

Dharma retreats

People who love the Dharma continue to surprise us. They inspire us with their gratefulness, our gratefulness, as we see more deeply into the meaning of our Dharma work and the purpose of our Dharma practice. We know that we are part of a joyful global network of Dharma practitioners who are looking directly at the Dharma, as we, both monastic and lay, face growing challenges regarding the authenticity and relevance of Buddhism in our world today.

At least two Dharma friends – one in Canada, another in Australia – wrote to us telling us how they spent quiet moments and solitary retreats with our sutta researches on meditation. The fact is that they are not our work at all, but the teachings of the Buddha. Indeed, we would be speechless if not for the Buddha Word. They were referring to the three volumes on *Meditation* that are available to date.

Volume 1 is entitled ***Meditation: A safety guide*** (an introduction to meditation, samadhi, *nimitta*, and *jhāna*); volume 2, ***Meditation: A skills guide*** (overcoming the mental hindrances); and volume 3, ***Meditation: A stillness guide*** (on inspiring meditations, recollections and inner peace). Volume 2 is especially popular because it deals with overcoming the mental hindrances.

Our Australian Dharma friend has been taught by various experienced meditation teachers, and lives near monastics and a well known retreat centre. Our Canadian friend has been a close worker in the inner circle of a world renowned meditation-cult guru who introduced perhaps the most expensive commercialized meditation, but who has since fallen hard from grace. This friend celebrates his liberation from the cult prison, rejoicing deeply in the true Dharma of the historical Buddha. People with great suffering have a lot to teach us.

Our Australian friend wrote to us a most inspiring email describing how he had been on various retreats, and had based his latest one on *Meditation 1: A safety guide*, and was planning the next one based on *Meditation 2: A skills guide*. And surely it is a matter of time when he would be doing his third retreat with *Meditation 3: A stillness guide*. Perhaps, it's time that we (my wife and I) started work on the fourth volume, *Meditation: The divine abodes*. We have actually planned the set up to a total of 7 volumes, but first things first, and let us be surprised with the remaining titles when they are completed.

The first *Meditation* volume, as the subtitle suggests, is “a safety guide.” It opens with an introduction to the purpose of meditation; then on who should *not* meditate, and the “downside” of meditation (that is, false teachings and abuse of meditation by exploitative gurus). These 9 chapters follow:

Chapter 1: Mental cultivation. An introduction to the basic principles of early Buddhist meditation.

Chapter 2: The 4 kinds of samadhi. The Samādhi Bhāvanā Sutta (A 4.41).

Chapter 3: The nature of spiritual liberation. On the dependent-on-solitude (*viveka, nissita*) formula.

Chapter 4: The nature of mental stillness (*samādhi*).

Chapter 5: The mental sign (*nimitta*) in cognition and meditation.

Chapter 6: The 3 kinds of meditation signs. The Nimitta Sutta (A 3.100b).

Chapter 7: The mind that is fully free from the body. On dhyana (*jhāna*).

Chapter 8: The layman and dhyana. How streamwinning can be attained without dhyana.

Chapter 9: The Buddha discovered dhyana (with right view). Was there dhyana before the Buddha? Do thoughts arise during dhyana? Discussing the views of two renowned meditation teachers.

This first volume can be the basis of an 8-day retreat, reflecting on one chapter (or part thereof) a day. It is best that the last, chapter 9, be read *before* the retreat, as it is a discursive essay. Or, of course, it may be read when the retreat is well over.

A solitary meditation retreat based on **the second volume**, *Meditation: A skills guide*, is especially interesting. There are 11 chapters: so we could, if we like, spend an 11-day retreat reflecting on one chapter (or part thereof) a day, thus:

Day 1: A general introduction to the 5 mental hindrances.

Day 2: Overcoming desire for sensual pleasures (the first of the mental hindrances).

Day 3: The Ānanda Sutta (S 8.4). On how Ānanda helps Vaṅgīsa to overcome lust.

Day 4: Overcoming ill will (the second of the mental hindrances).

Day 5: The Karaṇīya Metta Sutta (Khp 9 = Sn 1.8). An annotated translation and cultivating lovingkindness.

Day 6: Overcoming sloth and torpor (the third of the mental hindrances).

Day 7: The (Thīna,middha) Tissa Sutta (S 22.84): how drowsiness is overcome by insight.

Day 8: Overcoming restlessness and remorse (the fourth of the mental hindrances).

Day 9: Overcoming spiritual doubt (the fifth of the mental hindrances).

Day 10: The Nīvaraṇa Pahāna Vagga (A 1.2.1-10): On the arising and ending of the 5 mental hindrances.

Day 11: The Vitakka Saṅghāna Sutta (M 20): How to overcome distracting thoughts.

The third volume, *Meditation: A stillness guide*, has 11 chapters based on the 5 kinds of inspiring meditations, which are helpful when we have difficulty with the breath meditation or the cultivation of lovingkindness (or both). As such, this can be a retreat where we try out these two main meditations with 5 other helping meditations, thus:

Chapter 1: The Paṭisallāna Sutta (It 45). The benefits of a balanced practice.

Chapter 2: The Dhajagga Sutta (S 11.3). The recollection of the 3 jewels. (The first of the 5 meditations.)

Chapter 3: *Buddhānussati*, or the recollection on the 9 virtues of the Buddha. The (Tathāgata) Loka Sutta (A 4.23 = It 112).

Chapter 4: The (Sandiṭṭhika Dhamma) Brāhmaṇa Sutta (A 3.53). The nature of the true Dharma.

Chapter 5: *Dhammānussati*, or the recollection of the 6 virtues of the true Dharma.

Chapter 6: *Saṅghānussati*, or the recollection of the 9 virtues of the noble community. The Aṭṭha Puggala Sutta 1 & 2 (A 8.59-60), and the Visuddhi,magga 7.89-100.

Chapter 7: *Sīlānussati*, or the recollection of moral virtue.

Chapter 8: *Cāgānussati*, or the recollection of charity.

Chapter 9: *Devatānussati*, or the recollection of deities. Meditating on our own “godliness.” This is helpful for those who are still struggling with past conditionings in the God-belief.

Chapter 10: The Pacalā Sutta (A 7.58): 8 ways of overcoming drowsiness and the nature of discipleship. This Sutta also records the awakening of Mahā Moggallāna.

Chapter 11: The Vimutt’āyatana Sutta (A 5.26): Can liberation be won without meditation?

It was such zestful experience searching the suttas and culling related teachings for materials for this Meditation series. We can only continue to be amazed at the awakened mind and heart behind these beautiful and efficacious teachings of how to train and tweak our consciousness and lives for better, indeed, for self-awakening in this life itself. The Dharma-inspired life is always amazing: let us live the Dharma.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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