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Nimitta

The radiant and blissful sign

Theme: How to enjoy *and* benefit from our meditation

Essay and selected translations by Piya Tan ©2006

1 Meanings of *nimitta*

1.1 The result of keeping proper mental focus during meditation leads to the rise of the meditation sign (*nimitta*). Its etymology is uncertain, but could be related to $\sqrt{mā}$, “to measure,” as in *nimmināti* (v), “measures out, creates, produces miraculously”; *nimmāna* (n), “creation, production”;¹ *nimmita* (adj, pp), “measured out, created (supernaturally).”² The word *nimitta* has various meanings, some of which are examined here.³ In the Suttas, *nimitta* is used in the following senses:⁴

(1) **Object**, also called “bases (*āyatana*), that is, the six sense-objects or objects presented at the six sense-doors, namely, eye-object (visual form), ear-object (sound), nose-object (smell), tongue-object (taste), body-object (touch), mind-object (thoughts etc)” (D 1:70). This usage is found in **the Vitakka Saṅghāna Sutta** (M 20), where it refers to “evil unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, with hate, or with delusion.”⁵ Its Commentary glosses *nimitta* here as “cause,”⁶ that is, a cause of distraction.

(2) **Outward appearance** or general appearance, or simply “sign,” that is, “the distinguishing feature by which one recognizes or remembers something,”⁷ which would also include “general appearance.” “Sign” (*nimitta*) is often contrasted with “details” or “particulars” (*anuvyañjana*).⁸ Of one who restrains his senses it is said, “He does not seize at the sign” (*na nimitta-g, gāhi*) of an object.⁹

1.2 In terms of perception, this “sign” (*nimitta*) is “related to the first evaluation of the raw sense data, because of which the object appears to be, for example, ‘beautiful’ (*subha, nimitta*) or ‘irritating’ (*paṭigha, nimitta*), which then usually leads to subsequent evaluations and mental reactions.”¹⁰ (Analayo 2003: 225 f). The Commentaries say that “sign” (*nimitta*) here refers to a grasping arising through one’s sensual lust (*chanda, rāga, vasena*) or on account of one’s view (*diṭṭhi, matta, vasena*); “features” (*anuvyañjanā*) here refers to finding delight by grasping at another’s limb or body part (eyes, arms, legs, etc).¹¹

¹ D 11.75/1:218; M 101.22/2:222; A 3.61.1/1:173.

² D 1:18, 56, 219.

³ A brief discussion on *nimitta* is found in **Satipaṭṭhāna Ss** (D 22; M10), SD 13.1 (3.1d). See also Harvey 1986: 31-33, 237 n21.

⁴ For other less common senses, see PED, sv.

⁵ *Pāpakā akusalā vitakkā chandūpasamhitā pi dosūpasamhitā pi mohūpasamhitā pi* (M 20/1:118-122), SD 1.6.

⁶ *Nimittāni ti kāraṇāni* (MA 87).

⁷ Analayo 2003:225. For example, **Potaliya S** (M 54.3/1:360) refers to the outer aspect of being a householder, or at **V 3:15. Raṭṭhapāla S** (M 82) relates how a slave woman, in a similar manner, recognizes a monk who was the former son of her master, returning after a long absence, by “the characteristic features of his hand, his feet, and his voice.” (M 82.18/2:62)

⁸ **Mahā Assa, pura S** (M 39.8/1:273), SD 10.13. See also *Nimitta and anuvyañjana*, SD 19.14.

⁹ D 2.64/1:70 = D:RD 1:80n; M 33.7/1:221, 38.35/1:269; Vism 1.53-59/20-23.

¹⁰ In **Nīvaraṇa, pahāna Vagga** (A 1:3), sensual desire arises due to unwise attention to the “sign of beauty” (A 1.2.1/1:3) and aversion arises due to the “sign of repulsion” (A 1.2.2/1:3). **Mahā Vedalla S** (M 43) explains that greed, hate and delusion are each a “maker of signs” (*nimitta, karaṇa*) (M 43.37/1:298), ie, they ascribe a false significance to things as being impermanent, pleasurable, self, or beautiful (ie in terms of the 4 perversions, *vipallāsa*, A 2:52; Pm 2:80; Bodhi 1980:4, 25 n27). **Uddesa Vibhaṅga S** (M 138) describes how when consciousness follows the sign, it becomes “tied and shackled by the gratification derived in the sign,” and thereby becomes fettered to the sign (M 138.10/3:225). It is also possible that a grasping at a “sign” may be followed by various types of thought that could be regarded as “association” (**Vitakka Saṅghāna S**, M 20,3/1:119).

¹¹ D 3:249; A 1:256, 3:319, 375 f, 4:33, 418 f; J 1:420; Pm 1:60, 91 f, 164, 170, 2:39, 64; Vbh 193 f; Nm 2:390; Nc 141, 141; DhsA 400, 402; cf MA 1:75, 4:195; SA 3:4, 394; Nc 1:55; DhA 1:74. For a detailed study, see *Nimitta & anuvyañjana*, SD 19.14 & also Ñāṇananda 1974: 13-16 (ch III).

(3) Basis. As evident from our study of the Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas,¹² the function of *satipaṭṭhāna* is as a support for *dhyana*,¹³ clearly evident in the Suttas: two examples would suffice as examples. The very first discourse of **the Magga Saṃyutta** stresses the causal relationship between the factors of the path including mindfulness and samadhi: “For one of right mindfulness, right samadhi comes to be.”¹⁴ An important definition of “noble right samadhi” (*ariya sammā,samādhi*) found in all four Nikāyas, also emphasizes that the path factors, culminating in right mindfulness, functions to support samadhi:

What, bhikshus, is noble right samadhi, with its vital conditions, with its prerequisites?

There are these (seven factors): right view, right thought [intention], right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness.

One-pointedness of mind, bhikshus, equipped with these seven factors, is called noble right samadhi “with its vital conditions, with its prerequisites (*sa,upaniso sa,parikkhāro*).”¹⁵

(D 18.27/2:216 f; M 117.3/3:71; S 45.28/5:21; A 7.42/4:40)

1.3 The same principle is spelled out in **the Cūḷa Vedalla Sutta** (M 44), where the nun Dhamma,-dinnā gives this analysis of samadhi to the layman Visākha:

One-pointedness of mind, friend Visākha, is samadhi. The focuses of mindfulness (*sati,-paṭṭhāna*) are the basis for samadhi. The four right strivings are the prerequisite of samadhi. The cultivation, development, and making much of these same principles is the development of samadhi therein.

(M 44,12/1:301)

1.4 The Commentary here notes that the four focuses of mindfulness are the basis of samadhi (*sam-ādhi,nimitta*)¹⁶ in the sense of being its condition (MA 2:363). **Bodhi** says that here it “would seem incorrect to translate *nimitta* as ‘sign,’ in the sense of either distinctive mark or object.”¹⁷ According to **Anala-yo**, “an object, image or concept which, on being meditated upon, induces *samādhi* (*jhāna*) is a *nimitta*.”¹⁸ As such, the term here can also be translated, somewhat loosely, though, as “condition.” Such a usage is found in, for example, **the Nimitta Sutta** (A 3.110b).¹⁹

However, here, *nimitta* can also be translated as “mental reflex,” that is, a mirror image of the near-focus mind just before dhyana arises (that is, just before mental unification). In the Commentaries, however, the *nimitta* is also used to refer to the dhyanic mind itself (see sense 7 below).

(4) Condition of existence. In the **Paṭisambhidā,magga**,²⁰ *nimitta* appears in a repetitive set following *uppāda* (arising, origin), *pavatta* (existence, occurrence).

¹² See SD 13, esp §13.1(3.1b).

¹³ See **Satipaṭṭhāna Ss**, SD 13.1(3.1b).

¹⁴ S 45.1/5:2.

¹⁵ The term *parikkhāra* more familiarly refers to a monk’s four requisites: bowl, robes, dwelling, and medicine. Here, it obviously means the factors that are “pre-requisite” for attaining dhyana. In later usage, it is replaced in this sense by its etymological twin *parikamma*, usu rendered something like “preparatory work.” (Sujato’s fn)

¹⁶ D 3:226, 242; M 1:249, 301, 3:112; A 1:115, 2:17, 3:23, 321. Although at M 1:301, this sign of concentration is related to the 4 satipaṭṭhanas, at M 3:112, it refers to the practice of samatha meditation, since it speaks of quieting the mind leading up to dhyanas. Cf *samatha,nimitta*, “sign of calmness,” where S 5:105 recommends as food for the awakening factor of concentration (also at D 3:213; S 5:66; cf Dhs 1357; Vism 1.113, 125; Abhs 9.5 = Abhs:SR 54, Abhs:BRS 9.18-20, Abhs:WG 328 (see index); *Manual of a Mystic* 2); and *citta,nimitta*, “sign of the mind” (S 5:151; A 3:423), which Tha 85 relates to non-sensual happiness, “an instance reminiscent of the experience of non-sensual happiness during absorption” (Anala-yo 2003:237). Cf A 4:419, which recommends developing the “sign,” which in this passage too represents dhyanic attainment. See §3.1d below.

¹⁷ M:ÑB 1242 n464 ad **Cūḷa Vedalla S**, M 44.12/1:301; see also S:B 1900 n54.

¹⁸ *Satipaṭṭhāna: The direct way to realization*, 2003:237 n21. For a situation where it is *dhyana* that is the support for satipaṭṭhana, see **Satipaṭṭhāna Ss**, SD 13.1(7): “How to enter the path in one week.”

¹⁹ A 3.100b/1:256-258 = SD 19.12 (2).

²⁰ Pm 1.18/1:10. See BDict: *nimitta* (5); also Anala-yo 2003 225 n35.

The following meanings of *nimitta* are found in the Commentaries:

(5) **Sign, omen, portent, prognostication.**²¹ **The Brahma, jāla Sutta** (D 1) mentions “divination by way of signs” (*nimittam*),²² which the Commentary glosses as “the study of omens” (*nimitta, sattham*).²³ The term *pubba, nimitta* (lit “preceding sign”), referring to signs preceding an event, portents, warnings, or foreshadowings, is found in the Suttas.²⁴ Thirty-two signs before the Bodhisattva’s birth are mentioned in the Jātaka.²⁵

(6) **Karmic sign** (*kamma, nimitta*), that is, a past karma taking effect, and **destiny sign** (*gati, nimitta*), that is, an indication of one future rebirth. They arise as mental objects of the last karmic consciousness before death (*marañ ‘āsanna, kamma*).²⁶

(7) **Mental reflex**, that is, any of the meditation signs that arise as one approaches and attains mental concentration. This is a commentarial usage, and will be discussed below [3].

2 Some usages of *nimitta* in the Suttas

2.1 The Suttas often use *nimitta* to refer to any “sign” or mental object arising during meditation. In **the Vitakka Saṅghāna Sutta** (M 20), for example (see meaning 1) [1], it refers to “evil unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, with hate, or with delusion.”²⁷ This sense clearly has nothing to do with the attaining of dhyana: indeed, it is a *cause* of distraction, and is to be overcome so that we can progress in our mindfulness practice.

2.2 According to **the Upakkilesa Sutta** (M 128), when Anuruddha complains about his inability to progress—when “light and the vision of forms”²⁸ arise in his meditation, he simply let them cease—but the Buddha advises that he “should penetrate the sign” (*nimittam paṭivijjhitabbam*), that is, he should know or master it.²⁹ The Sutta’s Commentary explains this phrase as *taṃ vo kāraṇam jānitabbam* (“the reason should be known”) (MA 4:207).

This explanation is further supported by the phrase *kilesa, gahana, paccavekkhaṇānubhāvenāpi evaṃ cittam nami* (“he directed his mind thus by virtue of reviewing the defilement that he has clung to”) found repeatedly in Buddhaghosa’s Commentaries.³⁰ The method here is that of reviewing the meditation practice: what sort of hindrance or defilement was it, why did it arise, how to let go of it? A similar method, called “the stilling of the thought-formation” (*vitakka, saṅkhāra, santhāna*),³¹ is taught in **the Vitakka Saṅghāna Sutta** (M 20), thus:

...then he should attend to the stilling of the thought-formation (*vitakka, saṅkhāra, santhānam manasikarato*) [by identifying the causes] of those evil unwholesome thoughts.³²

Then the evil unwholesome thoughts are eliminated and disappear. By their elimination, the mind thus stands firm internally, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated.

²¹ J 1:11, 48, 59; Miln 79, 178, 298; Vism 577.

²² D 1.21/1:9.

²³ DA 1:92.

²⁴ S 5:154, 278, 554; It 76 (cf Divy 193, on the impending death of a god).

²⁵ J 1:50; some are given at DA 1:61.

²⁶ PmA 3:571; DhsA 411, 417; VbhA 156, 160. BDict: Karma III,3.

²⁷ *Pāpakā akusalā vitakkā chandūpasamhitā pi dosūpasamhitā pi mohūpasamhitā pi* (M 20/1:118-122), SD 1.6.

²⁸ *Obhāsam... dassanañ ca rūpānam*.

²⁹ M 128.16/3:157 = SD 5.18.

³⁰ DA 2:466 = MA 2:177 = SA 1:198.

³¹ *Vitakka, saṅkhāra, saṅghāna*. MA explains *saṅkhāra* here as condition, cause or root, and takes the compound to mean “stopping the cause of the thought.” The Chinese Āgama version, MA 101 = T1.588b26, however, instructs that one “should use intention and volition to gradually decrease the (unwholesome) thoughts” 當以思行漸減其念. This is accomplished by investigating the unwholesome thought thus: “What is the cause? What is the cause of its cause?” and so on. MA explains that such an investigation would loosen the mind from the flow of evil thoughts, eventually ending them. This is perhaps the most important and interesting of all the methods; hence, the title of the Sutta. In modern terms, this can be simply called “thought analysis.” See SD 1.6 Intro (2).

³² **Daddabha J** (J 322) illustrates this method of going to the root or source of the problem.

Bhikshus, just as a man finding no reason for walking fast, walks slowly; finding no reason for walking slowly, stands; finding no reason for standing, sits down; finding no reason for sitting down, lies down—thus giving up an awkward posture for an easy one—even so, should the monk get rid of the evil unwholesome thoughts by attending to the stilling of the thought-formation.

Then the evil unwholesome thoughts are eliminated and disappear. By their elimination, the mind thus stands firm internally, settles down, becomes unified and concentrated.

(M 20,6/1:120), SD 1.6

2.3 The aorist (past tense) form *paṭivijjha* is also found, for example, in **the (Vīṇopama) Soṇa Sutta** (A 6.55), where the Buddha instructs Soṇa how to moderate his meditation practice, thus: “Therefore, Soṇa, keep our energy [effort] even, penetrated to an evenness of the spiritual faculties, and then seize the sign.”³³ The similar form *paṭivijjhi* is found in **the Cunda Sutta** (Sn 90), where its Commentary glosses as *aññāsi sacchākāsi* (“understood, realized,” SnA 166). This explanation is confirmed by the usage in **the Ajjuna Thera, gāthā**, where we find the phrase *saccāni paṭivijjh’ahan ti* (“I penetrated the truths”). In all these cases, *paṭivijjha* or *paṭivijjhi* has the sense of mastering or penetrating a state.

2.4 In **the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16), the Buddha describes to Ānanda how his (the Buddha’s) aged body feels like:

Ānanda, I am now old, worn out, burdened with years, my journey done, I have reached the sum of my days, I am turning eighty. Ānanda, just as an old cart is kept going by being held together with straps, even so the Tathāgata’s body is kept going by being strapped up.³⁴

Ānanda, it is only when the Tathāgata pays no attention to all the signs and by the ending of certain feelings, enters and dwells in the signless concentration of mind,³⁵ that the Tathāgata’s body knows comfort. (D 16.2.25b/2:101), SD 9

Here, “the signless concentration of mind” (*animittam ceto, samādhim*), says Bodhi is a samadhi that “must be different from the one with the same name mentioned at [**the Animitta Sutta**, S 40.9]”³⁶ (S:B 1921 n142), which the Saṃyutta Commentary (SA 3:90) on the Sutta explains as deep insight concentration. The samadhi here however is a fruition attainment (*phala, samāpatti*), which would then be identical with the *animittam ceto, vimutti* of **the Go, datta Sutta** (S 41.7).³⁷ The Commentary on the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta (D 16) simply says it is “fruition attainment” (DA 2:548). In simple terms, this is the samadhi of the Buddha and the arhats, who are able to naturally enjoy the bliss of samadhi without any meditation sign. This is the highest possible manifestation of the *nimitta*.

3 Nimitta and zest

3.1 One of the key features of dhyana experience is profound joy, or more technically, zest (*pīti*), sometimes somewhat crudely rendered as “rapture” (which has a very sensuous or worldly connotation). “Zest,” in the sense of *joyful interest*, is perhaps the best translation for *pīti* as it connotes profound joy,

³³ *Tasmā tiha tvaṃ Soṇa viriya, samataṃ adhiṭṭhaha indriyānañ ca samataṃ paṭivijjha tattha ca nimittam ganhāhī ti* (A 6.55/3:375).

³⁴ “By being strapped,” *veṭha, missakena*, following Norman and Bodhi. See Tha:N 143 n & S:B 1920 n141. Bodhi also notes that if Comys (SA 2:425; ApA 58, 358; J 1:63) were right in saying that Ānanda was born on the same day as the Bodhisattva, this passage would hardly make sense, “for the Buddha would not need to insist on the frailties of old age if Ānanda too was an old man” (S:B id). Bodhi thinks that Ānanda “must have been considerably younger than the Buddha, perhaps by as much as thirty years” (S:B 804 n296). It is interesting that the Tibetan sources (eg the *Dulva* or *Vinaya*) says that Ānanda is the same age as Rāhula (Rockhill 57), which should be a good age for one to be the Buddha’s life-long personal attendant. On the differences of opinion regarding Ānanda’s age amongst the early Buddhist schools, see C Witanachchi, “Ānanda,” *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism* 1:529. See also Thomas 1949:123; Rhys Davids’ article on “Devadatta” in ERE; DPPN 1:268.

³⁵ On the Buddha’s first serious illness, see **Mahā, parinibbāna S** (D 16), SD 9 §2.23 n.

³⁶ S 40.9/4:268 f = SD 24.6.

³⁷ S 41.7/4:297 = SD 24.7.

spiritual energy and mental focus. Both Upatissa, in his **Vimutti,magga**, and Buddhaghosa (following Upatissa) in his **Visuddhi,magga**, speak of three successive “signs” (*nimitta*)³⁸ and five stages of zest.³⁹

3.2 *The Buddhist Dictionary* defines **nimitta**, following the Commentaries, as follows:

“Mental (reflex-) image,” obtained in meditation. In full clarity, it will appear in the mind by successful practice of certain concentration-exercises and will then appear as vividly as if seen by the eye. The object perceived at the very beginning of concentration is called **the preparatory image** (*parikamma,nimitta*).

The still unsteady and unclear image which arises when the mind has reached a weak degree of concentration is called **the acquired image** (*uggaha,nimitta*).

An entirely clear and immovable image arising at a higher degree of concentration is **the counterpart sign or counter-image** (*paṭibhāga,nimitta*). As soon as this image arises, the stage of neighbourhood (or access) concentration (*upacāra,samādhi*) is reached.⁴⁰

(*The Buddhist Dictionary*: nimitta)

“Access (or neighbourhood) concentration” (*upacāra,samādhi*) refers to a mental focus when an entirely clear and immovable image (*nimitta*), called the **counter-image** (*paṭibhāga,nimitta*) has arisen. As soon as this image arises, access concentration is reached.⁴¹

3.3 According to a popular tradition today known as insight meditation or “Vipassana,” mental cultivation comprises of five progressively refined and profound states of zest. Even at the stage of preliminary cultivation, when the meditator is directing his attention to the meditation object (**the preparatory sign**), he might taste the “minor zest” (*khuddaka pīti*), marked by horripilation, literally, a pleasant hair-raising experience. Or, he might even experience a more profoundly pleasant “momentary zest” (*khaṇika pīti*), that arises and disappears like repeated flashings of lightning.

When the meditator, during access or neighbourhood cultivation stage, begins to visualize **the acquired sign**, he may be filled with “flooding zest” (*okkantikā pīti*) that descend upon him like tossing sea-waves. This feeling may then intensify into the “uplifting zest” (*ubbegā pīti*), so called because it can literally lift one off the ground momentarily. At its peak of meditation ecstasy, he is utterly drenched in “pervading zest” or “suffusing zest” (*pharaṇa pīti*). Then he sees **the counterpart sign** and attains the full concentration of dhyana. The relationship of the meditation sign and the kinds of zest is summarized here:

Cultivation (<i>bhāvanā</i>) ⁴²	Meditation sign (<i>nimitta</i>)	The 5 kinds of zest (<i>pīti</i>) ⁴³
attainment cultivation (<i>appanā bhāvanā</i>)	counterpart sign (<i>paṭibhāga nimitta</i>)	full concentration (<i>appanā samādhi</i>)
access cultivation (<i>upacāra bhāvanā</i>)	acquired sign (<i>uggaha nimitta</i>)	pervading zest (<i>pharaṇa pīti</i>) uplifting zest (<i>ubbegā pīti</i>)
preparatory cultivation (<i>parikamma bhāvanā</i>)	preparatory sign (<i>parikamma nimitta</i>)	flooding zest (<i>okkantikā pīti</i>) momentary zest (<i>khaṇika pīti</i>) minor zest (<i>khuddaka pīti</i>)

Table 3 *Bhāvanā, nimitta and pīti* (the table should be read in an ascending order)⁴⁴

³⁸ See Brahmavamso, “The nimitta: the ‘home stretch’ into Jhānas,” 2003:21-39 (pt 2).

³⁹ For details, see *Bhāvanā*, SD 15.1(9). For a helpful reading, see Gethin 1998:181-184; also Cousins 1973:120 f.

⁴⁰ For details, see BDict: *kaṣiṇa,samādhi*. For other meanings and usages of nimitta, see PED sv.

⁴¹ For details, see **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 10) @ SD 13.1 (3.1d); also see BDict: *kaṣiṇa,samādhi*.

⁴² D 33.1.10(48)/3:219. See [2] above.

⁴³ Vism 4.94-99/143 f.

⁴⁴ Gethin has a similar table (1998:182, Table 5): see *Bhāvanā*, SD 15.1(9.6).

4 The breath meditation: from *nimitta* to *dhyana*⁴⁵

4.1 PRESENT-MOMENT AWARENESS.⁴⁶ “*Watch the present moment: let go of the past and the future.*”⁴⁷ Notice that when we *worry*, we are invariably thinking of the past or planning the future, but totally neglecting the present moment. Worry is tiring and disempowering simply because the past is gone, and the future has not yet come. The only reality we have is the present moment. But when we worry, we lose even the present moment.

Our memory is often distorted, even when we are quite sure we remembered correctly. We do not really remember our past unless we are really mindful. Instead we tend to *construct* our past, and are often affected by it, so that we effectively live in that virtual past. Similarly, our thoughts of the future are simply projections of our present desires, and notice how often we change our minds and our future plans! Either way, we do not live in the present and simply let all the precious present moments pass by without living them. Both the past and the future thus become burdens for us.

Understandably, mindfulness meditation simply begins with the letting go of the past and the future. We are like a security guard carefully watching six monitors. None of the monitors have any sound: we only watch out for any suspicious activities on these monitors, one screen at a time. In the same way, we simply watch and restrain our sense-faculties (the eyes, the ears, the nose, the tongue, the body, and the mind), and whatever experience that arises there, we observe it *without any comment*: we let it come, we let it go. We just sit silently like a flower and slowly our minds blossom beautifully. Do not be pushed by the past nor pulled by the future: *live now*.

4.2 SILENT PRESENT-MOMENT AWARENESS.⁴⁸ “*Watch the present moment: let go of mental chatter.*” It is like watching a movie on TV with the sound turned off, without any commentary. Remember how less frightening a horror movie becomes when we turn off the sound! If we “hear” our minds commenting on anything, we simply *let it come, let it go*.

Our inner speech comes from the greatest busybody of all, known as “the doer,” that is, our “old mind” or habitual tendencies, built up from long time past but still controlling us, so that we often exist on autopilot. The truth is *whatever comments we make, they are always about a previous experience*. But it is gone: so, leave it where it should be buried, in the graveyard of the past.

Another method of keeping the mind’s inner silence is to notice the space between periods of inner chatter, or between thoughts. Carefully notice when one thought ends and before another begins—this is silent awareness! This inner silence helps to keep us in the present moment so that we are prepared for the next stage in our journey in inner space.

4.3 SILENT PRESENT-MOMENT AWARENESS OF THE BREATH.⁴⁹ “*Watch the breath: let go of all thoughts.*” In our “normal” daily lives, we live with six telephones ringing at the same time. These phones are our six senses. Very often we try to answer more than one phone at a time, with devastating effects! No wonder we have so much stress. At this stage, we simply notice any thought that arises, and simply let it go.

We direct all our attention to the breath, while keeping it natural. Do nothing to the breath, it will take care of itself, as it always has. It is best not to locate the breath anywhere. Simply observe our awareness of the breath. If we have any difficulty, simply ask, “Am I breathing in or breathing out? How do I know?” Otherwise, imagine we are in a comfortable car chauffeured by our breath. So simply sit back and enjoy the ride. Let the breath do the breathing, and we simply watch.

⁴⁵ In this section, I present a practical summary of the forest method as taught by Ajahn Chah, based on the writings of Brahmavamso (see biblio). I have added my own occasional notes or comments.

⁴⁶ See Brahmavamso 2006:1-11.

⁴⁷ These instructions found at the beginning of the following 4 sub-sections should be mindfully noted a couple of time at the start of each stage; then remain silent and let the mind carry out the instruction. Whenever we are distracted, give the instruction again in the same way.

⁴⁸ See Brahmavamso 2006:11-14.

⁴⁹ See Brahmavamso 2006:14-16.

4.4 SUSTAINED AWARENESS OF THE BREATH.⁵⁰ “*Watch the breath, only the breath, all the time.*” In this stage, we extend our attention to take in every moment of the breath. Observe the in-breath at the very first sensation as it arises. Notice how the breath flows in. Observe how the first breath ends, followed by a gap. Then notice how the next breath begins. All this is done in the silence of the mind in the present moment.

This is actually the real starting point, the “springboard,” of the breath meditation, because this is the stage where we may begin to dive into the blissful states. When we simply keep up this single-minded mindfulness by not interfering, the breath will begin to disappear. It appears to fade away as the mind focuses instead on what is at *the centre* of the breathing experience, which is profoundly blissful. We are aware only of the breath, effortlessly and for a very long time. This is the “**beautiful breath.**”

The mind is now taking the mind as its own object. We are no longer aware of the breath, body, thought, sound, pain, or the outside world. The feeling of *bliss* is beginning to flower in our minds. This is the bliss, when fully developed, will bring the mind into dhyana, absolute bliss.

For the fullest benefit, each of these four stages should be carefully cultivated before going on to the next. We should take as much time as needed for each stage, so that they are stable. It is like building a good foundation for a house. We should be able to maintain with ease this fourth stage—the sustained awareness of the breath—during every moment of the breath, without a single break for 200-300 breaths in succession. We need not count the breaths, but we will *know* approximately when the number is right! In meditation, careful patience is the fastest way.

4.5 FULL AWARENESS OF THE BEAUTIFUL BREATH.⁵¹ This stage often flows seamlessly from the previous one. At this stage, “we” do not do anything. In fact, if we try, we will lose everything, and like in the game of Snakes-and-ladders, we are caught in the snake’s head and go back many squares! The doer must disappear, so that we are just a *knower*, a passive observer.

A helpful trick at this stage is to break the inner silence for a moment by gently saying in our mind, “Calm, calm, calm,” saying it gently and mindfully. At this stage, the mind is usually so sensitive that just a simple instruction like this causes it to fully follow the instruction. When the breath calms down, the beautiful breath arises.

When watching the beautiful breath, there is no more perception of “in” or “out,” or beginning, or middle, or ending. There is *only the experience of the beautiful breath here and now*. We should take our time to savour this inner beautiful stillness.

Soon, when there is enough calm, the breath itself will disappear, leaving only the sign of “the beautiful” (*subha, nimitta*). This is like the famous Cheshire Cat in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*, that sits grinning ear to ear on a bough in a tree. Then its body disappears, leaving only its head, which then disappears, leaving only the face. When the face disappears, only the grinning mouth is left, and finally only the grin! So too in meditation, at this stage, our body, as it were, disappears, leaving only the beautiful, or more accurately, the sign of the beautiful.

4.6 EXPERIENCING THE BEAUTIFUL SIGN.

4.6.1 The nimitta.⁵² This stage is attained when we completely let go of the body, thought, and the 5 senses, including the awareness of the breath, so that only a beautiful mental sign—the nimitta—remains. When it appears for the first time, it is extremely strange or even frightening. The mental process called *perception*⁵³ searches through our all memory bank for something even remotely similar, but is unable to find one!

For most meditators, this disembodied joyful beauty is perceived as a profoundly beautiful *light*. But it is *not* a light, as the eyes are closed, and the eye-consciousness has shut down. It is the *mind-consciousness* that is freed for the first time from the world of the five senses. It is like the full moon in a clear

⁵⁰ See Brahmavamsa 2003:20-22; 2006:16-18.

⁵¹ See Brahmavamsa 2003:22-30; 2006:19-21.

⁵² See Brahmavamsa 2006:21 f.

⁵³ See *Saññā*, SD 17.4.

cloudless sky. The radiant mind is *perceived* as a light because this imperfect description is the best that perception can offer.

4.6.2 The characteristics of the nimitta. Some meditators may *feel* a physical sensation, such as an intense tranquillity or ecstasy. But the body consciousness—which experiences pleasure and pain, etc—has long since shut down. So it is not a physical feeling, but *a mental experience*. As such, whether we are experiencing a bright light or an intense bliss, we are talking about the same thing, the same pure mental object, the nimitta. **The nimitta** can be recognized by the following six features:

- (1) It appears only after the fifth stage of the meditation, after the meditator has been with the beautiful breath for a long time.
- (2) It appears when the breath disappears;
- (3) It comes only when the five physical senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch are completely absent.
- (4) It manifests itself only in the silent mind, when discursive thought (inner speech) is totally absent.
- (5) It is strange but powerfully attractive.
- (6) It is a beautifully simple object.

An important point to remember: When we first see some kind of brightness in our mind during meditation, do not rush at it. Always sustain the full awareness of the beautiful breath. If we move to the nimitta too soon, it may appear dull. Or, it may be bright but unstable, flashing off and on like a lighthouse, and then disappearing. Keep training our attention on the beautiful breath, and the nimitta will in due course appear, bright, stable, and lasting.

4.6.3 Contentment.⁵⁴ A dhyana is a profound state of **contentment**, of letting go. The main reason why the nimitta appears dull or unstable is that our *contentment* is not fully developed. This problem is addressed by the 10th and 11th steps of the 16-step breath meditation,⁵⁵ respectively,

shining the nimitta and sustaining the nimitta... The more joy there is in the mind, the more brilliant shines the nimitta. To enter *Jhāna*, the nimitta has to be the most brilliant thing that you have ever seen, and an unearthly beauty. (Brahmavamso 1999: ch 9; 2002:74 f)

In this connection, Ajahn Chah tells the well known story of **the still forest pool**, about how when he sits very still near a forest pool, strange and beautiful animals would appear at the pool's edge, and the longer he sits in his absolute stillness, the more strange and more beautiful forest beings would appear. At the slightest movement, however, these fabulous beings would simply disappear.⁵⁶

There are four common reasons why the nimitta fails to appear, much less to shine:

- (1) Too goal-oriented in meditation.
- (2) Low mental effort.
- (3) Too much fault-finding.
- (4) Disharmonious daily life, or lack of moral conduct.

(1) Meditation is letting go. So if we go into meditation *aiming* to experience samadhi or nimitta, or to anticipate it: we will certainly never get it! The Buddha gives a beautiful parable of the hen hatching her eggs, in **the Ceto, khila Sutta** (M 16) and **the Sekha Sutta** (M 53), thus:

Suppose there were a hen with eight, ten or twelve eggs, which she has properly sat on, properly incubated, properly brooded.⁵⁷ Even though she does not wish: “O, that my chicks might break the shell with their claw-tips or with their beaks,⁵⁸ and hatch out safely!” Yet these chicks

⁵⁴ See Brahmavamso 2003: 41 f; 2006:22 f.

⁵⁵ **Ānāpāna, sati S** (M 118.20/3:83), SD 7.13.

⁵⁶ “A still forest pool,” see 2002:71 f & 2003:46

⁵⁷ “Properly sat on, ... properly brooded,” *sammā adhisāyitāni sammā pariseditāni sammā paribhāvitāni*.

⁵⁸ “With the points... beaks,” *pāda, nakha, sikhāya vā mukha, tuṇḍakena vā*.

are still capable of breaking through their shells with their claw-tips or with their beaks, and hatch out safely. (M 16,27/1:103 f = M 53,19-22/1:356-359)⁵⁹

The point of the parable is that meditation is not a prayer. In calming the mind, we prepare the ground for the mind to break out of its habitual cycle into the spaciousness of the beautiful nimitta.

Furthermore, when the nimitta arises, be careful not to be curious and wonder, “What is this?” “Is this dhyana?” This sort of questioning breaks the attention. A good way to encourage contentment is to gently interrupt the silence of the mind for a moment and mentally whisper that we are giving complete trust to the nimitta, so that the doer can give up control and just disappear.

(2) In the case of low mental effort, we should remedy it by switching from the breath meditation to one of “**the inspiring meditations**,” such as a reflection (*anussati*) on any of the three jewels or on giving (*cāgānussati*), or the *mettā, bhāvanā*.⁶⁰

(3) If we have a strong fault-finding mind, constantly and obsessively picking out various faults in ourself or in others, then it is almost impossible to see the beautiful centre of a dull nimitta. We have become so accustomed to fault-finding that we compulsively attend to the dull and dirty areas of the nimitta. By *cultivating a more compassionate and forgiving heart*, we are more able to embrace the duality of good and evil—“neither being a negative obsessive nor a positive excessive, but a balanced ‘acceptive’”⁶¹—then, we can not only see beauty in mistakes, but we can also see *the beautiful centre* in the dull and dirty nimitta.

(4) If our daily life is not harmonious, it is difficult to mentally focus. Our moral conduct needs some working. We should spend some effort purifying our daily conduct beyond the meditation cushion. We should keep our precepts faultlessly. Check our speech. Our personal issues should be resolved first [6.2].

The Buddha often says that without first purifying moral conduct, it is impossible to perfect samadhi or mental focus. The advantage that moral virtue gives to mental training is clearly stated in this stock phrase from **the (Agata,phala) Mahānāma Sutta** (A 6.10):

Furthermore, āvuso, the noble disciple possesses virtues dear to the noble ones,⁶² unbroken, untorn, unmixed, spotless, liberating, praised by the wise, untarnished, giving rise to concentration. (A 6.10,5/3:286, SD 15.7a⁶³)

4.6.4 Shining the nimitta.⁶⁴ When we have all the above wholesome conditions, then we are ready to welcome and “shine” the nimitta. Brahmavamso teaches 4 ways of “shining”⁶⁵ the nimitta (here summarized):

- (1) Focus on the centre of the nimitta.
- (2) Sharpen the attention in the present moment.
- (3) Smile inwardly at the nimitta.
- (4) Go back to the beautiful breath.

(1) Focus at the centre of the nimitta. If we are leading a generally harmonious daily life, we will usually be able to attain a level of calmness for the nimitta to arise. To shine the nimitta, we only need to focus the attention on its centre. Do not wonder about the shape or nature of the periphery or edges of the nimitta, such as, “Is it round or oval?” “Is it clear or fuzzy?” Such discursive thoughts only lead to more duality of inside and outside, and more distraction. If we just let go, the mind would usually go to the centre of the nimitta. That is where the light is most brilliant and pure, the most beautiful. It is also the

⁵⁹ See SD 15.2 Intro (2).

⁶⁰ On the reflections (*anussati*), see SD 15. On *mettā, bhāvanā*, see SD 38.3.

⁶¹ Brahmavamso 2003:41.

⁶² “Virtues dear to the noble ones,” *ariya, kantāni sīlāni*. The virtues of the noble one are explained at Vism 221 f. SA says that the noble ones do not violate the five precepts; hence, these virtues are dear to them (SA 2:74).

⁶³ See *Bhāvanā*, SD 15.1(2-3).

⁶⁴ See Brahmavamso 2002: 76 f; 2003: 40 f; 2006: 94-96, 144 f.

⁶⁵ This is Brahmavamso’s word for *abhippamodayam cittam*, lit “the giving of joy to the mind.” (2006:94)

most workable part of the nimitta. As we focus on the centre, it becomes brighter and purer, and a second nimitta, even brighter and purer, arise. This goes on until we get a really beautifully radiant nimitta.

(2) Sharpen the attention in the present moment. If after trying all this, we still are unable to see any nimitta, or unable to focus, it is likely that we are still wanting something, such as wanting the bright light or wanting dhyana. In that case, go back to the earlier stages of the breath meditation, especially the “present-moment awareness” [4.1]. Sometimes, we can brighten the nimitta by simply and gently reminding ourself to focus sharply in the present moment.

(3) Smile inwardly at the nimitta. Remember that the nimitta is simply a reflection of our own minds. So if we smile inwardly, the nimitta smiles back, and brightens! This inward smiling is a gentle but powerful way of overcoming dullness and the other mental hindrances. Just try smiling at ourself in a mirror to see how it works.

(4) Go back to the beautiful breath. Sometimes it is too early to go to the nimitta, and it is wiser to remain with the beautiful breath a bit longer. When the nimitta arises and it is dull, ignore it and return to the mental experience of the breath. Then the nimitta re-arises a little brighter; again ignore it, and so on until a brilliantly beautiful nimitta appears. This is the one we attend to.

4.6.5 Suitable nimitta and useless nimitta.⁶⁶ Besides the “light nimitta” that we have been referring to, there is a “**feeling nimitta**,” so called because it is an experience of bliss. However, this is not a bodily feeling, since at this stage, the sense of touch has been transcended. It is a *mental feeling*. It is a pure mental object, but is perceived as relating closely to a physical feeling of bliss. However, this nimitta is more difficult to work with to gain dhyana, but it is not impossible. As such, if we aspire to attain dhyana, it is recommended to cultivate *the light nimitta*.

As we go deeper into our meditation, “visions” are likely to arise, and they are mostly replays of some past experiences. They may appear in the form of people, buildings, and landscapes, and may appear familiar or strange. We may find these visions fascinating or frightening, but they are all *mind-made* and of little use. We should certainly not take them as some powerful level of meditation, or some divine revelation! These are useless nimittas.

It is highly recommended to withdraw from such visions, no matter how fascinating they are. They are usually the reflections of an over-active and complicated mind. It is like the desert heat that conjures up mirages. Let go of these mental mirages by returning to the “silent present-moment awareness of the breath” [4.3]. When the breath disappears, a simple unified nimitta arises, and this is the one that we should work on.

4.6.6 Types of meditation nimitta.⁶⁷ Brahmavamso speaks of three types that are unsatisfactory and needs working, and of the best nimitta:

- (1) The firework nimitta.
- (2) The shy nimitta.
- (3) The point nimitta.
- (4) The best nimitta.

(1) The firework nimitta. This “firework nimitta” is a complicated nimitta, so called, because it appears as numerous momentary bursts of light, with much movement. They may be several bursts of light at the same time, but they do not last very long. Fascinating as this may be, it is merely the reflection of a complicated mind. Ignore all the fireworks, and return to the breath [4.3] to *develop more one-pointedness and calm*.

(2) The shy nimitta. The “shy nimitta” is so called because it is a single burst of pure light that flashes up quickly and then disappears, like a small comet. After a few moments, it appears again. They last for only a couple of seconds. Due to its simplicity, it is a more useful nimitta, as it is a sign that our joy and happiness (*pīti, sukha*) are strong, but it is unable to remain long enough for further use. So we should patiently cultivate more calm.

⁶⁶ See Brahmavamso 2003:37 f; 2006: 141 f.

⁶⁷ See Brahmavamso 2003:38 f; 2006: 142-144.

As will be explained below, this nimitta disappears because the mind overreacts to its arrival, usually due to excitement or fear [4.7.1]. To make the nimitta less “shy,” ignore it and return to the beautiful breath [4.4]. When the mind has garnered more calm, then we can return to the shy nimitta, and work on it [4.6.4].

(3) **The point nimitta.** The “point nimitta” is so called because it is a simple but powerful *point* of light, lasting for a few seconds. This nimitta can be very useful as it shows that the one-pointedness of mind is excellent and mental calm is sufficient, *but joy and happiness are still weak*. All we need to do is look deeper into the point nimitta, and as our awareness zeroes in, its size begins to grow.

As the point nimitta grows, it is important to keep our attention at its centre. Disregard its periphery, edges and beyond. As we focus on the nimitta’s centre, it will grow in joy and happiness, and soon bloom into the best nimitta.

(4) **The best nimitta.** **The best nimitta** begins to appear like a full moon in a cloud-free night sky. It gently and majestically arises when the beautiful breath softly disappears.

It takes three or four seconds to establish its presence and settle down, remaining still and very beautiful before the mind’s eye. As it remains without effort it grows brighter, more luminous. Soon it appears brighter than the sun at midday, radiating bliss. It becomes, by far, the most beautiful thing one has ever seen. Its beauty and power will often feel more than one can bear. One wonders whether one can take so much bliss of such extreme power. But one can. **There’s no limit to the bliss one can feel.** Then the nimitta explodes, drowning one in even more bliss, or one dives into the centre of the radiating ecstasy. If one remains there, it is *jhāna*.

(Brahmavamso 2003:39)

4.7 DHYANA.

4.7.1 Immediate obstacles to dhyana.⁶⁸ When we sit with our mind fully contented and still, and the nimitta appears pure and radiant, we have then attained dhyana. There are two common obstacles to attaining dhyana: excitement and fear. The **excited** mind thinks. “Wow, this is it!” This wow reaction disrupts the calming process. Leave all this excitement to the “review” stage at the end of the sitting. Here it is worth recalling Ajahn Chah’s story of the still forest pool, how we should learn to calm the mind [4.6.3].

Of the two obstacles, **fear** is more common. It may arise from the recognition of the sheer power and bliss of dhyana. Teachings such as that found in **the Laṭṭikikôpama Sutta** (M 66) remind us not to fear the bliss of dhyana, for

This is called the bliss of renunciation, the bliss of seclusion, the bliss of stillness, the bliss of self-awakening—it should be pursued, cultivated, developed. This pleasure should not be feared, I say!”

(M 66.21/1:454), SD 28.11

Fear may also arise from the perception that on fully entering dhyana, something must be left behind—the “I”! The doer may be silent, but he is still present. The doer must be completely gone before dhyana can appear: we must let go of the idea of self and trust the nimitta. If this is difficult, then we should spend some time studying the Suttas connected with meditation and non-self (*anattā*)⁶⁹ under an experienced teacher who is also a meditation practitioner.

Or fear could arise simply because when the nimitta first appears, it is extremely strange. Our perception (*saññā*) searches through our all memory bank for something even remotely similar, but is unable to find one! [4.6.1]. We are often terrified of first experiences. Remember the first time we tried learning how to ride a bicycle. We keep looking at the bicycle or the wheel, and we keep falling, and bruising ourselves. As we trust ourselves more and look ahead, and just let the body and the bicycle balance themselves, we begin to float away in a new riding experience!

⁶⁸ See Brahmavamso 2003:22 f, 42-47; 2006:24, 145-149.

⁶⁹ Eg **Anatta, lakkhaṇa S** (S 22.59/3:66-88 = V 1:33 f), SD 1.2.

4.7.2 Qualities of dhyana.⁷⁰ The novice meditator may experience glimpses of the nimitta or flashes of dhyanic experience. This is a good sign that we are on the way to inner stillness, but the journey is not over yet. True dhyana lasts for a long time. We will emerge from a dhyana only when all the “fuel” of contentment is used up. However, a skilled meditator can determine at the start of his meditation how long he would sit, and he would emerge accordingly.⁷¹

It should be noted that dhyana occurs only after the nimitta is clearly noticed [4.6.2]. Furthermore, during dhyana, it is impossible to experience the body (that is, no physical pain), nor hear a sound from outside, nor would any thought arise (not even a “good” thought). There is just a clear stable singleness of bliss that goes on unchanging for a very long time. It is not a trance, but an altered mental state of heightened awareness.

Dhyana, as such, is a pure *feeling* state, free from all language-induced processes. In a sense, we *feel* the bliss, but we do not *know* what is going on. The language-based description of dhyanic experience can only be done at the end of the experience by way of reviewing it. If we *think* or *know* that we are in dhyana, we are not!

4.7.3 Entering dhyana.⁷² When the nimitta is stable and radiant, the blissful peace builds up until we reach dhyana. That is, if we patiently maintain the stillness and non-doing until the mind is ready to enter dhyana. When the nimitta is stable, some meditators make the mistake of disrupting the process by discursive thoughts, such as wondering about its shape or size, or by looking at its edge. As a result, they fall back into concepts of duality and lose their one-pointedness. Or, they may try to expand or contract the nimitta: the doer has reasserted itself, dragging him back into duality and so losing focus.

We should keep our mindfulness at the very centre of the nimitta, away from the edge until it vanishes into the non-duality of one-pointedness. Even when the nimitta is stable and bright, we must be patient by remaining mentally still and do nothing. These are very subtle mental processes of letting-go, until there is nothing more to let go of.

Sometimes, it happens that an inexperienced meditator gains the nimitta, but he immediately bounces back to where he began. This is called a “yo-yo dhyana,” after the children’s toy. It is not a real dhyana because it does not last long enough, but it is close. *Excitement* causes this [4.7.1]. It is like the children’s game of snakes and ladders, where we are almost reaching the last square, when we land on a snake’s head, we go back or down some spaces, sometimes even back to square one!

Even then, this momentary dhyana is a powerful experience, and we may burst into tears of joy on emerging from it. We might realize, too, that it is much more pleasurable than even the best sexual orgasm! There is so much blissful energy that we can hardly sleep, or need to.

It takes some wisdom to let go of mental excitement, but with a little more training in letting go and wise attention on the experience, we will be able to gain the nimitta again. We may feel as if the nimitta growing and engulfing us into its bliss, or that we are being softly drawn and dissolving blissfully into it. We have entered dhyana.

5 *Mettā nimitta*

5.1 OTHER METHODS OF MEDITATION. There are many other objects of meditation other than the breath, for example, parts of the body (*kāya, gatā, sati*), visualization (*kaṣiṇa*), and lovingkindness (*mettā, bhāvanā*). However, to attain dhyana, the meditation must come to a stage where there is joy and happiness (*pīti, sukha*) born of letting go. The cultivation of lovingkindness (*mettā bhāvanā*), for example,

⁷⁰ See Brahmavamsa 2006:24 f.

⁷¹ From the suttas, evidently, the longest period for each dhyanic sitting is a week. See eg the account of the 7 weeks after the awakening: SD 26.1(5).

⁷² See Brahmavamsa 2003: 49-51; 2006:149-151.

opens into a blissful unconditional love for all living beings, the whole universe.⁷³ This is the stage where the “beautiful breath” arises, and which is so called because there is such profound bliss in it.⁷⁴

Dhyanas are *emotional peaks*, not intellectual heights. We can only *feel* our way into dhyana; we *cannot think* our way in. To succeed in attaining dhyana, we need to be fully familiar with our emotional world. We have to trust ourselves, have full faith in ourselves, to be silent, without any controlling or directing. Apparently this is why women meditators generally seem to enter dhyana more easily than men.

5.2 THE POWER OF *METTĀ*. We can use the cultivation of lovingkindness to go directly into dhyana. But first we should cultivate lovingkindness to the level of “breaking the barriers,” that is, usually the last stage of the meditation, where we perceive the whole universe in our mind and radiate lovingkindness everywhere, to all beings.⁷⁵

In the next stage, forget about all beings and ignore where the lovingkindness is coming from. This step often happens spontaneously, without any decision on our part. If not, direct our attention to the experience of lovingkindness *in itself*. The meditation object is simplified, freed from the perception of separate beings, of manyness. All that remains is “disembodied *mettā*,” like the disembodied grin of the Cheshire cat [4.5]. We experience this as a radiant sphere of blissful golden light in our mind’s eye. This is “the lovingkindness sign” (*mettā nimitta*).

Such a nimitta is always incredibly beautiful, but sometimes it is unstable. The instability is usually caused by excitement. However, it is easy to remain in the intense bliss, and in a short time we will reach dhyana. This is how lovingkindness cultivation takes us to dhyana.

6 Overcoming difficulties in meditation

6.1 BEGINNING MEDITATION⁷⁶

6.1.1 Meditation generally may not work for those with prevalent stress or personal problems.⁷⁷ These issues need to be resolved first before we move on to practise sitting meditation. Most self-taught meditators, even when they do it rightly, are unable to recognize any sign of progress when it arises because of their excitement or fear over such states due to lack of guidance and wisdom.

The process of meditation begins with the gradual closing of the sense-doors or the sense-faculties. According to Buddhist psychology, the sense-doors are the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body, and the mind. “Closing of the sense-doors” is a metaphor for *sense-restraint*, that is, cutting down on the sense-stimulation, beginning with the physical sense-doors, so that we can focus on cultivating the mind-door.

As our meditation progresses, the body-door is gradually closed (the sense of touch is calmed), and the sense of mind becomes more dominant. At the level of the beautiful breath [4.4], the breath is experienced only partly by the body door, that is, by the sense of touch, but mostly by the mind-door. The sense of touch (the body) gives us the perception of breathing. The mind gives us the perception of beauty.

6.1.2 When the “breath” disappears, it means that we have succeeded in calming the sense of touch, that is, we have closed the body-door. The five external senses have all been transcended. Only the mind-sense or mind-door remains, and which experiences the breath as *beauty*.

At this stage, we are still breathing but very subtly. The breathing is now experienced through the *mind-sense*, not through the sense of touch. Because the familiar experience of breath is no longer there,

⁷³ See Brahmavamso 2003:24 for two other methods.

⁷⁴ This is in reference to stages 5 & 6 of the 16-stage breath meditation: see *Ānāpāna,sati S* (M 118.19/3:82 f), SD 7.13. See Brahmavamso 2002:66-68.

⁷⁵ See *Metta S* (Kh 9/Sn 1.8), SD 38.3.

⁷⁶ Brahmavamso 2003: 25 f; 2006: 30-33.

⁷⁷ Meditation is not to be recommended for people with psychotic disorders, severe depression, and other severe personality disorders, unless they are also receiving psychological or medical treatment, and closely monitored so that they can receive support whenever needed. Individuals who are aware of an underlying psychiatric disorder who wish to take up meditation should speak with a mental health professional or experienced instructor before doing so. See *Meditation & consciousness*, SD 17.8c (8.5); also see *Bhāvanā*, SD 15.1 esp (14).

we may think that the breath has stopped. It is just that we are experiencing our breath in a new and wonderful way, that is, through the mind, and perceiving it as bliss. [4.5]

6.2 OVERCOMING MENTAL HINDRANCES⁷⁸

6.2.1 *Meditation is like driving a car, but is safer.* Like driving, we cannot really progress, much less master it, merely using a manual, even the best one. We need to be guided by an experienced instructor, especially at the beginning. Yet, even with an instructor, we may at first *be trying too hard*, compulsively trying to get focus on the nimitta or dhyana. This is the working of **sense-desire** (*kāma-c, chanda*)—the first mental hindrance—that draws our attention to the object of desire, and thus away from the breath.⁷⁹

Or, we could be *finding various faults with our meditation* or the experience of breathing, and the dissatisfaction pushes the attention away from the breath. This is the effect of **ill will** (*vyāpāda*), the second mental hindrance, which is the opposite of sense-desire. Contentment is the middle way between and away from the two extremes of emotional reactivity. When we stay on this middle course with the breath, joy and happiness will arise in due course.

6.2.2 Then there is the matter of effort. At the level just before the beautiful breath [4.4], our effort should be directed only as *knowing* the breath, and totally keeping away from the *doing* (mental chatter and thoughts of accomplishing or controlling this or that). When our effort is channeled in this way, trying to control everything, especially what we expect from meditation; then, we are rattled into **restlessness** (*kukkucca*).

Or, some past thought could arise as we approach inner stillness, and we may experience **worry** (*uddhacca*) over things done or undone, and this discursive thoughts cloud up our minds so that we lose sight of the breath. Restlessness and worry together form the third mental hindrance to mental concentration. But when we remove the effort from the doing, restlessness and worry begin to disappear.

6.2.3 When the knowing lacks energy, **sloth and torpor** (*thīna, middha*), the fourth hindrance, arise. Sometimes the action function of the mind (the “doer”) takes away all our mental energy, so that the passive function of knowing is totally weakened. But when we direct enough energy into the knowing, then sloth and torpor turns into bright and energized knowing, which in due course will lead to joy and happiness.

The purpose of joy and happiness is to still the mind. Stillness is the absence of movement. But what is it that causes the mind to move? It is *the will*, that is, the doer. When the wind is blowing around a tree, even if we hold a leaf tightly, it will still tremble. Only when the wind stops that the leaf will be still. In other words, *we cannot will the mind to be still*. Stillness arises through the joy and happiness arising from letting go.

Mental stillness enriches the joy and happiness (*pīti, sukha*) of meditation. The deepening of joy and happiness, in turn, allows less opportunity for effort to interfere, and so stillness grows stronger. When this process continues *unbroken*, it leads to dhyana, where the joy and happiness is profound.

6.2.4 A common problem faced by self-taught meditators is that they *panic* when they begin to notice their breath disappearing, or they are not sure what to do next. This is the fifth mental hindrance, that of **doubt** (*vicikicchā*) [6.1]. Indeed, when the breath disappears before the arising of the beautiful breath, it is a case of sloth and torpor [6.1], or weak attention. We should take a step back, as it were, to strengthen the “silent present moment awareness” [4.2], so that we put more energy into the awareness.

6.2.5 When the beautiful breath [4.4] has arisen, it feels very blissful and effortless to be mindful of the breath for long durations. As the mind grows more still, the perception of the breath becomes more subtle. There comes a point where there is no more perception of the beginning, middle or end of the breath. It becomes a single experience of subtle breathing that remains unchanged as it were from moment to moment. What has happened is that we have transcended the external or physical features of the breath, and are seeing the heart of the breath experience.

⁷⁸ Brahmavamso 2003:27-29; 2006: 20 f, 30-33; 62 f, 89 f, 110 f.

⁷⁹ On mental hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*), see SD 32 esp 1.

When stillness and meditative joy and happiness (*pīti, sukha*) have grown strong enough, the breath disappears. At the stage of the beautiful breath, the breath disappears, leaving only the beauty [4.4]. We are a step closer to dhyana.

6.3 OTHER MEDITATION METHODS. *The idea of dhyana* can sometimes become fashionable so that everyone thinks that he or she should attain it, and that their meditation is incomplete, or even has failed, if they have not attained dhyana. The point is simple enough: not everyone can attain dhyana, and that one need *not* attain dhyana to progress spiritually.⁸⁰

While it is true that dhyana is a profoundly blissful and spiritually rewarding experience, it should be noted that we can reach the path to awakening without mastering dhyana.⁸¹ However, this is not saying that there is no need of meditation or mindfulness practice, but that there are various methods that can be used by those who wish to progress spiritually, even if we are unable to attain dhyana.

Of prime importance here is **the perception of impermanence** (*anicca, saññā*),⁸² the consistent practice of which, whether done *out of faith or with wisdom*, definitely brings us to the state of streamwinning in this life itself. This practice of course entails mindfulness, especially the restraint of the senses (*indriya, samvara*), where we still train ourselves in the mindfulness towards the nimitta in daily life.⁸³ Such a practice still assures us of sainthood and liberation here and now as streamwinners.

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⁸⁰ See *Samatha & Vipassanā*, SD 41.1.

⁸¹ See **The layman and dhyana**, SD 8.5.

⁸² See esp (**Anicca**) **Cakkhu S** (S 25.1/3:225), SD 16.7.

⁸³ See **Nimitta and anuvyañjana**, SD 19.14.

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