Chapter 2
Nature of Reality

The first step in any training is to become familiar with the framework for the training itself. For example, in sports one must first become familiar with the rules, the equipment, playing field, etc. In meditation practice, before one can actually give rise to insight about reality, one must first become familiar with the nature of reality itself.

It is important to be clear what is meant by the word “reality”. There are two main types of understanding: conceptual understanding and experiential understanding. It is important that one be aware of the difference between these two types of understanding at the beginning of one’s practice, as acting under the influence of a wrong understanding of reality means one will be unable to progress on the path to true understanding.

Conceptual understanding means seeing reality as made up of conceptual entities - people, places, and things. This is the paradigm on which we base our ordinary, everyday lives; it is essential for the purpose of living one’s life in the world but useless in the practice of understanding reality, since it relies on concepts that arise in the mind. In this sense, it is not really a description of reality at all.

For example, when you clench the fingers of your hand, you create what we call a fist; when you unclench your hand, the fist disappears. If we ask when and where and how the fist arose and ceased, it becomes clear that its existence is based solely on one’s own mental recognition of the concept of the fist. No fist truly arose anywhere but in one’s own mind. This is what is meant by its being a concept.

Observation of concepts cannot lead us to understand reality. Instead, it tends to encourage delusion, as concepts provide the appearance of stability, satisfaction, and controllability. A fist, for example, may be a useful tool that is constant and controllable throughout our lives. Unfortunately, the underlying reality is not, and so depending on the fist has the potential of bringing disappointment, for example when we get old, sick, and die.

Scientists, recognizing the limitation of conceptual entities in describing reality, tried to break apart these entities and discover what actually exists behind, for example, the hand that makes the fist. This investigation led to the discovery of cells, molecules, atoms, and even subatomic particles, eventually mapping out the entire universe on to an impersonal four-dimensional (three spatial and one temporal) grid, within which every part of reality was understood to exist.

As useful as the scientific explanation is in describing the nature of the physical universe around us, it still relies on conceptualization of that which is outside of one’s own experience. As such, it still cannot bring about the type of understanding about reality that is necessary to break free from one’s delusions and the bad habits based on them. For example, one may calculate to a

great degree of precision the nature and interactivity of all the many physical particles that form the addiction systems in the brain and yet be no closer to actually giving up one's own addictions

For one's meditation practice to succeed, it is necessary for one to undergo a shift towards an experiential paradigm that discards any preconceived notions of time, space, or identity. When one sees a fist, one must train oneself to separate the experience of seeing, from the recognition of the fist. One must discard the fist itself as conceptual, focusing only on the experience and the mental activity (recognition, perception, judgment, etc.) associated with it.

According to modern science, the physical universe exists independent of the observer. Reality, according to modern science, is impersonal; it continues to function according to causes and conditions whether we are aware of it or not. The fist (or that which makes up the fist) exists independent of our experience of it. Unfortunately, this is exactly what makes the modern scientific paradigm unsuitable for cultivating self-realization, since it requires conceptualization of something that is outside of one's experience.

It is not that there is anything wrong with scientific theory, it is simply that theory alone is not strong enough to lead to inner change in the same way as experiential observation. For the purposes of meditation practice, it is not necessary to question the veracity of scientific theory (i.e. as to whether impersonal entities actually exist or not); it is only necessary to shift one's outlook to see reality in terms of momentary experience during the meditation practice. In this way, one can focus on the bare building blocks of experience, free from mental conceptualization; rather than simply learning about the nature of addiction, for example, one will be able to observe one's own patterns of addictive behaviour and come to understand directly how they lead to stress and suffering.

From a point of view of personal experience, the building blocks of reality are, in fact, quite limited. Beginning meditators need concern themselves with only two aspects of reality: the physical and the mental. Perceiving reality according to these two aspects should be enough to shift one's outlook away from conceptualization in favour of experiential observation.

After one or two days of intensive practice, or longer in the case of daily sessions, a beginning meditator should be able to separate experience into its physical and mental aspects. One should further be able to discern two truths about the physical and mental aspects:

1. that they arise and cease without remainder, and
2. that they differ in nature from one another.

The first truth is a defining element of the experiential way of understanding; conceptually, entities can exist for extended periods of time, unchanged and unmoving. Experientially, however, an entity can only ever exist momentarily; once an experience ends, the physical and mental aspects of the entity (i.e. the experience) cease. Because our minds function based on experience alone, understanding must likewise be developed based on bare experience.

A great deal of our stress and suffering is arguably based on our attachment to entities that we see as persisting and stable. For example, our relationships with other people cause us

suffering due to our attachment to the concepts of the other person and the relationship; when the relationship ends, we suffer due to the loss of the person and the relationship itself.

If, on the other hand, we understand reality as being made up of momentary experiences, there will be no opportunity for disappointment based on loss, since there will be no misperception of persistence or stability.

Mental illness provides a good example of how entities actually prevent us from becoming free from suffering. Identification of a condition as a specific illness can create a sense of helplessness, since entities are by definition atomic (i.e. indivisible). The “cure” thus becomes dependent on actually removing the “disease”.

As with the physical atom, however, the reality of all mental illnesses, even those with organic origins, is that they are divisible into smaller entities. A schizophrenic, for example, may be unable to avoid experiencing hallucinations, but if they are able to observe each hallucination as merely an experience, they will be able to bear with the hallucinations without having to suffer from them.

To this end, a meditator is instructed to begin by cultivating an understanding of the momentary nature of experience. For example, that the movement of the right foot arises and ceases along with the awareness of the movement; and that together they constitute a single experience. The movement of the left foot is an entirely different experience; nothing is carried from one experience to the next. No lasting entity exists within the framework of one’s experience.

This is what is called “momentary death”. In fact, it is the only death that is admitted to exist in ultimate reality. The death of a person isn’t something that we can perceive experientially; it is a concept that we apply intellectually to an entity other than ourselves, and something we conjecture as waiting for us somewhere in the future. In terms of our experience, there will only ever be momentary phenomena arising and ceasing until they finally cease entirely at the moment of death.

Actually, we can’t even really be sure what happens at death. From a point of view of our own experience, we have nothing to compare it to - for all we know, our experience might continue on indefinitely. This is, in fact, the favoured view in our tradition, with some meditators even claiming to remember past lives or having near death experiences after their brains have ceased to function. At any rate, what is important is to discard conceptualization of entities that exist continuously from moment to moment in favour of empirically observable experiences that last only for a single moment.

When watching the abdomen rising and falling, a beginner meditator should likewise be able to perceive a distinct beginning and ending of both the rising and of the falling. They should be able to distinguish between the two experiences, conceiving of them as distinct phenomena rather than a single entity (i.e. the abdomen) rising and falling. Likewise, one should experience sensations of pain and pleasure as arising and ceasing, as well as thoughts and emotions. In brief, one should come to understand that nothing lasts longer than the time it takes for an

experience to occur; from the point of view of experience, there exists no lasting or stable entity whatsoever.

The second truth relates to one's ability to distinguish the physical from the mental and understand their essential natures. For example, one should be able to observe that when the abdomen rises, there is both the rising movement and the mind that is aware of the movement.

It is readily apparent that a person's respiratory system works continuously day and night throughout one's life. Each in-breath causes the diaphragm to contract, leading to a tensing of the abdomen. Each out-breath causes a complementary release of tension. This is an explanation of breathing according to the modern scientific paradigm.

From the point of view of experience, however, there is a second factor involved in breathing, and that is the awareness that allows the experience of the breathing to occur. The awareness is one thing and the physical manifestations of breathing are another; they are not the same, and yet both are required for the experience to occur.

The nature of the physical aspect is to present itself to the mental aspect; the nature of the mental aspect is to become aware of the physical aspect through one of the five senses. Both are merely aspects of a single experience; neither the body nor the mind persists longer than the time it takes for a single experience to occur.

This, incidentally, is the reason why focussing on the breath itself is not recommended as a means of understanding experiential reality, since the breath coming into the body and leaving it is conceptual. Only the changes in pressure and temperature are experientially real.

The ability to separate reality into its physical and mental components allows one to differentiate between objective reality and subjective reactions to it, for example, separating physical discomfort from mental upset or physical pleasure from desire. Given the suffering inherent in reactivity, this is a crucial step in one's progress towards freedom.

To summarize, the first steps in one's understanding of reality are:

1. Acquire an experiential view of reality;
2. Observe that each experience arises and ceases without remainder;
3. Observe that experience can be separated into distinct physical and mental components.

Once one has achieved these three goals, one is said to have begun to understand the nature of reality. Though this understanding may seem insignificant in and of itself, it will pave the way for further realization about the nature of reality, and is therefore a crucial first step in the meditation practice.

All of the theory presented in this chapter is intended to describe and explain that which is to be understood by the meditator for themselves; it is not intended to supplant actual practice, and anyone reading this material without practicing according to the technique outlined in the first

book[1] (or a similar practice) is unlikely to appreciate its true import. Therefore I encourage you once more to take the time and put out effort to realize these truths for yourselves.

[1] http://htm.sirimangalo.org/

Cause and Effect

Once the nature of experience becomes clear to the meditator as described in the previous chapter, the meditator will begin to notice how individual experiences relate to each other causally, affecting or even giving rise to future experiences entirely. Whereas the first stage of knowledge involves the understanding of the *nature* of experiential phenomena, this knowledge involves understanding the *relationships* between experiential phenomena; it is knowledge that comes to the meditator gradually as they continue observing the four foundations of mindfulness as outlined in the first volume on how to meditate. This knowledge is described as the understanding of causality, often referred to as the “law of karma”.

In modern times, the concept of karma is well-known, but not very well understood. Karma is often thought of as a law that ascribes repercussions to one’s actions - certain actions have positive results, others have negative results. In fact, as a meditator will quickly realize, it is not one’s physical *actions* that affect one’s future in any meaningful way, but rather *the state of one’s mind* while performing said actions.

In order to attain this understanding, it is recommended that one who has attained the knowledge outlined in the previous chapter continue on with the same practice that led them to that stage of knowledge. If walking meditation begins to feel overly simple, one may at this point break the walking step into two parts, noting “lifting” as one lifts the foot straight up to float level with the other ankle, then “placing” as one moves the foot down and out in a straight line to rest one foot length from where it was before. The added complexity will help hold one’s attention and sharpen one’s awareness, allowing more precise observation of experiences and the relationships between them.

As one observes the moment-to-moment experiences that arise and cease during the meditation practice, one will come to recognize patterns of cause and effect that govern one’s experience in a very real way; sort of like a law of nature. Early on in the meditation practice, one will notice simple causal relationships; the desire to stand (mental) leading one to stand (physical), or standing up (physical) leading to an awareness of standing up (mental). During the observation of the rising and falling of the abdomen, one may become aware of the mind waiting for the abdomen to rise (mental) followed by the abdomen rising (physical) or the abdomen rising (physical) leading to a realization that the abdomen has risen (mental).

If such observations don’t come to the meditator on their own over time, it is recommended that a meditator pay special attention to the intention to change positions, noting, for example, “wanting to stand” or “wanting to sit” before standing up or sitting down. Noting the mental intention will help cultivate an awareness of the causal relationship between the body and the mind.

Another common sign of this stage of knowledge is the mind’s taking note of the sequential pattern of mental distraction - e.g. the observation of the abdomen being interrupted by a stray

thought which causes one to stray from the abdomen, which in turn leads to an awareness of the distraction, which in turn leads one to note the thought, which leads to the thought fading away, which leads one to return to observe the abdomen rising and falling again.

When this sort of sequential observation occurs often, the meditator may feel as if they are unable to keep the mind in the present moment. The knowledge of causal relationships between phenomena is, however, an important stage in the progress of insight, and should be noted objectively. Eventually, it is this sort of pattern recognition that will lead one to understand how certain mental states lead to suffering; how anger, for example, leads to pain and sickness, and how greed leads to stress and disappointment.

It is mental relationships such as these that form the basis of the law of karma; while ordinary physical and mental phenomena work according to cause and effect as described above, they tend to do so without definite repercussions either positive or negative. Certain mental activities, on the other hand - e.g. those based on greed, anger, or delusion - do have definite repercussions both on one's physical body and surrounding as well as one's state of mind.

If, for example, one were to step on an ant without knowledge, or kill a fly accidentally while attempting to save it from a spider's web, the result might be a sense of guilt or remorse, but it might just as well be one of indifference, since one's intentions were not directed towards harming. If on the other hand one were to consciously place poison around one's home in an effort to wipe out an ant colony, or if one were to drop helpless insects into a spider's web, the result would invariably be an increased inclination to cruelty and insensitivity towards the suffering of others. Through observation of cause and effect in this way, one comes to see the importance of one's mental state in determining one's future.

It is this stage of knowledge that leads one to see how mental states like greed, anger, arrogance, conceit, etc., bring about both negative changes in the body - leading to tension, fatigue, headaches, etc. - as well as negative mental habits that disrupt one's peace of mind and incline one towards acting and speaking in ways that cause suffering for oneself and others.

Likewise, one comes to see how mental states like love, compassion, objectivity, contentment, patience, etc., lead to positive physical benefits like reduced blood pressure, relaxation, proper digestion, etc., as well as having obvious mental benefits and cultivating positive character traits and habits that lead one to greater peace of mind and improved social interactions and relationships.

This stage is perhaps the first obvious example of a clear benefit to objective observation of reality. It is in fact considered a decisive victory for a meditator to attain this stage of knowledge; a meditator who is able to see the causal relationships between physical and mental phenomena is understood to have passed a crucial test in deciding whether they will be capable of attaining the higher stages of knowledge. It is said that if such a meditator continues their practice, they are guaranteed to attain the higher knowledges without question, as they have

proven themselves capable of discerning right from wrong based on their own direct observation.

Such a meditator no longer need take it on faith that one's actions (or rather the mental states behind one's actions) have repercussions; because of their direct observation of cause and effect, they are able to adjust their behaviour according to what brings true benefit to themselves and others. This knowledge of causality is thus an important step on the path to peace, one that should not be taken lightly or dismissed as inconsequential.

It is important to note that, as with the first stage of knowledge described in the previous chapter, this knowledge must arise without prompting or instigation; one cannot simply rationalize one's way to this sort of insight knowledge. Insight knowledge can only arise truly and genuinely through the practice of meditation similar to that outlined in the first volume of this series. Anyone who thinks that by merely reading or studying or even logic and reflection that they will come to understand these simple truths is most certainly mistaken and doomed to never experience the fruits of true insight knowledge.

To that end, let me once more repeat the encouragement to put these teachings into practice; the above is written not as a substitute for the practice of meditation as taught in the first volume, but merely as a guide to help those travelling the meditation path recognize the landmarks on their monumental journey to true peace, happiness, and freedom from suffering. May you all find this path and follow it to its goal.

Imperfections of Insight

It is at this point in one's practice that true insight into the nature of reality begins. Upon seeing the causal relationships between the body and the mind, one begins to naturally resist some habitual tendencies, realizing often for the first time that certain built-up habits are a cause of great suffering to oneself and others.

Through continued practice, one begins to favour objective, non-reactive observation, fueled by the constant reminding oneself of the nature of each experience free from bias or interpretation. It is at this stage that the meditator begins to truly develop skills like patience, equanimity, and wisdom. Rather than simply acquiescing to one's desires and aversions, one begins to bear with unpleasant sensations and forebear against the immediate inclination towards gratification of desire, due mainly to the realization that such reactivity is a real cause for stress and suffering.

It is this sort of realization that leads to the next stage of knowledge, which is based on a deepening understanding that the objects of experience are unworthy of the obsession we normally give to them. Seeing the suffering caused by clinging to transient objects of desire, one begins to realize that it is the very transience that makes them unworthy of desire; seeing the suffering caused by aversion to likewise transient unpleasant experiences, one begins to realize that they too are unworthy of such aversion, as they too will pass in their own time and on their own schedule.

Before this understanding comes to fruition, however, it is common for the mind to rebel, recoiling from the sudden onslaught of instability, insipidness, and chaos that arises from no longer chasing after pleasantness nor running away from unpleasantness. In the beginning, the experience of reality is more likely to lead one to seek out an alternative to that which is impermanent, stressful, and uncontrollable. As a result, a new meditator will tend to cling to anything that appears at first glance even remotely stable, satisfying, or controllable. Such objects of clinging are called the "imperfections of insight", of which ten are enumerated in the texts.

1. **obhāsa ("illumination")** - Some meditators experience extraordinary concentration-based visions during their practice that can distract them from the object of clear comprehension and mindfulness. Some meditators see bright lights, or feel like the room is brighter even with their eyes closed. Some meditators see colours or shapes dancing behind their eyelids. Some meditators see visions of religious symbols or natural landscapes. All of these are ordinary byproducts of meditation practice, but any of them can become obstacles if one clings to them as stable, satisfying, or controllable, since they in fact are none of these things.

   Visions of any sort should be noted as detailed in the first volume, as "seeing, seeing…" until they disappear or are no longer an object of interest for the mind. Any attachment to the vision should likewise be noted as "liking, liking…".

2. **ñāṇa (“knowledge”)** - In the course of meditating on one’s thoughts and emotions, one may slip into the mode of trying to solve the various mundane problems in one’s life, giving up the practice of mental development for that of physical success and prosperity. One might begin to speculate on business dealings or personal relationships, trying to find solutions to these and other worldly dilemmas.

   Due to the heightened clarity of mind it brings, meditation is well-suited to providing such knowledge. Indeed, the power of the meditative mind is said to have few real boundaries in the mundane realm. A meditator might find themselves giving rise to profound insights into their mundane affairs, or even having visions or empathic realizations of the physical and mental states of other beings. While such knowledge and insight is of value in a mundane sphere, it is useless in the practice of mental development and should, after a firm self-reminder of the true purpose of meditation, be noted objectively as “thinking, thinking…” or “knowing, knowing…”

3. **Pīti (“rapture”)** - During meditation, one may slip into one of many ecstatic states, which likewise become a distraction from the practice. Some meditators will begin to rock back and forth seemingly unintentionally; some meditators will feel light as though they were floating; some meditators will begin to laugh or cry uncontrollably; some meditators will feel energy flowing through their bodies or striking them like a bolt of lightning. There are many types of experience that could be classified as “rapture” in this sense. The important point is that none of these experiences are intrinsically beneficial; they are all impermanent, unsatisfying, and uncontrollable, no matter how much to the contrary they may appear. It is only by noting them objectively as “ swaying, swaying…” etc., that one begins to see them for what they are.

   If, even upon noting an ecstatic experience at length, one finds that it refuses to cease, it is recommended that one jog one’s mind back to reality by reaffirming one’s commitment to objective observation, for which such experiences are ill-suited. Often it will take an actual self-rebuke, as in telling oneself “Stop!” to pull the mind out of its absorption in the generally pleasant sensation of ecstatic experience.

4. **passaddhi (“quietude”)** - Tranquility of mind is considered a positive outcome of meditation practice; in fact, most of the items on this list are not intrinsically harmful. Like the others, however, a quiet mind can become a cause for complacency. Many meditators who have previously practiced without a teacher will come to us asking what they should do when they find their minds have become so quiet they have nothing left to be mindful of. The answer, of course, is that one should be mindful of the quietude itself as “quiet, quiet…” or “calm, calm…” If there is an enjoyment of the experience, that too should be noted as “liking, liking…”

5. **sukha (“happiness”)** - Though this has been discussed previously, it bears mentioning again, simply because of the seductive quality of pleasant feelings; they should not be shunned or avoided, but neither should they be clung to or obsessed over. They *must* be

observed objectively by reminding oneself “happy, happy…” or they will invariably lead to attachment, complacency, and disappointment when they are later unobtainable.

6. **adhimokkha (“resolve”)** - This refers to the confidence that comes from successful meditation practice. Obviously, such confidence is important but, as mentioned earlier, when it is dissociated from wisdom, it can lead to distraction and diversion. Often new meditators will let their confidence overtake their meditation practice, as they reflect on their success and attainment. They might begin to plan ways of encouraging others to practice, or think of ways to repay their teachers and supporters. Or they might simply wallow in their self-assurance, thinking they have attained some supramundane state of being. These various states should be noted, reminding oneself of their various natures as previously instructed.

7. **paggaha (“exertion”)** - Some meditators will become hyper-energetic, feeling like they can practice all day and night without stopping. One meditator might feel the need to walk quickly back and forth to release their energy; another might be inclined to engage in physical exercise. While effort is important in meditation practice, it must be tempered by concentration. One should note energy when it becomes apparent, not succumbing to the desire to provide it with an outlet outside of the meditation practice.

8. **upaṭṭhāna (“attention”)** - This refers to the state of attentiveness brought about by the constant practice of mindfulness. As a result of the practice, one is able to attend to any subject - past, present, or future - without obstruction or difficulty. This becomes an obstacle when one takes up as an object of observation something that is outside the present moment. Some meditators will fixate on past memories; others on plans for the future; some will create stories or fantasies with such clarity and detail that they become completely absorbed in their machinations. All of these activities should be seen as distractions from the path and noted with appropriate remembrance and clarity of thought directed to the base experience that gave rise to them.

9. **upekkhā (“equanimity”)** - Like happiness, calm can be seductive in its pull, leading a meditator to forget about their practice in favour of simply wallowing in the state of neutrality. Further, equanimity can lead to delusions of enlightenment, as one reflects that one is no longer plagued by likes or dislikes. Such thoughts should be noted as they arise, and one should remind oneself “calm, calm…” as previously instructed in order to avoid making more out of the temporary state of calm than is warranted.

10. **nikanti (“desire”)** - For many meditators, there will arise a yearning for the other items on this list. For others, desire will arise for sense pleasure, towards either past or present experiences. Yet others might cling to a desire for insight itself, wishing or wondering when positive results as yet unrealized will come to them. All of these should be recognized as harmful obstacles to true understanding of reality and noted accordingly.

Only once these sort of experiences are discarded and one is able to fully comprehend what is the true and proper path to mental development, (i.e. clear and objective recognition of reality as it is without any sort of partiality or extrapolation), will one be able to appreciate the simple fact

that no experience is worth clinging to. This simple truth makes up most of the remainder of the path and will be dealt with in the next chapter.

To this end, meditators should take note of the many ways in which one can become distracted from the path, enticed into false conception of stability, satisfaction, and control by the many pleasant and even positive byproducts of the meditation practice. Meditators must stand ready to observe such experiences with a clear mind, reminding themselves of the true essence of these experiences using simple mantras that capture their nature clearly and succinctly according to the practice described in the first volume in this series. Once they are able to do this, they will be ready to enter the realm of true and profound insight into the nature of reality.

The Path of Insight

As discussed in the previous chapter, one's ability to progress on the path to true peace depends upon how one reacts to the characteristics of the objects of one's experience. Regardless of one's beliefs and opinions about the various kinds of experiential phenomena, they all share three characteristics in common:

1. They are all impermanent - whether inside ourselves or in the world around us, there is nothing we can hold on to as stable, lasting, or secure; all experiences are unstable, unpredictable, ephemeral, and undependable.

2. They are all insubstantial - whether inside ourselves or in the world around us, there is nothing we can hold onto as me, mine, or the self, as all experiential phenomena are transient, arising and ceasing based on causes and conditions; they are, as a result, also uncontrollable.

3. They are all unsatisfying - whether inside ourselves or in the world around us, there is no one thing that can truly satisfy us, since all experiences are impermanent, and likewise insubstantial and uncontrollable.

While these characteristics are easily understood intellectually as applying to the objects of experience, it is only through the practice of insight meditation up to this point that one comes to see, by extrapolating on one's meditation experience, that all of reality is made up entirely of that which is impermanent, insubstantial, and thus unsatisfying. For this reason, the meditator may begin to waver in their practice at this point, seeking desperately to return to the comfortable illusion of stability, substantiality, and satisfaction.

Some meditators may even consider quitting the practice as they discover that the experience of meditation exposes the chaos in their minds and the tension and pain in their bodies without offering any refuge from this stark view of reality as it is. They may feel that they are inadequate, simply not up to the task of facing the true nature of their mind. Or, they may feel that the practice itself is the problem; having been touted from the beginning as "the path to peace", it is understandable that the meditation practice may come under question at this point.

Regardless of their difficulties, most meditators who follow this technique of meditation will, either with the encouragement of a teacher or through their own determination, come to see the difference between what is and what is not the path, as their practice thus far has been based entirely on objectivity. Applying this objectivity to both the harsh reality of mundane experience as well as the more comfortable illusion presented by the various "special" states mentioned in the last chapter, one comes to the gradual realization that all of reality is merely a sequence of experiences that are worthy of neither desire nor aversion, and that true peace and happiness cannot depend on such experiences.

This gradual realization comprises the remainder of the path of insight, up until the final point where one realizes clearly and fully that nothing is worth clinging to and one's mind lets go

completely and realizes true peace, just as a bird that flies away only when it releases its hold on the tree. In this chapter, we will look at the gradual path to this goal; we will reserve our discussion of the realization of peace for the next and final chapter.

The path of insight leading up to final realization is gradated into a series of stages, delimiting various states of revelation as the mind gradually attains perfect understanding of reality. While it is generally thought to be unhelpful for a new meditator to know too much about these stages or to study them in depth, prior knowledge of an outline of the general path is arguably better than no knowledge at all, as it will help one incline oneself accordingly.

What is important to note is that one should use these stages not as a detailed road map, but as a general guide to the practice as a whole, for several reasons: first, each meditator's path is unique and guessing where one is on the path is much better left up to a qualified teacher with the experience of having guided many meditators along the path; second, regardless of one's ability to assess progress on the stages of insight, one's vision will always be clouded in regards to oneself as it is one's subjectivity that makes up the bulk of the challenge in meditation itself; and finally, most importantly, fixation on one's level of progress is most likely to bring about expectation and false affirmation of superficial insight in one's quest to progress to the next level.

For these reasons, caution is encouraged in relation to not only the individual stages of progress outlined below, but also in relation to the entire concept of progress in general. A true measure of one's practice can only be had in the present moment, in relation to whether one truly comprehends the experience of the present moment as it is without bias or extrapolation. Long term progress is actually a poor measure of one's success, both because of the complexity of the mind in terms of the conflict between one's old, unskillful habits and one's newer, more skillful habits of clarity of mind and because of the inherent difficulty in self-assessment in general.

That being said, without a close relationship with a teacher, a basic outline of the path will be indispensable to the aspiring meditator; it is with this in mind that the following outline is provided, though it must be well understood that these stages will arise by themselves through the practice of clear observation, and are not to be confused with intellectual reflection.

1. Once the meditator has succeeded in discerning the difference between what is the path (objective observation) and what is not (avoiding reality or clinging to specific experiences), one will begin to appreciate the simple truth that all phenomena arise from nothing and cease without remainder. This important observation will provide a solid foundation for further realizations, and is considered the first of the insight knowledges.

2. Gradually, the mind will shift and focus more on the aspect of cessation; the meditator may feel like their practice is not progressing as they no longer see the entirety of objects of observation, catching them only as they cease. It is at this stage that the meditator begins to realize that nothing exists outside of the experience of the present moment; some meditators will observe that the room around them and even their bodies seem to have "disappeared", as they lose their fixation on conceptual reality, realizing

that once an experience ceases, the entity it represents also ceases. This insight marks a decisive shift from conceptual to ultimate reality, and is equally as important as the last.

3. The mind's fixation on the cessation of experience leads to several knowledges in succession. First, there comes the realization of the dangers in complacency and by extension clinging, since everything we hold dear could leave us at any moment. Indeed, this knowledge becomes so acute that some meditators will begin to actually feel afraid of ordinary objects, as they cope with the bare awareness of the insubstantiality and undependability of all things in the world. This fear is not useful, however, and should be noted systematically as "afraid, afraid", without letting it take control of one's mind.

4. Next, one begins to lose one's infatuation with objects of the senses; initially, this can lead to feelings of revulsion and symptoms of minor physical sickness and mental malaise as one uncovers previously unrealized negative aspects of the objects of one's desire.

5. Eventually, one will come to the point where all of experience will appear as insipid and undesirable. While this realization will ultimately lead to great peace and happiness once one's insight has matured, at this point it often brings about boredom and anxiety as the mind continues to seek for an experience that is stable, satisfying, and substantial. Nonetheless, this knowledge is a turning point whereat the mind, previously inclined strongly towards the pursuit of sensual gratification, begins to turn away from sensual pleasure as the evidence begins to show undeniably that its pursuit is ultimately futile and based on flawed assumptions and beliefs.

6. At some point in this process, the meditator will generally come to another crossroad, where the conflict between one's desire to be free and one's desire to cling to sensuality will come to a head. Without proper guidance, a meditator may at this point decide to quit the meditation practice as the desire to be free is misdirected by one's habitual desires, leading one to believe that a return to sensual pleasure will free one from one's current predicament. For the most part, however, such thoughts do not last long, as one's insight is generally strong enough to see the fault in such reasoning. Eventually, either through guidance from a teacher, or through one's own fortitude of mind, one will reaffirm the truth that freedom from clinging is the only way to be truly happy and continue on one's path.

7. At this point, the practice will begin in earnest. Whereas before this point the meditator was most likely conflicted about the practice, they now have a clear and unobstructed vision of the path, having finally dealt with their doubts and reservations about the practice entirely. The next stage of practice is at once more difficult and far easier than the last, as one begins to face reality head on without any uncertainty or misgivings. At this stage, the three characteristics of experience should become exceedingly clear to the meditator. It may appear that one's practice has become more difficult or that one has regressed in one's practice; in reality, the mind is simply going over everything that it previously avoided dealing with and replacing unskillful habits with more skillful ones.

8. Eventually the efficiency of mind cultivated in the previous knowledge will bear fruit and the meditator will begin to feel the practice becoming progressively easier, while at the same time becoming progressively more effective as well. One will know that one has reached the pinnacle of insight practice when one's practice becomes effortless and unimpeded and one's tendency to judge or react to experience fades away entirely. At this stage, the meditator will become completely equanimous about all phenomena, seeing them all clearly for the first time simply as they truly are.

Having gone through each of the above stages in succession, the meditator comes to the point where they are finally able to truly let go and be free from clinging. It can be said that at this point the meditator has reached the pinnacle of existence, a state that is excelled only by its fruit, which will be the object of discussion in the next chapter.

Again, it can not be stressed enough that the above description is only useful as a general guide, and not suitable for detailed comparison to or analysis of one's own practice. In depth knowledge of the stages of insight is best used by a teacher to assess a student's progress on the path, but a general knowledge of the path is useful for a student as well, provided it doesn't give rise to expectation or intellectualization of one's practice. Meditators should be encouraged to see progress in the clarity of the present moment alone, and focus their attention on cultivating that clarity as a habit. All insight into reality depends on this, and has it as a sufficient cause for its arising. May all beings be able to practice and realize these insights for themselves.

Realization of Freedom

Freedom is a word that has as many diverse meanings as the word peace. In our meditation tradition, however, they are a part of the same experience; freedom means freedom from suffering, and peace is the result of that very freedom. In this final chapter, we will look at how the meditation practice leads to complete freedom and peace, and discuss the result of attaining true spiritual enlightenment.

As a meditator progresses through the stages of knowledge, seeing the nature of impermanence, inability to satisfy, and insubstantiality inherent in all mundane reality, they will find themselves increasingly free from suffering, experiencing an increasing amount of peace as a result. This mundane peace is not the true goal of meditation, however, as it is not safe from potential regression by the meditator. That is not to say that there is a goal beyond freedom from suffering and peace, but that the nature of the freedom and peace that are the true goal of meditation practice transcends mundane experience, and one who realizes them is no longer susceptible to regressing back into conflict and suffering.

Transcendental freedom from suffering is called *nirvana*, and is often misunderstood as being a kind of heaven or blissful state of experience. The truth of *nirvana* is that it is the simple consequence of letting go. Our ordinary experience of the mundane depends on our continuous craving and clinging to experience, due in turn to our ignorance of the unsatisfying nature of said experience. As we begin to look more closely at our experiences through the practice of meditation, we begin to change our perspective, seeing clearly that the things we thought were worth desiring and clinging to are not. This clarity of vision in turn leads to the weakening of our grasp on the objects of experience until there comes a moment of perfect clarity and the mind releases its hold on experience completely.

In practical terms, the meditator will begin to experience an increasing refinement of perception until every object that arises is seen with perfect objectivity, with no reacting to or craving for any object whatsoever. At this time the meditator will feel perfectly equanimous and mindful without any desire or aversion. Everything that they experience will appear to cease as soon as it has arisen, with mindful noting proceeding unimpeded for increasingly long periods of time. During one of these periods there will eventually arise a perfect observation of one of the three characteristics of either impermanence, suffering, or non-self. Examples of such an experience are:

- In the case of impermanence, one might experience an erratic or unexpected movement of the abdomen, fast when it was just slow, shallow when it was just deep, etc.
- In the case of suffering, one might experience a stiffness or unpleasantness to the movement of the abdomen.
- In the case of non-self, one might experience a smooth movement of the abdomen, totally independent of one's will or intention.

Any such experience comes to the meditator at the pinnacle of their practice, without any special investigation or intention. One should not ever try to evoke or seek out such experiences, as that will do little besides increase one's ego and attachment.

After experiencing one of the three characteristics with perfect clarity as described, the mind will enter into perfect alignment with the simple truth that nothing could ever possibly be worth clinging to; the truth that clinging is by its very nature a useless and futile activity. This alignment is not an intellectual knowledge, it is like knowing something exists because you see it right in front of you.

The next moment that proceeds directly from this perfection of vision is the experience of *nirvana*, which is without any arising or ceasing of physical or mental phenomena. Indeed, there will not even be any memory of the experience afterwards, as there was nothing to be remembered for its arising or ceasing. It is quite literally supermundane, as it is the one state outside of arisen phenomena. It is like the extinguishing of a flame, or the turning off of a light switch.

The experience of *nirvana* can last anywhere from a few brief moments to hours or even days in rare (and usually advanced) cases. In each instance, there will be the same cessation of experience, followed by no recollection of anything during the time one was in that state. It is important to understand that descriptions of *nirvana* will always be of limited value and potentially misleading if one has never experienced it for oneself. It is likewise easy to mistake states like sleep or trance for *nirvana* as there are many types of state that leave one with little or no memory of the experience. *Nirvana* is unique in that it proceeds from a perfect understanding of reality and thus involves complete detachment from experience.

Because there is no memory involved with the experience of *nirvana*, one will only be able to recognize the experience after the fact. This recognition has five parts, as follows:

1. One will remember what led to the experience, as described above relating to the three characteristics;
2. One will understand that *something* happened, that there was a cessation of all experience, though one will not know for how long without checking the clock;
3. One will have a profound sense of peace related to the experience, and the mind will feel completely refreshed and awake in a way one has never felt before;
4. One will be cognisant of a change in one's mental faculties, realizing that certain unwholesome habits or inclinations are completely absent;
5. One will be cognisant of the existence of further unwholesome habits and inclinations, more subtle than the previous and only now susceptible to one's conscious awareness.

For a meditator who has reached the end of the path and become an *arahant*, only the first four recognitions will arise as there are then no further unwholesome qualities of mind to remove.

A person who has gone through the above process can be rightly considered as one who has experienced enlightenment. Even a momentary glimpse of the cessation of *nirvana* is enough to effect profound and irrevocable change. Subsequent experiences of cessation lead to

further refinement of character until the meditator can be described as being free from mental impurity entirely. This gradual purification is broken up into four stages, as follows:

1. The first experience of complete cessation frees a meditator from impurities relating to views and beliefs. One who has experienced cessation even once will have no remaining wrong views or doubts about what constitutes freedom, enlightenment, or the path.
2. Subsequent experiences of cessation will weaken one's biases and partialities of aversion and attraction. Each experience of cessation will further purify the mind, allowing one to become increasingly free from the domination of these harmful mind states.
3. Eventually one will reach a point where they are free from any addiction or aversion to sense objects. At this point all that is left is residual immaterial ambitions and aversions, as well as states like distraction and conceit.
4. Finally, through persistent application of mindfulness to the finest degree and attainment of cessation to the point of complete clarity of mind, one will free oneself from all ignorance and delusion, allowing no further cause for suffering, stress or harm to oneself or others to arise. At this point, one can be said to have attained the true goal of the meditation practice.

This process and its attainments are described here primarily in order to clarify that the true goal of meditation practice is not simply temporary mundane stress relief. This description is not meant to be a focus of the meditator during their mental development, but rather a reminder of the depth and potency of the meditation practice in effecting true and lasting change. It should serve as encouragement for the meditator that what they are doing is something profound and worthy of all the time and effort they might apply to it.

This ends the second part of How To Meditate, written for the benefit of advanced meditators in order to attempt to put into simple terms these profound and ultimately experiential teachings. As always, the real truth is within you and true realization must come for yourself through your own practice. These words are only a guide to lead you to that realization for yourself; never be content with intellectual knowledge or understanding. May all who read this benefit from it by using it to further their practice and attain true freedom from suffering.