

The Buddha's Toolbox

The inner workings
of Vipassana meditation techniques

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How to make this life a good and satisfying one, beneficial to ourselves and others...
– ***Gautama Buddha***

Foreword

Understanding how we think, and feel, and see the world is essential for truly understanding anything and everything else. Meditation is work towards these ends.

Although the subject of this book is meditation, it is for anyone interested in human nature and life as we know it – which I hope is everyone.

That said... Nothing in this book is necessary for learning, practicing and experiencing the benefits of meditation. What you can gain from this book is an intellectual understanding that is confined to imagination. Just as we cannot fully understand what it is to eat a gooseberry, persimmon or canepa by looking at pictures, studying nutritional information or reading about other people's experiences, we cannot truly understand meditation by reading about it. To truly understand requires that we experience it directly for ourselves.

The techniques of Vipassana meditation are extremely simple. However, some of the ideas behind the techniques are quite heavy and mind-bending. But again, nothing in this book is necessary to meditate!

I have tried to balance the heaviness of ideas with simple analogies. Please work with the material and stretch the mind. But, if you lose interest in this book, please don't lose interest in experiencing for yourself the benefits of meditation; please, track down a course.

Most people carry the idea that meditation is important, that it is good for us. People promote a variety of techniques and practices that can range from 3-minute meditations for the busy person to lifelong hermitages. Each practice has its own benefits. But, the emphasis of *The Buddha's Toolbox* is to lay out the structure of the human mind so that we can see the wisdom of the practice promoted by Gautama Buddha – how a handful of simple tools dovetail perfectly with the structure of the human mind to foster self-awareness, calm the mind and bring peace to the world.

The Buddha is known for the qualities that came from his meditation practice. But, what was the Buddha actually doing while he was sitting there with eyes closed and legs crossed?

Although I had read books, attended talks, listened to friends and spent 6 months visiting various Buddhist monasteries, it seems strange that I never came across what was at the core of his practice; until 4 years ago, I assumed that he just sat there long enough, with enough determination until his mind went blank, the Zen switch got flipped and bingo – no mind, no thought, no sensation, infinite love, infinite compassion.

It turns out he wasn't just sitting there steeped in deep concentration, or chanting or praying. He was working with scientific diligence and deep desire to be of help; he was working to put aside beliefs and dogma to investigate **through his own direct experience** the nature of the human mind and the human condition. In the process he rediscovered the tools and techniques that (in a translation of his own words) are “the only way for the purification of all beings, for overcoming sorrow, for extinguishing suffering, for walking on the path of truth and for realizing liberation.”

The tools are a handful of simple mental exercises that bring awareness onto the body and the breath; strengthen concentration; heighten our sensitivity by focusing on more and more subtle sensations within the body; and develop a calmness of mind.

This is more than just trying to relax and de-stress a little. He is offering the tools to rid the mind **at its deepest level** of all the conditioning (impurities) that are the cause of all stress, all misunderstanding and all harm. What could be more important than this?

Although based in logic, research and direct observation of the turmoil of my own mind, *The Buddha's Toolbox* is a love letter to the world. An invitation to embrace your opportunity to experience for yourself what the Buddha discovered – awareness that transcends the *self* and opens to tranquility and infinite compassion.

Although you will have to do your own work, you will not have to rediscover the tools and techniques; they have been passed down through the generations.

These are simple exercises that everyone can do. There is one catch – in order for these tools to work, a person must want to be good. This doesn't mean that you have to be good, just that you are ready to work to be better. This means: putting to use the virtues that you already have; being ready to develop new ones; while working to do less harm to yourself and to others.

During the first few days of a retreat you set to work sharpening your attention. The next six days you will learn how to put your finely honed awareness to use – noticing sensations within the framework of the body while developing “equanimity” (developing a calm and balanced mind that is less and less reactive, less and less judgmental).

This is the essence of the work: developing one’s *sensitivity to subtle sensations* while developing one’s capacity for *equanimity*. The sensations to be noticed are nothing spectacular, nothing out of the ordinary; quite to the contrary, they are very ordinary. For example: Sensations of heat or cold. Pressure or ticklish sensation. Tingling, pulsing or vibration. Dryness, moisture, prickling, or pain, or... It doesn’t matter if the sensation is pleasant or unpleasant; any sensation that is observed with equanimity brings us in contact with a deeper reality and begins a process for “[purifying the mind], for overcoming sorrow, for extinguishing suffering, for walking on the path of truth and for realizing liberation.” Yes, these are the tools for enlightenment.

Please know that although the techniques are simple, **it would be extremely difficult to learn them on your own or from a book**. However, over 90 percent of the participants in the courses that I have attended have been successful in completing the course and have begun to benefit from the wisdom of this practice.

I am sure there are other qualified courses, but I am only familiar with the courses taught by S.N. Goenka as they are offered by www.Dhamma.org. The organization runs entirely through donation and is very careful to avoid any introduction of dogma into the classes and their centers.

May all be happy.

Introduction

Much of the Buddha's current fame stems from the numerous religions that formed after his death and the trans-cultural prevalence of statues of him sitting with legs crossed. For the past 2,500 years people have passed down a respect and devotion for the man, his accomplishments and his teachings. The teachings include the importance of working on your virtues and the value of increased awareness. He also taught that each one of us is responsible for our own work and that we can all come out of our misery – we can all become enlightened.

It is a testament to human stubbornness that although we passed down the importance of developing virtue (being kinder both to ourselves and to others) and deepening our awareness, we all but stopped sharing what could be easily seen as the most important discovery of all time – **the actual tools required to do the work; what to do** in order to deepen awareness and break free of our ignorance, small mindedness and our reactive, compulsive and less-than-gracious natures.

Fortunately for us, a small group of people in Myanmar/Burma did pass the wisdom down through the generations. It turns out that the Buddha practiced 4 simple mental exercises – the same 4 simple mental exercises that you and I can do to change our lives.

Although we might not attain enlightenment in this lifetime, the same tools generate: Calmness of mind, tranquility, increased concentration, greater sensitivity, greater awareness, greater energy, a curtailment of habitual and compulsive behaviors and a weakening of judgments. They guide us to the source of addiction and create deep, lasting change. They can also provide a sense of meaning and purpose. Other benefits are: Freedom from the smallness and nastiness of our thoughts; a mastery of the mind; Joy; deep connection to life; kindness that is unconditional; and the comfort of knowing that you will always have the tools you need to get back on track to work toward these ends.

The human mind has a very specific structure that allows us to use a handful of simple techniques to impair and eventually dismantle the mental processes that divorce us from Reality and the essential nature of the universe.

Once the Buddha understood the power of these tools, he patiently and persistently put them to use until all that fuels self-deception and our

imaginary sense of reality was exhausted. When this process of liberation had concluded within him, the Buddha spent the rest of his life teaching these techniques and supporting the process in anyone who was willing.

The tools of Vipassana Meditation develop kindness, strengthen concentration, exercise our capacity for non-judgment, and increase our awareness of the sensations in and on our body. That's it. What results from this work is governed by natural, universal laws.

Again, these are *very simple exercises that everyone can do*. A person doesn't have to become a monk or give up a "normal" life. And, it doesn't take years to begin to benefit; the benefits are immediate. Three things are needed to initiate the process. 1) A desire to be good. 2) An understanding and practice of the technique. And 3) The occasional support of like-minded individuals. (Each person is always fully responsible for his own work, but we will see later why support is so important.)

I am no official expert in Vipassana; I have no special training or certification. Since I was fourteen, I have worked, studied, exercised, played, and struggled in pursuit of truth, my potential and an understanding of human nature. These efforts could just as easily be seen as: working through illness and ailments; and trying to understand social awkwardness, self-berating thoughts and compulsive behavior. I began meditating at age 15 and discovered yoga at age 24. I intermittently pursued counseling.

But it wasn't until I discovered Vipassana in 2012, at the age of 52, that I finally found a tool that puts an end to struggle. This doesn't mean that life is now always peachy and full of bliss. But, I am no longer at a loss of what to do. Yes, I can still fight and wallow and make myself miserable. But it doesn't have to be this way; at any moment, I can direct attention inward, find the breath and observe sensation. Do I immediately enter a state of calm? Probably not, but it is an enormous shift of consciousness; at this moment, I am no longer totally caught up in my thoughts and lost in the apparent reality of my life. And, (as explored in this book), I have reentered a process of self-awareness, greater understanding and liberation.

The Buddha's Toolbox describes the structure of our minds so that we can see how the tools of Vipassana meditation work to free us from the emotional tumult of our stories, curtail habitual and compulsive behavior and open experience to profound calm, clarity and kindness.

This is not a “how to” manual. For those new to Vipassana, I hope this book motivates you to sign up for a beginner’s course. Each person has to sharpen her own set of tools. This takes time. But, in 10 days you can experience for yourself what many consider to be the greatest discovery of all time.

For those who already practice the technique, I hope this book will inspire and offer insights that will further your practice.

There are only two mistakes one can make along the road to truth; not going all the way, and not starting. ***– Gautama Buddha***

PART ONE – The Mind

Mind precedes all phenomena; mind matters most; everything is mind-made.
– ***Gautama Buddha***

Chapter 1: Two Realities

We'll start with an overview of the structure of the mind. First, looking at each layer of the mind separately, and then putting them all together to see the big picture. The overview will show us what is needed to break free from the smaller "reality" created by the Imagination and open experience to the greater Reality.

We'll begin with Reality, the essence of the universe. Everything is complete, connected, impermanent – a flow of creation and annihilation, arising and passing. There is no judgment, no need, no desire. There is no longing, loneliness, avoidance or hate. There are neither boundaries nor separation. There is no *self*, no time, no place. This is divine experience in the *here* and *now*. This is experience before it has been filtered by the human mind-imagination. (Please excuse my presumptiveness as I have not experienced existence as such and must rely on other people's accounts.) This experience cannot be described, but those who try call it "both the Void and Everything", "Calm" and "Emptiness."

Experience "is deep, difficult to see, difficult to understand, tranquil, excellent, beyond the reach of mere logic, subtle, and to be realized only by the wise."
– ***Gautama Buddha***

REALITY - UNIVERSAL NATURE

- Unity
 - Infinite Connection
 - Constant Change
 - Love
 - Compassion
 - Calm
 - Calm connection with all
 - Joy in the ephemeral and the ever-changing nature of life
 - Beauty in the cycle of creation/annihilation
 - Ultimate Truth
 - Grace
- (This is experience unfiltered by the human mind-imagination.)

We cannot imagine this experience because the very first act of the mind-imagination is to filter out the enormity, the complexity and the simplicity of this experience.

Think of the mind as a map-maker. If the sandbars in a bay are changing so fast that moments later the map is useless, what is the point of mapping them at all? The sailor must resort to direct observation with moment to moment sounding of the ocean floor.

In a universe of constant change and infinite connection, there is no need for a map-maker or a point of view. *But the mind is only a maker of maps and models.*

The mind has limited capacity; it has limited processing power; the mind is at a loss in a sea of infinite interconnection and infinite change. But, the mind has a gift, the filter of **perception** whose first task is to squelch the enormity of *infinite connection* and *constant change*.

Perception quells change by creating a sense of *stability, same-ness, and permanence*; none of which are qualities of Reality. The physical world created in the Imagination is full of surfaces, edges, intrinsic colors and unchanging shapes. Things in this world still move, but it is nothing compared to the infinite change of universal form.

In universal form, not only is everything constantly moving, everything is also infinitely interconnected – nothing moves without moving/influencing everything else. The mind denies this complexity by using the boundaries created by perception to create objects – each appearing to have an existence of its own, separate and distinct from every other object on display. Divorced from their essential form and infinite interconnection these objects can be moved about independent of one another.

Once *stability* and *separateness* has been established, the mind can set to work arranging its objects into maps and models of the world. Some of these models represent “reality” while other models are expressions of creativity. What we experience as “the real world” is one of these models; we live inside a model of the Imagination.

MODELS of IMAGINATION

- Both: our Models of “reality”; and our Models of imagination and creativity.
- Permanence, stability, same-ness, solidity, objects that are separate and independent of one another.
- One of these models is what we perceive to be “the real world”.

We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts, we make the world.
– Gautama Buddha

Chapter 2: The Dollhouse – A Model of Thought & Imagination

The greatest trick of the human mind is to create a sense of *reality* – to make it seem as if *we experience our inner and outer worlds directly, unfiltered, as they actually are*. But, this is not true.

I find it helpful to consider Thought to be a *Dollhouse of the Imagination*. Every time we visit a new place, our minds make a scene in the Imagination that depicts our surroundings – we make a new doll for each new person we meet and a new toy for each new thing that we notice. (We can make dolls and toys that are entirely make-believe, but most of the time the dolls and toys in our Imagination match real people and real things.)

This scene of “the present moment”, or “reality”, is constantly updated by adding, moving and removing toys and dolls as needed in order to keep track of relevant changes in the world. This happens automatically and doesn’t seem like thinking or imagination – it seems like we are just passively “taking in the world”.

The principal model of the Imagination represents *the present moment*. But the Imagination also uses these dolls and toys to construct scenes that represent *the real past* and scenes that represent *the real future*. (It is through the mind’s ability to create a sense of sameness, permanence and stability that we have a sense of *the real future*; we carry assumptions and expectations that much of today’s world will carry over to tomorrow).

The human mind is powerful, but not powerful enough to keep up with every change in the actual world. It can however: ignore, edit, diminish and/or delete incoming experience to create what we perceive to be the physical world, as well as organize a cascade of sensations and emotional responses that imbues what is psychologically most important to us fast enough to create what seems to be a “*living*” experience of the “*present moment*”. This is no small feat – it is the entirety of our experience of life! It is a huge amount of work that the brain can do in only $4/10^{\text{ths}}$ of a second.

But, that means that what we experience as the “present moment” is always $4/10^{\text{ths}}$ of a second behind what is actually taking place in the world.

In that short time, the brain has taken the incoming stimuli of the senses and processed it according to our previous models of reality to determine color, shape, distance and size as well as recognize objects as “the same”, “familiar”, or “just another one of those”. And if there is something *new*, we immediately name/categorize/classify/label/assess/ compare/judge and pigeonhole it according to notions of prior experience and psychological importance. Through these processes, the *new* is conformed to our notions of the past and prepared as a doll or toy that will fit as easily as possible into the psychological/emotional structure of our world-views.

We don't actually see our surroundings; we see ***our model of toys and dolls*** projected onto the framework of our surroundings!

Our models of reality are not just representations of the *external world*, like people, places, things and events; they also represent our *world of values*, such as ideas, philosophies, or beliefs that are consciously or unconsciously held to be true. And, at the center of most of our models of reality is the “me”-doll. It is just another doll, but it seems special to us because it is used to keep track of our *internal world* (our thoughts and emotions) and our “personal experience”; the “me”-doll embodies our sense of *self* and represents “who I am”.

Chapter 3: Perception

The instruments of our senses are no different than other instruments for perceiving the world: like sonar, radar, telescopes, x-rays, microscopes or infra-red goggles. These instruments take in physical interactions at the sensors and create some sort of display that we can notice.

What we see with our eyes is but one type of sensitivity and one interpretation of the form of the physical world. Instruments of subatomic physics reveal that the form of the universe is patterns of energy with no true boundaries that exist in constant change and infinite connectivity.

There is a state of human vision that some people refer to as “stopping the world”. This is not enlightenment; it is low-level concentration of attention (samadhi) with attention in the external environment. But, it is a visual realization of a magnitude of change, with neither boundaries nor separation.

Visual perception flattens and breaks into a maelstrom of light awareness; all is a flow of electricity-like light energy. Just as there is no defining edge to any eddy in a river’s running, no pattern in this storm has a distinct boundary or determinate size. Nothing lives or moves independently of the whole. There is no color, no surface, only regions of greater and less density of light, with smaller electricity-like currents coursing through and among them. There is still intellectual understanding, for example, a region of change is understood to be an outstretched arm. And, words and sounds are still recognized and understood, they just all emanate from the same place as the inner voice in the center of the skull. The intensity of the experience is great – this is experience of existence as a maelstrom of change and interconnectivity.

There is nothing that is not dependent on something else. Nothing can arise on its own accord, independent. Everything is cause and effect; everything is conditioned and conditioning; everything (and everyone) is a participant in and an agent of creation. This chain of cause and effect continues unbroken if all action (all behavior) is unconscious. [Sadhatissa and Page]

El Tathagta (how the Buddha referred to himself) will perceive clearly in all of such men a clean heart and see the magnitude of their excellent morals. By what means (do such men maintain a clean heart)? Because such men will not fallback to feeding the idea of a self, a personality, a being or a separate individual. They will not fallback to feeding the idea of things

possessing intrinsic qualities, not even that things have an intrinsic predisposition for certain qualities. –Gautama Buddha

Again, the intellect has limited capacity; it has limited processing power; it cannot handle infinite change and infinite interconnection. To squelch the maelstrom of infinite change, the Imagination creates surfaces, often with distinct edges, intrinsic permanent colors and unchanging shape. Things in the world of the Imagination still move, but this change is nothing compared to the maelstrom of universal form.

***Nothing is permanent, stable, immutable. Everything is changing; everything is flow. That, which has beginning, has end; the coming together portends deterioration. Such is the other characteristic of existence that must be understood, not only intellectually, but [empirically, experientially]. Otherwise, impermanence is the source of suffering. But, how to experience [the truth of the changing nature of all existence] directly? Here's how...
– Ramiro Calle***

In universal form, nothing moves without moving and influencing everything else. To negate infinite connection, the intellect uses the surfaces and discrete boundaries it has created to limit and define “objects”. This creates separation – as if each thing (each object) has an existence separate and distinct from every other object in the world. Through this interpretation of universal form, the Imagination creates a display of the world which is manageable, in which each “thing” appears to exist and move independently of each other.

But any sense of *permanence, sameness, stability* or *solidity* is a deceit, a deception organized by perception in order to make a display of the world that the intellect can control. Any sense of *disconnection* and *loneliness* are just as much products and tools of the Imagination as are *size, shape* and *color*.

Chapter 4: The Seed of Our Existence

The mind is a maker of maps and models. A map, model (or blueprint) is a pattern that embeds what is most important in order to instruct, guide, determine or direct behaviors. At the base of the mind is a Conditioning; this conditioning is the very cause of the mind, the seed of our existence and carries our deepest needs and purposes. Working through the dynamics of the mind, our conditioning is the orchestrating force for all our maps and models.

On their own, the mind and its conditioning do not have a physical existence in our universe. The mind and its processes are the dark soil in which the conditioning takes root and grows; the purpose and patterns of the conditioning only come to light when they burgeon forth as a force of creation through Thought (our maps and models of the Imagination). Again...

***We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts.
With our thoughts, we make the world. – Gautama Buddha***

It doesn't matter where we think our conditioning comes from. We can believe we are responding to past personal experience, genetic inheritance, connection to nature's cycles of similarity, assimilated cultural patterns or "family baggage". It can be considered personality or "just who I am", or soul, or archetypes, or the influence of the stars, or karma, or God, or all of the above. Vipassana meditation is not concerned with belief; it is mental exercises that tame and purify the mind so that awareness is freed from the smallness of Imagination and experiences Reality, truth and beauty directly – which is at the heart of every religion.

Our conditioning is the seed of our existence. When this conditioning arises through human form, the purpose and needs of the conditioning must work through the deep patterns of creation and survival that govern all of the animal kingdom – the primal forces of passivity and aggression, fight, flight or freeze, and what to kill and die for. Everything that takes form within the Imagination mandates: what to pursue and hold on to, and what to avoid and eradicate. This is often described as "clinging and craving, aversion and hostility."

This may appear to be a negative outlook on the human condition, but it is dangerous to lose sight of the pettiness of the human mind. All the triumphs and goodness that have come out of human endeavor pale in

comparison to the flood of human atrocities that is just as rampant today as in any other time in history. But this is not cause to be disheartened. A deep change is needed. This is why meditation is so important.

THE MIND

Deepest Patterns of Survival and Creation

Primal Forces/Passivity/Aggression

Fight or Flight or Freeze / What to Kill and Die For

(Always Outside of Awareness and Direct Observation. One can only guess at the dynamics of the Mind through observation of Sensation and displays within the Imagination)

Conditioning – the seed of the mind and the impetus for the formation of the senses and all mental activity

Chapter 5: The Power of Sensations

There is just one more field to look at, the Field of Sensations. Through sensations on and in the body, the mind orchestrates **all** aspects of our lives: how we think, what we feel, and what we say and do. These sensations often go unnoticed, but **we can notice them** depending on one's concentration, focus and sensitivity.

Sensations in this deeper field have *not been processed by perception and are outside of Imagination!* **They are a Field of Reality!** They are in continual flow, constant change, arising and passing. They have not been given any intellectual meaning.

These sensations are the impetus for every thought, emotion and activity within the models of Imagination. But, these sensations are only prodding and prompting to action. **All activity in the Imagination is a reaction to these sensations.** *If we observe the sensations without reacting, nothing happens in the Imagination!* And, as simple as that, in the present moment, we are free from conditioning and unconscious, habitual behavior. Momentary freedom is huge, but calm observation of Sensation without reacting also weakens and eventually clears the mind of the conditioning that generates those behaviors!

Not just every act, but every thought and utterance that is not based in truth and kindness, either deepens (strengthens) our conditioned responses or creates new ones. The only way to weaken our conditioning is through awareness.

Chapter 6: More Perception

Here is how perception works. You are walking through the woods and come across a maelstrom of form known as a <bear>. While searching for recognition/familiarity, the Imagination adds color and size and shape and texture. Oh, this is “one of those”. All this is going on in the processing part of the brain; nothing yet has been sent to the perception part of the brain – you have not yet consciously seen or experienced anything. The brain continues processing to determine the value of this object. And this is where our personal values and conditioning come into play. Depending on our conditioning, the processing brain triggers our physiology to start building sensations and flooding the systems with hormones and neurotransmitters which will prepare us for both mental and physical activity. All this takes about 4/10ths of a second.

The physiology is now primed and the processing brain finally sends the image of the bear to your perception and (unless you were noticing the building of these sensations) you will react to the image according to your conditioning. I might soil my pants and begin running. Another person, a hunter, might drop to one knee and ready her gun. And a child, who loves teddy bears, might cry in delight, “Look Mommy, a bear!”

Depending on your neck of the woods, coming across a bear might be rare, but this is how all perception works. All our emotional responses and all our mental and physical reactions are primed/prepared prior to our visual and/or auditory experience. Sporting events tend to be a more common experience. Here it is easy to watch my own and other spectators’ large reactions to a ball going through the goal – half the people will jump up and shout in delight while the other half goes through the cataleptics of dejection: a dropping of the head with a despondent “arrghh”, or vein popping profanity. There is no intrinsic, inherent value of a ball crossing a line. (Nothing is good or bad; only thinking makes it so.) It is only the value that each person’s mind has attached to the event (which team you are rooting for) that gives it emotional importance.

I especially appreciate my own reactions when at an event for which I have no emotional investment. At first, I am just bored or appreciating good play. But, it can be as difficult to watch a sporting event without taking sides as it is to watch clouds and not see shapes. At some point in the game, I start having stronger reactions and catch myself rooting in favor of one of the teams. This is what the mind does: it limits change, it creates

patterns and shapes, it defines boundaries, it creates objects that are separate from one another, it creates relationships among objects, it attaches value to the objects and their relationships, it determines how it wants you to react in thought, emotions, speech and actions; next, it triggers the physiology which is based in the primal forces of animal nature; and then, *through sensations* it spurs us to make judgments, build a point-of-view and a taking of sides (which need defending), and propels us into action.

The human mind is a war machine. Even at something as non-essential as a football match, fans can lash out with lethal force.

The Big Picture

MODELS of IMAGINATION

Permanence, stability, same-ness, solidity, objects that are separate and independent of one another

Models of “reality”/Models of Imagination and Creativity
(we can notice things in this field to greater or lesser extent depending on the focus of attention)

Gross/Afferent Sensations – sensations after they have been processed by perception.

Whether we are aware of the sensations or not, all activity within the Imagination is a reaction/response to the flow within the Field of Sensations (see below).

If these sensations are observed without reacting, we hinder the mechanism and free ourselves from our conditioned responses and the mind’s control

FILTER of PERCEPTION

SENSATIONS – A Field of Reality

Experience in this field has not been processed by perception – is outside of Imagination! The mind orchestrates all activity in the field of Imagination through these sensations!

(we can notice things in this field to greater or lesser extent depending the concentration and focus of one’s attention)

THE MIND

Deepest Patterns of Survival and Creation

Primal Forces/Passivity/Aggression

Fight or Flight or Freeze / What to Kill and Die For

(Always Outside of Awareness and Direct Observation. One can only guess at the Dynamics of the mind through observation of Sensation and Displays within the Imagination)

CONDITIONING – the seed of the mind and the impetus for the formation of the Senses and all mental activity

REALITY – UNIVERSAL NATURE

(Experience unfiltered by the human mind-imagination.)

(Available as direct experience – but not if the mind-imagination is active)

Unity –Infinite Connection –Constant Change –Love –Compassion

–Calm –Calm connection with all –Joy in impermanence and ever-changing nature of life –Beauty in the cycle of creation/annihilation –Ultimate Truth

Chapter 7: The Game of Life

As long as the mind is active, we cannot experience Reality. So, how do we go about calming and eventually stopping the mind?

We never can observe the deeper dynamics of the mind and its conditioning directly. We can only observe the surface level of the mind by paying attention to what the mind and its conditioning are displaying in the Imagination.

We gain some understanding of the mind and its conditioning by observing and studying the patterns and products of the Imagination: our thoughts, feelings and behaviors. But, this work never results in change at the deepest level. Knowing that an activity, e.g. alcohol or eating sugar, is affecting my health or ruining relationships does not stop me from drinking or eating sweets. Knowing that I am behaving like a child or like my father helps, but does not free me from the pressures to behave like that. Our lives are still confined to the realm of the Imagination and continue to be guided/puppetted/controlled by what the mind determines to be important.

In order for change to be permanent, the cause of the behavior must be removed at its roots – which is at the level of our conditioning.

Everything in the Imagination has already been contorted/processed through Perception. Until the mechanism that creates Imagination and Thought stops, we cannot experience Reality fully. But, experience in the Field of Sensations is unfiltered, unprocessed. It is a field of Reality! And, it is through these sensations that the mind orchestrates all activity in the Imagination, including our thoughts, emotions, words, actions and inactions. Although these sensations orchestrate everything that takes place in our world, from nurture to warfare, a reaction to sensation is not set in stone, it is not rigid; it is not inevitable; we don't have to react! The link between sensations (an impulse) and an action is *soft*.

To explain this, imagine *The Game of Life*. The playing surface is an opaque sheet of glass. The playing surface is well lit, but the rest of the room is dark; you cannot see any of the other players. Most of the pieces are entirely wood. But, each player's figurine has pieces of metal embedded in it. You cannot touch anything on the table directly, but each person is given a magnet. By moving the magnet under the table, you pull, draw, tug and yank your figurine about the board. Each player is given a secret objective

and sets to work using his figurine to move the other pieces toward his objective. Again, you cannot see the other players, and no talking is allowed. But, you can try to communicate to others through the body language of your figurine in order to motivate other players to help you move pieces towards your goal.

But in the version of *the game of life* that you and I are playing right now, we are not the player in charge of the magnet; we are the figurines on the field! We can only see the playing surface; we cannot see who is controlling the magnet. From the point of view of the figurine we feel that we are in charge. But our entire lives – everything we think, feel, say or do is a reaction to the little impulses of sensations orchestrated by the mind and its conditioning! If we are unaware of the sensations, we are just puppets. If we are aware of the sensations but still react, we are semi-conscious puppets. But we don't have to react! The impulses are not directly connected to our motor pathways, the connection is soft like the magnet under the table. **It only takes sensitivity to sensations and a little conscious stillness to overcome the force of the impulses and hold the figurine (ourselves) in place.** This is Huge. This is the secret to life.

Meditation brings wisdom; lack of meditation leaves ignorance. Know well what leads you forward and what holds you back, and choose the path that leads to wisdom.
– ***Gautama Buddha***

Each time we don't react to an impulse, the pathway that supports that dynamic is weakened. This is not just a change in the neuro-physiological, bio-chemical pathways; *it is a change at the deepest level of conditioning, the essence of our existence!*

Chapter 8: The Mind at Work

Once our models of reality are active, we no longer see the world directly. When our eyes are closed, it is easy to believe that we are thinking about *real* people and *real* things, but it is only movement of our figurines, which are at best wooden statues compared to the actual entity (the essential dynamic) that they are supposed to represent. When our eyes are open, ***our models, laden with their psychological importance and conditioned emotional triggers are projected onto the framework of the actual world.***¹ When our eyes are open, we are living inside our own personal virtual reality.

The mind's fundamental deception is to make it seem as if we are taking in the one and only actual world that exists apart from me or anyone else. But the truth is that, I only see the world that my mind creates for my *sense of me* (my "me"-doll) to live in; the world that gives existence to the needs, values and purposes of my Conditioning. Our social world, our shared "reality", is a layering of all of our individual virtual worlds, one on top of another onto the framework of the actual world.

The mind does not simply create and move about our figurines; it also assesses and attaches value and importance to every object active in a scenario. Is it dangerous? Can I eat it (or is it useful in some way)? Is it for procreation (or somehow beneficial to my survival)? These assessments can be reduced to: things to be desired (or held on to), and things to avoid (or eradicate). These values are not just for the objects themselves, but as well for the *relationships* the mind creates among objects.

The scene for the *present moment* is updated to take into account changes in the actual world; but this takes place *after* the mind has conformed incoming experience to our models of the past. *Our "direct observation" (what we see as "the real world") is the display of a mental model that has already been molded by our past experiences and contains our deeper psychological values as they pertain to our objects, relationships and our current mental/emotional states.* Our psychological values (as determined by our conditioning) direct our attention within this display of the world according to what is most important for us; at a sporting event – one person

¹ Meditation will lead to an understanding of the nature of "the mind-matter phenomenon" and what this "actual world" consists of. But, this is best left to *direct experience*.

notices the game, another person notices fellow spectators, a third person is interested in the food, and another is lost in thought about work.

Here's an example of the mind at work. When we walk into a room and notice that a table is in a different location, our mind automatically moves our matching toy for that table into its new location. When a figurine (doll or toy) in a scene is adjusted to account for a change in the external world, the mind will let us know how important that difference is to us and orchestrate our reactions through sensations. These sensations orchestrate our ensuing thoughts, vocalizations, actions and emotions. For example, one person might walk into the room and notice that the table has been moved and feel delight (because he had mentioned earlier that it needed moving). Another person might walk into the room and feel irritation because the table isn't in its "proper place". And, another person might feel terror because he had left the house locked and there is no reason that anyone should have entered the house and rearranged the furniture.

Chapter 9: Body-Thought: Another Way of Thinking

Not only do we think by moving around visual notions of things we have seen (our dolls and toys), we also think by playing with past experiences of our body's movements and things we have touched, held or moved. We all think this way all the time, but usually we are so focused on other aspects of thought (inner voice and visualization), that our touch-thought/body-thought goes unnoticed. This aspect of Thought is so off our radars that we don't even have a popular name for it. The fancy name is Kinesthetic Thought, but I usually prefer the terms Body-Thought and Touch-Thought.

The sensations of body-thought often get lost behind the stronger experience of visualization. Visualization is movement of the body connected with sight. But body-thought uses a lesser-known sensory system called "proprio-reception". Sensors in the joints and muscles send signals to the brain about the angle of each joint and the force that each muscle is exerting. Through this information the brain keeps track of the location and movement of limbs and torso. Whether our eyes are open or closed, the two systems work together to create our body-awareness.

We can use notions of past bodily experience to imagine doing everything our real bodies can do. But, body-thought is most noticeable when we are engaged in flights of fancy: imagining lifting a car, jumping a hundred meters or crawling into a mouse hole. It is body-thought that makes sporting events so visceral – creating sensations that mimic the movements and impacts that are taking place on the field.

Although body-thought and visualization usually go hand in hand, a simple exercise often reveals how disparate they are. Read the rest of this paragraph and then close the eyes and follow the instructions: Rub the hands together for a few seconds. Then straighten the arms more-or-less forward. Close the hands but extend the index fingers and move the hands and wrists so that the index fingers are pointing towards one another. Remember, this is all done with the eyes closed. Move the hands slowly towards each other and when you feel that the fingertips are about 10 cm (3 inches) away, pause for a few seconds. Still without opening the eyes, move the fingers yet closer together and pause again when you think you are at 1 cm (1/2 inch). Now, move the fingertips as close as possible without letting the fingers touch and stop. Now, open the eyes.

Because kinesthetic thought/visualization is imagining your body doing something that it is not actually doing now, it must pull the attention **off the**

body in order to work. Again, this might not be readily apparent, but you cannot imagine the size and weight of a ball in the palm of your hand or imagine throwing it, if you are strongly aware of the sensations of your actual arm.

Although kinesthetic thought only works if attention is off the body, *it does create experience within the framework of the body*. This is because the brain very subtly activates the muscles that would be involved if you were actually doing the movement. Because focus is off the body, this muscular tension usually goes unnoticed. But, occasionally we get so carried away with body-thought that the muscles actually twitch. Watching a sporting event can be so visceral because our body-thought is not-so-subtly mimicking the action on the field and will create noticeable twinges and jerks in order to vicariously feel the impacts taking place on the field.

The sensations of body-thought are different than the sensations by which the mind puppets our activity. Controlling sensations are underneath Imagination. The sensations of body-thought are *reactions* to controlling sensations, they are part of Imagination.

A note on lucid-dreaming

One of the primary techniques in learning lucid dreaming is to practice looking for your hands in dream-state. Once you find the hands, you can practice controlling the hands and eventually the entire body. But this practice does not develop the skills of Vipassana; dreams (and drug induced experiences) are in the field of Imagination and do nothing to develop wisdom. If you catch yourself in a lucid display, even though the hand or arm looks and feels real, it is not the real arm – *the work is to find the sensations of the real arm*. This greatly develops the capacity to disregard the displays of apparent reality. Although this work does not make for a good story, it has you well in the river of greater consciousness.

Chapter 10: The Imaginary Divide and Secondary Models of “Reality”

Our Imagination is divided in two. On one half of the Imaginary Divide, we keep our three Primary Models of “reality”, our models for: the present moment, the real past and the real future.

Creating and maintaining our Primary Models of “reality” doesn’t feel like thinking or imagination; it feels like we are just passively taking in what is or recalling what was. Because these Primary Models of “reality” seem to exist apart from us, it can be difficult to acknowledge that we are creating them moment to moment, that they are products of our own Imagination.

To the contrary, what does feel like *thinking* and *imagination* is activity on the other side of the Imaginary Divide – in what is easily “acknowledged as imagination”.

This side of the Imagination is open to logic, reason, creativity and fantasy. Here, ***there is a sense of control as we play with and explore possibilities***; here, there is a sense of personal assessment, judgment and choice.² (I will use small “i”– imagination to refer to the processes that create secondary models and a sense of control and responsibility. I will use capital “I”– Imagination to refer to the processes that create ***all*** models. (See, The Bigger Picture, page 32.)

At times, we create scenarios in the imagination that are pure fantasy. But mostly, we use this side of the Imagination to create *Secondary Models of “reality”* – rearranging our toys and dolls into scenes that assess how the world could be (or should be) different. They can be of the past, present or future: <what I should be doing right now>, <what a friend was supposed to do>, <what I could have said differently>, <rehearsing what I will say>, <what I hope will happen> or <what I would rather be doing>.

² It is important to appreciate the power of *Judgment* and the role it plays in creating and maintaining “reality”. Judgment controls truth and reality; it determines what is fact and what is fiction. Within secondary models, judgment is “assessment” and “evaluation”. Within primary models, judgment is “certainty”, “truth” and “righteousness”. At any point that an idea, story or assessment is deemed true, that idea, story or assessment is embedded in our primary models, the realm of *reality* and has sway over all our future thoughts, emotions and actions.

We use secondary models of reality, for example, when we want to figure out what we would like to do tomorrow. We pull up tomorrow's world and get out our favorite toys and dolls and have them do different things, go different places and eat different foods. We also get into our thought-bodies and run, jump and snuggle. Every body-thought or movement of a toy or doll in our dollhouse is dictated to us through sensations. Our mental and emotional responses/reactions to what we are thinking about are also dictated to us through sensations: <that feels good>, or <that's impossible>, or <that would be fun>. When a certain scene is deemed <the best>, then we know what we would like to do tomorrow.

Here on the secondary stages (in the realm of imagination) the mind allows the "me"-doll to feel like it is the director and in charge of the action. The "me"-doll can direct a scene from "off-stage" or put itself onstage as one of the characters in the action that it is orchestrating.

Even though the "me"-doll feels like it is in charge and responsible, the creation of all *secondary models of reality* (as well as our sense of control) is also orchestrated by the mind through the flow of sensations! If this is disappointing, that is okay; your "me"-doll is deepening its understanding of the value of meditation.

There is a third field within the Imagination, *Uncertainty*, which we will look at later. On the next page is a visual of the structure of the Mind and Imagination. Notice that all aspects of thought, both "reality" and that which is "easily acknowledged as imagination", are products of the Imagination.

All this "thinking" can take place without any use of language – nothing but moving around our visual and tactile notions of past experience. But once we have learned language, we tend to focus primarily (or exclusively) on the thread of ideas that comes through our "inner voice". Although language has become our primary mode of thinking, our sense of place and the relationships among our toys and dolls are still the foundation of our mental worlds.

It is easy to assume/believe that we are in control of our imagination and creativity, and that by thinking (playing, wrestling and/or struggling with different arrangements of our dolls and toys) we are engaged in a learning process, that we are attempting to find scenarios that are the <best> or <truest>. With the idea that this "learning" will better prepare us for similar events in the future.

But, the deepest function of all thought (that is not “right thought”) is to keep the mechanism active which keeps our sense-of-self “alive” while honoring the deepest dynamics of our conditioning. An enormous part of thinking is actually efforts to **prevent deep change** and to keep learning at just the surface levels in order to protect the mechanism and the psychological status quo.

When we stop to notice, we can appreciate how random, incessant and incoherent our thoughts really are.

The Bigger Picture

The Structure of the Mind and Imagination

<p>FIELD OF IMAGINATION The “Dollhouse” or “The Theater of the Mind” (All Activity of the Imagination is a <i>Reaction</i> to the flow of Sensations within the Field of Sensations)</p>		
<p>APPARENT “REALITY” –Exists apart from me and is outside my control –Principle Models of Reality used to keep track of Inner and Outer Worlds –Real Past (How the World Was) –Real Present (How the World Is) –Real Future (Assumptions and Expectations as to How the World Will Be) –Truth –Certainty –Righteousness –Stories that are believed to be true –Values, ideas, philosophies, or beliefs that are consciously or unconsciously held to be true. –Emotions (All emotions are imaginary, but we usually place these experiences in “reality”)</p>	<p>UNCERTAINTY</p>	<p>EASILY ACKNOWLEDGED AS IMAGINATION –imagination –Intellect –Logic –Creativity –Reason –Fantasy –Sense of ownership and control as these displays only exist in <i>my</i> imagination – Secondary Models of Reality that explore possibilities, both for our “Inner” and “Outer” Worlds –How the World Could Be –How the World Could Have Been –How the World Might Be</p>
<p>PERCEPTION</p>		
<p>FIELD OF SENSATIONS—A Field of Reality (The Mind Surfaces as Sensations, but nothing occurs in the universe until we <i>React or Respond</i> to these Sensations.) Here, we can notice the activity of the Mind and its conditioning before it has been molded by Perception into a product of Imagination (Depending on Attention, these Sensations can be Observed)</p>		
<p>THE MIND (Outside of Awareness and Direct Observation) Conditioning/Deepest Patterns of Survival, Purpose and Creation Primal Forces/Passivity/Aggression What to Kill and Die For/Fight or Flight or Freeze</p>		

Chapter 11: Story – A Model of Verbal Thought

The foundation of Thought is the models that we use to keep track of our physical and social-emotional worlds. The physical world (our sense of place) is organized through the *spatial arrangement* of our objects. This is done through touch, sight and sound. Our social-emotional world is built upon the values given each object and the importance plug into the relationships that the mind has created between objects.

This is why it is very difficult to memorize a list of concepts, numbers or unrelated objects; they just float unconnected to what is most important to us – our physical and social worlds. People who compete in memory contests connect items to their physical and social worlds by building a special living room in their imagination. They place each item in sequence on the next piece of furniture in their room while creating a story that links each item with the next.

The foundation of Thought is visual, tactile, auditory and emotional, but once we have learned language, we tend to pay less attention to those aspects of thought and focus primarily (or exclusively) on words – the auditory thread of ideas that comes through our “inner voice”.

Verbal language was a boon to society and civilization; without language, we must rely on body-language or pictures to attempt to share with another what is happening in our thoughts. However, it is important to understand how language and Imagination work in order to be aware of their limitations and dangers.

Story Time

Any thought involving words is a use of *Story*. Story involves stringing together our words for dolls, toys, activities, ideas and emotions to encode a scene in our intellect/imagination. We use story both to think to ourselves and to share experience with other people.

But words (names) are very different than dolls and toys. The dolls and toys of our imagination have a one to one correspondence with a particular thing in the world – we make a doll for *each* new person we meet and a toy for *each* new thing we notice. That doll or toy only corresponds to that particular person or thing. One doll → one person. However, a *word* represents a concept or a category for a group of objects; one name → millions of objects. Think of how many things you call “cat” – imaginary

cats, drawings of cats, stuffed animal cats and every real cat that you have ever met or are going to meet.

The advantage of having imaginary scenarios that represent “the real world” is that our understanding of the world is not limited to just our own direct personal experiences (what we see, hear and touch). We can also update and add to our understanding of “the real world” by listening to other people’s Stories about things that have happened or might happen. This might involve creating new dolls and new toys and a new sense of place, or it might just require moving our existing figurines (what we already know) into new arrangements.

To share what is going on in your mind, you tell a Story. You arrange a thread of concepts and share each concept with me, one at a time. Every time you say a name out loud, I pull up my matching concept and add it to a scene in the theater of my mind. We ignore that these are just concepts. (see chapter 15, Pool of Recollection) Even though I just built this scene entirely from my own past experiences, I suspend disbelief and somehow treat this display as if I have experienced something that is apart from me and my own personal experiences! And, if I have no other reason to suspect otherwise, I will adjust my understanding of the “real world” accordingly.

Remember, the Imagination has two main divisions: “reality” and imagination. One part is how we store and maintain our models of reality. The other half is how we store and maintain our secondary models of reality and our flights of fantasy. This may not seem like a big deal, after all we are talking about this deception right now and nothing seems different, my world isn’t unraveling. Sometimes life will knock us for a loop and our grip on “reality” will be unraveled for us, but the mind quickly sets to work trying to regain composure/control. Depending on the shock, this can take seconds, six months or a lifetime. To consciously unravel one’s sense of reality takes work.

We adjust our world-view according to people’s stories all the time; and most classroom education is just that – sitting in a box and building reality according to other people’s stories.

A lot of our inner dialogue (the stories we tell ourselves) is an attempt to adjust and fine-tune “reality” so that life makes sense. Stories that we regard as <true>, influence what is important to us and determine how we are going to react in the future.

What we are today comes from our thoughts of yesterday, and our present thoughts build our life of tomorrow. Our life is the creation of our mind.

– Gautama Buddha

Nothing is created once and then just sits static in existence. Everything that seems to be stable is a pattern of change that is recreated moment to moment. Our sense-of-self is no different and must be constantly regenerated. ***A large part of our mental noise is building scenarios in which to plug-in the emotions and “truths” which are the foundation of our sense-of-self:*** frustration, anger, charity, hope, <I’m an idiot>, <People are idiots>, <I work hard>, <Life is unfair>, <If I can just...>, etc.

I resurrect my fears

And redirect my anger

Over and over and over again.

– Doris Treissman

It is important to realize that any thought or action that arises as a *reaction to the sensations of Conditioning*, strengthens or deepens that behavior and will show up again in our future. However, there are thoughts and actions that are based in grace, kindness and truth. These actions arise and pass and do not agitate or defile the mind. These actions are taught as “the eight-fold path”, and are described as “right” thought, “right” speech, ... (Because the term “right” can imply that all other action is “wrong”, Victor Daniels suggests using the term *helpful and beneficial*: helpful and beneficial thought, helpful and beneficial speech, etc.)

Chapter 12: Sanity

The intellect works very hard to maintain its deception of “reality”. Our very sense of **sanity** is dependent upon maintaining clear distinctions between what we believe to be **real** and what we believe to be **imagination**. Any uncertainty as to whether a story is <real> or <not real> runs the risk of us realizing that our perception is smoke and mirrors – that *all of our experience of reality is a product of Imagination*.

The intellect abhors uncertainty and as quickly as possible wants to place information on one side of the reality divide or the other. We can still remain uncertain about choices. But when it comes to facts or stories, the mind will decide for you – if you go to bed uncertain, when you wake up your mind has probably already determined whether the information is <true> or <made-up>, and has embedded the model and its importance in the appropriate half of the Imagination.

No one saves us but ourselves. No one can and no one may. We ourselves must walk the path.

–Gautama Buddha

Even if there were a pill that could do the work for us and pullback the veil of deception created by Perception, it would not be advisable. The path to liberation entails a *development* of the mind, the body and the nervous system.

Discipline yourself as a horse-dealer trains a thoroughbred.

–Gautama Buddha

Even if a novice's systems could handle the force of a quick foray into ultimate truth, the mind is not going to allow it; the intellect is not going to sit back and take a break now and then to let some deeper understanding of life run the show for a while – your intellect fervently believes that it is *solely and wholly responsible for your wellbeing*.

Maintaining belief of our reality is essential in preventing the mind from collapsing. The mind has many defenses to distract, dismiss or dispel any new idea, story or experience that is confronting the frailty of our system of belief: disinterest, denial, sleepiness, heaviness, pain or distraction (grabbing onto any commotion in the surroundings or creating a thought that is so important that the attention is pulled away). But less obvious defense mechanisms are: laughter, anger, tears or blinking.

Humor often makes use of the mind's existential discomfort concerning uncertainty. There is a genre of jokes that start by telling you something that you easily assume to be either true or false – you quickly place this information on its appropriate side of the reality divide. Then, later in the story, new information reveals that you have been duped and you must extract the information from one side of the divide and move it to the other side. Or, even worse, the information just leaves you hanging in uncertainty. “I flew in from San Francisco yesterday.” “Boy, my arms are still tired.”

On one level, the mind enjoys this because it is a puzzle (the two pieces of information together don't readily make sense). The mind quickly goes through various permutations: both utterances are true, but unconnected. Both are false... Eventually the mind will connect *flying* and *arms* with bird wings.

Part of laughter can be pleasure from social connection. Part of laughter can be pleasure from mental connection – putting together the pieces to *figure it out*. But, laughter has another important mental function. Laughter is fluff that dispels the discomfort that comes with *struggling to place* or *having wrongly placed* a story on its appropriate side of the Imagination.

In the end, we still don't know the truth about each utterance, but at least we came up with one “fun” possibility. Then, before we delve any deeper and realize that any reality that we have established through Story is circumspect, we laugh – <Okay, that was fun, but now back to business (of maintaining reality)>.

Blinking can do the same thing. Stories are such an integral part of our reality, that the default is for stories to be true. But, stories have to start somewhere. Every story is temporally supported/embedded in “reality” by bookending each story in two catch-all assumptions: <everything that happened before> and <everything that happens after>. The intellect doesn't just fill in *before* and *after*; it fills in any gaps within the story. Movies use this to their advantage all the time. One shot shows a zombie, head intact. The next shot shows the hero swinging a blade. Final shot shows the zombie hitting the floor and head rolling away.

The intellect-imagination is very good at filling gaps with assumptions because **this is how we see**. It seems to us that our visual experience is continuous, unbroken. But when you turn your head to survey your

surroundings, the brain can only make a series of snapshots and the intellect fills in whatever assumptions and denials are needed in order to make it seem like our visual experience flows.

Remember that the intellect is a master in editing, contorting and deleting our perception. Anything that is psychologically awkward or difficult can be dismissed or deleted simply by blinking. The intellect just deletes what was happening, reboots, and starts a new story.

Chapter 13: Sensations and Emotions

Somewhere on the path of greater sensitivity, a person will realize that ***an emotion is not in or on the body!*** The precursors of an emotion are probably 18 to 7,219 different sensations surging throughout the entire body (I am just making up numbers, but there are a lot. And at deeper levels, sensations are a flow – and outside of numbers and counting). Most (or all?) of these sensations can go unnoticed and the Imagination keeps on working just fine!

You will not be punished for your anger; you will be punished by your anger.
– Gautama Buddha

I am learning that for what I'd call *anger*, I might notice the jutting of the jaw, tension in the neck and tension in the back of the right hand and wrist. I might also notice tightness or discomfort in my calves. Sometimes I feel pressure in the chest. If I was more attuned, I might be able to notice an increased heart rate, heightened blood pressure and heat in different parts of my skin due to constrictions and dilations of my veins.

It is important to appreciate that ***the “emotional physiology” is the entirety of the body – from skin to bones.*** We get some glimpse of this through our expressions: Made my skin crawl, gave me goose bumps, made my hair stand on end, made my blood boil, gut wrenching, took my breath away, stomach in a knot, made my heart skip a beat... Supposedly, every emotion varies one's breathing in some way. There are also all kinds of hormones and neurotransmitters released in the preparation of any emotion which alter the functioning of probably every organ, every muscle and every cell.

The sensations themselves are not the emotion! The sensations are in the body, but the emotion itself only comes into existence when the sensations are ***projected*** onto a display of the imagination: a person, an event, an interaction, a memory or a scene of possibilities. The same list of expressions shows how easy it is to believe that our emotions are caused or triggered by external events, but our emotions are preloaded by our conditioning; the mind is ***constantly*** looking for places to plug in the darndest emotions. When we are paying attention to “the world” (and not the field of sensations), our perception is always half a second behind. In that half second while the mind is building our model of the world, it has set up the emotional trip-lines and booby-traps within our physical and social worlds. ***We are each entirely responsible for how we react to events in the world!*** Nobody else and nothing in the world can ***make us*** feel, say or do

anything. It is so easy to believe that people and events in the world are the cause of the emotions – and that anyone in their right mind would be having the same feelings. But, we are each just tripping through our personal emotional minefield that the mind has set up for us!

Our awareness is rarely 100% focused on any one thing or on any one of our senses; our attention is usually divided among several places of interest. When we are listening to someone: we are partially listening to the words in order to build the scenario that will represent our understanding of the story; while part of our attention is caught up creating another scene or two in contemplation of how we might respond to the speaker; we might also be noticing that we are hungry; a friend just passed by; and a scene representing some random “memory” just flashed by.

This “lifting” of the attention off of the body and the projection of the display of thought *somewhere else* can be very subtle and difficult to notice. Again, the inner voice is somewhere inside our heads, but all other thought, including thinking about other people’s words, pulls at least some of our attention off the body. When we are recalling an event or listening to another person’s story of something that has happened, we project partial attention in the direction of the place where the event occurred. If we are thinking about a person, we direct attention towards the place in the world where we last saw the person or where we think they are now. And, when we are creating a purely imaginary scenario, we create *a world* somewhere off of our bodies in which the events can take place. As a person’s meditation practice develops, both the movement of the awareness within the framework of the body and the lifting of attention off the body become more evident.

Every time we *notice something* or we *think of something* our emotional physiology has already been triggered, for example, muscle tension and faster heart rate. If our awareness is strongly caught up in the tumult of our thoughts, the organs of our emotional physiology are working overtime and we are deepening our imprint for that pattern of response.

Also, all aspects of thought use up some of the physiology that we use to sense the world. For example, if I am listening to a song in my head, I will be less aware of the sounds in my surroundings, while mental imagery decreases my visual awareness. The stronger our thoughts – the less sensitive we are to the physical world, our internal environment, and the present moment.

Simply placing the awareness on or in the body dis-empowers the Imagination and frees up the sensory and emotional physiologies – by doing so, we calm the emotional tumult of our perpetual thoughts and the innate intelligence of the body is allowed to take care of and heal itself.

Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned. –Gautama Buddha

It is easy to lose sight of the enormity of the forces underneath our dollhouse that are governing our sense of reality, our actions and our inactions – they are the primal forces of survival: *fight, flight or freeze and what to kill and die for*. That is why we are just as capable of killing in defense of an idea as we are to kill in defense of our children. It is also why we can send our children to kill and die when an elder or official says it is important.

It can be easy to disregard *phobias* as simply an illness or a malfunctioning of the brain. But, **phobias are just the far end of normal functioning of the Imagination.** Phobias (and neurosis) reveal the power of the forces underneath all of our arrangements of the Imagination and the subjectivity of all our emotional connections; ***all of our emotional reactions are just as imaginary as in phobias.*** “Normal” or “healthy” functioning just means that the emotions attached to our thoughts, ideas and actions are more internally and/or socially acceptable. One might think that evolution would weed out neurotic behavior, but I have noticed that neurotic behavior often gives that person a lot of social clout – as others often acquiesce rather than contend with the intensity of the person’s emotions.

Phobias also provide insight as to how difficult it is to disconnect and/or rearrange our emotional reactions once they have been attached to a situation or idea. Even when a fear (or other emotion) is blatantly imaginary, it is still outside of our conscious control to change; we cannot simply *choose* to not to react or *choose* to have a different emotional reaction.

The power of Vipassana is that we are learning to notice the surfacing of sensations *before* we have been triggered, *before* we have reacted, *before* emotions have coalesced as a projection onto a display of thought. By working on our equanimity (our mental non-reactivity and our physical stillness) the impulses by which we are puppeted have less influence on us.

It is not a matter of *willpower*; when an impulse to react is noticed and met with equanimity, without effort, the reaction does not take place. This capacity ebbs and flows, so don't expect to be free from all habitual behavior after one ten-day retreat. But, any change from typical unconscious behavior is monumental. Even if it is just one time out of ten that we don't react, it is a major shift in consciousness; it is *moving mountains!* *You are changing the fabric of the universe.*

Chapter 14: Watching T.V. – A Model of Focus

In order to get *caught up* in a story, our attention must be carefully focused just within the *frame* of the story. If the focus is either too wide or too narrow, we can no longer *suspend disbelief* and we become detached from the story or the story dissolves. This is most obvious when watching television or a play at the theater, but it is true for all stories, fact or fiction, whether we are listening to another person or thinking to ourselves.

If you are caught up watching a movie, your attention will be focused just within the picture on the screen. You know this is just electricity dancing around to create patterns of light, but it doesn't matter – we are all experts at “suspending disbelief”. This is a double negative, but it is what we do – in order to **believe**, we simply disregard the fact that *this is not real*. This allows us to have a stronger connection with the characters and more intense emotional reactions.

It doesn't matter the size of the screen. It can be a colossal I-Max wall or a wristwatch T.V. If we are focusing just within the screen and suspending disbelief, even watching a fiction movie on our smart phone will have a quality of reality; our experience is a strange combination of three factors. One, we know we are in our seats, in front of the television. Two, much of our experience is as if we are within the frame of the movie, observing at a mostly safe distance in a way that somehow does not disturb the characters or the action. And three, at times we can let ourselves be so drawn into the story that we have physical and emotional responses as if we were actually there within the environment or as if we have become one of the characters.

There is nothing like a good horror movie to show all of us (even those of us who consider themselves to be highly rational) how susceptible we are to “falling into” stories.

Whether we are plugging in *emotions* into a work of fiction or into a display of “reality”, almost all of our *emotional experience is false, make-believe, a product of the mind-imagination* – one of the base human emotions: ecstasy, joy, desire, fear, anger, sadness or disgust; or a *mélange* of these emotions. **True, Real experience** is limited to: unity, tranquility, calm, loving-kindness, sympathetic joy or compassion for those who are still lost within the turmoil of imagined “reality”.

It is good to be mindful that the Mind, not wanting to lose control, will send in an impostor disguised as one of these experiences. For example, for Tranquility or Equanimity, the mind will plug in Indifference or Drowsiness; for Compassion, Pity or Empathy (a mimicking of the emotion); for Unity, Aggrandizement or Accomplishment; and for Love or Joy, Passion.

An *apparent* aspect of sympathy and compassion is *empathy*, our ability to put ourselves in another's place and *feel* something of that person's experience. But, we must be careful as it is quite possible that what feels like *compassion* is entirely made from our own conditioning and our personal past experience.

Our ability to project ourselves into another's experience has the very deepest roots – **it is how “we” come to life!** Our conditioning condenses and focuses Awareness to build the Senses, which it then uses to construct displays of the Imagination and carry out its purposes. The source of Awareness is vast, without bounds. But, as confabulated by the Conditioning it takes on the role of a passive observer without a point-of-view – a disinterested,³ fully awake audience seated offstage in the theater of life.⁴ But, in order for the show to begin (in order for the mind to begin manipulating you and orchestrating your life) it must first lure this passive audience (the detached awareness) to collapse/condense/embed itself into one of the characters (a figurine) within your models of “reality”. Now, “the game of life”, according to the conditioning, can begin.

This is crazy, but it doesn't matter which doll it is – as long as you are moderately (adequately) functional within your physical and social worlds.

We all step into different roles and use different “registers” every day – we use different vocabulary, tone of voice and social rules depending with whom we are interacting. People with multiple personalities are just the far

³ I have to include the synonyms from the computer's thesaurus because some readers might have the same propensity that I do, which is to not include some gist of “disinterest” (indifference, lack of concern, lackadaisical attitude, apathy) with the term “disinterested” (fair-minded, unbiased, impartial, without prejudice, neutral, objective, able to see all sides).

⁴ It is worth taking a few moments to appreciate that Conditioning invites Awareness into the Theater that will stage your life. Awareness is now the audience, but it is still indeterminate, amorphous and undefined; it is not a “person” or even “an entity” seated in the audience – it is the entire audience.

end of normal functioning; the mind just switches which figurine within their *game of life* will currently function as their *primary character* (their “me”-doll) by pulling **primary awareness** out of one figurine and embedding it into another.

When we are caught up in a movie, we are passing the attention *through our primary figurine*, our “me”-doll, and temporarily embedding it into a **secondary** figurine so that we can adopt the point of view of an invisible observer within the frame of the story (“a fly on the wall”) or of one of the characters. This is a *dream within a dream*, and might seem weird or difficult, but **we do this all the time; we do this so often that it is normal and goes unnoticed**. Our sanity depends upon a moderate ability to keep these experiences compartmentalized within our models of Imagination and on one side of the Imaginary Divide or the other.

Returning to the role of **passive observer** is an essential aspect of meditation; opening up to Reality requires leaving the realm of Imagination behind and establishing emotional distance from my *sense-of-self*, and what I consider to be *me, my life and my problems*.

While watching a movie, if we widen our attention to take in the entire room, the movie loses the force that we had been giving it. Try it sometime – at home, the theater, or (if it doesn’t seem rude) when you are listening to someone talk. Open your attention to notice as much of the surroundings as possible without focusing on any one thing and see if leaving the frame of the story doesn’t distance or deaden the story.

Some meditation techniques make use of this broad attention to divorce us from story and impair thought. They invite people to pull the attention to the back of the head and gaze out, as if to take in the entire panorama of the world all at once. This gaze hinders focusing on any one thing, making it difficult for the mind to define boundaries and divide the scene into separate objects (which perception must do in order to create relationships and begin organizing any kind of story). In Vipassana, when a person has begun to notice some kind of sensation everywhere on the body, they can start working with broad/global attention, noticing at once as much of the body at as possible. But, *attention still remains within the framework of the body*.

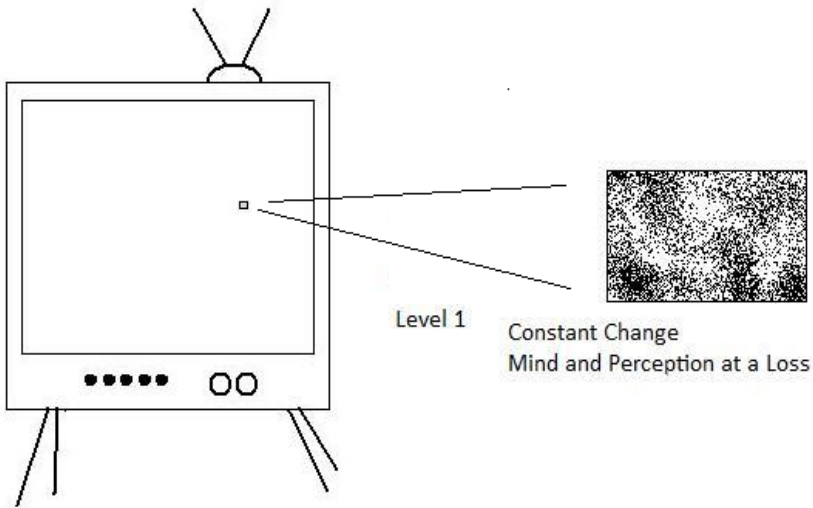
To fall into and stay within *story*, the attention has to be fully *in the story itself*. Some people enjoy watching movies because they enjoy “losing themselves” in the story. But, other people enjoy watching a movie with a

critic's eye. At times, allowing themselves to be more absorbed in the action and at times pulling out slightly in order to focus on the formulation of their own ideas and judgments.

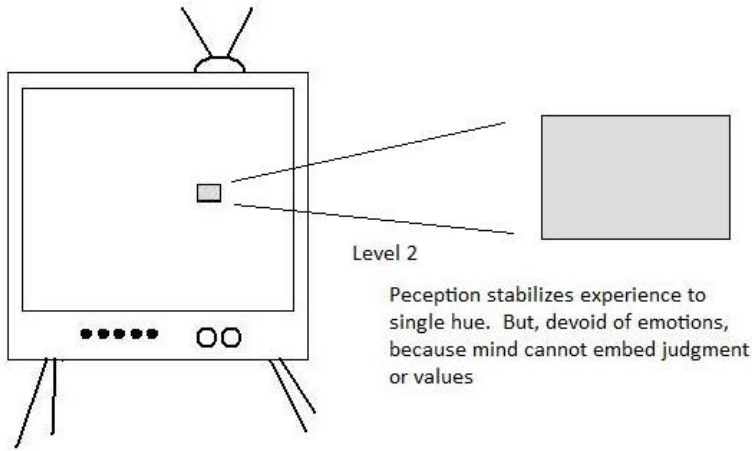
Like waking from a bad dream, if for whatever reason our experience of a movie (our our thoughts) gets too intense, we can simply pull our attention completely out of the frame – after all, “it’s just a movie.”

We can distance ourselves from story by pulling partially or completely out of the frame. But, we can also disrupt Story by getting too close.

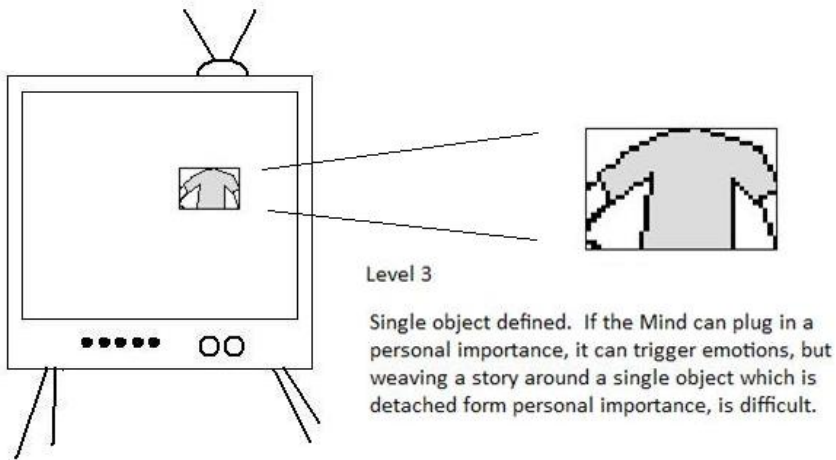
Let’s watch a movie on an old black and white television set. But, we are going to start by sitting super close, with our noses touching the screen. All we can see is the “snow” of the screen – a fuzzy grayness created by the flickering little dabs of light and darkness. Just like finding shapes in the clouds, the mind will try to overlay any pattern that it can over this fuzziness so that it can create an object and begin higher level thought processes, but it cannot! This is like trying to map a constantly shifting sandbar; the mind, perception and the conditioning are at a loss.



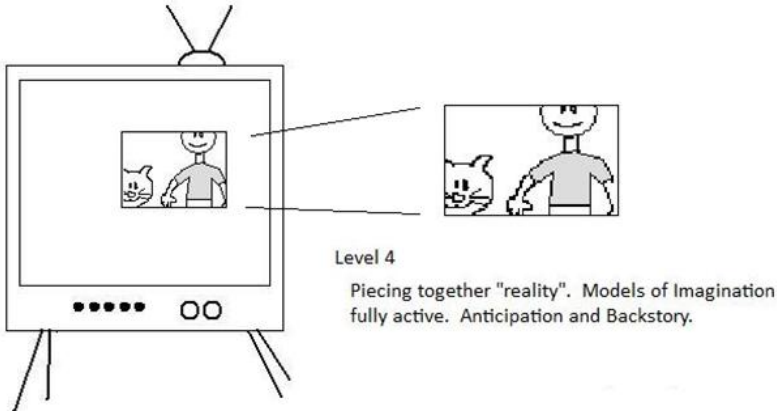
If we back up just a little, we lose sight of the individual dabs of light and dark. Although there is still a slight vibration and variation in the area, perception sees the area as a stable hue of gray. But, a single color or hue does not make for much of a story.



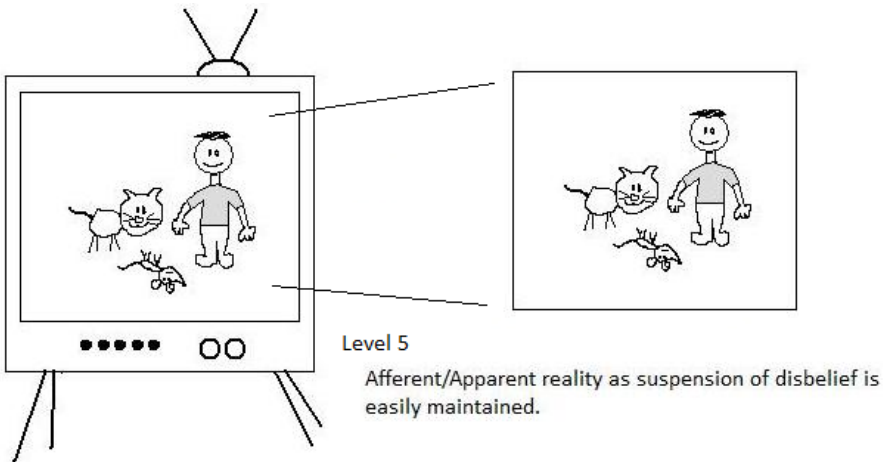
Backing up further, our mind can finally organize the experience into a stable pattern which it recognizes; we see a shirt. We don't know anything else, and a single object detached from our personal importances does not make a story in itself. But, the mind only exists in story; it is desperate. Our minds will start to use any associations it has with that object/concept to anticipate story, wondering what is going to happen and/or creating possible "back-stories" as to who the shirt belongs to and how it got to be here now.



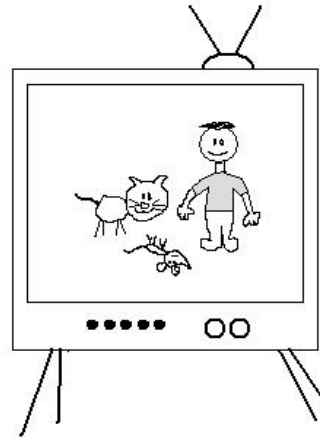
Still a little further back... Now, there are several objects that can be defined and even though the picture is still only partial, the mind can set to work. The mind can plug in emotions for the action and relationships within the story itself as well as run emotions according to how these objects affect me personally. This is my friend Bob. And, I can see part of his cat's head.



At the next level of focus, we have backed off to a distance where we can easily maintain our awareness just inside the frame of the story. Here the mind controls our attention and emotions through a flood of sensations and the story becomes as much a part of our present reality as the mind wants it to be.



Level 6



Panoramic focus. Suspension of disbelief is weakened as we are aware that this is just a recoding. The action is incorporated into our various models.

At Level 6, focus is larger than the frame of the Story and suspension of disbelief is compromised. We know the action is not taking place right now; we can be interested in the action, but it won't have the same visceral impact. If this is a video of Bob's life, then all the information is stored in my models of *the real past*. If this is a movie that Bob acted in, then I store the information both in my models of reality, <Bob made a movie> and in my models of imagination <the story that Bob acted in is make-believe>.

Chapter 15: Focus in Meditation

Backing out from a television is not just an intellectual exercise. It helps understand the role of *focus* in creating and maintaining story. And, it helps understand how and why Vipassana meditation works.

As a person's concentration and focus develop, the attention stays longer with more subtle sensations within a smaller area of the body. This development is not *backing away* from the screen, but it is like starting at Level 5 (totally caught up in the *apparent reality* of the world and *life as we know it*) and moving closer and closer to the T.V. set.

If we start by paying attention to a larger area of the body, like the throat, back, chest and jaw, this is enough large/gross experience that our minds will start piecing together a story to accommodate these sensations and we will not develop sensitivity to subtler experience. This is like watching T.V. at level 4. We are more body-aware, but we are still functioning at a level of afferent reality; as far as the mind is concerned it is business as usual. *Once sensitivity has been developed*, attention can open up to notice the subtle sensations within larger areas.

Again, the practice is to develop *tactile* awareness. Some people describe their experience as a team of benign ants gradually advancing with the movement of attention. Others, as if sitting in an empty pool and feeling the water advance up the body as the pool is being filled. Or in reverse, the advancement of water as a bucket of water is being slowly poured on top of the head. Because this is tactile awareness, practitioners will eventually notice that awareness has a *textural* quality, and that the scanning of awareness can feel like the touch of a piece of cloth moving over the skin – the size, weight and fineness of the cloth varying with intention and depth of attention. For example, the end of a wool scarf, a remnant of bandana, a feather, a swatch of silk, or an even yet finer, slicker, smoother nature.⁵ It is

⁵ For 18 years I as much as possible practiced a form of firmly energized breathing, called *ujjayi breath*, to the point that friends said I did it while sleeping. One of the benefits is that it makes it easier to be partially aware of the breath both while meditating and throughout the day. It became so second nature that I could not breathe without slight constriction in the throat and audible sound. It was nine months of Vipassana practice before the habitual tension in the throat subsided and I learned just how strongly connected the texture of awareness is to the strength of the breath. Yes, ujjayi breathing makes it easier to notice the breath; it is like wearing a wool T-shirt with every breath surfacing sensations in the shoulders, neck

good to sweep or scan the attention so that one ensures that one is covering the entire body and learning where there are blank or missing areas. But sometimes, the movement of attention is relegated to dabbing or plopping the attention from one place to another. It is what it is... a few times it has felt like lugging around a truck tire.

With awareness at level 3, there are sensations that are still “gross-afferent” – which means the mind has already interpreted and objectified the experience. This can be like a “pain” in the back or “discomfort” in the belly or throat. Anything that seems to be the “same”, “persistent” or “permanent” or seems to have fairly determined shape or boundaries is an indication that Perception has already been at work and has already manipulated our experience! Although it can be more difficult to make up a story around this experience, the mind will try to nudge us into buying a story around the experience, like, “this is that injury”, or into telling ourselves how this “ailment” is holding back my yoga practice or making me feel less desirable.

At level 2, we lose the shapes of our objects. The ache is still there, but as we look closer and explore where “the ache” begins, boundaries become diffuse. Delving into the area, it can seem like the sensations are always moving away just before I can really focus on them. With perseverance, we might notice that “the ache” is made up of pricking, pressure or pulling. Or, sensations of temperature, weight, movement, or a gluey dynamic that is working to hold or bind “things” together. The mind still labels, but we are skirting the boundary of emotional influence!

We deepen into the next level of awareness by appreciating change at all levels of experience and following the instruction, “whenever there are two or more sensations, focus on the most subtle.” At level 1, the constantly changing nature of sensations becomes obvious. We have entered a field of Reality – all experience is fleeting, momentary, quickly arising and passing. There is no discernible pattern, so there are no objects, no relationships nor

and torso. It also makes it easier to feel “the breath” (maybe prana?) in other parts of the body, like the hands, forearms or feet. But, it hindered focus and yet deeper, finer sensitivity. With ujjayii breathing, my practice had developed to the level of dowsing emotional conditioning that was embedded within the dynamics of the breath and in the body-mind structure; it facilitated emotional and energetic release which at some level was cathartic, but it kept awareness from getting **below** the level of conditioning and fostering calm.

emotions. This is experience within the mind, but outside of imagination and conditioning. Most people describe it as subtle vibrations, or maybe a soft fuzziness. Goenka says that it is a bio-electric dynamic that is present in all living matter.

There is probably nothing earth-shaking or spectacular about this experience, it is what it is. Acceptance of *what is*, without wanting anything to be different, is an important quality of mind that is required for attention to soften into and stay at this level of awareness; to notice “pain” or any sensation that is regarded as “discomfort” and wanting it to go away, or any sensation that is regarded as “pleasant” and trying to hold on to it, pulls attention out of the softness, surrender and acceptance that is required to maintain attention within the Field of Sensations.

Meditation is like trying to stay focused at level 1 of the T.V. screen *while a movie is playing*. Your inner dialogue and your stories will still be running and the mind will constantly want to lure attention into the commotion of its stories.

Again, our awareness is rarely 100% focused on any one thing or on any one of our senses; our attention is usually divided among several places of interest. In meditation, awareness is rarely 100 % in a particular level; partial awareness can be floating in and out of levels 1 through 3, while some awareness is fairly ensconced in thought.

Before Vipassana, people have instructed me to “just watch thoughts like clouds floating by.” Or, if I notice that I am thinking, then say to myself, “I am thinking.” The Buddha advises people to be aware if they are experiencing Thought, or if they are experiencing the Gross Body, or if experience is Subtle. This is *meta-awareness*, awareness of awareness itself. Mostly, we are caught up in thought and our awareness is on autopilot with the attention being dragged around to where the mind needs it in order to run its programs; noticing more readily and more often *how* and *where* the attention is is huge. Have I unknowingly been lost in thought for the past 2 hours cussing in my problems? Or, am I at work and consciously using the Intellect as a tool to organize the day?

Only the deepest layers of meditative awareness are without thoughts; if I were to say “I am thinking” with every thought, I would be continually repeating it like a mantra. The practice in Vipassana is focusing on the

tactile and *ever-changing* nature of experience. This is not denying or avoiding thoughts; it is just giving them no heed. The work is not to float awareness in the clouds of our thoughts (which are also constantly changing and impermanent) but to sweep and float the awareness within the tactile nature of the body.

Sometimes I catch the movement of attention as it is being lured away towards a display of thought. But, often attention has been surreptitiously lured away to a different level of focus or into a story without notice and it takes a bit to realize that I am now somewhere else. *It doesn't matter what level of focus the attention is in now; level 1 is not better than level 5. The value of being aware of the current level of attention cannot be overestimated;* if you find you have been lost in thought, don't let the mind plug in frustration or disappointment; simply return to the techniques and the process of liberation will continue.

If available, most meditators are not going to have a tooth pulled without anesthesia. However, the "pain" that surfaces in my back after 8 minutes of sitting still or the sensations of "sickness" and "ailments" have time and time again shown to be psycho-somatic – eventually dissolving with close, calm attention.

Suspending judgments around "illness" and "ailments" is important work – the sensations of control can feel like being sick. If you can remain unknowing, attentive and equanimous during "an illness" (even a pathogen has been diagnosed), you might find that "the sickness" has not "knocked you off course", but has put you "back on track" or has taken you further downstream. *Wellbeing* does not mean *not being sick* or *without ailments*...

When faced with the vicissitudes of life, one's mind remains unshaken, sorrowless, stainless, secure; this is the greatest welfare.

–Gautama Buddha

Re-run

As focus gets smaller and more subtle, Story begins to dissolve. Even closer, we can see that there are no solid surfaces – but the dance of ever changing dots that from far enough away conveyed a shape, a person or an object. When awareness is close enough to where everything is change, any attempt to create stability or shapes is meaningless – we are well below the level of Story and we are free from the emotional content involved – everything is "empty" of value; nothing or no one is good or bad; no one is at fault. This is the progress of our meditation sensitivity as well. What

seems like pain is just a mental construct, if a person floats the attention inside these sensations (sometimes referred to as “dissecting a gross sensation”) to explore more accurately where and what this “pain” is (is it heat? sharpness? or pressure?) sometimes the mental “reality” of the sensations dissolves or dissipates – there is no anguish, just experience.

It is normal to be caught up as the main character in the movie of your life. But, if you catch yourself complaining or wanting things to be different, the only way to deeply change the world or your character’s behavior is to drop under the story of your life by developing sensitivity to the sensations by which the mind directs every aspect of your life. And, with work, attention will drop into the “Field of Wisdom”, the subtle sensations that are well below the apparent emotional “reality” and you will know moment to moment freedom from Conditioning’s control.

It is helpful to remember to appreciate the changing nature of *all* experience because one’s Focus and Concentration are also changing moment to moment. It is not uncommon that after an experience of “easy free-flow of energy” a meditator will feel like he finally *got it*, and unknowingly create an expectation that he has established a new level of work/experience. But, the development of Concentration and Focus is less like digging a mineshaft in bedrock, where you work hard for a while then enjoy life for a bit at this new depth of understanding. The development of Concentration and Focus is more like trying to dig a mineshaft in a marsh. And, quite often after “a break-through”, the next sit will be particularly thick, agitated or difficult in some way. This is like getting to the next level of a video game. And you will have to “up your game”, by returning to the basics: accepting the present moment *as it is*; finding the breath and any sensations; kind observation of judgments or wanting things to be different; noticing how the attention now moves or doesn’t move; and, the only measure of *progress* is one’s equanimity *in this moment* (even if that is appreciating your lack of equanimity). “Storms” are part of the purification process and one day you will find you have dug an ocean.

Chapter 16: The Pool of Recollection

In chapter 11, *Story – A Model of Verbal Thought*, we looked at how Words differ from Dolls and Toys in the Imagination – each Doll and Toy representing one particular thing in the world, whereas, a Word is a concept that represents a group or category of things. In this chapter we will look at how focusing just within the frame of the story maintains our suspension of disbelief and makes Concepts come to life.

A word at the level of *concept* is like a rock: concrete, unchanging, easily picked up, moved around and passed from one person to another. At the level of concept, “whale” is the same as “whale” is the same as “whale”. But, on closer inspection this single thing turns out to be like a clump of dirt, an aggregate of past experiences, meanings, notions and emotions all bound together.

When dry, a dirt clod is concrete and easily manageable, but when submersed in water, it quickly dissolves and breaks up into its constituent parts. At the boundary of our conscious and unconscious is the place where Imagination unfolds and aspects of thought surface into our awareness. I call this place the *Pool of Recollection*.

A word held above the surface of the pool stays at the level of concept – easily handled, but also dry, lifeless and devoid of feeling. But, when a word is dropped into the pool, it creates a *splash of cognitive understanding* as it breaks apart into a tumult of its myriad associations – all of its meanings, “memories”, visual and tactile notions swirl about in that realm just between our conscious and unconscious.

In the first half of a moment when a concept has been activated, notions swirl about like bubbles in an eddy’s turbulence. Some notions might be larger or stronger than others, but often no particular image, feeling, emotion or “memory” clearly stands out or is easily discernible. However, if attention lingers for a second longer, the display starts to calm and notions begin to separate and surface or pass by again, but more slowly – some images and “memories” that initially flashed by, return to consciousness with more clarity and detail.

With still deeper curiosity and attention, one might notice that the running commentary of the “inner voice” is watching and influencing the display – and ***Recollection is understood to be a creative process in which nothing is ever static or the same, but always forming/displaying new associations/***

connections/arrangements. With deep attentiveness to the process of recollection each activation of a word is a novel display of notions and emotional charge; and “whale” is different than “whale” is different than “whale”.

With yet deeper, quieter, softer attention (bordering on sleep) awareness drops under the surface of the pool and while still awake a person relaxes into an oceanic expanse or enters a conscious dream state. This is not the goal or work of Vipassana; this is floating in the Realm of Imagination with awareness off of the body; it does not engender wisdom.

When we are listening to a story, each word is quickly activated by being dropped into the pool. The concept is only allowed to activate our associations long enough to allow us to find our own matching doll or toy or to trigger the initial gestalt (overall feelings and meanings) of the concept. Quickly scooped back up, the concept or the matching figurine then takes its place in the newly forming map/model/scene that is being built *just above* the surface of the pool.

Even though each concept is quickly removed, *aspects of each concept continue to ripple in the pool and the emotional physiology.* As more and more words/concepts from the story are activated, the pool and emotional physiology is filled/agitated by traces of all the notions of concepts and relationships within the display. This psycho-emotional commotion is what gives <life> to the story.

Whether we are thinking our own thoughts or taking in another person’s story, for our models of reality to seem real and our models of Imagination to be interesting, it is crucial that one’s attention remains at the level of **story** – that our attention stays predominantly focused within the new scene, just above the pool. As long as attention doesn’t deepen past the surface of the display to become aware of the whole process, the deception of reality is maintained and the story seems to have an intellectual/psychological/ emotional existence of its own.

Our ability to rearrange *our past experience* into something that we believe to be both new and real is most noticeable when the listener does not already have an exact matching doll/toy/map-object from previous experience to add to a scenario. Without a matching object, the listener must rearrange pieces of past experience to create a new object. For instance, if I am unfamiliar with the whale you are talking about, I will take my concept for “whale” and all my counterparts of the other words you are

using to describe your particular whale and dip them into my pool of recollection to create a splash of cognitive/emotional experience. Before noticing that this new whale is being construed entirely from *my own old experience*, the experience is scooped out the pool and collected into a new object and treated as if it has an existence all its own – *the whale you are talking about*.

Memory...?

Part of the intellect's deception is for us to believe that our experience of "memory" is an *accurate recall of past experience*. Because it is an affront to intellectual security, it can be difficult to acknowledge that there is no such thing as accurate recall or "true memory". Whether a person is aware of it or not, **the creative process of recollection is just as active with "memories" as with any other aspect of imagination/recollection.**

A "memory of the past" is no different than any other creative display within the Imagination, for example building a display of the future. If I am planning a party for next month, I have a model <next month's party>. Each time I want to work on "the party", I activate the model and begin playing with possibilities, often creating dozens of secondary models to *try out* new ideas. All these scenarios then get scooped up together as the **newest** aggregate of <next month's party>.

Working with our models of the real past is no different than working with our models of the future, except we deny our involvement in the creative process.

Memories are stored, as any other concept, as a dirt clod, an aggregate of: dolls, toys, ideas, activity and emotions. When the memory of an event is dropped into the pool of recollection, it breaks apart into its myriad associations. At this point the event is under the influence of creativity and feedback from the person's *current mental and emotional state* which reevaluates and usually, unconsciously, rearranges the psychological and emotional importance of the events. Since the past is the past and the *facts cannot change*; any modifications and rethinking are treated as just making our *understanding* of the facts of the event *more accurate*. When the event is scooped back up out of the pool and re-solidified as a concept, it is not treated as the *newest* configuration of the event, but is treated as the *exact same* event; but, the event can have been vastly rewritten, especially concerning the underlying emotional charge.

Even when the *emotional* rewrite is intense, for example, at the end of a love-relationship, we still believe that the *facts of past* can't change. However, psychologists are learning just how easy it is to alter a person's memory, even planting new *facts*.

Why memories and dreams seem real...

When you look out at the world, you organize your matching figurines into a display of <the present surroundings> just above the Pool of Recollection. Your attention is embedded in one of the figurines to be the "me"-doll. And, in this display, just above the pool of recollection, is where your *game of life* plays out. These displays with their psychological and emotional importances are gathered as a clump of associations and stored as <memories>. When we are remembering an event, we have dropped the clump for that <memory> into the Pool of Recollection and have started to pluck out certain details to begin to reconstruct enough of an experience to satisfy our intentions for recalling that "memory". For example, answering a friend's question, "What did you have for lunch yesterday?"

Thinking, listening, reading, movies, imagination, dreams and memory can all seem *very real* because they are just arrangements of **the same medium, the same "stuff"**, that we use to initially make our "real life" dolls and toys when we create our *experience of the present moment*; **the stuff of "reality", stories, movies and dreams is one and the same; it is all artifice of the Imagination in and above the Pool of Recollection!**

Chapter 17: Three Analogies

People often wonder why the beginning Vipassana course has to be 10-days long. One of the reasons (that I see; again, all of this is not official anything, but just my take on things) is that the course has to be long enough to create enough strength of concentration and sensitivity so that you actually feel a difference. A shorter course would be like going to the gym for 4 days – you would be all achy and sore but there would be no long term effects and no deep appreciation for the benefits of exercise. A 10-day course is like going to the gym 6 days a week for a month with a personal trainer. When you have finished, there is no question – you will be a different person. After the course, the practice is to meditate for one hour – two times a day, once in the morning and once in the afternoon or evening. This would be like doing push-ups and sit-ups at home to maintain your fitness; our concentration/attention is like a muscle that needs to be exercised to be maintained and grow.

Eventually, either because your fitness is slacking or you are ready for the next level, you will get back to the gym for a stint with your trainer. At this point in your meditation practice you will sign up for another course.

In Vipassana, we are not just developing the strength of our concentration, we are sharpening our instrument; we are increasing our *sensitivity* to more and more subtle sensations. Like building strength, this is a process that develops with time. Be as kind to yourself if you were trying to learn to read Braille. At first it would be a challenge to just discern where the patches of little bumps start and stop for paragraphs. But, with patience and persistence your nervous system will change and with time you will be able to detect sentences, words and eventually individual letters. Any moment that your attention is on your body is a major shift in consciousness. Follow the instructions as they are given to you during the course and your sensitivity to subtler levels of attention will develop.

People often talk about the “path” of enlightenment. But, I often think of it as a river.^{6,7,8,9} A path carries a sense that we are personally responsible for

⁶ Some people might call this the River Dhamma (or Dharma). Dhamma can refer to many things: the natural laws or intelligence of the universe; the truth or teachings

both: knowing in which direction to step in order to make progress; and that we are responsible for the rate of our progress (if I take bigger, faster steps, I will progress faster). But neither of these implications is accurate. The development of consciousness is a process and has its own wisdom; there is no way to know which direction to move except for directing the attention inwards. After every 10-day course I feel different, but I am not sure why or what exactly happened. And, it doesn't matter. The work is developing concentration, sensitivity and equanimity with an appreciation of change at all levels of experience.

The river of consciousness is always there, always flowing. It knows where to and how fast. *Our job is simply to get in the river*; the rest takes care of itself. As soon as any of our attention is within the framework of the body, we are in the river. The more of our attention that is within the framework of the body at any one moment, the further out we are in the current. The more subtle our sensitivity, the more easily we are swept along. And, the more time we spend with our awareness on the body, the further along we

that carry truth; the way or path of consciousness; the process of increasing consciousness; or, a practice that opens one to that process.

⁷ As soon as anything is capitalized or there is the mention of "enlightenment" it is easy to think "Religion". But a buddha has no interest in religion. Vipassana is exercise in calming, training, taming the mind and increasing our sensitivity to sensations. There is also a strengthening of non-judgment and (something we will go into in more detail later) an appreciation of the changing nature of all our experience. For all this to work a person *does need* to have the desire to be *good*. This doesn't mean that you have to be good, but willing to work to be kinder both to yourself and others. The process will take care of the rest.

⁸ If a practice is to be universal, it is important that no part of it creates division: No focus on words, sounds, images or people as any of these can have special meaning or significance to an individual or group of people. But, everyone has a body and everyone breathes. By focusing on nothing but the body and the breath - there is no division. Vipassana practice is universal; it is for everyone.

⁹ Some people bring special clothes, food or chanting to their practice. It is said that eventually a vegetarian diet will feel right. Some clothes might be more comfortable, but this is not necessary. At first I was surprised by the chanting and a few of the beginning formalities. But, I noticed that voicing a desire to learn the Vipassana technique did build a level of commitment to the course (and as it turned out, any help in this department is of great value). During the first course and also in a 9-day advanced course I learned that the chantings are Gautama Buddha's instructions for the technique, why the technique works and words of encouragement.

are carried. Other than that, we have no control. It is the same river for all of us; it just depends where in the river we are at and how deeply we are in it. We might barely have stepped in and the next thing we are in rapids hitting boulders or going off a cliff. Or, we may be days in deep concentration but in water that is barely moving.

“The only gauge for progress is your equanimity.” – S.N. Goenka

Whether we are three days into the practice or three days from enlightenment, there are only two noteworthy aspects of any experience during meditation: 1) that all experience comes from change and is itself changing. And, 2) that all experience is observed, *as it is*, in equanimity, without judgment, without reaction.

PART TWO – Meditation

Chapter 18: Appreciating Change, Noticing Sensations and Equanimity

The Mind's veil of "reality" divorces us from the power, beauty, kindness and connection of Universal Nature. In order to create and maintain the deception of "reality":

- 1) The Mind mitigates CHANGE by creating various levels of stability and permanence.
- 2) The Mind invents SEPARATION, defines objects; and instills values which impel JUDGMENT.
- 3) The Mind then tries to ORCHESTRATE all aspects of our lives by using SENSATIONS to prompt our mental and physical REACTIONS.

Now we can see what a meditation technique must provide in order to hinder and dismantle the effects of the Mind and open experience to Reality.

- Meditation must develop awareness of CHANGE.
- Meditation must develop the KINDNESS of deep CONNECTION.
- Meditation must develop Equanimity which is: NON-REACTIVITY/ NON-JUDGMENT (mental and physical calmness and stillness).
- And, meditation must develop our ability to notice the *entire* FIELD OF SENSATIONS (throughout the entire body) by which the mind attempts to control all aspect of our lives.

Vipassana Meditation

Vipassana meditation involves four main techniques. (A little bit confusing, one of these techniques is called "Vipassana Scanning Technique".) The four techniques are: Body-Breath Awareness, Anapana, Vipassana Scanning Technique and Metta.

The main invitation in the first three techniques is to place our attention on or in the body. To appreciate why this simple practice is so powerful, it is helpful to understand what role the *attention* plays in maintaining the deception of "reality".

In order for a display of Imagination to seem real, we must maintain a certain level of focus, not too close or not too far. Whether we are watching T.V. or meditating, if the mind starts to feel uncomfortable with

how we are paying attention, it will seduce the attention away to a different level of attention or to another display of thought that will seem more important, more passionate, more upsetting, more violent, etc. Or, it will distract us by making us fidgety, sleepy, bored, anxious, heavy or sore.

It is easy to believe that we see the world as it actually is and that our experience of what is going on inside our bodies is also direct and unfiltered. However, this is not true. Our Imagination edits and orchestrates *all* of our perception. My favorite example of just how easily the Imagination edits sensations from our experience is in the blinking of the eyes. We blink every three to five seconds, but unless we are paying close attention, the intellect edits out this fairly large movement of the facial muscles and the repetitive black-outs. But, with concentrated attention we can notice our blinking. However, as soon as our attention is directed elsewhere, blinking again disappears from our experience.

Some of this editing is just removing sensations that would just be a distraction, like the touch of our clothing or the blinking of our eyes. Some of the editing is denial – deleting or contorting experiences that are psychologically awkward. ***But, a huge part of the intellect's editing removes the sensations in and on the body by which the intellect orchestrates all our feelings, thoughts, "memories", words, actions and inaction.***

If we are unaware of these sensations, we are but puppets on strings. But, like the blinking of our eyes, *with concentrated attention these sensations can be noticed.*

Although a simple task, placing (and maintaining) the awareness within the framework of the body is extremely powerful. Because our "inner voice" seems to emanate from somewhere inside the skull, it is easy to assume that all aspects of Thought take place *inside us*. But, the visual and even tactile aspects of imagination are not in our heads or in the body – they are off the body and projected somewhere "out in the world".

In order for our thoughts to seem real and/or to run at full force, the intellect/imagination pulls our attention off our body – usually somewhere in front of us, but off of the midline (the midline is used to focus on the physical world). This "lifting" of the attention off of the body and the projection of the display of thought somewhere else usually goes unnoticed. For example, when we are recalling an event or listening to another person's story, we project partial or full attention in the direction of the

place where the event occurred. If we are thinking about a person, we direct attention to the place in the world where we last saw the person or where we think they are now. And, when we are creating a purely imaginary scenario, we create a world somewhere off of our bodies in which the events can take place.

Although we rarely notice it in ourselves, we can watch other people looking towards their different scenarios of thought by noticing the movement of their eyes as they think or talk. As a person's meditation practice develops, the lifting of attention off the body and into worlds of thought becomes more evident.

Noticing Sensations

After an introduction and some formalities, participants begin practicing Body-Breath Awareness. This is a good place to start because the movement of the body during the breath-cycle creates sensations that most of us are able to notice. The invitation is to just watch the natural breath "as it is". This is a bit of a trick request because the very act of noticing the breath probably changes how you are breathing. But, the idea is to notice the sensations of your *now conscious* breathing. This is just a starting point as *awareness at this large a level does not induce deep change*. Noticing sensations at the level of deep change requires Concentration, Focus and Sensitivity. And courses will go immediately to work using the techniques of Anapana to hone awareness.

Concentration

There are two aspects in developing Concentration. One is lengthening the duration that the attention stays on task before being lured away to something else. The other aspect is shortening the time it takes before realizing that awareness has strayed and has been lost in thought.

Focus

Anapana develops Focus by decreasing the area of attention. This is done in the first few days by noticing sensations of the breath at smaller and smaller regions around the nose and upper lip – working towards an area about the size of a fingertip.

With concentration and focus our breath naturally slows and the body naturally stills. For example, if there is a faint noise in the distance, we can increase our sensitivity by concentrating as much of our attention as possible to our hearing in that direction. If this is really important to us, our

breathing will become slight and we might even stop breathing altogether; at this level of focus, even the noise of our breathing and the movement of our bodies are a distraction.

This same slowing of the breath occurs while meditating; when there is deep interest in the sensations of our experience – the breath slows down and we are able to notice finer, more subtle sensations.

The natural slowing of the breath in combination with the instruction that “whenever there are two or more sensations, notice the most subtle”, ensures that the practice effortlessly moves towards greater subtlety.

In Anapana, participants feel for sensations of the breath at the upper lip and nostrils. As concentration and focus develop, participants are invited to continue to feel for the “touch of the breath” even when we are not breathing, for example, during the slight pauses between inhales and exhales. What the participant might notice is that there are dynamics of sensations at the skin that remain whether we are breathing or not. What seemed to be movement of air is actually subtle vibrations that Goenka says are a “bio-electrical dynamic that takes place in all living tissue.” This is outside my experience, but I can tell that it is a level of awareness that changes the nature of my perception; how I perceived *ache*, *pain* and *physical discomfort*. It is also a level of concentration that creates distance from the tumult of the emotions.

Honing the attention through Anapana is just preparation for the real work of meditation, which is ***guiding one’s attention over the entirety of the body***. I put this in bold because it is important to understand this next step.

Many people define, understand or limit “meditation” as *concentration*, *focus* and *stillness*. Developing these attributes calm the mind, clear the sensory physiology and give the emotional physiology a rest. This has benefits and often, when attention leaves the object of focus and returns to taking in the surroundings, the world feels different, both softer and more vibrant.

With very deep concentration, but still in the realm of Imagination, people can have all kinds of powerful experiences. But, as told by S.N. Goenka, these are the experiences Gautama Buddha left behind; they were missing something; they weren’t making him a better person; they weren’t clearing out his Conditioning and purifying his mind at the roots. These techniques lack the wisdom and understanding of the deepest nature of Existence, they

don't take one to final liberation. When he understood the limited nature of the meditation techniques he was practicing, The Buddha began a search for different tools – eventually re-inventing/rediscovering Vipassana.

The sensations, through which we are controlled, are *everywhere in the body* – from the top of the head to the tips of the toes – from skin to bones. Once attention has been sharpened, participants learn Vipassana Scanning Technique. This is where meditation actually begins – participants learn how to guide their awareness over the entire surface of the body, simply noticing any sensation that is available at that moment *as it is* at that area and moving on.

A person will probably soon notice that there are places on the surface of the body that seem to be blank, devoid of sensations and that the attention does not easily move onto or through these areas. This is fine. It is important to remember that *no sensation at all* is just as valuable as any particular sensation. It is an opportunity to practice observing *what is* without judgment.

The flow of guiding sensations is always there, everywhere throughout the body, 24 hours a day – 7 days a week, orchestrating our reasoning, righteousness and drama in daylight and our unconscious and semi-conscious dream-worlds. Like noticing the blinking of the eyes, in order to bring some sensations to our awareness, all we need to do is focus on them. However, there are other sensations for which our attention lacks the concentration and refinement needed to be able to notice them. But with experience, sensitivity will develop and awareness will begin to soften into and/or penetrate these areas as well to reveal plenty of sensations.

The stream of sensations is always there, everywhere, orchestrating our lives. If the awareness still lacks the development to notice certain sensations, these sensations could have more control over us. This is why developing *equanimity* is so important; whether we can notice the sensations or not, if we are *not reacting*, we are free from conditioning's control.

There are several variations of Vipassana “scanning” depending on the size of focus and the speed in which the attention is moved around the body. These variations are introduced throughout the course. One variation is not better than another. What is important is simply noticing, without judgment, any sensation (or lack thereof) in that area then moving on.

There is an important “station” in the development of one’s practice when one is able to notice some kind of sensation everywhere on the surface of the body. So, it is important to scan every part of the body on each scan – taking time to explore the *blank* or *thick* areas as well.

Feeling the entire body, I shall breathe in; thus he trains himself.

Feeling the entire body, I shall breathe out; thus he trains himself.

– Gautama Buddha

In this last quote, it is important to appreciate that the meditator is not training himself to *choose* or *control* when to breathe; the work is to observe the breath *as it is*. Once we have developed sensitivity to “the entire body”, the Buddha is instructing us to notice the space before the breath has begun. One possible experience is noticing the building of the sensations of ***the impulse*** to breathe. Here, we have no intention of stopping the breath from happening, but ***we are training ourselves to notice the space between an impulse and an impulsive reaction!***

We saw that *focus* naturally slows and stills the breath and body and increases sensitivity. As most patterns of breathing have natural pauses during the transitions in the breath cycle, the stillness and opportunity for sensitivity are already provided. As awareness floats in the *stillness* when there is no breath and as of yet there are no sensations building to create the impulse to breathe, it is possible that awareness opens up/expands into subtlety, calm, quietness and timeless spaciousness.

Some schools of meditation invite participants to actively lengthen the pauses between breaths, probably with the intention of facilitating these types of experiences. But, Vipassana is firm that the work is not to *look for* or *try to induce* any particular experience. The instructions are: Accept things as they are; if there is more than one sensation, focus on the most subtle; and, be kind to yourself when you have been lured into a moment of disappointment or lack of patience. This is the work that leads to the final goal.

Some styles of meditation focus on specific areas of the body and are looking for certain sensations/experiences. The drawback of this advice is that a person develops a search image and a preference for some sensations over others. But, no sensation is *better* or *more important* than others. There is nothing special about a sensation at the chest (“heart”) or forehead. And all visual experience, colors and images, should be quickly

ignored as most vision lifts the awareness off the framework of the body. Following visual notions might seem harmless, but Goenka is firm that, “it is *imperative* that the attention stays within the framework of the body.” And, I assure you that at greater levels of energy and deeper levels of concentration, to indulge an impulse to go with a visual display can be detrimental.¹⁰ Again, the purification of the mind is through awareness of the *sensations* of Conditioning, which are *tactile*.

Appreciating Change

Change is the Mind’s nemesis. The very first act of the Mind is to diminish change and create a sense of *stability* and *permanence* which it must do in order to begin building a world of surfaces, shapes and solid matter.

By appreciating change at all levels of experience, we weaken the very foundation of the mind-imagination, whether it is movement in “the physical world”, the flux of words and sounds of the inner voice, or the transitory nature of sensations. It is by noticing Change that experience opens up to Reality – constant change and infinite connection.

The very first act of the mind is to subdue change/create stability. In this stability, perception can isolate features and define objects. Then, to make these objects seem important and emotionally come to life, the mind gives value to each object and each relationship. And now, through a flood of sensations, the mind can spur emotions, judgments and reactions. Because every judgment requires stability, noticing Change debilitates judgment which supports Equanimity.

¹⁰ It would be remiss to not mention “kundalini” energy. It is a process of lesser or greater insistence that rearranges a person’s systems to handle greater amounts of energy and different sensitivities. (Read, *Living with Kundalini*, by Gopi Krishna.) This can be a gentle process, but for many it is a trauma. It can show up as nervous ticks, emotional outbursts, energetic firings and strong compulsions. It is also a strong creative force and probably the source of *the tortured artist*. A search on the Web shows that many people who have a kundalini experience work to quell, stop or prevent the process. It is everything I know that Vipassana techniques are the tools to abide with kundalini development. Developing concentration that keeps awareness within the body and developing the “felt sense” (the ability to notice tactile experience in as much of the body as possible) allows the process to continue without the trauma or drama. After a couple years of Vipassana practice, I invite you to look into a Kundalini Yoga practice. Its activities, if done with a little less vigor than usually taught, facilitates the process so that it needs to be much less insistent.

Chapter 19: Equanimity

Equanimity is defined as composure and calm. It can also be understood as *non-reactivity*. Everything that takes place in the Imagination is a **reaction** to sensations. Reactions are thoughts, emotions, talking, and large and small physical movement. We don't have to react, but how do we practice and develop non-reactivity?

Reaction as Thought

Non-reactivity is relaxed stillness, but we cannot simply decide to stop thinking or still the mind; the mind has its own momentum and a reserve of fuel which must be allowed to burn out before the mind will come to complete stillness. The mind is like a snow-globe that has already been agitated. There is nothing we can do to speed up the descent of the flakes around the figurines; any effort or reaction only brings more commotion to the world. All we can do is observe calmly and passively our inner dimension.

Therefore, mental non-reactivity is passive observation, without judgment or desire for anything to be different. Thoughts and Judgments will be there; we are not trying to stop or avoid them; we simply let them be. When we notice that our attention has been pulled back into the world of thought and judgment, we simply refocus attention back onto the body, and as breath and body slow, thoughts and judgments (although still running) lose power.

Minimizing the need for thoughts, interactions and choices

A large part of the success of a Vipassana retreat has to do with the schedule and the setup of the center. Everything possible is done to make sure that participants' basic needs are adequately, if not wonderfully, met. The only choice a participant really has to make is to decide whether to start brushing her teeth with the top or bottom row.

With everything provided for ten days, there is no need to plan, worry, or wrestle with decisions. The people who serve a course (who cook and clean) are gifting participants ten days of zero responsibility.

The recent past and upcoming future are our most active models. Ten days of retreat is long enough for most people drop into the present environment and let go of some of <what has happened> and <what we fear and hope will happen when the retreat is over>. Thoughts of impending future might rev up again on day 9 or 10, but a lot can happen in

ten days and we might not expect the world to still be the same as it was when we left it.

For the first nine days, participants do not talk or communicate with each other. This includes no eye contact. We are extremely social beings. By avoiding all social interaction, we avoid the commotion of interacting as well as the ensuing playback, rehashing, fantasizing and rehearsing of possible next encounters. Silence and social isolation are essential in quieting the mind and developing equanimity.

The more we appreciate that all thought, even thoughts of “reality”, are products of Imagination, thoughts become less interesting and it becomes somewhat easier for attention to stay with sensations. We begin to catch the moment when we are about to make a judgment or attach an emotion to a situation; “But, why that emotion?” We become aware that any emotion is subjective; I could just as easily say, “I was excited”, as say, “I was nervous.” If the situation is framed one way, <I am frustrated>. If framed in another way, <I am grateful>.

Zero Entertainment

The facilities at Centers are devoid of any easy form of entertainment. There are no books, no writing materials, no pictures, no altars, no sculptures, no figurative art. The mind will gravitate towards, if not pounce on, anyone of these objects and begin to weave an array of thoughts, emotions and projects.

Centers distance participants from the environments, the people, the objects and the substances that have become associated with our normal habitual patterns (or for some of us, our compulsive, addictive behaviors). The mechanism, the group of sensations that forms the impulse by which the mind tries to control us, is time dependent. By its very nature, all sensation is fleeting. Therefore, if we don't react almost immediately to an impulse that is trying to incite us to react, the impulse quickly dissipates. The frequency and duration for deeper, more ingrained, patterns of behavior are greater, but still time sensitive. Distance and separation from objects and environments of habit make it difficult to fulfill impulses and every unfulfilled impulse weakens the pattern and calms the mind.

Reaction as Physical Movement

All non-mental forms of habit and compulsion require physical movement to fulfill the impulse – I have to move to get my third bowl of ice cream or

light my cigarette. Large movement is a distraction that makes it difficult to delve into the Field of Sensations and notice subtler sensations. This can be engaging in a task, exercise or stretching. Fidgeting is just smaller movement that attempts to shrug off physical/psychological discomfort¹¹ and to keep attention distracted from subtlety.

Physical stillness stills the mind. Retreats move towards stillness by at times keeping movement within the Center boundaries, at times within the meditation hall, and starting on day five, occasionally practicing keeping the body as still as possible for one hour.

During the retreat we are not working on any particular ailment, behavior or psychological attribute. By practicing being as attentive and non-reactive as possible, *we are weakening all habitual behaviors/attributes that would normally be activated during a ten-day period of our lives.*

Learning to *sit still* and *doing nothing* are essential in developing Equanimity.

¹¹ Psychological and physical discomfort is one and the same thing; the mind and body are inextricably linked; our afferent physical structure is a mental structure that embodies and promotes our Conditioning.

Chapter 20: Posture

The instructions for Posture are simple: Sit in a comfortable position with back unsupported and straight and slightly lower the chin. If at all possible, sit on the floor using cushions as needed, otherwise sit in a chair.

The teacher Goenka offers that, “at some point Posture will become important.”

Otherwise, just as when you notice that the mind has wandered to calmly bring it back onto the body, when you notice that the body has slumped, you can gently bring it back into alignment.

Some styles of meditation are very firm about maintaining a straight spine and “good” posture, but Goenka’s courses do everything they can to not let us get distracted from the primary work of *accepting things as they are* and *developing sensitivity*. To be overly concerned with posture can be avoidance of dropping into deeper work.

When you have noticed that posture has strayed, there are two options. One is to not do anything except notice the sensations that come with this position and continue *accepting things as they are*. For those of us who fidget, this can be a strong practice.

But, if we opt to bring the body back into alignment, there are three ways to go about it. One is to abruptly rearrange oneself. Another is to calmly rearrange oneself. And the third is to guide the attention towards the dynamics of Natural Breath and Natural Posture. Depending on the level of attention and our general awareness of these dynamics, the extra vitality that comes with focus is enough to revitalize the dynamics that engender healthy alignment.¹²

Posture will become important on its own when practice develops past “noticing some kind of sensation everywhere on the surface of the body,” and the instructions are now to sometimes scan for internal structures as well. The final two Vipassana scanning techniques are a movement of attention near the spine. Whether done subtly or “piercingly and penetratingly” this work fosters alignment. And at times some people experience a free flow of energy that all but insists on healthy alignment.

¹² This is the core of the classes I offer: Natural Posture and Natural Breath in meditation, yoga and daily movement.

PART THREE – Choice, Control and Addiction

Chapter 21: Choice

Choice seems so simple. We think a bit – reformatting some of our “past experience” to create several models of the future – and make a decision according to what is deemed to be <best> or <most important> (for example, <the most economical> or <the most fun>) and then take actions to honor that choice.

I go to the market and see before me: collard greens and kale. I had kale last week, so I choose collard greens. But, when I reach out, I don’t move towards the greens, I grab the kale. This might seem absurd or surprising, but why? Is every choice followed by actions that honor that choice? Am I the only person to have had the experience of choosing to do one thing and immediately doing the opposite?

We all do things that we wish we did not do. And, we all don’t do things that we wish we would. So, what governs our choices? And, what governs our actions? If both our choices and our actions are governed by the same understanding, why is there ever a discrepancy between what we want to do and our actual behavior?

Choice has two components: *selection* and *action towards fulfillment*. Most of the time, after an item or activity has been selected, a course of action leads to the chosen outcome. I choose kale over collard greens so I reach out and pick up a bunch of kale. Choice usually works. But, why does it ever fail?

Choice sometimes fails because the course of action needed to honor the choice is unclear, difficult or requires persistent effort. For example, if I decided to compete in the Olympics or write a play. But, choice often fails when the actions required to honor the selection are clear and simple, like uttering a sentence, picking something up, putting something down, or putting something in one’s body.

When the course of action is obvious and simple, **choice only seems to fail when we have chosen a healthy activity!** If I am choosing between ice cream and an apple and decide to eat a bowl of ice cream, no problem, I get up and go get it. However, if I decide to eat an apple, sometimes I get up and come back with a bowl (or two) of ice cream.

A healthy activity is one that: heightens sensitivities; sharpens attentiveness; moves towards a calm, productive energy; or, increases vitality. Unhealthy activity: moves towards lethargy or hyperactivity; dulls, numbs or poisons the body; or, creates regret, remorse, anger or heaviness.

It would be understandable if there were a mechanism that resisted or prevented unhealthy choice and actions. It would be understandable if there were a mechanism that pressured us towards or insisted upon healthful activity. But instead, the opposite seems to be true: **choice only seems to fail when one has chosen a healthy activity.** Not only is the healthy activity denied, but often, against reason, good intentions and willpower, ***we are compelled towards unhealthy actions.*** Why? What is the Mind thinking? Why can it be so difficult to initiate healthy activity, even when we know that we will feel better afterwards? What compels a person, even against one's will, to engage in detrimental or even life-threatening activity?

Chapter 22: Control

Working through the point-of-view of the “me”-doll, the mind creates a sense of choice and control. But, what actions and behaviors are actually under *complete* conscious control?

Here is a list of some of the things for which we have *partial* control: muscular/skeletal movement, posture, the content of our thoughts, attention, breath, inner voice, grammar, what we eat (or drink), how we eat, when we eat, staying awake.

These actions, which can be consciously controlled, return to autonomous functioning when attention fades or compulsion takes over.

We have seen that *attention* is the key to becoming more conscious – more aware of the sensations that are both the precursors of emotions and the impulses that attempt to control every aspect of our lives. So, what governs attention?

Back in Chapter 3, we looked at how Perception works: Before we notice anything, the *processing* part of the brain takes in the signals from the senses and compares them with past experience to look for object recognition. It is also using past experience to add color, shape and distances to the scene and to create new objects. Meanwhile, it is building sensations and flooding our physiology with chemicals to prepare us for mental and physical activity according to what has been deemed important. 4/10ths of a second later, the processing part of the brain shows the *awareness* part of the brain the display of our surroundings. And if all goes well (according to the mind and its conditioning), we react exactly as the mind wanted us to.

In order to get us to react the way it wants us to, the mind must make sure that we *direct our attention* to the object (or activity) that has been deemed of greatest importance.

While walking through the market, I am scanning my mind’s display of the tables and booths of the vendors. Again, my perception of the surroundings is always half a second behind. Nothing grabs my interest.

When the mind wants me to notice something, it intensifies that object by making its colors more vibrant, as well making the object appear both larger and closer than the surrounding objects. This may sound crazy, but this is

how it works. There is even a form of conscious communication and therapy, called Neuro-Linguistic Programming, which makes use of how the mind creates displays. In their mind's eye, the participants practice making objects larger or smaller, changing their brightness and sometimes moving the entire frame of a display closer or further away.

Before the processing brain has shown me the target object, it has started the physiology of desire: sensations of interest, yearning, lust, want. There is warmth building in my belly, chest and/or groin as well as pressure and expansion, twists, pangs and flushes in different locations. Now, to make sure my desire is directed to the right object, as the mind shows me the display of the intensified object, it also creates a swath or surge of sensations through the body that directs the attention towards that thing or person within our display of the external world. If I am unaware of these sensations, I will react accordingly and either start thinking about that object or start moving towards it.

*Humpty Dumpty [an egg or a canon] sat on a wall,
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
All the king's horses and all the king's men
Couldn't put Humpty together again.*

– English nursery rhyme before 1870

Chapter 23: Addiction

Addiction has four parts: the craving; the surrender; fulfillment; and the aftermath. Each part has its addictive qualities.

It is easy to believe that the chemical compounds within a substance and how they affect our brain chemistry are the *cause* of the addiction. But, the deepest level of addiction has nothing to do with the substance itself! This is evident in substance-less addictions, like gambling. ***The addiction is to the sensations*** that underlie each part of the process. The substance or activity is unimportant; the mind only cares that we gravitate back to the “*same*” substance or activity because the mind feels safe in repetition/habit and it helps sustain the belief that it is the *object* or *substance* that is causing the addictive behavior.

The ***object*** of desire makes little difference because it the ***desire/craving*** that is the drug. Because it is less complicated and less fearful, passion can be sublimated through food and a piece of cake becomes as important as sex.

This next bit is very helpful in understanding the human condition... As we saw earlier while walking through the market, in order to control us the mind has to be able to pull us out of our inertia and into mental or physical activity; through sensations, the mind has to be able to create a ***sense of importance*** that is ***so powerful*** that it will actually get us up and moving towards some, usually ***non-essential***, object or action.

What this means is: ***the impulse or craving for an object or activity is almost always more intense, alluring and pleasurable than the actual act of fulfillment! Fulfillment rarely (or never?) lives up to expectations.***

It doesn't matter that it is just a piece of cake, ***the surge of sensations that constitute a sense of importance (whether it be desire, craving, fear or aversion) is the most potent force the mind/Imagination can create!***

The world created by the Imagination is vapid and lifeless; the mind cannot create experience that “is deep, difficult to see, difficult to understand, tranquil, excellent, beyond the reach of mere logic, subtle, and to be realized only by the wise.” All the mind can do is take a universe that is resplendent in union, calm intelligence and quiet love, freeze-dry the life out of it and push it off a wall to shatter into a billion pieces. What we experience as life is the continual piecing and re-piecing of the myriad *separate* objects the mind has created and the plugging in of the emotions of our animal nature as the pieces are continually shifted about. There is no thought (no arrangement of the pieces within the mind/Imagination) that will ever be truly satisfying; there is no, “finely figuring it out” that opens the mind up to true connection and divine beauty ; all the king’s horses and all the king’s men can never put true happiness, true peace, true harmony together again.

Lust; desire; craving; fury; concern; care; delight; defeat; a modicum of joy, happiness or affiliation; anxiety; panic and victory are as close as the mind can get to an experience of universal importance.¹³

Sometimes these surges of self-expression are all encompassing, but mostly the impulses are tiny to moderate and the mind does not expect us to actually fulfill them.¹⁴ These nearly constant little hits (sensitive people report that they run at near 70 hits per second.) are like putting a cocktail of lust, apprehension, care, concern and hostility in a patient’s intravenous drip-bag; and, moment to moment there is something coursing through my mundane, cardboard life that seems to be <truly, deeply important>.

The eradication of craving triumphs over all suffering. – Gautama Buddha

But, where is the misery and suffering if we just enjoy sex or a piece of cake now and then? The suffering comes in because we ***never*** leave ***well enough***

¹³ Yes, kindness, charity and service do exist and developing these qualities while we are developing sensitivity is an important part of the practice. There is no ownership in *grace* and *right doing*; *grace* and *right doing* is never ***our*** doing.

¹⁴ For example, with lust... I know that this yearning is not going to be fulfilled by all the wonderful strangers that I encounter crossing the street or by past loves. But there can still be a nearly constant firing of passion. Whether it is in creating a new doll or by reactivating an old doll, the mind will find a way to plug in sensations for biology’s most powerful inclination. (A buddha in her last lifetime still has sensations of yearning for procreation.)

alone. The mind is trapped in a paradox: it is dependent upon *stability* and *permanence*, which do not exist except in the Imagination, at the same time, it is terrified of *stillness*. Afraid of doing nothing, the Mind constantly spurs us to either crave and cling to pleasurable experience or live in apprehension that a past negative experience might reoccur

All experience is fleeting. We suffer because we cling to pleasurable experience and don't want it to end. Rather than just dissolve into the joy of the new present moment, the Mind invites (cattle-prods us) us to start yearning to re-experience this <past pleasure>. Yes, we get another hit of craving and another moment of something being <deeply valuable>, but then comes more misery: disappointment, concern, sadness, frustration or anger that this is not what is happening here and now.

The eradication of craving triumphs over all suffering. – Gautama Buddha

We also suffer when we are concerned that a negative experience will happen again.^{15,16} The present moment is fine, safe, tranquil, and there is no indication of a possible reoccurrence in the present surroundings. But, the undercurrent of sensations has us in a state of alert. This state of alert or alarm can be *triggered by* (or more accurately, *plugged into*) certain situations or it can be so prevalent and persistent (our drip-bag so swollen with apprehension) that it creates a background of anxiety – a nearly constant triggering of *fight, flight or freeze* that is written off as part of life. The subtext of aversion and avoidance can be, “frustration or anger that I have to be on guard,” exhaustion, despondency, defeat, victimhood, apathy, hostility or hate.

Surrender

The second part of addiction is *surrender*. This facet of addiction varies depending on how the addiction is being used by the mind.

¹⁵ Please know that some people are addicted to difficulty and unpleasant experiences so they can run their stories that <people are idiots> or <things never go right>.

¹⁶ Two of my perennial favorites that keep me in a broken world and out of the perfection of the moment (for example, the plate of food before me is lovely) are <something could be better> or <something should be different>.

If the person is happy to actuate the desire, then there is little sensation here except the pleasure of accepting. But, very often the mind creates a battlefield by creating an oppositional desire – not wanting to give into the craving, <oh, I shouldn't>. Now, between these polarities the mind can plug in all its <truths>, emotions and stories of *self-worth*. For example, <if I were a stronger person...> or <I really deserve this (treat)>.

Often, the **main purpose** of an addiction is **the sensations** behind the emotions of **struggle and beating oneself up!** After all, it is just a piece of cake; it isn't going to kill me.

It doesn't matter if I eat the cake or not; more important than actually **fulfilling** the desire is that the mind has me completely caught up in thought and reacting as it wishes with thoughts and emotions: hope, anxiety, control, victory, exasperation, etc.

It doesn't matter if I eat the cake or not; more important than actually **fulfilling** the desire is our **emotional reactions**; for the mind, **OUR REACTIONS** to its sensations **IS LIFE ITSELF!** Our **emotional reactions** are what the mind **substitutes for true connection and joy**.

Throughout the battle the mind is running full throttle, reifying the deeper personal <truths> and stories that are at the core of our *sense-of-self* and "who we are". Addictive behaviors and certain thought patterns are so recurrent because the mind can only *fill in* or suspend the dynamics that constitute the *self* for so long before needing another hit of certain feelings/emotions/sensations.

If we don't have at hand the substance that we regularly use, the mind will find some other way in which to run behaviors that support our deepest <truths> and <stories>. And, as can be seen in "dry drunks", sometimes the mind will forego the pretense of a trigger and exert enormous pressure for us to give in to bouts of belligerence without having had anything to drink. In such instances it is easier to see that it is *succumbing to the sensations* of anger and/or loss of control that is important, not the *substance*.

People, who engage in diets, often are just creating a stronger battlefield. Each person they tell about their diet, the deeper they are entrenched – making the sensations that churn under the internal dialogue that comes with each dietary success or failure, just that much more intense.

Fulfillment

Because the sensations of craving and desire have to be powerful enough to actually motivate a person to action, the **craving** for an object or activity is almost always more alluring and pleasurable than the **actual act of fulfillment**. Fulfillment rarely lives up to expectations.

Hence, “buyer’s regret” – you get home and you don’t feel as good as you did when you saw the advertisement or thought about it. There are mechanisms that help mitigate the disappointment of having fulfillment fall short of one’s expectations. But usually, it involves desire for **more of the same** (because it is that *desire* (the craving) that feels so good; not the consuming of the product) or the mind starts a search image (craving) for something <better>. We are addicted to **craving** itself!

That is why halfway through a piece of cake, I can already be thinking about a second helping. Even when I am noticing that without the help of some beverage, I am having trouble swallowing, that the icing is greasy on the tongue and the roof of my mouth and that there is a burning sensation in the throat, the *surge of attraction* to the second piece feels great. (We will take a look soon at why some of us actually like the unpleasant feelings connected to eating store-bought cake.)

Going back to surrender... if we have allowed a battlefield to be created, we have filled our physiology with tension. Now, if the mind allows us to muster the willpower to not indulge, we can run sensations of self-congratulations. But here’s the kicker – **Succumbing to craving often has some of the most pleasant sensations possible!** “Giving in” brings a flood of relief and warmth.¹⁷ And, giving over to something that is bigger and beyond triggers a deep sense of wellbeing, even when succumbing to self-destructive behavior!¹⁸ This can have the surge, sweetness, heat, loss of control, being swept away, climax and a *losing of oneself* akin to rapture, passion and sexual release. This surrender to something that is beyond me

¹⁷ (Or Guilt, if that is the addiction of choice.)

¹⁸ It was astonishing to finally understand the sensations behind some of my most dangerous and compelling behaviors. In the twisted logic of the mind, I was trying to punish or torture my parents by making them watch me sabotage my life (even though they were both dead). Revenge, all acts based in Righteousness and “teaching a person a lesson” are so dangerous because they come with sensations that *feel good*.

feels good, but it is almost always accompanied by a loss of consciousness, a *whiting out*, a detachment from responsibility.

Sexual or energetic release, or choosing to use psychotropic substances in which the attention leaves the framework of the body is a *dissipation of energy*, a “checking out”, a vacation in *unconsciousness*, not a “checking in” and an opening to greater consciousness.

The Aftermath

When the actual experience is done and gone, the mind now has at its disposal the means to revitalize any <truth> or <story> that it wants to by simply activating the “memory” of that event. If I need a pat on the back, I can think of the time I won 200 dollars. (Even though I just lost 500.) The purpose of overeating at night might be to cover the feelings of sadness and anger about going to bed alone. And then in the morning, with thoughts of overeating the night before, I can wake up to <sadness> and <low self-esteem>.

But something is still missing. Why are we like this?

PART FOUR: Biological Importance, Stasis and Change, and Love: Fear and Fury

Chapter 24: Biological Importance

Our Conditioning, the seed of our existence, orchestrates a life within the world of Imagination that promulgates our deepest values, needs, purposes, <truths>, (and, if this is a “spiritual journey” maybe life lessons).¹⁹

Remember that when Conditioning comes to the world in human form it must honor our biological roots; our insanity makes a little more sense from the perspective of mammalian evolution and the evolutionary forces of stasis and change.

As the earth, moon and sun tumble together through space, they will never again be in the same place in the same arrangement. But for billions of years, the earth’s seasons have come round to a configuration that is again similar to last year’s arrangement. Within these cosmological cycles of similarity biological patterns of existence reside.²⁰

Survival of a specific species is not part of biological or universal importance; species come and go.

Biological importance at the level of an organism is an understanding that orchestrates behavior that completes a lifecycle: a pattern of maintenance (metabolism); interaction with the environment; interaction with other species; the generation of other organisms with similar life cycles (usually through budding or offspring, but as long as an organism helps other members propagate the species, individual procreation is not essential); and death. A lifecycle might also involve maturation and interaction with organisms of the same species.

¹⁹ It is interesting that it is often when people are contending with their out-of-control nature that they begin to look for “spiritual” practice.

²⁰ Human efforts to know how or why patterns of energy ever organized into biological understanding can stymie one towards humility and beatitude or rile one to righteousness and/or genocide.

Chapter 25: Stasis and Change

Every life balances the enormous creative forces of **stasis** (maintaining previous patterns of existence) and **change** (trying new patterns of existence); you and every other organism presently alive are the newest participants in an evolutionary dance of fury, fear, nurture, reproduction and death that has been unfolding for at least the last 4 billion years. Unwittingly or not, everything you do contributes to the dance of creation and eternally influences everything that will be. Fortunately, continued participation in creation (survival) does not require perfection.²¹ As the world unfolds to cycles of similarity, a trait that was once precisely honed to the state of the world might a generation later have the species on the edge of survival. The operative word in the billowing of evolution is “adequate”. If an organism does not have adequate actions to participate in the unfolding of the world, it dies. If a species does not have adequate actions to participate in the unfolding of the world, it goes extinct. The pressures of evolution are severe but do not involve bad or good. A trait is neither bad nor good. An individual or action is neither bad nor good. Evolution is trial.²²

Some species, like bacteria, thrive on change. But for mammals, drastic change in the world’s cycles is rare.²³ Parents’ patterns are divine in the wash of evolution; they adequately negotiated the most recent cycles of existence to come round to reproductive success. To let go of parental patterns is tantamount to death. A baby mosquito is probably not going to fare well if it tried to live life like a giraffe.

Although, the pressures to hold on to previous patterns of existence are enormous, *eventually the world will change in a way that no longer supports*

²¹ Any sense that something is *less than perfect* is a distortion of the immediate by the human intellect. In biological evolution, *adequate* is *perfectly adequate*.

²² Many people read, “trial and error.” But “error” was thoughtfully omitted; where is the error in evolution or creation?

²³ Mammalian and human history has taken place in a relatively short period of geologic and climatic calm; the Earth’s history is more dramatic and drastic than most people realize. A show on human evolution said that so far deep rearrangement of human understanding has only occurred about every 10,000 years. One of their examples was the fashioning of string and a fishing hook which opened up travel by sea and deeply shifted the way humans could travel, exchange, explore, conquer and control the world.

those patterns. For biological life to continue, change must prevail. Continued biological existence depends upon constant trial of new patterns to provide pressure at the edges of survival, so that when those edges move, biological life can move with it. This means that a part of the population must be constantly pushed to the edges or beyond, to either be sacrifice or the genesis of a new way of life.

How adamantly are you holding onto the patterns that worked for your parents? If necessary, are you willing to risk everything to try a different way of life?²⁴ However daunting the task may seem, no matter how you see yourself and your contribution to evolution, don't worry, you are well equipped. You *and every other organism now alive* are descended from a line of organisms in which each generation (*without a single failure in over 4 billion years!*) negotiated the physical and social environments of their generation to come round to produce at least one offspring whose patterns of behavior, learning and growth also enabled them to complete another life cycle.

You (and every organism currently on the planet) are the latest in an unbroken string of successes in which each parent was strong enough, smart enough, brash enough, mean enough, cowardly enough, sexy enough and lucky enough to adequately deal with everything life brought his or her (or its) way. Deep within the dynamics/patterns of one's ancestry is an understanding of life that balances enough stability to participate in Earth's cycles of similarity while providing enough flexibility to adequately change when change in the world requires. Somewhere in your inheritance, in your deepest nature, is an understanding of the crucial balance of the creative forces of stasis and change.

²⁴ Please take a deep moment to appreciate the enormity of the situation: In the human psyche/condition (in you right now) are forces, or pressures, so powerful that you will kill or fight to the death to hang on to these patterns (or in essence, to be your parents). Where are these forces? Can you feel them? How do they work? At the same time there must be an even **greater** force (near by? constantly lurking? always at the ready?) to shatter those patterns so that when needed, change can prevail. Are these forces obvious in you right now? What is suicide?

Chapter 26: Love: Fear and Fury

When a lioness, *with all her being*, stalks, pursues and kills a gazelle to feed her cubs, is that not an act of love?

When a gazelle, *with all her being*, flees from an attacking lioness, escapes and returns to suckle her young, is that not an act of love?

Fear and fury are enormous powers in creation's unfolding – with life in the balance, which animal will survive to pass its understanding to future generations?

Whether through genetic inheritance or learning, somehow the next generation must understand what to pursue, what to avoid, what to run away from, what to kill, and what to die for. These fears, furies, hurts and desires form the emotional landscape²⁵ that channels an organism towards or away from certain behaviors.

There are developmental stages in the life of a human that help hide from us these pressures to act like our parents. Until the age of five or six, it is easy to see children emulating the behaviors of their parents and other adult role models; except for not meeting their every need, *parents can do no wrong*. Then comes puberty and the child distances herself from her parents and often *parents can do no right*. She starts to build a world around the objects and activities of her cohorts (other children of the same age). The child deeply believes that she is now her own person, a free agent, and nothing like her parents. On the surface, a child's interests and life can look very different, but the deeper family patterns are already deeply embedded in the psyche and are controlling every thought and behavior. This self-deception often continues until the child grows up, has struggled in partner relationship, and has children of her own. If and when she starts deep work and begins to free herself from her conditioning, the dynamics of the conditioning are already deeply embedded in the next generation.

²⁵ Emotional: some physiological signal or feeling that either spurs on or thwarts action – somehow conveying, “Yes, this is good.” or, “Don’t go there.” or, “DON’T GO THERE!” or, “FREEZE!” or “Sneak away.” or, “RUN FOR YOUR LIFE!” When building a nest does a bird feel a *click* when he has placed a branch appropriately? Does he feel an *ugh* when he is about to place a branch inappropriately?

Fear/Passivity and Fury/Aggression are extremely powerful forces of creation/survival. Some species specialize in one or the other. Two of the longest living species currently on the planet are good examples: the crocodile getting things done through aggression, and the turtle thriving through passivity.

No person is all one or the other, but in the human species less than 15 percent of us tend towards aggression, risk taking and novelty. The rest of us do our best to hang out in the security of the middle of the flock.

Our apparently crazy behaviors (whether of neurosis, addiction, nastiness or low self-esteem) rarely prevent us from procreating. And, they make perfect sense as dynamics of passivity and aggression and forces for stasis and change. For example, in my mind the uncomfortable sensations of longing and regret seem like they would be a force for change; clearly I want things to be different, so these feelings should get me up and out into the world to make something different happen. But, longing and regret are deeply based in stasis – keeping me safe in my little uncomfortable world to which I am accustomed. My mind can be very active with strong emotions, but time and time again, I let opportunity pass me by so that I can plug in more longing and regret; I find a low level of discomfort to be comforting and the background of anxiety to be normal. And, this is why I can be attracted to store-bought cake! (Or, the <ugly> sensations that are easily plugged into the stress that Fast-Foods place on the body.)

Seen from the perspective of mammalian evolution, some of our less-than-gracious nature begins to make sense. Now we can see my father's belittlement as an act of love; he was doing his duty (as his father did his) to instill in me our turtle nature, to not stick our necks out, to wisely stay safe in the mud of our puddle.

PART FIVE – The Heart of the Message

Chapter 27: The Heart of the Message

When people share the Buddha’s teachings, they often talk about “The Four Noble Truths” and “The Eight-Fold Path”: right understanding, right speech, right thought, right livelihood, right effort, right action, right attention and right concentration.

Let’s use what we have explored in *The Buddha’s Toolbox* to take a quick look at The Noble Truths.

The first two truths are: Everyone is born to a life of misery; and, misery has a cause.

The human mind (our intellect and Imagination) doesn’t allow us to experience the world directly, *as it is*. Instead, it hides, filters and distorts Reality from us and shows us a *virtual world* of its own making! This is always hard to fathom, but we now have a better idea of what this means.

The mind doesn’t just control what we see; it controls **all** aspects of our lives: what we see, feel, think, say and do.

We each live confined within a world of our own making, within our own Imagination. The foundation of this world and our actions includes the primal forces of what to kill and what to die for. When we pull back the curtain through which the intellect filters the actual world (Reality) we experience a Calm connection with all, Joy in the ephemeral and ever-changing nature of all things, Love and Kindness, and Compassion for those still struggling within the human condition.

The mind creates permanence, separation, expectations and non-essential desires and fears. We then suffer when things change, don’t go as planned or we are obsessed with trying to satisfy an insatiable yearning.

A very important piece of the Buddha’s discovery is: **The mind controls/orchestrates all our experience and all our behavior through sensations within the framework of the body**. It even controls our sense of choice and freewill. Through these sensations we are unknowingly puppeted through a life of craving and clinging, of aversion, animosity and hostility.

This is life as we know it. We are unique in the animal kingdom in the strength of our Imagination. Within the displays of Imagination (feeling as if we are *mostly* in charge) we live our lives, we play with possibilities, solve problems and make decisions.

But there are two drawbacks. The mind is first and foremost a **Problem Generator!** Its very existence, which includes our sense of self, requires that something is deemed wrong, inadequate, or needs fixing; we are conditioned to always be in struggle, to always be in turmoil, to always be in stress. There is always work to be done.²⁶ There is always an emptiness that needs filling. If we are always looking at the world through the filter of the imagination, we (and the world) will never be at peace!

Things might be different if we could pick up the intellect/Imagination as a tool when we needed it and then put it back down again to resume a life of connection and joy. But the mind (again, which includes our sense of self) is terrified of relaxed attentiveness, of sharply being aware of doing nothing; the mind equates stillness of thought and doing nothing with death. Boredom is the restlessness and discomfort that the mind uses to ensure its own existence, to urge us out of inactivity.

The second difficulty is that the underlying forces of our imagination, that drive our imagined reality, are the same that govern the rest of the animal kingdom: the primal forces of *flight or fight or freeze* and *what to kill and die for*. Yes, charity and kindness are within the panoply of human emotions, but they are too often overrun by our less than gracious nature. We are stuck inside a mechanism that is bent on over-reacting – with no real need, we tend to plug in destructive forces rather than act in kindness.

Hence the human condition – we are never going to be comfortable in our own skins. We live in an imaginary world based on separation. The mind uses primal forces to orchestrate a life of desire (what to pursue and hold on to) and shunning (what to ignore, avoid, flee from, eradicate or kill). Nothing, no experience that the mind can create within its world, is truly, deeply satisfying!

We are guided, propelled, compelled to a life full of agitation, anxiety, racing and repeated thoughts, depression, anger, appetite, sadness, over-

²⁶ Or, the mind has orchestrated a life of Complacency, Entertainment or Self-Medication.

activity, empty entertainment, hope, strained cheerfulness, resignation and loneliness. And when attention is turned outward, we generate greed, nastiness, blind devotion, group association, disregard and violence. And there is deep angst, if not terror, to do otherwise – **to still or stop this mechanism feels like dying, feels like death.** (If you have ever experienced phobia or a full on panic attack, then you know what the Mind is capable of.)

To cope we give into thoughts and behaviors that stir up or hide our feelings. We take refuge in our righteous battles, achievements (small and large), our own and other's dramas. And/or we build adequately comfortable lives within complacency, resignation, denial, entertainments and self-medication. "Be kind to everyone you meet, for each is fighting a great battle." – Philo of Alexandria

And, the most important part of the Buddha's discovery (the third noble truth) is that **there is a solution!** There is no problem. Yes, humans are born into misery. But the very same Imagination that generates problems, misery and hate, allows us to be self-aware and to feel that something can and should be different. Human beings are born with an invaluable opportunity to turn our attention inwards and begin a process of calming the mind and becoming sensitive to (becoming conscious of) the sensations by which our lives are controlled. This frees us from that control and begins a process that clears the conditioning of the "defilements" that generate all human nastiness and the ugliness that we throw upon ourselves, our loved ones and the world.

I invite you to consider that humans were not once these clear and pristine beings that somehow lost paradise and now must struggle and pay penance to regain the qualities of calm and unconditional love. Instead, we are in our rightful place in the unfolding of a universe based in care and kindness. And it is through the development of the Imagination and self-awareness that we are in the enviable position to make a great leap in the evolution of consciousness – to break from the brutishness of animal nature and dwell in the finer, higher qualities that, if we cannot yet feel, we at least hope are the essence of life.

The fourth noble truth is **the eight-fold path.** Working on the attributes of the eight-fold path "leads one from darkness to light, from servitude to

freedom.”²⁷ (Ramiro Calle) Just as we are usually unaware of the blinking of the eyes, we usually go through life unaware of the sensations by which the mind controls the Imagination and keeps us wrapped up, if not locked into, a world of its own design (a life of *darkness* and *servitude*). But, with a little work, we can develop our concentration and sensitivity and begin to observe these sensations. When sensations are observed without reaction, without judgment, the mechanism falters – we break free of Imagination and the mind’s control, and begin a process towards freedom!

This is the jewel! “Observing any sensation with equanimity is reality, is purity, is freedom.” **–S. N. Goenka**

One can wonder or worry about how long it will take to clear out the source of unrest at the base of the mind, but why? The question of value is: In this moment am I noticing sensations in equanimity? What I did yesterday, two seconds ago, or what I will do tomorrow is just the mind mastering its strings and pulling me back into its worlds.

²⁷ And, finally to “an enlightened one, an Arahant, a saint, a purveyor of Truth.”

PART SIX – Metta

You can search throughout the entire universe for someone who is more deserving of your love and affection than you are yourself, and that person is not to be found anywhere. You yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe, deserve your love and affection. – Gautama Buddha

Chapter 28: Metta

Metta is often translated as, *Loving-kindness* or *Unconditional love*. It is the last of the Vipassana meditation techniques and is taught on the tenth day of retreat, just before people are free to start talking with one another again. The main invitation in the previous three techniques, Body-Breath Awareness, Anapana, and the various Vipassana Scanning techniques, was to keep attention within the framework of the body. Metta lets go of that restriction, as Metta is opportunity to open up your new sensitivity to the qualities of Reality – all of which have no boundaries.

Let's go back to what has happened in the previous nine days. Body Breath Awareness brought attention within the framework of the body. Anapana strengthened our concentration and sharpened our focus so that we can begin to notice and stay with subtler sensations. The various Vipassana Scanning techniques built awareness of sensations throughout the body while learning to develop equanimity/non-reactivity and an appreciation of change.

During the various Vipassana Scanning techniques, “you are performing a very deep operation of the mind – like draining pus from a wound”. It is very important to complete the entire 10 days of the retreat as leaving early would be like getting up off the operating table before the surgeon has closed the incision. The techniques of Metta serve as a salve that helps sooth and heal the wound.

The work in Vipassana scanning has cleared out, at a very deep level, some of the mind's conditioning, thereby liberating/healing some of the emotional physiology, the nervous system (and energetic systems?). Whether it is obvious to us or not, at the end of the retreat our sensitivity is different than it was 10 days ago.

Most of us do not experience the world as a sea of interconnectivity and change. We tend to limit the size of objects and their ability to interact and

influence one another at our visual and tactile boundaries. But, when we are playing with two magnets their sphere of influence does not correspond with our visual and tactile boundaries. Rather than readjust our entire view of the world, we tend to treat magnets as a special case. *But, all physical objects work like magnets*: everything at every distance (the entire universe) is at least gravitationally and electro-magnetically connected and constantly both pushing and pulling on everything else with different strengths according to their distances. When we are playing with any two objects other than magnets, we lack the sensitivity to feel the interactions between them until our afferent visual and tactile boundaries also seem to be touching. *People* are more like magnets than typical perception suggests – our “size” and our *sphere of influence* are different than is generally assumed.

During the retreat we have dropped through the Imagination and worked at various levels of attention moving towards subtlety. Instead of being ***divorced from Reality***, it is now through *subtlety* that we are more or less ***divorced from the Imagination***; and that we now *give* and *receive* differently.

Because this is not *business as usual*, you are only supposed to participate in Metta if you meet two conditions: you can find a comfortable seat without any strong discomfort or pain, and at the moment you are not contending with any dark or heavy thoughts.

At the end of my first retreat, at the time of Metta, I was experiencing the physical and mental effects of a heavy dose of humility; so rather than actively participate in Metta, I kept my awareness inwards in soft global scanning. Still, what came through the proceedings was astonishment, appreciation and respect for those around me now and anyone who had ever done such difficult and important work. And then it finally came home, and there opened in me an appreciation and respect for the work I too had done.

Twenty minutes later and you could look people in the eyes again. A few people carried themselves with a sense of uncertainty. And, a young man that I knew from primitive skills gatherings had a tender beauty, as if he had just had a good cry. But mostly, faces were noticeably more relaxed than on the first day of the course with a brightness in people’s eyes, smiles and countenances that must be experienced directly to truly understand.

The practice of Metta will make greater or less sense depending on your deep assumptions and beliefs about yourself, life and the universe.

The Buddha shares that when you can see the *Biggest Picture*, it will be obvious that everything is “empty”. This could be that Awareness, unconfined by the Imagination, has no size and can delve both into the void of the infinitesimal as well as expand into the emptiness of the infinite. But, “empty” can also be that Reality is devoid of intellectual meaning and intrinsic value, as it is only the mind’s judgments that rigidify life and embalm it with apparent value.

At the deepest level, the universe is “empty”. But otherwise, there is talk of the “four divine states” that a person dissolves or opens into. When I first read the list, I remember first being caught off guard and then being embarrassed. I realized that I was looking to find what *I* would gain from this work and that my universe carried a strong distinction between me and my inner world and an outer “rest of the world” (ah, a yet clean heart). “[For such people] will not fallback to feeding the idea of a self, a personality, a being or a separate individual.” In Reality there is no *self*; there is no “inner” and “outer”; there is no distinction; there is no separation. There is Tranquility and Calm. There is Metta (unconditional love and loving kindness). And there is sympathetic Joy and Compassion.

Until we open to Reality, we will have to *practice* and *work on* loving and kindness. For some of us, we are kinder to others than we are to ourselves. Good, be kind and loving wherever and whenever possible. But, until we reside in Union, we are going to be projecting our inner world onto the outer world and the greatest gift we can give the world is to learn to love ourselves... “You yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe, deserve your love and affection.”

Why “sympathetic Joy” and not just “Joy” on its own? It appears that a buddha functions at a level that is calmer and more refined than Joy, but he/she/it is still sensitive to (is open to) the Joy of those around her.

It is not uncommon for people during their retreat to start thinking how good meditating would be for people they know. This is a good sign; if I am thinking how others would benefit from meditating, somewhere in the past nine days, I must have directly experience the value and importance of the work for myself. And, wishing others well is a sign of Metta.

Again, the practice of Metta will make more or less sense depending on the deepest messages, ideas and beliefs concerning oneself, life and the universe.

Here are a few common ones: <You reap what you sow>, <What goes around, comes around>, <Life is unfair>, <Life is what you make of it>, <Things just never quite seem to work out>, <If the foundation of the universe were goodness, there wouldn't be so much evil and misery>, <The world is perfect in every moment>, <You are a saint, a deeply beautiful person, whose greatest work is to further purify your life. And, your greatest contribution to the world will be as an example that inspires and permits others to risk doing the same>, <I complain because I want things to be different>, <By complaining, I make a difference>, <I get angry because I want things to be different>, <By getting angry, I make a difference>, <If the problem is fixable, why get upset? >, <If the problem is not fixable, why get upset?>, <One of the greatest pleasures in life is to be of service>.

A buddha says that there are universal laws that become evident when one can see *The Biggest Picture*. One of them is – The Law of Cause and Effect: Everything is part of the chain of cause and effect; nothing comes from nothing, but is the result from what went before and conditions that which will follow.

We expect to see ripples when we throw a pebble in a pond. But, universal cause and effect is a little more intense. It is... if you throw a rock at a dog, you can be assured that at some point, life will throw a rock at you. I can play with the ideas that <our lives are confined to displays of the Imagination> and that <our conditioning fabricates all our experience>. But this says that, ***there is nothing in our lives that we haven't brought upon ourselves!***

But, it also says that our future is open; everything we do *now* shapes how the world will come to us. This shaping of our world stems not just from actions, but from every thought and utterance. There is usually a time lag. But, once we start developing sensitivity and equanimity and we start to cut short our little tantrums, judgments and unkind thoughts, our personal world will begin to shape itself differently!

If this is true, it reveals the vastness of universal intelligence. At every moment, while we are each sowing the seeds for our own future, all our lives are interconnected in a way that allows each of us to receive exactly

what we need to learn from our past deeds and thoughts. This means you, me, the fly I want to swat and the baby just born with HIV.

I have no experience that would validate the truth of reincarnation. I still find the topic a little uncomfortable as the major religions in my native culture promote the idea that we only get this one life to get it right. They have stories of people coming back from the dead but make no mention of reincarnation.

I am so grateful for the practice of Vipassana. Firstly, for the effects it has had on me and my life. And secondly, for its scientific nature; nowhere are we asked to believe in something, or take something on blind faith. The importance of the technique is for each person to *directly observe for him or herself*. If we can't detect something for ourselves, just put it aside. I can see no reason that one of the most honest persons in human history would lie about reincarnation. I do find that when I play with the idea of reincarnation, I relax more easily into <the world is perfect in every moment>, and that <everyone (you, me and the child with HIV) is receiving what they have created and what they and those around them need in order to learn deeper truths and to be better people>.

If one day reincarnation is obvious, so be it. Until then, the idea sits in the realm of Uncertainty.

Here is a quote from Gautama Buddha revealing just how clueless we are:

The mark of your ignorance (cluelessness) is the depth of your belief in injustice and tragedy.
– ***Gautama Buddha***

So, what does all this have to do with Metta? Certain ideas and attitudes make it more difficult to feel life at the level of Metta. So, on the ninth day of retreat, while we are in our subtlety and somewhat divorced from the smallness of the mind and its ideas – we take a few moments to hold in our thoughts those who we feel would benefit from a practice of meditation and to appreciate all those who have ever practiced and shared this work.

Another practice of Metta involves taking a few moments to *give pardon* to all those who might have harmed us in thought, speech and action. And then taking a few more moments to *seek pardon* from all those whom we *might have harmed* in thought, speech and action. As...

It is in the nature of things that joy arises in a person free from remorse.

– *Gautama Buddha*

With equanimity and an appreciation of change we have developed our sensitivity to subtle sensation. This work has cleared some of our Conditioning and we begin to move free from Imagination. Now, it is through *subtle sensation* that the practices of Metta help us give and receive at a level of infinite union. For most of us this will not be entering a state of enlightenment. But care, kindness, gratitude, self-love and wishing others well are all symptoms of realizing a deeper truth.

You are a deeply beautiful person, whose greatest work is to further purify your life. And, your greatest contribution to the world will be as a quiet example that inspires and permits others to risk doing the same.

Meditate. Live purely. Be quiet. Do your work with mastery. Like the moon, come out from behind the clouds! Shine. – *Gautama Buddha*