha, shouldn’t we use it? Yes, of course we should.

### ***Does experience automatically lead to wisdom?***

The above example clearly demonstrates the futility of another common myth that if you “experience life,” using concentration and mindfulness in the present moment, then wisdom will automatically arise. This wrong view is yet another misunderstanding which encourages many meditators not to use reflective meditation.

Regarding this myth, I’d like to quote the late United States Supreme Court Justice, Earl Warren, “The only thing we learn from history, is that we don’t learn.” Do you understand what he was saying? Here was a man hugely experienced in the difficulties people have in dealing with each other, who was also required to have an intimate knowledge of political, social and legal history, making a considered statement about the problem of learning from experience. Simply put, *humans have an extremely hard time learning from experience.*

Yet, can we increase our ability to learn from experience? Yes, but to do so we have to reflect about our experience. We have to think about it; as to whether it was beneficial or not, examine it, investigate it, understand what actually happened, and then consider whether we would like it to happen again in the future or not. Regarding this the Ambalaṭṭhikā Rāhulovāda Sutta (MN 61) is important. In this sutta the Buddha teaches his own son, Rāhula, at the age of seven. He encourages Rāhula to think wisely about what he had done, what he is doing, and what he will do. As well, he encourages Rāhula to do this not only for every physical activity, but also for every verbal and mental activity.

Regarding any activity, one should reflect:

“Is it leading to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Is it an unskillful activity, with painful consequences, painful results? If, on reflection, you know that it is leading to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both, it is an unskillful activity with painful consequences, painful results, then any activity of that sort is absolutely inappropriate for you to do. But if, on reflection, you know that it is not leading to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it is a skillful activity with happy consequences, happy results, then any activity of that sort is appropriate for you to do.”

The Buddha taught his own son to *think wisely* about all of his activities, whether already done, in the process of being done, or yet to be done.

Another example of how experience by itself does not produce wisdom, but reflecting about experience can, is the following: Friends invite a man to drink with them one Friday night. He gets drunk, goes home and hits his wife. The next day he finds out what he did and regrets the action. He apologises to his wife, but he does not think about it any further. The next Friday night he gets drunk again and hits his wife again. The same cycle repeats itself.

A second man is invited by friends to drink with them one Friday night. He gets drunk, goes home and hits his wife. The next day he finds out what he did and regrets the action. He apologises to his wife. He feels absolutely ashamed of what he did. He thinks about it continuously and wishes he had never done it. It is in his thoughts regularly. His friends ask him to drink with them again. Now, however, not wishing to confuse his mind with intoxicants so that the same suffering arises for himself and his wife again, he refuses.

*Experience itself does not guarantee wisdom. We have to reflect about experience.* These two men had the same experience, one reflected wisely and one did not. Experience by itself doesn't guarantee wisdom, but reflecting about it can.

Remember the quote at the beginning of this booklet? Getting rid of our anxieties and troubles is possible, but a person must know how to reflect wisely in order to do it.

Also, and very importantly, we don't even have to have the experience in order to develop wisdom. That is, if we can reflect wisely beforehand, as the Buddha taught his own son. We don't have to experience the same dukkha as everybody else, just to know the pain of that dukkha. That's where wise reflection helps, so we can avoid having the same dukkha. If we hear a story about someone getting drunk, coming home and hitting his wife, we can say, "Oh my gosh! Getting drunk? Forget it!" Because we understand the dukkha that happened to somebody else, we don't even want to risk clouding our awareness so that we can't make wise choices.

### ***Four types of thoroughbred horses***

The Buddha once likened human beings to four types of thoroughbred horses, in relation to how quickly they can "wake up" to the reality of dukkha and start to purify their minds and hearts (AN 4:113). He said that for the first type of horse, you wave the stick, it only sees the shadow of the stick and it's ready to go. For the second type, you wave the stick, it does nothing, then you touch it lightly with the stick and it's ready to go. For the third type, you wave the stick, it does nothing, you touch it lightly with the stick, it does nothing, then you poke it sharply with the stick and it's ready to go. For the fourth type, you wave the stick, it does nothing, you touch it lightly with the stick, it does nothing, you poke it sharply with the stick, it still does nothing, then you pierce the horse with the stick right through to the bone and only then is it ready to go.

In the same way the Buddha likened humans who have woken up to dukkha. They can be viewed like this: some hear about dukkha in the world and consider, "Oh, it may happen to me!" and they wake up quickly. Others see someone in the world who has some dukkha, "Oh, there it is for real, it could be me!" and they wake up quickly. Still others have a relative or friend with dukkha and they think, "Oh, it is even closer to me!" and they wake up. While the fourth type experiences dukkha themselves, "Oh, here it is!" and they wake up.

Unfortunately though, most human beings are even worse off than the fourth type of horse. You only have to look at the world. So many people have so much dukkha, yet they won't wake up. You want to help them, but generally you can't, and sure enough they have more dukkha tomorrow, and more dukkha next week. They get hit by dukkha again and again and again, yet still never wake up.

I would rather be one of the thoroughbred horses. Wouldn't you also?

Wise reflection can help us to avoid dukkha in the future. Why do so many suttas, including the Mahācattārisaka Sutta and Sabbāsava Sutta, have a statement by the Buddha or an enlightened disciple prior to beginning the teaching similar to this, "Listen and heed well to what I shall say?"

What does "heed well" mean? Reflect and follow this advice. In other words, they could have easily said, "If you wish to avoid dukkha, you must listen carefully to what I say, you must reflect wisely on it and you must follow it accordingly."

### ***Moral shame and moral dread***

When we train our minds to think wisely, it is very helpful to be aware of the "two virtues which protect the world," the *lokapāla dhamma* (It 42). These two virtues are moral shame and moral dread.

In order to use these two virtues to protect “our world,” we must know how to think wisely. And in order to know how to think wisely, we must train our minds to think wisely.

I believe that if a person could perfect moral shame and moral dread, then enlightenment would soon follow. This is quite a claim, especially coming from someone who is not yet enlightened. Why do I believe this so strongly that I would state it? I will leave the answer for now, as I will first explain these two wonderful virtues and how they work.

Moral shame and moral dread are a pair. A wonderful and very important pair. They each have a different job and are responsible for two different things. Yet they work together protecting the world—our world.

Moral shame’s job is to look into our past. It just looks at everything and is objective about it. Looking into the past, it thinks, “Okay, what did I do that wasn’t so wise? What was not skilful? What was basically wrong?” It does this objectively, like a scientist, not in order to come back later and beat us over the head with guilt, fear and all of that, but simply to look objectively into our past and consider, “What did I do wrong?”

Moral shame is like a computer database. It looks back and says, “When I was twelve I did this, when I was fourteen I did that,” and so on. It records everything that we did that was not wise.

Now, if that’s all we use moral shame for, we’ve got a nice file tucked away in a folder and that’s it. Yet, moral shame has more to do; it turns to moral dread and says, “Here, moral dread, here’s your stuff. Study it. Learn from it and don’t let it happen again.” Moral dread is a type of wise fear, linked with compassion for ourselves and others, that ignites *right effort*, in this case the effort to prevent, the first of the “four great efforts,” to prevent the same dukkha from arising for ourselves and others again. Through compassion for the person we will become, we make a determination to be more aware of our actions, speech and thoughts to avoid similar dukkha. This is moral dread’s job, to bring up the wise fear that says, “I don’t want to cause dukkha again.”

However, moral dread can’t stop us from doing anything again in the future unless it knows what was done in the past, that’s why moral shame hands over the file to moral dread. Moral dread has to study it. It’s got to really study it; it’s got to learn, “What did I do which led to problems? What did I do which was unskilful?” Moral dread must think about, reflect about all that moral shame has recorded. It has to understand everything it can about moral shame’s database.

Then moral dread starts watching out, because we have compassion for ourselves and for others. We don’t want to create the same dukkha again. That’s moral dread’s job: “Don’t do it again.” This is how the two work together. Do you see what these two virtues can do for each one of us? They can help us understand how not to do a similar unbeneficial action in the future. Do you see how this would certainly take a person toward enlightenment, the ending of all dukkha? This is not hard to understand because every defilement would be uprooted. This is why I believe, “If a person could perfect moral shame and moral dread, then enlightenment would soon follow.”

So what do the “two virtues which protect the world” have to do with wise reflection? We must be able to think wisely in order for moral shame and moral dread to do their work efficiently. We must train our minds to focus directly on our dukkha: “Does dukkha exist or not? Where does the dukkha come from? How can the dukkha go away?” And most important, “How does similar dukkha not come again in the future?” In order to apply the Four Noble Truths to our practice and our life, we must know how to think wisely.

Along with the “two virtues which protect the world,” I would like to mention a few more groupings in which the Buddha emphasised wise reflection, *yoniso manasikāra*. One is the “two causes for the arising of wisdom,” the *sammāditṭhi-paccaya* (MN 43). The first of these is wise reflection and the second is hearing teachings or advice from a wise spiritual friend, *kalyāṇamitta*.

Wise reflection is also listed among the four “virtues conducive to growth,” the *vuḍḍhi dhamma* (AN 4:246). These four are 1) association with a wise friend (*kalyāṇamitta*); 2) listening to good teaching; 3) wise reflection; and 4) practise in accordance with good teaching. These appear to be exactly the same as another grouping, the “factors for attaining stream-entry,” *sotāpattiyaṅga* (SN 55:5).

A cause for the arising of wisdom, a virtue conducive to growth, a factor for attaining stream-entry, these are just three of the groupings in which the Buddha included wise reflection. Is it worth practising? Is it worth developing? Is it worth perfecting?

My answer to all of these three questions is “yes.” But let’s now consider the way in which many other meditators would answer, and I’ll do this in reverse: Is it worth perfecting? Many would answer, “Yes.” Is it worth developing? Many would answer, “Yes.” Is it worth practising? Many would answer, “But thinking is not really meditating...”

It’s time for all those meditators to take the “but” out of their practice; it’s time to blow away those incorrect myths; and it’s time to practise more fully as the Buddha is recorded to have taught us.

### *Yoniso manasikāra—wise reflection*

Now, let’s return to the dictionary definition of meditation as given at the beginning of this essay: “The emptying of the mind of thoughts, or concentration of the mind on just one thing.”

It is clear from everything written here that our meditation training to develop wisdom and to end dukkha includes much more than this. It is also clear that concentration, by itself, does not guarantee the development of wisdom.

So let us now consider two other dictionary definitions of meditation:

1. The act of thinking about something deeply and carefully
2. An extended and serious study of a particular topic

Can you see how these two definitions appear very similar to the one of wise reflection, *yoniso manasikāra*?

In the suttas the Buddha teaches *citta-bhāvanā*. *Citta* generally means “mind-heart” and *bhāvanā* means “development.” So *citta-bhāvanā* is normally translated as “mental development.” In our retreats my wife, Rosemary, and I emphasise mental development, trying to develop beneficial mental qualities and to lessen unbeneficial mental qualities. All of the meditation methods taught in our retreats are concerned with mental development. And as we use the words, “meditation” and “mental development,” they mean basically the same thing.

For many years we have been trying to help our students see the broad, practical nature of Theravada Buddhism, to see that it is a training for every moment of the day; and to understand that a significant part of these wonderful teachings include formally training our minds to think wisely in order to end our mental dukkha and find deeper peace within.

In the balanced practice that we teach, concentration and mindfulness are important tools to develop and use. The point is, though, that we must know how to use them wisely and this is where wise reflection helps greatly. With wise reflection we can develop a balanced practice with right view, which will guide the other factors of the noble eightfold path, and bring us to deeper wisdom and peace. “Right view comes first.”

As the Buddha has taught:

“With regard to internal factors, I do not perceive any other single factor as helpful as wise reflection in doing so much benefit for one in training, who has not attained the heart’s goal but remains intent on the unsurpassed safety from bondage. One who reflects wisely abandons what is unskillful and develops what is skillful.” (It 16)

I sincerely hope that this essay has helped you to understand more fully how important it is to train your mind to think wisely, with wise reflection, *yoniso manasikāra*.

## Part 2

### *Wise Reflection Meditations*

For those who wish to put some of these ideas into practice, the following list includes many of the wise reflection meditations we teach, along with brief notes about them. When practising wise reflection meditation, we use our thoughts to develop our understanding of the nature of the world and ourselves, and to cultivate beneficial states of mind. We try to keep our minds centred on the topic being examined and not wander to new subjects, getting lost in other thoughts. It's very normal for the mind to wander off, here and there, so we must make a concerted effort to stay on the topic.

For some, using visualisation of situations and people can be very helpful. For others, using reflection and analytical thinking helps them develop the appropriate states of mind and understanding. Nearly all of the systematic methods we teach have been designed for the purpose of developing wisdom. This is not a complete listing, but it will certainly give you plenty to work with:

#### *Eating and our relationship to food*

This is based on traditional advice from the Buddha. To reflect wisely in the following ways prior to eating our food helps greatly to avoid the excessive reactions to pleasant and unpleasant tastes:

- Why do we eat?
  - How fortunate we are to have sufficient food.
  - The dukkha involved in producing the food and how it came to us.
- By reflecting in these ways, we come to deeper understandings that include:

- The basic reason why we eat is to keep our body alive and healthy, to alleviate discomfort and to enable us to continue on with our inner development.
- The appreciation that we have so much food at a time when many people around the world are starving. We can use this reflection to help us to be more content with whatever food we have, whether pleasant or unpleasant, knowing how very fortunate we are.
- That many beings suffer just for us to have our food. Even whether or not we are a vegetarian, numerous beings die so we may eat. When the fields are ploughed for planting rice or vegetables, many, many animals and insects are killed. The growing and producing of nearly all foods causes the deaths of other beings.
- As well, to reflect upon the hardships of the farmers, transport people, store owners and all of the people who have helped get our food to us, all the way to the people who are cooking and preparing the food for us. In this way we can see how interrelated we are with the rest of the world.

#### *Compassion and loving kindness*

This approach to compassion and loving kindness differs from the more usual *metta-bhāvanā* meditation in that it is intended to develop wisdom. These meditations are therefore closer to vipassanā type practices rather than *samatha* or concentration. With these meditations, we start by focusing our attention on a particular subject, whether ourselves, another person, an animal or any other living being, and reflect on the difficulties that the subject is, or might be, experiencing, allowing our compassion to arise for them. We then wish them compassion and loving kindness, a combined expression of a sincere hope that the person, persons, or beings will be free from their difficulties and find inner peace and happiness.

There are several different systems that can be used to guide this reflection, for example:

- Start with yourself, then reflect about someone you like, someone who is neutral to you and someone you don't like.
- Start with yourself, then with your closest family and relatives: husband, wife, children, parents, brothers, sisters, expanding to the rest of your relatives, friends, teachers and, depending on how much time you have, you could continue expanding to other people and creatures. Upon finishing, it can be helpful to come back to yourself.

- Start with yourself, then the person who is spatially closest to you (next to you or in the next room), then expand to all the people in your building or on your street. Expanding again to all in your town, all in your country and so on. Again, when finishing, it can be helpful to come back to yourself.
  - Use grouping systems such as ages (one year at a time 0–100), people with different occupations (the alphabet helps; airplane pilots, barbers, cooks, etc.), mental problems (anger, boredom, etc.), countries, or any other way of grouping people. This gives the mind a “map” to follow for what subjects to think of, making it less likely that the mind wanders off, thinking, “Oh, whom should I do next?”
- There are also some special systems for doing compassion and loving kindness meditation, designed to help with particular situations.

### ***D/D (defusing and diffusing)***

D/D is a play on two English words, defusing and diffusing. With this technique we are going to defuse the “bomb” we create within ourselves by negatively attaching to experience and diffuse or universalize our compassion and loving kindness. This technique is extremely useful for letting go of self-pity and other unbeneficial mental states when experiencing any type of dukkha, whether physical or mental. This method has its roots in the story of Kisā Gotamī and the mustard seed.

This is a systematic way of doing the defusing and diffusing reflection:

- In the first part of the meditation start with yourself; reflect on the dukkha you’re experiencing and wish yourself compassion and loving kindness. Then reflect on someone else, same age and sex with similar dukkha, giving them the compassion and loving kindness wish. Then the same age but opposite sex, then add 10 years and include both sexes, then go down 10 years for both sexes, then up 20, down 20 and continue until you have gone down to little children and up to 100 year olds.
- In the second part of the meditation, use your own age and sex only. Consider many people similar to you, but gradually imagine their dukkha getting more and more intense, until suicide and/or murder are the end result.

The first part of this meditation shows us that we are not alone with our dukkha. Many people of all different ages experience the same types of dukkha. This helps us to know that it is not just “me, me, me, I am the only one who has this dukkha!”

The second part of this compassion and loving kindness meditation shows us that our dukkha is not so big, if we compare it to the more extreme dukkha of others. This helps us greatly to let go of our self-pity about our dukkha.

### ***Waking up in the morning***

This method is a helpful way to begin the day, as it not only helps us to develop compassion but also motivates us to think of how fortunate we are, for which we give further advice in the next section. This helps to expand our concern from simply ourselves and those we know, to feel more connected with people we do not know and the universality of dukkha.

Upon waking, reflect deeply on a situation in the world where heavy dukkha is occurring. Imagine yourself vividly in such a situation in order to empathise with those involved and wish them all compassion and loving kindness.

Two suggested phrases to use, when wishing compassion and loving kindness, are:

- “May \_\_\_ be able to learn, practise and develop methods, techniques and tools of mental development, so that \_\_\_ can cope with, understand, accept and overcome the difficulties and challenges of life. May \_\_\_ find peace of mind.”
- “May \_\_\_ be able to let go of anger, fear, worry and ignorance. May \_\_\_ also have patience, courage, wisdom and determination to meet and overcome difficulties and problems, challenges of life. May \_\_\_ find peace of mind.”

## *How fortunate we are*

Simply reflect on all the different ways that you are fortunate, materially and mentally. Watch out for the word “but”—it is not part of this reflection. This reflection is also very good when waking up each morning.

It can be especially helpful to consider the odds of being born human compared to being born another being on this planet. Then consider how many have the chance to read or listen to the Dhamma. Then consider how many have the chance to actually practise the Dhamma. How very, very fortunate we are.

To truly understand how fortunate we are is extremely helpful, in particular, with letting go of self-pity. This then allows more joy, contentment and energy to arise.

Self-pity is a major hindrance for so many meditators. One main reason is because they are not looking at themselves objectively and truthfully. But in this practice we try to be objective with our view of life. We try to see life truly for what it actually is. Thus reflecting on how fortunate we are is a very simple and effective technique to find more inner peace.

## *Generosity*

To reflect on our good generosity is included in the ten “recommended daily recollections,” the *anussati*. It is similar to reflecting on “how fortunate we are.” Reflect on all of your past generous actions—the times when you used your time, talents, understanding or material resources so others could benefit. Again, this helps us to see ourselves more objectively. Specifically, this helps us to feel positive about ourselves, which aids in overcoming doubt.

One special note here; if you don’t feel you’ve done enough generous actions to feel positive about yourself—then do more!

## *Dukkha*

One way to reflect on dukkha is to think of every single type of dukkha that you can imagine. There are systems that help with this, such as these:

- The alphabet with occupations: What types of dukkha can artists experience? Bankers, carpenters, doctors, etc.?
- Body parts: What kinds of dukkha can occur in the toes, feet, legs, hips, etc.? Internally also, e.g., cancer, diarrhoea, etc.
- Ages: from 0 to 100: What kinds of dukkha can happen to babies, one year olds, two, etc.?
- The alphabet with mental dukkha: aversion, bigotry, craving, etc.

It’s also very important to reflect that dukkha is natural and will occur countless times throughout our lives. This is basically due to the fact that everything in and around us is impermanent. All things, including our bodies and our thoughts, have their arising, existing and eventual passing away. This is simply a truth of our existence. Since everything that we know is impermanent, different types of dukkha will arise.

We must take this understanding deep within ourselves, because many people become upset, irritated, angry or agitated when they encounter different types of dukkha, which only causes more and more dukkha. Thus by reflecting that dukkha is natural—that it comes to everyone, to any part of the body, to all age groups and so on—will help us have less resistance to life’s difficulties and find more inner peace despite outward conditions.

## *Impermanence*

Contemplate how everything you know is constantly in a state of change—the mind, the body and the world. Using methods similar to the dukkha reflection above can be very helpful. To reflect on impermanence is especially beneficial when experiencing unpleasant situations. It also helps guard us from getting too attached to pleasant situations.

## ***Death***

In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta the Buddha encourages us to reflect in the following way whenever we see a body in any stage of decomposition:

“This body, too, is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate.”

We could also reflect similarly to the dukkha reflection above. Using systems such as ages, occupations or the parts of the body, consider every different way in which people could die.

Specifically, it's important to do this for ourselves, reflect on every possible way we could die right now. So often we believe that tonight will come, tomorrow will come, next week, next year, the future will always come. However, there is only one certain thing that will come, for each and every one of us. That is death. And it may come tonight, tomorrow, next week, next year. We don't know when, yet it is definitely coming. Awareness of death is one of the most important areas of practice lacking in many experienced meditators.

Meditators who use death reflection regularly can often be easily identified by their speech. How many people will say, “See you later?” Whereas, those who regularly reflect on death will say, simply, “Goodbye” or “Hope to see you later.” Whenever you think of the future, ask yourself, “What is the only certain thing which will happen to us all?” Death reflection can help us to let go of future desires, worries and fears.

## ***Actions and their results***

This is an important subject, which includes kamma and dependent origination. One way of reflecting can be what we call “inward and outward.”

Inward is where we look into our past and consider an experience and the results of it. If it was a beneficial action with beneficial results, then we try to remember it so we can repeat it in the future, should a similar experience arise. If it was an unbeneficial action with unbeneficial results, then we try to understand how we could have done it better. We could also consider what others would have done in a similar event. Thinking about what people whom we respect would have done can be especially beneficial.

Outward is where we look at others and experiences that have happened, whether read about or seen. Then we contemplate how the actions were beneficial or unbeneficial as above, and we consider what we would do in a similar situation. By reflecting in these ways, we can develop more understanding of how to react with more wisdom in the future.

## ***Balancing compassion and equanimity***

This reflection is part of the previous one. However, in this case we reflect on situations in which a balance of compassion and equanimity was needed. We try to think of times when it was in balance and times when it was not, and reflect how to increase this balance or how to correct the imbalance.

Again, this can be inward and outward. An outward example of balanced compassion and equanimity is Mother Theresa's life story. When she went to India she was filled with compassion, keeping it balanced with equanimity. She did not allow her compassion to turn into grief nor into anger. An example of completely unbalanced compassion and equanimity is the Oklahoma (USA) bombing of a government building some years ago. Apparently, the men who did the bombing had some sort of “compassion” for the USA and wanted to “wake up” the American people. However, their compassion went off into extreme aversion and many people died as a result.

## ***The five daily recollections***

This is traditional wise advice from the Buddha to reflect on. It is a very simple practice, often used as a chant, but we must do it over and over to drive this wisdom deep inside.

- I am of the nature to decay; I have not gone beyond decay.
- I am of the nature to be diseased; I have not gone beyond disease.

- I am of the nature to die; I have not gone beyond death.
- All that is mine, dear and delightful, will change and vanish.
- I am the owner of my kamma, heir to my kamma, born of my kamma, related to my kamma, abide supported by my kamma. Whatever kamma I shall do, whether wholesome or unwholesome, of that I will be the heir.

### ***The Four Noble Truths***

Take an example of a difficult experience you have had and examine it in light of these four truths:

- What was the dukkha?
- What type of desire did I have which created this dukkha?
- Did the dukkha go away when I let go of my desire?
- What methods did I use to let go of the dukkha?

### ***The eight worldly dhammas***

The eight worldly dhammas—praise and blame, fame and obscurity, gain and loss, pleasure and pain—are essential to understand. Yet they are not being taught enough and/or are being inaccurately taught; especially the pair fame and obscurity. We stress the understanding of these eight as an invaluable way to see just what we get attached to and where we create dukkha. One way to meditate on them is by way of the following reflections, adjusting the wording for each pair:

- Considering praise and blame. In what ways do you get stuck, involved, attached to and concerned with wanting praise?
- In what ways do you get stuck, involved, attached to and concerned with not wanting blame?
- Can you remember any times in your life when you received praise and you thought it was very important at the time, making you very happy, yet now you can see it really did not matter?
- Can you remember any times in your life when you received blame and you thought it was very important at the time, making you very sad, yet now you can see it really did not matter?
- Are there any times in your life when you actually do not want praise, times when you would rather have blame, when you would rather people did not think well of you?
- Please reflect on how by attaching to praise and blame, in wanting one and not wanting the other, this can often block you from understanding reality and can give you more dukkha.

### ***The ten perfections***

It is said that five hundred lifetimes before our Buddha became enlightened, he made the Bodhisattva vow to become a Buddha, and then meditated on the ten perfections, *pāramīs*, so he could fully understand what his “work” was: generosity, morality, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience, truthfulness, determination, compassion, loving kindness and equanimity. For the Buddha, they had to become perfect. For us, we have to develop them more and more, so it is important to understand them and learn how to increase them.

To understand the ten *pāramīs* more, we teach one meditation in which we reflect on the ten in pairs, trying to see how they work together, which ones support the others, which ones comes first, etc.

To help develop them, we teach another meditation with five questions to ask oneself about each *pāramī*:

- Since starting my meditation/mental development practice, have I grown in \_\_\_?
- How much have I grown in \_\_\_?
- Reflecting upon my ..., how do I feel about my development of \_\_\_?
- Is there more I can grow in \_\_\_?
- What can I do in my life to help my level of \_\_\_ to grow?

## *Conclusion*

I sincerely hope that you will experiment with these techniques, see their value, and practise them regularly; they will help you find more inner peace and happiness.

---

## *About the Author*

Steve Weissman has been a Buddhist meditation teacher along with his wife, Rosemary, at Wat Kow Tahm International Meditation Centre in Thailand since 1988. Other books by him and his wife are *Meditation, Compassion & Loving kindness* (U.S.A., 1996) and *...with Compassionate Understanding: A Meditation Retreat* (U.S.A., 1999). Some of his work has also been translated into German, French and Chinese.

To contact Steve, or for more information about retreats at Wat Kow Tahm, please visit [www.watkowtahm.org](http://www.watkowtahm.org).

# The Buddhist Publication Society

The BPS is an approved charity dedicated to making known the Teaching of the Buddha, which has a vital message for all people.

Founded in 1958, the BPS has published a wide variety of books and booklets covering a great range of topics. Its publications include accurate annotated translations of the Buddha's discourses, standard reference works, as well as original contemporary expositions of Buddhist thought and practice. These works present Buddhism as it truly is—a dynamic force which has influenced receptive minds for the past 2500 years and is still as relevant today as it was when it first arose.

For more information about the BPS and our publications, please visit our website, or contact:

The Administrative Secretary  
Buddhist Publication Society  
P.O. Box 61  
54 Sangharaja Mawatha  
Kandy, Sri Lanka  
E-mail: [bps@bps.lk](mailto:bps@bps.lk)  
Web site: <http://www.bps.lk>  
Tel: 0094 81 223 7283  
Fax: 0094 81 222 3679