

The Basic Method of Meditation

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(Edited from a talk given by Ajahn Brahmavamso during a 9-day retreat
in North Perth, Western Australia, December 1997)

NAMO TASSA BHAGAVATO ARAHATO SAMMASAMBUDDHASSA

Part 1

Meditation is the way to achieve letting go. In meditation one lets go of the complex world outside in order to reach the serene world inside. In all types of mysticism and in many traditions, this is known as the path to the pure and powerful mind. The experience of this pure mind, released from the world, is very wonderful and blissful.

During this meditation retreat there will be some hard work at the beginning, but be willing to bear that hard work knowing that it will lead you to experience some very beautiful and meaningful states. They will be well worth the effort! It is a law of nature that without effort one does not make progress. Whether one is a layperson or a monk, without effort one gets nowhere, in meditation or in anything.

Effort alone, though, is not sufficient. The effort needs to be skilful. This means directing your energy just at the right places and sustaining it there until its task is completed. Skilful effort neither hinders nor disturbs you, instead it produces the beautiful peace of deep meditation.

In order to know where your effort should be directed, you must have a clear understanding of the goal of meditation. The goal of this meditation is the beautiful silence, stillness and clarity of mind. If you can understand that goal then the place to apply your effort, the means to achieve the goal becomes very clear.

The effort is directed to letting go, to developing a mind which inclines to abandoning. One of the many simple but profound statements of the Lord Buddha is that "a meditator whose mind inclines to abandoning, easily achieves Samadhi (the goal of meditation)". Such a meditator gains these states of inner bliss almost automatically. What the Lord Buddha was saying was that the major cause for attaining deep meditation, for reaching these powerful states is the willingness to abandon, to let go and to renounce.

During this meditation retreat, we are not going to develop a mind which accumulates and holds on to things, but instead we develop a mind which is willing to let go of things, to let go of burdens. Outside of meditation we have to carry the burden of our many duties, like so many heavy suitcases, but within the period of meditation so much baggage is unnecessary. So, in meditation see if you can unload as much baggage as you can. Think of these things as

burdens, heavy weights pressing upon you. Then you have the right attitude for letting go of these things, abandoning them freely without looking back. This effort, this attitude, this movement of mind that inclines to giving up, is what will lead you into deep meditation. Even during the beginning stages of this meditation retreat, see if you can generate the energy of renunciation, the willingness to give things away, and little by little the letting go will occur. As you give things away in your mind you will feel much lighter, unburdened and free. In the way of meditation, this abandoning of things occurs in stages, step by step.

You may go through the initial stages quickly if you wish, but be very careful if you so do. Sometimes when you pass through the initial steps too quickly, you find that preparatory work has not been completed. It is like trying to build a town house on a very weak and rushed foundation. The structure goes up very quickly, but it comes down very quickly as well! So you are wise to spend a lot of time on the foundations, and on the "first storey" as well, making the groundwork well done, strong and firm. Then when you proceed to the higher storeys, the bliss states of meditation, they too are stable and firm.

In the way that I teach meditation, I like to begin at the very simple stage of *giving up the baggage of past and future*. Sometimes you may think that this is such an easy thing to do, that it is too basic. However, if you give it your full effort, not running ahead to the higher stages of meditation until you have properly reached the first goal of sustained attention on the present moment, then you will find later on that you have established a very strong foundation on which to build the higher stages.

Abandoning the past means not even thinking about your work, your family, your commitments, your responsibilities, your history, the good or bad times you had as a child..., you abandon all past experiences by showing no interest in them at all. You become someone who has no history during the time that you meditate. You do not even think about where you are from, where you were born, who your parents were or what your upbringing was like. All of that history is renounced in meditation. In this way, everyone here on the retreat becomes equal, just a meditator. It becomes unimportant how many years you have been meditating, whether you are an old hand or a beginner. If you abandon all that history then we are all equal and free. We are freeing ourselves of some of these concerns, perceptions and thoughts which limit us and which stop us from developing the peace born of letting go. So every "part" of your history you finally let go of, even the history of what has happened to you so far in this retreat, even the memory of what happened to you just a moment ago! In this way, you carry no burden from the past into the present. Whatever has just happened, you are no longer interested in it and you let it go. You do not allow the past to reverberate in your mind.

I describe this as developing your mind like a padded cell! When any experience, perception or thought hits the wall of the "padded cell", it does not bounce back again. It just sinks into the padding and stops right there. Thus we do not allow the past to echo in our consciousness, certainly not the past of yesterday and all that time before, because we are developing the mind inclined to letting go, giving away and unburdening.

Some people have the view that if they take up the past for contemplation they can somehow learn from it and solve the problems of the past. However, you should understand that when you gaze at the past, you invariably look through distorted lenses. Whatever you think it was like, in truth it was not quite like that! This is why people have arguments about what actually happened, even a few moments ago. It is well known to police who investigate traffic accidents that even though the accident may have happened only half an hour ago, two

different eyewitnesses, both completely honest, will give different accounts. Our memory is untrustworthy. If you consider just how unreliable memory is, then you do not put value on thinking over the past. Then you can let it go. You can bury it, just as you bury a person who has died. You place them in a coffin then bury it, or cremate it, and it is done with, finished. Do not linger on the past. Do not continue to carry the coffins of dead moments on your head! If you do then you are weighing yourself down with heavy burdens which do not really belong to you. Let all of the past go and you have the ability to be free in the present moment.

As for the future, the anticipations, fears, plans, and expectations -- let all of that go too. The Lord Buddha once said about the future "whatever you think it will be, it will always be something different"! This future is known to the wise as uncertain, unknown and so unpredictable. It is often complete stupidity to anticipate the future, and always a great waste of your time to think of the future in meditation.

When you work with your mind, you find that the mind is so strange. It can do some wonderful and unexpected things. It is very common for meditators who are having a difficult time, who are not getting very peaceful, to sit there thinking "Here we go again, another hour of frustration". Even though they begin thinking like that, anticipating failure, something strange happens and they get into a very peaceful meditation.

Recently I heard of one man on his first ten day retreat. After the first day his body was hurting so much he asked to go home. The teacher said "Stay one more day and the pain will disappear, I promise". So he stayed another day, the pain got worse so he wanted to go home again. The teacher repeated "just one more day, the pain will go". He stayed for a third day and the pain was even worse. For each of nine days, in the evening he would go to the teacher and, in great pain, ask to go home and the teacher would say, "just one more day and the pain will disappear". It went completely beyond his expectations that, on the final day, when he started the first sit of the morning, the pain did disappear! It did not come back. He could sit for long periods with no pain at all! He was amazed at how wonderful is this mind and how it can produce such unexpected results. So, you don't know about the future. It can be so strange, even weird, completely beyond whatever you expect. Experiences like this give you the wisdom and courage to abandon all thoughts about the future, and all expectation as well.

When you're meditating and thinking "How many more minutes are there to go? How much longer have I to endure all of this?" then that is just wandering off into the future again. The pain could just disappear in a moment. The next moment might be the free one. You just cannot anticipate what is going to happen.

When on retreat, you have been meditating for many sessions, you may sometimes think that none of those meditations have been any good. In the next meditation session you sit down and everything becomes so peaceful and easy. You think "Wow! Now I can meditate!", but the next meditation is awful again. What's going on here?

The first meditation teacher I had told me something which then sounded quite strange. He said that there is no such thing as a bad meditation! He was right. All those meditations which you called bad, frustrating and not meeting your expectations, all those meditations are where you do the hard work for your "pay cheque"...

It is like a person who goes to work all day Monday and gets no money at the end of the day. "What am I doing this for?", he thinks. He works all day Tuesday and still gets nothing.

Another bad day. All day Wednesday, all day Thursday, and still nothing to show for all the hard work. That's four bad days in a row. Then along comes Friday, he does exactly the same work as before and at the end of the day the boss gives him a pay cheque. "Wow! Why can't every day be a pay-day?!"

Why can't every meditation be "pay-day"? Now, do you understand the simile? It is in the difficult meditations that you build up your credit, you build up the causes for success. Working for peace in the hard meditations, you build up your strength, the momentum for peace. Then when there's enough credit of good qualities, the mind goes into a good meditation and it feels like "pay-day". It is in the bad meditations that you do the work.

In a recent retreat that I gave in Sydney, during interview time, a lady told me that she had been angry with me all day, but for two different reasons. In her early meditations she was having a difficult time and was angry at me for not ringing the bell to end the meditation early enough. In the later meditations she got into a beautiful peaceful state and was angry at me for ringing the bell too soon. The sessions were all the same length, exactly one hour. You just can't win as a teacher, ringing the bell!

This is what happens when you go anticipating the future, thinking "How many more minutes until the bell goes?" That is where you torture yourself, where you pick up a heavy burden which is none of your business. So be very careful not to pick up the heavy suitcase of "How many more minutes are there to go?" or "What should I do next?" If that is what you are thinking, then you are not paying attention to what is happening now. You are not doing the meditation. You have lost the plot and are asking for trouble.

In this stage of the meditation keep your attention right in the present moment, to the point where you don't even know what day it is or what time it is -- morning? afternoon? don't know! All you know is what moment it is -- right now! In this way you arrive at this beautiful monastic time scale where you are just meditating in the moment, not aware of how many minutes have gone or how many remain, not even remembering what day it is.

Once, as a young monk in Thailand, I had actually forgotten what year it was! It is marvelous living in that realm that is timeless, a realm so much more free than the time driven world we usually have to live in. In the timeless realm, you experience this moment, just as all wise beings have been experiencing this same moment for thousands of years. It has always been just like this, no different. You have come into the reality of now.

The reality of now is magnificent and awesome. When you have abandoned all past and all future, it is as if you have come alive. You are here, you are mindful. This is the first stage of the meditation, just this mindfulness sustained only in the present. Reaching here, you have done a great deal. You have let go of the first burden which stops deep meditation. So put forth a lot of effort to reach this first stage until it is strong, firm and well established. Next we will refine the present moment awareness into the next stage -- silent awareness of the present moment.

Part 2

In Part 1 of this three-part article, I outlined the goal of this meditation, which is the beautiful silence, stillness and clarity of mind, pregnant with the most profound of insights. Then I pointed out the underlying theme which runs like an unbroken thread throughout all meditation, that is the letting go of material and mental burdens. Lastly, in Part 1, I described at length the practice which leads to what I call the first stage of this meditation, and that first stage is attained when the meditator comfortably abides in the present moment for long, unbroken periods of time. As I wrote in the previous article "The reality of now is magnificent and awesome... Reaching here you have done a great deal. You have let go of the first burden which stops deep meditation." But having achieved so much, one should go further into the even more beautiful and truthful silence of the mind.

It is helpful, here, to clarify the difference between silent awareness of the present moment and thinking about it. The simile of watching a tennis match on T.V. is informative. When watching such a match, you may notice that, in fact, there are two matches occurring simultaneously -- there is the match that you see on the screen, and there is the match that you hear described by the commentator. Indeed, if an Australian is playing a New Zealander then the commentary from the Australian presenter is likely to be much different from what actually occurred! Commentary is often biased. In this simile, watching the screen with no commentary stands for silent awareness in meditation, paying attention to the commentary stands for thinking about it. You should realize that you are much closer to Truth when you observe without commentary, when you experience just the silent awareness of the present moment.

Sometimes it is through the inner commentary that we think we know the world. Actually, that inner speech does not know the world at all! It is the inner speech that weaves the delusions that cause suffering. It is the inner speech that causes us to be angry at those we make our enemies, and to have dangerous attachments to those we make our loved ones. Inner speech causes all of life's problems. It constructs fear and guilt. It creates anxiety and depression. It builds these illusions as surely as the skilful commentator on T.V. can manipulate an audience to create anger or tears. So if you seek for Truth, you should value silent awareness, considering it more important, when meditating, than any thought whatsoever.

It is the high value that one gives to one's thoughts that is the major obstacle to silent awareness. Carefully removing the importance one gives to one's thinking and realizing the value and truthfulness of silent awareness is the insight that makes this second stage -- silent awareness of the present moment -- possible.

One of the beautiful ways of overcoming the inner commentary is to develop such refined present moment awareness, that you are watching every moment so closely that you simply do not have the time to comment about what has just happened. A thought is often an opinion on what has just happened, e.g. "That *was* good", "That *was* gross", "What *was* that?" All of these comments are about an experience which has just passed by. When you are noting, making a comment about an experience which has just passed, then you are not paying attention to the experience which has just arrived. You are dealing with old visitors and neglecting the new visitors coming now!

You may imagine your mind to be a host at a party, meeting the guests as they come in the door. If one guest comes in and you meet them and start talking to them about this that or the other, then you are not doing your duty of paying attention to the new guest that comes in the door. Because a guest comes in the door every moment, all you can do is to greet one and then immediately go on to greet the next one. You cannot afford to engage in even the shortest conversation with any guest, since this would mean you will miss the one coming in next. In meditation, all experiences come through the door of our senses into the mind one by one in succession. If you greet one experience with mindfulness and then get into conversation with your guest, then you will miss the next experience following right behind.

When you are perfectly in the moment with every experience, with every guest which comes in your mind, then you just do not have the space for inner speech. You can not chatter to yourself because you are completely taken up with mindfully greeting everything just as it arrives in your mind. This is refined present moment awareness to the level that it becomes silent awareness of the present in every moment.

You discover, on developing that degree of inner silence, that this is like giving up another great burden. It is as if you have been carrying a big heavy rucksack on your back for forty or fifty years continuously and during that time you have wearily trudged through many many miles. Now you have had the courage and found the wisdom to take that rucksack off and put it on the ground for a while. One feels so immensely relieved, so light, so free because one is now not burdened with that heavy rucksack of inner chatter.

Another useful method of developing silent awareness is to recognize the space between thoughts, between periods of inner chatter. If you attend closely with sharp mindfulness, when one thought ends and before another thought begins -- THERE! That is silent awareness! It may be only momentary at first but as you recognize that fleeting silence you become accustomed to it, and as you become accustomed to it then the silence lasts longer. You begin to enjoy the silence, once you have found it at last, and that is why it grows. But remember, silence is shy. If silence hears you talking about her, she vanishes immediately!

It would be marvelous for each one of us if we could abandon the inner speech and abide in silent awareness of the present moment long enough to realize how delightful it is. Silence is so much more productive of wisdom and clarity than thinking. When you realize how much more enjoyable and valuable it is to be silent within, then silence becomes more attractive and important to you. The Inner Silence becomes what the mind inclines towards. The mind seeks out silence constantly, to the point where it only thinks if it really has to, only if there is some point to it. Since, at this stage, you have realized that most of our thinking is really pointless anyway, that it gets you nowhere, only giving you many headaches, you gladly and easily spend much time in inner quiet.

The second stage of this meditation, then, is *silent awareness of the present moment*. You may spend the majority of your time just developing these two stages because if you can get this far then you have gone a long way indeed in your meditation. In that silent awareness of "Just Now" you will experience much peace, joy and consequent wisdom.

If you want to go further, then instead of being silently aware of whatever comes into the mind, you choose silent present moment awareness of just ONE THING. That ONE THING can be the experience of breathing, the idea of loving kindness (METTA), a coloured circle

visualised in the mind (KASINA) or several other, less common, focal points for awareness. Here we will describe the silent present moment awareness of the breath.

Choosing to fix one's attention on one thing is letting go of diversity and moving to its opposite, unity. As the mind begins to unify, sustaining attention on just one thing, the experience of peace, bliss and power increases significantly. You discover here that the diversity of consciousness -- like having six telephones on ones desk ringing at the same time -- is such a burden, and letting go of this diversity -- only permitting one telephone, a private line at that, on ones desk -- is such a relief it generates bliss. The understanding that diversity is a burden is crucial to being able to settle on the breath.

If you have developed silent awareness of the present moment carefully for long periods of time, then you will find it quite easy to turn that awareness on to the breath and follow that breath from moment to moment without interruption. This is because the two major obstacles to breath meditation have already been subdued. The first of these two obstacles is the mind's tendency to go off into the past or future, and the second obstacle is the inner speech. This is why I teach the two preliminary stages of present moment awareness and silent awareness of the present moment as a solid preparation for deeper meditation on the breath.

It often happens that meditators start breath meditation when their mind is still jumping around between past and future, and when awareness is being drowned by the inner commentary. With no preparation they find breath meditation so difficult, even impossible and give up in frustration. They give up because they did not start at the right place. They did not perform the preparatory work before taking up the breath as a focus of their attention. However, if the mind has been well prepared by completing these first two stages then you will find when you turn to the breath, you can sustain your attention on it with ease. If you find it difficult to keep attention on your breath then this is a sign that you rushed the first two stages. Go back to the preliminary exercises! Careful patience is the fastest way.

When you focus on the breath, you focus on the experience of the breath happening now. You experience "that which tells you what the breath is doing", whether it is going in or out or in between. Some teachers say to watch the breath at the tip of the nose, some say to watch it at the abdomen and some say to move it here and then move it there. I have found through experience that it does not matter where you watch the breath. In fact it is best not to locate the breath anywhere! If you locate the breath at the tip of your nose then it becomes nose awareness, not breath awareness, and if you locate it at your abdomen then it becomes abdomen awareness. Just ask yourself the question right now "Am I breathing in or am I breathing out? How do you know? There!". That experience which tells you what the breath is doing, that is what you focus on in breath meditation. Let go of concern about where this experience is located; just focus on the experience itself.

A common hindrance at this stage is the tendency to control the breathing, and this makes the breathing uncomfortable. To overcome this hindrance, imagine that you are just a passenger in a car looking through the window at your breath. You are not the driver, nor a "back seat driver", so stop giving orders, let go and enjoy the ride. Let the breath do the breathing while you simply watch without interfering.

When you know the breath is going in, or the breath is going out, for say one hundred breaths in a row, not missing one, then you have achieved what I call the third stage of this

meditation, *sustained attention on the breath*. This again is more peaceful and joyful than the previous stage. To go deeper, you now aim for full sustained attention on the breath.

This fourth stage, or *full sustained attention on the breath*, occurs when one's attention expands to take in every single moment of the breath. You know the in-breath at the very first moment, when the first sensation of in-breathing arises. Then you observe those sensations develop gradually through the whole course of one in-breath, not missing even a moment of the in-breath. When that in-breath finishes, you know that moment, you see in your mind that last movement of the in-breath. You then see the next moment as a pause between breaths, and then many more pauses until the out-breath begins. You see the first moment of the out-breath and each subsequent sensation as the out-breath evolves, until the out-breath disappears when its function is complete. All this is done in silence and just in the present moment.

You experience every part of each in-breath and out-breath, continuously for many hundred breaths in a row. This is why this stage is called "FULL sustained attention on the breath". You cannot reach this stage through force, through holding or gripping. You can only attain this degree of stillness by letting go of everything in the entire universe, except for this momentary experience of breath happening silently now. "You" don't reach this stage; the mind reaches this stage. The mind does the work itself. The mind recognizes this stage to be a very peaceful and pleasant abiding, just being alone with the breath. This is where the "doer", the major part of one's ego, starts to disappear.

You will find that progress happens effortlessly at this stage of the meditation. You just have to get out of the way, let go, and watch it all happen. The mind will automatically incline, if you only let it, towards this very simple, peaceful and delicious unity of being alone with one thing, just being with the breath in each and every moment. This is the unity of mind, the unity in the moment, the unity in stillness.

The fourth stage is what I call the "springboard" of meditation, because from here one can dive into the blissful states. When you simply maintain this unity of consciousness, by not interfering, the breath will begin to disappear. The breath appears to fade away as the mind focuses instead on what is at the centre of the experience of breath, which is the awesome peace, freedom and bliss.

At this stage I use the term "the beautiful breath". Here the mind recognizes that this peaceful breath is extraordinarily beautiful. You are aware of this beautiful breath continuously, moment after moment, with no break in the chain of experience. You are only aware of the beautiful breath, without effort, and for a very long time.

Now you let the breath disappear and all that is left is "the beautiful". Disembodied beauty becomes the sole object of the mind. The mind is now taking its own object. You are now not aware at all of breath, body, thought sound or the world outside. All that you are aware of is beauty, peace, bliss, light or whatever your perception will later call it. You are experiencing only beauty, with nothing being beautiful, continuously, effortlessly. You have long ago let go of chatter, let go of descriptions and assessments. Here, the mind is that still that you can not say anything.

You are just experiencing the first flowering of bliss in the mind. That bliss will develop, grow, become very firm and strong. Thus you enter into those states of meditation called Jhana. But that is for Part 3 of this talk!

Part 3

Parts 1 and 2 describe the first four stages (as they are called here) of meditation. These are:

1. Present moment awareness.
2. Silent awareness of the present moment.
3. Silent present moment awareness of the breath.
4. Full sustained attention on the breath.

Each of these stages needs to be well developed before going in to the next stage. When one rushes through these "stages of letting go" then the higher stages will be unreachable. It is like constructing a tall building with inadequate foundations. The first storey is built quickly and so is the second and third storey. When the fourth storey is added, though, the structure begins to wobble a bit. Then when they try to add a fifth storey it all comes tumbling down. So please take a lot of time on these four initial stages, making them all firm and stable, before proceeding on to the fifth stage. You should be able to maintain the fourth stage, "full sustained attention on the breath", aware of every moment of the breath without a single break, for two or three hundred breaths in succession with ease. I am not saying to count the breaths during this stage, but I am giving an indication of the sort of time interval that one should remain with stage 4 before proceeding further. In meditation, patience is the fastest way!

The fifth stage is called "***full sustained attention on the beautiful breath***". Often, this stage flows on naturally, seamlessly, from the previous stage. As one's full attention rests easily and continuously on the experience of breath, with nothing interrupting the even flow of awareness, the breath calms down. It changes from a coarse, ordinary breath, to a very smooth and peaceful "beautiful breath". The mind recognizes this beautiful breath and delights in it. The mind experiences a deepening of contentment. It is happy just to be there watching this beautiful breath. The mind does not need to be forced. It stays with the beautiful breath by itself. "You" don't do anything. If you try and do something at this stage, you disturb the whole process, the beauty is lost and, like landing on a snake's head in the game of snakes and ladders, you go back many squares. The "doer" has to disappear from this stage of the meditation on, with just the "knower" passively observing.

A helpful trick to achieve this stage is to break the inner silence just once and gently think to yourself: "Calm". That's all. At this stage of the meditation, the mind is usually so sensitive that just a little nudge like this causes the mind to follow the instruction obediently. The breath calms down and the beautiful breath emerges.

When you are passively observing just the beautiful breath in the moment, the perception of "in" (breath) or "out" (breath), or beginning or middle or end of a breath, should all be allowed to disappear. All that is known is this experience of the beautiful breath happening

now. The mind is not concerned with what part of the breath cycle this is in, nor on what part of the body this is occurring. Here we are simplifying the object of meditation, the experience of breath in the moment, stripping away all unnecessary details, moving beyond the duality of "in" and "out", and just being aware of a beautiful breath which appears smooth and continuous, hardly changing at all.

Do absolutely nothing and see how smooth and beautiful and timeless the breath can appear. See how calm you can allow it to be. Take time to savour the sweetness of the beautiful breath, ever calmer, ever sweeter.

Now the breath will disappear, not when "you" want it to but when there is enough calm, leaving only "the beautiful". A simile from English literature might help. In Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland", Alice and the White Queen saw a vision of a smiling Cheshire cat appear in the sky. As they watched, first the cat's tail disappeared, then its paws followed by the rest of its legs. Soon the Cheshire cat's torso completely vanished leaving only the cat's head, still with a smile. Then the head started to fade into nothing, from the ears and whiskers inwards, and soon the smiling cat's head had completely disappeared -- except for the smile which still remained in the sky! This was a smile without any lips to do the smiling, but a visible smile nevertheless. This is an accurate analogy for the process of letting go happening at this point in meditation. The cat with a smile on her face stands for the beautiful breath. The cat disappearing represents the breath disappearing and the disembodied smile still visible in the sky stands for the pure mental object "beauty" clearly visible in the mind.

This pure mental object is called a NIMITTA. "Nimitta" means "a sign", here a mental sign. This is a real object in the landscape of the mind (CITTA) and when it appears for the first time it is extremely strange. One simply has not experienced anything like it before. Nevertheless, the mental activity called "perception" searches through its memory bank of life experiences for something even a little bit similar in order to supply a description to the mind. For most meditators, this "disembodied beauty", this mental joy, is perceived as a beautiful light. It is not a light. The eyes are closed and the sight consciousness has long been turned off. It is the mind consciousness freed for the first time from the world of the five senses. It is like the full moon, here standing for the radiant mind, coming out from behind the clouds, here standing for the world of the five senses. It is the mind manifesting, not a light, but for most it appears like a light, it is perceived as a light, because this imperfect description is the best that perception can offer.

For other meditators, perception chooses to describe this first appearance of mind in terms of physical sensation, such as intense tranquillity or ecstasy. Again, the body consciousness (that which experiences pleasure and pain, heat and cold, and so on) has long since closed down and this is not a physical feeling. It is just "perceived" as similar to pleasure. Some see a white light, some a gold star, some a blue pearl...the important fact to know is that they are all describing the same phenomena. They all experience the same pure mental object and these different details are added by their different perceptions.

You can recognize a nimitta by the following 6 features: 1) It appears only after the 5th stage of the meditation, after the meditator has been with the beautiful breath for a long time; 2) It appears when the breath disappears; 3) It only comes with the external five senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch are completely absent; 4) It manifests only in the silent mind, when descriptive thoughts (inner speech) are totally absent; 5) It is strange but powerfully

attractive; 6) It is a beautifully simple object. I mention these features so that you may distinguish real nimittas from imaginary ones.

The sixth stage, then, is called "*experiencing the beautiful nimitta*". It is achieved when one lets go of the body, thought, and the five senses (including the awareness of the breath) so completely that only the beautiful nimitta remains.

Sometimes when the nimitta first arises it may appear "dull". In this stage, one should go immediately back to the previous stage of the meditation, continuous silent awareness of the beautiful breath. One has moved to the nimitta too soon. Sometimes the nimitta is bright but unstable, flashing on and off like a lighthouse beacon and then disappearing. Again this shows that you have left the beautiful breath too early. One must be able to sustain one's attention on the beautiful breath with ease for a long, long time before the mind is capable of maintaining clear attention on the far more subtle nimitta. So train the mind on the beautiful breath, train it patiently and diligently, then when it is time to go on to the nimitta, it is bright, stable and easy to sustain.

The main reason why the nimitta can appear dull is that the depth of contentment is too shallow. You are still "wanting" something. Usually, you are wanting the bright nimitta or you are wanting Jhana. Remember, and this is important, Jhanas are states of letting go, incredibly deep states of contentment. So give away the hungry mind, develop contentment on the beautiful breath and the nimitta and Jhana will happen by themselves.

The main reason why the nimitta is unstable is because the "doer" just will not stop interfering. The "doer" is the controller, the back seat driver, always getting involved where it does not belong and messing everything up. This meditation is a natural process of coming to rest and it requires "you" to get out of the way completely. Deep meditation only occurs when you really let go, and this means REALLY LET GO to the point that the process becomes inaccessible to the "doer".

A skilful means to achieve such profound letting go is to deliberately offer the gift of confidence to the nimitta. Interrupt the silence just for a moment, so so gently, and whisper as it were inside your mind that you give complete trust to the nimitta, so that the "doer" can relinquish all control and just disappear. The mind, represented here by the nimitta before you, will then take over the process as you watch it all happen.

You do not need to do anything here because the intense beauty of the nimitta is more than capable of holding the attention without your assistance. Be careful, here, not to go assessing. Questions such as "What is this?", "Is this Jhana?", "What should I do next?", and so on are all the work of "the doer" trying to get involved again. This is disturbing the process. You may assess everything once the journey is over. A good scientist only assesses the experiment at the end, when all the data is in. So now, do not assess or try to work it all out. There is no need to pay attention to the edge of the nimitta "Is it round or oval?", "Is the edge clear or fuzzy?". This is all unnecessary and just leads to more diversity, more duality of "inside" and "outside", and more disturbance.

Let the mind incline where it wants, which is usually to the centre of the nimitta. The centre is where the most beautiful part lies, where the light is most brilliant and pure. Let go and just enjoy the ride as the attention gets drawn into the centre and falls right inside, or as the light expands all around enveloping you totally. This is, in fact, one and the same experience

perceived from different perspectives. Let the mind merge in the bliss. Let the seventh stage of this path of meditation, *Jhana*, occur.

There are two common obstacles at the door into Jhana: exhilaration and fear. Exhilaration is becoming excited. If, at this point, the mind thinks "Wow, this is it!" then the Jhana is most unlikely to happen. This "Wow" response needs to be subdued in favour of absolute passivity. You can leave all the "Wows" until after emerging from the Jhana, where they properly belong. The more likely obstacle, though, is fear. Fear arises at the recognition of the sheer power and bliss of the Jhana, or else at the recognition that to go fully inside the Jhana, something must be left behind -- You! The "doer" is silent before Jhana but still there. Inside Jhana, the "doer" is completely gone. The "knower" is still functioning, you are fully aware, but all the controls are now beyond reach. You cannot even form a single thought, let alone make a decision. The will is frozen, and this can appear scary to the beginner. Never before in your whole life have you ever experienced being so stripped of all control yet so fully awake. The fear is the fear of surrendering something so essentially personal as the will to do.

This fear can be overcome through confidence in the Buddha's Teachings together with the enticing bliss just ahead that one can see as the reward. The Lord Buddha often said that this bliss of Jhana "should not be feared but should be followed, developed and practised often" (LATUKIKOPAMA SUTTA, MAJJHIMA NIKAYA). So before fear arises, offer your full confidence to that bliss and maintain faith in the Lord Buddha's Teachings and the example of the Noble Disciples. Trust the Dhamma and let the Jhana warmly embrace you for an effortless, body-less and ego-less, blissful experience that will be the most profound of your life. Have the courage to fully relinquish control for a while and experience all this for yourself.

If it is a Jhana it will last a long time. It does not deserve to be called Jhana if it lasts only a few minutes. Usually, the higher Jhanas persist for many hours. Once inside, there is no choice. You will emerge from the Jhana only when the mind is ready to come out, when the "fuel" of relinquishment that was built up before is all used up. These are such still and satisfying states of consciousness that their very nature is to persist for a very long time. Another feature of Jhana is that it occurs only after the nimitta is discerned as described above. Furthermore, you should know that while in any Jhana it is impossible to experience the body (e.g. physical pain), hear a sound from outside or produce any thought, not even "good" thoughts. There is just a clear singleness of perception, an experience of non-dualistic bliss which continues unchanging for a very long time. This is not a trance, but a state of heightened awareness. This is said so that you may know for yourself whether what you take to be a Jhana is real or imaginary.

There is much more to meditation, but here only the basic method has been described using seven stages culminating with the First Jhana. Much more could be said about the "five hindrances" and how they are overcome, about the meaning of mindfulness and how it is used, about the Four Satipatthana and the Four Roads to Success (IDDHIPADA) and the Five Controlling Faculties (INDRIYA) and, of course, about the higher Jhanas. All these concern this practice of meditation but must be left for another occasion.

For those who are misled to conceive of all this as "just Samatha practice" without regard to Insight (VIPASSANA), please know that this is neither Vipassana nor Samatha. It is called "Bhavana", the method taught by the Lord Buddha and repeated in the Forest Tradition of

N.E. Thailand of which my teacher, Ven. Ajahn Chah, was a part. Ajahn Chah often said that Samatha and Vipassana can not be separated, nor can the pair be developed apart from Right View, Right Thought, Right Moral Conduct and so forth. Indeed, to make progress on the above seven stages, the meditator needs an understanding and acceptance of the Lord Buddha's Teachings and one's precepts must be pure. Insight will be needed to achieve each of these stages, that is insight into the meaning of "letting go". The further one develops these stages, the more profound will be the insight, and if you reach as far as Jhana then it will change your whole understanding. As it were, Insight dances around Jhana and Jhana dances around Insight. This is the Path to Nibbana for, the Lord Buddha said, "for one who indulges in Jhana, four results are to be expected: Stream Winner, Once Returner, Non Returner or Arahant" (PASADIKA SUTTA, DIGHA NIKAYA).

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Perth, Western Australia, 1998

Source: *Buddhist Society of Western Australia* Newsletter, 1998