

Living with Ease
A Buddhist Perspective on Emotions

Sylvia Wetzel

Translation into American English
by Jane Anhold
and Jonathan Akasaraja Bruton

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Foreword

To feel more at ease and connected with others in happiness, peace and joy – is there anyone who doesn't want this? When it comes to it, however, our attempts to achieve this quickly run up against difficulties and obstacles. If we are really honest we have to admit that most of the difficulties are of our own making. Why is this so? The Buddhist tradition tells us that our problems arise because we don't know ourselves well enough. Buddhist practices can help us to become more clearly aware of our patterns of behaviour and emotional response, along with feelings which lie concealed within us. And we can apply ourselves with gentleness to changing what we become aware of, allowing our hearts to open and our minds to clarify. We will gradually open up more space for new patterns of behaviour to emerge. We will be able to jettison unnecessary ballast – thereby lightening our lives.

The starting point for each of us on the path of self-awareness and training of heart and mind is where we are right now. Some people just want to relax and recuperate from a hard day's work. Others feel attracted to the positive idea of humanity revealed by Buddhism. Yet others would like to be able to concentrate better or to understand their own feelings more fully. All of these aspirations are embraced by this book. The ideas and exercises in the book are formulated in such a way as to make meditation experience or knowledge of Buddhism unnecessary. Teachings and practices are largely presented in a culturally non-specific way and formulated using the language of psychology. There can be no good life without a deep appreciation of oneself and other people. Buddhism maintains that, in the depths of our being, there is

nothing fundamentally wrong, because the nature of our mind is to be open, limpid and sensitive. The more strongly we can sense this, the lighter our lives will become. It is for this reason that references to the nature of mind form the central theme of the book.

In cases of serious crisis or psychiatric disorder, however, the ideas and exercises described in this book are not intended to provide a substitute for psychotherapeutic treatment. The book is basically aimed at people who are to some extent already able to manage their own lives.

For the purposes of this book I have singled out some individual ideas and practices that work particularly well from the vast depth and breadth of Buddhist thought and teachings. They have been tried out and found to be effective by participants in my practice days and weeks. However, many of these people do not consider themselves to be Buddhists. This book is explicitly aimed at people who don't want to convert to Buddhism. It's enough for you to be looking for a contemplative approach to the problems in your life and to be open to ideas from the Buddhist tradition.

Feel free either to work systematically through the whole book or just to start with the chapter that particularly appeals to you. In either case, once you have read a chapter I would recommend that you do at least one of the suggested exercises in order to get the flavour of what it is to practise.

Acknowledgements

My thanks go first of all to those Buddhist teachers who initiated me into the living traditions of Tibetan Buddhism, Rinzai Zen and the Theravada. I would equally like to thank all those who have taken part in my courses. Their positive experiences have strengthened yet further my resolve to find a distinctively Western way to tread the Buddhist path. It is together that all of us – men and women – can find ways to live out the timeless teachings of the Buddha in our cultural context.

Heartfelt thanks go out to Susanne Billig who edited the manuscript for this book with such style and sensitivity and who used her strong sense of dramatic structure and pedagogical effect to reorganise it. It was her experience as an author and journalist which made such a great contribution to the clarity and relevance to everyday life of the final version. My conversations with Susanne Billig, whom I have known since 1990, inspired me in particular to allow more space for the elaboration of the “difficult experiences” issue and to consider the question of types of fear in greater detail than is customary in the Buddhist context. Our conversations about the use - and uselessness - of spiritual practice in dealing with more serious existential crises made it yet clearer to me just how important stable social structures are for the healing of emotional wounds and the development of a healthy and robust sense of self-confidence. Spiritual practice alone isn't really enough.

Good titles make books more approachable – so I would like to extend particular thanks to Andrea Krug for coming up with the original German title, *Leichter leben*, which could be easily translated into English and Spanish, *La vida mas facil*.

At this point I want to thank Ursula Richard, good friend and longterm chief editor of the main Buddhist publisher in Germany, *Theseus Verlag*, and now director of the Buddhist publisher *edition steinrich*, for her encouragement to write this book. Her commitment to finding contemporary interpretations of Buddhism by Western authors has made a significant contribution in making accessible for Westerners the concepts and methods of Buddhism drawn from real life. I would also like to thank her for our many inspiring discussions on central issues in this book.

May you live with ease – or more lightly
Jütchendorf, Germany, May 2002
Sylvia Wetzel

Foreword to the English edition

I am delighted that this book is now available in English and thus accessible for a wider audience. May you find it as useful as many readers in the German- and Spanish-speaking world. Many have written to me to tell me how their lives have been changed for the better by the ideas and practices to be found in this book.

Jütchendorf, Germany, Spring 2015
Sylvia Wetzel

8 Discovering the nature of mind (pp 165-198)

What are thoughts? What is the world? What am I? What relation does the external reality have to our inner reality and our perceptions? Is there a “world out there” in the first place? What can we know about it? These are basic questions of philosophy which have over the centuries been investigated, answered and asked afresh, in both East and West. It isn’t only philosophers who answer these questions; we answer them too in the way we think, act and live. We go down the street, we work in our office, we chat to colleagues during the lunch break, we sit in our favourite cafe after work and have a drink – all the time in the utter conviction that all of this “really” exists: The street, the office, our colleagues, the mug of coffee. We believe this because this is how we think.

If asked we may well be prepared to admit that we see ourselves and the world, as it were, through many different pairs of glasses. We know that we see things in a different light depending on our mood, our preferences and our dislikes. Yet the more agitated and wound-up we feel, the more we will be inclined to take our world view to be “true” and “objectively correct”. It isn’t easy not to get involved in this dynamic: When your colleague turns up late to a team meeting for the third time and insists on leaving ten minutes early to go shopping, you will find her behaviour objectively wrong and the colleague herself objectively unreliable. Staying with work, anyone who keeps getting into arguments with the same colleague in the team about his cold way of

communicating will find this colleague *objectively* unfriendly and emotionally underdeveloped. It's not a matter of denying external circumstances.

The basic question is how we can live with more ease in an imperfect world. Meditation brings us back time and again to the insight that our inner life and subjectivity have a crucial part to play in defining what we feel and what we perceive. If we keep coming back to the realization that we can deal better with difficulties if we have an optimistic attitude and are in a relaxed state, this will help us in emotionally charged situations too. We may then sometimes be able to stand back from the immediate pull of feelings and perceptions and say to ourselves something like: "I only think that this is so. But it might conceivably be completely different." We straight away get a sense of spaciousness, and our life becomes lighter, even if only for a few seconds.

Different aspects of insight

Different Buddhist schools emphasise different aspects of insight. The southern schools - which predominate in Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma - teach above all that Insight consists in penetrating the three "marks of conditioned existence": all phenomena are impermanent, incapable of giving us ultimate satisfaction and devoid of any kind of fixed and definite selfhood that can be identified. Anyone who sees this at *every* moment is enlightened. As long as we continue to dream that people and objects, circumstances and feelings have some kind of permanence, we will continue to hope that they will be able to make us really and ultimately happy - and we will be disappointed whenever this proves not to be the case. The Indian tradition calls this *Maya*, the veil, or *lila*, the

game. *Maya* and *Lila* make up the world of fantasies and imaginings. This is the world that is meant when it is said that we are living in a dream. In this dream we suffer from our conviction that we ourselves and the world around us are objective - that things really are as we see them. Anyone who sees through this deception is awakened and incapable of being disappointed.

The teachings of the Mahayana schools of the northern lands - including China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Tibet and Mongolia - place Buddha nature at the heart of their teachings and practices. They too teach the four foundations of mindfulness and the three marks, but what they stress is the space in which everything arises. Anyone who grasps that all thoughts and feelings arise out of the nature of mind is free.

Buddha nature

According to Mahayana Buddhism, "The true nature of all beings is bliss". The object of the practices is to get in touch with our ability to be happy. Another guiding principle is this: "All beings have Buddha nature". What this means is that all beings have the capacity for Awakening. This is possible because we are more than our thoughts and feelings. They are nothing more than the surface of mind. Awakening or realising Buddha nature means directly experiencing and abiding in the deep structure of the mind. What is the deep structure of the mind? How can we discover it? What do thoughts and feelings and the experience of joy and spaciousness have to do with one another? Do you have to "believe" in the Buddha to experience Buddha nature or the nature of mind?

The deep structure or nature of mind is characterised in three ways: as "open", "clear" and "sensitive". A helpful and illuminating traditional image describes it as follows: The nature of mind is open and expansive like the sky, clear and

luminous like the sun, warming us all just as the sun's rays warm the whole world. Feelings and thoughts, fears and worries, views and opinions are like the weather that arises in this open space. No bad weather, no matter how severe, can affect this sky-like space and its radiance. Dark clouds and hail showers, weeks of rain and snow can conceal the sky, the sun and its warmth, but they can never destroy it. Anyone who gets a taste of this every now and again will no longer identify completely with their inner storms of fear and disappointment; nor will they fall for weeks at a time into the pit of despondency and depression. Should we, however, continue every now and again to identify with the periods of internal bad weather, we will after a while become aware of what we are doing. We will recall the sky, the sun and its rays and regain confidence that we will see them again.

Open and wide like the sky

How can we use this image of open space? If we just sit down for five minutes without distraction and take a look at what is going on inside us we can directly experience three facets of the nature of mind. Every single experience is open and expansive like the sky. All experience is open in time: Even when we find ourselves telling the third friend in a row about our last holiday we still don't know exactly what we are going to say. And if we don't know what we are going to say, how can we possibly know what others are going to say? Every experience is open. Even though we may construct a stable life out of habits, character structures and views, we still never know what is going to happen the next moment. We normally don't realise that this openness is there. And if an unexpected situation reveals it to us, our response is usually one of fear.

We are surprised when all of a sudden the car refuses to start. We are at a loss for words when a colleague who is otherwise always punctual arrives at work half an hour late without apologising. If we are standing at 9:30 at night in front of the departure board of an airport and suddenly hear that our flight had been cancelled due to bad weather at the destination airport, our mind will just for a moment be unable to compute the information. If we succeed in becoming aware of the openness of this experience without yielding to fear, we will for some instants get a sense of the deep structure of the mind.

Every single experience is open and ungraspable like the vast expanse of sky. When we hear a melody that touches our heart or when, after a long period of separation, we can hold a loved one in our arms, we simply don't have the words to describe the experience. After a trip to India we may be able to describe to a friend how Indian *chai* is made, but we will be unable to convey in words the experience itself. All experiences are at the end of the day ungraspable and indescribable. What does sugar taste like? What is love? What is the sound of the sea? How do you feel when you have finally finished a piece of work? What is joy? What does a peaceful heart feel like? We may try to answer such questions but anyone who has not shared the experience will not really understand what we mean. Every single experience is ungraspable, beyond the reach of words and concepts. If you can experience this regularly, letting it work its magic on you without giving in to fear, than you will get a sense of the openness of mind that I am talking about.

Luminous like the sun and warm like her rays

Although our lives are open and ungraspable and we never know what is going to happen, the fact is that experience is incessantly occurring: We are seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling and thinking – sixty-five times in one single finger snap. The ability to produce experiences is the second aspect of the nature of mind, characterised by clarity and luminosity. This relates to the immense vitality and vibrancy of direct experience. The author Aldous Huxley interprets people’s love of shiny objects, precious stones, gold and silver as a subconscious recollection of this kind of undivided experience. Fairy stories and myths tell of it, and people of all places and times have in the course of delirium, dreams and deep meditation experienced the world as a realm of light.

Mahayana Buddhism explains this in terms of the qualities of the deep structure of the mind, of its clarity and luminosity, which are in principle accessible in all experience. When experiences “arise” they are in the very first instance not divided into “me in here” and “the world out there”. Seeing happens, hearing happens, feeling happens. Anyone who can see without fear into the openness of the mind experiences things as a unity and does not divide experience up, standing instead in the midst of life without feeling separated from it. As Martin Buber says, the spell of separateness is broken. We feel connected with everything that is. Or, to be more precise: We don’t feel separated. We’re not talking here about some rare esoteric experience. We all know this from moments of deep wellbeing and complete surrender: for example, when we are dancing or singing, pottering in the garden or polishing our favourite silverware for a party – and we are attending with all our heart.

Every single experience is open and ungraspable like the sky and luminous and clear like the sun. Anyone who experiences

this feels connected and joyful. On the level of feeling we experience openness and clarity as joy and connectedness. This is the third aspect of the nature of mind: sensitivity. Sie wärmt und nährt alles, was lebt, wie die Sonnenstrahlen Erde und Pflanzen, Menschen und Tiere mit ihrer Wärme umhüllt.

Abiding in the nature of mind

If we repeatedly bring to mind the deep structure of the mind and experience it directly, it will with a little practice become possible to stop identifying so closely with the weather – the incessant ebb and flow of thoughts and feelings – and to identify instead with the sky, the sun and her rays. Then we will be able, as Buddhism has it, to “abide in the nature of mind” and experience new forms of faith, strength and inner peace. This level of deep inner peace will also give us strength when we are sick, exhausted or dissatisfied. We may on the surface still experience bad moods – but only on the surface. Deep down inside we know: It really isn’t that bad. We may even come to see that life will continue, even though one day “we” will no longer be around. This experience can help us overcome our fears. This existential fear of annihilation and death, which underlies all lesser fears, can only be dissolved if we can discover the profound security and protection that comes with abiding in the true nature of mind. Only this will be able to dissolve our feelings of separation and loneliness. In such moments we are no longer afraid of death because we feel connected with all that lives.

Initially, we may hardly even notice such brief moments. We are too preoccupied with the waves of feeling, emotion and expectation that beat on the inner shore. What we need to become aware of the deep structure of mind as open, clear,

sensitive and joyful is a certain amount of inner peace, wakefulness and relaxation. Without the experience of still moments of practice our life is like a glass which contains a mixture of water and sand. The clarity of the water is not visible because it is disguised by the sand. But if we leave the glass to stand for a few minutes, the sand will gradually sink to the bottom of its own accord, and the water will become clear. We don't have to make an effort to do this. It all happens without our needing to do anything. All we have to do is allow the glass to stand undisturbed. No bad weather, however extreme, can drive Awakened people to desperation, because they never lose sight of the sky, the sun or her rays. We can make this attitude into our defining approach to life.

Wisdom, love and wise action

All Buddhist schools which work with the concept of Buddha nature stress the experience of spaciousness and joy, the present moment and direct experience. If you feel that you have little space and little joy, you can do the “magic moments” exercise a few times a week for a period of one or two months in order consciously to evoke your own experiences of joy and openness. Anyone who is in contact with the underlying openness, clarity and sensitivity of the mind and abides therein sees things as they really are. Directly to experience the nature of mind and to abide in it is the highest insight, the highest happiness, the goal of all paths. This is wisdom. Anyone who experiences this will feel a deep sense of connection with the people around them. This is love. And then we will always know what to do. This security will give rise to faith and the strength to act wisely and appropriately. People who live wisely, lovingly and appropriately know no fear. Anyone who can deal with any situation and make the best of it is fearless and completely self-confident.

Openness arises when we feel the space in which everything happens without knowing what is going to come next.

Clarity arises when our experience is defined by unity, Without harsh division into “me in here” and

“the world out there”, without setting up a contradiction between me as a “subject” and the “world” as an object.

Sensitivity arises when our perceptions are spacious and whole and we feel the joy of being present.

Exercise: Openness, clarity, sensitivity

Whatever we happen to be experiencing at any given moment, there is no experience which can't lead us to openness, clarity and sensitivity - to that open space in which everything arises. Even if we are experiencing back pain we can open ourselves up for a few moments to the sensation involved. This is openness. We experience with all of our senses any physical sensations and feelings that may arise. This is sensitivity. And we acknowledge any thoughts that come up. We try to develop a little understanding of the experience. This is clarity.

We can practise this even in moments of dullness.

Even when we are thinking: "I just don't want to open up", the very fact that we can actually think or say this shows that we have some appreciation of what openness actually is. Even when we are thinking: "I'm not feeling anything", the very fact that we can actually think or say this shows that we have some appreciation of what sensitivity actually is. Even when we are thinking: "I don't understand anything", the very fact that we can actually think or say this shows that we have some appreciation of what clarity and understanding actually are.

How real is reality?

Although we long for openness and expansiveness and suffer as a result of our self-imposed restrictions, we still constantly develop fixed ideas and expectations and cling onto them for dear life. Why do we do that? Because we confuse our ideas with reality, and they give us security.

When we visit a new acquaintance for the first time we initially see his house only from the

front. We automatically complete our picture of the facade by conjuring up an image of the whole house. As we have seen a lot of houses, we create an image in our mind's eye of how the house looks from the rear, how the staircase and the rest of the interior have been designed. Depending upon the kind of image we have generated, once we have entered the house we will either be pleasantly surprised or disappointed.

We need ideas about things so that we can navigate our way through new impressions and unknown places and deal with new people. The problems only arise if we are not aware that we are constantly creating hypotheses and deriving complex ideas, which we then take to be real, from a relatively scant set of impressions. We then run the risk of becoming inflexible and closing ourselves off to new experiences.

Every day we form hundreds of hypotheses, most of which are the result of unconscious processes. We create images of people and work processes, situations, objects and ourselves. The more frequently we can realise that this is going on, the simpler our life will become. If we can realise with both heart and mind that ninety-nine percent of our life is made up of hypotheses, we will become lighter, more flexible and more ready to experiment: we will be interested in ourselves and in the world and open to new experiences. We won't somehow expect to shed all our expectations from one day to the next. Expectations are part of life: everyone has them. We will however be aware of our expectations, examine them in the light of reality and correct them if necessary. Mindfulness and attentiveness can help us to awaken. As soon as we become aware of what is happening and remember what we want, we will experience spaciousness and expansiveness. It isn't a question of changing or somehow censoring ourselves. All it

takes is to be aware. A non-judgemental awareness opens up the space.

We may have to look closely very many times before our heart will understand how thinking and feeling, reacting and seeing function. We often make do with concepts that we have arrived at too quickly. We think that we have understood. But there is a big difference between thinking and knowing. There is a rule of thumb which may help us to grasp this difference: If we carry on being angry, we haven't understood. We just had a good idea. If we can accept in a wakeful and relaxed manner the things that happen, then the space will arise that is necessary for real knowledge to emerge. If we can see how things really are, our heart will open and a feeling of separation will give way to feelings of love and appreciation. Our lives will become more expansive and lighter. And then we won't need to deliberate for very long about what we should do. We will just know what to do and do it. Either that or we don't know, so we try something out and learn from our mistakes. If we do this we will at least know that we don't yet know.

What is this?

Schools of Zen Buddhism took a radical turn. They developed practices using paradoxical statements (Jap. *Koan*), which are intended to catapult us out of our fixed and habitual patterns of thought. One central *koan*, for example, is, quite simply, this: "What is this?" This *koan* is used mainly in Korean Zen. Whatever arises in mind and body, we ask the same question: "What is this?" We don't ask this existential question with a view to finding a clever answer. The idea is rather to arouse our interest, shake us out of our complacent certitudes and

wake us up out of the sleep of our fixed ways of thinking and deeply ingrained habits. Some Zen practitioners work with this one *koan* for many years: walking and washing up, sitting quietly in meditation and going to sleep, whenever there is nothing to talk about or to plan, to write down or to think about. In time this *koan* can become the background to all mental activity. This inspires wakefulness.

Anyone who gets used to practising this *koan* with a certain kind of equanimity, without expecting quick answers or judging themselves – practising to the extent that the *koan* retreats into the background – will experience life as something truly remarkable. We realise that we don't know how and what things are, no matter how many concepts and definitions we may have for them. Astonishment at the wonder of existence will serve to wake us up. Even if we don't have an answer to the question "what is this?", we can still tie our shoes, arrange to see people and remember that we have done so, speak in a way that others can comprehend, go shopping and cook meals. We may even be able to do this better than before. Instead of wandering half-asleep through the day and asking ourselves at night exactly where the day has gone, we will feel wide awake, full of wonder at the mystery of life.

Four veils

Abiding in the nature of mind, seeing things as they truly are, feeling connected in love and appreciation with everyone and everything and being able to act with spontaneous wisdom are all things which sound very optimistic. The flip side is this: If you are not in touch with the nature of mind you will not see things as they are. We don't feel connected with everything that is: quite the reverse, we feel isolated. We don't know what we ought to do and become fearful and uncertain. We don't have any sense of spaciousness, instead being constrained in a world of familiar things and concepts, in the grip of knee-jerk feeling responses and habits. We create a detailed map of our lives and completely fail to see the secret of the open, living moment.

Tibetan Buddhism uses a very clear and vivid image to describe all this: the "four veils" which prevent us from living our lives freely: The veil concealing our Buddha nature, the veil of separateness, the veil of passions and the veil of habitual behaviour. This model offers a very good description of our human dilemma in simple terms. We can use the Four Veils to gain a better understanding of why many traditional and modern attempts to "get our lives under control" just don't work.

The Four Veils obscure our view of ourselves and the world. We don't see things as they are; instead we see them through the lens of low self-confidence, feelings of separateness, turbulent emotions and habitual behavioural patterns. This prevents us from feeling connected with all that lives and making the best of every situation.

What are the Four Veils and how can we lift them?

The veil concealing Buddha nature: The first gives a label to the source of all our problems. The open, clear and sensitive deep structure of the mind is hidden from us. This is the veil concealing our Buddha nature. It is the most deeply rooted and heaviest form of ignorance and has painful consequences for our whole life and experience. Because we have no sense of openness - or, if we do, we are afraid of it - we cling on to all impressions that arise in the open space of the mind. We divide them all up into “me in here” and “the world out there”.

The veil of dualistic view: We create a fixed and unchanging world of objects, at the same time feeling separated from it. This is the second veil – the veil of separateness, the veil of distorted views, of existential desperation that arises out of duality. If we feel alone and separated from a world of objects, desires will arise.

The veil of Kleshas: Out of existential fear we come up with all kinds ideas about ourselves and other people, about things and circumstances that we want to have – or want to be free of – in order to be happy. We get upset if our life doesn't match up to our ideas. We look for recognition and support and are afraid of criticism and losing the love of other people; we are proud of our abilities yet ashamed of our weaknesses, both major and minor. This is the third veil – the *veil of Kleshas, of unconscious and conscious concepts and reactive emotions*. This covers views and opinions that we mistake for realities and the reactive emotions with which we defend our views and opinions.

The veil of Karma or habits: Confused ideas and reactive emotions make us feel insecure even more, and so we look for security in fixed daily routines and habits, preferences and dislikes. This is the fourth veil – the *veil of habits* and of fixed

patterns of behaviour, which Buddhism calls Karma. A life spent endlessly swapping one veil for the next is a lived daily reality for many in our western cultural environment. Our life oscillates back and forth in a constant quest for – and avoidance of – experience. When the emotional waves get whipped up we perceive this as a threat and take refuge in habits. However, fixed habits very quickly become boring, so we end up looking for more intense experiences. We plunge headlong into hectic activity: working too much, acquiring qualifications, buying useless commodities and surrounding ourselves with dates with other people – until we get completely exhausted and seek refuge in the confines of a narrow set of rules and an inner shutdown.

But then we quickly get bored all over again. This endless round would not be a problem if such a life could satisfy us. But it is quite apparent that people in the materially wealthy western world are not very happy burning themselves out by bouncing back and forth between extremes of withdrawal and hectic diversion. What we are lacking is what this book is intended to help us cultivate: experience of the open, clear and sensitive nature of mind. To borrow from the famous quotation from Mahatma Gandhi on the subject of peace, one might say:

There is no way to happiness.

Happiness is the way.

Lifting the veils

Are the Four Veils part and parcel of life and of being human? Or can we lift them and live with an open heart and a clear mind? And even if it is possible to lift the veils, how do we start? The first step consists, as always, in recognising that the

Four Veils are there. A woman who has been coming on meditation courses for years explained her practice in the following simple terms: "I observe the Four Veils in my daily life. This helps me live more lightly, because I don't waste time getting tied up in fears, views, emotions and feelings."

When we start practising such introspection we will quickly notice one thing: Good intentions are short-lived. We may be inspired by a lovely meditation practice and undertake to do it the next day – but something gets in the way. A friend calls up, or the newspaper is lying there clamouring to be read; we find it hard to get up and, by the time evening comes, we are already too tired.

If we look very closely we will see that our everyday habits are preventing us from practising. The veil of habitual behaviour is stopping us from integrating something new into our lives. After a week spent on a meditation course it will initially be fairly easy to practise regularly. After two or three weeks, however, the daily grind mostly has us firmly in its grip, and there just isn't any space left for the practice in our life. We are not yet familiar with what it means to practise.

Clever people who are in the habit of relying on their intellectual prowess often underestimate the banal power of habit. They may quickly grasp that introspection and relaxation are good for them, but they don't get round to practising because they haven't created any space for doing so. Religious traditions and behavioural therapy agree on two points: You can only undo bad habits if you have a deep understanding of the fact that they are harmful. And: If you want to get used to doing something new, you have to do it!

What we can do is to make a resolution today to reserve five minutes every day for a week for introspection. During this week there is no discussion of this decision: we just practise.

After this week has elapsed we undertake again to practise for another week. After a few months we will be so familiar with practising that it will be as self-evident as brushing our teeth and reading the paper. We may not always end up soaring in ecstasy, but we just do it anyway. Eating and reading the paper, brushing our teeth and clearing up aren't always necessarily a source of great inspiration and wholeness either - but we do them because we see them as meaningful and are in the habit of doing them.

The more equanimous our prevailing mindset is, the lighter it becomes to cast off bad habits and try new ones. For this reason it is important to know what our mental states are. How to do this was the subject of the second part of this book. There we can read about how to deal with cravings and longings, with aversion, laziness and stubbornness, with restlessness and anxiety and with indecisiveness and self-doubt. Using this as a basis we can now turn our attention to the interplay between illusion and disillusionment, observing which expectations and fears trigger which turbulent emotions.

Valid and invalid concepts

The German word for disappointment, Enttäuschung, shows us quite clearly how disillusionment occurs. Behind every instance of disillusionment (Enttäuschung) lurks an illusion (Täuschung). We can quite easily check whether our ideas about ourselves and the world are true or not: whether they are valid or invalid concepts. An example: If we have yet again failed to get done all those things we wanted to do during the day and feel disillusioned with ourselves, the problem is most likely to be that we have been prey to an illusion about ourselves. We have either taken on too much or we have wrongly assessed our state on that day and have proved not to be up to the task. We have an inclination to take our very best form as guidance – causing us regularly to fail. The idea that "I am now going to write five letters at one go, because I once managed to do this five years ago" is simply wrong - because we aren't in top form all the time.

An expectation is realistic if it fulfils two conditions: Firstly, we know that it is an expectation and not a reality. If you manage even only sporadically to bring this definition to mind, you will quickly learn that ninety-nine per cent of your expectations are unrealistic. The problem is that we don't see that we have an expectation: instead, we naively assume that things will go just as we imagine they will. The second condition for an expectation to be realistic or a concept to be valid is quite simply this: It works, turning out to be appropriate to the situation. If we spend twenty-five years expecting our relatives to stop asking when we are going to get married and to finally just accept that our long-term partner really is our long-term partner, we are perpetuating a false expectation. Again, if we spend years getting angry with the man at work who likes to

tell idiotic jokes about women, then this is a sign that we still expect to be able to change him with a few rational arguments. It might be better to try it with humour. The less we grasp that our expectations are unrealistic, the less happy we will feel in ourselves. We will be insecure and take refuge in getting wound up because it makes us feel safe. We will defend unrealistic expectations on the basis of an agitated emotional state. And then we will be unable to comprehend why other people, the world at large and we ourselves just aren't as we would like them to be.

Every time we are disappointed or disillusioned it's a sign that we have been harbouring an illusion: so we can go looking for the illusion behind the disillusionment. Once we have uncovered a false expectation we can conduct an interesting and beneficial experiment: We can try for three minutes – or three seconds – just to let go of the expectation that our relatives are somehow going to accept our long-term partner or that our colleague at work is suddenly going to stop telling stupid jokes. We will then see the truth behind the words that Buddhist nun Ayya Khema was fond of repeating: To let go for a second is to enjoy a second of liberation. If we can manage to recognise and let go, even for a few moments, of the illusion behind our disillusionment, we will see how space opens up. It is in this space that we will be able to accept the world just as it is. It will then be easier for us to think of and try out new ways of behaving.

*To let go for one second is
to enjoy one second of liberation.*

Facing the present frankly and clearly

Letting go of false expectations doesn't somehow imply giving one's blessing to every act of injustice and accepting

everything bad with a shrug of the shoulders. It is quite legitimate – and an expression of compassion – to harbour a desire to help shape this life and the world we live in. This will however remain a pious wish if we are not prepared to take a hard, sober look at the current state of affairs.

We ourselves; our anxious or ignorant relatives; our alcoholic neighbour or the violent local hoodies; our difficult ex-partner and adolescent daughter; the entrepreneur who cold-bloodedly oversees the destruction of the tropical rainforests; warlords who train children to become soldiers; the US government which at one and the same time spends billions on a nuclear defensive shield whilst standing by as millions are forced to subsist below the poverty line; corrupt politicians and fomenters of civil war in the Balkans, the Middle East and Africa: All of these things are just as they are at this moment. Unrealistic expectations won't help to change them. What can help are clarity and the insight into how difficult circumstances arise in dependence on conditions. Cultivating openness can help reveal creative possibilities even in the most intractable of situations. Sensitivity helps us discern where something can be done and how individual factors can be changed. Things are just as they are at every moment. If we realise that our views and opinions are nothing more than working hypotheses in respect of combinations of circumstances and possible chains of events, then we can open up to new factors which we have hitherto overlooked and actually learn to welcome opinions that differ from our own.

We will above all grasp that life is complex and that all we can try to do is our best.

*The world can help us to break down unrealistic expectations.
As an unfailing mirror it shows us clearly whether we are being
hoodwinked by illusions.*

*If we are, we will perceive the world as our enemy.
If, on the other hand, we have a balanced view, we will
also have an eye for those things which are of beauty
and which can help us. We will then have faith that there are
solutions, even if we don't yet know what they are.*

Uncovering our inner wisdom

To the extent that we are not in touch with our inner wisdom, we will always have a feeling of existential insecurity. We will be lacking a basic level of confidence, the courage to live our lives, and zest for life. If we fail to become aware of the openness, clarity and sensitivity of our mind, we will always experience separation from our body, feelings, moods and thoughts, from nature and from other people. This being the case, we will develop unrealistic expectations of ourselves and the world, using more-or-less sustainable theories to justify them and defending our views with a passion born of whipped-up emotion. We then use habits to bring stability to this uncertain situation. We trot out the same old arguments and congratulate ourselves for being consistent. We see fixed emotional patterns as evidence of character and see nothing unusual in rigid and unyielding behaviour. We simply *are* shiftless or excitable, cautious or reckless, always late or inclined to pedantry – that's just "how we are".

We can only get out of the painful loop of fear and insecurity, unbending opinions, emotional agitation and fixed patterns of behaviour if we can uncover our inner wisdom. It's not enough just to believe that it is there. Deep confidence will help fortify

us on our journey. We will only experience solid ground under our feet if we can really uncover and really experience the space in which everything arises. It's up to us to find this ground and to plant our lives four-square on it. This is the great opportunity that comes with being human.

We can lift the veil of ignorance if we learn to uncover and let go of the illusions that give rise to our disillusionment. Space will then arise in which we can experience the spontaneous activity of our inner wisdom.

Three kinds of wisdom

This book begins with simple exercises – watching your breath and feeling your body. These practices can help us firstly to get to know the surface structure of our mind. Then, through meditation on magic moments, profound happiness and the nature of mind, we can become intimate with our mind's deep structure. Theories and clever books are no substitute for your own experience. It's for this reason that, at the end of this book, I am once again going to stress the value of experience, continuous personal practice and the path that takes you there.

Every learning process entails three stages and three corresponding levels of understanding. The tradition describes them in terms of "hearing, reflecting, experiencing in meditation". As far as our everyday lives are concerned, they often look like this: Read, try out, put into practice. This corresponds to the three levels of faith which formed the subject of the chapter "Faith and Awakening": "Childlike" or "naïve" enthusiasm and inspiration can arise when we hear or read something – this is traditionally known as "simple faith".

Once we start to look into a matter in greater detail or to think about particular issues, the faith that then arises is anchored in reason: We understand the matter, at least to the extent that we can talk about it. It takes a lot of practice for robust self-confidence and genuine security to arise. Doing chikung or dancing the tango, playing the piano or doing the books will not become part of our lives unless we have read or heard something about them.

The next step is to think about whether we want to find out more about whatever has got us interested before going on to sign up for a course and committing to regular practice. It will then take some years of trying out and practising the object of our interest before it really starts to become second nature. We go through exactly the same process in meditation: We read something about meditating on the breath, gross and subtle impermanence, mantra recitation or Zen koans. Better yet, we listen to talks given by people who actually practise them. If the expositions we hear inspire us we will want to try it out for ourselves. With an attitude of childlike or simple faith in the method we begin to actually practise and to see for ourselves whether these practices work for us. For many people this second phase goes on for too long. They want to have mastered everything in a matter of just a few weeks. If they haven't perfected their skills within six months they just give up. Carrying on like this they never get to the stage of personal experience. It is only practice which makes perfect.

What we are doing in meditation is trying to understand how we perceive and feel, think and experience. We want to get a handle on the basic mechanism of happiness and suffering and to allow it to work on our internal system. This is no small undertaking.

No-one can learn how to meditate “properly” in just a few weeks. Deep insights can arise once we have heard or read information that is of relevance to us and tested it out with all the faculties at our disposal: With heart and mind, life experience and the entire intellectual understanding available to us. And even all this is not yet enough. If deep wisdom is to arise, our minds must expand, and we have to grasp that what knowledge we do have is of a merely intellectual character. We start out with an attitude of childlike or simple faith before our intellectual insight gives us the resolve required to devote ourselves completely to practice. This is when the third stage becomes possible: We put our knowledge into practice and live it out. We constantly come back to turning unshakeable insights over in our heart.

Suddenly a lightning flash of insight illuminates the landscape of our heart. Just for a few moments we see things as they really are. Such moments of understanding open up both heart and mind. The circular edifice of ever-recurring problems is suddenly shaken to its very foundations. We feel as if we have been completely transformed and experience a deep insight. But old habits are strong. If we are to avoid falling back it is at moments like these that we have to go on practising. We use all the power of collectedness and focus we can muster to keep our deep insights alive in our heart until they have permeated our entire being. At the beginning of the 1990s Prabhava Dharma Roshi, a Frankfurt-born Zen master, put it like this: “If we have experienced deep insights in meditation we will still have to practise for another thirty years to become fully intimate with this new perspective on the world. However,” she continued, “we don’t tell this to people at the start of the path, because if we did no-one would ever even begin to practise.”

Ethical behaviour simplifies our lives, giving us more time for the things that actually matter to us. The first conceptual insights motivate us to practise regularly, and in the course of Samatha meditation (see next page) the fabric of our lives loses its previously defined colour until it becomes neutral, thus making us open and sensitive to new experience. The new colour is that of profound insight. Through the cultivation of further focus and collectedness it penetrates deep into the fibres of our being.

Hearing or reading, trying out and putting into practice are the three levels of wisdom. Words and similes can do no more than provide conditions for the spark of authenticity to leap the gap between knowledge and direct experience, enabling us really to grasp what it is those words and similes are pointing at: That which cannot be put into words.

Exercise: Habits

We call to mind a situation from the last few days in which we decided we wanted to do something nice but didn't actually get round to doing it because of the paralysing intervention of habit. We ask ourselves: Which habits prevent me from doing those things that will benefit me? Which circumstances, people and methods strengthen these hindrances? For which experiences do I want to create space in my life? Which conditions, people or methods can support me in this? When am I going to start?

Exercise: Disappointment and dis-illusionment (p.139)

Calm and insight

Sitting quietly in meditation is a very effective way of becoming aware of the streams of thought that pass through our mind, gaining access to our innate wisdom and creating the conditions for inner peace. There are two different ways of doing this: Using practices that primarily begin with our need for stillness (Pali: *Samatha* – calm abiding), and practices that support insight and understanding (Pali: *Vipassana* – deep insight, clarity of vision). To start with we gain insight into the surface movements of our mind – thoughts and feelings, moods and patterns – before penetrating into the nature of our mind.

Samatha meditations calm the surface of the mind. Instead of chasing after sixty-five different impressions – hearing and feeling, smelling and tasting, thinking and remembering - in the time it takes us to snap our fingers, we simply spend some time in the company of one single thing. We just hear without interpreting the sounds. We just smell something or repeat a

mantra. Practising in this way will calm, clarify and energise the mind. Just as a laser beam concentrates light with such intensity that it can cut through solid structures, so can a concentrated and collected mind cut through craving and aversion. Even short Samatha meditations are refreshing and restorative, because, for as long as the period of collectedness endures, we are not in a state of agitation. In these few precious minutes we aren't lamenting the past or dreaming of the future. There is neither longing nor anger nor fear. This beneficial and shows us very clearly that we are not just our thoughts and emotions.

Samatha meditations can be systematically learned. If you regularly practise one meditation technique for three months you will experience moments of concentration and peace. However, this peace will remain dependent on external factors: If we don't practise for a period of weeks or are sick, furious or sad, we will immediately find it harder to concentrate.

So what are we if we are not our thoughts and emotions? To answer this question requires deep insight. Insight meditations start at the level of our normal, everyday consciousness. We learn to be aware of feelings, emotional patterns, moods and thoughts and to distinguish between them. We train ourselves in "pure awareness". We register our inner processes and train ourselves neither to devalue them nor to exaggerate their importance. We train ourselves in "non-judgemental awareness". This is easy to say, but putting it into practice is the task of a lifetime. This is because there are thoughts that disguise themselves as "objective" truths.

When we sit still for ten minutes and follow the rhythm of our breathing – in and out, in and out – we will with a little

practice learn to notice some thoughts, to label them and then to return to the breath. Then the following thought may arise: “You’re not concentrated. You’re not trying nearly hard enough. Look at you – you’ve been meditating for two months already and you’re still all over the place.” We usually tend to fall into judging thoughts, completely believing in what they are telling us. Why is this? We tend to believe that judgements are thoughts of a special kind. Judgements make assertions: “I’m not a thought. I’m you!” And, accordingly, this is what we believe. In time, however, we can learn to see this as well.

Waking up from the dream

If we can stay on the ball and patiently learn to recognise thoughts as thoughts, to label them and to return to the breath, at some point the scales will fall from our eyes: “These are all just thoughts! My whole life is one unceasing procession of thoughts!” This may in itself be a thought, but it is also a moment of insight, of clear vision, of *vipassana*. For just a fraction of a second we grasp with all our heart that our life consists of thoughts. In the Zen tradition, such moments are referred to as insight into one’s own nature (Jap. *kensho*) or Enlightenment (Jap. *satori*). In the wake of such an experience, some people consider themselves to be enlightened. The truth is that, if we have such an experience, we are “a little bit” enlightened – we now know what’s going on. Just for a few seconds we are awake. The more familiar we are with meditative processes, the better we can process such insights and integrate them into our daily lives.

Gaining Enlightenment is compared with awakening from a dream. Sometimes we notice just for a few seconds that we are dreaming – but then we fall back into the dream. The

dream will only end once we are awake – and stay awake. So it is with the “Great Awakening”, which Buddhism calls “Enlightenment”: If we are really awake, we know that we are awake. If you’re not sure, then you’re bound to still be asleep. Just like in a dream. But even in dreams we sometimes dream of being awake.

About the practices

A popular collection of Tibetan sayings contains fifty-nine memorable phrases that can accompany us on our path of introspection and self-reflection. The first of these – “train yourself in the preparatory practices” – reminds us of some basic rules of life, deep knowledge of which lays a solid foundation for further practices. These topics were introduced in the preceding chapters and some exercises were suggested

Recommended exercises

Life is a miracle (p. 197)

Life and death go together (p.120)

What kind of suffering am I most afraid of?” (p.112)

The next six phrases lead us step by step to a state of abiding in the nature of mind. They presuppose a relatively stable psyche; however, unlike in many other instructions on Buddhist practice concerning the nature of mind, no deep philosophical knowledge or particular meditation experience is required. They encourage us to try things out and to think for ourselves.

Before allowing the following phrases to have their effect on us we should have prepared ourselves by doing the preparatory exercises as described in the preceding chapters

of this book. We need at least to an extent to have become familiar with our strengths and weaknesses and to have developed a relatively robust sense of self-worth. As an old American Indian proverb has it: “If you want to find heaven you have to stand with both feet firmly on the ground.” These practices are not appropriate as a first introduction to meditation even for psychologically stable people.

Exercise: All things are like a dream

We bring to mind a dream from the night before. We recall just how real all the people and things in the dream seemed to be. And yet it was only a dream. Trying to maintain this sense, we spend five minutes looking at our desk or sofa, the coffee cup and shopping list on the table, the flowers in the garden or the cars passing by in the street. Suddenly our gaze softens. Everything stays just as it was. This exercise doesn't cause a single mote of dust to dissolve; nor does it teach us that the world doesn't exist or that it is all just a dream. The world goes on, just as the world of our dream goes on even after we have realised that we are dreaming. We can continue to make phone calls and write letters, go shopping and sweep the kitchen floor. But our gaze is softer, and everything that is appears to be like a dream. Now we can allow one of the following sentences to work on us:

Every situation is a passing memory.

Thoughts are like soap bubbles. Name them gently.

Everything we experience is merely experience.

Find a connection to the openness of your mind.

No-one is all right, yet everyone is well.

*All people are walking contradictions,
especially when they open their mouths.*

*The whole world is perception, is experience.
Everything that we know of the world is conveyed to us
by perception, via the senses or the thinking mind. There is
no objective world independent of our relationship to it.*

Exercise: Investigate the nature of mind

What this literally means is: “Investigate the nature of the unborn Awareness.” This exercise is asking us to investigate our thoughts with a kind of childlike interest. It isn’t a question of finding the right answer – what we are looking to do is to rediscover our sense of wonder. Once we have stopped pretending to be satisfied with second-hand information and have become prepared to jettison concepts from books, we can become privy to the secret of life. We don’t know where thoughts come from or where they go when we start thinking about something else, nor do we even know exactly where they are when they are with us.

Once again, we can allow one of these sentences to work on us, turning it over in our heart for two or three minutes: The mind has neither colour nor form, neither origin nor end. There is no mind that has experiences. There are only experiences.

The thick carapace of the “I” consists of nothing other than thoughts. Let go of thoughts. They will then stop being a problem. Let go of all systems of belief.

Where do the thoughts come from? Where exactly are they when they are with us? Where do they go when they disappear? Is the mind when still the same as the mind in motion: is the awareness of the mind the same as the mind or is it different?

Exercise: Life is a miracle

Life is a miracle. Abide in the knowledge that it is so.
Look around you like a child, with openness and wonder.
Experiences are impossible to grasp.

Exercise: Abiding in the nature of mind

We think about what we understand of the nature of mind. We can reread the sections of this book that deal with Buddha Nature and the nature of mind a few times and allow the phrases and images that particularly move us to have their effect. We can choose to write a few phrases down on little cards and turn them over in our heart. We can say them slowly to ourselves and ask: "What does this mean to me? What do I understand by it?" To start with these questions will stimulate new thoughts. In time they will begin to knock at the door of our heart and awaken our inner wisdom. Then we will understand them directly and without words and concepts. Once again, we can allow one of these sentences to work on us, turning it over in our heart for two or three minutes: Mind is open and expansive like space. Abide in pure simplicity and in the clarity that is directed toward insight. Do not follow your thoughts. Feel the openness, clarity and sensitivity of your mind and abide therein. Abide at the level of Buddha Nature, which is at this moment accessible to you.

After meditation: Be a child of illusion

The last memorable phrase in this sequence connects back to the second - all things are like a dream - and is a practical recommendation: "In the period after meditation be a child of illusion." When we are washing up or getting dressed, walking down the street or sitting at home, whether we are being quiet or are busy doing something, we can return time and again for one or two minutes at a time to the dreamlike

character of our experiences. The more frequently we can practise this in meditation, the easier it will become to remember to do it. A popular variation of this exercise has become established in psychotherapeutic circles: “See yourself as an actor in a play that you yourself have written and in which you are playing all the roles.” Once again: This is not a description of reality to which we should cling but an exercise to help us to let go and become lighter. Once again, we can allow some of these sentences to work on us, turning them over in our heart for two or three minutes: