

MINDING CLOSELY

The Four Applications of Mindfulness

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keep the counts succinct. Do not fall into mindfulness of counting. The counts are passing road markers, while your attention is focused continuously on the course of the breath.

Periodically verify that the body is relaxed, still, and maintaining a posture of vigilance. Ensure that the breath flows naturally, without impediment. If you find yourself caught up and carried away by thoughts, immediately relax, release all thoughts, and return to the tactile sensations of the breath at the abdomen. If you find yourself falling into dullness or drowsiness, open the eyes to let in a bit of light and focus more closely, taking a fresh interest in the practice. ❧

DEPENDENT METHODS

In his discourse on the four close applications of mindfulness, the Buddha refers to these quintessential vipashyana teachings as the direct path to nirvana. A wide variety of meditations are designed to bring about various personal transformations, mental abilities, and other goals. The specific purpose of the four close applications of mindfulness is the complete purification of all mental afflictions, leading directly to the realization of nirvana.

Vipashyana is not a stand-alone practice. The path to the cessation of suffering asserted in the Fourth Noble Truth is depicted as a pyramid in traditional Buddhism. The foundation of the pyramid is ethics. Resting upon ethics are mental balance and samadhi, constituting a platform. Resting upon this platform is vipashyana, which severs the root of mental afflictions.

The ancient Pali commentaries liken shamatha to a great warrior and vipashyana to a wise minister.⁵³ The example is given of a wise minister authorized to negotiate with a wayward prince who had fallen under the influence of evil friends, symbolizing the five obscurations. If the minister attempts to admonish the prince by himself, he might be killed. But if he is accompanied and protected by a strong warrior, who first subdues the prince, then the minister can persuade him to change his ways.

Similarly, the efforts of the wise minister of vipashyana are strengthened and protected by the great warrior of shamatha.

Ethical Foundation

It is unrealistic to think that without any development of ethics and samadhi, one could still practice vipashyana and achieve the same result. But how ethical do we need to be in order to create a stable foundation for samadhi? What degree of samadhi constitutes an effective platform for practicing vipashyana? To me, these crucial questions are not raised often enough. Many people practice vipashyana simply to cultivate mindfulness, serenity, and harmony in their lives, which is perfectly fine. There's nothing wrong with using vipashyana methods to relieve stress.

A question was posed to the Dalai Lama, in 1990, concerning the teaching of basic mindfulness practices that were radically decontextualized from the framework of Buddhist theory, without ethics, without samadhi, and not even attributed to the Buddha: Did His Holiness think that teaching these mindfulness practices was a kind of plagiarism? The Dalai Lama answered: "If following these practices helps people to simply alleviate stress, even without the framework of ethics, samadhi, and the larger worldview, this is a good thing." All the Buddha's teachings were given in order to alleviate suffering. Even if people derive only a fraction of the benefit of his teachings, simplified practices can help alleviate their suffering. But then the Dalai Lama added this precaution: "Just don't mistake it for the Buddhadharma." A radically simplified, decontextualized mindfulness practice, without ethics or samadhi, is only one small aspect of the vast framework of the Dharma.

How important is the issue of ethics? To pursue the practice of vipashyana effectively requires proper supporting conditions. For example, if you are sick and take a prescribed medicine, following all the dosage, dietary, and exercise requirements, it may yield a complete cure. If you don't follow all the conditions of the prescription, it may result only in temporary relief.

Is it necessary to take monastic vows and be celibate in order to achieve nirvana? The answer is very clear—no. During the Buddha's lifetime, the

monastic lifestyle was specifically designed for people intent on achieving nirvana, but it is not necessary. The Pali Canon describes cases of lay people achieving nirvana. Nevertheless, a very high level of ethics—doing one's best to avoid harming others and trying to be of service where possible—is essential for both lay people and monks.

There's an interesting corollary here. As one's quality of life becomes refined through developing increasing mental balance and samadhi, the mind becomes finely tuned, sensitive, stable, and clear. Then, as insight develops through the practice of vipashyana, one finds something quite remarkable taking place: one becomes increasingly sensitive to one's own mistakes. Even while avoiding any blatantly negative behavior, one becomes acutely aware of the pain caused by one's subtler mental afflictions, insensitive comments, thoughtless acts, and innocent gaffes.

A classical Tibetan analogy says that for an ordinary person, the arising of a mental affliction such as craving or hostility is like a hair falling on the palm of one's hand—its presence is barely felt. On the other hand, for a person who is advanced on the path of developing insight, the arising of the same mental affliction is like a hair falling into one's eye—it is quite intolerable. This suggests that one's standard of ethics becomes elevated and refined along the path. The cultivation of ethics is not simply learning a set of ten nonvirtues to avoid, or even abiding by 253 monastic precepts. The enhancement and refinement of the quality of one's behavior, speech, and mental activity is an ongoing process. Experiences of increasing sensitivity lead to increasing purification and elevation of ethical standards. Becoming a monk or a nun can be helpful and is the optimal way of life for some people, but it is not required or necessary for everyone.

Samadhi Platform

Finally, what degree of samadhi is sufficient? Can one disregard samadhi altogether in favor of practicing vipashyana? Clearly not, or the Buddha would not have described the path as consisting of ethics, samadhi, and wisdom. Learned scholars in the Theravadin tradition debate this point and defend different views. I cannot end the debate. Nevertheless, the Buddha's teachings give us a strong hint, such as in the wonderful

account he gave to his followers after he achieved enlightenment. I can imagine a disciple asking, “What was the ultimate reason why—after having achieved high levels of samadhi and finding this insufficient; then undergoing six years of incredible austerities and recognizing that this didn’t work either; and finally, with good food and restored health, sitting beneath the bodhi tree—suddenly, you were enlightened?”

At the age of thirty-five—having experimented with all the major methods of his time, endured six years of great asceticism, and accomplished deep samadhi—the proverbial light bulb went on in the Buddha’s head. Here is what he told his disciples about what was going through his mind just before he sat down and completed the job of becoming fully enlightened:

I thought of a time when my Sakyan father was working and I was sitting in the cool shade of a rose apple tree; quite secluded from sensual desires and disengaged from unwholesome things, I entered into and abode in the first *dhyana*, which is accompanied by coarse and precise investigation, with well-being and bliss born of seclusion. I thought, “Might this be the way to enlightenment?” Then, following that memory, there came the recognition that this was the way to enlightenment.⁴⁴

His father was a king performing a ritual spring plowing, and young Prince Gautama was off duty, sitting in the cool shade of a rose apple tree on a hot spring day. Saying that he was quite secluded from sensual desire—an enormously important phrase here—means that his mind was withdrawn, not looking for entertainment, not fantasizing about sensual pleasures, and not engaged with unwholesome things. He had settled his body, speech, and mind.

Then, as a contemplative prodigy, Gautama spontaneously slipped into the samadhi known as the first meditative stabilization (Skt. *dhyana*; Pali *jhana*). (The term “dhyana” gave rise to the names of the Chan and Zen schools.) He achieved this state without meditative training. Why was he so lucky? From the Buddhist perspective, he had

already achieved it in many prior lifetimes. Similarly, Plato held that much of the knowledge we seem to acquire in this lifetime consists of rekindled memories from past lifetimes.

The Buddha described this very profound state of samadhi, the first dhyana, as being accompanied by coarse and precise investigation. The mind is utterly controlled and settled in a state of equipoise that is nothing like a trance, in which you cannot think or function. To the contrary, in this state you can engage in general investigations or precise analysis of any subject. Your intelligence and conceptual abilities are fully available, but you are completely free of obsessive-compulsive thinking. This state is suffused with a blissful well-being; it’s not ecstasy or teeth-chattering, incapacitating bliss. Being born of seclusion means the mind is withdrawn from the sense fields and compulsive ideation, resting naturally in balance. When the mind is settled in the first dhyana, bliss arises from the very nature of awareness.

At the age of thirty-five, the Buddha remembered his spontaneous experience as a youth. Having recalled it, the thought arose, “Might this be the way to enlightenment?” He was clearly referring to the first dhyana, the first of four stages within what is called the form realm. This state is imbued with discerning intelligence, a sense of blissful well-being, and a highly focused mind. Buddhists claim that a mind settled in such equipoise—with awareness that is malleable, supple, calm, clear, and intelligent—comes to know reality as it is.

Following this thought, the Buddha recognized that this was indeed the way to enlightenment. I am happy to take that statement at face value; he couldn’t have said it more clearly. He did not mention the second meditative stabilization, let alone the formless absorptions, in which the capacities for investigation and analysis are dormant. He simply said that the first dhyana was the way to enlightenment.

Vipashyana Method

Very shortly thereafter, the Buddha sat beneath the bodhi tree with an adamant resolve: “I shall not move from this seat until I have achieved enlightenment,” and that’s what he did. The first dhyana seems to have been his platform for launching into vipashyana. This ultimately

led him to what is called supermundane vipashyana, the examination of the facets of reality that directly liberate the mind.

But first, in mundane vipashyana, one simply investigates certain critical aspects of the phenomenal world in which we live. The Buddha described his experiences during that night's three watches, each lasting about three hours. He might have sat down as the sun was setting, and in the first watch of the night, he settled immediately into samadhi. From this platform, he directed his attention back in time to ascertain the circumstances in thousands of his previous lifetimes. In this first exploration, the Buddha probed the history of his own mind-stream, and he declared that he saw with direct knowledge the vast sequence of his past lives.

In the second watch of the night, he directed his attention panoramically, attending to the mind-streams of other sentient beings. He found that they also had long histories, and he attended to their myriad past lives. Then, still applying mundane vipashyana, he examined the patterns in this massive database of the lives of myriad sentient beings, performing a meta-analysis of their actions and the consequences. The results of the Buddha's analysis in the second watch of that night came to be known as the laws of karma; the Sanskrit term "karma" means action. He saw that actions in one lifetime are like seeds sowed that eventually give rise to consequences in later lifetimes. He observed regular patterns of causal sequences from one lifetime to the next, and his experiential insights into rebirth and karma were significantly different from any of the views that were prevalent before his enlightenment. So recent claims that he simply adopted these ideas from common beliefs of his era are entirely spurious, without any basis in historical fact.

In the third watch of the night, he probed into the reality of suffering and its origins, the path, and the culmination of the path. He directly realized the twelve links of dependent origination, the mechanics of samsara, and the path to liberation. As the sun rose, he achieved enlightenment—the Buddha awakened! His platform was the samadhi of the first dhyana.

There are many methods for achieving the first dhyana, and dozens of them were taught by the Buddha. Bear in mind that in teaching the

development of the dhyanas, he truly stood on the shoulders of giants. He was born into a culture with a rich tradition in samadhi. Without attaining the extraordinarily sublime mental balance of the first dhyana, he would have had no platform for developing fully effective vipashyana.

It is interesting to consider whether the Pythagoreans might have rivaled the Indian tradition of samadhi. Pythagoras may have achieved very deep samadhi, and some speculate that he learned it from Indian adepts. Legend says that Pythagoras traveled to Egypt, where he received knowledge of India. The travelers between the Indian subcontinent, Egypt, and the near East included wandering ascetics, who were called "gymnosophists" by the Greeks. These naked (*gymno*) wise (*sophia*) people were probably Indian yogis, highly accomplished in samadhi; this could indicate a samadhi lineage in early Greek thought. It is said that Pythagoras remembered twenty of his past lives, including some as members of nonhuman species. This belief in reincarnation persisted through Plato and into the Neoplatonic tradition.

Nevertheless, the development of samadhi was not in our legacy from the Greeks. Plato and Aristotle were titans in the realms of mathematics, logic, philosophy, and physics, but they were not renowned for their methods of developing samadhi. We have no knowledge of the methods Pythagoras might have employed because the brotherhood he founded was quasi-secret.

The cultivation of samadhi at that time in India surpassed that in China, the Americas, and Australia, as well as in the Jewish tradition. Gautama was born in the best possible place for the practice of samadhi, and he inherited a rich tradition from hundreds of years of contemplative research. The trajectory of shamatha had been explored to the heights of subtlety and the depths of samadhi. The Buddha's second teacher had achieved the highest absorption in the formless realm, called the peak of existence, and Gautama reached it ever so rapidly. The practice begins with many obscurations and hindrances, eventually becoming peaceful, then blissful, and finally giving way to an inconceivable equanimity that transcends pleasure and pain.

The nature of this continuum of quiescence is sweet, calm, and

soothing. No wonder people pursued this trajectory for hundreds of years, much longer than the history of modern science. Then the Buddha launched a revolution in Indian contemplative culture by claiming that samadhi does not produce irreversible change, and neither do austerities, physical exercises, or the sheer exertion of will. He embraced the wisdom he inherited, refined it, and formulated it into his triad of ethics, samadhi, and wisdom. The Buddha introduced the fusion of shamatha and vipashyana as the technology to effect irreversible change. The vipashyana mode of inquiry does not have the same sweet ambience as shamatha—it can be unsettling, challenging, and demanding. Of course, the revelations and insights can be pretty exciting, but the task is more like research than relaxation. You may pursue peace in a meditative retreat by practicing shamatha, but the practice of vipashyana is an expedition in the pursuit of freedom.

MINDFULNESS OF THE BREATH

In the Buddha's time, there were myriad methods for developing samadhi. The one he emphasized and taught most often, including in his discourse on the four close applications of mindfulness, is mindfulness of the breath. Here is his metaphor for the great power of this simple method:

Just as in the last month of the hot season, when a mass of dust and dirt has swirled up, and a great, unseasonable rain cloud disperses it and quells it on the spot, so too concentration by mindfulness of the breath, when developed and cultivated, is peaceful and sublime, an ambrosial dwelling; and it disperses and quells evil, unwholesome states on the spot, whenever they arise.⁵⁵

Imagine India in May or June, before the monsoon hits: sweltering, gritty, acrid, and suffocating. A sudden cloudburst can drench the land and make the air crystal clear instantaneously. Likewise, the Buddha said, the single-pointed, focused attention that is achieved by way of

mindfulness of the breath, when developed and cultivated, is peaceful and sublime. This development might not occur overnight, but a sublime psychosomatic state can result from simply focusing on the sensations of the breath.

Sweet Abode

It is crucial to note that this sweet, ambrosial dwelling is not the result of attending to some highly pleasant stimulus. The sensations of the breath are quite neutral: neither disagreeable nor agreeable. When one focuses on the breath and settles the mind to be free of craving and aversion, a peaceful and sublime state arises out of the nature of awareness itself. Balancing and settling the mind in this ambrosial dwelling disperses and quells mental afflictions on the spot.

This practice has enormous potential to improve mental health. If mindfulness of the breath can really subdue unwholesome states, such as hatred, malice, resentment, and greed, it is profoundly therapeutic. The Buddha does not say that by merely focusing on the breath and settling the mind in equilibrium, the virtues of loving-kindness, compassion, generosity, and wisdom will spring forth full-blown. He says that this will allow you to achieve a sublime state of neutrality. You will not be irreversibly free; but temporarily, the mind's unwholesome tendencies will be subdued on the spot, and you'll settle into a state of equilibrium that gives rise to a sense of bliss.

First, you must establish a neutral state of balance, without craving, hostility, and resentment. If you can establish this sense of equilibrium and well-being, your development of virtue is bound to be much more effective. You will be equipped with a platform that can be used to actively cultivate wisdom, insight, compassion, loving-kindness, and all other virtues.

The power of a sense of well-being has been measured by research, over the past ten years, in the field of positive psychology.⁵⁶ Rigorous psychological studies have been conducted in which subjects are given an opportunity to engage in an act of kindness, generosity, altruism, or some other virtue. One group consists of subjects who report feeling unhappy, depressed, or anxious. Another group consists of subjects who

report feeling happy, relaxed, and cheerful. When both groups are presented with opportunities to be of service to others, the happy subjects are much more likely to extend themselves in acts of kindness and generosity. Simple happiness is a valuable thing.

All-Purpose Vehicle

The instructions for mindfulness of the breath occur many times in the record of the Buddha's forty-five-year teaching career. His quintessential description of this practice was largely standardized and most often unelaborate. The commentaries by Buddhaghosa and others give a much richer picture, but the Buddha's words are quite succinct. In the *Satipatthana Sutta*, the Buddha describes a fourfold sequence of practices for mindfulness of the breath, designed to establish shamatha or meditative equipoise.

In the *Anapanasati Sutta*, the Buddha's primary discourse on mindfulness of breathing in and out (Skt. *anapanasati*), he describes sixteen phases, where the first four phases concern the development of shamatha. The next twelve phases concern vipashyana. Mindfulness of the breath evolves from an exercise for developing attention skills into a platform for probing the nature of reality. Having developed shamatha, we can utilize this extraordinary equilibrium and balance of attention to investigate the nature of the mind itself. The breath is the vehicle for exploring the fundamental marks of existence: the reality of impermanence, the nature of suffering, and the lack of an inherent self. At the culmination of stage sixteen, congratulations—you're an arhat! How difficult could that be?

The *Satipatthana Sutta* begins with anapanasati, but the Buddha teaches mindfulness of the breath only in the first four stages, as a preliminary exercise to develop shamatha and achieve the dhyanas. Even though mindfulness of the breath can be one's sole vehicle to reach liberation or nirvana, this sutra reveals another powerful method. The rest of the discourse concerns vipashyana, the act of inquiry into the central features of reality: impermanence, dukkha, and nonself. The framework of the four close applications of mindfulness is a broader one; it

addresses not only the body but feelings, mental phenomena, and the array of interdependencies between all internal and external phenomena. In the larger scope of vipashyana practice, mindfulness of the breath appears at the introductory stage.

The Buddha's discourse to Bahiya consisted of a very short instruction. So little needed to be said to this extremely mature contemplative that the Buddha just gave him a couple of paragraphs. These simple words are profoundly deep. If we could listen to them with Bahiya's ears, then we would achieve nirvana too! The Buddha did not mention the close application of mindfulness to the breath, body, feelings, or mental states. He simply said, "In the seen, there is only the seen."

This quintessential exposition progresses from seeing that there is no reified subject that is separate from the rest of reality to seeing that there is no reified object with intrinsic existence; nothing arises independently of the matrix of existence. There is no evidence for an internal subjective agent or self that is somehow separate from perceived objects—nothing here that is the observer. Seeing this, one turns the attention to see that there is nothing external as an independent object—nothing there. Finally, one recognizes that there is no self between internal and external. The Buddha led Bahiya in a stepwise manner and cut through his delusion on the spot. To use my trivial example, Bahiya recognized that he wasn't Napoleon, and now that he's seen the truth, he'll never imagine he's Napoleon again. He was not using the power of samadhi to subdue his grasping into dormancy. He was taking the bull by the horns, investigating very closely, and seeing for himself that there is no Napoleon anywhere.

When the vipashyana insight into the absence of a self here, there, and in between is fully backed by the muscle of shamatha, it's like a wise minister protected by a warrior. When insight breaks through with the stability and vividness of shamatha, there is radiant clarity and adamant stability, and the practitioner retains this insight—you absolutely and irreversibly grok it. This is like knowing "I'm not Napoleon," with enough certainty to fully eradicate every habitual pattern of thinking and proclivity for grasping. You're free!

ESSENTIAL INSTRUCTIONS

The Buddha's primary teachings on the practice of mindfulness of the breath are pointed:

Breathing in long, one is aware: "I breathe in long."

Breathing out long, one is aware: "I breathe out long."

Breathing in short, one is aware: "I breathe in short."

Breathing out short, one is aware: "I breathe out short."⁵⁷

At first, your mindfulness might not include much finesse. When you begin practicing mindfulness of the breath, your mind is bound to be relatively coarse, and your breath will tend to be long. If your inhalation and exhalation are long, simply note their duration. Continuing to breathe in and out while noting this, you settle down, just as if you were falling asleep. Gradually, as your body requires less oxygen, the volume of your respiration may subside and the duration of each breath may become shorter. Let this occur naturally, without trying to make your respiration conform to your expectations.

The Buddha continues, "Attending to the whole body, I shall breathe in.' Thus one trains oneself. 'Attending to the whole body, I shall breathe out.' Thus one trains."⁵⁸ Now the quality of attention is being enhanced, and a greater continuity of mindfulness is being sustained. This requires more attention than simply noticing the length of the breath. According to all the great commentaries, "the whole body" means the whole course of the breath. A classic metaphor says that the breath is like a horse, and awareness is like a rider trying to stay on the horse throughout the ride—a stable union of rider and horse. In a similar fashion, you mount the breath and maintain a face-to-face encounter throughout the entire course of the inhalation and exhalation.

This approaches what Csikszentmihalyi called the state of "flow." At least on a coarse level, you are mindfully and uninterruptedly attentive to the breath—you're not bucked off your horse. Along with the ongoing flow of sensations of the breath, you maintain a corollary flow of mindfulness of these sensations. When you develop and cultivate a

smooth flow throughout the whole course of the breath, you begin to taste that which the Buddha called peaceful and sublime.

Going deeper into the practice, stage four is simply described by "Soothing the composite of the body, I shall breathe in.' Thus one trains oneself. 'Soothing the composite of the body, I shall breathe out.' Thus one trains."⁵⁹ The Buddha is describing a progressively deepening calm in the whole body-mind system, not merely in the physical body. Everything is settling into an increasingly profound state of equilibrium. The breath becomes rhythmic, but not because you are trying to make it so. It gradually settles into a gentle, sinusoidal pattern, with lower volume, simply because you don't need as much air anymore.

Achieving the First Dhyana

The body's energy system is settling into a silky, sweet state of balance. The mind is calm, settling into an ambrosial equilibrium, peaceful and sublime. You are approaching the first dhyana, in which your abilities to think clearly and analytically are available, should you wish to use them for coarse or subtle investigation. This is like a surgeon with a wide variety of tools at hand, from coarse saws for cutting bone to fine scalpels for dissecting the tiniest vessels. Your equilibrium, focus of attention, and sense of well-being enable you to venture into vipashyana, which is the ultimate reason for achieving samadhi. By soothing the whole composite of myriad interdependently arising phenomena that we label "body and mind," this system naturally settles into equilibrium.

A great deal of confusion about the first dhyana has been generated in the last twenty years, particularly in European languages. This is not the result of ill will but of ignorance. People hear sound bites, read short descriptions of the first, second, third, and fourth dhyanas, and they say, "Yeah, I had that one!" Misconceiving the Dharma to fit their own expectations, some people go so far as to redefine classic Buddhist concepts in terms of their own experience. It is crucial to study the authoritative accounts of the dhyanas. What are the causes of the dhyanas, what is their nature, and what are their results? The full picture will not appear in a short passage or a select aphorism. Misinformed people think that a dhyana is something you can score at a weekend retreat, and

they boast: “I had this dhyana. Then I lost it, but it came back.” It sounds like a missing sock!

Buddhaghosa was not only an exceedingly authoritative commentator and scholar, but he was the chronicler of the first nine hundred years after the Buddha—prime time for Buddhists, especially the Theravadins. In this glorious era, many people achieved advanced stages of the path, all the states of samadhi in the form and formless realms, arhatship, and so forth. Buddhaghosa made no claim to be an innovative philosopher or a contemplative adept. Drawing from the Buddha’s teachings, upon which he wrote many commentaries, his masterpiece, *The Path of Purification*, narrates meticulous descriptions of the practices, struggles, and accomplishments of adepts during this golden age.

Buddhaghosa’s *The Path of Purification* is a brilliant record of theory and practice in the Theravadin tradition. He includes compelling accounts of innumerable accomplished yogis and arhats from this founding era. He claims that when one has actually achieved the state of the first dhyana, samadhi can be sustained “for a whole night and a whole day, just as a healthy man, after rising from his seat, could stand a whole day.”⁶⁰ When you enter into and abide in the first dhyana, indicated by the Buddha’s experience under the rose apple tree, you can sustain your samadhi for a whole night and a whole day. It is clear that achieving the first dhyana is an exceptional, transcendent state if you can maintain unwavering samadhi for a twenty-four-hour period.

Such an accomplishment is not common. I would love to hear about anyone who achieves this on a weekend retreat. The top neuroscientists will definitely invite him or her into their labs because they have never tested anyone like this, as far as I know. The actual first dhyana—characterized by the sheer power to remain in samadhi for twenty-four hours, little notice of the passage of time, full use of conceptual ability, and a largely nonconceptual repose—is an extraordinary state.

Free of Obscurations

Is the point of this practice to win samadhi marathons? No, the primary reason that the first dhyana is said to be an indispensable foundation for fully effective vipashyana is that it temporarily subdues mental

obscurations, or hindrances. This is not irreversible, but your mind is no longer prone to the five obscurations that disrupt the balance of the mind: sensual craving, malice, laxity and lethargy, excitation and anxiety, and uncertainty. With the achievement of the first dhyana, you are free of these factors, albeit temporarily.

This is like receiving the tetanus vaccine, which can prevent the disease for ten years or so. If you get regular booster shots, you can avoid contracting tetanus. Still, your immunity is not permanent, and if the vaccination wears off, you could be infected. In a similar fashion, by achieving the first dhyana, you will be free for as long as you sustain it. If you let it atrophy, you will lose it. If you recognize its profound benefits and modify your behavior, by developing at least a quasi-contemplative lifestyle, you can sustain it.

When you abide in the first dhyana, sensual craving does not arise. Although not eradicated, it is dormant. For all practical purposes, the five obscurations no longer trouble you. Enjoyment of good food, art, music, and the beauty of nature does not lead to craving. You know that these are not true sources of happiness because you have discovered an authentic source. This is not a reasoned deduction but a conviction based on personal experience. Settling in the first dhyana yields a blissful sense of well-being, and everything else pales in comparison. Who would search downstream for a few flakes of gold when they have found the mother lode—the source? Sensual craving no longer occurs, making life much more peaceful. Malice and enmity, which so often arise when someone thwarts our desires, disappear as well. Laxity, lethargy, excitation, and anxiety are banished from the scene by excellent samadhi. Finally, the plague of doubts and uncertainties simply evaporates. Such are the results of abiding within the attentional balance of the first dhyana.

We often deny our potential by thinking, “Even if I tried, I probably wouldn’t achieve anything. Maybe nobody’s ever done it.” Of course, if we don’t try, we’ll never succeed. Nevertheless, there is value in vibrant, energetic skepticism that challenges us to look more closely. How can we be sure that death entails an absolute termination of an individual consciousness? Was there a continuity of lives before this one? Such

important questions challenge our very notions of existence. If there is no continuity, and we are locked into a handful of decades, I can live with that. But if there have been countless previous existences, and this continuum of consciousness cannot be snuffed out—like a Buddhist principle of conservation of consciousness—I'd like some idea of what's in store, before I die.

These questions concerning the nature of the mind, consciousness, and death are sometimes presented as imponderable. Theologians and philosophers call them perennial mysteries. How could you possibly know the nature of death? You can't know anything when you're dead, and until then, you're still alive. German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) believed that death is unknowable. More often, the assumption goes unsaid: the mind is just a product of the brain. Many people are quite content with that assumption. On the other hand, if the continuity of consciousness before this life and following it can be determined through meditative experience, this is no longer a metaphysical issue but an empirical one. This Buddhist hypothesis can best be put to the test if one develops excellent samadhi, which is not a common strength in our modern world. India developed a vast tradition of samadhi, which has been maintained by Tibetans and other Buddhist cultures.

In order to be irreversibly free of the mental afflictions, one needs to develop the extraordinary mental health and balance of the first dhyana as a platform for the real work—practicing vipashyana to effect a full cure. The achievement of shamatha still occurs today, especially in the Tibetan tradition, and is virtually equated with the achievement of the first dhyana; this is more accurately called “access to the first dhyana.” Achieving shamatha is right on the threshold, where samadhi can be sustained for about four hours instead of twenty-four. Note that these are not precise limits.

Even if you have achieved only access to the first dhyana and not the actual state of the first dhyana, you are equally free of the five obscurations. They can still crop up on occasion, but they're manageable. This means that you can tap into them out of curiosity, or perhaps to transmute them, as is done in certain types of Vajrayana practice. By utilizing

the energy of desire and transmuting it, or sublimating it (in Freudian terms), this energy can actually propel you toward enlightenment. In this case, you might not want to remain in the actual state of the first dhyana because you may not be able to give rise to desires at all.

Luminous Glow

The notion of the five obscurations raises this question: What do they obscure? Of course they implicitly obscure buddha nature, but you will not realize buddha nature simply by achieving the first dhyana and becoming free of the five obscurations. They also explicitly obscure something more proximate: the substrate consciousness (Skt. *alayavijñana*). The substrate consciousness is the relative ground state from which the psyche emerges each time we awaken, and into which the psyche dissolves each time we fall asleep. When you access the substrate consciousness clearly and vividly by way of shamatha, it's like falling deep asleep while remaining luminously awake. This state is imbued with three universal qualities: bliss, luminosity, and nonconceptuality.

Everyone's individual psyche is unique, like a snowflake. Your psyche is built from the experiences of this lifetime and is influenced by past lifetimes, genetic dispositions, parenting, cultural values, and language, which make your psyche and everyone else's absolutely unique. But if we melt any snowflake, its fundamental ingredient is simply water. Similarly, when you or anyone “melts” the psyche by using shamatha, and it settles back into the substrate consciousness from which it arose, then the three traits that you or anyone will find, regardless of genetic and cultural background, are that the substrate consciousness is blissful, luminous, and nonconceptual.

The substrate (Skt. *alaya*) and the substrate consciousness are not the same. The substrate is the space of the mind itself, and the substrate consciousness is the awareness of that space. The substrate consciousness is the stem consciousness, whereas the psyche is a configured stem consciousness. Just as a stem cell becomes a specific kind of cell in the body, such as a blood cell or neuron, the stem consciousness becomes configured as a specific individual's psyche, which is precisely what psychologists study. The vast array of our mental states and processes

is strongly conditioned by genetics, brain chemistry, diet, exercise, language, personal history, and social influences. Without addressing the precise details here, everyone's psyche has a finite duration, beginning in the womb and ending at death. Death is the end of the story for the psyche. The origin of the psyche is the subject of two primary hypotheses. One view is that the psyche emerges from the brain or is equivalent to brain function—the materialist hypothesis.

Consciousness emerging from a complex network of neurons seems just as improbable to me as an emotion arising from my laptop computer. The brain does have emergent properties—such as density and temperature—and they are all physical and are therefore physically measurable. Mental events have no physical attributes and are physically unmeasurable, so the evidence suggests that thoughts and emotions are not emergent properties of the brain. Any cell, whether a liver cell or a neuron, has descended from a stem cell. But no matter how complex this network of cells might be, it strikes me as mystical thinking to imagine that something as radically different as an emotion or a dream could emerge from neurons. We could just as easily believe in the emergence of a genie from a magic lamp.

The alternate hypothesis is that the psyche emerges not from neurons but from the substrate consciousness. If we develop the requisite skills of observation, we can actually witness mental events and emotions emerging from this dimension of awareness. Nevertheless, this does not eliminate the possibility that mental events emerge from the brain. Many scientists say that introspective observations and neuroscientific observations of the brain are concerned with the same phenomena. They assert that the mind and the brain are the same thing viewed from two different perspectives: inside and outside. This could be true, but so far there is no evidence for it.

Why do we often feel dull and lethargic? What obscures the innate luminosity of the mind's relative ground state? If one of the three fundamental qualities of the substrate consciousness is bliss, why don't we always feel blissful? These qualities are always present, but they are veiled by malice, sensual craving, and the other obscurations. Meditative quiescence is not like being gagged and bound. The mind is settled in a

state of peaceful, luminous silence in which you can think at any time. Your abilities to investigate and analyze are on tap, but you are no longer subject to obsessive-compulsive ideation. You can finally switch off the mind's motor-mouth. The five obscurations no longer veil the natural serenity and silence of the substrate. On the other hand, without achieving the first dhyana, the Buddha's assessment is sobering:

So long as these five obscurations are not abandoned, one considers oneself as indebted, sick, in bonds, enslaved, and lost on a desert track.⁶

In other words, don't be content with such a state. This is like living in a village where tuberculosis is endemic and everybody thinks it's incurable; people assume it's natural to cough chronically and die at the age of thirty-five. A doctor might visit such a community and say, "Please realize that you're sick and there's a cure!" In Buddhism, the typical mind is not considered to be a healthy mind. Don't tolerate mental illness any longer!