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SAYADAW U PANDITA

Foreword by Joseph Goldstein • Edited by Kate Wheeler

IN THIS VERY LIFE

THE LIBERATION TEACHINGS OF THE BUDDHA

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The Liberation Teachings of the Buddha

Sayadaw U Pandita

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FOREWORD

I first met Sayadaw U Pandita in the spring of 1984, when he came to teach a three-month meditation course at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts. We awaited his arrival with great anticipation, having heard of his remarkable presence and unique teaching skills. In some way, that course was a turning point in the transmission of Theravāda Buddhist practice in the West. In ways that we could not have imagined at the time, his teaching and presence helped to open many new doors of understanding. As a skilled meditation master, he guided us through the subtleties of practice; as a renowned scholar, he brought new meaning and life to the timeless words of the Buddha; and as a great spiritual friend, he inspired us to seek the highest freedom.

Just as the Buddha came from the warrior class of ancient India, so too, Sayadaw U Pandita is a spiritual warrior of our time. He is a rare teacher, uncompromising in his belief that liberation is possible. Through his own example of heroic endeavor, Sayadaw gave life to the last exhortation of the Buddha—"practice with diligence"—and inspired a whole generation of practitioners to follow suit. Sayadaw has helped us recognize our own capacity to go beyond the limitations of the conditioned mind.

It is said that the gift of Dhamma is the highest gift. What makes it possible for us to receive it is the wisdom and compassion of those who pass it on. It is a great blessing that Sayadaw U Pandita has so openly shared with us the depth and breadth of his understanding. His teachings set a high benchmark in the continuing transmission of Buddhism in the West.

In This Very Life is a collection of talks from the first three-month retreat that Sayadaw taught at the Insight Meditation Society. He describes in detail both the practical journey of awakening and a profound theoretical model of understanding. These discourses reward a thoughtful reading, allowing the familiar aspects of the teachings to mature in our minds, and challenging us with new perspectives on some old and cherished viewpoints.

This book is a treasure-house of applied Dhamma. May it help to awaken wisdom and compassion in us all.

Joseph Goldstein
Barre, Massachusetts

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This book came into being through the help of many people.

We want to thank all those who arranged for and supported Sayadaw U Pandita's course at the Insight Meditation Society, Barre, Massachusetts in 1984. Venerable U Aggacitta expertly and lucidly translated Sayadaw U Pandita's discourses. Ron Browning asked that the tapes be transcribed. Evelyn Sweeney patiently transcribed them. U Mya Thaung went over every word of the manuscript, and Eric Kolvig edited one draft of it. We are grateful to Bruce Mitteldorf for his generous contribution toward the printing of this book.

Kate Wheeler steadfastly and very skillfully devoted months to editing the talks—none of this would have been possible without her.

Sharon Salzberg
Insight Meditation Society
Barre, Massachusetts

TO THE READER

It is my humble and sincere wish to help you discover for yourself the state of inner peace through the essays in this book, based on the Dhamma, or way of truth, taught by the Buddha and also following the tradition of the late Venerable Mahāsī Sayadaw of Rangoon, Burma. I am trying my best, as far as my wisdom can take me, to provide this service to you.

The publication of these essays helps fulfill five beneficial purposes. First, it may give you access to new aspects of the Dhamma that you might not have heard before. Second, if you have already heard about these subjects, you may be able to consolidate your knowledge of the Dhamma. Third, if you have doubts, these essays may help you to clear them. Fourth, if you have certain pet views and preconceptions that are incorrect, you may be relieved of them by proper and respectful attention to the Dhamma of the Buddha.

The last and perhaps the most fulfilling aspect is that you may be able to tally your own experiences with what is written in this book. If your practice is deep, it can be a joyous and rapturous occasion when you realize that your experiences conform to the theory.

If you do not practice meditation, perhaps these essays can inspire you to begin. Then wisdom, the most potent medicine, can bring you relief from the sufferings of your mind.

I offer you my personal best wishes and encouragement. May you reach liberation, the highest goal.

Sayadaw U Pandita

TECHNICAL NOTE

The Pāli terms in this text are meant to introduce a precision of meaning that is not possible in English. It is hoped that readers will pause and reflect in a way they might not, had the terms simply been translated.

Pāli is used this way in Burma and in most of the communities in countries where vipassanā meditation is practiced. As Pāli words are incorporated into living languages, they inevitably lose endings or suffer other minor changes. The Pāli in this text will differ slightly from academic usage. This reflects the use in Sayadaw U Pandita's native Burma, and more important, the refined application of these terms specifically to meditation practice and understanding. For ease of readability, we have used English forms for pluralization or adjectival case.

The first use of a term in the text is italicized and subsequent uses are generally unemphasized. Definitions will be found in the glossary.

I. BASIC MORALITY & MEDITATION INSTRUCTIONS

We do not practice meditation to gain admiration from anyone. Rather, we practice to contribute to peace in the world. We try to follow the teachings of the Buddha, and take the instructions of trustworthy teachers, in hopes that we too can reach the Buddha's state of purity. Having realized this purity within ourselves, we can inspire others and share this Dhamma, this truth.

The Buddha's teachings can be summed up in three parts: *sīla,* morality; *samādhi,* concentration; and *paññā,* intuitive wisdom.

Sīla is spoken of first because it is the foundation for the other two. Its importance cannot be overstressed. Without sīla, no further practices can be undertaken. For laypeople the basic level of sīla consists of five precepts or training rules: refraining from taking life, refraining from taking what is not given, refraining from sexual misconduct, refraining from lying, and refraining from taking intoxicating substances. These observances foster a basic purity that makes it easy to progress along the path of practice.

A BASIC SENSE OF HUMANITY

Sīla is not a set of commandments handed down by the Buddha, and it need not be confined to Buddhist teachings. It actually derives from a basic sense of humanity. For example, suppose

we have a spurt of anger and want to harm another being. If we put ourselves in that other being's shoes, and honestly contemplate the action we have been planning, we will quickly answer, "No, I wouldn't want that done to me. That would be cruel and unjust." If we feel this way about some action that we plan, we can be quite sure that the action is unwholesome.

In this way, morality can be looked upon as a manifestation of our sense of oneness with other beings. We know what it feels like to be harmed, and out of loving care and consideration we undertake to avoid harming others. We should remain committed to truthful speech and avoid words that abuse, deceive, or slander. As we practice refraining from angry actions and angry speech, then this gross and unwholesome mental state may gradually cease to arise, or at least it will become weaker and less frequent.

Of course, anger is not the only reason we harm other beings. Greed might make us try to grab something in an illegal or unethical way. Or our sexual desire can attach itself to another person's partner. Here again, if we consider how much we could hurt someone, we will try hard to refrain from succumbing to lustful desire.

Even in small amounts, intoxicating substances can make us less sensitive, more easily swayed by gross motivations of anger and greed. Some people defend the use of drugs or alcohol, saying that these substances are not so bad. On the contrary, they are very dangerous; they can lead even a good-hearted person into forgetfulness. Like accomplices to a crime, intoxicants open the door to a host of problems, from just talking nonsense, to inexplicable bursts of rage, to negligence that could be fatal to oneself or others. Indeed, any intoxicated person is unpredictable. Abstaining from intoxicants is therefore a way of protecting all the other precepts.

For those whose devotion makes them wish to undertake a further discipline, there are also sets of eight and ten precepts for

laypeople, ten precepts for nuns, and the Vinaya, or 227 rules for monks. There is more information about these forms of sīla in the glossary.

Refinements during a Retreat

During a meditation retreat it becomes useful to change some of our conduct in ways that support the intensification of meditation practice. In a retreat, silence becomes the appropriate form of right speech, and celibacy that of sexual conduct. One eats lightly to prevent drowsiness and to weaken sensual appetite. The Buddha recommended fasting from noon until the following morning; or, if this is difficult, one could eat only a little in the afternoon. During the time one thus gains to practice, one may well discover that the taste of the Dhamma excels all worldly tastes!

Cleanliness is another support for developing insight and wisdom. You should bathe, keep nails and hair trimmed, and take care to regulate the bowels. This is known as internal cleanliness. Externally, your clothing and bedroom should be tidy and neat. Such observance is said to bring clarity and lightness of mind. Obviously, you do not make cleanliness an obsession. In the context of a retreat, adornments, cosmetics, fragrances, and time-consuming practices to beautify and perfect the body are not appropriate.

In fact, in this world there is no greater adornment than purity of conduct, no greater refuge, and no other basis for the flowering of insight and wisdom. Sīla brings a beauty that is not plastered onto the outside, but instead comes from the heart and is reflected in the entire person. Suitable for everyone, regardless of age, station, or circumstance, truly it is the adornment for all seasons. So please be sure to keep your virtue fresh and alive.

Even if we refine our speech and actions to a large extent, however, sīla is not sufficient in itself to tame the mind. A method is needed to bring us to spiritual maturity, to help us

realize the real nature of life and to bring the mind to a higher level of understanding. That method is meditation.

MEDITATION INSTRUCTIONS

The Buddha suggested that either a forest place under a tree or any other very quiet place is best for meditation. He said the meditator should sit quietly and peacefully with legs crossed. If sitting with crossed legs proves to be too difficult, other sitting postures may be used. For those with back trouble a chair is quite acceptable. It is true that to achieve peace of mind, we must make sure our body is at peace. So it is important to choose a position that will be comfortable for a long period of time.

Sit with your back erect, at a right angle to the ground, but not too stiff. The reason for sitting straight is not difficult to see. An arched or crooked back will soon bring pain. Furthermore, the physical effort to remain upright without additional support energizes the meditation practice.

Close your eyes. Now place your attention at the belly, at the abdomen. Breathe normally, not forcing your breathing, neither slowing it down nor hastening it, just a natural breath. You will become aware of certain sensations as you breathe in and the abdomen rises, as you breathe out and the abdomen falls. Now sharpen your aim and make sure that the mind is attentive to the entirety of each process. Be aware from the very beginning of all sensations involved in the rising. Maintain a steady attention through the middle and the end of the rising. Then be aware of the sensations of the falling movement of the abdomen from the beginning, through the middle, and to the very end of the falling.

Although we describe the rising and falling as having a beginning, a middle, and an end, this is only in order to show that your awareness should be continuous and thorough. We do not intend you to break these processes into three segments. You

should try to be aware of each of these movements from beginning to end as one complete process, as a whole. Do not peer at the sensations with an overfocused mind, specifically looking to discover how the abdominal movement begins or ends.

In this meditation it is very important to have both effort and precise aim, so that the mind meets the sensation directly and powerfully. An essential aid to precision and accuracy is to make a soft mental note of the object of awareness, naming the sensation by saying the word gently and silently in the mind, like "rising, rising…falling, falling."

Returning from Wandering

There will be moments when the mind wanders off. You will start to think of something. At this time, watch the mind! Be aware that you are thinking. To clarify this to yourself, note the thought silently with the verbal label "thinking, thinking," and come back to the rising and falling.

The same practice should be used for objects of awareness that arise at any of what are called the six sense doors: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. Despite making an effort to do so, no one can remain perfectly focused on the rising and falling of the abdomen forever. Other objects inevitably arise and become predominant. Thus, the sphere of meditation encompasses all of our experiences: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, sensations in the body, and mental objects such as visions in the imagination or emotions. When any of these objects arise you should focus direct awareness on them, and use a gentle verbal label "spoken" in the mind.

During a sitting meditation, if another object impinges strongly on the awareness so as to draw it away from the rising and falling of the abdomen, this object must be clearly noted. For example, if a loud sound arises during your meditation, consciously direct your attention toward that sound as soon as it arises. Be aware of the sound as a direct experience, and also

identify it succinctly with the soft, internal verbal label "hearing, hearing." When the sound fades and is no longer predominant, come back to the rising and falling. This is the basic principle to follow in sitting meditation.

In making the verbal label, there is no need for complex language. One simple word is best. For the eye, ear, and tongue doors we simply say, "Seeing, seeing… Hearing, hearing… Tasting, tasting." For sensations in the body we may choose a slightly more descriptive term like warmth, pressure, hardness, or motion. Mental objects appear to present a bewildering diversity, but actually they fall into just a few clear categories such as thinking, imagining, remembering, planning, and visualizing. But remember that in using the labeling technique, your goal is not to gain verbal skills. Labeling technique helps us to perceive clearly the actual qualities of our experience, without getting immersed in the content. It develops mental power and focus. In meditation we seek a deep, clear, precise awareness of the mind and body. This direct awareness shows us the truth about our lives, the actual nature of mental and physical processes.

Meditation need not come to an end after an hour of sitting. It can be carried out continuously through the day. When you get up from sitting, you must note carefully—beginning with the intention to open the eyes. "Intending, intending… Opening, opening." Experience the mental event of intending, and feel the sensations of opening the eyes. Continue to note carefully and precisely, with full observing power, through the whole transition of postures until the moment you have stood up, and when you begin to walk. Throughout the day you should also be aware of, and mentally note, all other activities, such as stretching, bending your arm, taking a spoon, putting on clothes, brushing your teeth, closing the door, opening the door, closing your eyelids, eating, and so forth. All of these activities should be noted with careful awareness and a soft mental label.

Apart from the hours of sound sleep, you should try to

maintain continuous mindfulness throughout your waking hours. Actually this is not a heavy task; it is just sitting and walking and simply observing whatever occurs.

WALKING MEDITATION

During a retreat it is usual to alternate periods of sitting meditation with periods of formal walking meditation of about the same duration, one after another throughout the day. One hour is a standard period, but forty-five minutes can also be used. For formal walking, retreatants choose a lane of about twenty steps in length and walk slowly back and forth along it.

In daily life, walking meditation can also be very helpful. A short period—say ten minutes—of formal walking meditation before sitting serves to focus the mind. Beyond this advantage, the awareness developed in walking meditation is useful to all of us as we move our bodies from place to place in the course of a normal day.

Walking meditation develops balance and accuracy of awareness as well as durability of concentration. One can observe very profound aspects of the Dhamma while walking, and even get enlightened! In fact, a yogi who does not do walking meditation before sitting is like a car with a rundown battery. He or she will have a difficult time starting the engine of mindfulness when sitting.

Walking meditation consists of paying attention to the walking process. If you are moving fairly rapidly, make a mental note of the movement of the legs, "Left, right, left, right" and use your awareness to follow the actual sensations throughout the leg area. If you are moving more slowly, note the lifting, moving, and placing of each foot. In each case you must try to keep your mind on just the sensations of walking. Notice what processes occur when you stop at the end of the lane, when you stand still, when you turn and begin walking again. Do not watch your feet unless this becomes necessary due to some obstacle on the

ground; it is unhelpful to hold the image of a foot in your mind while you are trying to be aware of sensations. You want to focus on the sensations themselves, and these are not visual. For many people it is a fascinating discovery when they are able to have a pure, bare perception of physical objects such as lightness, tingling, cold, and warmth.

Usually we divide walking into three distinct movements: lifting, moving, and placing the foot. To support a precise awareness, we separate the movements clearly, making a soft mental label at the beginning of each movement, and making sure that our awareness follows it clearly and powerfully until it ends. One minor but important point is to begin noting the placing movement at the instant that the foot begins to move downward.

A New World in Sensations

Let us consider lifting. We know its conventional name, but in meditation it is important to penetrate behind that conventional concept and to understand the true nature of the whole process of lifting, beginning with the intention to lift and continuing through the actual process, which involves many sensations.

Our effort to be aware of lifting the foot must neither overshoot the sensation nor weakly fall short of this target. Precise and accurate mental aim helps balance our effort. When our effort is balanced and our aim is precise, mindfulness will firmly establish itself on the object of awareness. It is only in the presence of these three factors—effort, accuracy, and mindfulness—that concentration develops. Concentration, of course, is collectedness of mind, one-pointedness. Its characteristic is to keep consciousness from becoming diffuse or dispersed.

As we get closer and closer to this lifting process, we will see that it is like a line of ants crawling across the road. From afar the line may appear to be static, but from closer up it begins to shimmer and vibrate. And from even closer the line breaks up into

individual ants, and we see that our notion of a line was just an illusion. We now accurately perceive the line of ants as one ant after another ant, after another ant. Exactly like this, when we look accurately at the lifting process from beginning to end, the mental factor or quality of consciousness called "insight" comes nearer to the object of observation. The nearer insight comes, the clearer the true nature of the lifting process can be seen. It is an amazing fact about the human mind that when insight arises and deepens through *vipassanā* (or insight) meditation practice, particular aspects of the truth about existence tend to be revealed in a definite order. This order is known as the progress of insight.

The first insight that meditators commonly experience is to begin to comprehend—not intellectually or by reasoning, but quite intuitively—that the lifting process is composed of distinct mental and material phenomena occurring together, as a pair. The physical sensations, which are material, are linked with, but different from, the awareness, which is mental. We begin to see a whole succession of mental events and physical sensations, and to appreciate the conditionality that relates mind and matter. We see with the greatest freshness and immediacy that mind causes matter—as when our intention to lift the foot initiates the physical sensations of movement, and we see that matter causes mind—as when a physical sensation of strong heat generates a wish to move our walking meditation into a shady spot. The insight into cause and effect can take a great variety of forms; but when it arises, our life seems far more simple to us than ever before. Our life is no more than a chain of mental and physical causes and effects. This is the second insight in the classical progress of insight.

As we develop concentration we see even more deeply that these phenomena of the lifting process are impermanent, impersonal, appearing, and disappearing one by one at fantastic speed. This is the next level of insight, the next aspect of existence that concentrated awareness becomes capable of seeing directly.

There is no one behind what is happening; the phenomena arise and pass away as an empty process, according to the law of cause and effect. This illusion of movement and solidity is like a movie. To ordinary perception it seems full of characters and objects, all the semblances of a world. But if we slow the movie down we will see that it is actually composed of separate, static frames of film.

Discovering the Path by Walking

When one is very mindful during a single lifting process—that is to say, when the mind is with the movement, penetrating with mindfulness into the true nature of what is happening—at that moment, the path to liberation taught by the Buddha opens up. The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path, often known as the Middle Way or Middle Path, consists of the eight factors of right view or understanding, right thought or aim, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. During any moment of strong mindfulness, five of the eight path factors come alive in consciousness. There is right effort; there is mindfulness; there is one-pointedness or concentration; there is right aim; and as we begin to have insight into the true nature of the phenomena, right view also arises. And during a moment when these five factors of the Eightfold Path are present, consciousness is completely free from any sort of defilement.

As we make use of that purified consciousness to penetrate into the true nature of what is happening, we become free of the delusion or illusion of self; we see only bare phenomena coming and going. When insight gives us intuitive comprehension of the mechanism of cause and effect, how mind and matter are related to one another, we free ourselves of misconceptions about the nature of phenomena. Seeing that each object lasts only for a moment, we free ourselves of the illusion of permanence, the illusion of continuity. As we understand impermanence and its

underlying unsatisfactoriness, we are freed from the illusion that our mind and body are not suffering.

This direct seeing of impersonality brings freedom from pride and conceit, as well as freedom from the wrong view that we have an abiding self. When we carefully observe the lifting process, we see mind and body as unsatisfactory and so are freed from craving. These three states of mind—conceit, wrong view, and craving—are called "the perpetuating dhammas." They help to perpetuate existence in *samsāra,* the cycle of craving and suffering that is caused by ignorance of ultimate truth. Careful attention in walking meditation shatters the perpetuating dhammas, bringing us closer to freedom.

You can see that noting the lifting of one's foot has incredible possibilities! These are no less present in moving the foot forward and in placing it on the ground. Naturally, the depth and detail of awareness described in these walking instructions should also be applied to noting the abdominal movement in sitting, and all other physical movements.

Five Benefits of Walking Meditation

The Buddha described five additional, specific benefits of walking meditation. The first is that one who does walking meditation will have the stamina to go on long journeys. This was important in the Buddha's time, when *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs,* monks and nuns, had no form of transportation other than their feet and legs. You who are meditating today can consider yourselves to be bhikkhus, and can think of this benefit simply as physical strengthening.

The second benefit is that walking meditation brings stamina for the practice of meditation itself. During walking meditation a double effort is needed. In addition to the ordinary, mechanical effort needed to lift the foot, there is also the mental effort to be aware of the movement—and this is the factor of right effort from the Noble Eightfold Path. If this double effort continues

through the movements of lifting, pushing, and placing, it strengthens the capacity for that strong, consistent mental effort all yogis know is crucial to vipassanā practice.

Third, according to the Buddha, a balance between sitting and walking contributes to good health, which in turn speeds progress in practice. Obviously it is difficult to meditate when we are sick. Too much sitting can cause many physical ailments. But the shift of posture and the movements of walking revive the muscles and stimulate circulation, helping prevent illness.

The fourth benefit is that walking meditation assists digestion. Improper digestion produces a lot of discomfort and is thus a hindrance to practice. Walking keeps the bowels clear, minimizing sloth and torpor. After a meal, and before sitting, one should do a good walking meditation to forestall drowsiness. Walking as soon as one gets up in the morning is also a good way to establish mindfulness and to avoid a nodding head in the first sitting of the day.

Last, but not least, of the benefits of walking is that it builds durable concentration. As the mind works to focus on each section of the movement during a walking session, concentration becomes continuous. Every step builds the foundation for the sitting that follows, helping the mind stay with the object from moment to moment—eventually to reveal the true nature of reality at the deepest level. This is why I use the simile of a car battery. If a car is never driven, its battery runs down. A yogi who never does walking meditation will have a difficult time getting anywhere when he or she sits down on the cushion. But one who is diligent in walking will automatically carry strong mindfulness and firm concentration into sitting meditation.

I hope that all of you will be successful in completely carrying out this practice. May you be pure in your precepts, cultivating them in speech and action, thus creating the conditions for developing samādhi and wisdom.

May you follow these meditation instructions carefully,

noting each moment's experience with deep, accurate, and precise mindfulness, so that you will penetrate into the true nature of reality. May you see how mind and matter constitute all experiences, how these two are interrelated by cause and effect, how all experiences are characterized by impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and absence of self so that you may eventually realize *nibbāna*—the unconditioned state that uproots mental defilements—here and now.

THE INTERVIEW

Vipassanā meditation is like planting a garden. We have the seed of clear and complete vision, which is the mindfulness with which we observe phenomena. In order to cultivate this seed, nurture the plant, and reap its fruit of transcendent wisdom, there are five procedures we must follow. These are called the five protections, or the five *anuggahitas.*

The Five Protections

As gardeners do, we must build a fence around our little plot to protect against large animals, deer and rabbits, who might devour our tender plant as soon as it tries to sprout. This first protection is *sīlā·nuggahita,* morality's protection against gross and wild behavior that agitates the mind and prevents concentration and wisdom from ever appearing.

Second, we must water the seed. This means listening to discourses on the Dhamma and reading texts, then carefully applying the understanding we have gained. Just as overwatering will rot a seed, our goal here is only clarification. It is definitely not to bewilder ourselves, getting lost in a maze of concepts. This second protection is called *sutā·nuggahita.*

The third protection is the one I will dwell on here. It is *sākacchā·nuggahita,* discussion with a teacher, and it is likened to the many processes involved in cultivating a plant. Plants need

different things at different times. Soil may need to be loosened around the roots, but not too much, or the roots will lose their grip in the soil. Leaves must be trimmed, again with care. Overshadowing plants must be cut down. In just this way, when we discuss our practice with a teacher, the teacher will give different instructions depending on what is needed to keep us on the right path.

The fourth protection is *samathā·nuggahita,* the protection of concentration, which keeps off the caterpillars and weeds of unwholesome states of mind. As we practice we make a strong effort to be aware of whatever is actually arising at the six sense doors—eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind—in the present moment. When the mind is sharply focused and energetic in this way, greed, hatred, and delusion have no opportunity to creep in. Thus, concentration can be compared to weeding the area around the plant, or to applying a very wholesome and natural type of pesticide.

If these first four protections are present, insights have the opportunity to blossom. However, yogis tend to become attached to early insights and unusual experiences related to strong concentration. Unfortunately, this will hinder their practice from ripening into the deeper levels of vipassanā. Here, the fifth protection, *vipassanā·nuggahita,* comes into play. This is meditation that continues forcefully at a high level, not stopping to dawdle in the enjoyment of peace of mind nor other pleasures of concentration. Craving for these pleasures is called *nikanti taṇhā.* It is subtle, like cobwebs, aphids, mildew, tiny spiders—sticky little things that can eventually choke off a plant's growth.

Even if a yogi gets caught in such booby-traps, however, a good teacher can find out about this in the interview and nudge him or her back onto the straight path. This is why discussing one's experiences with a teacher is such an important protection for meditation practice.

The Interview Process

During an intensive vipassanā retreat, personal interviews are held as often as possible, ideally every day. Interviews are formally structured. After the yogi presents his or her experiences as described below, the teacher may ask questions relating to particular details before giving a pithy comment or instruction.

The interview process is quite simple. You should be able to communicate the essence of your practice in about ten minutes. Consider that you are reporting on your research into yourself, which is what vipassanā actually is. Try to adhere to the standards used in the scientific world: brevity, accuracy, and precision.

First, report how many hours of sitting you did and how many of walking in the most recent twenty-four-hour period. If you are quite truthful and honest about this, it will show the sincerity of your practice. Next, describe your sitting practice. It is not necessary to describe each sitting in detail. If sittings are similar, you may combine their traits together in a general report. Try using details from the clearest sitting or sittings. Begin your description with the primary object of meditation, the rise and fall of the abdomen. After this you may add other objects that arose at any of the six sense doors.

After describing the sitting, go into your walking practice. Here you must only describe experiences directly connected with your walking movements—do not include a range of objects as you might in reporting a sitting. If you use the three-part method of lifting, moving, and placing in your walking meditation, try to include each segment and the experiences you had with it.

What Occurred, How You Noted It, What Happened to It

For all of these objects, indeed with any object of meditation, please report your experience in three phases. One, you identify what occurred. Two, you report how you noted it. And three, you describe what you saw, or felt, or understood: that is, what happened when you noted it.

Let us take as an example the primary object, the rising and falling movement of the abdomen. The first thing to do is to identify the occurrence of the rising process.

"Rising occurred."

The second phase is to note it, give it a silent verbal label.

"I noted it as 'rising.'"

The third phase is to describe what happened to the rising.

"As I noted 'rising,' this is what I experienced, the different sensations I felt. This was the behavior of the sensations at that time."

Then you continue the interview by using the same three-phase description for the falling process and the other objects that arise during sitting. You mention the object's occurrence, describe how you noted it, and relate your subsequent experiences until the object disappears or your attention moves elsewhere.

Perhaps an analogy will serve to clarify. Imagine that I am sitting in front of you, and suddenly I raise my hand into the air and open it so that you can see that I am holding an apple. You direct your attention toward this apple; you recognize it and (because this is an analogy) you say the word "apple" to yourself. Now you go on to discern that the apple is red, round, and shiny. At last I slowly close my hand so that the apple disappears.

How would you report your experience of the apple, if the apple were your primary object of meditation? You would say, "The apple appeared. I noted it as 'apple' and I noticed that it was red, round, and shiny. Then the apple slowly disappeared."

Thus, you would have reported in a precise way on the three phases of your involvement with the apple. First, there was the moment when the apple appeared and you became able to perceive it. Second, you directed your attention to the apple and recognized what it was; since you were "practicing meditation" with the apple, you made the particular effort to label it verbally in your mind. Third, you continued attending to the apple and

discerned its qualities, as well as the manner of its passing out of your awareness. This three-step process is the same one you must follow in actual vipassanā meditation, except, of course, that you observe and report on your experiences of the rising and falling of your abdomen. One warning: your duty to observe the fictitious apple does not extend to imagining the apple's juiciness or visualizing yourself eating it! Similarly, in a meditation interview, you must restrict your descriptions to what you have experienced directly, rather than what you may imagine, visualize, and opine about the object.

As you can see, this style of reporting is a guide for how awareness should be functioning in actual vipassanā meditation. For this reason, meditation interviews are helpful for an additional reason beyond the chance to receive a teacher's guidance. Yogis often find that being required to produce a report of this kind has a galvanizing effect on their meditation practice, for it asks them to focus on their experiences as clearly as they possibly can.

Awareness, Accuracy, Perseverance

It is not enough to look at the object indifferently, haphazardly, or in an unmindful, automatic way. This is not a practice where you mindlessly recite some mental formula. You must look at the object with full commitment, with all of your heart. Directing your whole attention toward the object, as accurately as possible, you keep your attention there so that you can penetrate into the object's true nature.

Despite our best efforts, the mind may not always be so well behaved as to remain with our abdomen. It wanders off. At this point a new object, the wandering mind, has arisen. How do we handle this? We become aware of the wandering. This is the first phase. Now the second phase: we label it as "wandering, wandering." How soon after its arising were we aware of the wandering? One second, two minutes, half an hour? And what happens after we label it? Does the wandering mind disappear

instantly? Does the mind just keep on wandering? Or do the thoughts reduce in intensity and eventually disappear? Does a new object arise before we have seen the disappearance of the old one? If you cannot note the wandering mind at all, you should tell the teacher about this, too.

If the wandering mind disappears, you come back to the rising and falling. You should make a point to describe whether you are able to come back to it. In your reports it is good, also, to say how long the mind usually remained with the rising and falling movements before a new object arose.

Pains and aches, unpleasant sensations, are sure to arise after some time of sitting. Say an itch suddenly appears—a new object. You label it as "itching." Does the itch get worse or remain the same? Does it change or disappear? Do new objects arise, such as a wish to scratch? All this should be described as precisely as possible. It is the same with visions and sights, sounds and tastes, heat and cold, tightness, vibrations, tinglings, the unending procession of objects of consciousness. No matter what the object, you only have to apply the same three-step principle to it.

All of this process is done as a silent investigation, coming very close to our experience—not asking ourselves a lot of questions and getting lost in thought. What is important to the teacher is whether you could be aware of whatever object has arisen, whether you had the accuracy of mind to be mindful of it, and the perseverance to observe it fully. Be honest with your teacher. If you are unable to find the object, or note it, or experience anything at all after making a mental label, it may not always mean that you are practicing poorly! A clear and precise report enables the teacher to assess your practice, then point out mistakes or make corrections to put you back on the right path.

May you benefit from these interview instructions. May a teacher someday help you help yourself.