

The Gradual Training

The Gradual Training

**The Buddha's
Step-by-Step Guide
for Awakening**

by
Leigh Brasington

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Dedication

In loving memory of Ven. Ayya Khema,
who taught me the Gradual Training and thereby
transformed my life.

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Abbreviations and Notes

AN – Aṅguttara Nikāya (book.sutta)
Dhp – Dhammapada (verse)
DN – Dīgha Nikāya (sutta.verse)
Iti – Itivuttaka (verse)
MN – Majjhima Nikāya (sutta.verse)
PED – Pāli-English Dictionary from the Pāli Text Society
SN – Saṃyutta Nikāya (book.sutta)
Snp – Sutta Nipāta (book.sutta)
Ud – Udāna (book.sutta)
Vsm – Visuddhimagga (The Path of Purification by
Buddhaghosa, translated by the Ven. Nāṇamoli, BPS 1956
+)



Most Pālī words are italicized, but a few in common English usage are only italicized at their first use: *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anatta*, *vedanā*

In order to save typing, all the internet URLs mentioned in this book can be found at <http://gt.leighb.com/links.htm>.

Most of the suttas mentioned can be found at [Sutta Central](http://leighb.com/suttacentral.htm) via <http://leighb.com/suttacentral.htm>.

Preface

When I went on my very first month-long retreat in 1991, it was like I went into that retreat with, metaphorically, a bunch of post-it notes with all these ideas from Buddhism randomly stuffed into an envelope. I had learned a number of Buddhist practices and ideas during the previous six years, but I had no idea how it all fit together. During the retreat, Ayya Khema¹ taught the Gradual Training in splendid detail² for over three weeks. And when she finished teaching this, I knew where to stick each metaphorical post-it note: this is *Sīla*, this is *Samādhi*, and this is *Paññā*.³ The path started making sense as a whole – it was no longer a disconnected set of ideas and practices.

But the Gradual Training is very seldom taught in Western Buddhism. Other than Ayya Khema, I've never heard anyone else teach it. And I've only heard of one other teacher who has taught it.⁴

Since this path of practice has such a profound positive effect on my understanding of what the Buddha taught, I've been teaching it ever since – though never in three-week-long detail. I give a Dhamma talk on it in every long retreat I teach, and occasionally I will teach a day-long event where I go into it in more detail.

This book is the result of such a day-long event I taught for the Sati Center⁵ in February, 2023. The talks were [recorded](#) and then transcribed and edited. I used these

transcripts as the basis for creating this book. Because this was a live event, there were lots of Questions and Answers after each section. Some of this info has been folded into the relevant chapters that follow, and a selection of the remaining Q&A's is included in [Appendix 1](#). There are links into that appendix at the end of chapters that have this additional information.

Please keep in mind that this is just my interpretation of the Gradual Training. I'm sure others will have different interpretations of some of the factors. What is presented here reflects my understanding of this important teaching and how I've used it on my own spiritual journey. May what follows be helpful to you for gaining a deeper understanding of the Buddha's path of practice.

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1. Ayya Khema was my first meditation teacher and became my primary Dhamma teacher when I reconnected with her 5 years after that first retreat. For a short biography of Ayya Khema, see http://leighb.com/a_khema.htm
 2. 24 audio recordings on Dharma Seed at <http://leighb.com/ayyakhemadharmaseed.htm#12>
 3. *Sīla* is morality/ethics, *Samādhi* is concentration/indistractibility, and *Paññā* is wisdom.
 4. Rachael O'Brien – her 7 talks on this subject can be found at <https://www.thenoblesearch.com/talks>
 5. Sati Center – <https://sati.org/>

Introduction

"The Gradual Training" (*anupubbasikkhā*) is the name given to a series of practices that are to be undertaken in order to progress on the spiritual path. It appears to be the curriculum for the monks and nuns in the Buddha's sangha. If one were to become a monastic, here are the practices that were to be done. But these practices are also highly applicable to lay practitioners. Multiple of these practices will probably be familiar to anyone who has practiced extensively in any Buddhist tradition.

These practices occurs in 30+ suttas in some form or another. The Gradual Training has various elements – thirty in total – but not all elements appear in every sutta. In fact, no sutta contains all thirty elements. But there are a number of suttas that contain quite a number of these elements, particularly in the long discourses, the Dīgha Nikāya. (For more on what practices are found in which suttas, see [Appendix 2](#).)

*Anupubbasikkhā*¹ is also sometimes translated as "The Graduated Training." It's called "gradual" or "graduated" because each step gradually takes you further along the spiritual path. In MN 70,² the Buddha says, "Bhikkhus, I do not say that final knowledge is achieved all at once. On the contrary, final knowledge is achieved by gradual training, by gradual practice, by gradual progress." It's like the way a flight of stairs gradually take you higher and higher; you don't have to jump all the way up at once to go from the first floor to the second.

In MN 107,³ the brahman Gaṇaka-Moggallāna approached the Buddha and pointed out that many disciplines, such as the study of the Vedas [the Brahminical teaching], the learning of archery, mathematics, etc., all have a gradual training in that you start simple and gradually add more advanced practices. He then asked the Buddha if the Buddha's teachings have a gradual path. And of course, the Buddha's reply is the Gradual Training as we will discuss it here.

By way of introduction, we are going to look at a sutta that exemplifies the Gradual Training. This is the second one in the Long Discourses: the *Sāmaññaphala-Sutta* – **The Discourse on the Fruits of the Spiritual Life**. It not only has an interesting backstory, it will also give you a sense of what the Gradual Training is.

There is a very excellent translation of this sutta by Bhikkhu Bodhi at <https://suttacentral.net/dn2/en/bodhi>. The best thing now would be for you to go read that sutta. But there is a TL;DR version of it in the next chapter.

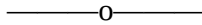
1. *Anupubba* (adj.): following in one's turn, successive, gradual, by and by, regular + *Sikkhā* (f.): study, training, discipline

2. MN 70.22 – see <https://suttacentral.net/mn70/en/bodhi>

3. MN 107.1-3ff – see <https://suttacentral.net/mn107/en/sujato>

The Discourse on the Fruits of the Spiritual Life [abridged & storyfied]

This is an abridged version of DN 2 – *Sāmaññaphala-Sutta*, The Discourse on the Fruits of the Spiritual Life. I tell it as a story on most of the retreats I teach, so maybe it's a little more approachable than the actual sutta. This is not the actual sutta – this is a story based on the sutta. I think it is reasonably accurate, and I hope it covers all the important points in the sutta, and it will give you a sense of what the Gradual Training is all about. I still recommend [reading the sutta](#) – but I'll give you what I've got.



Thus have I heard, once the Blessed One was staying in Jīvaka's mango grove with a company of 1250 monks just outside the great city of Rājagaha. Jīvaka, who had given the mango grove to the Buddha to use as a monastery, was the royal physician in the court of King Ajātasattu, King of Magadha. On this occasion, it was the night of the full moon and King Ajātasattu was seated on the upper terrace of his palace, surrounded by his ministers and other members of the court, including Jīvaka. When the full moon rose, King Ajātasattu uttered a joyful exclamation, "Oh, what a beautiful night! Oh, what a wondrous night! Oh, what an auspicious night! Perhaps we could visit

some recluse or brahman, who could bring some peace to my mind."

You see, King Ajātasattu had a very unpeaceful mind. This was because he had killed his father, good King Bimbisāra. The Buddha-to-be actually met King Bimbisāra before he became the Buddha. The story¹ is that King Bimbisāra was looking out of one of the upper windows of his palace, and he saw a recluse on alms round down below going from house to house. But this recluse seem different from other recluses, maybe a more regal bearing or something. So King Bimbisāra, called some of his messengers over and said, "You see that recluse? Follow him, see where he goes and report back to me."

Three of his ministers followed Siddhartha Gotama back to Mount Paṇḍava, which is a hill outside the city of Rājagaha. It was a place where recluses would go and meditate. While two of the messengers kept an eye on where Siddhartha Gotama had gone, one went back and told the king.

The king rode out in his chariot as far as he could go, then walked the rest of the way, and introduced himself to Siddhartha Gotama. He inquired of him about his background – if you've been to Asia, you know how the questions start out: "Who's your family? Are your parents still alive? How many brothers and sisters do you have...." It apparently progressed into an interesting conversation for both of them. Eventually King Bimbisāra asked, "Would you like to be a minister in my court?" But Siddhartha Gotama had left home, not because he was seeking a political position, but because he wanted to find out what to do about old age, sickness and death. So he

politely declined.

But King Bimbisāra got him to promise that if he figured it out, he'd come back and tell the king. Sure enough, three years after his awakening,² the Buddha returned to Rājagaha, gave a discourse to King Bimbisāra, and the king was established in the fruit of stream entry. In other words, he attained the first level of awakening. The king became a great supporter of the Buddha.

However, the king had a son, Prince Ajātasattu, and Prince Ajātasattu was an ambitious man.³ He grew weary of waiting for his father to die and decided to take matters into his own hands. He strapped a dagger to his thigh and went sneaking into the king's private quarters, where he was immediately apprehended by the guards. They hauled him up in front of the king and said, "Great King, we found your son sneaking into your private quarters, and he had this dagger strapped to his thigh!"

"Son, why were you sneaking into my private quarters with a dagger strapped to your thigh?"

"I was gonna kill you, dad."

"Why do you want to kill me?"

"I want your kingdom."

"Why didn't you just say so, here – you can be king." And he made him king right on the spot. King Bimbisāra was quite happy to give up his kingship so that he could practice Dhamma more seriously.

So Prince Ajātasattu got to be king without having to kill

his father. But he grew worried that his father was going to get bored with all that meditation stuff and want his kingdom back. So he ordered his father thrown in the dungeon. He didn't have the heart to order him killed. He just cut off all his food. He did allow one visitor, the Queen. When she would go visit her husband she would smear her body with honey, and the king could live by licking it off.

When King Bimbisāra wasn't dying, King Ajātasattu went to see him. "Dad, how come you're not dead yet?"

"Oh, when your mother comes to visit, she smears her body with honey and I live by licking it off." End of visits from the queen. But still King Bimbisāra wasn't dying. So King Ajātasattu ordered him tortured, and during the torturing, he died.

It is said in the commentaries that two messages arrived simultaneously back at the palace. The first message was that King Ajātasattu's queen had given birth to a baby boy. For the first time, King Ajātasattu understood the love of a father for his son. He ordered his men: "Release my father from prison!" Then they gave him the second message, which was that his father was dead.

From that night on, King Ajātasattu had terrible nightmares. He would no sooner fall asleep than he would wake up screaming. His servants would rush in: "Great King, Great King, are you all right?"

"I'm fine. I'm fine, go away, go away." And they'd go away and he'd fall asleep and have another nightmare.

So on this full moon night, King Ajātasattu doesn't want

to go to bed because he doesn't want to have nightmares. And if the king can't sleep, nobody gets to sleep. So all the members of the court are up there with him when he utters his joyful exclamation about wanting to visit some recluse or brahman who could maybe bring some peace to his mind. Immediately one of the ministers piped up and said, "There is Pūraṇa Kassapa. He's long gone forth. He has many followers. He's esteemed as holy. He's in the last stage of his life. You should visit him, perhaps he can bring some peace to your mind." The King said nothing.

Another Minister piped up, "There is Makkhali Gosāla. He's long gone forth. He has many followers. He's esteemed as holy. He is in the last stage of his life. You should visit him, perhaps he can bring some peace to your mind." The King said nothing.

Another minister.... You get the picture – each of the ministers piped up championing his recluse or brahman, and the King never said anything. After the hubbub finally calmed down, the king turned to Jīvaka, "Jīvaka! Do you know any reclusive brahman we might visit who could bring some peace to my mind?"

"Great King, The Buddha, the perfectly awakened one, is living in my mango grove with a company of 1250 monks. He teaches Dhamma which is good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end. You should go visit the Buddha. Perhaps he can bring some peace to your mind."

"Prepare the elephant vehicles, Jīvaka."

So Jīvaka went running down from the upper terrace of the palace, down to the stables below and he had 500⁴

female elephants saddled up, along with the king's royal bull elephant. He then ran back up to the upper terrace and said, "Great King, the elephant vehicles are prepared! Do as you see fit."

So the king had 500 women of his court seated one each on the 500 female elephants. Then the king and Jīvaka mounted up on the royal tusker, and they went riding forth in full royal splendor, with torch bearers going before. It must have been quite a sight on that full moon night. They rode out of the palace, thru the streets of New Rājagaha, then thru the Old City, then out of the south gate, hung a left, and headed towards the mango grove.

But when they got near the mango grove, it was quiet. It was a little too quiet. "Jīvaka! Are you betraying me? Are you turning me over to my enemies?"

"No Great King. Why would you think that?"

"You said there was 1250 people in this mango grove. I don't hear a sound."

"They're probably all meditating, Great King. Look, you can see lights in the pavilion hall – go forward, Great King, go forward." So they went as far as they could go on the elephants. And then they dismounted, the King and Jīvaka and all the women of the court, and they went to the pavilion hall.

The King was quite impressed. 1250 people sitting there absolutely silent, nobody twitching, nobody coughing. He wandered around, taking in the spectacle. Finally he said to Jīvaka, "Which one's the Buddha?"

"He's the one sitting at the back of the hall, facing everybody else."

The King wandered to the back. He was very impressed and said, "Oh, if only my son the prince could enjoy such peace as the company of bhikkhus enjoys." The Buddha overheard him and said, "Great King, do your thoughts follow your affection?"

"Indeed they do, Venerable Sir. I love my son very much. It would be wonderful if he could enjoy such peace as the company of bhikkhus enjoys." Then the king saluted the Buddha, saluted the company of monks, and sat down at one side.

Sitting there, he said, "Venerable Sir, may I ask you a question?"

"Certainly, Great King, ask whatever you wish."

"Venerable Sir, in my kingdom, there are people who practice many different crafts. There are elephant trainers, horse trainers, charioteers, archers, standard bearers, camp marshals, commandos, high royal officers, front-line soldiers, bull warriors, military heroes, mail-clad warriors, domestic slaves, confectioners, barbers, bath attendants, cooks, garland-makers, laundrymen, weavers, basket-makers, potters, statisticians, accountants, and various other crafts of a similar nature. All of them practice some craft, and it's possible to see here and now some fruit of their labor. Venerable Sir, can you point out any fruit of the spiritual life that is visible here and now?"

"Great King. Have you ever asked this question of any other recluses or Brahmins?"

"Well, actually, yes, I have. I've asked a half a dozen about this matter, but they just preached their doctrine at me; they never got around to answering the question. It was most unsatisfying. It was like asking for a mango and being given a breadfruit. But I never said anything. I just went away quietly. So I ask you again: Venerable Sir, can you point out any fruit of the spiritual life, visible here and now?"

"Great King, I will ask you a question; answer as you see fit. Suppose in your palace there was a workman, a slave, who rises before you each morning, waits on you hand and foot, sees that all of your needs are met, and doesn't go to bed until after you go to bed. Suppose this slave were to think, 'It is wonderful, it is marvelous, the destiny of meritorious deeds. For this King Ajātasattu is a man and I am a man. And yet he enjoys the five strands of sense pleasures as though he were a god, while I wait on him hand and foot from morning to night. It must be the result of doing meritorious deeds. Perhaps I too, should do meritorious deeds.'

"Great King, suppose at some later point the slave were to shave off his hair and beard, put on an ocher robe, and go forth from the home life to the homeless life. Upon learning of this, would you send your men saying, 'Bring that man back and let him be my slave!'"

"Oh, no, Venerable Sir. We would rise up before him, we would prepare a seat, we would see to his food, clothing, shelter and medicinal requirements, we would provide for him righteous protection."

"Great King, is this not a fruit of the spiritual life visible

here and now?"

"Yes, yes, it is. Venerable Sir, can you point out any other fruit of the spiritual life, visible here and now?"

"Great King, I will ask you a question. Answer as you see fit. Suppose in your kingdom, there's a farmer who toils in his fields from morning to night. And of course, when it's harvest time, he winds up paying a large portion of his harvest as taxes to support the royal treasury. Suppose this farmer were to think, 'It is wonderful, it is marvelous, the destiny of meritorious deeds. For this King Ajātasattu is a man and I am a man. And yet he enjoys the five strands of sense pleasures as though he were a god, while I toil in my fields from morning to night and wind up paying a large portion of my harvest as taxes to support the royal treasury. Perhaps I too should do meritorious deeds.'

Great King, suppose at some later point this farmer were to shave off hair and beard, put on an ochre robe, and go forth from the home life to the homeless life. Upon learning of this, would you send your men saying, 'Make that man come back and work his fields so he can support the royal treasury?'"

"Oh, no, Venerable Sir. We would rise up before him, we would prepare a seat, we would see to his food, clothing, shelter and medicinal requirements, we would provide for him righteous protection.

Great King, is this not also a fruit of the spiritual life, visible here and now?"

"Yes, yes, indeed it is, Venerable Sir. Venerable Sir, can you point out any other fruit of the spiritual life, visible

here and now, but more wondrous and more sublime than these?"

"Listen carefully, Great King, and pay attention. A Tathāgata arises in this world, a fully awakened Buddha, who teaches Dhamma which is good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end. A householder or householder's child hears the Dhamma, gains faith, and thinks, 'Household life is crowded and dusty, going forth is free like the air.' Then at some point, that household or householder's child or other person shaves off hair and beard, puts on the ochre robe, goes forth, and joins the Tathāgata's order.

"Great King, when one joins the Tathāgata's order, they live restrained by the precepts, the rules of behavior. The first of these precepts, Great King, is 'I undertake the training to refrain from killing living beings.' The second of these precepts, Great King, is 'I undertake the training to refrain from taking that which is not given.' There are many rules, Great King. We're celibate. We speak the truth. We don't use divisive or harsh language. We don't engage in gossip or idle chatter. We don't take intoxicants. We only eat in one part of the day. We don't attend singing, dancing or musical shows. We don't adorn ourselves with garlands and perfumes. We don't sleep in high and luxurious beds. We don't handle gold or silver. There are many rules, Great King.

"By keeping these precepts it makes it possible to live with our senses restrained. Upon seeing a sight with the eye, one does not grasp at the signs or secondary characteristics, lest evil, unwholesome states such as covetousness or grief overcome one. When hearing a sound, smelling a smell, tasting a taste, touching a texture,

thinking a thought, one does not grasp at the signs or secondary characteristics, lest evil, unwholesome states such as covetousness or grief overcome one.

"By living with our senses restrained, it makes it possible to be mindful of all that we do: mindful when going forward, mindful when coming back; mindful when looking forward, mindful when looking back; mindful when getting dressed and mindful when going on alms round. Mindful when eating, chewing, savoring, and swallowing. Mindful when going to the toilet. Mindful when walking, standing, sitting, or lying down. Mindful when speaking and keeping silent. Mindful when falling asleep and waking up.

"Also, Great King, we don't have many needs. All we need is food, clothing, shelter, and medicine if we're ill. Other than that, we're content with little. This makes it possible to go wherever we wish, like a bird on the wing.

"With these noble precepts, this noble guarding of the senses, this noble mindfulness, this noble contentment with little, it makes it possible to do the work of a recluse. Upon returning from alms round, having eaten the midday meal, one resorts to a secluded dwelling, the forest, the root of a tree, a heap of straw, a charnel ground, a hillside cave, the open air. One sits down cross-legged, holds one's body erect, and sets up mindfulness before oneself.

"Great King, when practicing meditation, there are five states of mind that might arise that hinder progress on the spiritual path. The first of these is sensual desire. Great King, sensual desire is like being in debt. If someone is in debt, they must continually work to pay off that debt. If someone is entranced by sensual desire – well, no sensual

desire is ultimately fulfilling, it only leads to wanting more sensual pleasures. But if someone who was in debt was to pay off that debt, they would rejoice and become glad. In the same way, if one can overcome sensual desire, even temporarily, one rejoices and becomes glad.

"The second of these hindrances, Great King, is ill-will and hatred. Ill-will and hatred is like being physically ill. If you're physically ill, you don't feel well, you can't think straight, you're hot, you can't do what you want to do. If you're overcome with ill-will and hatred, you don't feel well, you can't think straight, you're hot, you can't do what you want to do. But if someone were physically ill, and were to take medicine and overcome that illness, they would rejoice and become glad. In the same way, if one can overcome ill-will and hatred, even temporarily, one rejoices and becomes glad.

"The third of these hindrances, Great King, is sloth and torpor. Sloth and torpor is like being in prison. If one is in prison, one just sits there missing out on all the good things of life. If one is overcome with sloth and torpor, when one sits down to meditate, one just sits there missing out on all the good things of the spiritual life. But if a prisoner were to gain his freedom, he would rejoice and become glad. In the same way, if one can overcome sloth and torpor, even temporarily, one rejoices and becomes glad.

"The fourth of these hindrances, Great King, is restlessness and remorse. Restlessness and remorse is like being a slave. A slave is always busy – doing what the master commands: 'Go there, do that, come here, do this!' but never getting to do what the slave wants to do. It's the same with restlessness and remorse. One's mind is all over

the place, one's body can't get settled. One can't really do what one wants to do. But if a slave were to gain his freedom he would rejoice and become glad. In the same way, if one can overcome restlessness and remorse, even temporarily, one rejoices and becomes glad.

"The fifth of these hindrances, Great King, is skeptical doubt. Skeptical doubt is like being on a perilous desert journey where bandits abound and provisions are scarce. First one thinks to go this way; but no, there's sure to be bandits. Maybe better to go that way; but no, there won't be any water. One does more starting and stopping than actual progressing. It's the same with skeptical doubt. First one takes up this practice, but it doesn't give instant results. So one takes up another practice, but that one is kind of weird. In the end one does more starting and stopping than actual progressing. But if someone on a perilous desert journey were to arrive at a place of safety, they would rejoice and become glad. If one can overcome skeptical doubt, even temporarily, one rejoices and becomes glad.

"Great King, when one sees that these five hindrances are not abandoned, one regards that as being in debt, as being physically ill, as being in prison, as being a slave, as a desert road. But when one sees that these five hindrances have been abandoned, one regards that as freedom from debt, as good health, as release from prison, as freedom from slavery, as a place of safety.

"Thus secluded from sense desires and unwholesome states of mind, one enters and dwells in the first jhāna, which is with thinking and examining, and is filled with rapture and happiness born of seclusion. One drenches, steep, saturates, and suffuses one's body with this rapture

and happiness born of seclusion, so that there is no part of one's body not filled with rapture and happiness.

"Great King, imagine a skilled bath attendant, or his apprentice, taking a metal bowl, pouring in just the right amount of soap flakes, then just the right amount of water, and then mixing the soap flakes and water until he has a homogeneous ball of soap that does not trickle. In the same way one drenches, steeps, saturates, and suffuses one's body with this rapture and happiness born of seclusion, so there is no part of one's body not filled with rapture and happiness. Great King, this is a fruit of the spiritual life, visible here and now, and more wondrous and more sublime than the previous.

"Further, Great King, with the subsiding of thinking and examining, and by gaining inner tranquility and unification of mind, one enters and dwells in the second jhāna, a state without thinking and examining, that contains rapture and happiness born of concentration. One drenches, steeps, saturates, and suffuses one's body with this rapture and happiness born of concentration, so there is no part of one's body not filled with rapture and happiness.

"Great King, imagine a lake, far up in the mountains, with no streams coming in from the east, the west, the north, or the south – and not even any showers of rain. And yet at the bottom of the lake, there's a spring of cool, clear water. The cool, clear water from the spring would totally permeate the lake, totally fill the lake so there would be no part of that lake not filled with the cool, clear water from the spring. In the same way, one drenches, steeps, saturates, and suffuses one's body with this rapture and happiness born of concentration, so there is no part of

one's body not filled with rapture and happiness. Great King, this too is a fruit of the spiritual life, visible here and now, and more wondrous and more sublime than the previous.

"Further, Great King, with the fading away of rapture, and by remaining mindful, clearly comprehending, and equanimous, one experiences happiness with the body. Thus one enters and dwells in the third jhāna, of which the Noble Ones declare, 'Happy is one who is equanimous and mindful.' One drenches, steepes, saturates, and suffuses one's body with this happiness free from rapture, so there is no part of one's body not filled with happiness.

"Great King, imagine a lotus pond where there grow blue, white, or red lotuses which come up out of the mud but not above the surface of the water. From their tips to their roots, they would be filled with water. In the same way, Great King, one drenches, steepes, saturates, and suffuses one's body with this happiness free from rapture so there is no part of one's body not filled with happiness. Great King, this too is a fruit of the spiritual life, visible here and now, and more wondrous and more sublime than the previous.

"Further, Great King, with the passing of pleasure and pain, as with the previous passing of joy and grief, one enters and dwells in the fourth jhāna, a state beyond pleasure and pain that contains mindfulness fully purified by equanimity. One sits suffusing one's body with a pure bright mind so there is no part of one's body not suffused by this pure bright mind.

"Great King, imagine a man covered from the head down by a white cloth, so there is no part of his body not

suffused with the white cloth. In the same way, one sits suffusing one's body with a pure bright mind so there is no part of one's body not suffused with this pure bright mind. Great King, this too is a fruit of the spiritual life, visible here and now, and more wondrous and more sublime than the previous.

"Further, Great King, with a mind thus concentrated, clear, sharp, bright, malleable, wieldy, and given to imperturbability, one directs and inclines it to knowing and seeing. One understands thus: 'This is my body having material form, composed of the four primary elements, originating from mother and father, built up of rice and gruel, impermanent, subject to rubbing and pressing, to dissolution and dispersion. And this is my consciousness, supported by it and bound up with it.' Great King, insights into the nature of reality such as these are also fruits of the spiritual life, visible here and now, and more wondrous and more sublime than the previous.

"Further, Great King, with a mind thus concentrated, clear, sharp, bright, malleable, wieldy, and given to imperturbability, one can direct and incline it to the various modes of psychic power: one can create a Mind-Made Body; one can wield the supernormal powers like walking on water or diving into the earth; being one, becoming many; being many, becoming one; appearing and disappearing at will; passing thru walls and ramparts unimpeded; flying cross-legged thru the sky like a bird; stroking the Sun and Moon; wielding mastery over the body as far as the Brahma realms. Great King, these too are fruits of the spiritual life, visible here and now, and more wondrous and more sublime than the previous.

"Further, Great King, with a mind thus concentrated clear, sharp, bright, malleable, wieldy, and given to imperturbability, one can direct and incline it to hearing sounds at a great distance, both human and divine. One can also direct and incline one's mind to knowing the minds of others. Great King, these too are fruits of the spiritual life, visible here and now, and more wondrous and more sublime than the previous.

"Further, Great King, with a mind thus concentrated clear, sharp, bright, malleable, wieldy, and given to imperturbability, one can direct and incline it to remembering past lives. One can also direct and incline one's mind to seeing beings passing away and arising according to their karma. Great King, these too are fruits of the spiritual life, visible here and now, and more wondrous and more sublime than the previous.

"Further, Great King with a mind thus concentrated clear, sharp, bright, malleable, wieldy, and given to imperturbability, one directs and inclines it to the overcoming of the *āsavas* – the intoxicants. One can understand: This is dukkha. This is the origin of dukkha. This is the cessation of dukkha. This is the path of practice that leads to the cessation of dukkha. One can understand: These are the *āsavas*. This is the origin of the *āsavas*. This is a cessation of the *āsavas*. This is the path of practice that leads to the cessation of the *āsavas*. And one can follow that path all the way to the end and put an end to the *āsava* of sense desire, the *āsava* of becoming, and the *āsava* of ignorance – putting an end to all of the intoxicants – and in so doing putting an end to all dukkha. Great King, this too is a fruit of the spiritual life, visible here and now, and more wondrous and more sublime than the previous. Furthermore, Great King, there is no fruit of

the spiritual life more wondrous and more sublime than this."

The King was impressed. "Wonderful, marvelous. It's like setting upright something that's been knocked down! It's like pointing out the way to one who is lost. It's like bringing a light into a darkened room so that those who have eyes can see. I go for refuge to the Buddha and to the Dhamma and to the Bhikkhu Sangha. May the Buddha please consider me a lay follower from this day forth!"

Then King Ajātasattu got all shamefaced, and finally he blurted out: "Venerable Sir, a transgression overcame me in that I killed my father, a righteous man and a righteous king."

"Great King, indeed, a transgression did overcome you in that you killed your father, a righteous man and a righteous king, but it is good that you admit such a transgression for the sake of your restraint in the future."

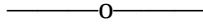
Then the king said, "We must be going. We have many things to do."

"Do as you see fit, Great King."

So the king saluted the Buddha, saluted the monks, circumambulated the Buddha, and keeping the Buddha on his right side, he and Jīvaka and all the women of the court went back to where the elephants were parked, mounted up and rode back to the palace.

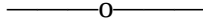
Not long after the king had departed, the Buddha said to the monks, "This king has ruined himself, this king has destroyed himself. If he had not killed his father, a

righteous man and a righteous king, then the Stainless Eye of Dhamma would have opened in him tonight, and he would have attained the first level of awakening, stream entry. But this king has ruined himself, this king has destroyed himself." And the monks were very pleased with all that the Buddha taught.



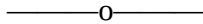
Now the sutta ends here, but the commentaries go on to say that King Ajātasattu went back to the palace and had his first good night's sleep since his father died. And the King did indeed become a great protector of the Dhamma. Three months after the Buddha's death there was the first council of arahants, where five hundred of the Buddha's fully awakened disciples came together in a cave just outside the city of Rājagaha to codify the Buddha's teachings. They recited the suttas and recited the precepts, and this became the basis for the suttas and precepts that we have today. Obviously, they felt safe under the protection of King Ajātasattu.

However, King Ajātasattu was an ambitious man. After the Buddha's death he set out on wars of conquest, conquered all of the neighboring kingdoms and republics, and built the nucleus of the first great Indian empire. Yet not all went well for King Ajātasattu. You see, his son killed him, and his grandson killed his son, and his great grandson killed his grandson, and his great great grandson killed his great grandson. At that point, the people of Magadha said, "Enough of these father killers." They killed the last of their line, and established a new dynasty.



This sutta is a truly magnificent composition. The story in and of itself is wonderful: 500 elephants, kings, a moonlit journey seeking the fruits of the spiritual life, and an absolutely brilliant teaching.

But the real key part is the Gradual Training, and that kicks off with hearing the Dhamma, gaining faith, going forth – or since we're lay people, committing ourselves to the spiritual path – and keeping the precepts. Then there's guarding the senses, being mindful of all that we do, being content with little, abandoning the hindrances, and practicing the jhānas. Then there is using the jhānicly-concentrated mind to practice insight meditation. The psychic powers seem to be optional; they show up in some of the recensions, and in some they don't. We'll discuss them later, but basically don't waste your time. Finally, most importantly, is overcoming the intoxicants, the *āsavas*. The overcoming of the *āsavas* is equivalent to full awakening. So what we're going to do for the rest of this book is examine these aspects of the Gradual Training in great detail.



Since this book was created from transcripts of a live presentation, [Appendix 1: Questions & Answers](#) contains additional material for some of the chapters, including this one.

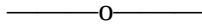
1. Pabbaja Sutta at [Snp 3.1](#)
2. Thruout this book, I will use “awakening” rather than the perhaps more familiar “enlightenment” since “enlightenment” is not an accurate translation, having been chosen by the early translators to suggest a connection with the European Enlightenment.
3. The story of King Bimbisāra and King Ajātasattu is taken from the commentary to DN 2. See Bhikkhu Bodhi (1989) for the details.
4. Don't take the number 500 literally – it just means "a whole bunch."

Going Forth

As we go forward, you may want to refer to [Appendix 2](#) from time to time. The information there is the same as what's on my website at <http://leighb.com/gtchart.htm>. You might find it useful to have the chart from my website open on your computer or tablet as you work your way thru the following chapters.

If you scroll to the bottom of [Appendix 2](#) (or the webpage), all the factors are listed by name, and with an abbreviation in the left hand column. The number next to it in the second column is the number of suttas in which this particular part of the Gradual Training is mentioned. The last column spells out what each factor is.

Each factor is mentioned pretty much verbatim wherever it is mentioned; there's not much variety. The colors are for grouping things together. The bar chart at the top of [Appendix 2](#) shows what factors show up with what frequency. I would say in general, the more frequent a factor appears, the more important it is.



The first item in the Gradual Training is Going Forth (GF in the chart). As you can see in the chart at the bottom of [Appendix 2](#), GF shows up in 24 of the 32 total suttas where the Gradual Training is talked about. The way it is

presented often is as follows: "A Tathāgata arises in this world. Someone hears the Dhamma, gains faith, and goes forth from the home life into homelessness."

Or we could say the person hears the Dhamma and gains confidence that this is a reasonable path of practice, then applies themselves to actually practicing. Since most of us are lay people, we're not actually going forth. But we have encountered the Dhamma – you wouldn't be reading this book if you hadn't encountered it – and you must have some faith that this Buddha Dhamma has some usefulness. This is the initial glimpse of the first element of the Eightfold Path – Right View. Now we have to actually practice this Dhamma – and that begins with the next item.

Keeping the Precepts – The First Three

The first of the practices are the moralities – the keeping of the precepts. There's a small section on morality, which shows up in 23 suttas, and then in 8 suttas in the DN there are medium and large sections on morality.

At DN 2.44, the *Sāmaññaphala-Sutta* says, "When one has gone forth, one lives restrained by the Patimokkha [the precepts for the monastics], possessed of proper behavior and resort." Following that, we have a summary of what this means: "One takes up the rules of training and trains oneself in them, seeing danger in the slightest faults." In other words, one keeps the precepts – because one sees that this is what works.

The precepts in Buddhism are not about, "keep these precepts or you go to hell!" You can certainly find that in the suttas; there's the Aggikkhandopama Sutta at AN 7.68 / [AN 7.72](#) [depending on who's doing the numbering] that any evangelical preacher would be proud of – it's all hellfire and brimstone. But I don't think it's from the Buddha; it just doesn't sound like the bulk of the suttas attributed to him, so I think it's a later composition.

Anyhow, one sees the danger in breaking a precept, one sees that this leads in the wrong direction. You're not keeping them because you've been told to keep them, you're keeping them because you understand that breaking

them does not lead to spiritual advancement; in fact breaking a precept often leads to trouble.

"One is endowed with wholesome bodily and verbal action, one's livelihood is purified, and one is possessed of moral discipline." Following this summary of keeping the precepts, there is a summary of the other morality factors: "One guards the doors of the sense faculties, is endowed with mindfulness and clear comprehension, and is content."¹ Following that summary is the Small Section on Morality. Four of the five lay precepts appear here, and there is a more detail than we usually hear when we recite the Five Precepts.

The first precept is: "Having abandoned the destruction of life, one abstains from the destruction of life. One has laid down the rod and weapon and dwells conscientious, full of kindness, sympathetic for the welfare of all living beings." The usual first precept is: "I undertake the training to refrain from killing living beings," but according to the Buddha, there's an opposite also to be practiced. "One dwells conscientious, full of kindness, sympathetic for the welfare of all living beings." Basically this is saying it's not good enough to just not kill living beings; one also needs to live a life full of love and compassion for all living beings.

The implications of this precept are much bigger than may be apparent at first. We live in a world where there are vast levels of interconnectedness/interrelatedness, that may not be readily apparent. To act in harmony with this interconnectedness/interrelatedness is to act with intentions of love and compassion as basic motivations. The Buddha points out this in the second element of the Eightfold Path: Right Intention, which when manifested is

intentions of letting go, intentions of love, intentions of compassion.² It simply works much better to act in harmony with the way things are than to work at cross purposes; it works better to act from love than from hate. And you cannot kill anything without having hate in your mind.

Also, our little planet is currently dealing with a number of crises, not the least of which is that global climate change is killing an untold number of individuals and species. So doing everything you can to mitigate your contribution to the climate crisis is also important if you really want to keep this precept.

The second precept is: "Having abandoned taking what is not given, one abstains from taking what is not given, accepting and expecting only what is given, one lives honestly with a pure mind." I remember at the end of my first retreat, which was really my first exposure to Buddhism in any depth, Ayya Khema did a precept ceremony. I didn't take the precepts, because, although I was interested in meditation, the religion aspect was questionable in my mind. But when I got back home and I needed a pen, I didn't swipe it from work anymore. It just seemed like I could upgrade my behavior there. That's what the precept means: accepting and expecting only what is given. If I needed to photocopy something at work for my own use, I would go ask the person who was the keeper of the photocopier: "May I Xerox something for my own use?" It just seemed like a better way to be; it seemed like right practice.

Another of this planet's crises is that we are using up the resources here at an unsustainable rate. I'm quite certain future generations have not given us permission to do

that. So keeping this precept also includes reducing your consumption to as small an amount as possible, given your circumstances. No one needs all the things that are advertised in this culture. Again, Right Intention includes intentions of letting go. There is nothing to get on the spiritual path; there is everything to let go of.

The third precept is about sexual conduct – specifically refraining from sexual misconduct. Celibacy is required for the monks and nuns; for lay people it's about not causing harm. Our sexual energy is very powerful energy. We don't want to cause harm with it, not to ourselves, and not to our sexual partners. We also don't want to cause harm to any other parties directly or indirectly intimately associated with us or a partner. This means that cheating on your spouse breaks this precept, even if your spouse doesn't find out – if they did, it would cause harm.

1. Warning- Speculation! The *sīla* summary here kind of interrupts the flow of the story since it mentions more than just the precepts. The king has already stated that he asked the other recluses or Brahmans about the fruits of the spiritual life, and they just preached their doctrine at him and never answered his question. Perhaps this summary was all the Buddha told the king about *sīla* so the Buddha could move quickly to the actual more wondrous and sublime fruits. Then later all the details of *sīla* were inserted into this sutta from other Gradual Training suttas where the details were more appropriate. But this is just my speculation based on the awkwardness of the *sīla* summary in the flow of the precepts.

2. "And what is right intention? Intentions of renunciation, intention of non-ill-will, and intention of

non-cruelty — this is called right intention." DN 22.21,
MN 141.25, SN 45.8

Keeping the Precepts – Right Speech

The next four verses are about the fourth precept – abandoning wrong speech. We usually take the precept as: "I undertake the training to refrain from wrong speech." But here, what constitutes wrong speech is laid out in detail.

The first section is about being truthful: "Having abandoned false speech, one abstains from falsehood. One speaks only the truth, one lives devoted to truth; trustworthy and reliable, one does not deceive anyone in the world."

If you're on a spiritual path, you're seeking the truth – that's what it means to be on a spiritual path: to seek the deeper truths. You can't find the truth if you're telling lies; you have to be dedicated to the truth. But you also have to be careful. The Buddha said:

If you know something that is not true and not useful, don't say it.

If you know something that is true, but not useful, don't say it.

If you know something that is not true, but is useful, don't say that either.

If you know something that is both true and useful, find the right time to say it, and say it with a heart

full of love.¹

This is really what this first part of the speech precept is about. Speak that which is true, useful, timely, and say it with love.

The second part of the fourth precept is about abandoning divisive speech: "One does not repeat here what one has heard elsewhere in order to divide these people here from those people there. One is a reconciler of those who are divided, a promoter of friendships." Right speech is about bringing harmony; this is an important part of the fourth precept as well. We want to be peacemakers, rather than contribute to conflict.

The third part: "Having abandoned harsh speech, one speaks only words that are gentle, pleasing to the ear, endearing, going to the heart, polite, amicable, and agreeable to the many folk." Yes, you can get someone's attention with a string of four-letter words. But you'll make your point much better if you can get it across without resorting to four-letter words, etc. This also means refraining from abusive speech. Even if you strongly disagree with someone, you don't need to abuse them with your words.

And the last section on speech: "One abandons gossip and idle chatter (*samphapalāpa*)." How much of what we say is useless speech? *Samphapalāpa* is sometimes translated as "animal talk." How much mooing and squawking do we do each day?

The Buddha told the monks and nuns that if they wanted to talk about the Dhamma, that was fine. If they didn't

want to talk about the Dhamma, then they should keep noble silence. There is a detailed list of topics that the Buddha said are "unedifying conversations" in the Middle Section on Morality. This is found at DN 2.52:

"Talk about kings, thieves, ministers of state, talk of armies, dangers and wars; talk about food, drink, clothing, lodgings, talk about garlands and perfumes; talk about relations, vehicles, villages, towns, cities, countries; talk about women [or men]; talk about heroes [that's popstars, sport stars, celebrities, etc.]; street and well gossip [water cooler gossip], talk of those long departed, rambling chit chat, speculations about the world and about the sea; talk of loss and gain."

Now, this doesn't mean that you don't need to know what's going on in the world. But do you really need a six o'clock dukkha² report? I mean, that's what it is, right? The six o'clock news comes on. They tell you about the dukkha that happened in Ukraine, and the dukkha that happened in Afghanistan, and the dukkha that happened in the Middle East, and the dukkha that happened in Washington when they tried to prevent dukkha but only made more dukkha, and the dukkha that happened in your local town, and then they come back with the weather. You do need to know what's going on. But I would suggest you get your news from reputable websites rather than from the TV. Remember, TV news is about keeping your eyeballs attached to that TV channel; it's not about educating you about what's going on. There actually are good sources of news on the Internet – amid all the drivel and highly questionable sources. That way you take the news in bites

you can digest, rather than getting it from a firehose of questionable usefulness.

Admittedly, the above list of "unedifying conversations" was given to the monastics. As lay people, we can't talk about the Dhamma with everyone we interact with. So if you are engaged in a conversation with a topic from the list above, at least you should recognize that's the case. And if you find a chance to take a conversation to a higher level, definitely do so.

Also in the Middle Section on Morality at DN 2.53 it says "one abstains from wrangling argumentation." Most scholars say the fourth book of the Sutta Nipata³ is very early material. One overriding theme of that book is not holding to fixed views. Wrangling argumentation goes something like, "You don't understand this, I understand it! How can you understand that? You're doing it wrong, etc." How many arguments have you actually won in your life? What percentage of the arguments you've had in your life has the other person said, "Oh, you're right. I changed my mind." Especially, how many arguments have you won on social media? Part of Right Speech is to recognize that "wrangling argumentation" is almost always not useful – so it is to be avoided. This of course does not mean that you should avoid all discussions where there is not total agreement. But you need to approach such discussions with both an open mind and the goal of understanding and harmony. And you need to recognize at the outset which such discussions are never going to be resolved.

Right Speech is a very powerful precept. It can free us from time and energy wasted on useless speech. It has the potential to bring people together rather than stoke

division. And if you lead your life in such a way that you would never be tempted to lie about what you have done, then you will be leading a life that does not cause harm to you or anyone else – you'll be keeping all the precepts.

1. [AN 5.198](#) -

<https://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/an/an05/an05.198.than.html>

2. dukkha – bummer, unsatisfactoriness, stress, suffering, distress

3. [Snp 4](#) - <https://suttacentral.net/snp-atthakavagga>

Keeping the Precepts – Additional Precepts

Following the fourth precept on speech, you would expect the usual fifth precept about intoxicants. Instead we find: "One abstains from damaging seed and plant life." That's unexpected and interesting. Ayya Khema pointed out that this has been interpreted as meaning that the monks can't keep a garden, which she says is basically laziness on the part of the monks. Whether it is laziness or not, if you're keeping a garden you're doing the opposite of damaging seed and plant life.

Ayya Khema also provided the backstory for this precept. It came about because the monks and nuns would go on daily alms round. During the rainy season, the farmers would plant rice in the fields which were flooded. If the monks and nuns went walking across a flooded field, they would damage the rice seedlings. So the farmers asked the Buddha to have the monastics not do that. This is where the annual rains retreat for monastics came from. The monks and nuns would go into retreat for the three months of the rainy season and the devoted followers would bring food to the monasteries because they knew where the trails were, and hence wouldn't trample the plants.

The fact that the usual precept about refraining from intoxicants is omitted in the Gradual Training is an indicator that the Gradual Training is early material. The

precept on intoxicants only came about a while after the Buddha had lay followers – a time which was likely after the Gradual Training had been codified.

The story is as follows:

“Then the Kosambī lay followers, having prepared pigeon’s liquor in house after house, and seeing that Ven. Sāgata had gone out for alms, said to him, ‘Master Sāgata, drink some pigeon’s liquor! Master Sāgata, drink some pigeon’s liquor!’ Then Ven. Sāgata, having drunk pigeon’s liquor in house after house, passed out at the city gate as he was leaving the city.

“Then the Blessed One, leaving the city with a number of bhikkhus, saw that Ven. Sāgata had passed out at the city gate.”¹

After this incident, the Buddha made the fifth precept – although obviously it was not numbered as "Five" at that point. It apparently got moved to the fifth precept when the five lay precepts were taught.

The fifth precept reads: *Surāmerayamajjapamādaṭṭhāna veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi*, "I undertake the training rule to abstain from fermented and distilled intoxicants which are the basis for heedlessness." The word *meraya* means fermented liquors; *surā* means liquors which have been distilled to increase their strength and flavor. The word *majja*, meaning an intoxicant, can be related to the rest of the passage either as qualified by

surāmeraya or as additional to them. In the former case the whole phrase means "fermented and distilled liquors which are intoxicants;" in the latter it means "fermented and distilled liquors and other intoxicants." If this second reading is adopted the precept would explicitly include intoxicating drugs used non-medicinally, such as the opiates, hemp, and psychedelics.²

The meaning is very clear. As Ayya Khema put it on my very first retreat, "We are confused enough already; we don't want to ingest anything that will makes us even more confused." A clear head is essential on the spiritual path.

There are more precepts given in the Small Section on Morality. The next four precepts are added to the five lay precepts to make the eight precepts that are observed by lay Buddhists on observance days and festivals, and sometimes on retreat. Yes, $5 + 4 = 9$, but precepts 7 and 8 are combined in order to make eight.

The sixth precept is: "One eats in only one part of the day, refraining from food at night and eating at improper times." This has come to mean monastics can't eat after the sun reaches its zenith. India is a hot country and you don't really need to eat all day long. When Ayya Khema was in Sri Lanka, which is equally hot, she ate only one meal a day. When she went back to Germany, where it can be really cold, she ate something in the evening because she needed the calories to keep warm. The precept is more about not indulging in food – not overeating, not eating anytime you're bored. When you're on retreat, the only excitement you have is mealtime, right? Don't eat too much at your mealtime, because at your next meditation period, you'll be thinking about what's for the next meal.

And if you eat too much, then you'll be falling asleep while trying to meditate.

The seventh precept is: "One abstains from dancing, singing, instrumental music, and attending unsuitable shows." These are all distractions from practice. So on an observance day or Buddhist festival, or on retreat, abstaining from these makes perfect sense.

The eighth precept is: "One abstains from wearing garlands and embellishing oneself with perfumes, beautifying oneself with ointments." We live in a culture where it's pretty much required that you can't just be who you are. You have to beautify yourself, particularly if you're female. But none of these things are actually going to solve the problem of dukkha. In fact, you are going to have a much better chance of skillfully dealing with dukkha if you just be who you are.

The last of the 8 precepts (number 9 in the sutta's list) is: "One abstains from high and luxurious beds and seats." This one also gets talked about more in the Middle Section on Morality, and basically it means don't waste your life indulging in sleep. We have a limited amount of time here. You're already going to spend a third of it asleep. You don't need to spend even more of it asleep or being lazy. And you especially don't want to spend time sleeping as a means of running away from something. I doubt that even a few people on their death bed ever complain, "I didn't get enough sleep during my life."

The tenth precept is added to the previous nine to make the ten precepts for a novice. It is: "One abstains from accepting gold and silver." Basically monks and nuns even today are not to handle money. They are to lead a life

dependent on generosity of the lay community.

But monastics can handle credit cards! It's gotten a little absurd. Ayya Khema talked about how after she became a nun and was going to fly from Sri Lanka back to the United States, they gave her a credit card. "What's this? I can't handle money, but I can have a credit card?" She thought it was ridiculous. And so she had bank accounts, and she handled money. She was very much into keeping the spirit of the precepts, not necessarily the letter.

The Second Buddhist Council was called around 60 to 100 years after the Buddha's death. One of the main reasons for calling the Council was that the town monks wanted to be able to handle gold and silver. The forest monks were adamant that, no, they didn't need to do that. Of course, the forest monks were only going into town on alms round, and then going back to the monastery. They didn't need gold or silver. The Council decided that the rule was not going to be changed – even though the Buddha on his deathbed had said the monks could abolish the minor rules. But since no one ever bothered to ask what the Buddha meant by "the minor rules," it was decided at both the first and second councils to keep all the rules to avoid abolishing some rule that wasn't actually minor.

The town monks decided, "No, we're going to handle gold and silver." And they broke off. This is where the divergence into the Theravāda and the Mahāyāna started; it was about this precept in particular.

There are seven more precepts following these in the small section on morality. Four are concerned with not accepting living things (including people) that need to be

taken care of; not accepting fields and lands; not being a "errand boy;" and not going into business. If you are a monastic, you are to be devoted full time to just taking care of the spiritual path, and not take on extra responsibilities.

The last three are about not being a crook: not dealing in false weights and measures; abstaining from bribery, deception, and fraud; and not being a violent criminal. You will probably have no trouble taking on these precepts – especially since breaking them would also entail breaking one or more of the first five precepts.

This first section on morality shows up in 23 of the 30 recensions of the Gradual Training, including in all 13 of the Long Discourses that include the Gradual Training. So keeping the precepts is important. If you want to shorten the list, they boil down to "Don't cause harm." Don't cause harm to yourself, don't cause harm to anybody else.

In eight of the recensions found in the Long Discourses, there are the Middle and Large Sections on Morality. You might find it interesting to read those at some point, as they do give a sense of what was going on in the culture at the time of the Buddha. These two longer sections primarily contain precepts for monastics. There are some activities in these sections that are forbidden for monastics, but are not a problem for a lay person. And there are many activities that everyone should avoid.

The five precepts are the essential foundation of the path. You have to work at keeping them if you are serious about following a spiritual path. If you don't do that, you are going to be causing harm. These are the practices that are to help you to avoid causing any harm. Plus any behavior

outside of the five precepts that might cause harm should also be avoided. And if there is anything that you might do that can be of benefit, then you should do that.

The five precepts are such an essential part of the path that you are very unlikely to be able to enter the jhānas or gain any deep insights without them; and you can't actually follow a spiritual path unless you're doing your best to avoid causing harm. Any behavior over and above these precepts that doesn't cause harm and/or provides benefit will also be of help on the spiritual path.

[Q&A on the Precepts](#) are in Appendix 1.

1. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, pg 554.
2. Bhikkhu Bodhi, 1994, II. The Five Precepts #5

Restraint of the Sense Faculties

The next item in the Gradual Training is the restraint of the sense faculties: "And how does one guard the doors of the sense faculties? Having seen a form with the eye one does not grasp at the signs or secondary characteristics."

If I hold up a thin black rectangle about 6 inches by 3 inches (15 x 7 cm) with a screen and with buttons on the side, what am I holding? Did you think "cell phone?" How did you know it was a cell phone? Well, the "thin black rectangle, etc." are the signs of a cell phone. So you conceptualized that as a description of a cell phone. Those are the signs.

Examples of secondary characteristics would be whether it is an Android or iPhone, how much memory it has, what apps are installed, etc. Those would be secondary characteristics. The ability to identify something uses the signs – the signs are the minimum information that you need in order to recognize what it is. The secondary characteristics are all the other details about it.

So the instructions for guarding the senses are that when you see something, you do not grasp at the signs or secondary characteristics, "since if one were to dwell without restraint over the faculty of the eye, evil unwholesome states such as covetousness and grief might assail one. One practices restraint, guards the faculty of eye, achieves restraint over the faculty of the eye." However, guarding the senses doesn't necessarily mean

you don't look. We have to look – our senses are how we navigate our environment, so we can't shut them off. They tell you as a little kid, look both ways before you cross the street; it still applies no matter how deep you are into the spiritual path. You can't survive for long if you shut off your senses. You can go meditate in a sensory deprivation tank for a while, but most of the time, you're going to need your senses turned on.

If you go for a walk in nature, enjoy all the sights, sounds, smells, etc. By "enjoy" I mean appreciate, but don't become entangled. If you are really being mindful, that's all you do. The idea of restraint or guarding of the sense faculties is to not get hooked by your sensory input. You see something; you recognize what it is via its signs. If there's something you need to do about it, you do what you need to do. Otherwise you let it go, rather than getting caught in, "Oh, I want one of those" – that would be covetousness. Grief could arise when you see something and are upset that you don't have or can't get one of those – or that what you are sensing is excessively disturbing.

Of course, this guarding applies to the remaining senses as well. When hearing a sound, you just hear a sound and probably identify it. You could identify the sound as an airplane, but you probably have no need to look up in the sky wondering, "Is this a twin engine? Is this commercial? Is this private? Where is it going?" Occasionally you might have such a need, but most of the time, you don't have to process the sound any further than identifying it.

You smell a smell as you are going past a bakery. If you don't guard your sense faculties, the smell is going to come out, grab you by your nose, and drag you into the bakery. The idea is that you see the sign for the bakery

and you guard your senses, such that when you arrive at the bakery door, you are at the end of an exhale, and then you deeply inhale thru your nose, so you can enjoy the pleasant vedanā¹ of the bakery smell and keep walking. You don't grasp at the signs, you just take it in, appreciate the pleasant smell, and keep going.

We are to do the same thing with flavors, tangibles, and mind objects. The idea is that you don't get hooked by your sensory input; you just use the sensory input to navigate the environment. If something pleasant comes along, appreciate it. As long as you don't get hooked, such that covetousness or grief overcomes you, there's no problem. If something unpleasant comes along, deal with it; just don't fall into grief. There is actually nothing wrong with sensory input – in fact sensory input is a necessity.

However, sometimes it's necessary to choose wisely what your sensory input is. There are movies, books, TV shows, internet websites that are at a minimum a waste of time, and possibly something even worse. Western culture has generated a number of things where guarding your senses works best by just not going there. Guarding your senses always means don't get hooked by your sensory input.

In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, in the fourth establishment of mindfulness, we find the following:

Here one understands the eye, one understands forms, and one understands any fetter that arises dependent on the two; one understands how there comes to be the arising of an unarisen fetter, one

understands how there comes to be the abandoning of an arisen fetter, and one understands how there comes to be the future non-arising of an abandoned fetter.²

This is then repeated for the other five senses and their objects, including the mind. A "fetter" would be anything that contributes to impeding progress on the spiritual path, such as any form of greed, hatred, or delusion.³

A lack of Restraint of the Sense Faculties contributes to "the arising of an unarisen fetter." And this practice is an important one to insure that "there comes to be the future non-arising of an abandoned fetter."

[Q&A on Restraint Of The Sense Faculties](#) are in Appendix 1.

1. *Vedanā* is usually translated as "feeling" but that has the unfortunate connotation of "emotion," and *vedanā* certainly never means emotion. It refers to the initial categorization of a sense input and there are only three possibilities: pleasant, unpleasant and neither unpleasant or pleasant. There is no English word that has this meaning, although "valence" comes close. So I've left *vedanā* untranslated.

2. MN 10.40

3. [Appendix 4](#) lists (among many other things) the 10 fetters associated with the four stages of awakening.

Mindfulness And Clear Comprehension

The next item is mindfulness and clear comprehension. This is basically about being mindful of everything you do. "Mindfulness" is the usual translation of the Pāli word *sati*; sometimes you see it translated as "awareness." It's about being aware of what's going on in the here and now. Ram Das was right: be here now. Pay attention to what's happening in the here and now, whatever you're doing.

In the Gradual Training, it's specifically about being mindful of your bodily actions. It speaks of being mindful and fully aware when waking up, getting dressed, obtaining food, eating, drinking, chewing, and tasting, going to the toilet, speaking, and remaining silent. It says one should be mindful when walking, standing, sitting, and lying down. In other words, you should be mindful – aware of the here and now – whatever you are doing.

One way to work on continuity of mindfulness is to find something you do fairly frequently and use it as a mindfulness reminder. For example, every time you encounter a door, you remember to return to being mindful. At first you might only do this only when you have to open or close a door. You feel the hardness of the doorknob and the weight of the door, and then continue to be mindful as you go onto whatever comes next. Eventually, once opening and closing doors becomes an habitual reminder, you can perhaps use doorways – you

drop back into mindfulness whenever you pass thru a doorway, whether or not you needed to open that door. Once doorways are working well as a reminder, you can find something else to add as an additional reminder – perhaps faucets, perhaps a hallway you occasionally walk down. When picking reminders, you don't want to choose something you do all the time. If you work at a keyboard, pressing keys is too frequent to be a useful reminder. Once you have several fairly frequent reminders, you can start adding infrequent reminders – checking the mail, getting in or out of a car, seeing an Exit sign in a building.

One of the practices I like to give students on a retreat I teach is what I call "walking outside of time." Go for a walk, where you don't have to navigate your way back, because you know how to get back; a walk where you don't have to watch out for tree roots or anything like that. Now can you just pay attention to the here and now to such an extent that you're noticing, not time, but change. That bird is changing its place in the sky, that old tree has changed to horizontal. You're not thinking of the past, you're not thinking of the future. You're simply trying to see only change, rather than time. There's actually no such thing as time; time is an emergent property of our attempt to measure change.¹ So pay attention to what's going on by going for a walk someplace and don't think about the past, don't think about the future. It's all the present, the ever changing present. This is what you're noticing. This is a good exercise to get you into paying attention to what's actually going on in the here and now. This is what mindfulness is all about – noticing what's happening now.

The primary discourse on mindfulness from the Buddha's time is the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. In fact, the stock phrase on mindfulness and clear comprehension found in the

Gradual Training is exactly the same as the one found in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*.² There are several really great books on this sutta. I would recommend both Bhikkhu Anālayo's [Satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realization](#), which is a scholarly study of the sutta, and Joseph Goldstein's [Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening](#). Both are really excellent.

The other phrase appearing in the title of this section is "Clear Comprehension" – *sampajañña*. There are multiple understandings of clear comprehension that have evolved in various Buddhist traditions over the centuries. In general it can be thought of as being aware of the larger context in which you are being mindful.

Ayya Khema taught it as a guideline for intentional thought, speech, and action. Mindfulness is knowing only, without any discriminating faculty. Mindfulness does not evaluate or judge, but pays full attention. Wrong Mindfulness is actually mentioned multiple times in the suttas³ – in contrast to the later *Abhidhamma* which asserts that mindfulness is always wholesome. There are certainly endeavors that definitely break a precept, yet require mindfulness to be effective. An example is being a cat burglar – if a cat burglar is clumsy and unmindful, they will quickly be apprehended. But the mindfulness the cat burglar needs to be successful is wrong mindfulness, since the context is one of taking what is not given.

Ayya Khema taught that clear comprehension has four aspects to it:

First: "What is my purpose in thinking, talking, or doing?" Thought, speech, and action are our three

doors. We need to be clear as to why we are proposing doing what we are considering doing, whether it be to think, speak, or act.

Second: "Am I using the most skillful means for my purpose?" That needs wisdom and discrimination.

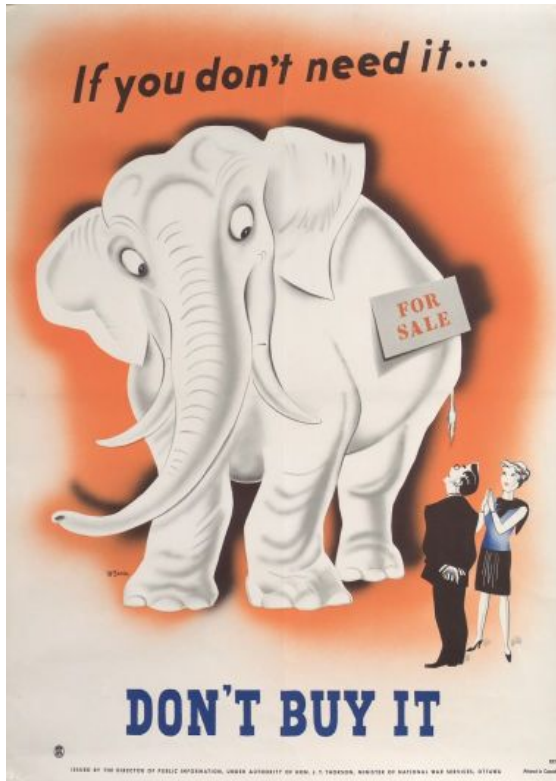
Third: "Are these means within the Dhamma?" This is about knowing the distinction between wholesome and unwholesome. The thought process needs our primary attention, because speech and action will follow from it. Sometimes people think that the end justifies the means. It doesn't. Both means and end have to be within the Dhamma.

Fourth: If the purpose and the means are within the Dhamma (in other words, the Buddha would approve), then carry out the activity. Afterwards, check whether the purpose has been accomplished – and if not, why not.⁴

Mindfulness closely examines what is happening. Clear comprehension gives a bigger picture of how what is happening fits into the broader picture of the Buddha's instructions. Being both mindful and clearly comprehending will enable you to lead a life that progresses towards the goal of spiritual practice.

1. Time is Only an Illusion –
<http://leighb.com/notime.htm>
2. DN 22.4 & MN 10.8
3. E.g. DN 23.31, MN 8.12&14, MN 19.26, MN 117.35,
MN 126.9&11-13, SN 22.84, SN 45.1, SN 45.25, AN
5.103, AN 5.104, AN 10.108
4. Adapted from "The Meditative Mind" at
<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/khema/herenow.html#ch1>

Contentment with Little



Canadian WWII Poster

The last of the Gradual Training elements in the *sīla* section is Contentment. "And how is one content? One is content with robes to protect the body, and alms food to sustain the belly. Wherever one goes one sets out taking

only one's requisites with one. Just as a bird wherever it goes, flies with its wings as its only burden. In the same way one is content with robes and alms food."

Now lay people definitely need more than three robes and a bowl. But lay people definitely don't need everything Western culture says we need. Rock and roll has some really good Dhamma. One of my favorites is: "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose." We live in a culture that says, "Whatever you've got, it's not enough. You need this. It's on sale." This is ridiculous. Again, in talking about the eightfold path, the Buddha says that Right Intention is intentions of renunciation, non ill-will, and harmlessness; that is intentions of letting go, love, and compassion.

Letting go is the essence of the spiritual path. There's a book in the Tibetan tradition entitled "Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand." It's a big thick book. I read it, it's good. But the title is the best part. We do have liberation in the palm of our hand. You can see it. Make a fist and hold it up in front of your face. Now, you want to see liberation? Look at the palm of your hand. That unclenching gesture is how you get to liberation.¹ There is nothing to get on the spiritual path, there's everything to let go of.

We live in a culture that teaches the exact opposite of that and you need to be very aware of this. If you do what the culture says to do, you're going to contribute to a lot of ongoing problems: global climate change, environmental destruction, squandering the planet's resources, etc. If you live lightly, you're not going to contribute as much to these problems. As mentioned earlier, future generations have not given us permission to use up all the resources

now. Using up resources at an unsustainable pace is stealing from future generations; it's taking what is not given.

So the first two precepts and this element of the Gradual Training involve living lightly, taking care of the planet, and doing whatever you can do to reduce global climate change and environmental destruction. This is what's required. The best way to do this is to not be a good consumer; you should strive to be a failure as a consumer. Yes, you definitely need to get enough food to eat and have clothes to wear. You need a place to live. And you sort of have to have a car in many places in this culture. But the greenest car you could possibly have is the one you currently own, rather than buying a new one. You've probably heard all these things before. But on the spiritual path, everything is to let go of; there's nothing to get. This is what the contentment is about. The goal is to live lightly so that others can just live.

This is not about being an ascetic. You can do that if you really think it would be beneficial for you. But this is about being content with little.² Freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose.

1. Thanks to Nick Herzmark for this visual metaphor (personal conversation).
2. Kim Allen has a wonderful book about renunciation and letting go entitled [Full Simplicity](#).

The Five Hindrances

"Now endowed with this noble aggregate of moral discipline, of restraint over these sense faculties, of noble mindfulness and clear comprehension, and of noble contentment, one resorts to a secluded dwelling." We see that keeping the precepts, restraining the senses, being mindful, and being content are the preliminary practices for formal meditation.

What follows is a list of potential secluded dwellings: "a forest, the root of a tree, a mountain, a glen, a hillside cave, a cremation ground, a jungle grove, the open air, a heap of straw." The idea is go someplace to meditate where you won't be disturbed. That's somewhere no one is doing handicrafts, or cooking food, or selling things, or playing a TV.

The sutta continues, "after returning from alms round, having eaten the midday meal...." The Buddha and the monks would go on alms round probably around 10 or 11 in the morning. When they returned, they would eat the alms food. Then they would "go for the day's abiding." They would go to one of the above secluded dwellings, sit down and meditate until it got dark.

The sutta says, "one sits down, crosses one's legs, holds one's body erect, and sets up mindfulness before oneself." Due to the scarcity of chairs, people in those days could sit cross-legged for extended periods. If you can comfortably maintain the cross-legged posture for the

length of your meditation period, this is an excellent posture in which to meditate. But here in the West many people have lost the ability to sit cross-legged for extended periods. In that case use a kneeling bench, or sit in a chair. Holding your body erect brings energy, helps keep you awake, and makes the breathing smoother. Then one "sets up mindfulness before oneself." This literally is "one sets up mindfulness *parimukham*." *Parimukham* is *pari* = around and *mukham* = mouth, face, entrance, in front of, top. So become mindful around the entrance to your face. This could be the mouth, but could also be the nose – the latter of which is going to work much better for mindfulness of breathing.

Given that India is close to the equator, sunset would be around 6pm, giving six hours of meditation after midday. I doubt they were doing 45 minutes sits, interspersed with 45 minute walking periods. Maybe it went something like a three hour sit, a short break, and then another three hours. This would certainly lead to deeper levels of concentration than 45 minute sittings, and that would be useful for deeper *jhānas*.

What follows is the list of the five hindrances. "Having abandoned covetousness for the world, one dwells with a mind free from covetousness. One purifies one's mind from covetousness."¹ So the first hindrance is given here as "covetousness for the world" – *abhijjham loke*.² Sometimes you see it expressed as the "desire for sense pleasures," *kāma-chanda*. This is the wanting mind. When you're caught in planning, it often can be wanting. It might be other things: you might be planning out of fear, you might be planning out of boredom, but often there's wanting involved. You want to have a good holiday when you go to Spain, you want lunch, you want a good

meditation. The Buddha compares this wanting sense pleasures to being in debt:

"Suppose a man were to take a loan and apply it to his business and his business were to succeed so that he could pay back his old debts and would have enough money left over to maintain a family. He would reflect on this and as a result he would become glad and experience joy."³

If you are in debt, you must continually work to pay back the debt. You can't simply call up the bank and say, "Well I'm going to go to Spain on vacation this month and I'm not going to make a payment. I hope that's okay with you." You can't even call them up and say, "I lost my job, I can't make a payment this month. I hope that's okay with you." As unfortunately far too many people discovered in the last recession, the banks have no sympathy for that. You've got to keep working. It's the same with our sense pleasures; no sense pleasure is ultimately satisfying. If you get something that you really like, you simply want to keep it, or repeat it, or get something similar to it. Like being in debt, we must continually work to satisfy our desire for sensual pleasures, our wanting. There is no fulfillment to be found by obtaining what you want. Okay, you may get some fulfillment for a bit, but no ultimate fulfillment. We usually assume that when we want something and we get it and that feels great, that the feeling is due to the fact that we got what we wanted. But have you ever stopped to consider that it might be due to the fact that you stopped wanting? The relief from the wanting produces quite a bit of pleasure. So perhaps a more effective strategy would be to let go of the wanting.

The Buddha also compared sense desire to a bowl of water into which someone had poured many different colored dyes.⁴ If you try and look into the water, you cannot see into the depths.

Now this hasn't quite answered the question of what to do about the wanting mind. It's just pointing out that it's a problem. Well, luckily in the commentaries⁵ there are six things to be done to deal with each of the hindrances. For sense desire these are:

- learning the sign of the unattractive, that is the repulsive nature of the body;
- application to meditation on the unattractive;
- guarding the doors of the sense faculties;
- moderation in eating;
- noble friends and noble conversations.

This is probably not the list you were hoping for. The first two are learning the sign of the unattractive, which refers to repulsive nature of the body, and application to meditation on the unattractive. This refers to the fact that at the time of the Buddha if you had a lot of lust, a lot of sense desire, they would send you to the charnel ground to do your meditation. However a charnel ground is not like a cemetery. A cemetery is actually a rather pleasant place; nice little statues, they cut the grass, a quite pleasant place as far as the five senses are concerned. A charnel ground was where they dumped the bodies of the people who didn't have enough money to pay for a cremation. The bodies were ripped apart and eaten, and they rotted. It was not a pleasant place, visually unappetizing and I imagine it smelled horrible. You would be sent there and told to sit down in front of a rotting corpse and contemplate that corpse. The body that you were lusting after was going to

wind up like that. Also you were to recognize that your own body was going to wind up like that. However we don't have charnel grounds around here. It is interesting and insightful to wander thru a cemetery and notice that people can die at any age. But a cemetery does not have quite the same impact as a charnel ground.

In the West I think what we need more than anything else is to get a more realistic picture of the body. Basically the media are telling us to never have a body that looks more than 25 years old; stay young forever. But that's not possible. I think our goal in the West is more about getting a realistic picture of the body rather than looking at the disgusting nature of it. In the West people often have low self-esteem, and for many people that's directly associated with their body. In order to battle the low self-esteem, it's helpful to get a realistic picture, not only your body, but of all bodies.

Guarding the doors of the sense faculties has been discussed in detail above. It makes sense that if you are not feeding your sense desires off the cushion, you are far less likely to be assailed by this hindrance when you sit down to meditate.

Moderation in eating – there's not a lot of excitement on a silent meditation retreat; about the only excitement you get is eating. There is indeed a tendency, because that's your only excitement, to stoke up on it, get a lot of sense pleasure out of it. Generally that only tends to increase your wanting for food. If you're looking for your pleasure in the food, you do get some pleasure for maybe twenty minutes, half an hour? How long does your meal last? After you return to meditating, you're thinking about the food. So you should be moderate in your eating so that it

doesn't become the most important experience of your day. I've heard it said that if you can eat until just before you feel full, that's the perfect way to do it. Of course the problem is, you don't know when you're going to feel full until you get there. So it is a bit tricky.

The last two things helpful in overcoming the desire for sensual pleasures are noble friends and noble conversations. The discussion of these will be deferred for the moment.

This still hasn't addressed the question about what to do about sense desire when you're sitting there meditating and it comes up strongly. What seems to work the best is to get a realistic picture of what it is you are desiring, to see its limitations, and to see that it's not going to bring lasting happiness. One of the ways that people can get caught in sense desire during a retreat is the phenomenon known as a vipassanā romance. You are on a retreat and you see someone that you can tell is really serious about their practice, because they walk like it, they sit so well, and besides, they're very attractive. The next thing you know, you are caught up in your fantasies. The idea of seeing what's really going on is recognizing that, one, you don't know anything about this person; it's just your ideas that are happening. Two, even if they were to turn out to be as wonderful as you are imagining them to be, it still wouldn't be totally satisfying. Furthermore, the odds are probably a hundred percent that they won't turn out to be who you are imagining them to be. Working to get a realistic picture of what's going on is probably the best that you can do with sense desire. See it, name it, and really investigate the limitations and defects of any objects that are attracting your desiring attention.

It's important to remember that not all wanting is counter-productive. When I was at Wat Suan Mokkh in southern Thailand, they talked about **wise wishes and foolish desires**. Wanting to come on a meditation retreat, wanting to see the truth, wanting to gain insight – these would be classified as wise wishes. Wanting dessert after every meal or wanting to experience some blissful state so you can hang out there would be considered foolish desires. There is indeed pleasure on the spiritual path; the Buddha frequently mentions the fact that gladness and joy are necessary components of the path.⁶ But you can't be hankering after that pleasure while working to generate deep concentration. The strategy is to see where you are, to know what the instructions say to do at that point, and just do that – without what Ayya Khema called "result thinking." As part of the practice for entering the first jhāna, when you recognize the mind has arrived at access concentration and been stabilized there for a bit, then the next step is the focusing on pleasure. That's just part of the path. Simply stay focused on the pleasurable sensation and enjoy it. There's nothing wrong with appreciating it as long as you don't become entangled; it's the grasping and seeking that causes the problems. Being there and just staying focused on it is not a problem. But if you are actively wanting the jhāna while you are meditating, that's a hindrance and it's going to prevent you from attaining access concentration, and with no access concentration there's no jhāna possible. This is actually a great example of the second noble truth: dukkha arises from craving.

The second hindrance discussed in the Gradual Training is: "Having abandoned ill-will and hatred, one dwells with a benevolent mind, sympathetic for the welfare of all living beings. One purifies one's mind from ill-will and

hatred."⁷ So the second hindrance is ill-will and hatred – *byāpādapadosa*. It's pushing things away, not wanting; the opposite of the first hindrance. This covers everything from ill-will and hatred to sadness and fear. In fact fear is probably the basis of most hatred. I made that statement in a retreat, and somebody wrote me a note and said, "I hate broccoli, but I'm not afraid of it." What I responded was, "you're afraid of the unpleasant taste you will experience by putting broccoli in your mouth." You're not afraid it's going to attack you, but you are afraid of the unpleasant *vedanā* that tasting it will generate. It seems that fear is really the basis of all of our aversion; fear that we will experience some unpleasant *vedanā*. The Buddha compares ill-will and hatred to being physically ill.

"Suppose a man were to become sick, afflicted, gravely ill so that he could not enjoy his food and his strength were to decline. Then after some time, he would recover from that illness and soon would enjoy his food again and regain his bodily strength. He would reflect on this and as a result, he would become glad and experience joy."⁸

When you are overcome with ill-will, it's very much like being physically ill. You don't feel well. You can't think straight. You're hot. You can't really do what you want to do. This is a perfect description of physical illness as well as of ill-will and hatred. The Buddha also compares ill-will and hatred to a bowl of water which is over a fire and is boiling.⁹ If you try and look into the depths, you can't see what's there.

There's a story about a Brahman who came to see the

Buddha and he was very upset.¹⁰ His younger brother had come a few days earlier to see the Buddha and the Buddha had "corrupted" him, because his younger brother had become a monk. So this Brahman insulted and cursed the Buddha with rude, harsh words. The Buddha replied, "Do friends and colleagues, relatives and kinsmen come to you as guests?"

"Yes, certainly they do."

"Do you serve them with staple and non-staple foods and delicacies?"

"Well, of course I prepare nice food for my guests."

"And if they don't accept them, to whom do those foods belong?"

"If they don't accept them, Master Gotama, those foods are all mine."

"Just so, Brahman, I'm not accepting the harsh words you offered." In other words, the Buddha didn't take on the anger that this Brahman was expressing towards him. The Brahman was so impressed that he decided to become a monk as well.

When someone is angry at you, there is no law that you have to become angry back. If you can keep your equanimity, you have a much better chance of diffusing the situation without things escalating into an even worse situation. Of course sometimes when you don't get angry back, the person who is angry at you becomes even more angry because you are not angry as well. But that's their problem, not yours.

Luckily, however, there are six things mentioned in the commentaries to do for overcoming ill-will and hatred. These are:

- learning the sign of loving-kindness;
- application to meditation on loving-kindness;
- reflection on the ownership of action;
- abundance of wise reflection;
- noble friends and noble conversations.

Learning the sign of loving-kindness and application to meditation on loving-kindness – if the hindrance you are experiencing is aversion, then the thing to do is to stop the practice that you were doing and start doing mettā meditation. Suppose you are working with following your breath and some aversion arises. If you can set that aversion aside and continue on with the breath, fine. But if it keeps coming up and it really isn't something that you can set aside, then forget about the breath and start doing mettā meditation. However it may be far too difficult to do loving-kindness practice for the person that is triggering this negativity. You don't have to do mettā towards any particular person at all. If you can do it for the person that's triggering the negativity that's pretty powerful practice, but just do mettā for somebody. It doesn't matter who. Do it for yourself. You certainly need it at this point given the fact that this aversion is coming up and is preventing your meditation from going well. Do it for somebody that you care about. Do it for the Dalai Lama. Just simply get your mind off the aversion and then get it into a positive state. Mettā is a very powerful practice. I have said that if they were to come to me and say, "you can only do one practice, choose," I would unhesitatingly choose mettā practice. It's a very

transformative practice as well.

Reflection on the ownership of action – did you ever do something when you were angry that wasn't really the wisest choice? Well, you still have to reap the results of that action. It's not like you can later phone the karma gods and say, "Oh, sorry, I was angry then. Can we just set that aside?" No, when you're in an angry state, when you have ill-will and hatred, you are putting yourself in a position where you will probably not act in the wisest fashion. You are disempowering yourself and yet you will still have to reap the results of that action. So recognizing that this angry state is not an empowering state, but a disempowering state, may help you let it go.

Abundance of wise reflection – Simply pay attention to what the aversive state feels like. Feel how unpleasant it is. Feel how the unpleasantness that you are experiencing with this aversion is not really solving the problem. If you are sitting here and are mad at somebody who's a hundred miles away, your anger is in no way affecting them. It's affecting you, but it's not doing anything to solve the problem. So just reflect on any angry experience that you're having and see the limitations of it.

And again, lastly comes noble friends and noble conversation, which again will be deferred.

The discussion of the third hindrance is: "Having abandoned dullness and drowsiness, one dwells perceiving light. Mindfully and clearly comprehending, one purifies one's mind from dullness and drowsiness" – *thinamiddha*.¹¹ Often this hindrance is translated as sloth and torpor, or sleepiness and laziness. It can take the form

of being physically sleepy – as when you get concentrated, you fall asleep. Or it can take the form of just being lazy. You sit down and it's a lot of work to follow the breath and you'd rather fantasize, or maybe you'll just skip this meditation period altogether – either of these would be this hindrance. The Buddha compares sloth and torpor to being in prison.

"Suppose a man were locked up in a prison and after some time he would be released from prison, safe and secure with no loss of his possessions. He would reflect on this and as a result, he would become glad and experience joy."¹²

If you are a prisoner, you can't do anything; you just sit there missing out on all the good things of life. If you are overcome with sloth and torpor, you can't do anything. You just sit there not able to get concentrated, not able to gain any insight, not able to follow the spiritual path. It is like being in prison. The Buddha also compared sloth and torpor to a stagnant bowl of water, one that is covered over with slimy moss and water-plants.¹³ Again, you can't see into the depths. But luckily, there are six things to do for overcoming sloth and torpor. These are:

- recognizing that overeating is the basis for sloth and torpor;
- changing the postures;
- attention to the perception of light;
- living in the open air;
- noble friends and noble conversations.

Recognizing that overeating is the basis for sloth and

torpor – there is a reason why there are no meditation periods right after a meal on a retreat. It's not just because someone is needed to wash the dishes. After you have eaten, your system is busy digesting the food – and the more food you eat, the longer it's going to take to digest it. If it takes a long time to digest it, then when you next sit down to meditate, you are going to fall asleep. So once again, eat less food. Eating less food actually helps you overcome two of the hindrances.

On most retreats that I teach, about forty percent of the students mention that they are dealing with sleepiness at the beginning of a retreat. I suspect the actual number dealing with sleepiness is even higher. This is not surprising since so many people in our culture have a chronic sleep deficit. If that's part of what you are dealing with, just eat less food. After all, how many calories do you need? If you are on retreat, you're spending your day sitting around. You do burn quite a few calories with your brain while you're trying to concentrate, but not all that many. Skip the entertainment value of the food; just get some nourishment. Don't overeat and you will be dealing less with sloth and torpor.

Changing the postures, attention to the perception of light, living in the open air – if you are feeling sleepy, open your eyes, rub your cheeks, pinch and pull on your ear lobes. If you know where the acupuncture points are on the sides of your ears, you can squeeze them very hard to wake you up for at least a few minutes. Make sure you have fresh air. And if all else fails, stand up. You are not going to fall asleep standing up with your eyes open. If you're doing standing meditation, it is important that you flex your knees. If you lock your knees, you might pass out. That would be most unpleasant for you and for

whomever you fall upon, so keep your knees flexed. You can continue to follow your breath, or you can put your attention on the subtle adjustments that you are making to stay standing. You may think that when you just stand there you are not moving, but actually there is a little bit of subtle motion that you are doing all the time to keep your balance. You can pay attention to those subtle motions and use them as your meditation object, which will help keep you awake.

Definitely, the first thing to do when you find you are getting sleepy is to get yourself out of it. Continuing to pursue deeper concentration is probably not useful, because that will just make you sleepier. If you know a practice that you find a little more energizing, switch to doing that practice. You might find mettā practice a bit more energizing. If you know the body scan practice, you might find that a bit more energizing. It is said that if you do the body scan from the feet up, it's more energizing. I never have noticed much difference, but you can try it out and see.

It really is quite important to balance your energy and concentration. If your energy is too low, working to become concentrated is quite likely to lead to you falling asleep. If you know when you sit down to meditate that your energy is low, it's probably best not to work on deep concentration during that sitting, but rather see if you can generate a bit of calm and collectedness and then begin doing some insight practice.

And then there are noble friends and noble conversations, which again will be deferred.

The discussion of the fourth hindrance is: "Having abandoned restlessness and remorse, one dwells at ease within oneself with a peaceful mind. One purifies one's mind from restlessness and remorse" – *uddhaccakukkucca*.¹⁴ So this is the opposite of sloth and torpor; it's having too much energy – too much energy in your body, or too much energy in your mind. Sometimes when you sit down, your body just doesn't want to sit. You just can't find a comfortable posture; when you finally do get settled, it's still not right – you've just got to move. Or you sit down, your body is fine, but your mind is all over the place. It just won't get settled on the breath. It's got to run off and entertain itself. This is restlessness, which the Buddha compares to being a slave.

"Suppose a man were a slave without independence, subservient to others, unable to go where he wants. After some time he would be released from slavery and gain his independence. He would no longer be subservient to others, but a free man able to go where he wants. He would reflect on this and as a result, he would become glad and experience joy."¹⁵

A slave is compelled to go there and do that, come here and do this. The slave is always doing what the master wants done, not what the slave wants to do. If you are overcome with restlessness and remorse, you are unable to do what you want to do even though there is a lot of activity, either physically or mentally. The Buddha also compared restlessness and remorse to a small bowl of water where there is a strong wind blowing over the surface, and the ripples prevent you from seeing down to the depths.¹⁶ But luckily, there are six things to do for

overcoming restlessness and remorse:

much learning;
interrogation;
skill in the Vinaya;
associating with senior monks;
noble friends and noble conversations.

Much learning – sometimes the restlessness arises simply because you don't know quite what to do. So you are struggling to figure out how you should be doing this practice, what's going on here? Learn all you can, both about the Buddha's teachings as well as the practices.

Interrogation – ask questions. The Buddha felt that this was very important; he encouraged his monks, his nuns, and lay people who came to visit him, to ask questions.

Skill in the Vinaya – skill in the precepts. The Vinaya is the rules for the monks and nuns; in the Theravāda tradition, there are 227 for the monks, 313 for the nuns. But as lay people, we really only have the five precepts to worry about. Skill in keeping the precepts means you have much less to be remorseful about. To take a gross example, if you are out robbing banks and then you sit down to meditate, you are probably going to be restlessly worrying about the authorities coming and hauling you off to jail.

Associating with senior monks – Hang out with people from whom you can learn the Dharma and the practices that provide progress on the spiritual path.

What's being addressed in these suggestions from the commentaries is more about the remorse aspect. The

physical restlessness aspect can sometimes be helped by going for a vigorous walk. If you feel that you have too much energy, then go burn some of it off. Just make sure it's a mindful, vigorous walk. Interestingly enough, going for a vigorous walk can sometimes be helpful for the opposite hindrance – if you're overcome with sloth and torpor, wake yourself up by going for vigorous walk.

And once again the discussion of noble friends and noble conversations will be deferred.

The discussion of the fifth hindrance is: "Having abandoned doubt, one dwells as one who has passed beyond doubt. Unperplexed about wholesome states, one purifies one's mind from doubt" – *vicikicchā*.¹⁷ Doubt is an insidious hindrance. and can take many forms. Did the Buddha really know what he was talking about? Was he really enlightened? Is the Dharma really the truth? Is what is being taught here really what the Buddha was teaching? Has it become garbled along the way? Doubt about the Saṅgha can take the form of wondering if anybody else really can become enlightened. Maybe only people twenty-five hundred years ago could become enlightened. What am I doing on this path? Probably the most destructive doubt of all is doubt about yourself. I can't do this. This is too hard. This is impossible. It's just beyond my abilities. The Buddha compares skeptical doubt to being on a perilous desert journey where bandits abound and provisions are scarce.

"Suppose a man with wealth and possessions were traveling along a desert road where food was scarce and dangers were many. After some time, he would

have crossed over the desert and he would have arrived safely at a village which is safe and free from danger. He would reflect on this and as a result would become glad and experience joy."¹⁸

If you have a doubting mind, you are not sure what to do. If you are on a perilous desert journey, you think maybe we should go this way; but wait, there might be bandits. Better to go that way; but no, there won't be any water. So there is more starting and stopping than actual progressing.

You set out on the spiritual path and you are following the Theravādan tradition, the Vipassanā path, but it's kind of dry. You want something a little more colorful, exciting. Well, the Tibetans, I mean have you seen what they've got? They got the horns and they got the colorful paintings. So you switch to Tibetan practice and you start doing that, but it turns out to be a little too baroque, a little too catholic. Zen, that's where it's at. I mean look at their gardens. This is really cool and they got all these great stories, so you switch to Zen practice. It turns out they hit you with a stick. Sufi dancing, that's where it's at....

Another translation of *vicikicchā*, besides "doubt," is "uncertainty." You are trying one thing after another. You are never finding out where any of these paths actually lead. I've heard it said that if you really want to find out where a path will take you, it's necessary to follow it for five years. Now this doesn't mean that if you start down a path and you realize this is not the right path for you that you have to stick with it for five years before you can change your mind. But if you do find yourself trying one practice and then another and then another and then

another, it might not be the practices that are at fault. It really could be that you are not sticking with a practice long enough to find what's really going on. The Buddha also compared skeptical doubt to a bowl of water that's very muddy,¹⁹ which prevents you from seeing into the depths. Once again there are six things to do for overcoming skeptical doubt; they are very much like those for overcoming restlessness and remorse:

much learning;
interrogation;
skill in the Vinaya;
resolution;
noble friends and noble conversations.

In order to overcome your doubt or uncertainty, learn what you can about the practice. Learn what you can about the Dharma. Ask questions; this can be quite helpful. If you think your practice is not working, ask questions to find out what you can about what's going on, what it's supposed to be like.

Skill in the Vinaya – try out keeping the precepts. See if this makes your life better. In many spiritual traditions, ethical practice is based on "Behave, or you'll wind up in hell," or something equivalent. While that can be found in Buddhism, the depths of the Buddha's teaching on ethics is "this is the way to behave that actually works the best." Your life will go more easily if you don't go around killing living beings, or taking what's not given, or misusing your sexual energy, or telling lies, or getting intoxicated. Practicing the precepts and experiencing first-hand the benefits of doing so helps you gain confidence in the path and in yourself.

Resolution – resolve to stay with a practice until you've explored it and see where it leads. It's the only way you are going to find out. Reading about a practice and talking to other people about a practice can be helpful, but the real proof is in actually doing the practice and seeing what happens. But it's probably going to take a while to follow thru and see where it goes. So resolve to stay with the practice until you can learn its benefits first hand.

Noble friends and noble conversations – These are helpful for dealing with all of the hindrances. They are not so helpful while you are practicing silent meditation, obviously, since you are not going to be having any kind of conversation with anybody at that point. But they are helpful for getting yourself to where the hindrances are much less likely to arise when you are practicing. There is a sutta where Ānanda, who was the Buddha's attendant, was having a discussion with another monk.²⁰ According to the commentaries, they were discussing what was the most important aspect of the spiritual path. The other monk was the meditation master and he felt that meditation was the most important part of the spiritual path. Ānanda was a very outgoing, gregarious soul – an extravert – and he felt that noble friends and noble conversation were the most important part of the path. They discussed it back and forth and, as always happens with these things, they went to see the Buddha. They saluted the Buddha and sat down at one side. Ānanda said, "Venerable Sir, I say that noble friends and noble conversations are half the holy life." The Buddha replied, "Do not say so Ānanda, noble friends and noble conversations are the entire holy life." It's really difficult to practice this path without having like-minded people around to support each other. And this support is very important for helping you overcome these hindrances.

It's also really helpful to have friends that will call you on your stuff. Anytime you do something stupid, it's important to have friends who will tell you, "That was stupid." This is so valuable. All of us do stupid things – we're not enlightened, so we do stupid stuff. It's really important to get the feedback from your friends when you have a crazy idea, or you're going to do a some silly thing, to help you stay on path.

Having noble friends with whom you can have noble conversations really helps with doubt. If the doubt about "I can't do this" arises, your friend can say, "Look at the progress you've made" and they can point out what you were like five years ago when you were a complete idiot, and how much smarter you are now with your behavior. Noble friends and noble conversations are needed for overcoming all of the hindrances and they are especially helpful for overcoming doubt.

These are the basic categories of hindering things that can arise when you are trying to get concentrated: the wanting mind, the aversive mind, the tired or lazy mind, the restless or remorseful mind, and the doubting or uncertain mind. You should apply the antidotes as best you can. A general antidote is to substitute with the opposite. For hatred, the opposite is love. For wanting, it's seeing that the object of your wanting isn't going to bring ultimate fulfillment. For sleepiness, it's doing things to wake yourself up. For too much energy, try and see if you can get yourself calmed down. And for the doubting mind learn as much as you can, so that you actually have the fortitude to stick with the practice.

These are the five hindrances; pretty much anything that

is blocking your development of concentration falls into one of these categories. The words that name each hindrance point to the more extreme end of these useless mind-states, so it may not always be obvious why some mind-states are grouped under a particular hindrance. For example, how is sadness related to ill-will and hatred? Well, the second hindrance is really "not wanting" and sadness arises when you don't accept that some unpleasant thing has occurred; it's a pushing away of reality, a not wanting. If we think of the five hindrances as "wanting", "not wanting", "too little energy", "too much energy" and "doubt" it might make things more obvious.

[Q&A on the Hindrances](#) are in Appendix 1.

1. DN 2.68

2. Sometimes it is translated as "longing for the world." In AN 10.176 we find "Here, someone is full of longing. He longs for the wealth and property of others thus: 'Oh, may what belongs to another be mine!'" Thus "covetousness" seems more accurate.

3. DN 2.69

4. SN 46.55

5. From the New Subcommentary to DN 2, quoted in Bhikkhu Bodhi, "The Discourse on the Fruits of Recluship," Buddhist Publications Society, 1989, pp 146-148.

6. E.g., DN 2-13, MN 7, MN 40, SN 12.23, SN 35.97, SN 42.13, SN 47.10, SN 55.40

7. DN 2.68
8. DN 2.70
9. SN 46.55
10. SN 7.2
11. DN 2.68
12. DN 2.71
13. SN 46.55
14. DN 2.68
15. DN 2.72
16. SN 46.55
17. DN 2.68
18. DN 2.73
19. SN 46.55
20. SN 45.2

Access Concentration and the Jhāna Summary

After the detailed description of the five hindrances, we find a summary: "When one sees that these five hindrances are unabandoned, one regards that as a debt, a sickness, confinement in prison, slavery, a desert road. But when one sees these five hindrances have been abandoned, one regards that as freedom from debt, as good health, as release from prison, as freedom from slavery, as a place of safety." With the abandoning of each of the hindrances, one "becomes glad and experiences joy."

With the abandoning of all five hindrances, "When one sees that these five hindrances have been abandoned within oneself, gladness arises,..." This "gladness" is *pāmojja* which is also sometimes translated as "worldly joy." This is not yet the joy (*sukha*) found in the jhānas, but it does serve as the key to opening the door to the first jhāna. "...when one is gladdened (*pāmojja*), glee (*pīti*) arises. When one's mind is filled with *pīti*, one's body becomes tranquil; tranquil in body, one experiences happiness (*sukha*); being happy, one's mind becomes concentrated." This verse at DN 2.76 is what I refer to as the "Jhāna Summary." Its components are gladness (*pāmojja*), glee (*pīti*), tranquility (*pasaddhakāya*), happiness (*sukha*), and concentration (*samādhi*).

In my book, [Right Concentration](#), I have a whole

chapter on Access Concentration. The chapter discusses bringing the mind to a quiet enough level where you are fully with the object of meditation (e.g. the breath), and if there are thoughts, they are wispy and in the background, and do not drag you off into distraction. There are also 3 Appendices in that book that provide detailed instructions for generating Access Concentration. Following the chapter on Access Concentration, there is a chapter on how to move from Access Concentration to the First jhāna. It suggests staying at Access Concentration for a while, then shift your attention from your access method (e.g. the breath) to a pleasant sensation and enjoy it.

But the Gradual Training describes only abandoning the hindrances and then entering the first jhāna via the gladness (*pāmojja*) that arises from having done so. This is not as different as it may appear at first from what I say in the book. If one arrives at a mind state where one is not becoming distracted (access concentration), then the hindrances are not arising either. Shifting one's attention from the access method (e.g. breath) to a pleasant sensation and enjoying it is experiencing *pāmojja* – just like abandoning the hindrances does for one in the Gradual Training.

This *pāmojja* – whether it arises on its own from abandoning the hindrances, or from focusing on a pleasant sensation with a concentrated mind – leads to *pīti*. "Rapture" is a common translation of *pīti*, as are "euphoria," "ecstasy," "delight," and "interest." Perhaps the most accurate translation is "glee." *Pīti* is a physical, uplifting, energetic response. When one's mind is filled with *pīti*, one's body becomes tranquil. Tranquil in body one experiences *sukha*, which can be translated as happiness or joy. Being happy one's mind becomes

concentrated, *samādhi*.

So in the Jhāna Summary, we have

pāmojja - arises prior to 1st jhāna and serves as the key to enter 1st jhāna

pīti - primary factor of first jhāna

tranquility - prominent factor of second jhāna

sukha - primary factor of second and third jhānas

samādhi - fully realized in fourth jhāna

That this is a summary of the first four jhānas is not often recognized. I suspect this verse is a later insertion in the Gradual Training. I doubt it was in the Buddha's original talk, or in the earliest recensions of the Gradual Training, because it interrupts the flow here. The commentaries certainly do not recognize it as a later insertion, but go off in a weird direction talking about "tender *pīti*" and other nonsense in an attempt to make sense of *pīti* showing up prior to the First Jhāna. The commentaries take all of each sutta as a unitary composition and do not recognize that changes and insertions occurred over time. This same Jhāna Summary shows up in numerous places in the Saṃyutta and Aṅguttara Nikāyas as well as several other places.¹ There is a whole chapter on The Jhāna Summary in [Right Concentration](#).

1. DN 2-13, MN 7, MN 40, SN 12.23, SN 35.97, SN 42.13, SN 47.10, SN 55.40, AN 3.95, AN 5.26, AN 6.10, AN 10.1-5, AN 11.12

The Jhānas

The Gradual Training contains the most detailed description of the jhānas found anywhere in the suttas. In particular, Long Discourses 2-12 provide the stock phrases describing each jhāna, plus additional detail and memorable similes.¹ Needless to say, these descriptions follow the abandoning of the hindrances.

I've actually said everything I know to say about the jhānas in my book [Right Concentration](#). If you want the details, read the chapters on Access Concentration and on the four Jhānas in Part I of that book. But below is a TL;DR version of what the Gradual Training teaches about the jhānas.

For the first jhāna we find, "Quite secluded from sense pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, one enters and dwells in the first jhāna, which is accompanied by *vitakka* and *vicāra* and is filled with *pīti* and *sukha* born of seclusion."

Vitakka means "thinking" and *vicāra* means "examining" or "pondering." The frequent (mis)translation of these two as "applied and sustained thought" is from later Buddhism – the *Abhidhamma* and the *Visuddhimagga*. As time went on, the understanding of the depth of concentration required for the jhānas kept increasing, until by the time of the *Visuddhimagga*, the jhānic states described are actually different states from what we find in the suttas. Indeed applied and sustained attention to the meditation

object is required for any meditation, but that's not what these words meant to the Buddha. In the first *jhāna* found in the suttas, *vitakka* and *vicāra* are just background thinking leftover from Access Concentration, because the depth of concentration is not yet deep enough.

When the first *jhāna* arrives, it's filled with rapture and happiness born of seclusion. There is a physical rush of energy, as well as an emotional sense of happiness. There's probably going to be some thinking – something like "Wow, that's pretty amazing. What's this?" Or after you've done it a lot, "all right, here we go." So there'll be some background thinking, but you won't be thinking about your trip to Hawaii. The thinking will be commenting on the experience.

The *pīti* is the primary factor of the experience of the first *jhāna*, and the *sukha* is in the background. *Pīti* is primarily physical and can show up as shaking, your hairs standing on end, sitting up really straight, or even as heat (like a hot flash). The *sukha* is emotional and shows up as joy or happiness. You might not be able to distinguish between the *pīti* and the *sukha* initially – that's fine. We could say that the first *jhāna* is filled with *pītisukha* – all one experience.

The strength of both the *pīti* and *sukha* can vary quite a lot from person to person. Some people get very intense *pīti* – and probably should move on rather quickly to the second *jhāna*. Others get only mild physical sensations. Still others can get anything in between. In the first *jhāna*, the *sukha* is far enough in the background that its strength is probably not noticed; it's really the *pīti* that determines the intensity of the first *jhāna*.

Following the stock description, we have the advanced practice of "One drenches, steeps, saturates, and suffuses one's body with this rapture and happiness born of seclusion, so that there is no part of one's entire body not suffused by this rapture and happiness." The first thing to do is get the *pīti* and *sukha* going. It may be only upper torso, neck, head at first. But over time, you get skilled enough so that you can spread it thru your whole body simply by moving your attention from where the *pīti* and *sukha* are the strongest to other places where it is less strong or is absent. But this is an advanced practice! Get good at getting in the first *jhāna*, and stabilize it before trying to spread it.

We have a simile: A skilled bath attendant takes a metal basin, pours in soap flakes and water, and mixes them together to make a ball of soap. This is not a calm activity, and the first *jhāna* is also not calm. And the water totally suffusing the ball of soap flakes with moisture inside and out is the advanced practice of spreading the *pīti* and *sukha* thruout your body.

The length of time to stay in the first *jhāna* is inversely proportional to the strength of the *pīti*. If the *pīti* is really strong, you don't need to stay very long – 30 seconds maybe. If the *pīti* is mild, you might stay for up to 10 minutes – but staying any longer than 10 minutes is actually not recommended, and really 5 minutes is certainly sufficient.

To move to the second *jhāna*, take a deep breath and really let the energy out on the exhale. If ever you find the energy of the first *jhāna* too much, this deep inhale+exhale is what you do to exit the first *jhāna* – and it takes you towards the second *jhāna*. This deep exhale

calms the *pīti* (if doesn't calm it enough, take several deep inhale+exhales) and does a foreground/background shift so that the *pīti* is now in the background and the *sukha* predominates.

"With the subsiding of *vitakka* and *vicāra*, one enters and dwells in the second *jhāna*, which is accompanied by inner tranquility and unification of mind, is without *vitakka* and *vicāra*, and is filled with *pīti* and *sukha* born of concentration."

The subsiding of *vitakka* and *vicāra* may not get to the point where all the thoughts completely disappear. After all, this is the curriculum for the monks and nuns, people that are on lifetime retreat. Even in a month long retreat, you're probably not going to experience a lot of times where there's totally no thinking – but the gaps between your thoughts do become longer. Any thinking recedes further into the background as the second *jhāna* deepens.

"...one enters and dwells in the second *jhāna*, which is accompanied by inner tranquility and unification of mind." Here the one pointed mind really coalesces around the "*pīti* and *sukha* born of concentration" experience. The emotional experience (the *sukha*) is going to predominate, and you are to focus on that. There will still be some physical energy in the background. But instead of your hair standing on end, or vibrating, or a hot flash, or anything like that, there may be some rocking or swaying; definitely a lot less physical energy.

Again, one should, as an advanced practice, learn to fill the whole body with *sukha*. But first learn to get to second *jhāna*, then get there regularly so you can learn to sustain it for a while. Then you can do the same thing as for

spreading first jhāna: wherever the *sukha* feels the strongest, which for many people is the heart center, then you move your attention from there to some other place, and the feeling of happiness will follow along.

The simile given is of a lake with no streams or rain coming in, but a spring at the bottom of that lake. The upwelling of this spring water fills the whole lake. This is an absolutely brilliantly accurate simile for the second jhāna. The second jhāna feels like there is a wellspring of happiness coming out of your heart, which is just filling you. This simile does a superb job of capturing what the second jhāna feels like.

Now you're just happy for no reason other than you have a concentrated mind. Normally we become happy because some external circumstance. Somebody says, "Oh, you did a great job on that," or "Here's a birthday present," or whatever – and your happiness is triggered by something external. But notice that your experience of happiness is triggered – the happiness isn't in the words or in the present; the happiness, like everything else you experience, is just a bunch of neurotransmitters in your brain. What you're doing with the second jhāna is learning to trigger those neurotransmitters with your concentrated mind, without needing an external trigger.

For the second jhāna and higher, you can stay in any of these jhānas for as long as you wish with no negative side effects. It's also good to learn to maintain this jhāna for 10 to 15 minutes before attempting to move on to the third jhāna.

When you are ready to move on to the third jhāna, again take a deep breath and really let the energy out as you

exhale. The description of the third jhāna begins with, "With the fading away of *pīti*...." So on that exhale, you want to calm things down even further. You want to transform the joy/happiness of the second jhāna into contentment, wishlessness, satisfaction; and in so doing, you want all the *pīti* to be gone. You don't have to do anything explicitly to get rid of the *pīti*; all you have to do is get emotionally calm enough – go from happiness to contentment. You may find it helpful, as you are exhaling, to remember a time when you were very contented and pluck the feeling of contentment out that memory. Then let that decreasing *sukha* become that feeling of contentment.

The description of the third jhāna continues: "With the fading away of *pīti*, one dwells in equanimity, mindful and clearly comprehending, and experiences happiness with the body." By this point, the body has receded into the background, it's not as prominent. It's certainly not like it was in the first jhāna, where it was completely taking up the foreground. Now it's in the background and everything is just perfect; the body is really contented.

"Thus one enters and dwells in the third jhāna, of which the Noble Ones declare, 'One dwells happily with equanimity and mindfulness.'" The noble ones are the awakened ones, the enlightened ones. So is the state of mind of the third jhāna a foretaste of nibbāna? Is nibbāna a state of happiness, equanimity and mindfulness? Well, I don't have any personal information about that, but I don't know any place else where the noble ones are declaring, "One dwells happily with equanimity and mindfulness" in regard to anything else. Maybe hanging out in the third jhāna is what it's like to be fully awakened. You'll have to do the work and become one of the noble ones; then you

can let me know. Once again, one drenches, steeps, saturates and suffuses one's body, this time with happiness free from rapture – *sukha* free from *pīti*.

We have a simile of a lotus pond where the lotuses come out of the mud, but don't come above the surface of the water. They're not waving in the breeze, they're not bobbing up and down on the surface. They're underwater and they're filled with water from their tips to their roots. This points to both the stillness of the third *jhāna* and the feeling of being somewhat isolated when you get into third *jhāna*. When you're that well concentrated, you're just not really aware of the outside world like you were when you first sat down to meditate, or even when you got into the first or second *jhāna*. There's now a real sense that the outside world is further away.

Again, stay as long as you want. Again it's good to learn to maintain this *jhāna* for 10 to 15 minutes before moving on. And again, as an advanced practice, one can do the "drench, steep, saturate, and suffuse" step to fill one's body with the contentment free from *pīti*.

The description of the fourth *jhāna* begins: "With the abandoning of pleasure and pain, and with the previous passing away of joy and grief." To move from third to fourth *jhāna*, again take a deep breath, and as you let the energy out, let go of any pleasure you are experiencing. Being contented is pleasurable – let go of that. Often in third *jhāna* people have a wispy Buddha smile on their faces – if that's you, relax all the muscles in your face and let the smile fade. If there is a sense of dropping down, go with that dropping down feeling and let it sink until you come to rest in a place of quiet stillness – which is the object of the fourth *jhāna*.

Now, the "pleasure and pain" and "joy and grief" mentioned above don't mean there was pain or grief in any of the previous jhānas – this is just pointing to the emotionally neutral mind state in the fourth jhāna. There was pleasure in the first three jhānas. The glee (*pīti*) of the first jhāna is pleasurable; the happiness (*sukha*) there is also pleasurable. In the second jhāna, there are still *pīti* and *sukha*, and those are still pleasurable. In the third jhāna there is just *sukha* and it's more like contentment than happiness. It's a deep sense of satisfaction, and it's pleasurable. As for the phrase "the previous passing away of joy" – in both the first and second jhānas, you have a strongly positive emotional experience – here referred to as "joy."

Thus "One enters and dwells in the fourth jhāna, which is neither pleasant nor painful..." As mentioned, it's an emotionally neutral mind state. Plus it contains "mindfulness fully purified by equanimity." The fourth jhāna is often referred to as the jhāna of equanimity, but trying to focus on equanimity is a bit difficult, because it's a little hard to know what exactly that means. Instead, focus on quiet stillness, because that's what you'll find in the fourth jhāna. And if you focus on quiet stillness, you will be focused on equanimity.

It's a deeper state by a good bit. It's very peaceful; it's very nice to be there. And it's definitely emotionally neutral. Ayya Khema compared dwelling in the third jhāna to sitting in the mouth of a well. To reach fourth jhāna, you drop down to the bottom of the well. It's not a freefall, but more a sense of drifting down. As you enter the fourth jhāna, the drifting down can last 20 seconds, a minute; occasionally people even experience the dropping for five

minutes before it settles into quiet stillness. By the time it settles, you have a mind in which mindfulness is fully purified by equanimity. You have a really supremely concentrated/indistractable mind at that point and your mindfulness is now of the highest quality.

The simile for the fourth jhāna is a man completely covered by a white sheet. At first I didn't understand why it was a white sheet; when I got to the fourth jhāna, my eyes were closed and it was black. The fourth jhāna description also mentions a pure, bright mind. For me, there was nothing bright, it was black. What was going on? I talked to Ayya Khema; she asked me to describe my fourth jhāna. I described it; she said that was fine, don't worry about it. So I had to put the "bright white" in the I-don't-know-bucket – for 16 years.

Eventually I went on retreat where we were sitting in access concentration for three or four hours each sitting. When I would enter the jhānas that I had learned from Ayya Khema and get to fourth jhāna, it would be bright white.² It was like I was sitting in an open field on a bright sunny day with a white sheet over me and my eyes open – just like the simile. This pointed out to me that the Buddha and his monks were experiencing levels of concentration much deeper than I had been experiencing prior to that, which makes sense. They weren't doing 45 minute sits. They would go sit for three hours or more and get supremely concentrated. If you become supremely concentrated, you will experience visual whiteness that will remain thru all of these four jhānas.

On a 10-day or two-week retreat, the same depth of concentration that the Buddha and his monks were experiencing is not likely to happen. But what students

can experience does give them sufficient concentration to enhance their insight practice – which is what comes next in the Gradual Training.

[Q&A on the Jhānas](#) are in Appendix 1.

1. See [Appendix 3](#) for list of all the similes in the Gradual Training

2. For more details of this experience, see http://leighb.com/jhana_fr.htm

Insight Practice

What follows the fourth jhāna in the Gradual Training is: "When one's mind is thus concentrated, pure and bright, unblemished, free from defects, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, one directs and inclines it to knowing and seeing." This is insight practice. Ayya Khema defined an insight as an understood experience. The jhānas enable you to do insight practice with an indistractable, less-egocentric mind, and insight practice¹ is what can lead to the understood experiences necessary for spiritual advancement.

So the jhānas are a warm-up exercise for turbocharging your insight practice. They are used to generate a mind that's concentrated, pure and bright, unblemished, free from defects, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability. This is *samādhi*. "*Samādhi*" is usually translated as concentration; however, it would be more accurate to translate it as "indistractibility" – it's the ability to not become distracted.

If you're in the jhānas, there's nothing else going on but the jhānic state. You definitely feel like you have a pure bright, mind, one unblemished, with no defects, malleable, wieldy, steady. This is the kind of mind that can learn things. It's open, it's not full of all sorts of other ideas obscuring the view.

It is also "attained to imperturbability." This is really important. Some of the insights we get on the spiritual

path may be experienced as at least a little bit disturbing. For example, when you actually deeply experienced that everything in the universe that you were counting on for your security is impermanent, you might become a bit perturbed. In fact, it might be so perturbing that you don't even see it clearly. But if you have an imperturbable mind, you can see it and begin to integrate it – because as it turns out, the truth is that all the things in the universe you were counting on to provide you with security are impermanent. The imperturbability allows you to gain deep insights into things that you might have just looked away from at some other time.

Having generated such a mind, one then directs and inclines it to knowing and seeing. In other words, one directs and inclines it to doing insight practice. You will leave the *jhāna* while doing your insight practice; you don't have to do anything to make the *jhāna* go away. You just shift your focus from the primary factor of the *jhāna* (e.g. quiet-stillness in fourth *jhāna*) to just doing whatever your insight practice is. The *jhāna* fades into the background and eventually there is no trace left – except the concentrated, pure, bright, etc. mind, which remains for some period of time.

The sutta continues, "One understands thus: This is my body, having material form, composed of the four primary elements originating from mother and father, built up out of rice and gruel, impermanent, subject to rubbing and pressing, to disillusion and dispersion. And this is my consciousness supported by it and bound up with it."

Most of the things mentioned about your body are pretty obvious – it has material form and it consists of "the four primary elements": earth, water, air, and fire. Don't take

these literally! Take them as solids, liquids, gases, and energy if you want. They are aspects of physical reality. You don't have to discard your understanding of chemistry. Your body is certainly "born of mother and father, and built up out of rice and gruel." Of course it's not literally rice and gruel that you subsist on, but it is solid and liquid foods.

Your body is impermanent. It may be perturbing to you that your body is impermanent, but you probably have received this information previously. Your body is also subject to rubbing and pressing, to disillusion and dispersion. In other words, it's subject to dukkha.

"And this is my consciousness...." "Consciousness" is the usual translation of the Pāli word *viññāṇa*. *Viññāṇa* is used in many different ways in the suttas;² it's not a well-defined term. Here, it's actually used as a synonym for mind. So we can translate this clause as "And this is my mind...."

"This is my mind supported by my body and bound up with it." This would indicate that your mind is dependent on your body. So if you're counting on your mind/consciousness going on to another incarnation after you die, if your body doesn't go along, I don't think that's going to work. People do have their immortality projects; they're looking for some way so that when their body dies, they don't really die. What's here in this sutta is hinting that it's not going to work using your mind, because your mind is definitely supported by your body and is bound up with it.

This use of "*viññāṇa*" as a synonym for "mind" is another clue that the Gradual Training is very early material. Later

Buddhism speaks of the five *khandhas* – the aggregates – but here we only find body and mind with "*viññāṇa*" used instead of *citta* or *mano* for "mind."³

We have a simile: "Suppose someone were to take a beautiful beryl green gem...." Beryl is a gem, actually a crystal, that is very clear. Eyeglasses used to be made out of beryl before high quality cheap glass could be made. So if you had a high quality pair of glasses, they were made out of beryl, and they allowed you to see clearly. "... and thru that gem, there are threads and a man with keen eyesight" looks and he can see the threads in the gem, he can in-see, he has in-sight into the threads in the beryl there because of the clarity. This is a simile for insight.⁴ Basically what the Buddha is saying is after your mind is concentrated, clear, sharp, etc., direct and incline it to investigating mind and body.

If you're familiar with the four establishments of mindfulness (sometime translated as the four foundations of mindfulness), the first establishment/foundation is body. Your body is one of the things to understand that was mentioned above in the insight instructions. The second establishment is *vedanā*; *vedanā* is your initial categorization of sensory input, and that's part of your mind, which is also mentioned in these instructions. The third establishment is mind states – that's definitely mind. And the fourth is *dhammas*, which could best be translated in this context as "phenomena." So what are the phenomena of the fourth establishment to be investigated? Well, most of them are mind, except for the ones that are body. So the idea behind the *jhānas* is to generate a mind that's most suitable for doing insight practice; most suitable for investigating, for example, the four establishments of mindfulness: mind and body. All the 13

different practices given in the Pāli version of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* are about investigating mind and/or body, and that investigation just goes better with a jhānically-concentrated mind. Again, for details for doing these practices, see Anālayo (2003) and Goldstein (2013).

There are, of course, insight practices taught in the suttas besides those found in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* – e.g. the Five Daily Reflections found at [AN 5.57](#), and the practice given to Bāhiya at [Ud 1.10](#). The imperturbability generated by the jhānas will make the Five Daily Reflections less perturbing, and the indistractibility will make the Bāhiya practice more stable. But again, these all are about investigating body or mind or both.

The purpose of the jhānas is to generate a mind that will turbocharge your insight practice. Normally, when we look at the world, we're looking at it from an egocentric perspective. It looks like the world revolves around me. If I go outside and I turn in a circle, the world just revolves around me, obviously, right? That the world revolves around me, as it turns out, is not really the case. If you truly want to see what's going on, it's much better to look at the world from a less egocentric perspective. Normally, we're looking at the world in terms of "Can I eat that?" Or "Will that eat me?" OK, we do get a little more sophisticated, but it's "Is this something I want to get?" Or "Is this something I need to push away?" Am "I" gonna get it, am "I" gonna push it away. "I" am at the center of it all. If I'm examining the world, from an egocentric place with me at the center, it's less likely that I will see what's really happening, because it turns out the world doesn't really revolve around any of us.

Once you have a mind that's jhānically-concentrated, your

normal ego functioning quiets down. You are so focused on the primary object of each jhāna that there is no bandwidth left over for ego construction. It's like your ego goes and sits in the corner for a while and quits coloring everything you are experiencing. Then you can see the world from a less egocentric perspective, which is going to give you a much better chance of seeing what's really happening. It's often talked about as "knowing and seeing things as they are" – *yathābhūtañāṇadassana*. But that translation is a little too static. It would be better to translate this as "knowing and seeing what's actually happening," because it's a happening world, not a static one. And you want to see what's actually happening in order to make progress on the spiritual path.

In the Tibetan tradition, the bodhisattva of wisdom is Mañjuśrī. He's usually depicted with a sword in his hand, which he uses to cut the bonds of ignorance. Jhāna practice is just sharpening Mañjuśrī's sword. It's not cutting any bonds of ignorance yet. You still have to wield the sword – that's insight practice. And you don't want to make the mistake of just sharpening the sword, just doing jhāna practice – because if you do that, eventually you got no sword.

When you look closely at what's listed to investigate, what you see are one or more of the three characteristics of *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anatta*. We can look thru that list of things to investigate again: "This is my body, having material form, composed of the four primary elements." Your body is not a unitary thing; exploring this is beginning to investigate anatta. "Originating from mother and father." That's a little bit more anatta. "Built up out of rice and gruel." The body is becoming more and more anatta. All of these are also investigating dependent

origination – not the twelve links, but the general principle.⁵ "Impermanent" – that's anicca. "Subject to rubbing and pressing to disillusion and dispersion," that's dukkha and anicca. What we have found to investigate is anatta, anicca, dukkha – and dependent origination. "And this is my consciousness, supported by it..." My consciousness is not an independent thing – exploring this leads towards anatta. "And bound up with it." That's still more anatta exploration – and more insight into dependent origination.

So all three characteristics are being investigated. The most important insights are going to be the insights into three characteristics: anicca, dukkha, anatta – impermanence or inconstancy, unsatisfactoriness or (my favorite translation) "bummer,"⁶ and anatta, which is literally not-self, or we could say corelessness or emptiness. Those are the most important insights, but there could be personal insights along the way; these psychological insights that are also very important. In fact, often the personal insights are in the way of seeing the deeper insights about the three characteristics. You need to get the personal insights out of the way, so to speak, so you can see the deeper insights. Any insight, any "aha," that's congruent with reality is very useful, but the ones that are about the impermanent, unsatisfactory, empty nature of reality are going to be the most transformative ones.

The idea is you sit down, you get your mind as concentrated as you can using the jhānas. Then **in the same sitting**, start investigating reality by doing insight practice. First you get your mind indistractably less egocentric. Then with penetrating insight, investigate mind and body. This is what insight practice is all about.

And it just works so much better with a turbocharged, jhānically-concentrated mind.

The insights are what will set you free. Without them, you can practice the jhānas every day for three hours, and you're never going to get enlightened, you're never even going to get to stream entry. You're only going to get there by gaining enough insight that you let go. Remember in the chapter [Contentment with Little](#), we discussed letting go, liberation in the palm of your hand? The only way you're going to let go is when you get enough insights so that you can experientially understand there's not only nothing worth hanging on to, but also that there's nothing that you can hang on to. Notice also that letting go doesn't mean throwing away. It just means that you recognize the impermanent, unsatisfactory, empty nature of everything in the universe and don't attempt to cling to anything.

[Q&A on Insight Practice](#) are in Appendix 1.

1. A partial list of insight practices can be found at <http://leighb.com/practice.htm#panna>. These are some of the practices that can lead to the transformative understood experiences that constitute insight.
2. E.g. in MN 112, *viññāṇa* is used in four different ways, see <https://suttacentral.net/mn112/en/sujato>
3. See Pande (1974), pp 83-87 for a more detailed discussion of the early (and late) features of DN 2.
4. See [Appendix 3](#) for the full text of this simile.
5. For much more on dependent origination, including the

twelve links and the general principle, see my book **Dependent Origination and Emptiness: Streams Of Dependently Arising Processes Interacting.**

6. For a discussion of "bummer" as a translation of dukkha, see <http://leighb.com/bummer.htm>.

The Psychic Powers

In the most complete recensions of the Gradual Training, six classes of psychic powers are discussed. We will look at them as three pairs.

Again, coming out of fourth jhāna, one directs and inclines the jhānically-concentrated mind, this time to creating a Mind-Made Body. "From this body one creates another body having material form, mind made, complete in all its parts not lacking any faculties." This would be cloning yourself – at least that's what it sounds like. It's material and it's identical. I know I never managed to pull off that feat; I don't even see how you could pull it off. Maybe it means something else?

There are similes,¹ maybe they will help? "Suppose a man were to draw a reed out from its sheath. He would think: 'this is the reed, this is the sheath.' The reed is one thing, the sheath is another. Or if a man were to draw a sword out of a scabbard; he would think: 'this is a sword, this is a scabbard'..." They're different things. "...or pull a snake out of its slough; he would think: 'this is the snake, this is the slough.' Therefore, one creates a Mind-Made Body." So do these similes clear things up? Maybe not.

So what's going on here? I've heard it explained as learning to have out-of-body experiences. But actually when I read this, it does seem to be some sort of psychic thing, but it's not clear what that is. So let's just set it aside for a moment.

Next we have the Knowledge of the Modes of Supernormal Powers. Again with one's mind concentrated, etc., one exercises the various modes of supernormal power: "Having been one, one becomes many; having been many, one becomes one. One appears and vanishes. One goes unimpeded thru walls, ramparts, and mountains as though they were space. One dives in and out of the earth as if it is water. One walks on water without sinking as if it is earth. Sitting cross-legged one travels thru space like a winged bird. With one's hand, one touches and strokes the sun and moon, so mighty and powerful. One exercises mastery over the body as far as the Brahma world."

I have never seen anybody walk on water or dive into the earth. I do sometimes walk thru walls, but I use this trick called a door. I don't think that's what is being talked about. And I've never seen someone flying thru the air like a bird while sitting cross-legged. This is magic that's being referred to. So what's really going on here?

Once I was in Portugal and staying with a student I had become good friends with. He was very interested in lucid dreaming – this is a dream where you know you're dreaming. While we were talking, he mentioned Wake Induced Lucid Dreaming – W.I.L.D. – WILD. He said that it's possible to go from a normal waking state of consciousness directly into a lucid dream. Of course, I looked it up via Google and read all about it. The mind state you're to produce to enter WILD is very much like what you have coming out of the fourth jhāna. Now in a lucid dream, it's possible to even start trying to do various things, like fly thru the air, or walk on water. So is that what's going on? Is the mind-made body learning the

Wake Induced Lucid Dreaming technique? Because what you're doing is creating another body, right? Then you go walk on water, fly thru the air, and all the rest of it. This makes more sense to me.

I have a background in science, so if somebody can really walk on water, I'd love to see that. All they'd have to do is give a demonstration. Extraordinary claims do need extraordinary evidence, so if walking on water is real, it should not be that difficult to provide a demonstration that provides the needed extra-ordinary evidence. But what I'm proposing is that what's happening here is that the Mind-Made Body is learning to do Wake Induced Lucid Dreaming, and that the various Modes of Supernormal Powers are lucid dreams.

Is there any other evidence for this hypothesis? Actually there is – in the Aṅguttara Nikāya, at AN 3.60.² A brahman is having a conversation with the Buddha, about miracles. The Buddha says there are three miracles. One of the miracles is these various things like walking on water, flying thru the air, etc. Another miracle is knowing the minds of others, and the brahman says, "But those two only benefit the one who does them. It's like a private event." If someone is having a lucid dream, it only benefits the one who does it. It is a private event, so that matches as well.

The third miracle mentioned in that sutta is the miracle of instruction. And that really is pretty miraculous. When I'm teaching on Zoom, I'm sitting in California, I'm exhaling and flapping twin infoldings of mucous membrane in my throat, making some compression waves in the air that go into a microphone, get turned into digital stuff, go over the internet, come out of the speaker on a student's

computer, and go into their ear. Hopefully, the idea I had in my mind when I exhaled to make those sounds then appears in the student's mind – that seems really miraculous; even more miraculous than walking on water. Later those sounds get transcribed and edited and turned into this book. In AN 3.60, the Buddha then explains the miracle of instruction, and the brahman praises it "as the most excellent and sublime of those three miracles."

There is also Dīgha Nikāya 11³ where, after discussing the same two miracles as above – the various supernormal powers and knowing the minds of others – the Buddha says, referring to "such miracles, I dislike, reject and despise them." Then, once again, he praises the miracle of instruction by teaching this very same Gradual Training, but without the Supernormal Powers. So what's really going on with the first two of the six psychic powers are learning the Wake Induce Lucid Dreaming technique and then applying it in order to experience the various Modes of Supernormal Powers. At least that's my interpretation. Your interpretation may vary; if so, please do let me know when you are ready to demonstrate walking on water – or any of these other supernormal powers.

In the next pair, the first is the Knowledge of the Divine Ear. "When one's mind is concentrated, etc. one hears both kinds of sounds, the divine and the human, those which are distant and which are near." This is clairaudience – some people who claim to have ESP can hear things far away. Modern science says it can't detect ESP. But absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. So we don't know exactly what's going on with clairaudience, but the phenomenon is reported frequently enough that it has its own name.

The second one of this pair is the Knowledge of Encompassing the Minds of Others.

One directs and inclines the concentrated, etc. mind and "One understands the minds of beings and persons having encompassed with those minds with one's own. One understands a mind with lust as with lust, a mind without lust as without lust, with or without hatred, with or without delusion, etc." The list of mind states is actually the same as found in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta's* third establishment of mindfulness⁴ and is jammed in here. This is mind reading, this is clairvoyance which is another form of ESP. We have the word "clairvoyance" and the phrase "Extra Sensory Perception;" this too is a well-known phenomenon. Whatever it is, whether it's just misjudging the arithmetic around probabilities, or picking up subtle cues, or something else, it does seem to be enhanced by being on retreat and doing lots of concentration practice. We don't have to know what ESP is scientifically or even if it really exists, in order to say that it is a phenomenon that gets reported. Whatever that phenomenon is, whether it's scientifically valid or not, it does seem to be enhanced by a concentrated mind. So whatever is going on with ESP, these phenomena are mentioned here as clairaudience and clairvoyance.

In the last pair of psychic powers, the first one is the Knowledge of Recollecting Past Lives. "Again with the mind thus concentrated etc. one directs and inclines it to the knowledge of recollecting previous dwellings. One recollects 1 birth, 2 births, 3, 4, 5, 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 100, 1000, 100,000, many aeons of world contraction, many aeons of world expansion, many aeons of world contraction and expansion, recollecting: there I had such a name, belonged to such a clan, had such an appearance, such is my food, such is my experience of pleasure and

pain, such my lifespan, passing away from that state, I re-
arose in a new state, there too I had a name, clan, etc."

During the night of his awakening, in the first watch of the night, the Buddha stepped thru the first four jhānas and then, in some of the suttas, it says he recollected his past lives. At this point it is interesting to do a bit of math and run the numbers. The first watch of the night: this is happening in India, which is on the equator; so night and day are approximately the same length year round, about 12 hours. There are three watches of the night, so each watch is four hours long. In four hours, the Buddha was able to remember 100,000 past lives we are told. So we do the arithmetic, divide 100,000 into four hours. ($4 * 60 * 60 = 14,400$ seconds; $14,400/100,000 = 0.144$ second per lifetime). That's one seventh of a second per lifetime. Not only that, in each one seventh of a second, the Buddha-to-be has to remember name, clan, appearance, food, pleasure, pain, and lifespan. That's seven things in a seventh of a second. One 49th of a second to remember each one of these; 49 different things a second, non-stop for four hours. And you can't say, "But he was the Buddha!" – that's not going to happen for another 8 hours at least. I don't think we should take this literally.

The second one of this last pair is the Divine Eye. "With one's mind thus concentrated etc., one directs and inclines it to the Knowledge of the Passing Away and Reappearance of Beings. One sees beings passing away and reappearing in inferior and superior, beautiful and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate states. One understands how beings fare according to their karma. Thus, these beings who are endowed with bad conduct of body, speech, and mind, who reviled the noble ones, held wrong views, undertook actions governed by wrong views, with

the breakup of the body after death have reappeared in a plane of misery, bad destinations, even realms in hell. But these beings who are endowed with good conduct of body, speech, and mind, who did not revile the noble ones, held right views, undertook actions governed by right views, with the breakup of the body have reappeared in good destinations, even in the heavenly world."

During the night of his awakening, in the second watch of the night, the Buddha supposedly watched beings dying and reappearing, passing and re-arising. So for four hours, the Buddha's sat there looking around, and seeing that guy just died. Oh, this couple's having sex, oh, he's going to be their baby. And that guy just died. Oh, he was bad. This other couple is going to have a baby that will have a miserable existence. Do you really think the Buddha was sitting there for four hours watching people die and other people have sex? Or watching recently deceased people showing up in various heavens or hells?

So what are we to make of this pair? In Stephen Batchelor's book "After Buddhism" he writes:

This critical assessment of the doctrines of rebirth and karma risks overlooking a crucially important role that they have played in historical Buddhist cultures. To dismiss them as unverifiable metaphysical beliefs of a former age fails to recognize how they served to situate human life within a vision of the cosmos. Rather than conceiving of one's life as a brief flicker of self-interested consciousness on the surface of the earth, people with these beliefs could see, in the mythic language of the time, how all living beings are

intimately connected to a complex series of causal conditions that preceded their existence, as well as to a seemingly infinite unfolding of future consequences for which each was in some small way responsible. In providing a sense of humility, connectedness, and responsibility, this worldview encouraged people to consider the significance of their existence in the selfless context of the immensity of life itself, not reduce it to the service of their egotistical greed and hatred.⁵

You can take any or all of these psychic powers literally if you want; doing so might support your immortality project. But I think I've provided enough information so you don't have to do that for any of them. They fit nicely into three categories: wake induced lucid dreaming, extra sensory perception, and a way of expressing the interconnectedness and the giant unfolding of the human process over time in the mythic language of the time of the Buddha.

I don't think you can find many other teachers that would interpret these six powers in the way I just interpreted them. But I'm going to stick by my interpretation until somebody can give me an actual demonstration; it's just as simple as that. It fits my understanding of reality, and I don't have to invent any magic. I know some people want a magic Buddha. I've actually had people basically tell me that – they didn't use those words – but what they were saying was that they wanted a magic Buddha. I don't want a magic Buddha. I want a human being who was able to wake up, because I'm not magic, I'm just a human being. I want a path that a human being can follow. If waking up involves me walking on water I'm probably not going to

get anywhere. But I can be ethical, I can get concentrated, I can do insight practice. That's what I'm most interested in.

There is a story about a Tibetan who studied with his master for a number of years. After some time, his master tells him you've learned what I can teach you, now go off and practice. So the guy goes off finds a cave, and practices for 20 years. It was not too far from a village where he could go on alms round. There also was a river between his cave and the village. Over that 20 year span he learned to walk on water – a shortcut into town.

One day he goes into town and hears that his teacher is coming, and he gets really excited. He goes back to his cave and he does whatever you do when guests are coming to your cave – spiff it up, whatever. Sure enough, his teacher shows up a couple days later. They have a joyful reunion, and eventually his teacher asks, "Well, what have you learned?" The student stands up all proud, walks down to the river, and then across it, and then he walks back across. He comes back to his teacher with a big smile, his teacher looks at him and says, "You just wasted 20 years of your life – there's a bridge quarter mile upstream."

So don't waste your time with these things, but do look at them in the mythic language of the time to situate human experience in a much bigger picture than your own self interested existence. I think Stephen Batchelor nailed it.

Now if these things are not really "real," why are all these things included in this sutta? I see two possibilities. One possibility is that since the king wanted to know what the visible fruits of the spiritual life are, the Buddha puts

these in because this would impress the king. He's trying to help the king get a good night's sleep. If the king gains faith in the Dhamma, maybe the Buddha figures this is going to bring some peace to his mind, which is what the king is looking for. So the Buddha includes these here. Yes, you can learn the Wake Induced Lucid Dreaming technique and walk on water in your dreams, but the king is not going to learn W.I.L.D. and walk on water or perform any of the other feats. But it will impress the king that this is a path that actually has serious power; it really does have amazing fruits. So maybe the Buddha actually did put these psychic powers in this discourse just because it would be useful as a pedagogical device for helping the king understand depths the Dhamma promises, and find some peace of mind.

Another possibility is these simply weren't in the original, and were inserted later. If you were a real spiritual teacher at that time, and even later, then, of course, you could walk on water and fly thru the air. That's what it meant to be real spiritual teacher – in the minds of a lot of people. As Buddhism was competing for support after the Buddha's death, it had to prove that the Buddha was the real guy, because he could walk on water and fly thru the air and do all this other stuff. So a lot of the miracles in the suttas seems to have been inserted later. Were these psychic powers part of what was inserted later? I don't know.

There are four versions of the Pāli canon. There are two Sri Lankan versions, the Burmese version, and the Thai version. The four versions are very similar; it's mostly just typos as to what is different. In all four versions, suttas 2 thru 12 of the Long Discourses have the "full" Gradual Training (except for DN 9). In some versions, not all of

the suttas between 2 and 12 include the psychic powers. Yet in some other versions, all of the suttas between 2 and 12 have psychic powers; clearly, inserting psychic powers was a done thing.⁶ When did they get inserted? Who knows? You can check [Appendix 2](#) to see which suttas do or do not include these psychic powers in the versions where the psychic powers are limited.

In the 24th sutta in the Long Discourses, there is a monk who comes to the Buddha and says he's disrobing because the Buddha never performed any miracles. The Buddha says, "Did I ever tell you I was going to perform miracles?" The monk replies, "No. But you didn't explain how the world begins!" "Did I ever tell you I was going to explain how the world begins?" "No." The monk left the order anyhow. Maybe at the time of the death of the Buddha, there was no "magic," no psychic powers in any suttas – or maybe there was some.

Yet today there are suttas where the Buddha has fire and water coming out of his hands and all other sorts of magic occurrences. I'm most interested in trying to understand what's there that doesn't have any of the magic, that doesn't have any the supernatural. What are the teachings when we remove all the stuff that's a bit unbelievable. That's what I'm basing my study on. I can't do the magic things, but I can keep the precepts, guard the senses, get concentrated, investigate what's actually happening. When reading or studying suttas, it's far more important to focus on what the Buddha is teaching you to do as practice, rather than taking anything as historical fact.

[Q&A on the Psychic Powers](#) are in Appendix 1.

1. See [Appendix 3](#) for the full text of the similes for each psychic power.
2. AN 3.60 <https://suttacentral.net/an3.60/en/bodhi>
3. DN 11.5 & 7
<https://suttacentral.net/dn11/en/rhysdavids-brasington>
4. DN 22.12 & MN 10.34
5. Batchelor (2015), p 303
6. Yes, I'm assuming the Psychic Powers were inserted rather than dropped to generate the differences in the different versions. It just seems much more likely that material was added, rather than huge chunks of identical material was dropped from some suttas, yet being preserved in other suttas.

Ending the Āsavas

The final section of the Gradual Training is the Knowledge of the Destruction of the *Āsavas*. The word *āsava* gets translated in many ways: cankers, taints, defilements, fermentations, influxes, out-flows. It originally referred to the secretion from a plant. Think of a poppy plant. If you cut it with a razor blade, what comes out is an *āsava*. But what happens if you put that *āsava* on your tongue? You become intoxicated; that's how *āsava* is being used here.¹ So, when one's mind is concentrated, etc., "One directs it and inclines it to the Knowledge of the Destruction of the Intoxicants. One understands as it really is: this is dukkha. This is the origin of dukkha. This is the cessation of dukkha. This is the path of practice leading to the cessation of dukkha. One understands as it really is: these are the intoxicants. This is the origin of the intoxicants. This is the cessation of the intoxicants. This is the path of practice leading to the cessation of the intoxicants. Knowing and seeing thus one's mind is liberated from the intoxicant of sensual desire, the intoxicant of becoming, and the intoxicant of ignorance."

Understanding the Four Noble Truths as they really are represents the first stage of awakening – stream entry. This is not just an intellectual understanding, it's a deep enough understood experience that it permanently changes you. The understanding and uprooting of the intoxicants is the final stage of awakening – liberation, arahantship, enlightenment. Again, it's not an intellectual understanding – it's a profound understood experience that

uproots greed, hatred, and delusion so deeply that there is never any more craving or clinging, and hence no more dukkha.

I once heard a talk by Eric Colvig, and he said that *samsāra* is not a wheel – it's a drunken party in a casino. Our job is to sober up, find the exit, and get out. And what are they serving at this drunken party in the casino? Sense desires, becoming, and ignorance. I think we all know what sense desires are. Becoming, can be becoming in this world – I want to become rich and famous, or whatever other crazy thing we want to become. Or it could be becoming in a future world. I want to become a deva, or I want to become reborn in a family with a Mercedes Benz – and we get intoxicated by that. As for ignorance, we're not intoxicated by pursuing ignorance, we're intoxicated by our ignorance.

Our job is to overcome the *āsavas*. The way to do that is to clearly see what's going on. Remember, at the insight step of the Gradual Training, we have the instruction that one directs and inclines the mind to knowing and seeing this is my body, etc. and this is my mind, etc. These deeply understood experiences of the three characteristics as related to body and mind are the insights to be gained. Then what follows (if you leave out the psychic powers) is the overcoming of the *āsavas*. Having gained deep enough insights to overcome the ignorance of the fact that the self is only illusion, that you are not the most important person in the universe, and that nothing is worth craving or clinging to, that then allows you to overcome the tendencies for craving and clinging, and thereby put an end to dukkha. This is what we're after on the spiritual path. This is the ultimate of all of the fruits of the spiritual life – there is no greater fruit of the spiritual

life than totally, once and for all, overcoming dukkha.

1. From the Pāli-English Dictionary: **Āsava** 1. spirit, the intoxicating extract or secretion of a tree or flower -- 2. discharge from a sore -- 3. in psychology, technical term for certain specified ideas which intoxicate the mind (bemuddle it, befoozle it, so that it cannot rise to higher things). Freedom from the "Āsavas" constitutes Arahantship, & the fight for the extinction of these *āsavas* forms one of the main duties of people.

Additional Gradual Training Factors

This concludes the examination of the factors of the Gradual Training found in the Discourse on the Fruits of the Spiritual Life. These 13 factors are the most common ones, and arguably the most important. But there are additional factors that appear occasionally when the Gradual Training is discussed in the suttas. You can use [Appendix 2](#) to see exactly which suttas contain the additional factors.

The first of these we will discuss are the **Medium and Large sections on Morality**. This pair always appear together and only in the Long Discourses collection, and only in eight of the dozen suttas where the Gradual Training is taught in that collection. A few of the items from these sections have been mentioned the chapters on [Keeping the Precepts](#). As mentioned earlier, you might find it interesting to read these sections at some point – they also occur in DN 2.¹ They certainly give a sense of what was going on in the culture at the time of the Buddha. These two longer sections primarily contain precepts for monastics. There are some activities in these sections that are forbidden for monastics, but they are not a problem for a lay person, and there are many activities that everyone should avoid.

Moderation in Eating is discussed in four suttas in the Middle Length Discourses collection. This is slotted in

after [Restraint of the Sense Faculties](#). The teaching here has become the meal chant in the Theravādan tradition:

Reflecting wisely, I use this food,
not playfully, nor for intoxication,
not for fattening, nor for beautification;
but simply for the survival & continuance of this
body,
for ending its afflictions,
for the support of the holy life,
thinking, 'Thus will I destroy old feelings [of hunger]
and not create new feelings [from overeating].
I will maintain myself, be blameless, & live in
comfort.'

This verse is obviously intended to help with restraint of the tongue faculty, and is also helpful in eating less food as recommended for overcoming the hindrances of sense desire and sloth & torpor as discussed in the chapter on [The Five Hindrances](#).

It's also important to remember this is really about wise eating. Western culture seems to generate a number of less than helpful ideas around food. This factor is not just about not over eating, it's also about not starving oneself. The Buddha's first teaching included the middle way between asceticism and sensual indulgence. Moderation in Eating is an opportunity to practice the middle way everyday. In addition, in the factor [Mindfulness And Clear Comprehension](#), we are instructed to act mindfully and fully aware when obtaining food, eating, drinking, chewing, and tasting. We are to eat in a way that maintains a healthy body without succumbing to greed or

unhealthy deprivation.

Devotion to Wakefulness appears always and only when Moderation in Eating is also discussed. During the day, while walking back and forth and sitting, you are to purify your mind of obstructive states. This is repeated for the first and third watch of the night (4 hours each). During the middle watch of the night (also 4 hours), you are to lie down on your right side in the lion's pose with one foot overlapping the other, mindful and fully aware, after noting in your mind the time for rising. This, like the mindful eating, appears in many other suttas and is the canonical source of some monasteries allowing only four hours of sleep a night for the monastics and visiting lay practitioners.

Personally I do not think four hours of sleep a night is either healthy or a sufficient amount for any endeavor. Having only four hours of sleep a night is almost certain to result in sloth and torpor when meditating. It is much better to get the amount of sleep you need, and upon waking, get up and resume your continuity of mindfulness and your meditation practice.

The Four Establishments of Mindfulness appear only in MN 125² and are placed after the Abandoning of [The Five Hindrances](#). You are to abide contemplating the body as a body, ardent, fully aware and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world; abide contemplating vedanā as vedanā... abide contemplating mind-states as mind-states... abide contemplating phenomena as phenomena, ardent, fully aware and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. This is the usual summary of mindfulness practice found, not only in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas*, but also in the chapter on

mindfulness at SN 47³ in the Connected Discourses.

There are some who teach that the *Satipaṭṭhāna* practices are concentration practices – even with those practices making far more sense as insight practices, as discussed above in the chapter [Insight Practice](#). Perhaps this occurrence of the *Satipaṭṭhāna* summary in this one sutta has led to this idea. But we have already seen that mindfulness practices occur in the Gradual Training suttas far more frequently prior to the Abandoning of [The Five Hindrances](#) than in this one case where they appear afterward. Mindfulness is helpful for fine tuning our behavior (*sīla*), it is necessary in order to generate concentration (*samādhi*), and the *Satipaṭṭhāna* practices often are useful for generating wisdom (*paññā*). Mindfulness practice pervades the entire spiritual path.

The Four Brahmavihāras (*mettā*, *karunā*, *muditā*, *upekkhā*) appear only in DN 13,⁴ and as above, immediately after the Abandoning of [The Five Hindrances](#). In this sutta, two Brahman youths are discussing the straight path, the direct way to salvation, that leads one who acts according to it to the state of union with Brahmā – which is the goal of the Brahminical teachings. But they can't agree which of the many teachers knows the true correct path.

To resolve their dispute, they decide to visit the Buddha and ask him the way to Brahmā. The Buddha teaches them the Gradual Training up thru the Abandoning of [The Five Hindrances](#). He then teaches them the practice of the four Brahmavihāras using the method that appears in most places in the suttas where these practices are taught:

One then dwells pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, likewise the second, likewise the third, likewise the fourth. Thus above, below, across, and everywhere, and to all as to oneself, one dwells pervading the entire world with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, vast, exalted, measureless, without hostility, without ill-will.

Just as a mighty trumpeter makes himself heard without difficulty in all four directions; even so, of all things that have shape or life, there is not one that is passed by or left aside, but one regards them all with a heart set free through deep-felt loving-kindness.⁵

This is the way to the state of union with Brahmā, says the Buddha.

These three verses are then repeated for compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity. None of the factors of the Gradual Training that usually follow the Abandoning of [The Five Hindrances](#) appear in this sutta. The two Brahman youths like the Buddha's answer so much they become lay followers.

The Immaterial States and Cessation are the last of these additional Gradual Training factors. The Immaterial States (The Experiences of Infinite Space, Infinite Consciousness, No-Thingness and Neither-Perception-Nor-Non-Perception) are later referred to as the "Higher Jhānas," i.e. Jhānas 5, 6, 7 and 8. Cessation is Cessation of Perception and Feeling (saññā-vedayita-nirodha) and is a state of suspended animation. For details on these five

states, see chapter 9, page 74ff, and chapters 18 and 19, page 134ff, in my book [Right Concentration](#).

In DN 9, the Poṭṭhapāda Sutta, Poṭṭhapāda wants to know how this state of Cessation comes about. The Buddha teaches him the Gradual Training thru the four Jhānas and then teaches Jhānas 5, 6 and 7 with Cessation being entered after Jhāna 7. None of the factors of the Gradual Training that usually follow the four Jhānas appear in this sutta.⁶

Finally in AN 10.99,⁷ after the four Jhānas, the Buddha teaches Jhānas 5, 6, 7, 8, and Cessation, saying after each of the Jhānas and Cessation "Isn't this state better than what was had before?" After Cessation, the Buddha says, "having seen with wisdom, one's defilements come to an end," i.e. one becomes fully awakened.

These additional Gradual Training factors are not unimportant; many of them appear in multiple other suttas. It's just that they appear infrequently as part of the Gradual Training teachings. Perhaps they are later additions to the basic factors found in DN 2 and many other suttas.

1. See <https://suttacentral.net/dn2/en/bodhi>

2. See <https://suttacentral.net/mn125>

3. See <https://suttacentral.net/sn47>

4. See <https://suttacentral.net/dn13>

5. DN 13.76-79

6. Ayya Khema's book **Who Is My Self** discusses DN 9 in wonderful detail – see it for more information.

7. See <https://suttacentral.net/an10.99/en/sujato>

The Gradual Training and The Eightfold Path

This concludes the detailed examination of the Gradual Training. However, the Noble Eightfold Path is usually what's spoken of when anyone talks about the Buddha's path of practice, so perhaps you are wondering how the Gradual Training relates to it. In fact there is a quite strong correspondence between the Gradual Training and the Eightfold Path, that is apparently seldom noticed and certainly rarely mentioned or taught. Yet the correspondence is quite striking (especially when you remember that Right Effort is often defined as overcoming & preventing unwholesome mind states plus arousing & perfecting wholesome ones). Consider the following table:

Gradual Training	Eightfold Path
Hearing the true Dhamma, gaining confidence	Right View
Going forth	Right Intention (renunciation)
Keeping the precepts	Right Intention, Right Action, Speech & Livelihood
Guarding the senses	Right Intention, Right Effort
Mindfulness	Right Mindfulness
Being content with little	Right Intention

Abandoning the hindrances	Right Effort
Practicing the Jhānas	Right Effort, Right Concentration
Gaining Insight	Right View
Overcoming the āsavas, Liberation	Right Effort, Right View

Hearing the true Dhamma and gaining confidence is the first step of the Gradual Training, and also provides the initial glimpse of Right View. Keeping the precepts requires the Right Intentions of renunciation, of non-ill-will, and of harmlessness. The precepts also specifically address Right Speech and Right Action (i.e., to refrain from killing, to refrain from taking what is not given, and to refrain from sexual misconduct). And much of the discussion of morality in the Gradual Training, especially in the intermediate and large sections, is about Right Livelihood – which means not earning one's livelihood in a way that involves breaking any precept.

Guarding the senses requires the Right Effort of preventing the arising of unwholesome mental states, as well as involving all three Right Intentions. Mindfulness is explicitly taught in the Gradual Training using one of the *Satipaṭṭhāna* practices given for mindfulness of the body.¹ Being content with little is a practice of the Right Intention of renunciation.

Abandoning the hindrances is the Right Effort of overcoming arisen unwholesome mental states and preventing new ones from arising. Right Concentration is defined as the four jhānas; entering and dwelling in the

jhānas are the Right Efforts of producing unarisen wholesome mental states and maintaining arisen wholesome mental states.

Gaining Insight leads to a more profound Right View. Overcoming the *āsavas* requires the Right Efforts of overcoming arisen unwholesome mental states and preventing new ones from arising; and Liberation results in the ultimate Right View.

It is interesting that the Eightfold Path is often subdivided into three sections of morality, concentration and wisdom but with the wisdom section surprisingly coming first rather than at the end as it usually does:

Right View Right Intention	Wisdom
Right Speech Right Action Right Livelihood	Morality
Right Effort Right Mindfulness Right Concentration	Concentration

Could it be that the order of the Eightfold Path is actually a reflection of the Gradual Training? Notice in the table at the beginning of this chapter that the order in which each element of the Eightfold Path first appears as one progresses thru the Gradual Training is the usual order in which the Eightfold Path is given, other than Right Speech and Right Action being swapped. Of course, there is no hard evidence that this speculation about the ordering of the Eightfold Path is correct – but the

correspondence between the Gradual Training and the Eightfold Path is very striking indeed. But I do think we can say that either the Gradual Training is filling in the details of the Eightfold Path, or that the Eightfold Path is a summary of the Gradual Training – either way, they are highly compatible.

1. [DN 22.4](#) and [MN 10.8](#)

Afterword

Hopefully you now have a better understanding of the path of practice that the Buddha taught for fully waking up. Hopefully you now have a scaffolding on which to hang all the practices you have worked with – or even just heard of. Hopefully you have a deeper sense of the coherent path to awakening.

This is *Sīla*:

Keeping the Precepts;
Guarding the Senses;
Being Mindful;
Being Content with Little.

This is *Samādhi*:

Abandoning the Hindrances;
Practicing the Jhānas.

And this is *Paññā*:

Insight Practices;
Overcoming the *Āsavas*.

May your journey on this spiritual path be fruitful!



QUIZ

Besides *mettā* being an important part of DN 13, how else does *mettā* fit into the Gradual Training?
(Answer in [Appendix 5](#))

Appendix 1: Questions & Answers

Q&A on the Backstory in DN 2

Q: Doesn't this set up a certain expectation of what one is going to achieve along this path? That sometimes is seen as problematic by say, in the Zen tradition, for instance, where any expectation of achieving anything is already problematic?

A: Yes, expectations can definitely be a hindrance on the spiritual path. When I teach a jhāna retreat, I give two warnings at the start of retreat. The first is that if you're practicing concentration – because that's what I'm teaching when I'm teaching jhānas – your unresolved stuff might come up. The other one is that if you have any expectations, you're in trouble. Expectations are the worst thing you can bring on any retreat. All that you can really expect is that it's going to be different from what you expect. So yes, expectations do get in the way.

But you started reading this book; you had some sort of expectation that this is going to be a useful way to spend your time, right? The Buddha said, "I teach dukkha and the end of dukkha;" so maybe you think there might be something here that would be of value for ending dukkha. If you don't have any expectations that a spiritual path would actually benefit you, you wouldn't attempt to

follow one. Nonetheless, you can't focus on the expectations. What I tell the students on a retreat is that I'm going to give you the instructions. Your job is to follow the instructions and not be concerned about any goal, or what the instructions are supposed to produce, or anything else. Just follow the instructions.

Suppose I'm in Oakland, California, and I want to drive to Chicago. Somebody gives me printed directions (like back before GPS). The instructions say go down the street you live on; when you get to the stop sign, take a right; then go under the freeway and take a left; and once you're on the freeway, look for this exit; etc. If I start looking for Chicago while I'm driving down the street I live on, I might run the stop sign and get into an accident or something. You can't be focused on the expected result; you have to be focused on doing the thing that is appropriate for where you are, and keep an eye out for the landmark where you are to start doing something different. Eventually, sometime in the future, doing this will get you where you want to go. That's about the only way you can work it. It's the same for learning skills on a spiritual path.

But it definitely helps to know where the instructions are supposed to lead! That's what this sutta spells out, in addition to providing a graduated list of practices necessary to arrive there.

Q: I am curious as to why the king took 500 women and the 500 female elephants but only one other member of his court. Was it just to make a big show? Was this to make it clear to the Buddha that he was the king? It just intrigues me because I would have thought he would have he would have come with his counselors or his retinue or

something else?

A: The first thing to say is that it's very important not to take any story in the suttas as literally true, as accurate history. The take-away from the story is that the king went to visit the Buddha seeking peace of mind, and he got a discourse on the gradual training. Everything else in the story is not that important, and may or may not reflect what actually happened.

The next thing to say is that the number 500 in the suttas should be translated as "a whole bunch." Don't take it literally. So Jīvaka went down and saddled up a whole bunch of female elephants and the king's royal Tusker. And then the king decided what to next. Did Jīvaka prompt him, "You know, we're going to see the Buddha, he's a really peaceful guy, you shouldn't be bringing your soldiers."? We don't really have any idea. This is what we are presented with, and there's no further information. Perhaps the king thought, "I'm going on a mission to find some peace, so I should come being as peaceful as I possibly can. If I bring the ministers maybe it looks like I'm trying to exhibit my power more. But if I come with a whole bunch of women and Jīvaka, whom Buddha knows really well, it's obvious I'm coming on a peace mission." That's my best guess, but I'm only guessing here.

Q: But then in that case, why not just come with Jīvaka and leave all the women at home?

A: Well, he was the king – and he was also insecure about his legitimacy. Such a king doesn't go anywhere without his retinue. He needs to impress his kingship on the Buddha, or anybody else that he interacts with. This has been his whole life, to prove he's the top dog. He's on a

peaceful mission, so he can't really bring his soldiers even if he brings his male ministers. It's the best thing to just bring a bunch of women. He hopes that the Buddha will be impressed that someone who has that many women in his harem is the top dog. Again, I'm just guessing – and it doesn't really matter as far as what we should learn from the sutta.

Q: Do these elements of the Gradual Training necessarily have an order? Or do they kind of pop up and appear and disappear?

A: They're in an order where each supports the next one. If you keep the precepts, it's much easier to guard your senses. If you're guarding your senses, it's a lot easier to be mindful. If you're mindful, you really pay attention, you understand that you don't need all the things that the culture says you need. You don't need to buy a new car every year, you don't need a four-foot wide TV. So now you've simplified your life. Having done so, when you sit down and start to meditate, you've got less likelihood of the hindrances arising. You're not thinking, "Oh, should I get this kind of TV or that kind of TV?" That just doesn't come up. And you're going to need to abandon the hindrances to be able to enter the jhānas. So there's definitely an order. Then with a jhānically-concentrated mind, your insight practice is going to go much better. And you're going to need to get a whole bunch of insights if you're going to overcome the *āsavas* and become fully awakened. So there's very much an order with each element being supported by the previous ones.

Q: My thinking in asking that question is, "Do I have to mess with mapping, keeping an eye on where I am? Or is that kind of like a feeling that it's either right or wrong;

we don't have to map and know where we are?"

A: It's some of both. You've got to know what the precepts are to be able to keep them. And you have to start doing that seriously if you're going to have any success on the spiritual path. You've got to know what guarding the senses means, and you have to figure out what that's like. You've already practiced some of these. For example you're walking down Main Street and you come to the bakery which, of course, has its door open. At that point, it's not like, "Oh, what precept am I supposed to keep at this point?" No, you know right away: guard my senses or the smell is gonna grab me by the nose and drag me in. So some of this requires doing the practices in order, but it's not all about doing the practices in order. It's do what's appropriate at that point. Your friend texts you and says, a big TV is on sale. And you're like, "Nah, I don't need that." You don't have at that point in time to worry about which precept applies, what sense do I need to guard, how should I be mindful? You have been practicing those things, and being content with little automatically means you are not hooked by the big TV being on sale.

Q: Why was it that every subsequent child killed his father for so many generations after that? It seemed like they didn't pick up the lesson from the Buddha. I just didn't understand the purpose of that in the story. I was wondering if there is a symbolic gesture behind it.

A: This apparently is actual Indian history, rather than anything symbolic. India had some pretty extreme cultural things that happened. There was a time in the past in India when a king died, his women were cremated with him while they were still alive. There was some really nasty violence going on. King Ajātasattu may have been a

follower of the Buddha, but he was also a warrior. He was very much into going out and slaying his enemies and conquering all the neighboring kingdoms. So his son grows up and sees his father killing anybody that's in his way, and his father's in his way. So he kills him. At that point the tradition had been established that this is what happens and it goes on until the people revolt and kick the bad guys out. But unfortunately it appears to be a historical fact.

Q: Royal patricide was also a tendency in ancient Israel, and later in the Roman Empire.

A: Yeah, we don't want to go into the Roman Empire and all the craziness that came with the killings of the Emperors and everything else. It was a thing that used to happen in multiple cultures, unfortunately.

Q: So the backstory: after the king leaves the mango grove with his parade of elephants and his contingency, we don't know what happened after that. At that point, we're left with just the ability to then speculate if we choose. I like to think the women also heard the Buddha's teaching. Did all those women return back to the palace, or did some of those women stay, and become bhikkhunis?

A: I suspect they all went back to the palace, but some of them may have come back. In the commentary to this sutta, it says that one of the reasons that probably Jīvaka saddled so many elephants was so lots of people could accompany the king. The Buddha would know that the king probably wasn't going to become a monk or profit greatly from the discourse. It might give him some peace of mind, which the commentaries say it did. But if many

members of the court came, then the Buddha would recognize that there would be people here who could really benefit from hearing this teaching. So I'm guessing the women all went back, but perhaps some of them returned to the Buddha to become nuns. This may be why the Buddha gave this particular teaching; he's got an audience of "500" people who maybe have never heard the Dhamma before. Some of them might really be interested in it – as well as the king getting to know "wondrous and sublime" things from the spiritual path. So he's going to lay out the full path as well.

We don't really know if Ajātasattu had a good night's sleep that night. The commentaries tell us he did. But we do know that he became a protector of the Dhamma, because there are suttas that talk about him being a follower of the Buddha, as well as more such stories in the Vinaya. So we don't know if he got a good night's sleep that night, but we do know that he was changed. Before this incident Ajātasattu was a follower of Devadatta. There are suttas that talk about him coming to see Devadatta, and after the event described in this sutta, he is depicted as a follower of the Buddha. So it did certainly have a big impact on Ajātasattu.

Q: It just makes me feel like all you need to do to enter the stream is to listen to this teaching and not kill your father.

A: This raises a very important point: what does stream entry actually mean? What's going on there? On my website, I have page¹ that's got a whole bunch of information on the four stages of awakening from various sources. It has been reproduced in [Appendix 4](#). You'll notice that in the first column are a number of different

ideas about what stream entry means. Certainly there are places where the Buddha gives a discourse and somebody gets to stream entry. But there are other teachings listed on that page, where there's a lot more going on than just hearing a discourse.

There's an excellent book called [Practice After Stream Entry](#) by Kim Allen. It's a PDF that you can download and read. Even if you're not a stream enterer it gives you some ideas of what stream entry is about. The sort of practices you would do after stream entry are the same practice you would do before stream entry.

We don't have the Buddha around to give an absolutely amazing Dhamma talk that is going to get somebody to stream entry. Unfortunately, you're stuck with me and other folks like me who aren't fully awakened, let alone buddhas. So you're going to have to do more than just listen to a good Dhamma talk, and not kill your father. [\[Back\]](#)

Q&A on the Precepts

Q: There's a phrase that's used a lot in interfaith dialogue: sins of commission and sins of omission, and I love that idea. When the precepts are elaborated upon in the suttas, that's the feeling I get. Am I on the right path? In other words it's not just a matter of not doing the bad thing; it's also a matter of being proactive, and doing the virtuous opposite of the bad thing. Is that right?

A: That's exactly right. Taking what is not given would be a sin of commission. Not being generous would be a sin of omission.

Q: I was interested in the source of your historical analysis. Are there certain scholars that you follow about this, or is it something you studied directly and came to your own conclusions? I'm particularly interested in how you, or whoever, discovered that the splitting of the Mahāyāna and the Theravāda and was over the precept about gold and silver, and that it was mainly urban monks who became the Mahāyāna? Also how you found out that the fifth precept of about intoxicants is a late precept.

A: One source that I have is a book called **Studies in the Origins of Buddhism**, by Govind C. Pande. Among other things in that book, he goes thru all of the suttas and decides which category they go in: early, late, composite, or don't know. The biggest bucket is the "don't know" bucket. Reading that book, in conjunction with reading all the suttas as I did so, is part of the scholarship I've done.

There's also a PDF on my website in the [reading list](#), called a **History of Mindfulness**² by Ajahn Sujato. He writes about how to determine what suttas are early and late and he has that type of information in there, as well as being a really deep dive into the history of the [Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta](#) and the history of mindfulness. So those are two sources that I use for understanding what sutta material is early and what is late.

A brief history of the split between the Theravāda and the Mahāyāna can be found online in several places, for example at:

- Second Buddhist Council at https://encyclopediaofbuddhism.org/wiki/Second_Buddhist_council
- Buddhist Council at <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Buddhist-council>

According to the **Dipavamsa** (part of the Sri Lankan history of Buddhism)³, the Second Council was called because some monks were not keeping the precept about not handling gold or silver.

The reason for this split probably is addressed in a book [Buddhist Religions: A Historical Introduction](#) by Richard H. Robinson. It's a college textbook so its price is on the order of \$100. But there are used versions of it around – I saw one recently for as little as \$15. It's definitely the best history of Buddhism I've ever read, but I read it long enough ago that I don't remember what it says about the split.

Other books that give at least a little history of early Buddhism include [The Awakening of the West: The Encounter of Buddhism and Western Culture](#) by Stephen Batchelor; and [How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America](#) by Rick Fields, which is also about Western Buddhism. I don't remember if either of these books address that split, but both are worth reading.

As for the precept on intoxicants being later, that's mostly my own opinion based on the fact that in multiple places where the precepts are discussed in the suttas, that precept does not occur. The story behind its origin (mentioned above in [Keeping the Precepts – Additional Precepts](#)) implies that the monastic sangha was already well established at the time of its inception. Given that the teachings in the first four precepts are found in many, if not most, world religions, I would suspect those four would be quite early – probably showing up at the time when any precept list initially appeared. Yet the monastic precept on intoxicants is number 51 in a list of 92 precepts of "transgressions to be confessed." That list appears to be in order of origin, rather than any other order – although that is certainly not certain. And I have no idea when the precept on intoxicants became the fifth precept.

Q: I have a question about the precept on non-harming. It seems it's not really possible to live a life without killing or without harming. If I grow a plant and want to eat part of it, it's definitely harming the plant. So I take the precept as not harming mindlessly. But I was wondering if you had any thoughts on the on that topic?

A: The literal precept is to not kill breathing beings.

Plants were not considered to breathe at that time, so it was perfectly okay to harm a plant in order to eat it. There is a different precept to not damage/harm seeds or plant life. So you could harvest a plant to eat it, but you wouldn't go around pulling leaves off of a tree or harming it in any way.

There is also a sutta in the Middle Length Discourses at number 55 that was given to Jīvaka, the Royal Physician. Jīvaka wanted to know if was it okay for the monks to eat meat. The Buddha says it's okay, if the monk doesn't know or suspect that the animal was killed for them specifically. So if you go on alms round, and they put chicken curry in your alms bowl, you can eat it. But if you go to have a meal with a family, and you hear squawking in the background, and then it's quiet, and then they serve chicken curry, you can't eat it.

The Buddha was not a vegetarian; he ate what was put in his alms bowl. When Devadatta suggested that the Buddha make a precept forbidding the eating of meat, the Buddha refused to do so because it was not practical. The lay followers were not vegetarians; they simply shared what they were eating with the monastics. If the monastics became vegetarians, the lay followers would be required to make two meals – a vegetarian one for the monastics and a regular one for the family. This was simply not practical.

I take the precept to mean I should do my very best to not harm living beings. If there is a spider in the house, get a cup, get a piece of paper, take the spider outside. If there is a fly, try to shoo it out rather than swat it. It's certainly possible to do things like that. Do the absolute best possible to not cause harm. But we're all going to fail. It's

not possible to live as a human being without being reliant upon killing either plants or animals or both. And we're all going to make mistakes.

The Jains, who were another religious group at the time of the Buddha, took this to such an extent that they would wear a mask over their face to keep from inhaling insects, and they would have a little broom and would sweep the ground in front of them, so they wouldn't step on an insect. Maybe that's taking it a little too far. In talking about karma, the Buddha said, "Karma, oh monks, I declare, is intention." So you don't want to intentionally harm anything. You want to intend, if at all possible, to prevent harm.

But if the ants invade your kitchen, you're going to need to deal with the ants, it's just going to be unhealthy for them to remain there. Maybe such an incident will teach you to keep your kitchen cleaner, so the ants won't have any reason to come in. That's about the best I can offer you. The idea is to do your best to not cause harm and to realize that, unfortunately, there are probably going to be times where you do wind up causing harm.

Q: I've just got two quick questions on the precepts. One is relating to your own experience and the other one on the precepts themselves. You mentioned that in the early stages that you didn't pay much attention to the precepts. Following your first retreat with Ayya Khema, you started to follow them. So did you see a significant difference on how the path developed or whether you could get into the *jhānas* easier once you started following them?

A: So my first actual Buddhist experience was that 10-day retreat with Ayya Khema. I had done no real practice

before that retreat. Well, I had tried to meditate, but I quickly learned on that retreat that what I thought was meditation was not what Ayya Khema thought was meditation. I grew up as a Presbyterian preacher's kid; I could recite the 10 commandments: don't kill, don't steal, don't bear false witness, all that sort of stuff. But I wasn't taking any of that all that seriously. Prior to that first retreat, I would say my spiritual practice was ethical hedonism. I wasn't ripping people off, but I would take a pen from work if I needed one. Mostly I was out looking for a good time. And I definitely had never heard of the Five Precepts.

So it all changed at once. It made sense to keep these precepts, and it made sense to do the meditation practice. So it went from weak ethics and no practice, to keeping the precepts and doing the practice. The jhānas were still three years away, so it made no difference in my jhāna practice, because that hadn't even begun.

Q: As laypeople, what we're looking at is what the Buddha preached to the monks at the time. So as lay people, do you think that keeping the five precepts is a good base to get into the path of Gradual Training? And do we need to look at other recommendations as well in terms of precepts as we develop the path?

A: I think the five precepts are the essential foundation of the path. You have to do that. If you don't do that, you are going cause harm. These are the practices that are to help you not cause any harm. Anything more than the five precepts would be realizing that something that you might do would cause harm – and then not do it. Also if there is anything that you might do that can be of benefit, then do that.

The five precepts are the baseline. Anything else you can do over and above those precepts, that is not specifically covered, pay attention to it and don't cause harm and do provide benefit. The five precepts are an essential part of the path; you are highly unlikely experience the jhānas without them, you can't actually follow a spiritual path unless you're keeping the precepts. Any behavior over and above these precepts that doesn't cause harm and/or provides benefit will also be of help on the spiritual path.

There are many suttas that were given to lay people, and among them are included the five lay precepts. So these precept are not optional for anyone who is serious about following the Buddha's teachings. For an excellent look at which suttas were given to lay people, see John Kelly's **The Buddha's Teachings to Lay People.**⁴ [[Back](#)]

Q&A on Restraint Of The Sense Faculties

Q: I just had a birthday. I got some cards from people and I put them up on my desk altar. Sometimes I just step back and look at them. I do it because they're pretty. They remind me of the people that sent the cards and who I love. If I'm feeling lousy, these physical kinds of things help elevate me to a level where I have more equanimity. But I know that sometimes I might look at a card or think about the person and then awful thoughts might arise – which doesn't usually happen. Certainly when something like that does arise, that's not a beneficial thing. I've been wondering about focusing on things that are pretty. You put flowers on your altar; and doing things like that, I find is beneficial. The flowers are going to die, and eventually I'll put the cards away. They're not permanent. They're just something that's there for a while. Do you have any comments on that?

A: It's perfectly okay to enjoy the beauty of life. If you have cards and they're temporary, and if you put them up and you're reminded of the people and you enjoy their beauty, it's fine. If however this goes off into any sort of craving and clinging, that's what we're trying to prevent. So if it triggers craving and clinging, then it's not so useful. But I don't see an intrinsic problem with it. You do have to really be mindful of how you're processing that sensory input. Are you grasping at the signs or secondary characteristics? Basically, if you're just enjoying the beauty and appreciating that you have good friends who wish you a happy birthday, I don't see a problem. But if

you're looking at the cards and thinking, "Yeah, this friend needs to change..." or "This person is a great friend. I wish I had more friends like that" then you're starting to wander off into something else.

Q: Isn't it about the middle path in regard to the senses?

A: Yes, it's about the middle path in regard to the senses. But sometimes you don't go as far as the middle – you don't stick your hand in the fire even a little bit. If you stick it in for a middle length of time, you'll get seriously burned. So it varies as to what the situation is. We have to use our senses to navigate the environment. Use them, but don't get hooked. [[Back](#)]

Q&A on the Hindrances

Q: You spoke about restlessness being the last hindrance to disappear. I'm also aware that the fetter of *māna*, or the conceit of I Am, is the last fetter to disappear, and it only disappears at arahantship. Can you make a comment about that, when all the hindrances disappear – does that mean we're awake?

A: When the hindrances disappear temporarily, we're set for doing concentration practice. When they are uprooted completely, that's when you're fully awakened. The last of the fetters to disappear really is, as you said, conceit, the conceiving of a self. If there is no self conceived of, there's nobody to become restless. So that takes care of restlessness at that point – and that's arahantship. The doubt is uprooted at the first stage of awakening – stream entry. The greed and aversion are weakened at the second stage and uprooted in the third stage. Sloth and torpor is never mentioned as to when it is uprooted in the suttas. The commentaries say it's uprooted at full awakening.

Q: I appreciated your comments about the restlessness and remorse being more about remorse and regret, rather than worry. That kind of worry fits with my own experience. What if you have a sense of regret or remorse about yourself? What about what they used to call an inferiority complex? It's kind of a global sense that you're not good enough. Would it be possible to consider that as like a lack of sympathetic joy? Or maybe a lack of *mettā*? Would these practices address that problem?

A: Definitely mettā practice for yourself will help. When Ayya Khema was first teaching me to do interviews, she said, "Ask them about their mettā practice. And ask them what it's like to do mettā for themselves. And you must press upon them the importance of doing mettā for themselves." When I started teaching, it was very disheartening to find out how much self loathing and low self-esteem there is in our culture. I wasn't totally shocked because I remember once at James Baraz's Thursday night meditation class he asked how many people had low self-esteem. 95% of the room raised their hands. How many people had high self-esteem? Three of us raised our hands. There were probably 60 to 80 people in the room and it was very disheartening to see how many had low self-esteem.

Here's a recommendation, which basically is that every time you have a thought of low self-esteem such as, "I always screw up" or "I'm no good," anything like that, you have to blow it up with TNT. **That's Not True.** You say to yourself, "That's Not True." Then you find a counter-example, actually find two counter-examples. Perhaps the greatest failing of Western civilization is this epidemic of low self-esteem in the culture. TNT practice is a page on my website:

<http://leighb.com/lowselfesteem.htm>. Remember, this is my invention and I'm not a psychotherapist. But you may find this useful. And it's a mindfulness practice to recognize these literally lousy thoughts.

Doing mettā for yourself is also important. One round of mettā for yourself is not going to fix this, but doing mettā for yourself for years will definitely help. Sharon Salzberg talks about how at one point she had very low self-esteem.

Once she was in the bathroom and she dropped a glass jar and it broke. She said to herself, "You're such a klutz, but I love you anyhow." And that was a real breakthrough for her. She actually could feel the love for herself. That's where you want to get to, where you can feel the love you have for yourself. Love for yourself doesn't mean you're perfect. Love for yourself means having a high regard for your own well-being and happiness. Self-love means taking care of your own needs and being true to yourself.

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Q&A on the Jhānas

Q: I have been to a couple of talks by some Buddhist monks who really kind of poopoo the jhānas. It's as if that's something you shouldn't do, that's something that should be avoided, and they're not necessary. Just go right by them and go right to insight. So I counted how often the Buddha would talk about the jhānas in the suttas and how often he would talk about vipassanā. He seemed to spend a lot of time talking about the jhānas. So I thought there must be something more to this. What's going on here?

A: So a history of the jhānas in the West – because you're not the first person to ask the exact same question: Over time the understanding of what constitutes a jhāna changed. You can actually see this in the Pāli literature. There are the jhānas that the Buddha and his monastics were doing, which is what is described in the chapter above on [The Jhānas](#). Then there is the *Abhidhamma* which was composed approximately 200 years after the Buddha's death. What you read there implies a deeper level of concentration. In fact, the level of concentration had become so much stronger, that understanding "*vitakka* and *vicāra*" as "thinking and examining" didn't fit their experience anymore. So instead of realizing, "Oh, we seem to have strayed off course", they just changed what *vitakka* and *vicāra* meant, changing the meanings to "initial and sustained attention to the meditation object."

Much later we find the *Vimuttimaggā* and then eventually

the *Visuddhimagga*. These are commentaries composed centuries after the Buddha's death. In the *Visuddhimagga* the understanding of the jhānas is that these states are so deep, that only one in a million people who come to meditation can enter the first jhāna. It's not phrased like that; what it says is

[The] preliminary work is difficult for a beginner and only one in a hundred or a thousand can do it. The arousing of the *nimitta* is difficult for one who has done the preliminary work and only one in a hundred or a thousand can do it. To extend the *nimitta* when it has arisen and to reach absorption is difficult and only one in a hundred or a thousand can do it."⁵

Thus only 1 in $100 \times 100 \times 100 = 1,000,000$ can reach absorption (first jhāna) – using the most optimistic figures. If we were to take the numbers above literally, it would seem to indicate that since the Buddha could enter the jhānas, statistically it would be unlikely that any of his far less than a million personal followers could – but of course this is flat out contradicted by the suttas where many disciples are shown as being accomplished in the jhānas.⁶ We shouldn't take these numbers literally, but they do point to the fact that by the time of the *Visuddhimagga*, the jhānas had come to be understood as states that were very difficult to learn and master.

Unfortunately much of Theravādan Buddhism is *Visuddhimagga* Buddhism. Its practitioners may claim that they follow the suttas, but it seems they're actually following the *Visuddhimagga*. Rather than looking at what the Buddha had to say, they're looking at what some

editor, in a completely different culture, put in a book nine centuries after the Buddha's death. So mostly Theravādan Buddhism understands the jhānas as these almost unattainable states.

In the 20th century our teachers went to Asia and wanted to learn to meditate. Were the monks in Asia, who probably couldn't do the jhānas either, going to teach jhānas to these Westerners? Well no, of course not – only one in a million people can do them! These visiting Westerners were taught following the breath, scanning the body, and some mettā, and sent them back to the West. And that's what they teach us.

Now people like you come along and ask, "What's all this about the jhānas?" Too often the answer is, "Oh, don't do that, you'll get attached. You'll go down the wrong track." Anyone who has actually seriously practiced jhānas – in any style, whether it's jhānas from the suttas or the *Visuddhimagga*, whether it's what I'm teaching or was learned from some other teacher – will realize that these are actually a very valuable tool. Such a person will want to share them with other people who can possibly learn them. But if someone doesn't know the jhānas, then all they know is what they've heard about the jhānas. If you heard someone say, "Oh, don't do that. It's a waste of time", it's because their teacher told them, "Oh, don't do that. It's a waste of time."

If you're actually pursuing the jhānas as described in the *Visuddhimagga*, there can be the possibility of spending all of your time trying to get those very difficult-to-access jhānas and never doing any insight practice. That would certainly be a waste of time. With skill in any jhānas, then you could spend all of your time hanging out there and

never doing any insight practice, though this is not very likely, especially if you have good Dhamma instruction – like what's provided in the Gradual Training.

When someone first learns the jhānas, a new toy has arrived and they're totally fascinated with it. But we're Westerners, we have our famous short attention span. You get high, and it's wonderful. You get high again, and it's wonderful. You get high, and "Okay, been there done that. What's next?" What's next is insight practice. People can become a bit of a jhāna junkie when they first learn them. But a competent jhāna teacher's job is to keep an eye out for that. As soon as someone becomes good enough at the jhānas to become a jhāna junkie, then the teacher needs to push them into doing insight practice. Once they start getting insights, that's far more interesting than just getting high.

Q: Is it possible for somebody to experience these jhānas without having had these instructions?

A: The Buddha-to-be did. He stumbled into the first jhāna as a child, sitting under a rose apple tree.⁷ I did. About a quarter of the people who come on retreats with me have done so; this is the natural way the mind tends to go. If you get quiet enough, and you focus on some pleasure, it's quite likely that will take you into the first jhāna. That's how I got there the first time – quite unintentionally and unexpectedly. And I had no idea what was happening.

If you do mettā meditation for a long enough period of time, it's not surprising that the beautiful feeling of mettā can take you into the first or even the second jhāna. I'm not putting the jhānas in my students' minds, I'm just telling them to stop doing stuff that's covering up the

jhānas. They're in there – that is, the neurological pathways are already in your brain – they just need to be activated. All you've got to do is stop covering them up with all of your distractions, with your hindrances. If you stop doing that, then the natural mind shines forth. And what's your natural mind? Oh, a gleeful, happy, contented, equanimous mind. The fact is I am just a retired hippie computer programmer. That I can teach these jhānas isn't about me. It's about the fact that I'm teaching humans who have this capacity. So people do stumble in all the time.

Q: I think there's a lot of debate around what *Sammā-Samādhī* is and what these jhānas are about. I think you've made a great point there in terms of the depth that is involved in practicing these jhānas. So my question is: on the night of his awakening the Buddha-to-be was thinking of what to do and how to attain awakening. What he directed his mind towards was his childhood experience of entering into the first jhāna. However, he had studied with two teachers – Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta – where he developed jhānas and he attained first the sphere of nothingness, and then the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception.⁸ But his mind didn't think of those jhānas that he developed under those teachers; his mind went to his childhood experience. So does that mean that there was a difference between his childhood experience and his experiences with his two teachers? What were the actual jhānas that he practiced the night of awakening? Is it that with some of these jhānas, you go so deep into them to the exclusion of everything else, that you lose complete awareness of your surroundings, that you don't hear sounds or anything, and then that doesn't allow for insight practice? Or when you get into the fourth jhāna does it, or should it, still allow awareness, maintaining awareness to practice insight?

A: The Buddha-to-be did indeed study with two teachers after he left home. His first teacher, Ālāra Kālāma, said that the seventh jhāna, the realm of no-thingness, was the goal of the path. Once you get there, there's no dukkha. But when the Buddha-to-be came out of the realm of no-thingness, he realized, "No. When I come out, the dukkha's still here, this is not the end of dukkha." So he left. He then studied with Uddaka Rāmaputta, who taught the realm of neither perception nor non perception (not cessation). And Uddaka also said that's the end of the path, or rather he taught that Rama said that's the end of the path. But again, the Buddha-to-be would come out of that state and there was still dukkha. So he left there, and begin practicing austerities, possibly under the Jains who were big into austerities.

He did austerity practices, and six years after leaving home, he realized, "No, none of this is working either. There's got to be some other way." In reflecting on what he could do, he remembered the incident from his childhood. Specifically, he remembered that the pleasure there was not sensual pleasure, it was a pure form of pleasure. Could these jhānas be the way to awakening? In other words, could these be a means instead of an end – which is what his teachers had taught him? Could he use the mind state generated by these jhānas as a pathway as opposed to a destination? But he also realized he was so emaciated he couldn't currently practice the jhānas. So he started eating. His five friends left him, thinking he had given up the spiritual path. Eventually he regained his strength. At some point (we don't know how much later, I would guess a few months later) he sat down under the Bodhi tree on his birthday, the full moon in May, and woke up. He started by practicing the four jhānas (the

same jhānas as discussed in the chapter [The Jhānas](#) above), and then he did insight practice. But he didn't do insight practice **in** the jhānas. As we can see in the chapter on [Insight Practice](#), one ceases maintaining the jhāna and switches to doing the insight practice; the jhāna fades away.

Q: I've just got a quick question: sometimes I feel that we have some kind of unresolved issues from the past popping up that can really drag us down. How do we manage that?

A: If unresolved issues do come up, if you can just set them aside temporarily, that's the thing to do. But often you can't; so then you're going to need to work with them. The spiritual path is probably not going to be the best place for dealing with whatever has arisen, other than to see the impermanent nature of whatever happened in the past – to see it's gone now, but left some residue. It's also helpful to see the dukkha nature of the issue. It's important to see that you're clinging to something from the past – why? These sorts of spiritual investigations are helpful, but they usually won't resolve a large issue.

What I usually recommend is Western psychotherapy – it is actually good for dealing with unresolved psychological issues, rather than trying to resolve them on the cushion. In addition to doing what you do on the cushion, find a therapist, a good friend, somebody to talk to about it, rather than trying to use a spiritual practice. This is because what often happens if you try and use a spiritual practice to handle unresolved stuff, you wind up spiritually bypassing⁹ and that's going in the wrong direction.

Q: Where does *Samādhi* fit in with the *jhānas*?

A: Here's a quote from the *Mahā-Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (DN 22.21): "And what, oh monks, is right concentration [*Sammā-Samādhi*]? Secluded from sense desires, secluded from unwholesome states of mind, one enters and dwells in first *jhāna*, second *jhāna*, *jhāna*, third *jhāna*, fourth *jhāna*. This is right concentration [*Sammā-Samādhi*]." So the *jhānas* are right *samādhi*, appropriate indistractibility.

Q: Is *nirodhasampatti* useful in the path of awakening?

A: *Nirodhasampatti* is basically a state of suspended animation, where you are just gone, checked out. Supposedly Mahā Moggallāna, who was one of the Buddha's two chief disciples, reached awakening by coming out of that state and watching his sense of self reassemble. The Buddha used it at times to escape from the unpleasant *vedanā* due to his bad back. Towards the end of his life, his back was so bad that if he really wanted some relief, he'd go into the state of *nirodha* where he was just checked out and it didn't bother him until he exited it. These are the two occasions I remember in the suttas where *nirodhasampatti* seemed to be of use, but I'd say it's probably not really all that useful.

Q: Sometimes when I meditate, it feels like I'm falling back in a chair. And I have to catch myself and hold on to keep from falling. What's that about?

A: Body distortions can be a sign of good concentration – like thinking you're falling back when you're not actually falling back.

Q: Can you explain why body distortions are a sign of good concentration? Why would that be the case?

A: When you're well concentrated, you are paying so much attention to one thing that you're not processing the signals from your extremities in the usual way; this can lead to distortions. Many people report this, it's quite common. I would say most retreats I've ever taught somebody comes to an interview, and says something like my hands felt like they were big as baseball gloves. Or I thought it was sitting upright, but I was leaning over, or I thought I was leaning over, but I was sitting upright. These sorts of things are very common and they are just a sign of good concentration.

Q: So in concentrating, first starting to meditate, it's a gradual process of calming. And then at some point, with me anyway, it's like, instantly, a light switch has been thrown where everything suddenly shifts, and everything feels good, and it's instantly calm. Is that a state that is normal? Like a switch. Like instantly.

A: Yes, it's the entry into access concentration, sufficient concentration to give you access to the jhānas. But I wouldn't try and jump into a jhāna immediately. Let that access concentration build for a few more minutes before attempting to move into a jhāna.

I was being interviewed by someone who was writing about the jhānas for his PhD thesis. I said, yeah, when I get to access concentration, it's like there's this thunk, and I drop into the access concentration state. And he started laughing and said, "I was interviewing someone else last week, and he also described a thunk of falling into access concentration." Now, this is not always happening for

everyone. A lot of people get to access concentration with no thunk, no shift, no light switch, no anything other than no longer getting distracted. Sometimes I get there and there is a very definite thunk. Sometimes it just sort of gradually eases in. The better my daily practice and the more frequently I've been getting there, the more likely I will get the thunk.

Q: For me, it's like right view, like right attitude, instantly. It's great, it feels wonderful.

A: The distractions are gone, your mind has settled. It is a great place. The hindrances have been abandoned – a hindrance is a distraction. With the abandoning of the hindrances, *pāmojja* (gladness) arises. So let the access concentration build for a while. Then drop the attention on the breath, or whatever you're using as your focus, and find something pleasant to focus on, like your smile or the tingly glow on your hands or whatever, and see what happens. [[Back](#)]

Q&A on Insight Practice

Q: When I'm practicing, and I go thru what I think are the jhānas, I get to this state where everything is just really calm, everything has just calmed down. There are some thoughts but they're like way wispy off in the background. They're thoughts like little bubbles in beer – they just rise and burst, I don't connect to create thinking. Sometimes then I will have kind of a thought come; it's almost like an aha type of moment. It's almost like, "Oh, okay, I get that." But then, when I've completed my meditation, when my timer goes off, I don't always remember what that was. Is that possible?

A: Yes, it's possible – and it's not useful to not remember. You want to try and keep your insights available – that's how they are useful on the spiritual path. If you get an insight and you forget about it, and then you get it again, you think oh, yeah, I knew that but I forgot. A forgotten insight goes back there with your unused high school foreign language. For example, you go to Mexico for two weeks and your high school Spanish starts to come back – it was back there, but it took some time and energy to get it going again. If you get an insight and you don't keep it fresh, it goes back there with your high school Spanish until you get it again.

An insight is like an aha; so when that occurs, it's often good at that point to just say to yourself, in words, to actually deliberately think, "Oh, I see that blah, blah, blah, I mean, blah, blah, and blah; interesting." So you're

imprinting it more.

Then when your timer goes off, you should think, "Did I get any insights?" If you did, what were they? Say them to yourself. If they seem really important, write them down. If you go to my website and click on the essays, a lot of those essays were written because I had an insight and I wrote down some notes, and then later I fleshed it out into an essay. You want to keep your insights fresh. One of the things to do is when you have an insight, is to articulate it to yourself with deliberate thinking, so you've got it clear, and then go back to doing whatever your practice is.

Q: So with insight practice, if you experience stream entry is it kind of like a momentary experience? Or does it occur over a period of time with multiple insights arising over that period of time? What's the experience like?

A: It varies from person to person. In general, you get a number of insights along the way. It's sort of like Pokeman; it's definitely not Pokeman, it's insights. You have to collect a bunch of them, you don't have to get them all but you've got to get enough insight so that you are willing to let go – and let go in such a profound way that you have an experience without an experience-er. That's the moment of (non)occurrence of stream entry, where you have actually experienced for yourself that the idea of someone having the experience is an optional thing – and that postulating an experiencer is not an accurate picture of what's going on. The experience was experienced, but there was nobody having that experience. But the only way to get there is to do enough practice and gain enough insights so that you are close enough such you can let go enough that you have an experience without an experience-er.

Q: The reason for that question is that I've heard certain people explaining their experiences as something just magical, something blew out into the air, and then here you go. They've had stream entry experience. But they don't talk about this accumulation of insights and having enough of them to finally let go of the concept of self.

A: You have to let go of Everything, not just the concept of self! The experience is profound enough that if someone talks about it, they are more likely to talk about that rather than all other things that led up to it.

When you walk over to the edge of the Grand Canyon and experience it, you don't really talk about the highway that got you there. You had to have that highway, and you had to make the turns at all the right places, and everything else. But you look over the edge, and it blows your mind. The same thing happens with stream entry. [[Back](#)]

Q&A on the Psychic Powers

Q: I've heard Jack Kornfield, Sharon Salzberg, Jack Angler, Joseph Goldstein all talk about being with Dipa Ma and seeing her in more than one place at one time, all kinds of things. Supposedly she holds a potato and it would get hot in her hand. I guess what she used to tell them is, "Don't get caught up in this stuff. This is something my teacher taught me." I think it was Munindra, "He taught me because I was able to understand that, but don't think that this is anything that you need to do."

A: I've heard these stories as well, but I haven't seen any demonstrations yet. I've heard a lot of stories. I just want to see for myself. If you can cook a potato in your hand by holding it, please do so for me. I'm sure you can find videos on the internet of people walking on water and flying thru the air. I just want to see it in person, that's all I'm asking. I can't say what Dipa Ma was up to. I can't vouch for the veracity of what Sharon and Joseph and Jack were saying, I just can't because I wasn't there. I'm getting it third hand. I just don't know.

Q: Are these divine powers, supposedly, the result of jhāna concentration, or ...

A: Yes, they supposedly arise from jhānic concentration. When one's mind is thus concentrated, pure and bright and unblemished, free from defects, malleable, wieldy, etc., one directs and inclines it to exactly whatever the

psychic power is: walking on water, and so forth. So they are a result of a jhānically-concentrated mind. Supposedly the Buddha had an evil cousin named Devadatta (he's never referred to as a relative of the Buddha in the suttas – but never mind). Devadatta supposedly was a master of the jhānas; he learned all the supernormal powers and used them to impress Prince Ajātasattu into becoming his follower. The Devadatta story is interesting; there is an essay about Devadatta on my website.¹⁰ But supposedly he could do all this evil stuff, because he was good at the jhānas and had these psychic powers. But I suspect that if you have evil intentions, you're not likely going to be good at the jhānas.

Q: I heard Bhante Gunaratana say that there are things that we can know from our own direct experience, and there are things that we can know from speculation. But it waters the seeds of doubt for your own direct experience when you place too much faith or hope into things that are just speculation. Being able to draw the distinction between what's actually speculation and what's actually your own direct experience is quite important. So to me, all of this stuff you haven't seen is just speculation. So I don't think there's really much use in in a hard core belief until it is your own direct experience, which I believe the Buddha said is your truest teacher.

A: Yes, exactly. That's a very good point. [[Back](#)]

1. see <http://leighb.com/4stagesofe.htm>

2. download from
<http://leighb.com/HistoryOfMindfulness.pdf>

3. The Dipavamsa is the base material of the Vamsa literatures of the island of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) written the Pāli language. It is of somewhat questionable historical accuracy, although it certainly contains much that is probably accurate, ascertaining exactly what is accurate and what is mythological is difficult since there are multiple conflicting ancient histories of early Buddhism.

4. download the PDF from https://buddhistuniversity.net/content/articles/teachings-to-lay-people_kelly-john

5. Vsm XII.8

6. E.g. Sāriputta in MN 111, SN 28; Mahāmoggallāna in SN 21.1, SN 40.1-8; Anuruddha in MN 31 (along with Nandiya and Kimbila), SN 52.21; Vacchagotta in MN 73; monks in general in DN 22, MN 141, SN 36.31, SN 46.54, SN 48.10. The phrase "He obtains/gains at will, without trouble or difficulty, the four jhānas" occurs at MN 6.9, MN 53.6, MN 108.17, MN 119.36, SN 21.4 and over 20 times in the AN.

7. MN 36.31

8. MN 26.15-16 and also in MN 36.14-15

9. Spiritual bypassing is using “spiritual ideas and practices to sidestep personal, emotional ‘unfinished business,’ to shore up a shaky sense of self, or to belittle basic needs, feelings, and developmental tasks.” Welwood (2000)

10. see <http://leighb.com/devadatta.htm>

Appendix 2: Gradual Training Factors As Found in Various Suttas

[The following information can be found on the internet at <http://leighb.com/gtchart.htm>. You might find it more useful to refer to the chart via your computer or tablet rather than these pages.]

The Gradual Training

(Place your cursor on the letters in a column heading to see what they stand for, or scroll down)	G	S	M	L	G	M	D	C	5	4	J	J	J	J	J	J	J	N	I	M	S	D	K	R	S	E							
or scroll down	F	I	d	g	S	E	T	&	W	H	V	B	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	M	N	B	P	a	r	P	O	L	R	A	K	A
32 Total Suttas	24	23	8	8	27	28	4	4	27	23	29	1	1	30	31	31	31	2	2	2	1	2	12	8	7	7	7	19	19	29			
4 Fac in 30 Su (94%)														X	X	X	X																
6 Fac in 29 Su (91%)										X		X	X	X	X																		X
9 Fac in 27 Su (84%)					X	X		X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X																	X
12 Fac in 23 Su (72%)	X	X		X	X		X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X																X	†
14 Fac in 19 Su (59%)	X	X		X	X		X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X											X	X	X			†	
15 Fac in 12 Su (38%)	X	X		X	X		X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X					X					X	X	X					
17 Fac in 8 Su (25%)	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X					X					X	X	X					
21 Fac in 7 Su (22%)	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X					X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		
9 Fac in < 5 Su (<16%)						X	X			X	X			X	X	X	X	X															
* = Same 21 factors as in DN2, etc. † = Same 14 factors as in MN 27, etc. ‡ = Same 12 factors as in MN 112																																	
	G	S	M	L	G	M	D	C	5	4	J	J	J	J	J	J	J	N	I	M	S	D	K	R	S	E							
	F	I	d	g	S	E	T	&	W	H	V	B	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	M	N	B	P	a	r	P	O	L	R	A	K	A
The height of the bar for each factor is proportional to the number of the 32 suttas that factor appears in.																																	
32 Total Suttas	24	23	8	8	27	28	4	4	27	23	29	1	1	30	31	31	31	2	2	2	1	2	12	8	7	7	7	19	19	29			
Group Totals	24	66				86				29	1	1	130						2	12	66				29								
Sila Samādhi Pañña						152									163								107										

Notes:

There is no "first page" in the Pāli canon that outlines the Buddha's teachings in a logical order. Many students of Dhamma in the West are familiar with the two

Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas, which describe more than a dozen practices, or the several suttas on Mindfulness of Breathing, which describes the 16 steps known as *Ānāpānasati*. Additionally, in several places there is a teaching called "The Gradual Path" (*anupubba paṭipadā*) or "Training Path" (*sekha paṭipadā*) which outlines the teachings in a logical order. It appears in detail in three different Nikāyas (books of teachings): the Dīgha, the Majjhima, and the Aṅguttara. Subsets of this collection of practices appear in other suttas as well, including one sutta in the Saṃyutta Nikāya. This Gradual Training (*anupubbāsikkhā*) is probably the most comprehensive list of spiritual practices. It is found, for example and perhaps most famously, in Dīgha Nikāya 2: The Discourse on the Fruits of the Spiritual Life.

Studying how it appears in the suttas reveals some interesting trends. The top chart above lists where the individual "factors" of the Gradual Training appear in various suttas. The chart with the vertical colored lines shows how often each factor is mentioned. Below are some notes and abbreviations for those not as familiar with sutta study.

The Gradual Training, as noted, is found multiple times in three of the Nikāyas, but unlike the *Satipaṭṭhāna* and *Ānāpānasati* practice lists, there is no single list that universally appears. Thirty "factors" of the Gradual Training are described with no more than 21 factors or fewer than seven factors appearing in any one sutta. This variation sparked my curiosity and I set out to try to understand what factors appear where and what I could learn from studying that information. That is the origin of what you have seen in this Appendix.

Some things jump right out at you: Abandoning the Hindrances and practicing the Four Jhānas are extremely important, as are Ethics (*Sīla*), Guarding the Senses, and Mindfulness & Clear Comprehension.

Other things become obvious only with a little study. For example, the Supernormal Powers (walking on water, flying thru the air, etc.) appear only half as frequently as Insight Practice. Yet Insight Practice appears less than half as many times as Jhāna Practice. The numbers for Remembering Past Lives and Seeing Beings Passing Away and Re-arising are boosted by their frequent occurrence in the Majjhima Nikāya, where they appear without the other Psychic Powers, unlike in the Dīgha Nikāya where they appear less frequently but are always preceded by the other Psychic Powers when they do appear.

It would seem that the Buddha (or at least the compilers of the canon) developed this Gradual Training and then used various parts of it dependent on the audience to whom the suttas was addressed.

1. DN factors are taken from T. W. Rhys Davids's translations. Thanissaro Bhikkhu and Maurice Walshe frequently include all the DN 2 factors, even where that makes no sense, e.g., DN 11 (though Walshe does correct that via a footnote). There are versions of the Pāli Canon that do include all the DN 2 factors in all except DN 9 & DN 13 but there are also versions that match Rhys Davids's translations. It seems more likely that DN 2's factors crept into suttas where they had not been (e.g. DN 11) than that factors got lost yet resulted in a coherent (or even more coherent) set. The one exception might be the Mind-Made Body appearing in DN 10.

2. Although DN 10 specifically includes Guarding the Senses, Mindfulness & Clear Comprehension, and Being Content with Little under *Samādhi*, that really does not make sense. Until one "resorts to a secluded dwelling, ... sits down cross-legged, ... and sets up mindfulness," there is no *Samādhi* in the sense used thruout the bulk of the suttas. It is only with the abandoning of [The Five Hindrances](#) that one attains any degree of indistractibility. Thus I have included all the factors prior to the abandoning of the Five Hindrances in *Sīla* since they all apply to lifestyle rather than meditation.

3. There may be missing suttas on the Gradual Training, and the chart of which factors appear in which sutta may have mistakes. If you find some other sutta that you think should be included or find any mistakes, please email me!

The Gradual Training

Abrv	#	Factor Description
GF	24	a tathāgata arises in this world, one hears the dhamma, Gains Faith, Goes Forth into homelessness
SmlM	23	Small section on Morality
MedM	8	Medium section on Morality
LrgM	8	Large section on Morality
V	27	Virtue summarized
GS	28	Guarding the Senses
ME	4	Moderation in Eating
DTW	4	Devotion to Wakefulness
M&CC	27	Mindfulness and Clear Comprehension (sati & sampajañña)
Cwl	23	Contentment with Little - food, clothing, shelter, medicine when ill
SH	29	abandoning the 5 Hindrances - sensual desire, hatred & ill-will, restless & remorse, sloth & torpor, doubt
4EM	1	4 Establishments of Mindfulness (4 satipaṭṭhāna)
BV	1	practicing the 4 Brahma Viharas (mettā, karuṇā, muditā, upekkhā)
J1	30	1st Jhana
J2	31	2nd Jhana
J3	31	3rd Jhana
J4	31	4th Jhana
J5	2	5th Jhana - infinite space
J6	2	6th Jhana - infinite consciousness
J7	2	7th Jhana - nothingness
J8	1	8th Jhana - neither perception nor non-perception
N	2	Nirodha - the cessation of feeling and perception
I	12	Insight practice
MMB	8	Mind Made Body
SNP	7	SuperNormal Powers
DEar	7	Divine Ear
KMO	7	Knowing the Minds of Others
RPL	19	Remembering Past Lives
SRAK	19	Seeing beings passing away and Rearising According to their Karma
EndA	29	the Ending of the Āsavas - Liberation

Appendix 3: The Similes in the Gradual Training

The Gradual Training includes a wonderful selection of similes for many of the factors. The following table lists all these similes as found in the Gradual Training in the *Sāmaññaphala-Sutta* (DN 2):¹

Moral Discipline

Just as a head-anointed noble warrior who has defeated his enemies sees no danger anywhere from his enemies, so one who is thus possessed of moral discipline sees no danger anywhere in regard to his restraint by moral discipline.

Restraint of the Sense Faculties

-

Mindfulness and Clear Comprehension

-

Contentment

Just as a bird, wherever it goes, flies with its wings as its only burden, in the same way one is content

The Abandoning of Sensual Desire

Suppose a man were to take a loan and apply it to his business, and his business were to succeed, so that he could pay back his old debts and would have enough money left over to maintain a wife.

The Abandoning of Ill-will and Hatred

Suppose a man were to become sick, afflicted, gravely ill, so that he could not enjoy his food and his strength would decline. After some time he would recover from that illness and would enjoy his food and regain his bodily strength.

The Abandoning of Sloth and Torpor

Suppose a man were locked up in a prison. After some time he would be released from prison, safe and secure, with no loss of his possessions.

The Abandoning of Restlessness and Remorse

Suppose a man were a slave, without independence, subservient to others, unable to go where he wants. After some time he would be released from slavery and gain his independence; he would no longer be subservient to others but a free man able to go where he wants.

The Abandoning of Doubt

Suppose a man with wealth and possessions were traveling along a desert road where food was scarce and dangers were many. After some time he would cross over the desert and arrive safely at a village which is safe and free from danger.

The First Jhāna

Suppose a skilled bath attendant or his apprentice were to pour soap-powder into a metal basin, sprinkle it with water, and knead it into a ball, so that the ball of soap-powder would be pervaded by moisture, encompassed by moisture, suffused with moisture inside and out, yet would not trickle.

The Second Jhāna

Suppose there were a deep lake whose waters welled up from below. It would have no inlet for water from the east, west, north, or south, nor would it be refilled from time to time with showers of rain; yet a current of cool water, welling up from within the lake, would drench, steep, saturate and suffuse the whole lake, so that there would be no part of that entire lake which is not suffused with the cool water.

The Third Jhāna

Suppose in a lotus pond there were blue, white, or red lotuses that have been born in the water, grow in the water, and never rise up above the water, but flourish immersed in the water. From their tips to their roots they would be drenched, steeped, saturated, and suffused with cool water, so that there would be no part of those lotuses not suffused with cool water.

The Fourth Jhāna

Suppose a man were to be sitting covered from the head down by a white cloth, so that there would be no part of his entire body not suffused by the white cloth.

Insight Knowledge

Suppose there were a beautiful beryl gem of purest water, eight-faceted, well cut, clear, limpid, flawless, endowed with all excellent qualities. And through it there would run a blue, yellow, red, white, or brown thread. A man with keen sight, taking it in his hand, would reflect upon it thus: 'This is a beautiful beryl gem of purest water, eight faceted, well cut, clear, limpid, flawless, endowed with all excellent qualities. And running through it there is this blue, yellow, red, white, or brown thread.'

The Knowledge of the Mind-made Body

Suppose a man were to draw out a reed from its sheath. He would think: 'This is the reed; this is the sheath. The reed is one thing, the sheath another, but the reed has been drawn out from the sheath.' Or suppose a man were to draw a sword out from its scabbard. He would think: 'This is the sword; this is the scabbard. The sword is one thing, the scabbard another, but the sword has been drawn out from the scabbard.' Or suppose a man were to pull a snake out from its slough. He would think: 'This is the snake; this is the slough. The snake is one thing, the slough another, but the snake has been pulled out from the slough.'

The Knowledge of the Modes of Supernatural Power

Suppose a skilled potter or his apprentice were to make and fashion out of well prepared clay whatever kind of vessel he might desire. Or suppose a skilled ivory-worker or his apprentice were to make and fashion out of well-prepared ivory whatever kind of ivory work he might desire. Or suppose a skilled goldsmith or his apprentice were to make and fashion out of well-prepared gold whatever kind of gold work he might desire.

The Knowledge of the Divine Ear

Suppose a man traveling along a highway were to hear the sounds of kettledrums, tambours, horns, cymbals and tom-toms, and would think: 'This is the sound of kettledrums, this is the sound of tambours, this the sound of horns, cymbals and tom-toms.'

The Knowledge of Encompassing the Minds of Others

Suppose a young man or woman, fond of ornaments, examining his or her own facial reflection in a pure bright mirror or in a bowl of clear water, would know, if there

were a mole, 'It has a mole,' and if there were no mole, 'It has no mole.'

The Knowledge of Recollecting Past Lives

Suppose a man were to go from his own village to another village, then from that village to still another village, and then from that village he would return to his own village. He would think to himself: 'I went from my own village to that village. There I stood in such a way, sat in such a way, spoke in such a way, and remained silent in such a way. From that village I went to still another village. There too I stood in such a way, sat in such a way, spoke in such a way, and remained silent in such a way. From that village I returned to my own village.'

The Knowledge of the Divine Eye

Suppose in a central square there were a building with an upper terrace, and a man with keen sight standing there were to see people entering a house, leaving it, walking along the streets, and sitting in the central square. He would think to himself: 'Those people are entering the house, those are leaving it, those are walking along the streets, and those are sitting in the central square.'

The Knowledge of the Destruction of the Āsavas

Suppose in a mountain glen there were a lake with clear water, limpid and unsullied. A man with keen sight, standing on the bank, would see oyster-shells, sand and pebbles, and shoals of fish moving about and keeping still. He would think to himself: 'This is a lake with clear water, limpid and unsullied, and there within it are oyster-shells, sand and pebbles, and shoals of fish moving about and keeping still.'


1. The similes are taken from Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation of the *Sāmaññaphala-Sutta* at SuttaCentral. Many thanks to Stephen Batchelor; the idea of creating the information found here arose from a conversation we had about the Gradual Training and its similes.

Appendix 4: The 4 Stages of Awakening (various opinions)

[The following information can be found on the internet at <http://leighb.com/4stagesofe.htm>. You might find it more useful to refer to the chart via your computer or tablet rather than these pages.]

Stream Enterer	Once Returner	Non Returner	Fully Awakened
			Unshakable Peace (Snp, especially Snp 4.*)
"All that arises also ceases" (SN 56.11)			End of Dukkha (SN 56.11)
Unshakable faith			End of Craving (MN 26)
1st 3 fetters removed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> wrong view of self efficacy of rites and rituals skeptical doubt 	2 fetters weakened: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> passion for pleasure (<i>kāmarāga</i>) ill-will (<i>vyāpāda</i>) 	2 fetters removed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> passion for pleasure (<i>kāmarāga</i>) ill-will (<i>vyāpāda</i>) 	5 "Higher" fetters removed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> passion for form passion for formless conceit restlessness ignorance (DN 16, MN 68)
"Blissful is detachment for one who is content, For one who has learned Dhamma and who sees"	"Blissful is non-affliction in the world, Restraint towards living creatures" (i.e. would not	"Blissful is passionlessness in the world, The overcoming of sensual desires" (i.e. would not	"But the abolition of the conceit 'I am' – That is truly the supreme bliss." (Ud 2.1) (i.e. no more conceiving of a self)

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	harm another out of greed or aversion)	harm oneself out of greed or aversion)	
16 Insight Knowledges with Mind Blink #1	16 Insight Knowledges with Mind Blink #2	16 Insight Knowledges with Mind Blink #3	16 Insight Knowledges with Mind Blink #4 (Vsm)
<p>Deep experience of Not-Self resulting in</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unshakable faith in Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha • Possess morality dear to the Noble Ones [Can't (unknowingly?) break a precept?] (DN 16) 		<p>5 types of non- returner (SN 46.3 – see especially Bodhi: footnote 65)</p>	<p>"Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what need to be done has been done, there is no further suchness." (DN 9, etc.)</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keeps the 5 precepts • Unshakable faith in Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha • Possess virtuous behavior dear to the Noble Ones AN 5.179 			<p>End of Greed, Hatred and Delusion</p>
<p>For much more information, see Kim Allen's excellent book Practice After Stream Entry </p>			<p>Not entangled in views, Not harming oneself or others, Clearly seeing what's happening, Freed from sensual craving (Snp 1.8)</p>
			<p>Full penetration of the 4 Noble Truths:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand • Abandon • Realize

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			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop (SN 56.11)
			<p>Ending of the <i>Āsavas</i>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense Pleasure intoxication • Becoming intoxication • {View intoxication} • Ignorance intoxication (DN 2, etc.)
			<p>One will think whatever thought one wishes to think and one will not think any thought that one does not wish to think. One has severed craving, flung off the fetters, and with the complete penetration of conceit one has made an end of dukkha. (MN 20)</p>
			<p>One has an equanimous mind – indifferent to praise or blame – is calm, and free from pride (Sn.702). One has renounced desire for sensual pleasures and developed empathy for others (Sn.704–5). Consequently, one does not kill or cause to kill. One is of modest needs and without covetousness (Sn.707). Moreover, one is as sharp ‘as a razor’s edge’. One should neither have an inactive mind nor</p>

The Gradual Training

			think too much (Sn.716). 'One should be without taints, not dependent, having holy living as his aim' (Sn.717). One should train oneself in solitude (Sn.718) since 'the state of being alone is called sagehood'. One is knowingly self-restrained and speaks little (Sn.723). Sutta Nipata 3.11 , part 2
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Appendix 5: DN 2.45

Q: Besides *mettā* being an important part of DN 13, how else does *mettā* fit into the Gradual Training?

A: "Herein having abandoned the destruction of life, one abstains from the destruction of life. One has laid down the rod and weapon and dwells conscientious, full of kindness, sympathetic for the welfare of all living beings. This pertains to one's moral discipline." DN 2.45

The above is the first precept in the Gradual Training. The precepts are the foundational practice for spiritual advancement, so everything in the Gradual Training is built atop *mettā*. *Mettā* is usually translated as "loving-kindness." But the underlined phrases above are what *mettā* is really all about. So perhaps a better translation of *mettā* would be "unconditional love."

For more on *mettā*, there is Ayya Khema's dhamma talk on metta here: <http://leighb.com/ayyamettha.htm>, which is also included in her book **The Path to Peace: A Buddhist Guide to Cultivating Loving-Kindness**. And there's Sharon Salzberg's classic **Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness**.

[Back to [Afterword](#)]

Appendix 6: The Gradual Training and The Maṅgala Sutta

by
Claralynn Nunamaker¹

The *Maṅgala Sutta*² is an important Buddhist text well-known and oft-used in Asia, but it is much less familiar to Western Buddhists. The sutta is of interest here because its twelve verses outline a complete path of practice that starts at the very beginning, develops and deepens, and culminates in full awakening. Sounds a lot like The Gradual Training.

And just as the Gradual Path is seldom taught in Western Buddhism (as mentioned in the Preface of this book), the *Maṅgala Sutta* is also not commonly taught in the West. But both are most worthy of our attention, as they provide valuable guidance along the entire path of practice.

A number of frameworks have been used by scholars to organize the aspects of practice found in this sutta. Bhikkhu Bodhi's excellent 'Ground Plan of the *Maṅgala Sutta*' describes the flow of practice in terms such as orientation, preparation, leading a virtuous life in the world, developing a spiritual life, the ascent towards realization, and fulfillment.³ U Ba Than uses the framework of *sīla-samādhi-pañña*, and R. Soni describes

phases of preparation, wayfaring in the world, spiritual growth, and the Summum Bonum.⁴

In this Appendix, the Gradual Training is used as a frame for viewing the flow of practice given in the *Maṅgala Sutta*. This is not an exact mapping. For example, the *Maṅgala Sutta* includes relatively more about ethical conduct in the world and doesn't mention the hindrances, jhānas, or mindfulness explicitly. Why, we don't know for sure. Maybe it's because, as the content suggests, the Buddha intended this sutta to be heard and practiced primarily by laypeople. The reference to 'maintaining a wife and children' in verse 5, for example, points to listeners who are laypeople rather than monastics. Or perhaps the *Maṅgala Sutta*, which is from an early period,⁵ was given before the Gradual Training was fully developed in the form presented in this book.

Nonetheless, the parallels are strong. Comparing the Gradual Training with the verses of the *Maṅgala Sutta*, one sees a similar arc of practice. The two are presented below side-by-side, then parallels are discussed step-by-step. The three elements of the Gradual Training that map weakly onto the sutta are given in parentheses. The twelve verses are numbered V1, V2...V12.

Gradual Training	Maṅgala Sutta ⁶
Hearing the true Dhamma, gaining confidence	V1. "Many devas and human beings have reflected on blessings, longing for safety, so declare the highest blessing."

<p>Going forth</p>	<p>V2. “Not associating with fools, associating with the wise, and venerating those worthy of veneration: this is the highest blessing.</p>
<p>Keeping the precepts and Guarding the senses (and Mindfulness)</p>	<p>V3. Residing in a suitable place, merit done in the past, and directing oneself rightly: this is the highest blessing.</p> <p>V4. Much learning, a craft, a well-trained discipline, and well-spoken speech: this is the highest blessing.</p> <p>V5. Serving one’s mother and father, maintaining a wife and children, and an honest occupation: this is the highest blessing.</p> <p>V6. Giving and righteous conduct, assistance to relatives, blameless deeds: this is the highest blessing.</p>

	<p>V7. Desisting and abstaining from evil, refraining from intoxicating drink, heedfulness in good qualities: this is the highest blessing.</p>
<p>Being content with little</p>	<p>V8. Reverence and humility, contentment and gratitude, timely listening to the Dhamma: this is the highest blessing.</p>
<p>(Abandoning the hindrances) (Practicing the Jhānas)</p>	<p>V9. Patience, being amenable to advice, the seeing of ascetics, timely discussion on the Dhamma: this is the highest blessing.</p>
<p>Gaining Insight</p>	<p>V10. Austerity and the spiritual life, seeing of the noble truths, and the realisation of nibbāna: this is the highest blessing.</p>

Overcoming the āsavas, Liberation	V11. One whose mind does not shake when touched by worldly conditions, sorrowless, dust free, secure: this is the highest blessing. V12. Those who have done these things are victorious everywhere; everywhere they go safely: theirs is that highest blessing.
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Hearing the true Dhamma, gaining confidence

The Gradual Training begins with hearing the true Dhamma and gaining confidence. This is encapsulated in the first verse of the *Māṅgala Sutta*, in which a deva addresses the Buddha, asking for a clarification. It is implied that the deva understands the response will be the true Dhamma, in which devas and humans can gain confidence.

Going forth

There's no exact parallel here. But there is a quite clear instruction to not associate with fools and to associate with the wise. This choice about where to put one's time and attention, and where to disassociate, can be seen as a kind of 'going forth' within the laylife -- 'going forth' into association with the wise, and disassociation with fools.

**Keeping the precepts, Guarding the Senses,
(Mindfulness)**

There's a strong parallel here. Some instructions are obviously related to precepts. 'Well-spoken speech' relates to keeping the precept about speaking. And 'refraining from intoxicating drink' is about the fifth precept. Other instructions are more general, such as 'desisting from evil' and 'giving and righteous conduct'.

Guarding the senses is not specifically mentioned anywhere in the *Maṅgala Sutta*. There is a link, albeit weak, in that guarding the senses often goes hand-in-hand with keeping the precepts. But this is arguably one of the weakest links in the overlay of the Gradual Training on this sutta.

By contrast, although Mindfulness is also not specifically mentioned anywhere in the *Maṅgala Sutta*, it's obvious that there's no way to practice what is being described if one isn't being mindful. So it's reasonable to consider mindfulness as being included in the instruction, implicitly but not explicitly.

Being content with little

This is clearly included in the line, 'contentment and gratitude'.

(Abandoning the hindrances, Practicing the Jhānas)

Again, this is a weak link. However, one might understand 'the seeing of ascetics, timely discussion on the Dhamma' as taking the opportunity to learn, practice, and discuss all aspects of Dhamma, which include abandoning the hindrances and practicing the jhānas.

Gaining Insight

Another strong parallel here. 'Seeing of the noble truths,

and the realization of nibbāna' both point to direct insight. The Pāli word for the 'realization of nibbāna' is *nibbānasacchikiriya*, which breaks down to *nibbāna* + *sacchikiriya*. What is *sacchikiriya*? It is the personal experience, the personal realization of something. There is no doubt that this is pointing to the gaining of direct insight.

Overcoming the āsavas, Liberation

The concluding two verses of the *Maṅgala Sutta* eloquently describe the end of the path of practice: 'One whose mind does not shake when touched by worldly conditions... victorious everywhere; everywhere they go safely.' This is a description of the liberated mind.

In conclusion, there are clear similarities between the content of the *Maṅgala Sutta* and the Gradual Path. Each gives us a starting point (wherever we are in our practice), encourages growth and development step by step, and ends with an inspiring reminder of the goal of practice -- a mind that does not shake when touched by worldly conditions, *āsavas* overcome, liberation realized.

-
1. Many thanks to Claralynn Nunamaker for writing this essay specifically for inclusion in this book.
 2. This sutta occurs twice in the Pāli Canon, as the *Maṅgala Sutta* in the Khuddhakapāṭha (Khp 5), and also with the slightly-changed name, *Mahā-Maṅgala Sutta* in the Sutta Nipāta (Sn 2.4).
 3. For a full list, see Bhikkhu Bodhi's 'The Ground Plan of the Maṅgala Sutta with its Thirty-Eight Blessings', https://bodhimonastery.org/courses/Sn/2Mangala_Outline.pdf

4. For more detail, see Soni R. (rev. Khantipālo, B.) (2018)(1956), *Life's Highest Blessings: The Mahā Maṅgala Sutta*, USA: Buddhist Publication Society, pp. 71-77, or C.R. Nunamaker (2019), *An Exploration of the Mahā-Maṅgala Sutta: Content and Context*, pp. 31-32.
5. The sutta is like early though not of the very earliest stratum. See C.R. Nunamaker (2019), *An Exploration of the Mahā-Maṅgala Sutta: Content and Context*, pp. 11-12.
6. Translation by Bhikkhu Bodhi (2017).

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Glossary

Abhidhamma – the third division of the Pāli Canon, consisting of a deconstructionist, metaphysical view of the Buddha's doctrine

anupubbasikkhā – gradual (or graduated) training

arahant – A worthy one, meaning fully awakened

āsava – intoxicant; also translated as outflow, influx, effluent, canker, taint

Bodhisatta – (Pāli) the Buddha-to-be before his awakening

Bodhisattva – (Sanskrit) a being that compassionately refrains from entering nirvana in order to save others and is worshipped as a deity in Mahāyāna Buddhism; the personification of an archetype.

brahma-vihāra – one of four meditation practices of loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy and equanimity

citta – heart/mind

dhamma – phenomena

Dhamma – the teaching of the Buddha and also "the way things truly are"

dukkha – bummer,¹ unsatisfactoriness, stress, suffering

jhāna – literally: meditation; one of four (later eight) states of concentration

jhāyati – to meditate

kāya – group, heap, collection, body

khandha – one of the five aggregates: *rūpa*, *vedanā*, *saññā*, *saṅkhārā* & *viññāṇa*

mettā – loving-kindness, unconditional love

nibbāna – literally "not burning," i.e., not burning with the fires of greed hate or delusion; the goal of the holy life, the realization that brings an end to *dukkha*

nimitta – sign. It later came to have a more specific meaning of a visual circle of light appearing as a sign of deep concentration.

ñāṇa – knowledge

pāmojja – gladness, worldly joy

pasaddhakāya – bodily tranquility

paññā – wisdom

pīti – glee, rapture, sometimes translated as euphoria, ecstasy, delight, or interest

rūpa – materiality, body

saṃsāra – worldly existence, the infinitely repeating cycles of birth, dukkha, and death

samādhi – indistractability, concentration

sampajañña – clear comprehension

samphapalapa – gossip or idle chatter; useless speech

saññā – conceptualization, perception, naming, identifying

saññāvedayitanirodha – the cessation of perception and feeling

sati – mindfulness, remembering to be here now

sīla – morality, ethical behavior

sukha – happiness/joy

sukha & dukkha – pleasure and pain

sutta – discourse, teaching

Suttas – the second division of the Pāli Canon, consisting of discourses given by the Buddha or his closest disciples

taṇhā – craving (literally "thirst")

TL;DR – Too Long; Didn't Read

thru – through

upekkhā – equanimity (literally "gaze upon")

vedanā – the initial categorization of a sense input as pleasant, unpleasant or neither unpleasant or pleasant; valence

vicāra – examining

vipassanā – insight, an understood experience

Visuddhimagga – a 5th century CE commentary on the Buddha's teachings

vitakka – thinking

viññāṇa – consciousness; occasionally it means "mind;" literally "divided knowing"

yathābhūtañāḍassana – knowing and seeing what is actually happening

1. See the essay "*Dukkha* is A Bummer" at <http://leighb.com/bummer.htm> for a detailed exploration of why "bummer" is a good translation of *dukkha*.

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About the Author



Leigh Brasington was born and raised in Mississippi. In 1971, he graduated from [Rhodes College](#) in Memphis with a B.A. in mathematics, with honors, Phi Beta Kappa. He then began a more than 35 year career of “[playing with computers for money](#).” After he moved to San Francisco in 1974, he began taking extended time to [travel](#): 3 years around the world in '79-'81, a year traveling in Australia and Asia in '88, 6 months around the world in '98, plus numerous shorter trips overseas as well.

He began meditating in 1985 and eventually became the senior North American student of [Ven. Ayya Khema](#). She

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Near the end of 2008, he retired from software engineering and over the next three years, he spent twenty months in retreat at the Insight Meditation Society's [Forest Refuge](#). This was a wonderful time of deepening his understanding of the Dhamma.

He is the author of the books **[Right Concentration: A Practical Guide to the jhānas](#)** and **[Dependent Origination and Emptiness: Streams Of Dependently Arising Processes Interacting](#)**.

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