



# Questions & Answers

**ALBA weekend retreat 2 - 4 April 2021**

*'A handful of leaves'*



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## Accepting negative emotions

*Martin's reflections this morning on accepting the way things are, and the example of anger, was very thought-provoking. Can there sometimes be negative consequences of allowing "negative" emotions like anger despair, or anxiety to run their course? Sometimes if I really allow my anger to run its course there will literally be blood on the carpet! Can we develop our practice so that fully accepting things the way they are leads to a mind in which emotions like anger do not arise? If I fully accept that the neighbours will make a racket while I am on this retreat, then can I hope that I will not feel anger? Or, if we allow the emotion to run its course, but "observe" it, are we in effect bottling it up?*

Allowing an emotion like anger to run its course doesn't mean acting it out - no, I mean letting the emotion run its course and observing it to the end, letting it cease in its own time. It is about accepting it. Accepting, rather than judging. Our habit may be to think it is wrong to feel angry, that I am a bad person. Or we may think that I am not an angry person - that's not who I am - thinking this way, we don't want to admit that we are angry. Either way, we push it away and so we never learn, never really investigate what anger is - and so we never properly understand it. When we understand it, we act with wisdom. We just let it come and go. We don't create suffering out of it, but we can see the suffering in it - the tension of the body, the pain in the mind. When we understand anger we accept it, we see it through to the end, and watch it cease in its own time. This is letting go with wisdom. We don't need hold onto some 'utopian' state of mind where unpleasant emotions don't arise - we can experience them fully. We are in the human realm and



enlightenment is to become fully human, fully accepting and open to the human condition.

## How do we investigate?

*You talked about investigating our feelings, state of mind et cetera being with what arises. My question is how does one actually investigate? How do I know I am investigating (rather than the mind taking over)? I have a feeling that one has to reach a certain place within from where 'investigation' can actually take place? (Or it won't happen) how will I know that I have accomplished the task of investigating and I no longer need to investigate? Is it after an insight that will come from investigation. I'm also thinking sometimes it may be better to 'let things go' especially if one has not understood how to 'investigate' otherwise it will be the mind investigating with control and force and that's obviously what we don't want for this is not the place from which one should investigate. How does one investigate without the mind taking over? I wonder whether that will follow naturally after we have calmed the mind and found stillness for the things will appear clearer and how they truly are? For one cannot investigate from a place of scattered and agitated mind? I'm reflecting whilst typing and asking these questions.*

Calming the mind down does create a place to investigate from. This is the opportunity we have when we come on retreat. It is more difficult to reflect when the mind is scattered and agitated. But when we think that we have to calm the mind first before we can investigate, we are left with the question, how calm is calm enough? It is possible to think meditation is just about calming, and then we see thought as an enemy getting in the way of our meditation practice. This





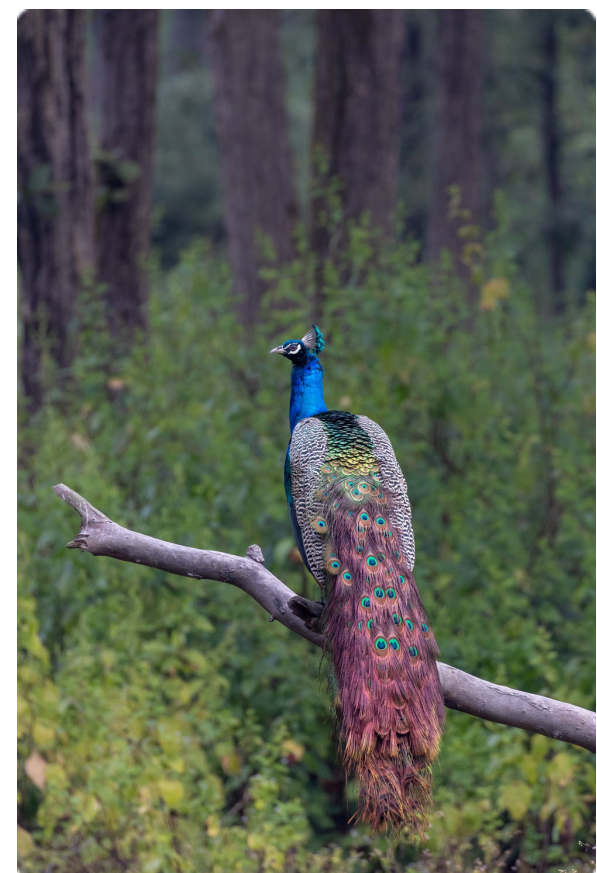
is not the right way to practice. We turn meditation into a battleground.

It is good to investigate when the mind isn't particularly calm, to learn how to bring our attention right into thought and emotion and restlessness and sleepiness – right into agitation, to understand it. This is sometimes called choiceless awareness. We learn how to sustain attention whatever the state of mind. Then the capacity to investigate stays with us wherever we go – we don't need to try to cultivate special conditions to investigate from – neither internally, thinking the mind has to be calm, nor externally, dependant on calm external conditions. The calmer we are the clearer we will see, but we can experience a calm in the eye of the storm. It is easy to get trapped in the idea that we can't practice because the conditions aren't right – it is just the opposite. If you don't think you can practice when the mind is agitated you are not practicing mindfulness – mindfulness is always in the here and now.

## Gaining insight

*I often over verbalise the product of my racing mind, regurgitating it all over people in my over-excitement to communicate and share and debate my emerging insight that I feel I am on the cusp of gaining: Of course I may be deluded that I am cultivating a piece of life changing profound Dhamma knowledge: Indeed of course it might well be a delusion I am brewing up!*

The thought, 'I am on the cusp of gaining an insight' comes from the grasping mind. It is like trying to pick up a football and every time you reach it you keep kicking it away. We can't grasp insight because insight comes from letting go. Your doubts about whether you are heading towards true Dhamma



or brewing up delusion come from impatience. An understandable impatience to escape from dukkha, but we don't get rid of suffering, we let go of the cause of it. Mindfulness means noticing and stepping back, which gives us a space to reflect before we react. That means we have to let go over and over. Which is not what the grasping mind wants to do. But it is the path of insight.

## Thoughts

*During meditation, my mind is full of thoughts; a) with those thoughts do I need to interrogate/contemplate immediately or after the end of the session? b) In simple words, what/how to do interrogation? Is there a simple guide you can tell us? Because if I start interrogation, I may go endlessly.*



We talked about it quite a lot during the Q&A discussions. Contemplation doesn't mean interrogation. Contemplation is more like holding a glass up to look at it – so see what it reveals. Perhaps a reflection in the glass of ourselves looking. We are not trying to answer a question, but we are willing to listen to the question itself – what does it have to teach us.

Interrogation sounds a very intellectual activity – and also critical – like someone being interrogated in a trial. We need to come from a place of kindness. We are not on the opposite side standing in judgement over the mind, but sitting beside like a compassionate friend, listening.

For contemplation we could say, reflection. It is like holding up a mirror. And being willing to not turn away. As we might look in the mirror and see our face, and not like what we see, it is often the case when we look at the mind. But we notice the judging mind and don't believe it – we keep listening. We listen to the critical inner voice, but we don't believe it – we know we are making it up. It's a story we are telling ourselves.



Without the need to interfere, we watch and listen until we come to understand the mind and how it works. We come to understand cause and effect. We let go of our resistance to thoughts and as we do we begin to let go of the problems we create out of our preferences - we stop identifying with thoughts as me or mine - this invites a radical acceptance and insight which shifts our attitude to the way we relate to thoughts - which has a profound effect on our lives.

Simply, we know that whatever arises will cease - so we can let thoughts come and go without creating a problem out of them.

## The practice - is all about making bread!

*In your fun analogy Randula: If kneading the dough is analogous to formal meditation practice (sitting, standing, walking) - either alone at home or in retreat gatherings.*

*Then: What is analogous to putting the kneaded dough in the oven at the right temperature? Is it for example surrounding yourself with a skilful environment e.g. lots of kalyana-mittas (mitras?) in real life - colleagues, friends, partner, family - and choosing or giving yourself the opportunity to develop a right livelihood profession ?What else is analogous to putting the 'kneaded dough in the oven'? It is not clear to me!*



The analogy was really to explain how we use thought in our practice.

The question often arises, should I be thinking, contemplating or just observing thought and experience. So, it is not one or the other - it is both. It is a contemplative practice that

ultimately leads to direct seeing and understanding of our experience through observation or mindfulness.

At times we may choose to contemplate - reflect on our experience in terms of the Dhamma, the teachings - dependent origination, anicca, dukkha, anatta, the five Khandas, physical properties, the Brahma viharas, the Path of practice etc. When we do this, we are inclining our minds to be in line with the Dhamma as we are not thinking in the ways of the world.

Yet, our contemplations and reflections are still bounded by the conditioned world and so are not ultimately true. For true understanding or wisdom to arise everything we reflect or study or contemplate needs to be let go of too. And we just observe and watch with mindfulness and trust that through this direct observing, the understanding of the true nature of what is being observed will come to us.

However, the conditions need to be right for wisdom to arise.

So, analogous to making bread - contemplating and reflecting could be seen as kneading the dough - but for true wisdom, understanding and for our hearts to transform - we need to let go of the well kneaded dough - leave it in the oven when the temperature is just right and then trust that the dough will now transform into bread - without us interfering or having to do anything. So, this is then analogous to merely observing experience through mindfulness and trusting that the understanding and the transformation will arise - without having to figure it out - this is then true understanding which transforms our hearts and the bread cannot go back to being dough again!

In terms of getting the oven to be the right temperature - it is a matter of developing our hearts in the practice of the Eightfold Path of Sila, Samadhi and Panna.





Of note, sometimes, the reflection in itself can lead to a concentrated mind and development of insight within that very moment if the conditions are right (Vipassana leading to Samadhi leading to Vipassana).

## Mindfulness

*In meditation we are in the moment, in the here and now, just being here. But can that not also be a construction by the thinking mind. The mind caught in the concept of time? In the concept of this moment. How do we get behind this concept?*

Mindfulness isn't a concept. Well, we can create a concept out of it, but that isn't the same as knowing what mindfulness is. It is an experience not an idea. It is happening now - if we are noticing what is happening, that is. It can be helpful to drop the word mindfulness and use the word, 'just'. As you have in your first sentence - 'just being here'. Just breathing is like this. Just thinking is like this. We are not adding anything to it, or creating anything out of it - but by just adding the word 'just' in front of what we are experiencing, there is a bit of letting go isn't there. We are stepping back from 'and next?' We don't add 'next' when there is just this. We come into the present like a child to a new toy, with a sense of wonder - just like this - and just like this, flowing in the present moment. And there is no time in that - just this moment.



## Do we over-value positive qualities

*Do you think people can have a natural tendency to over-value positive qualities? For example, if we meet a Buddhist who seems cold and aloof, who speaks and acts roughly, do we tend to think "The Buddha's Path is one of cultivating positive qualities such as kindness and openness, therefore this person can't be very spiritually developed". Conversely, if we meet a Buddhist who is kind and caring, who speaks and acts in a pleasing way, do we tend to think "This person has many positive qualities, so they must be very wise!" What are the results of thinking in these ways?*

Of course, we should know when we are judging people according to external perceptions – that it is not reliable. It is easy to be impressed by outward appearances, and it really isn't a good guide. I notice that Ajahn Chah often looks very stern in pictures of him, but reading about him, he comes across as full of joy.

In terms of whether people over-value positive qualities, I do agree that the fashion for positive thinking puts pressure on people to be positive – it is important to fully acknowledge negative states of mind when they arise and not push them away thinking there is something wrong that I feel this way. We only take selfies when we are having a good time – which creates the idea that life is a continual experience of feeling good, and there is something wrong – even shameful – if we are suffering. We don't know feelings – we judge them, which means we grasp or push them away. We end up living only on the surface and never look beneath it.

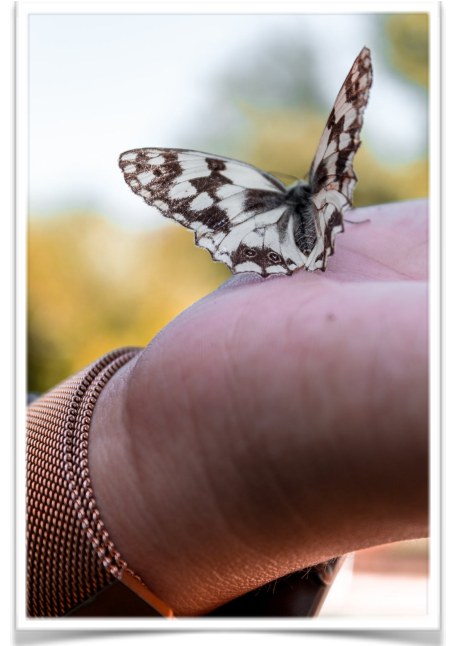




## Letting go

*To what extent is it appropriate to view the development of the Eightfold Path as a practice of 'letting go of' or 'releasing' unwholesome qualities, such as 'Wrong View, 'Wrong Intention' et cetera?*

The Eightfold Path is also called the Middle Way. We need to understand what letting go means. I think when you say 'releasing' you are alluding to that. It isn't about suppressing or getting rid of – but rather, releasing, as we would a butterfly from the palm of our hand.



## The three characteristics

*When meditate, we observe things as they are; in the meantime, is it right if I remind myself what I experience is impermanent, it is suffering and it is non-self?*

Investigating using the three characteristics is always right, if we ask these questions in the right way. They are for stopping the intellectual mind, not for using it to reason them out. Go to your local wood and pick up a handful of leaves and ask yourself these questions. But don't look for an answer – let the answer come to you. This is a teaching for someone who is ready to listen. If we think we know or that we can reason it out, stop. Listen to the silent mind. Listen to the silent mind unconditionally, seeking nothing, expecting nothing - let the truth come to you. Like an unbidden bird might come and sing you its song.



## Understanding self-delusion and rebirth

*As there is 'No I' what re-incarnates; what becomes a new life?*

The Buddha didn't say there is 'No I'? He said there is no unchanging I (or self). He said that whatever self we can conceive arises and ceases - it is in the world, not separate from it. So, it is bound by conditions like everything else. So it is not to deny this feeling of a self, by believing there is no self. This view itself is a delusion - it is a suppression of a heartfelt feeling - the sense of self, needs to be seen and understood, as bound by conditions - it arises and ceases.

So the Buddha says the continuation of life is not due to a permanent unchanging self. It depends on conditions rather than a fixed entity called a self. As long as these conditions for birth exist, birth will happen.

What are these conditions and what then is re-born?

What we experience as life are the five khandas mind and body manifested in consciousness in each moment. This experience or life is then a stream of conscious moments.

So, how do these conscious moments arise?

We can see this in every moment that the next moment arises conditioned by how we relate to and identify with the present moment. Out of not seeing clearly our delusion, we identify with the present moment experience as me or mine. We then develop liking or disliking of the present moment experience through our attachment to the present moment as me or mine. This craving and clinging conditions further moments to arise, conditioning rebirth. This is outlined in the Paticcasamuppada (dependent origination or conditioned co-arising)





Whatever realm of consciousness we are born in to, there is suffering (first Noble Truth). Our goal as Buddhists is to bring rebirth to an end, so as to bring suffering to an end.

This happens through understanding that this sense of self, that identifying with experience of mind, body and sense consciousness as me or mine, is a delusion. When we see through this delusion – when we realise that our attachment to what is experienced as me or mine, with desire and aversion is what causes us to suffer – we can then let go of identifying with experience (the five khandas) – craving for experience then ceases – it brings an end to the arising of further conscious moments.

Thus, when the cause of suffering is seen, understood and let go of – (greed, hatred and delusion, Second Noble Truth) this brings an end to suffering and rebirth (Nibbana, Third Noble Truth).

So at the moment of death if there is still identification and attachment to the experience of mind and body – the stream of consciousness will continue and another mind and body is created (arises) in that conscious moment, depending on the results (vipaka) of our actions rooted in greed, hatred and delusion (kamma).



## Metta to myself?

*If I am giving myself Metta and there is no self, then who am I giving the Metta to?*

It is important to cultivate Metta, so that we bring a kindly acceptance to our practice. It is better to lay aside the teachings of 'not-self' until we have cultivated a wholesome sense of wellbeing – otherwise we can grasp the teaching of not-self incorrectly as a wrong view thinking 'there is no self'



and use it like sledge hammer to keep the self down - when what we need to do is create a kindly acceptance of 'who we are' and let the self manifest, so we can investigate it and see the delusion that lies behind it. We will see that far from trying to destroy something or believe in something, this is a path of acceptance and wisdom. Ultimately, it is to cultivate a sense of kindly acceptance of the way things are. The thoughts, feelings, perceptions and the body that is experienced, for how they are in the present moment.

## How well am I doing?

*How to relinquish the need to check how 'well' we are doing....what mark have I got? Beginner/advanced....I am trivialising.. I know that I must keep going but this keeps coming up..... Help welcome...*



'How well am I doing?' is an understandable question - it is understandable because it reflects how we think - we think in terms of progress and achievement. We want to know if we are at the top of the class - especially if we have tried hard, practiced for many years - and even more so when we are reaching old age. We can think that if someone would just tell us we have attained enlightenment, or at least some stage along the way, we would die in peace. But would we?

When this thought comes up we can reflect on it by using the question, 'Who needs to know?' What does the question, 'Who', reveal? It isn't asked for the sake of finding an answer but for revealing the truth. Is there an attachment to a self who is accumulating attainments? Do I want to be presented

with a medal by the teacher? If so, that teaches us that there is something we can let go of here.

And ask yourself what you would do with the answer if someone were to validate your progress in this way? How would you feel if someone said you were level one? And would know for certain that they knew? You might think, 'Who are you to say I'm 'only' level one, what do you know?' Are you sure you wouldn't still have doubts?

Another way to reflect on this question is, what are the indicators that we can use to validate our progress for ourselves? It is an interesting reflection to take each of the ten fetters Samyojana - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fetter\\_\(Buddhism\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fetter_(Buddhism))

and consider what they might be pointing to. But this can lead to judging ourselves - if we haven't let them go we won't understand what they are - we will still be left with doubts.

So another way is to reflect, 'This is what it is like to have doubts, what it is like to crave certainty, to desire appreciation etc'. This is the path of mindfulness. You can take this question and hold it up gently with the reflective mind to understand what lied behind it. We are not trying to find the answer, but understand the question.

In the end, we will know for ourselves, through letting go - not giving up - but letting go until we see the truth clearly for ourselves. We won't need anyone else to tell us what we have realised - we will have no doubts. We'll know that we are not attached to anything.



## Lists in Buddhism

*Please would you be so kind as to email me the list of things that can be used to study with?*

The Buddha's teachings are full of lists – there is a helpful list of lists here on this website:

<https://www.insightmeditationcenter.org/books-articles/dhamma-lists/>.

They are helpful not to be learnt by rote – but to be used as reflections and see how we can develop these in our practice or using it to contemplate and understand our experience.

