

This Nectar of Naturalness

beginningless endless cycling of easeful clarity and luminous presence

Tarchin Hearn

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*Two things we need:
a passion for enquiry
and
a vast spacious heart.*

PROLOGUE

S *amatha* and *vipassana* are universal facets of meditation and contemplation. *Samatha* is the gentle, passive, accepting, loving, healing, accommodating, allowing aspect of each moment of lived experience. *Vipassana* is the sharp, questioning, discerning, discriminating, alert aspect. Seamlessly intermingled, they support a deepening experiential understanding of the infinite diversity and the profound unity of all that exists. *Samatha~vipassana* is a beginningless/endless cycling of easeful clarity and luminous presence – the heart of Buddhist awakening practice.

*Dwelling in a space of love,
with tendrils of curiosity reaching forth in all directions
we feel our way,
softening and sensitising into the richness of community,
a living world within us, around us and through us.*

*Apprentices of wonderment and awe,
probing and questioning,
sampling and savouring
with calm abiding and vivid discernment
together exquisitely intermeshed,
we touch our home,
this world,
of you and me and all of us together,
precious
beyond words.*

Such is the spirit and intent of this book.

As if you were visiting my home, I'd like to welcome you into this book. Wherever you are, please settle and make yourself comfortable. Would you like a cup of tea; a glass of water? Currently, I'm sitting in a beautiful garden in New Zealand's Bay of Plenty, with a viral pandemic sweeping the globe and climate change rocking our expectations for the future. In the midst of all of this beauty, uncertainty and challenge, I find myself drawn into an impossible yet utterly engaging question. Perhaps you'd like to join me. What does it mean for *all* of me to be present with and for *all*

of you? What does such living entail? What actually is all of me? And, for that matter, what is all of you? How do we relate? By 'we', I mean all of us: humans, animals, plants, fungi, and cellular beings alike. In brief, how do we 'present' ourselves to each other? Our journey together through "*This Nectar of Naturalness*" will touch on such questions, inviting us into a way of living that feels increasingly integrated, profoundly healing, and filled with wonder and discovery.

This is a book about meditation and contemplation. It is about the nature of mind and knowing and being. It is also about the mind of nature and how we – all creatures – might live well with each other. While the explorations found throughout these pages are informed by my years of engagement with Buddhism, I think they will be relevant to a wide range of people regardless their religious and philosophical backgrounds. I have tried to present them in straightforward and do-able ways, that require only a passion to live fully, to understand deeply, and to honour and support everyone we meet on our journey.

Although it is traditional in some introductions to preview the various chapters of the book, I will leave it for the contents page to give you a glimpse of what is to come. Of course, reading a menu is not the same as eating nurturing food. Our understanding grows from our living experience of the world which at the same time is shaping our understanding of the world – a never ending creatively

recursive cycle or cycling. This book is similar. Each section leads back to earlier sections; cycles within cycles, wheels within wheels. The last chapter brings us freshly to the first. Understandings blossoming from practice lead us back to earlier contemplations. With this in mind, I offer you a collage of suggested explorations; encouragements; poetry to give a sense of larger possibilities; and imaginative thought experiments to stimulate deeper levels of question and curiosity. Please delve into them; think, ponder, feel, and experiment with them. Doing this again and again, your sense of who and what and how you and we are, will surely enlarge.

*May this book inspire and encourage you to deepen
a way of being that is life affirming,
profoundly engaging, and utterly natural.
A book without beginning or end,
reminders to refresh our investigations when we forget.
May it bring you pleasure and
may you also have the opportunity
to share its essence with others.*

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Chapter 1

ENTERING:

A Cycle of Samatha

I am sitting at my desk, writing these words. I smile and give myself a few minutes to breathe. Raising my eyes, I notice the sunlight streaming into the room. The smell of beech forest is all around and the sound of a hammer, tapping in the distance, gives rhythm to the moment. Feeling all of this, appreciation flowers in many directions.¹

This Nectar of Naturalness, a flow of easeful clarity and luminous presence, is a deceptively simple yet profound teaching. It is an invitation to live richly and appreciatively in the midst of whatever is occurring. In a way, it's so ordinary that on hearing it for the first time,

¹ This first chapter is largely a revised and extended version of *Cycle of Samatha*, first published in 1996. The original *Cycle of Samatha* is available for free download at Green Dharma Treasury.

some people feel that they have already known it for years. But intellectually knowing it and experientially living it can sometimes be two quite different things. Too often in our busy lives, simplicity and straightforward ordinariness, turn out to be frustratingly elusive.

I'd like to make a suggestion. As you read this book, please allow yourself to pause every so often, to smile and breathe and deepen into whatever is your present flow of experience. Resist temptation to skim through the text searching for techniques or new facts and information – 'great ideas' that somehow rarely grow beyond an initial burst of enthusiasm. It would be better to take my words as a personal invitation; whisperings from me to you, and in a mysteriously reciprocal way, from you to me; two human beings calling out to each other. It is an invitation to leisurely stroll in the wild and beautiful garden of your life or to sip the tea of nowness in a tranquil moment while sharing something very precious, heart speaking to heart.



Samatha (*pronounced sah-mah-tah*) is a Pali word that is commonly translated as calm, tranquillity or sometimes tranquil abiding. In Sanskrit, which is closely related to Pali, the word *samma* means complete or total in the sense of wholeness. Our English word sum, as in summation, or adding up a column of figures, comes from this root. The

tha part, is a shortened form of the Sanskrit root *stha*, which is associated with the idea of firmness or solidity. In English, *stha* gave rise to words such as stand, station and static. Putting *samma* and *tha* together we find the idea of standing completely firm in the midst of whatever is arising – solid and unshakeably present – rooted in the wholeness of the situation. Here we discover something quite wonderful and, to some people, surprising. We're not talking about a calm that results from 'pouring oil on troubled waters' or a tranquillity that arises through suppressing or controlling a particular activity. Samatha is not stillness, as opposed to something dynamic, but calmness and clarity manifesting naturally – in the midst of activity.

In your imagination, I'd like you to come with me to the Wangapeka Study and Retreat Centre in New Zealand. At the foot of the hill, just across from the front gate, runs the cold and clear Wangapeka River. At certain times of the year, delicate white flower petals from Kanuka trees fall into the water and float down stream. Imagine you are sitting on the green mossy rocks, shaded by a grove of black beech trees. Sunlight is filtering through the leaves. Bellbirds and Tuis are calling, their liquid voices highlighting the purity of the air. Wood pigeons coo to each other, back and forth across the stream. The water is swirling by; bubbling, whirlpooling, dancing through the rocks, flowing down to the Tasman Sea. It seems amazing

that these delicate white flowers, speeding past, are not crushed in the turbulence.

Now imagine that you are one of those Kanuka flowers, floating in this same stream. You are relaxed. You cannot see the river bank rushing by. As far as you are concerned, you are easefully at rest in the water, totally relaxed in the flow of things; a delicate cluster of five petals cradled in a cushion of liquid fluidity. As bystanders situated on the bank, we see you racing down a turbulent course. But you the flower, however, are simply resting where you are, basking in the warmth of this sunny afternoon. Bystander and experience; watcher and watched; knower and known; can you sense a connection between this and your day to day life experience?

The cycle of samatha is a reminder of how to rest easefully in life's bubbling stream of constant change. It encourages us to let go of the deeply engrained habit of being a detached bystander and instead, to enter the flowing nowness; to release into the creative, living process suggested by the now clichéd phrase, 'present moment'. Whenever we hang on to the river bank, we are using a lot of energy to avoid being washed away. And yet we might ask ourselves if constantly hanging on is ever going to make life feel meaningful and worth living or is it just an unnecessary struggle?

Absolute zero is the place of rest²

Meditating she tried to find

the best

the quest

the goal of peace

a place of stillness

The place of death.

Life is moving.

Rest is abstraction,

a relative concept that hides the

ceaseless, restless dancing.

Nothing moves

and nothing is still

Yet repetitive cycling is stillness

and novel spiralling is movement.

Day/night, sleeping/waking, birthing/dying,

We need in English a new word

to highlight the moving, stilling, being.

A year went by of

dedicated practice

and all she found was constant action.

From atom through to

galactic whirl,

a joyous registering,

² Absolute zero is 0 degrees Kelvin which is the equivalent of -273 degrees Celsius. At this temperature all molecular activity stops.

*knowing fine,
– so fine.*

*She found the river tumbling vast
and threw herself into the torrent,
gone from sight
the birth of light,
A bubbling joy of running free.*

*The bubbling burst its banks
and flooded,
Streams are joining,
Ground and water
sogged and shining,*

*Wetlands of becoming
to feed the migrant flocks of
feathered beauty being now.*

*And still the flow to sea she goes
streams within streams
flashing in the light of dawning grace,
The glistening of knowing vast and wide
Like hands and arms embracing from the heart.
Holding the vision.
Holding the sky!³*

³ For All Meditators Seeking Rest, *A Sheaf of Poems, 1991 – 2000*, Green Dharma Treasury

SMILING

Resting in this moment of now, I remember to smile. Eyes lifting, glancing right and then left in playful lightening dance. Air touching nostrils and lips. Front teeth cooling, opening to a sparkling grin. The body twinkles through and through. A rush of warmth and goodness shapes a path of deepening breath.

The cycle of samatha begins in a very simple way. Simple, but also marvellous. We smile! Try it. Look up from the page or the screen and allow your face, your whole body and being, to soften into a smile. How does it feel?

One way of coming to a deeper appreciation of things is by comparing our experience with something else. Having reconnected with smiling; now try frowning. Explore the feeling of being sombre or serious. There are many flavours of frowning; angry, depressed, disinterested, confused, worried, puzzled. Check the overall tactile kinaesthetic qualities of your entire body and mind. How are they different from when you were smiling? Alternate between these two states, smiling and non-smiling, until you clearly recognise the differences between them. What is going on in your body? Muscles tightening. Tensions releasing. Subtle shiftings of density, rhythm, texture and felt-sense volumes. Check it out – right now – in the laboratory of your own direct experience.

How does smiling affect your perception; seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling and touching? What about non-smiling?

How has the flavour of perception changed? What do these states do to your attentiveness and your overall sense of aliveness? A simple smile can lighten up our whole way of being and immediately transform our appreciation of the present situation.

If you already practice some form of meditation, you could try a mini-experiment. For a few minutes, remind yourself how it feels to be meditating with a great deal of attentiveness and focus. Sit in your usual posture and recontact the sensations of being deeply engaged in your practice. Settle into it for a while, until a familiar body sense arises, of you in the process of meditating. What is the over-all quality? What is it like for you? It's possible you are already smiling but if not, allow a smile to lighten your face while continuing with your meditation. As you smile, does anything change? If so what is it? What is happening in your stomach? What changes take place in how you perceive and engage with phenomena? How does smiling affect the over-all quality of energy and your sense of connectedness?

In this practice we are not trying to look like a toothpaste advertisement. More important than the lips tightening to frame pearly white teeth, is the *feeling* of smiling eyes. Smile again and, this time, become aware of the sensations in and around your eyes. How would you describe them? Many people discover a kind of lightness or sparkle, sometimes a coolness, sometimes an increased degree of mobility that can feel quite playful. One person who was

visiting us in New Zealand and described himself as "a dourrr Scotsman", said that he didn't feel comfortable with all this smiling, however, he admitted that his eyes softened and that the softening gradually permeated his whole being. As our looking softens and twinkles, our vision becomes unfrozen and a wonder-filled ordinariness reveals itself. It seems that a lightness of looking brings a thawing of the heart.

Even if we do remember to smile, it can sometimes feel like an artificial cardboard grin, pasted on our face. A smiling mouth without smiling eyes is often just a grimace, a facade we present to others. A real smile is a burst of magic that can transform our experience of the world.

An absence of smile often goes with a dulling of vision and vitality. This is especially obvious when we are 'trying hard to concentrate'. It is as if, in order to focus on a chosen something, we end up ignoring or even pushing away everything else. The quality of our experience sometimes becomes flat and narrowed down. In the midst of this effort to 'concentrate', it can sometimes seem that we've lost our smile altogether. Does your meditation ever feel like that? Are you a 'serious' meditator? Or are you seriously into expansive joy and lightness?

When our smile seems to have vanished away, how can we find it again? Like anything we have lost, I suppose if we want to find it, it makes sense to look for it. Unfortunately we might end up looking for our smile – our happiness – in our pocket, in our wallet, in our bank balance or on the

internet. We look for it in the approval of others or in some kind of pleasurable addiction. Perhaps we misplaced it on the hard drive. Of course, the more we worry over its loss, the more our eyes freeze up or glaze over.

There is a simple way we can regain our smile that sometimes works even when we don't feel like smiling. I call it the Bali eye dance or, looking for your smile.

Are you familiar with Balinese dancing where the performers move their eyes in amazingly expressive ways, often accompanied with intricate hand gestures? When you have finished reading this paragraph, try raising your eyes a little so that you are looking slightly above the horizontal. Then, without moving your head, look to the right and then look to the left. Gently move your eyes back and forth a few times. Now roll them in large circles, clockwise, then counter clockwise. Become the mischievous child in a wonderful moment of showing off. Be playful. Many people find that very quickly they are smiling, if not actually laughing.

In this first step of the cycle, we simply pause wherever we are and smile. If it helps, we can do the Bali eye dance. After a few playful eye movements, you might discover a pleasurable warmth softening throughout your body and mind.

Don't think of this as a 'meditation technique'. It is something that anyone can do, at almost any time and in almost any place. Smiling not only lightens our experience

but it uplifts everyone we meet. Encourage your smile to flower in your place of work. Let it blossom with your family. Allow it to warm the daily happenings of your life. Smile when you are with others and smile when you are on your own. You may notice that when a smile is gracing your life, it is very natural for your breathing to spontaneously deepen. Now we find ourselves on the threshold of the second step in the cycle.

BREATHING

Without thinking or intending, my body breathes on its own! Surprise! Everything participates in the miracle. Legs invite the air. Palms pulse with the gaseous tidal flow. Stomach and back, neck and head, face and chest, every part responds to every other.

Breathing in, all of life supports me. Breathing out, sharing deeply. I breathe heart to heart with the world. My breathing in, is the world breathing out. My breathing out, is the world breathing in. We are lovers! Being to being. Cell to cell. Membrane to membrane. Intimately moving in rhythmic embrace. How simple. How natural. How richly now.

Cultivating this nectar of naturalness, people often note that as their smile deepens, so too does their breathing. The practice, dare I say it, is utterly natural. Breathing in and breathing out – smiling! Many readers will have already experienced some form of breathing meditation that

involves observing the breath as it comes and goes. You may have been taught to 'watch' the breath, or to control it in particular ways, perhaps to count it. With the cycle of samatha, we do none of these. We simply expand our visceral appreciation of the natural movements of the body – the complex rhythms of physical sense and sensation – that working together comprise this mystery we call breathing. Just smiling and breathing. That's it!

Don't think of this as a meditation practice. This is life. With rare exceptions, breathing happens twenty-four hours a day, from the moment we are born to the moment we die. If we are breathing, we are alive and breathing involves the whole of our body.

Most people are aware of only certain parts of their body at any one time; a tightness in the chest, a pulsing in the elbow, a click in the knee, a spaciousness in the throat. Inevitably though, most of the activity that is weaving our body into conscious existence completely escapes our attention. In the busyness of modern living, it seems to be rare for people to experience their body as a vibrantly alive, intelligent, well-integrated organism.

I sometimes find it useful to consider my body as having just one extraordinarily complex muscle that simultaneously tightens and loosens in a multitude of different directions, thus supporting my various movements. Imagine your own body this way. Anyone who's had lumbar problems will have experienced how picking up a light object such as a book or a pot of tea, can sometimes make us painfully

aware of how our whole body participates in any movement. If we carefully study our physical experience, we will find that even the tiniest gesture is accompanied by compensating shifts and changes in many other parts of the body.

A magical moment happened to me many years ago. We were on a ship off the coast of South Africa, on our way to India. In the middle of the night a number of friends crammed into a small cabin to support one of our members who was giving birth. Less than an hour later, awestruck and marvelling, I was holding a new born baby. As she breathed I could sense a rippling movement running from the soles of her feet to the crown of her head and then back again. The ship rolled. She rolled. I rolled. We all breathed back and forth, in and out; fluid movements, beautifully connected.

Breathing is a rhythmic, muscular movement. As adults, could we become so inwardly still and sensitive that we feel the subtle movements of breathing rippling throughout our entire organism, just like that baby? Smiling and breathing. Right now I am sitting back from my computer to do this. Please join me for a moment. We can smile and breathe together.

Breathing in and breathing out, become aware of the palms of your hands. Can you sense the rhythm of your breathing right there in your palms? Attend to your feet and legs. Can you feel an ebbing and flowing in your thighs and instep? Notice your back breathing; your scalp and face.

Feel your arms, your chest and abdomen. Settle into an expansive openness and feel your entire body breathing.

Of course, we breathe with much more than just our lungs. Air moving in and out of the chest won't do us much good if the oxygen isn't transported via the blood to the cells which in turn give off various chemical compounds. If, like our Scottish friend, you felt a wee bit foolish doing all the smiling of the first step of the cycle, then here is a visualisation that might initially feel really ridiculous! Please bear with me. Playing with the 'ridiculous' can sometimes lead to fresh understandings. Imagine each cell of your body is a microscopic nose! An entire human body made of trillions of tiny noses, each one savouring the delicate scent of oxygen. Ah! Here's a molecule from the rainforests of Borneo. Mmm, here's some from the grasslands of Patagonia! Becoming very still and extraordinarily clear, see if you can feel all of these noses inhaling and exhaling; inner connoisseurs of the rare and wondrous art of breathing. If you feel reluctance to do this, at least you could try sharing it with your children or grandchildren! Teach them how to be really 'nosy'!

Breathing in.

Breathing out.

One's entire body

breathing

and savouring

this essence

of life.

Sometimes the simple pleasure of smiling and breathing slips away without our even noticing. This can often happen to people when they are trying hard to meditate. Our smile fades in the effort to intently focus and our critical faculties gradually turn to judgement. Instead of enjoying our breathing, enjoying the immediacy of being alive, we seemingly step out from our bodies and once again become distant observers, uninvolved onlookers, spectators and sometimes commentators at some kind of meditation sporting event; opinionated bystanders on the banks of the river of life. That was a good breath. That one is too short – how pathetic! Having lost this intimate connection with breathing, our minds begin to wander all over the lot. Old stories surface; reviewing the past and planning the future. The easeful pleasure of living presence disappears and we are left with a hive of buzzing thoughts. Do you know this experience?

Like an early morning mist rolling up the valley, a subtle dulling can obscure the present arising experience. One moment, we are settling nicely into our meditation. The next moment, without really noticing how it happened, we find ourselves drifting in a vague, aimless way. It's as if any sense of active exploration has somehow vanished into a mist or fog. Some people associate this drifty state with a sense of turning 'inward', but it may be masking a subtle turning off, or a turning away, from what is often thought of as the 'outer world'. This is not awakening. A better name might be asleepening!

Imperceptibly, a gradual tightening and freezing of our faculties takes place until we are wrapped in an experience that is neither here nor there, neither awake nor asleep. Compared to the business of our lives, it may feel restful and calming, but it is not very functional for driving a car in busy traffic or interacting with others in a compassionate and enlivening way.

If you recognise this drifty dullness creeping in, check your smile and, if it seems to have disappeared, Bali eye dance until you recontact a playful quality that is refreshing. Then, soften into the symphony of trillions of breathing noses. Once you find yourself smiling and breathing with deepening calm, then it's time to add the third step; to brighten your state by settling into the rich sensorial dancing of experience that is arising all around you.

PRESENT

All the senses are waking up: seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, tasting. Smiling and breathing in this particular place. Not any other. Not yesterday. Not tomorrow. Smiling and breathing, a kaleidoscoping of colour, sound, touch, smell, taste and thought; weaving a mystery – this tapestry of present becoming.

As you smile and breathe, let your eyes be relaxed and open – seeing whatever presents itself. If the eyes shift their focus from one thing to another, allow this to happen.

Don't try to fixate on anything in particular. Looking is a natural activity.⁴ There is an effortless fluidity about it. Sometimes our eyes come to rest on an object. Sometimes they sweep the surround. But always, if you are seeing, your eyes are scanning with tiny movements called saccades. With practice you can acclimatise to this integrative way of being; smiling and breathing and quietly acknowledging the various visual things around you. Try it right now. I'll join you.



Once you have a sense of ease with smiling, breathing and seeing, then, in a similar way, explore listening. Allow the sounds both around you and within you to sing. Don't try to keep anything out, not even sounds that are disturbing or irritating. You may have a sense of being suspended in an ocean of vibration; sonic waves lapping against you with different strengths and rhythms; sculptings of sound, arising and passing in a space of knowing.

⁴ Although some traditions encourage meditating with closed eyes, this practice invites us to appreciate a continuum of easeful, present, awakeness, open to all forms of sensing. If you have previously developed a habit of meditating with your eyes closed, I would encourage you to explore meditating with open eyes and see what this does to the quality of your experience. When meditating this way, we are not actively trying to gather in visual objects, nor are we trying to keep anything out. We are simply relaxing in a spacious experience of smiling, breathing and seeing.

Become very sensitive to the immense range of tactile sensation. Feel the clothing on your skin, the breeze on your face; temperature, pressure, soft touch and tickles. The physical sensation of breathing is fundamentally tactile, so your awareness of breathing is already an opening to the sense of touch.

Bring your attention to smell and then to taste. These are constantly flavouring your experience; the smell of fresh paint or jasmine or rose garden or eucalyptus. The taste of a newly picked, crispy apple, a Madras curry, a square of Belgian chocolate or a sip of coffee or tea. Smells and tastes are subtly colouring our experience even though many people are often not aware of it. Pause for a moment right now. What do you smell? Even if you are not eating, what do you taste in your mouth?

Smiling. Breathing. Present. All the sense doors are open. Not blocking. Not judging. Not accepting. Not rejecting. Simply this moment in all its refinement and variety.

Opening into increasingly subtle layerings of experience and understanding.

Something very special can happen when smiling, breathing and present sensing come together. Many people discover a deepening aliveness often accompanied with a growing confidence that, although it is a very simple and available practice, it can transform the most ordinary moments into a deep path of wonderment.

Smiling, breathing, present – this living moment. Consciously bring these three together at different times throughout the day. Try it when you're happy, and when you're sad. Try it when you're feeling good, and when you are unwell. Try it in all sorts of different circumstances; not just when you meditate but also when you are working, playing, or just relaxing. Try it when you are travelling, when you are at the office, in the kitchen, lying in bed or when you are watching TV. Explore this in every situation and circumstance of your life.

As we deepen into this rich loam of reality, we will inevitably find ourselves in the fourth step of the cycle. Blossoming all around, right in the midst of our experience, comes a knowing of profound appreciation.

APPRECIATING

Smiling. Breathing. Present. In this rich flow of being and becoming, appreciation flowers in myriad directions. Appreciating, in a deeper knowing way, some of the factors that support and nourish this continual birthing now. Sunlight on the deck, singing of the birds; water, air, earth and solar energy cycling through us all; plants, animals, fungi and micro beings – these conversations are weaving the fabric of my experience. Mother and father, you too are in this moment. Your hands are reflected in mine, your hopes pulse in my blood, your histories and cultures mould my body and mind. Smiling, breathing, present, appreciating – an entire universe dancing this mystery of nowness in uninhibited wonderment.

As we become more familiar with the first three supports – smiling, breathing, present – it is not unusual to experience a sense of being profoundly still and at the same time vibrantly awake. Poised and centred, bright and alert, like a resting cat our interior is calm and clear and yet we are responsive to everything that is going on within and around us. Our whole being purrs, yet from the perspective of meaningful awakening, we are purring on the edge of a subtle and seductive trap. In this blissfully clear mode of being, it is easy to cherish the thought that we have somehow 'arrived', that '*this is it!*', that this is what we have always been searching for. Such confidences can be quite captivating. Although very beautiful, by regarding calm clear feelings as 'attainments', we unwittingly turn them into limitations – attitudes that bind us.

Buddhist meditation texts call clinging to these marvellous states of being *upakkilesa* – a higher, or more subtle, defilement. Seekers of truth in many different traditions of unfolding have unwittingly lost their way in this. We become attached to blissful positive modes of being which then inform our approach to further meditative exploration. A powerful yearning to re-experience these wonderful states takes hold and, in the grip of this, nothing else seems worth bothering with. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, we jokingly referred to someone who had fallen into this spiritual cul-de-sac as being a bliss junkie! We become attached to qualities such as clarity, bliss or serenity and, like any addict, we get anxious and compulsive when we

can't get our fix. Have you experienced this? Getting frustrated when the pleasure isn't present? Getting agitated when something threatens to take the pleasure away? Plotting and planning and trying to recapture it after it has vanished? Ironically, this obsession closes down our awareness of fresh new arisings and prevents the very bliss we crave. Clinging, even to good states, can stunt the process of further investigation and growth, so be cautious when grasping at meditative highs as if they were the ultimate goal of life.

As the experience of presence blossoms around us, and if we haven't become trapped in clinging to good feelings, it is very natural to find ourselves looking deeply into some of the factors that are contributing to our immediate, ongoing flow of experience. Actually, it may be much more than just 'looking'. You might have a sense of expanding into – recognising, savouring, or experiencing in a tactile visceral way – the dancing of uncountable linkings, threads of connection, or webs of relating, that together comprise the frame and fabric of this present arising. Exploring in this way, a deepening sense of appreciation begins to empower and transform our experience.⁵

At this stage in the cycle we are working with a very subtle balance of intellectual speculation and deep non-verbal

⁵ Appreciation doesn't necessarily imply that we like what is happening but it does indicate a broadening of understanding. One can appreciate the skill and mastery that goes into composing and playing a particular piece of music without necessarily liking the music.

absorption. In the midst of smiling, breathing and being present, we add the tiniest amount of thinking and consider or observe how the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches of the environment, are directly contributing to our sense of where we are and, to a degree, what we are. For example, the various objects that we see around us help to establish our sense of location. I am sitting between this floor and that ceiling. The bird song is in front and the river roar is behind. This is how I know that I am here in this place and not somewhere else. My current experience is a collaboration of floor and ceiling and bird song and human functioning. Imagine how your experience of reading this book would be different if you were exposed to wind and driving rain, or in a crowded sports stadium.

While smiling, breathing and present, look around with all your sensitivity and understanding, and appreciate how the five sense experiences are weaving the texture and shape of this present moment.

Everything is interdependent with other things. The floor is supporting you and, if it is made of wood, a forest with all its ecological intricacies is also participating in this moment. Your body is shaped by DNA from your parents, so they are also part of this present moment. The food that you have eaten was once earth, water, air and sunlight, transformed into plants and is now being the very flesh of your body. My parents and life experience, and my writing this on a laptop computer are all contributing to your present experience. The number of supporting factors is endless. In

the light of this, where does a specific thing begin and end off?

While smiling, breathing, present and appreciating, knower and knowing depends on known. Known depends on knower. Sensing depends on memory of prior experience and expectations of future unfoldings. The present moment is an inter-being of uncountable factors, a dynamic weaving of space and time crafting the extraordinary appearance called now. Micro realms are shaping the macro, while macro realms are simultaneously shaping the micro. Nothing in the universe exists independent of everything else.

Appreciating, as a support for meditation, involves much more than merely thinking about or reflecting on the interconnectedness of everything. We might begin the process by using our intellect to analyse the present situation but gradually, as our appreciation becomes more expansive, our thinking may become very quiet and subtle. It may feel more as if what is happening is a teasing out of myriad refined threads of connection and experience – a direct and intimate appreciating of the rich dynamic weaving of whatever is currently arising. After a while, we let go of all speculation and simply rest in the spacious clarity of the moment. If the resting becomes fuzzy or drifty, then we can sharpen the moment with some speculative analysis of this current situation and then return again to the non-verbal present.

Eventually, a sense of immense spaciousness may flavour our experience without causing us to lose any of the details. The world is rich and wondrous, manifesting in ways we may never have really appreciated before. Smiling, breathing, present, appreciating; seamless intermeshed, these four together give birth to the fifth step of this cycle – offering.

OFFERING

Smiling, breathing, present, appreciating – altogether bursting forth as spontaneous offering. Offering my heart, the nature of mind, the mystery of being, beauty's creation, everything is streaming out. God offering to God, nature offering to nature, this once in a lifetime forever moment, pouring itself out, falling open for everyone.

Smiling, breathing, present, appreciating, offering – five reminders of everything precious. Each one invoking the other. All of them together, deepening each other. Water molecules, cradled in the river, flowing to the sea of becoming, embedded forever in the living mystery of now.

Within this very special moment, we may find ourselves in a state of spontaneous offering. Young children frequently do this. Having discovered something new and amazing, they run to find someone to share the experience with. "Mommy mommy, come and see what I found!" Offering is a natural expression of uncontrived, spontaneous generosity. It arises out of the desire to share a beautiful moment, this

energy or insight, or flow of wonderment. In doing so we deepen our sense of connection with others.

As a meditation, there are a number of ways to work with this. While smiling, breathing, present and appreciating we could bring to mind a specific individual, or a group or class of beings: patients in a hospital, refugees, prison inmates, all humans, or mammals, or inhabitants of a particular city or ecosystem. Feeling their presence, we mentally share the particulars of our experience with them.

A more subtle practice might involve offering the qualities of our experience; the joy or insight or well-beingness that is present. As we did above, we may find ourselves radiating such qualities to specific beings. Sometimes, however, our generosity is directed to no-one in particular. It may feel more like a globe of goodness expanding out from us in all directions, touching all beings.

Occasionally we may feel so embedded in life that there is no sense of being separate from everything else. We are the world; magically offering jewels of experience to the world. Life offering life to life. Wonderment offering wonderment to wonderment. God offering God to God.

Essentially, this fifth support is a spontaneous sharing – an utterly natural out-flowing of appreciation. In letting go and letting be, we 'un-cling', giving the moment away in a joyful burst of generous release.

As we become more and more familiar with this practice we will see that these five supports flow one into the next.

Together they form a continuous cycle – a beginningless, endless flow of ease and clarity, a nectar of naturalness, a reverential remembering of "life and that more abundantly"⁶.

The joy and pleasure that comes with heartfelt offering will often trigger a spontaneous smile. In the act of smiling our breathing relaxes and opens into greater depth and sensitivity. Richer breathing strengthens our sense of vibrant presence, which in turn invites a broadening of appreciation. Expansive appreciation transforms into offering and so the cycle takes us deeper and deeper into this living that we are. Increasingly firm in the midst of whatever experience is present, we begin to taste true *samatha*; the gentle, passive, healing, accommodating, allowing aspect of each moment of lived experience.

We have become the kanuka flower, the river bank, the water and the observer standing on the bank. With *samatha* comes a grounding quality of calm abiding, easeful presence, relaxation and naturalness, loving acceptance, continual forgiveness, and effortless continuity and flow. This is the cycling of *samatha* – tranquil abiding thoroughly intermingled with clear discernment and deep understanding. Like wetness and water, like ocean and wave, tranquillity and insight flow as the seamless river of our living.

⁶ Biblical verse attributed to Christ in John 10:10

PRACTICAL HINT

There will likely be times when you are practicing that you find yourself losing touch with the sense of 'offering'. What once felt spontaneous and natural now feels contrived and emptied of meaning. If this happens, don't try to fabricate an artificial sense of offering; generosity can't be forced. Just step back one place in the cycle and deepen your 'appreciation'. Offering will spontaneously spring from this when it is ready. If your appreciation begins to feel contrived or overly intellectual, then shift back to 'presence' and attend to the vibrant aliveness of the five senses. If present sensing becomes blurred or unclear then rest in your breathing. If it doesn't seem possible to be with your 'breathing' then at least you can 'smile'! If in that moment you can't even find a smile, even with your Bali eye dancing, then go for a walk in nature, breathe deeply and feel your feet upon the earth and allow the world to find you.



These five words can be a wonderful reminder, supporting us in everything that we do. Many times in the course of your day, pause and review them. I think smiling, and immediately I smile! Smiling; Breathing; Present; Appreciating; Offering. This remembering is often enough

to bring us back to a richer way of being and can easily become part of our everyday experience. In Buddhist teaching it is said that the path is good at the beginning, good in the middle, and good at the end. Simple as they may seem, walking through life with these five supports can lead us into a profoundly fresh and wonderful way of being.

DEEPENING:

A Cycle of Vipassana

Smiling – breathing – present – appreciating – offering. Enter this dance of engagement again and again until the rich and dynamic texture of presence and immediacy feels familiar and workable. As the five – both individually and all together – become more alive and active in your experience, you may begin to suspect that you could begin anywhere in the cycle and still end up with the whole. Deepening into these explorations, what began as a cycle or circle now becomes a spiral with possibilities opening up in myriad directions.

Imagine a spiral continually turning inward towards its centre while simultaneously opening outward, broadening in ever widening sweeps of inclusivity towards the periphery. Smiling – breathing – present – appreciating – offering; Round and round yet never repeating; sometimes

you may feel that you are spiralling outward and at other times spiralling inward. Both directions are gateways into healing. Both can open into a place of increasing aliveness, presence and well-being. Now we shift the emphasis of our practice from trying to cultivate a stability of samatha, to nurturing and strengthening the discerning clarity of *vipassana*.

Vipassana pronounced (*vi-pah-sah-nah*) is often translated as insight. The *vi* part, conveys a sense of 'thorough' or 'intensifying'. It is also related to the English syllable *bi* which indicates two. Think of words such as bicycle, bite and bisect. *Passati* is the verb to see. So *vi-passati* is literally 'thorough seeing' or 'seeing that divides', in the sense that it clearly discerns and discriminates. This is this, and that is that. Vipassana could be described as the activity of looking deeply, or inclusively, or with great understanding and discernment.

In some schools of Buddhism, samatha and vipassana are taught as if they were two quite separate forms of practice. In the Mahamudra, Dzogchen and Madhyamaka traditions of Tibetan Buddhism, and in T'ien-t'ai, Zen and some forms of Pureland Buddhism, they are seen as inseparably complementary; two facets of a seamless whole.

In Tibetan language, samatha is rendered as *shi-ne* (*she-nay*) which is commonly translated into English as tranquil abiding. Vipassana is *lha-tong* which literally means clear seeing or superior seeing or penetrative insight.

To more deeply appreciate samatha, think of the spacious, open, easeful quality of acceptance; an effortless capacity to contain, cradle or support the current experience – easeful presence in the midst of whatever is happening; like the sky supporting any shape or colour of cloud, or like a boundless ocean containing myriad types of waves. Samatha could be thought of as the lovingkindness aspect of living.

Vipassana points to a quality of active enquiry. This is the curiosity, the investigating, probing, testing, experimenting, discriminating, discerning aspect of experience. It is the sharp, questioning, alert aspect; a way of experiencing that is suffused with insight, clarity, active enquiry, and engaged curiosity.

Together, samatha and vipassana are twin facets of all richly alive and engaged human beings. Kindness and interest – easeful presence and vivid awakeness – both must be present.

SMILING

*Smiling – all of me smiling;
the birds and grass and each raindrop journeying
through the vastness of knowing,
earth and earthworm,
chairs and cushions,
everything smiling,
at home in its fullness.*

*The dancing of our smiling is the substance of the world.
These open scintillations are the rejoicing of gods and devas,
the radiant understandings and hypothesisings
that feed the smiling of everything.
– smiling, breathing, present, appreciating, offering –
this joy, this clear water of compassion,
moistening and facilitating the flow of everyone everywhere.*

For those in doubt;

*Does the yellow blossoming gorse frown?
Does the raindrop, living as wet sky, complain?
Does the flowering cherry, displaying her beauty to bees
and flies and tiny midges,
wish she were elsewhere?*

*This smile of engagement,
this smile of dancing with dancers,
a living world of inter-knowing,
whirling stillness
moving in its own place,*

*crinkling the corners of eyes,
ephemeral delight
in recognition,
this communal belonging,
everywhere blessing!*

Of course, life is not always like this. There are times when our smile may seem to be miles away. Feeling engulfed in a fog of isolation and conflict we can take on a stiff,

sometimes mask-like expression. Our overall quality of being feels dull, lacking in sparkle and charge. In such moments, smiling in the sense of putting on a tooth-pasty grin can feel utterly fraudulent – a betrayal of our current state.

Even more disheartening, is to realise that we are developing a habitual scowl or frown, one that's with us most of the day – tightening lips and furrowing brows. Occasionally, it might feel as if we have lost the ability to smile. Some of us become so at home with a non-smiling state that we might suspect we have a deep resistance to being happy. The grim, stubborn, scowling, or the sad, sombre depression, is who we are. The mood suits us and it would seem strange and unsettling to be transformed by a radiant smile.

O smile

O zestful aliveness

O sparkling wonderment.

Dancing sunlight joy

triggering cascades of neural symphony

resolving as rhythms of simple appreciation;

Where have you gone?

Are you hiding?

Or have I simply closed my eyes?

How many kinds of smiles are you aware of? Consider the subtle difference between a smile of satisfaction, a smile of

joy, and a smile of well being. Consider smiles of relief, consummation, discovery, success, breakthrough, decompression, deliciousness and recognition. Consider smiles of friendship, appreciation, playfulness, enthusiasm, openness, serenity, unexpected meeting, bliss, happiness, empathic joy, affection. Consider a smile that only involves the mouth, or mouth and stomach, or mouth and stomach and whole body. Consider a non-localized smile, an overflowing totipotent smile. In which ways are smiles similar and in which ways are they different? Some are contrived and forced while others are spontaneous and genuine. Take some time to explore this in the laboratory of your direct experience.

Research in neurophysiology has shown that completely different parts of the brain are involved when we smile intentionally compared to when we smile with spontaneous happiness.⁷ Studies have been done with stroke patients who have paralysis on the right side of the face, due to damage in the left side of the brain. When they are asked to open their mouth and reveal their teeth, their face shows a marked asymmetry. However, when the same patient smiles or laughs in response to something funny, they smile quite naturally with both sides of the face moving symmetrically. This has led researchers to suspect that a genuine happy smile involves deeper structures of the brain

⁷ *Descartes Error*, and *Self Comes to Mind* by Antonio R. Damasio are both excellent introductions to recent neurophysiological thinking about emotion, reason and the human brain.

such as the limbic system which have much to do with emotion and feelings.

A spontaneous smile involves our entire physiology. Memories, attitudes and habitual ways of being, along with hormonal releasings, neural activity, organ functioning, muscle tension, and a host of other processes are continuously responding to each other, shaping and expressing the aliveness that we are. By loosening or releasing the tensions in the body and encouraging an increasing lightness and sense of spaciousness, we can begin to shift the rhythms of our chemistry and thus open a door to a genuine smile; one which pervades our whole being.



Let me speak to you more directly. As a meditator, it is important to investigate how your body is functioning when you feel uptight, unhappy, anxious or sad. You can explore this either in the midst of an actual situation, or by recalling a past moment and then tracking your responses to it. In this state, how are your senses operating? Are they bright? Are they blinkered? Are they shut down and defensive? How interested are you in the world within you and around you? How balanced and integrated do you feel? How bright and awake are you? Look into these experiences. Explore them from many different angles.

Now, investigate how your body is when you feel light and spacious and the twinkle of a smile is pervading your experience. Use the same questions as you did for the unhappy state. How are your senses operating in these situations? Are they bright? Are they blinkered? Are they shut down? How interested are you in the world? How balanced do you feel? How bright and awake are you?

After you have explored smiling and non-smiling individually, then go back and forth between them and clearly notice any differences. At this point an interesting question might occur. To what degree is the presence or absence of smiling, a result of the overall physical and mental state – or a cause of it? Perhaps it is not really a case of either/or. However this appears to you, it will eventually become clear that a warm welcoming smile goes hand in hand with a state of well being.

MASSAGE AND MOVEMENT

Once you begin to appreciate and value this deceptively simple whole organism mystery called smiling, you might then wish to actually do something to encourage your smile to flower more frequently. Many tiny muscles around the eyes which are active when we smile with joy, are not voluntarily controllable. Chronic tensions in this area due to stress or habitual defence postures can inhibit these involuntary movements and so we become incapable of fully smiling. Gentle, pleasurable massage and movement

around our eyes can help us recontact the fluidity of well being that reveals itself in a smile.

Here are six massage and movement explorations, plus a seventh involving imagination. They are worth doing more than once. Caring for our smile is a way of caring for others. Since a smile involves our whole face, and especially the area around the eyes, we will be working on our face and our eyes. It can be useful to follow all the steps in the order suggested. However, after you have experimented a bit, you may find that some parts are more effective for you and you don't need to go through the whole sequence.⁸

1. *Opening and Closing.* Open your eyes as wide as you can, as if you have just had a great shock. If you really get into this, you will find that your mouth will probably open as well. Hold this expression of shock and surprise for as long as you can and then squeeze your eyelids together as if you were trying to shut out some horrible or threatening experience. You'll probably find your mouth closing and your chin tucking in, like a turtle withdrawing its head. Hold this expression for as long as you can and then go back to the first expression with the eyes wide open.

⁸ These exercises are adapted from the Karuna Karma manual "*Coming to Your Senses*" which is available as a free e-book download from Green Dharma Treasury.

Alternate back and forth; opening and closing a number of times. Your eyes may begin to tear and you may contact various old feelings or memories. It comes as a surprise to many people just how much they control their feelings by controlling the mobility of their eyes. Whatever arises, just stay with it in a gentle, non-forcing manner and explore the weaving of physical sensation, feelings and memory. This is a simple exploration but it can reveal a lot.

2. *Face Massage.* A good way to do this is by sitting at a table with your elbows resting on the table top. Supporting your face comfortably on your finger tips, begin to massage your forehead and temples. Do this firmly and thoroughly. Take your time. After a while move down to the area just under the cheekbones and work your way out towards the place where your jaw hinges near your ears. Pull the flesh of your cheeks and massage along the jaw. Push firmly through the flesh and massage the gums. Give your lips a work out. Move your ears giving them both a massage and a vigorous pull. Now, using your fingertips, massage your head upwards towards the crown. Finish this general massage by again working over your whole face and head.

Once you have explored in this general fashion then you can begin to work more intensively around your eyes. Place your thumbs in the upper corner of your eyes near your nose. It helps to rest your forefingers against your eyebrows. In this position you can press up with your thumbs while squeezing down with your fingers. It may

feel as if you were squeezing your eyebrows whilst pressing up against the bone of the eye socket. Do this with a great deal of sensitivity. It should be firm but not painful.

Push the thumbs in for a moment and perhaps experiment with wiggling them a bit. Then gently release the pressure and move the thumbs a little along the boney ridge of the upper eye socket towards the outside of the eyes. Gently press again. Once you get to the far outside of the eyes, then change your hand position so that your forefinger is now on the inside of the eye socket and your thumb is just under your cheekbone. Now you can continue to work back towards your nose, along the lower part of the eye socket until you are at the point where you began. Finish off by once again massaging your eyebrows and your cheekbones. If you have time, it's very good to go straight on to the hot and cold compresses.

3. *Hot and Cold Compresses.* Arrange to have two large bowls, one filled with hot water and the other with ice water. Have two face cloths, one in each bowl. Lying comfortably on your back, take the hot face cloth and wring it nearly dry. Then lay it across your eyes, forehead and temple. Gently press it down with the palms of your hands. Be sure to leave room so that you can easily breathe through your nose. Leave it there for a few moments until it begins to cool. Then place the face cloth from the cold bowl over the same area. This one can be a lot wetter. Leave it there until it no longer feels cold. Continue to

alternate back and forth, hot to cold to hot and so forth, and allow your face to completely relax.

4. *Bathing in Blue Light.* Sitting or lying down, cover your eyes with the palms of your hands. Try to do this so that even though your eyes are open, they are seeing only darkness. Imagine a source of lapis lazuli blue light, far away in the distance. Feel this blue light streaming into your eyes and filling your head with soft, deep space-blue radiance. With each inhalation imagine the light streaming in and bathing your entire being. On each exhalation allow the body to soften and relax. Stay with this for ten or fifteen minutes.

5. *Sunning.* Sit or lie in a position where you can see the sun. Gently close your eyes and feel the warmth of the sun bathing your eye lids. Slowly move your head back and forth and feel the sun warming all the parts of your eyes. While doing this, MAKE SURE YOUR EYES ARE CLOSED. Alternating between (4) and (5), bathing in blue light and sunning, will encourage deep relaxation and a surprising degree of healing.

6. *Deepening the Bali Eye Dance.* Sit in an upright posture and gently rest your gaze on an object directly in front of you. With a great deal of awareness, slowly and sensitively rotate your head to the right, all the time keeping your gaze on the object. When you have gone as

far as you can without straining or losing sight of the object, pause there for a moment and then slowly move the head back towards the left as far as it will go, still keeping the eyes focused on the object in front. Go back and forth, right to left and left to right. Explore the texture of the movement. It is not unusual to find jerky bits or sticky places. Try moving even slower and at the same time become aware of your breathing. With a bit of practice you might discover a wonderful fluidity, not just in your neck and head but flowing down into the rest of your body. After experimenting with this for a few times, pause for a moment of rest. Then, with the same quality of sensitive awareness, try raising your head and lowering it, again keeping your eyes on the object. Finally, try rolling your head in a bit of a circle while gazing at the visual object. Then rest.

Now try moving your eyes while keeping your head still. Look to the right and then to the left and go back and forth a few times. Raise your eyes and lower them. Alternate these movements a few times. Now experiment with rolling your eyes in large circles. Do all these movements in a slow and gentle manner.

Finally, allow yourself to appear a bit impish. Move your eyes more quickly. Look up to the right. Up to the left. You are the mischievous monkey figure in the Balinese dance. Play with this for a while and then rest. You might find a lightness of seeing, a softness and pleasure glowing through your being.

After a while, try recalling a funny joke, or let your eyes 'Bali eye dance' for a moment. Have you found your smile? If you still can't find it, try looking in your shirt pocket, you know, the one just over your heart!

7. *Working with Imagination.* It used to be thought that eyes are the mirror of the soul. This is easily understandable as they can clearly indicate, both to ourselves, and to others, our state of present alertness and engagement. Tired eyes encourage tired feelings. Sore eyes, blinkered eyes, tense eyes, suspicious eyes, critical eyes – you could probably extend this list – all of these go along with an absence of smiling. It's not so much a smiling mouth that is important but smiling, happy eyes. Try another moment of Bali eye dancing, and then imagine the following.

You are in a beautiful garden somewhere near the equator. It is a clear night, very still and quiet. Floating above you is a narrow crescent moon. Being near the equator, it appears nearly horizontal, like a boat sailing in a celestial sea. As you relax in this pearly light the thought occurs to you that the moon is like the grin of an 'Alice in Wonderland' Cheshire cat! Clearly feel the presence of this moonlight smile, an enigmatic grin of sparkling serenity floating above you. As you do this, become aware of your breathing and at the same time, soften throughout your entire body. Breathing in, and breathing out, imagine that uncountable streams of tiny smiles are raining down from this great

smiling moon cat and melting into you. Millions of smiles are penetrating your body, completely saturating your being, right down to the level of molecules. When a smile passes a cell, the cell smiles back. Smiles smiling to cells. Cells smiling to smiles. Cells smiling to cells. Smiles smiling to smiles. Be playful. You could do this when you are actually having a shower! When every cell of your body is smiling in delight, an overflow of smiles leaks out from your feet, soaking into the earth to rise up through the roots of the plants around you and sparkle in their leaves.



It is important to be creative in these investigations. Feel free to experiment, explore, hypothesise, and then on the basis of fresh direct experience, investigate some more. What actually *is* a smile? Where does it take place? Is it a single event or is it a collection of activities and arisings? Where does it come from and, when it's not there, where does it go to? How is it that a smile seems to be able to transmit itself to another person? What is going on when that occurs? There are unending questions that could energise and guide your explorations. These are only a few suggestions to get you going.

Such questions need to be approached in a wide open fashion. Don't just intellectually think about them. While embracing them with your imagination and at the same

time deepening into the tactile-kinaesthetic sensations of breathing, investigate your arising experience with the wisdom and sensitivity of your entire body~mind. Insight, *vipassana*, is the activity of sighting into, looking into, investigating. Don't think of it as a noun, a mental bauble that you have come to possess, something you can show off to others. Better to regard insight as a verb, a process, an accelerating expansion of direct experience, curiosity and wonder. I'm grinning just thinking about it.

For those familiar with my way of speaking and writing, you will recognise that I have a passion for interlinking ideas, words and phrases as a way of suggesting richer and more subtle and dynamic forms of meaning. In earlier writings, I have often used combinations such as body/mind, or space/time or wave/particle. This convention suggests that the terms are somehow equivalent. However, they are not so much equivalent, as necessarily complementary, each one affecting the other. Body/mind is a process, not a thing.

Throughout this book, I have adapted a suggestion made by Scott Kelso and David Engstrom in their essay "The Complementary Nature", and will use a tilde instead of a side slash. The wiggly shape of the tilde already suggests indeterminable movement. The concepts on each side of the tilde are mutually affecting each other in myriad dynamic

ways and so, in this book, you will come across phrases such as body~mind, inner~outer, self~other and inter-being~inter-knowing.

BREATHING

*Breathing is warm and moist and intimate.
It permeates with abandonment our membranes and organs,
our lips and nostrils and lungs.
Totally opening in confidence,
meeting the world,
meeting with other.*

*We breathe in a state of unthinking vulnerability.
Breath by breath, hour by hour,
day and night continuously
through every season of being,
we draw the unknown other
deep into the sensitive tissues of our interior.*

*Breathing is the whisper of blessed communion,
a languaging of ecstasy
this living, this loving,
these ancient rhythms mingling
the deep heart pulse of all belonging.*

As our smile deepens and our very cells seem to tingle and sing, the plain act of breathing can blossom into a vast and

liberating exploration. There is much more to breathing meditation than simply 'watching the breath'.

The Buddha gave a very thorough teaching on the path of awakening through investigating the process of breathing. This meditative exploration became known as *anapanasati*. *Sati* means awareness or recollection. *Pana* in Pali, or *prana* in Sanskrit, means energy or breath. In the practice of *anapanasati*, the moment by moment experience of our own breathing becomes a support to help us stay centred and present while we investigate the inter-weavings of body and mind, inner and outer, self and other. Skilfully practised, *anapanasati* leads us into an exploration of the dynamic transformations that actually constitute our aliveness. These comings and goings reveal every dimension of life – whether physiological or mental – to be a play of continuous movement and responsive creativity.

Traditionally, the practice of *anapanasati* begins by attending to, observing, or sensitively experiencing, the many constantly changing rhythms of breathing. Fast, slow, full, wispy, short, long, wobbly, smooth; in this way we become familiar with the range and vocabulary of our breathing, without analysing or judging in terms of being good or bad. The variations of breath in the course of our living are endless and when we are deep in contemplation they can be endlessly interesting.

Fruitful meditation unfolds in gentleness. Attend to your breathing as if you were touching it with the lightness of a feather or the luminous warmth of a smile. Unfortunately, many people approach meditation as if they were at war with wandering thoughts. They try to nail their attention to the breath and to forcefully ignore everything else. If they are successful in this, they often end up with an overall heaviness; no feather, little smile and far too much effort.

Anapanasati practice really begins to flow when we touch the rhythmic sensations of our living, breathing body with a smile of genuine interest. Softening into the landscape of our immediate experience, we will begin to discern breathing not as a stream of air moving in and out of our lungs, but more as a flow of tactile kinaesthetic sensation, dancing throughout our entire body of being.

*Tides of energy,
rhythmic surges pouring through my being,
dancing with the moon of a larger lover.*

*Giving and receiving,
receiving and giving.*

O joy . . . the freedom of knowing they are one.

*Breath by breath the tides swirl through,
channels of my life shaping oceanic currents of air.*

Currents moulding channels.

Channels framing currents.

*Constantly changing,
this harbour of home.*

*Bone and muscle,
hopes and fears,
holdings and releasings,
patterns of freshness in an ever sparkling sea.*

As we become more accomplished in this art of gentle, attentive, applied interest, we will experience how particular patterns of holding and tension in the body, directly shape the rhythms of breathing and vice versa. In the traditional teaching of anapanasati we are given a phrase, or *gatha* to help us with this. "Experiencing the bodily formations, I breathe in. Experiencing the bodily formations, I breathe out." Mentally repeating these phrases while exploring our breathing can help harmonise our body and mind.

'Experiencing the bodily formations' is to experience the body as myriad dancing processes of forming and un-forming. Breath shaping body. Body shaping breath. It will help to realise that we live thoroughly immersed in a vast ocean of air. This ocean is around us and inside us, and the continual flow from inside to outside and outside to inside are the tidal movements of breathing. Imagine currents of air pouring in and out of the harbour of your body.

Like a real harbour, perhaps there is a hidden rock in the channel, or a tree fallen into the water. Perhaps there are dock pylons or the foundations of a bridge. The ebbing and flowing air swirls and eddies around and through the less-

moving shore of our habitual patterns. Channels of hope and fear, of fantasy and views of life, all made solid in the muscular holding patterns of our bones and flesh. We become contemplative naval pilots studying and mapping the twists and turns, the various features of these channels. The currents of our breathing are continuously being shaped by the present structures of our bodies just as the shifting structures of our bodies are shaping to the currents of breathing.

If you made a stop action film of ocean tides surging in and out of a harbour – two tides per day over the period of 5000 years – you would see the shape of the tidal channels changing due to the flow of the water *and* the flow of the water being directed by the shape of the channels. Now, imagine each tide is a breath cycle. In an average day you could have the equivalent of 5000 years of tides – channels shaping the breath – breath shaping the channels!

Tidal flows, rushing in. Tidal flows, rushing out. Right now, as you read these words, feel the flow of your breathing. Experiencing the bodily formations, breathing in. Experiencing the bodily formations, breathing out. Exploring the tidal formations, breathing in. Exploring the tidal formations, breathing out. Do this again and again until you are thoroughly familiar with both tides and channels and how they are constantly shaping each other. This is how to train a contemplative harbour master.

*Smiling and breathing in,
smiling and breathing out,
oceans within,
oceans without,
smiling and breathing,
smiling and breathing,
and so we live.*

In the process, we inevitably discover that we have preferences. When our breathing body is flowing with a sense of well being, we like it and often want to prolong it. When it moves with a less pleasant texture and rhythm, perhaps blocked or agitated, we don't like it and we immediately want to change it. In the traditional approach to anapanasati, this is the time to use the phrases. "Calming the bodily formations, I breathe in. Calming the bodily formations, I breathe out."

For many people, the idea of calming something suggests suppressing or controlling it. Perhaps it would help to use different words. "Making friends with the bodily formations, just as I find them, I breathe in. Making friends with the bodily formations, I breathe out." Alternately, we might think, "Softening the bodily formations, I breathe in. Softening the bodily formations, I breathe out." Instead of critically judging and trying to control the condition of our breath and body, we could enter into something that, on first encounter, can seem quite amazing. We make friends with the breathing body – just as we find it! It helps to remember our smile and the lightness of a feather.

Patterns of non-acceptance and critical judging can sometimes be extraordinarily subtle. As we smile and soften into the rhythms of breathing, we notice that today's breath is not quite as pleasurable or free as yesterday's. Perhaps there is a disappointingly familiar holding in the throat or a slight tightness in the chest. Without realising it, we search for a way of breathing that will feel like it did yesterday when it was flowing more pleurably. Shying away from exploring what is actually taking place, we find ourselves drifting into a maze of thoughts and fantasies focussed on what we would rather be present. Surely you know this experience?

Imagine a harbour master who can only navigate in fine weather and who collapses in anger or frustration or depression whenever there are difficult conditions. Patterns of tension and discomfort could be invitations to deepen one's skills at peacemaking; and peacemaking is the way of coming into your harbour, your 'haven' as they say in German. Perhaps haven is connected with heaven.

Pause for a moment. Recontact your smile and expand into a way of being that is gentle and unforced. Sometimes your breathing may feel shallow or hardly there. Sometimes it's rough and not very pleasant. Whatever is happening, stay with it. Invite a softening in any part of the body that is troubling. Explore this thing or situation that's happening with great tenderness. Does it have a name? It might be pain, or discomfort or tension. Gently feel your way into the discomfort. On the inhalation mentally say, "discomfort"

or whatever its name is. On the exhalation mentally say, "I'm here for you." Breathe this way again and again.

These explorations require persistent work over a long period of time. Of course, on first reading this approach might sound very lovely and poetic, but making friends with the mystery (and sometimes it is a frightening mystery) of our fragile and impermanent breathing bodies is one of the more challenging things a human being may try to do. Somewhere along the line we have to stop running away from ourselves. This is the moment. "Making friends with the bodily formations, breathing in. Making friends with the bodily formations, breathing out."



Inevitably you will become more familiar with, and feel more at home in, embracing your smiling, breathing body. In this sensitivity and friendliness, moments of physical pleasure or joy will begin to spontaneously arise. They may even intensify to a level of bliss and ecstasy. Ecstasy derives from *ex-stasis* which means, out of stasis, or no longer static, or non-clinging, or from a positive perspective, letting go into a field of continuous responsive movement. Here the tides of breathing/energy are beginning to flow freely. You are tasting the natural pleasure of a fluid, breathing, wondrously alive body. "Experiencing *piti* (*pronounced pee-tee*), I breathe in. Experiencing *piti*, I breathe out." *Piti* is a

Pali word that refers to all the pleasurable manifestations of physical well being. Namgyal Rinpoche once described piti as "experiencing the thrill of the aliveness of the body".

There are many varieties of piti and you can explore them for a long time, even a number of years. They can range from gentle, localised pleasure through to total body bliss. These moments of piti can be utterly engaging and also profoundly healing. Like a cleansing shower on the inner plane, piti washes our being while drawing us ever more deeply into the mystery so often referred to as 'this present moment'.

Occasionally, you may feel as if you pass right through this realm of piti into a place which is utterly peaceful, and indescribably pleasurable. Tranquil, spacious, and happy, the ancient teachings called this experience *sukha*, pronounced *soo-kah*. *Su* alludes to something good and life affirming. *Kha* is the sound of the crow and invokes a sense of space. *Su* and *kha* together in the form of *sukha* literally means a good, life affirming space. Where piti is sometimes compared to the pleasurable anticipation that precedes a good meal, *sukha* is the feeling of deep satisfaction that arises after we have eaten the meal. We have had exactly the right amount and feel utterly replete. "Experiencing *sukha*, I breathe in. Experiencing *sukha*, I breathe out."

Even with *sukha* the tides of breathing will still eddy around and over the rocks and bends that mark the channels of our lives. In the earlier stages of practice, these formations were experienced quite physically. They had a

density and opacity about them that identified them as part of our body. At this sukha-stage of deep abiding goodness, the curves and topography of our being are perceived as having a more subtle texture. Here we begin to meet what are commonly called the mental formations; the thoughts, feelings, memories, emotions, attitudes, views, expectations, opinions and so forth, that sculpt the tidal flow of experience. "Experiencing the mental formations, I breathe in. Experiencing the mental formations, I breathe out." "Calming the mental formations, I breathe in. Calming the mental formations, I breathe out." Just as we explored how the body and breath patterns are mutually shaping each other, now we continue the exploration but at a more subtle level. Although the texture and detail of mental experience may feel a bit more elusive than physical sensations, the work of resting – easeful, alert and appreciating – in the midst of whatever is arising, is the same.

In these last few pages, I have been outlining the classical Buddhist approach to mindfulness found in the Anapanasati and Satipatthana Suttas⁹ as it progresses from the first step of exploring bodily formations – recognising the different rhythms and textures of breathing – through to calming the mental formations. These teachings can sometimes seem to be almost technical exercises; one step leading to the next. With a bit of experience however, it's

⁹ A complete explanation of the Anapanasati Sutta can be found in, *Breathing: The Natural Way to Meditate*. A survey of the Satipatthana Sutta can be found in *Foundations of Mindfulness*. Both books are available on Green Dharma Treasury

obvious that nobody experiences life in such an orderly manner. We may be plagued with anger or jealousy mixed up with physical tensions before we take our first aware breath. To ignore present mental states because we are 'supposed' to be working with the body section is to miss the point of the entire meditation. In actual practice, it helps to first of all familiarise ourselves with the overall process but then to have the confidence to work with the stage or combinations of stages that best support our current arising experience. It's likely we will go back and forth from body to mind and mind to body until we begin to realise that the two are inseparably inter-linked. In a way, our body is the physical expression of our mind and our mind the mental expression of our body. Using breathing as a central touchstone of awareness we explore the tides of energy transformations that are our body~mind.

Very gradually we learn to make friends with the various mental formations. Of course, there rarely seems to be any problem with the patterns we like! I'm reminded how H.H. the 14th Dalai Lama once explained, in his wonderfully simple way, that the Buddha wasn't a very good teacher for him when it came to learning about patience. "After all," he said, "when I am in the presence of Buddha I don't need patience." He went on to say that, for him, the Chinese administration was a much better teacher of patience. Therefore from the standpoint of developing patience, the Chinese officials were more important to him than the Buddha! It is the challenging mental formations – the

various feelings, emotions and states of mind that we find difficult – that motivate us and sometimes even compel us to develop a deeper experience of forgiveness, kindness and active care-filled curiosity~investigation.

Many of these challenging body~mind formations have been around for a long time. They have grown from the various ways that we learned to cope with difficult situations. As an adult today, if you were in a reasonably good state and were to find yourself with a needy child, surely you would respond to them with love and support rather than destructive criticism. In a similar way, we might learn to bring love and support to these difficult habit patterns that have perhaps lingered in our being since childhood. See if you can touch the troublesome state with the texture of your breath. This is very gentle work. Call it by name and say, "I'm here for you." Anger, I'm here for you. Tension, I'm here for you. Bring some tenderness and caring to this moment; some deep seeing/understanding.

Distortions of breathing are distortions of our ability to give and receive. With each inhalation, all the cells of our body are receiving oxygen – a gift of life. With each exhalation our cells are giving off gases. Some of them, such as carbon dioxide, are a gift of life for green plants. Our breathing shapes our body and mind. The state of our body and mind shapes our breathing. The rhythm of this unending flowing reflects how we are able to be with others. When we are richly present with what we are, we can be richly present for another. When we are mostly absent and out of

touch with our own tides of energy then we will for sure be out of touch with others.

A number of years ago when visiting Plum Village Retreat Centre in France, we were greeted by a painted sign just inside the front gate. It said, "Welcome to Plum Village. Please smile and enjoy your breathing."

A smile is the key to the door, opening into a place of spacious stillness where we can feel and appreciate the tides of giving and receiving that sustain our being. As I type these words I can hear a Morepork¹⁰ calling, its pure voice resonating up and down the valley. Moonlight is streaming through the window and I pause, and smile, and breathe. Please join me in this. Imagine a greeting sign in front of you, like that one at Plum Village. "Welcome to (*fill in the name of wherever you are*). Please smile and enjoy your breathing!"

PRESENT

*This gift, this present, is the stable heart of things;
the sharpened stake,
the tent peg, the long thin 'phurba' dagger
anchored deep in the earth of manifesting life.*

*Unshakeably staked in suchness, pegged to thusness,
transient guy ropes tensing and releasing,*

¹⁰ A Morepork is a small New Zealand owl.

*tugging on pasts and futures
and myriad things in-between beyond counting.*

Our nomadic tent is firm in the weathers of all becoming.

Of the five supports, 'present' is perhaps the most challenging to think about. One moment it seems quite obvious and unremarkable, but in a different light it can become tremendously elusive. In living, there is only the present. When smiling, we are present. Yesterday's smile only exists as memory and this 'memory' is composed of thought and feeling, taking place in our present experience. The same applies to tomorrow's smile. We live in this moment of breathing. Yesterday's breathing or tomorrow's breathing will not sustain our physiology. Appreciating only happens now, in the present, and so too offering. Everything we do, everything we are, everything we experience, arises in and as this present living that we are. There is no present apart from this immediate living experience, and no living apart from this present. This is the obvious part.

The elusive part is revealed when we realise that while we can practice or encourage four of the supports: smiling, breathing, appreciating and offering; we can only *be* present. It's not something to practice. It's not something that we can attain through effort. Strangely, by being thoroughly present, we become a present – a gift, a 'presenting' of joy and generosity, a giving of immediacy, a dancing of universal immanence. Let's look into this.

For many, the idea of being present is not about being a 'gift' but rather involves locating themselves in an infinitely narrow slice of time, as if their existence was sandwiched between an unimaginably vast past and an immeasurable future. If we were to feel our way into the fullness of our immediate present or presenting experience, we would find it to be seamlessly entangled with various stories of pasts and possible futures. Deepening insight into what we mean by 'present' is inseparable from a deepening of appreciation of the fact that what we have been, is continuous with what we are, and what we will become. By opening to the fullness of what is happening, we can glimpse an immeasurable present that includes and embraces everything, including past and future. At this point, the support of 'present' blends seamlessly into the support of 'appreciating'.

*Remembering my relatives,
living puddles four billion years ago,
Moist films of mystery spread upon sheets of clay,
Chemical reaction cycles sensitive to light and pressure
and temperature and local molecules.
This sensitivity has become my senses
and yours too.
Not collectors of inert information,
But form itself being shaped and moulded by form
mutual, dynamic, living, informings.*

*A mystery of communion
a planet unfolding.
A passion for specialising led to
eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and skin.*

Amazing!

*Yet such a loss;
hiding communion under efforts to communicate,
A cacophony of messages,
receivers and senders all beating drums,
desperate to be heard.*

Ahhh!

*Relaxing and opening in all directions
so simple!
Dancing in the detail while being my ancestors,
weaving with oneness
this here and this now.*

What does it mean to be present? What does it actually involve? For many people, the answer to this requires a comparison with things not present. For example, objects whether sentient or insentient, are distinguished from what they are not – their environment or surround – by divisions or separations of space (here-ness), and divisions or separations of time (now-ness). Perhaps what we call 'being present' is more a process of drawing closer to what, where, when and who we are; an all-inclusive, immanent, experiencing, living-wholeness.

For most human beings, a sense of innate separateness is so deeply ingrained that it is possible for them to talk enthusiastically about 'oneness' or 'non-separation' or 'holistic' – treating them as particular things or qualities – without challenging in the least their unconscious experiential conviction of duality. Let's try to explore this.

In today's world it's not un-common to think of our eyes as being biological camera lenses designed to channel information about the surrounding environment into the visual cortex of the brain. For most people, their seeing apparatus seems obviously separate from the tree that they are observing and the light from the sun that allows the seeing. In a similar way, ears are specific forms of organised tissue that perform the function of hearing. They are rarely felt to be inter-dependently linked with muscles, densities of air, buried memories of long ago experiences, or the fact that we are living creatures communicating and coupling with other living creatures through the medium of a gaseous atmosphere. These are levels of connection that people seldom consider. It is difficult to even talk about this disconnect because it is built on so many unconscious assumptions and it has become so deeply ingrained and normalised in our ways of experience. For most of our living, the seamless unity of life – this unimaginable wholeness – has become completely invisible.

To find a way into this unity, travel in your imagination to a time when the planet seemed to be little more than a physical ball of rock and water and gases, whirling around

a relatively average star, itself embedded in a spiral arm of a fairly ordinary galaxy. Take yourself back to our world before life appeared.

The phrase "before life appeared", seems reasonable, even to scientifically inclined beings, but it again exposes an assumed division and deeply lived sense of separation. I'm referring, of course, to the separation between the living and the non-living, between organic and inorganic. To be a student of dharma today, it is not enough to study and master Buddhist teachings or any other contemplative or religious paths. One also needs to investigate the fields of knowledge associated with science. Science doesn't necessarily have more correct explanations than religion but it does, in theory, encourage thoughtful beings to question everything more deeply.

This ability to question, hypothesise, investigate and then review is essential for studying dharma. We might say, it's dharma in action. It's also the essence of science. How did this planet with its bio-systems and individual creatures come into being? What kind of relationships link the different dimensions of being; for example, molecules and cells, single-celled organisms and large multi-celled organisms, or an individual organism, its environment and the entire planet as an integrated evolving entity? What is communication and what is community? What is knowing, and how does it relate to being or doing? These last three questions affect all the other questions. Perhaps inquiry into the origin of life has more to do with how we perceive

and discriminate than with an objective, fundamental beginning point of something called life.

Imagine a river flowing towards the sea. It comes to an escarpment where it falls vertically with lots of sound and spray. This vertical river is now called a waterfall. Later on, the waterfall again 'becomes' a river. Is it meaningful to try to deeply understand and appreciate the waterfall while ignoring the preceding river, or for that matter, the downstream flow? In a similar way, can we hope to recognise a meaningful 'present' while ignoring the preceding past or the following future?

Let's continue with our contemplation – smiling, breathing and present, imagine planet Earth three or four billion years ago. Enwrapping the globe is a thin envelope of dynamic happenings, a planet wide brewing of intricate, inter-linking chemical processes destined to be called a biosphere.¹¹ Focussing on particular parts of this process, we say that life or a life form has arisen. Then later, after the 'death' or the disappearance of these parts, we say that that particular life-form has finished or gone extinct. It's like the problem of our waterfall. How can we come to a deep understanding of the living world if we are unconsciously or consciously breaking it up into arbitrary parts and then focussing only on the bits we are interested in?

¹¹ I realise that it is somewhat arbitrary to begin here but it will do for the purpose of introducing these contemplations. The atomic elements that compose the molecules that are interacting as chemical process, themselves have emerged much earlier from the life cycling of stars.

These are great philosophical questions, not to be shied away from simply because you might not see yourself as a philosopher. We need to explore them in order to understand what is going on in the world today. Where do we fit within the dance of everything? And how can we cultivate a moral compass that might guide our choices on the continuously branching journeys of our lives? Without embracing these kinds of questions, how can we do anything but go through life blindly relying on hope and unconscious assumptions? Such living will inevitably perpetuate multiple levels of misunderstanding and conflict.

The earliest fossil records of bacterial life found in Australia and South Africa are about 3.5 billion years old. Perhaps this was the beginning of 'biological evolution'. Before that however, between 4.5 and 3.5 billion years ago, there must have been a time of 'chemical evolution'; the development and transformation of chemical reaction cycles – precursors of the first cells.

Imagine complex assemblies of atoms mingling together as dynamic communities we now call molecules. Imagine these myriad chemical 'conversations'; linkings and unlinkings, givings and receivings, sharings and stealings; arising together as transient self-organising structures. Recursively inter-linked chemical reactions apparently developed a certain robustness in that they had the tendency to maintain their forms in the presence of changing micro-environments. These 'auto-catalytic-hyper-

cycles' had little in the way of skin or protective shells between themselves and their surroundings. Possibly they existed in a bubble of water that had a slightly different concentration and temperature, or they may have been smeared out on the surface of clay. When the environment changed, these dynamic matrices of chemistry would also change. 'Organism' and environment were intimately linked, flowing in and through each other – braided rivers of unending responsiveness.

These self-organising systems would have been very sensitive to light, especially ultraviolet and ionising radiation which we know can be damaging to unprotected living tissues. They would have been sensitive to electrical discharges in the form of lightning. They would have been sensitive to pressure coming from both the atmosphere and from tactile collisions with physical objects. In this case, what I'm calling "physical objects" would probably be best defined in terms of densities or concentrations of chemical activity. A study of these very early structures, that eventually became membrane encased and called 'life', suggests that what we call our five senses are not sudden recent developments but were functioning in proto-form from the very beginning.¹² Sensitivity led to sensing. Long before specialised eyes and ears, these processes underpinning and giving rise to proto-organisms existed in

¹² Two marvellous books that graphically outline this integrative vision of life and the universe are *What is Life* by Lynn Margulis and Dorian Sagan, and *The Self-Organising Universe* by Erich Jantsch

a continuum with a dynamic environment, an environment that extended all the way to the sun and beyond.

Because life on this planet came into being bathed in powerful solar energies, perhaps it was inevitable that sensitivity to light was unavoidably part of the life-process from the very beginning. Long before eyes, light sensitivity arose side by side with our embeddedness in a light filled world. It may sound odd and perhaps a bit outrageous but our ability to see was surely crafted by the presence of the sun, just as much as by the evolving physiologies of our bodies. It was a collaboration. Our senses, aren't just for seeing a world out there. Our senses, are part of the world out there. Without the 'out there', we wouldn't have the particular sense organs that we have. A different world would have given rise to different sensing.

Biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela have explored this extensively in their thoughtful book, *"The Tree of Knowledge"*. In it, they speak of the senses not as cameras or recording devices for registering an external world, but as facets of a continuous and intimate relating, linking so-called self and other. They suggest that in the process of sensing, an organism is "bringing forth a world". To understand this more fully, though still in a simplified way, think of each moment of sensing as a communion or interacting of sense organ, nervous system and over-all physiology, sensed object, and sense medium. The comingling of all of these factors reveals or brings forth the

world of one's current experience and knowing. This is the presence of being present.

All living entities have permeable skins or membranes. We are continuously taking in and sending out myriad types of substances. These exchanges are happening at multiple levels, from microscopic cellular chemistry to large scale movements of entire multi-celled organisms. The ways we take in and send out, determine the type of creature that we are. These multi-dimensional exchanges and couplings collectively comprise the creative activity we call life – form in process of forming – everything shaping, changing, and affecting everything else. Bees are a world of experience similar yet different from whales. Bacteria in the soil, birds in the air, humans on the earth, trees in the forest, fungi on the decaying log, dandelion on the lawn; the world that each one of us brings forth is unique and yet profoundly coupled with worlds brought forth by other beings. They are our environment and we are theirs. Can we learn to rest in this extraordinary, sensitive inter-weaving of knowing that we are? Can we actually learn to appreciate that the world that every other being brings forth is at least as vast and multi-dimensional and wondrously unique as our own? Can we live the implications of this intuition, that everything is part of an extraordinary phenomena we call life that everything is alive? Realising this, transforms everything.

Smiling

Breathing

Present

All our senses,

Open and engaging.

Invite your whole being to relax in deep communion with everything within and around you. Open wide the doors of sensing: seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, touching. Let the winds of experience blow as they will. Breathing and sensing. Smiling and sensing. As you deepen into this experience you will likely feel increasingly spacious and open. Consider the possibility that everything you sense is, in its own mysterious fashion, sensing you. You are part of its environment while, at the same time, it is part of yours. Think about this until your interest becomes focussed and sharp. Then let go of the thinking and simply settle into a place of tremendous openness.

In this immediate moment of sensing, your physical form at many different levels, from molecular, to cellular, to organ system, is shifting and changing. Smiling and breathing; what can you actually feel of this? Metabolic processes are shaping muscle tone which is triggering subliminal memories and floodings of feeling. This changing in form is the underlying process of all in-form-ation.

This is perhaps a good time to set aside your reading and simply deepen into your current experience. Directly feel the myriad layerings of responsiveness that are comprising this moment. Relax any need to distinguish mind from matter. To sense is to respond. Different forms of responsiveness are different types or categories of knowing. The whole field of experience: micro, macro, creature and environment, is extraordinarily alive. Smiling, breathing, present, let go into it!

People sometimes say that they find it difficult to stay present. This is often because they are lost in the turmoil of colouring their world with judgmental feeling states such as desire, aversion, confusion, pride and jealousy. The next time you find yourself looking at a tree, explore this complex mystery of looking. Really give yourself to seeing this *particular* tree in all its uniqueness. When you are thinking about the tree, know that this is present thinking. Give all your attention to the thinking.

To know you are doing something doesn't necessarily mean that you have to label it with words. Although for some people, naming the experience may help make them become more aware of what is happening, it is all too easy for the meditation to unwittingly become a fantastic effort of obsessive labelling. In the process we can again lose sight of the collective experience of tree and light and eye and body and memories and associations, all communing

together in this particular moment of beginningless, endless experience called, 'looking at a tree'.

FURTHER EXPLORATIONS OF PRESENCE

Smiling. Breathing. Present. All six senses are operating. In Buddhism, the sixth sense is called the mind door. If you think of the eyes as being doors through which seeing takes place then the mind door is the doorway through which experiences of evaluation, emotion, association, memory, thinking and so forth arise. An all too common mistake of many meditators is to regard mental activity as an enemy which obstructs 'pure' or 'direct' experience. Actually you won't see a tree without feelings and associations. Being present doesn't require an absence of thoughts or feelings or associations but it does mean that you know you are engaging in mental activity when you are.

In the midst of smiling and breathing, brighten your attentiveness to what is arising at all the sense doors, moment by moment. Present sensing and making sense of the world that is present; this is a profound mystery. It deserves to be explored. Trying to solve the problems in the world without exploring this is a recipe for increased cascades of suffering.

From the perspective of developing a solid contemplative practice, it is skilful to begin by exploring the five senses. Accustom yourself to being awake and aware of what is physically going on immediately within you and around

you. Try devoting an entire day to one particular sense. For example, today might be a seeing day. Intensify your curiosity about seeing. What do you notice? In a single day you see an incredible number and variety of objects. Can you develop a finer discrimination of colour, or movement or subtle shades and shapes. When you see something, how does it affect your body and mind state? When do you look away? When do you latch on to an object? Does the object seem to hijack you into emotional states and speculation? If such a hijacking takes place, what happens to the seeing? Can you stay visually attentive for longer periods of time? Do you see with your eyes or do you see with your memory? Do you see what is there or what you expect to be there? How does this work? At the end of the day, review what you discovered.

The next day take a different sense, perhaps hearing/ listening and, in a similar way, really explore it. Each day devote your exploration to a different sense. Then after five days go through them all again. If you can stay with this for a few months you will surely become more sensible!

A slightly different investigation that can also enhance your knowing of presence is to explore how a particular sense stimulates tension or relaxation. This is a very subtle exploration. Supported by smiling and breathing, soften into your body. Soften your belly. Now give exquisite attentiveness to seeing or hearing or any of the five senses and observe how each experience stimulates a matrix of tension or relaxation throughout your body. With practice

you will discover a way of being extraordinarily open in the midst of whatever is occurring.

As an aside; in many religious traditions there seems to be considerable ambivalence about sensing. For some reason, the five senses are seen as mundane and unspiritual. Perhaps it's because we are so often unawaresly channelled into confusing emotional states by the objects we are perceiving. A common response to this type of experience is to blame the object while trying to be detached. Many ethical guidelines address how a spiritual seeker should relate to sensing. Unfortunately, most of them involve some kind of restraint – a traditional expression of the modern fundamentalist's slogan, "just say no!" A more positive approach to sensing might go as follows. "I undertake to train myself to use the senses to further awakening, explore dharma and to come to know the world more profoundly and more compassionately"¹³

¹³ This is the third of the five buddhist training precepts, in positive expression, which can be found in *Daily Puja* on Green Dharma Treasury. For readers unfamiliar with the term *dharma*, it seems appropriate to say a few more words about it. This is a central concept in Buddhism and is used in different ways, depending on context. Common translations are: law, truth, thing, or phenomena. It is often associated with the teachings given by the historical Buddha but has a much broader range of meanings than that. The syllable *dhar* comes from *dhareti*, meaning, to carry, hold or support. *Ma*, in many languages refers to mother. Dharma is that which mothers, holds, supports and carries us. It wouldn't depart from the original meanings to think of dharma as referring to the flow of nature-in-process. The study of dharma is a study of how everything comes into being, and that includes the intelligence or the mind that can formulate such a question.

MIND DOOR AND PRESENT MOMENT

Smiling, breathing, present – fully awake and engaging the five senses. Once this becomes more effortlessly stable, then broaden your investigations to include what is happening in the sixth door. Begin by noting any tendency to evaluate each new moment of perception. I like it. This is nice! I don't like it. This is awful! I'm indifferent. It's a bit ho-hum! In the Buddhist practice of mindfulness, this process of evaluation is called *vedana*.

Vedana (pronounced *way-dah-nah*) is often misleadingly translated as 'feeling'. For many people, feelings are synonymous with emotions, but the meaning of *vedana* is closer to what is meant when we say that we have a feeling it will rain. This is a global evaluation, a total organism response to changing experience. Something happens – a moment of perception. Accompanying this is a co-ordinated response throughout our cells, organs and muscles, in terms of how this new experience supports or threatens the wellbeing of the organism. Smiling, breathing, present; noticing a continuous stream of responsive evaluation. Now leaning toward. Now pulling away. Now resting evenly. Our bodies will often demonstrate a subtle preferencing, even before we are consciously aware of doing so.

Some traditions of meditation seem to encourage a detaching from preference but this is a mistake. Don't try to stop the evaluating. Certainly don't step to one side and

judge yourself negatively for doing this. An organism can't exist without vedana. When functioning well, vedana helps preserve life. In this sense, it is a revelation of wisdom-in-action. Being present requires learning to rest in this process, while it is happening. Through doing so, you will gradually become less vulnerable to being unconsciously hijacked by these likes and dislikes. In the relative world of self and other, evaluation will always be present.

Once you're settled in a calm clear space, explore this phenomena we call vedana. How does evaluating come into being and how does it pass away, changing into something else? Don't just think about it. The key to understanding vedana is to be found by investigating subtle shifts in your physiology. Check it out. You will find that physical responses to experience arise, often before you are aware of actually liking or disliking something. The internal chemical milieu of the cells is constantly adjusting and rebalancing in response to your current situation of sensing. Your muscular/skeletal structure responds before 'you' are even aware of it. Your eye is continuously tracking the moving object, keeping it in focus. Alternately, you may have averted your eyes without even knowing why, sometimes not even realising that you looked away.

Moment by moment, the neurons in your brain are dancing elaborate ballets of collaboration – the micro and macro adjustments needed to maintain the sense of cohesive and orderly experience that underpins the overall health of the organism. All of this is happening in the blink of an eye! To

explore vedana is not to think about or analyse your evaluations but to become extraordinarily sensitive to multiple levels of intimate transformation – your entire organism communing with new experience.¹⁴

Can you identify factors that need to come together to give rise to a moment of evaluation? Do any one of your five senses trigger more moments of vedana for you than others? Is vedana physical, or mental, or is it a complex of feeling~knowing? Do you recognise that liking and disliking arise through the mind door and can you separate this from the treeness of the tree? These can be very subtle and engrossing explorations.

At this point, following the Buddha's teaching on mindfulness you might further observe and investigate *citta* (pronounced *chita*). These are the states of mind that people often think of as emotions – the innumerable flavours that can go with moving towards, leaning away, or freezing in uncertainty.¹⁵

Smiling, breathing, present – investigate the emotional flavour of present moment, by exploring how emotion

¹⁴ Vedana could be associated with Damasio's concept of core-self. These are the proto-emotions which form much of the underlying feeling of present moment self. The perception of an object takes place along with the organism/self responding to it. See, *Self Comes to Mind*, by Antonio Damasio.

¹⁵ *Foundations of Mindfulness*, downloadable from Green Dharma Treasury sketches out the Buddha's most detailed teaching on the practice of mindfulness. Familiarising yourself with these practices will enrich your understanding of *This Nectar of Naturalness* and vice versa.

informs or shapes your body and how your body itself gives rise to flavours of emotion. What is this current configuration of tensions and physical relationships an expression of? If you look carefully, you'll see that emotional states are amazingly fluid and constantly changing.

Notice how a visual object might trigger a mental association which, in turn, gives rise to a shift in your body towards or away from the object. The fact of this moving towards or away from, along with its overall flavour is the motion, the 'e-motion' of the moment. Some emotions are very gross and obvious but some are more like moods or background qualities of being. They tug at our senses and colour the way we perceive the world. When we are unaware of their presence, we can easily project them out on to other people, objects or situations.

It is easy to misread the world if we are not aware of the constant stream of evaluation and emotions, *vedana* and *citta*, that are part of the dynamic of this continuous, creative, responsive present. The key is to be found in understanding. Whatever is arising, investigate it. Smiling, breathing, present, all the six doors active and engaging.

As I mentioned earlier, people have often said to me that it's hard to be present all the time. In a sense, this isn't actually true. There is never a moment of life experience that is not present. There are however, many moments when you are not aware, when you are not in tune. To be richly present is

to relax, vividly awake and responsive, into the living that is occurring. This is the place where many worlds meet.

There is a Sufi saying. "No matter how fast you run or how hard you dig your heels in, you can't get away from your own two feet." Well, no matter how you think or feel, no matter how much you hope or fear, you cannot get away from the present arising moment. This mystery of presence is the most essential practice of meditation – to recognise the immense creative dynamic of what is happening right now, and to know that this is not separate from what you are. Once this understanding is relatively stable, then we can begin to refine the art of resting easefully and effortlessly in this continuously unfolding present in an increasingly wide range of circumstances and activities.

On a practical note, please keep in mind that in this chapter we are emphasising *vipassana* – the discernment, enquiry, investigation aspect of experience. The many questions and different avenues of exploration that are suggested, especially in this section, will hopefully enrich your experience and understanding of this essentially simple truth of presence. If you find yourself trying to hold too many questions at once and your practice becomes overly complicated with thinking and speculation, then set them aside and give more emphasis to the first two supports. Simply smiling and breathing in the midst of whatever you are doing. You might even find it useful to go back to Chapter One, and to work again with those suggestions. Eventually you will rediscover

sufficient calm and stability to be able to contemplatively embrace the rich collaborative dancing of activity that is bringing forth this present world, this world of your here and now experience.

APPRECIATING

*Resting in immediacy
The doors and windows open wide
Letting in the sky
The breeze flows through
Birds make nests in the rafters
The spider web glistens in the sunlight
While I camp out on the threshold.*

*Neither out nor in
Neither self nor other
Neither empty nor permanent
Every arising is amazingly alive
Each a mandala of initiation
Bestowing blessings on each other
A rain of relief
A shower of joy*

What we are exploring in this book is really a life's work. It is not just a technique to be done for a while before moving on to something more profound. Calling it "a life's work" however, isn't implying a long arduous journey. A clock that works well is not sweating. It's just functioning

beautifully. By life's work, I mean the fruitful working or fruitful functioning of our living; moment by moment by moment. 'Smiling' is the ongoing work of cultivating joy and lightness in every situation. 'Breathing' is the ongoing work of staying centered in the intimate and richly detailed immediacy of our dynamic physical body. 'Present' is the ongoing work of remembering presence by encouraging all our doors of perception to function well. 'Appreciating' is the ongoing work of continuously exploring and deepening our understanding of the detailed multi-levelled interdependency of all manifestation. 'Offering' is the ongoing work of sharing our passion for life and our love for all beings. In this sense it is a life's work; a life of engagement and exploration. Each moment of the journey, each moment of living, is both a transformation of who and what we are, and an acclimatisation to being continuously fresh and new. As long as we are alive, the work, the beautiful functioning, is never finished.

I once developed a mild inner ear infection. It's amazing that such a tiny thing can have such a huge effect. I was not aware of anything wrong until one morning I awoke, rolled over, and in the rolling the entire inner and outer world began to disintegrate. This stayed with me, mostly in the mornings, for nearly six weeks. Although it started out being extremely disorienting, it eventually became a very interesting exploration. These experiences made me acutely aware of how strongly I take for granted the stability of the world.

The first experiences of the vertigo were accompanied by a degree of fear. Would this ever end? Was I having a stroke? In the fear was a tremendous hanging on, so much so that I developed a painfully stiff neck from not allowing my head to move in an attempt to stop the world from whirling. Engulfed in a sea of nausea and grasping, there was very little exploration. If you have had a prolonged experience of severe vertigo, I'm sure you know what I mean. Gradually, as I acclimatised to the vertigo and stopped fighting with the nausea, the fear subsided and I found a new place of orientation in which I was able to investigate and experiment with what was actually taking place. It became very interesting and led into some immensely valuable exploration of perception and the assumptions we make about the world.

How might this be relevant to you? Right now, as you are reading, you are grounded in largely unconscious tactile-kinaesthetic impressions that underpin a visceral sense of who you are, where you are, and what you are mostly doing. It's what it feels like to be you. You don't feel like Uncle Bob or the person who lives across the road. Actually you have no idea how they feel. You probably do have a sense of being in a particular place and time which you think of as 'here and now'. At some level of awareness you have a sense of your posture and how it's enmeshed with you reading these words. This is different than riding a bicycle or talking on the phone. Although these feeling/perceptions may not be at the forefront of your attention,

they are never-the-less present, providing a continuous background sense of continuity, familiarity, and a degree of certainty and trusting confidence. One moment seamlessly flows into the next in a reasonably predictable manner.

This visceral familiarity that goes with being someone located somewhere, profoundly affects the way you experience and engage with the surrounding world. It is happening for all of us, including rabbits, birds and insects, and if you really stretched your understanding, for trees and flowers and migrating slime moulds.

Let's stay with humans, which is the domain we know most intimately. Myriad levels of responsive activity; atomic, molecular, cellular, organ and tissue system, and so forth together are generating our current experience, including the arising of generally unconscious assumptions about who we are, what we are and what we expect the world to be. These 'assumptions' rise and fall with our continuously shaping and reshaping memories of the past and expectations about the future. They tend to perpetuate the sense of a familiar world, one that is predictable, safe and reliable, an objectively real world shared by everyone. This is perfectly fine and workable unless one day we are plunged into disorientation by a terminal diagnosis, or a personal tragedy or, in a more benign way, developing an ear infection and finding ourselves spinning with vertigo. At these times we might directly realise how the solidity of our experience is really a delicate construction of myriad components, assumptions

and expectations which form the continuously arising creative enterprise of 'bringing forth a world'.



Smiling, breathing, and present; resting in the creative flow that is your present experience. Is this experience a static event? If it seems fixed, then can you locate where it is? If it seems dynamic, can you observe carefully the process of one moment becoming the next? Each moment of experience stimulates a response throughout your body. Each response in the body is a new stimulus that triggers cascades of thoughts, and feelings. It may seem that there is an endless proliferation of experiences; some we call inner and some outer, some subtle and some coarse, and yet throughout this ever shifting body~mind-scape you might notice a more ongoing mood or flavour of experience. This mood is accompanied by a particular quality of awakesness and the particular way you are using your senses. Look deeply into this dynamic weaving of ever present now; sitting here, reading, contemplating. Exploring your experience, begin to appreciate the immeasurable richness of every moment.

Even the idea of a 'moment' is worth questioning. Smiling, breathing, present, look into your current experience. Is it really a flow of moments? Is there a gap between the moments of experience? If there is, then what is in the gap?

Can you feel your way into the actual beginning of a moment? Can you discern how and where and when it actually ends?

These are subtle explorations. It is not a matter of finding answers to the questions raised here, rather, I'm trying to give examples of directions your investigations could take. Be courageous in your exploring. Whatever is arising, enquire into it. Feel the tactile kinaesthetic quality of your question – this deep questing – this sensitive probing. Let your entire body~mind become extraordinarily still and yet energised and focussed with interest, and then open further into an ever refining appreciation of what is happening right now.

As you continue with this flow of questioning, after careful investigation, it may be that you are unable to find any discrete moments of experience. If this seems to be the case, then explore how it is that anything changes. What determines the direction of the change? Is it 'you'? If it feels like 'you' then explore the various sensations and experiences that seem to make up 'you'. Or is 'you' just another thought or feeling called you? There are infinite numbers of questions that could shape and sharpen our investigations – all of them leading into a deepening appreciation of the richness of what we are calling 'now'.

Another major theme of investigation that can bring a wealth of fresh understanding is to meditatively explore the process of perception. Once again, I'll use sight as an example. Settle into an expanse of spacious ease using the

supports of smiling, breathing and presence and open your appreciation to the experience of seeing. Without departing from the easeful clarity of the moment, consider and acknowledge some of the factors that need to come together for you to experience seeing. Obviously, your eyes need to be open and functioning. In addition there needs to be an object within range of your eyes. Your optic nerves and visual cortex in the brain need to be functioning. Motor nerves feeding back to tiny muscles around your eyes need to be stimulating these muscles in order for the eyes to move in a co-ordinated fashion as they keep the object in focus. At the same time there is a fantastic amount of measuring and comparing taking place as the corporeal patterns associated with seeing this object are compared with prior experiences of objects and with names associated with objects so that after millions of moments of neural analysis and cross referencing all taking place in the blink of an eye, you know you are seeing your Aunt Jean.

Consider this looking. Without the light from the sun 150,000,000 kms away, there would be no seeing. Without the DNA from our parents that helps to structure a body with brain and eyes, there would be no seeing. Without prior similar experience, there would be no knowing that this particular apparition is 'Aunt Jean'. Without sub-atomic activity giving rise to what we call atoms, there would be no seeing. All of these factors, micro and macro, inner and outer, self and other, are collaboratively weaving together as this present moment of understanding. Each

factor is making a necessary contribution. Appreciated this way, the simplest experience reveals itself to be vast and expansive. There is far more going on than we usually acknowledge.

As you develop a sense of the immense richness of experience that is necessary for the simplest moment of visual perception, settle in this vast expanse of dynamic experience and gently refine the question even further. Appreciate what is happening. Where is the seeing taking place? Who is doing the seeing? Where is the object? How does the perception of one object give way to the perception of another object? Is the fabric of your life like the crystal beads on a rosary, one following the other? If this seems to be the case then what is the string that seems to hold the beads together, and why these particular beads and not some others?

After investigating seeing, then in a similar way, explore each of the other senses: hearing, smelling, tasting and touching. After working with them individually, try combinations; seeing and hearing, smelling and touching. Where does thinking and sensing begin and end off? Investigate a moment of sensing a thought, or an emotion. There are endless opportunities for exploration.



*I'm sitting on the red earth
gazing into mystery,
camp mat folded under me,
morning coffee steaming by my side.*

*In front is a young acacia bush.
Its roots are responding to moisture, sand chemistries,
and the lives of subterranean microorganisms.
Each of these particular biochemical respondings
are dancings of communion.
Plant collaborating with living earth.
Earth collaborating with plant.
We could call them forms or ways of knowing.*

*The sun appears over an immense flat desert plain.
Molecules of chill air,
are responding to increasing streams of photons.
Wind is beginning to stir.
Temperatures rise and photosynthesis in grey green leathery
leaves strengthens in rhythm and tempo,
these changing forms of knowing,
intelligent respondings,
patterns of orderly connection and inter-minglement.*

*The low light illumines tight-ropes of spider web,
tugging at leaves and shaping their movement,
flexing and shimmering in the sea of light and breeze.
A spider hunkers down under a leaf
preparing to wait out another period of heat.*

*All these movements,
all these respondings;
inter-flowings of living experience.*

*A Rainbow bee-eater flashes in from the left
and lands on the acacia branch,
feathers reflecting sunlight to my eyes;
cascades of neural conversations
inviting the vastness of my being
to see iridescent colour
and to think;
"Good morning, beauty!"*

*Me responding to bee-eater
and bee-eater responding to me,
and to acacia which is responding to sun and spider.*

*Each moment of responding
is a demonstration of knowing.
Knowings within knowings shaping knowing;
an ocean of wondrous collaboration.*

*Each being and becoming
is a dancing of knowing,
a unique expression,
an immeasurable weaving of unfolding life streams;*

*This total field of all events and meanings.
This eternal immediacy of local ordinariness;
collaboratively considering the great primordial question.
How should I live?
How do we live?*

But wait!

You too, dear reader, are also involved.

Widening the doors of empathy,

with exquisite sensitivity,

look around you and feel:

these writings,

the room,

the garden and sky,

the fly exploring the rim of your cup,

the sounds of people,

friends and family,

all around,

my words dancing patterns in your seeing embrace.

Open into this.

Breathing and appreciating.

A here-and-now translucent presence.

A seeing and being seen.

This interweaving is what and where you are.

It makes you.

It is you . . .

and me,

and the crickets,

and the sound of the traffic

and the whirr of bee-eater's wings.

We are in it together: molecules, cells, creatures and landscapes.

We need each other to function.

*These dancings of everyone and everything
bringing forth fields of knowing,
this mind and minding.
An ever changing world of everyday mystery;
this wonderment . . .
this blessing that we share.¹⁶*

Appreciating is an ongoing process that involves much more than simply trying to intellectually nail down the 'truth' of the universe. In practice you will probably oscillate back and forth between resting in an expanded calm, clear, easeful state, and then thinking a bit about your experience. The thinking helps to sharpen the question, the curiosity – the spirit of enquiry. It will help to brighten your sensitivity and engagement. Having sharpened the question then let go of the 'thinking' and return to the resting. Allow the implications of your investigation, to reverberate through your experience, simultaneously transforming your sense of who and what you are. We are growing into a richer universe.

As you explore you may come to a very challenging question. Who is having the experience? You might begin to feel that there is no self and that there is fundamentally nothing in particular to do. For some meditators, close on the heels of this can come the conclusion that everything is

¹⁶ This poem began to emerge as words on paper on Oct 5, 2011 in the Simpson Desert, Australia, at 5:30am.

meaningless. If this happens, see if you can recognise that these too are thoughts or feelings arising in your present knowing. This is the sixth sense door in action; the mind door – the expanse of that which knows. Take care that you don't unwittingly abandon the appreciative investigation by resting in either the quiescent satisfaction of nothing-in-particular to do, or the dull despair of meaninglessness.

Look deeply into this feeling of no-self. Appreciate how it too arises from myriad relational causes and conditions. Paraphrasing the Zen practitioner, Thich Nhat Hanh; 'no self' is composed of non 'no-self' elements. In other words the experience of the feeling or thought of no self has arisen through the present interacting of body, speech and mind, inner and outer, micro and macro, self and other, elements. It takes an entire functioning world to give rise to a sense of no-self!

Whilst continuing to investigate, do so in a loving way. Allow a little thinking to gently nudge the question and then, rest in the mystery pointed to by the three supports – smiling, breathing, present.

Smiling brings us to the pleasure, the vitality, the sparkle of being alive. Breathing, the ebb and flow of nature's energy, webs us into a larger world. Alive to the fullness of the present, the details of our life's mandala shines vividly in all its exquisite wonder. With appreciating, a spacious understanding opens up, embracing a vast dance of phenomena in myriad levels of being.

OFFERING

Standing in the midst of this miracle of being,

*I give all that I am
and all that I have.*

Abiding as a beginningless endless stream of offering;

*atom to atom, cell to cell,
organism to organism
parent to child, child to parent,
teacher to student, student to teacher,
friend to friend and friends to friends,
creature to creature, being to being,
this is a yoga of offerings;*

A celebration of life in process.

Smiling, breathing, present, appreciating; as these qualities mature and deepen we may begin to realise that all of nature, in fact the entire living world, is a continuous dance of offering; givings and receivings taking place through myriad domains and dimensions. Offering is not optional. It is inherently part of the inter-being nature of all existence. Rain moistens ground while ground water evaporates and births clouds. Sunlight energises plants while plants modify sunlight. Creatures become food for others who, in turn, become food for yet others. Parents care for children and children care for parents. Giving and receiving. Receiving and giving. These flows of transformative exchange comprise the ungraspable substance and beingness of everything and everyone. From a Buddhist perspective,

one could say that the entire path of awakening revolves around first of all recognising and then willingly releasing into this spontaneous dancing of mutual reciprocity.

Tragically, many people feel they have little of value to offer; no gifts to give or no opportunity to be of service. This is an all too common source of much depression and feelings of meaninglessness. Faced with the starkness of pain and suffering, marked by anguish and worry, consumed by plotting and planning, fearful of imminent chaos while desperately yearning for security; these tendencies help to craft a frozen world of neglect; a way of living that seems oblivious to the dynamic creative multi-weaving processes of generosity and generation that we are.

How can we thaw?

How can we soften?

*How can we make the brittle more malleable
and the stiff both warm and flexible,
full of give,
more giving?*

*This is a perennial question,
and a fundamental challenge of living.*

Christ urged his disciples to not hide their light under a bushel, and instead to share their life energies in uplifting all beings. This is a universal spiritual teaching of fundamental charity. Through the very process of existing we are already offering something uniquely invaluable to the world – the

ungraspable fullness of our living, with all its flavours and possibilities. If this was not being 'offered', the world would be a lesser place in the sense that it would lack the reverberating harmonics of the particular inter-beingness that our living brings forth. Offering is non-negotiable. The question is not whether to offer or not to offer, but what flavour of offering am I contributing? Everything we do and all the doings that comprise us affect the universe. We can offer this reluctantly, or willingly and open-heartedly. Which will it be?

Look into your smiling, breathing, sense of presence and appreciation when you open-heartedly give all your attentiveness to another. Explore this. How does the universe within you and around you dance so that this gift of attentiveness can take place? For contrast it may help to recall when you have been stingy, when you've been reluctant to offer your presence. How is this different? Explore the possibilities of offering kindness, interest, patience, wonderment and reverence. In the midst of whatever you are doing, gently hold the question I raised in the prologue; what would it imply for all of me to be present with and for all of you? Resting with this we may begin to touch the ineffable.



Offering could manifest in many different guises. Here are five possibilities. You could offer:

1. your attentiveness to another.
2. your personal, immediately arising experience.
3. your co-experience with others, as a communal offering.
4. yourself to the wholeness of what is happening.
5. by consciously surrendering into the flexing, bending and giving that is the consensual shaping and nurturing of wholeness unfolding.

Explore the potentialities and openings that occur when you are offering material support to another. How about offering emotional support, or your ongoing living as an example of awakening in action? Each of these will have subtly different qualities. How is the universe dancing when these acts of generosity take place? What can such action generate?

Explore the tactile kinaesthetic sense of being an immeasurable expanse of inter-becoming in which everything is giving to everything else. Now offering becomes more than just 'my' offering. This is 'our' offering, creature to creature, atom to atom, one to many and many to one. All of existence is offering to each and every other object. Every object is supported by everything else and so we dance in and through each other. Taste the possibilities of offering a living experience of reverence for life in all its vastness. Offer your love and freedom as a mirror for beings

to recognise their own love and freedom. What is actually going on here?

In the streaming of becoming

We bottle things.

*We dry them, salt them, pickle them,
fence them and contain them
with metal, glass, wood;
anything that comes to hand.*

We define them,

*fixing in categories,
opacifying surfaces,
trying to control a multi-realmed effusion.*

Let the river flow.

Let the living live.

Undo the locks.

*Soften the containers,
containers as embracers
volumes of loving*

Communities communing

Blessings abounding . . .

And we sing our praises of goodness

Spheres of sentience

Dancing with stars

In reverence.¹⁷

¹⁷ Written Oct. 12, 2019, at Refugio Paradisio, Brazil.

These five themes: smiling, breathing, present, appreciating, and offering are not difficult to understand. It is valuable, however to recognise that there is a world of difference between moments of transient inspiration and really taking these practices to heart. Although reading and thinking about them can be somewhat transformative, I think you will find that months or even years of living with these five supports; experimenting, adapting, learning, sampling and savouring them in innumerable situations and circumstances, will provide a foundation for understanding that can utterly revision everything. Through such deep involvement, the tone of your explorations will become increasingly subtle, integrative and profoundly immediate. As this happens, the ideas outlined in the next chapter will resonate helpfully, everywhere we look.

SEAMLESS ABIDING:

A Cycle of Samatha~Vipassana

Smilng – breathing – present – appreciating – offering; as we wake up in the morning and begin the day, as we meet with the pre-planned and with the unexpected, as we slip into the shadows of evening and merge with sleep – living this way continuously, we touch and are touched by a deepening sense of unity; an all inclusive immeasurable expanse of relational knowing, without beginning or end.

There is a wholeness about living.

It's not cracked, not glued together . . .

Feelings, values, perceptions and conceptions

co-emerging,

tumbling and flowing through each other

wherever we look . . .

if we look!

*Every experience is experienced by someone.
Every someone is an ungraspable matrix of knowing;
a unique contribution of looking,
a collaboration of domains and dimensions.*

*To thrive we must look,
and not only look
as if through looking
we might see what is;
To thrive we must look with passion and caring;
with discernment and playful zest.
Looking as an act of participation,
and so together, we bring forth worlds.*

*Experience is seamless;
we make wholes with whatever is at hand.
All of us do this;
protists, fungi, plants, animals,
able and disabled,
educated and unschooled,
privileged and exploited.*

*This dancing:
atoms, molecules, cells and communities of knowing
in every conceivable shape and form,
This beginningless endless collaborative intermingling
brings forth everything.¹⁸*

¹⁸ These lines are an adapted excerpt from a much longer poem called, *The Seamlessness of Experience* written August 10, 2017 at Iguazu Falls, Brazil. The full poem can be found in *A Sheaf of Poems 2010 - 2019*, Green Dharma Treasury

If you look into the detail of any presently occurring experience, whether harmonious or conflictive; whether physical, emotional or conceptual, you will inevitably find an immense collaboration involving a multitude of sensitive entities, from micro to macro. What we think of as present experience reveals itself to be a dynamic nesting of interweaving relationships involving innumerable domains and dimensions of activity. Everything is in movement. Smiling and breathing, feel your way into this. Taste it for yourself.

If now, you look into this process of looking, you will find yourself trying to make sense of the shifting play of situations and circumstances. If this, then that. If that, then this. What we conclude subsequently shapes how we look further. For humans, this sense-making activity inevitably involves contriving stories, hypotheses and explanations which then become foundations for future actions. Over time, these stories solidify into communal belief and tradition, and the dynamic play of relational creativity that underpins every perceived thing becomes obscured in mists of assumption, preference and generally muddled confusion. Of course, if we look with great calm and clarity we would find that even assumption, preference and confusion arises from a dancing of relational activity. The whole mystery is always with us!

A number of years ago I was exploring this theme and out of the fullness of experience, the following poem emerged.

Let me relate

the relating that we are.

Not me and you,

but me~you relating.

Not self and other,

but self~other relating.

Not foetus and womb,

but foetus~womb relating.

Not creature and world

but creature~world relating.

Our cells in their molecular dancing ongoingness

are inside~outside relating.

Our organs in their thriving

are singing cities; communities of flow

and pulse and temperature

and gradients of being.

And so, I~we;

dancing canvases of sky-like breath and tidal presence

and whispered touch

find ourselves;

with, in, and through each other,

beginningless and endless,

this relating,

inter-weaving universes of relating.

This relating that we are.

Relational living seems to arise hand in hand with dualistic distinction making. How can it not? After all, we relate with or to some kind of 'other' and, in the process, we comprise a pair. There are many examples of this. Some common ones are: subject and object, self and other, inner and outer, material and mental, consciously active effort and passive letting be. By designating one side of a dualism, the other side is automatically invoked. Each one defines or delimits the other: fast – slow, up – down, inside – outside, public – private. For many human beings, recognising and sensitively contemplating this yin-yang nature of things marks the beginning of a life of dharma. It's as if we were discovering the possibility of abiding in a middle ground, appreciating both while softening tendencies to identify with either. Our intuition blossoms with this glimpsing of wholeness and the myriad implications for action that flow out from it.

*Begin with this living,
this wholeness relating.
No, not a bunch of abstract concepts,
but these particular cicadas,
this aural tapestry of pulsing song,
of wind and trees
and fuzzy warmth in left ankle,
and this mysterious need to touch you
so deeply that the universe laughs
in cascading smiles of consummation and delight.*

Begin with this unity of natural creation.

There are no gaps, no holes.

*Sight and sound and smell and taste and touch
and remembering and feeling and empathising;
All are swimming through and with each other,
an alliance of experience happening now.*

Is this not how we live?

*Seamless, awesome gob-smacked presence,
living wholes telling stories of bits and fragments;
thrilling in the vibrancy of
hopes and fears
and worries and wonderings;
this passion in action,
this completeness containing all characters and places?¹⁹*

Filled with such questions and attitudes while patiently observing – not just in meditation but in the continuous flow of wherever we are and whatever we are doing – our contemplations will broaden, becoming more refined, more subtle and more discerning. Now begins a life-long apprenticeship, learning the arts of harmonising relaxation and effort, acceptance and attentiveness, serenity and clarity; in short, a robust balance of complete relaxation~acceptance ~surrender, interwoven with actively engaged participative curiosity.

¹⁹ Adapted from *How We Live*, Jan 17, 2018, *A Sheaf of Poems 2010 - 2019*, Green Dharma Treasury

Smiling and breathing with easeful presence and vibrant curiosity, we continue to study/investigate/explore the inter-dependent relating that is continuously happening through us and around us. Expanding one's appreciation of this will soften and 'translucentise' any rigid sense of separation between self and other, good and bad, right and wrong. Gradually, we will realise that our intellect, emotion, physicality and intuition, can work together in a harmonious flow. These seemingly separate ways of knowing, which are unendingly morphing in and through each other, reveal themselves as an ongoing living wholeness – the eternally fresh, cresting wave of our present experience.



It might help to pause for a moment to re-visit the question of mind and knowing. Consider the possibility that 'knowing', rather than being a detached cognitive reconstruction or representation of some otherness out there, could be more accurately described as a process of ongoing multi-levelled, multi-domained, relational attunement. Years ago, in Vancouver Canada, Kalu Rinpoche defined mind as "that which knows". Extending this pithy statement, we could say that mind, the immeasurable expanse of knowing, is a field of continuous multi-levelled, multi-domained, mutual-attunement. Mind

is what we are. Knowing is what we are. This dynamic field of relational attunement is what we are. It is where we dwell. It is what we have to work with. It is the ungraspable substance of all experience.²⁰

With the increasing confidence and competence that has arisen from skilfully applying the five basic supports of smiling, breathing, present, appreciating and offering, we now begin to subtly refine the art of resting in and as, this ever-present, continuously evolving yet utterly integrated, wholeness-in-action. Persistently and patiently cultivating our appreciation of inter-beingness, we gradually acclimatise to living this way in a widening range of situations and circumstances. In doing so, we are beginning to touch the domain of true meditation.

With deepening conviction we recognise that the activity of an entire universe of being~becoming – the on-going relational process which is birthing our conscious and non-conscious experiential functioning – is all that there is to work with. It is what we do; what we experience; what we are trying to understand; and what we are. Through cultivating a manner of living that is both radically inclusive and profoundly in tune, we find ourselves glimpsing something extraordinary.



²⁰ Chapter 4 will go more deeply into this process of attunement.

Buddhist yogi/practitioners from myriad schools and traditions, when pointing to the heart of true meditation, have consistently delineated two inter-dependent qualities. Reflecting the culture and historic background of the people being addressed, these two have been referred to in various ways, such as: 'stopping and seeing'; 'cessation and contemplation'; 'tranquil abiding and penetrative insight'; 'great tranquility and subtle observation'; 'samatha and vipassana'. From a first person perspective, this pair arises as 'stabilisation and insight'. From a third person perspective, it appears as 'skilful means and wisdom'.

Samatha, as we mentioned earlier, is often translated as tranquil abiding. However a profound experience of samatha is more than merely being relaxed or calm in the midst of what is arising. In a universal sense, it refers to the fullness of being and becoming, abiding in and as itself. Think of this as a primordial state of absorption. Samatha alludes to a quality of unshakable firmness, or sheer presence. We might describe it as the acceptance~surrender~beingness aspect of present experience.

Vipassana, commonly translated as insight, is pointing to the vivid detail and multidimensional appreciating ~discerning~investigating aspect of beingness. While samatha facilitates a sense of unity, vipassana facilitates a sense of diversity. One flows naturally into the other. Seamlessly intermingled, they support a deep experiential understanding of the infinite diversity and the profound unity of all that exists. Together they comprise the

beginningless/endless cycling of easeful clarity and discerning presence that is the foundation of Buddhist meditation practice.

Look in to your experience, right now as you read these lines, and see if you can recognise these two utterly inter-dependent qualities. This ever-fresh, ever-present now²¹ is inseparable from the process of clearly discerning it.

Refining our capacity for abiding as co-emerging samatha~vipassana, while at the same time compassionately engaging with a world of so-called 'others', is the heart core of dharma practice. In Tibetan traditions this naturally arising 'practice of no practice' is sometimes referred to as 'mahamudra'. The Third Karmapa²² described it with the phrase "learning the subtle teaching of mind practice" – entering the subtle praxis of the immeasurable expanse of inter-knowing. Zen master Yuanwu referred to it as "the vehicle of the source and the special practice outside doctrines".²³ Surrendering into this learning, this spontaneous creativity-in-action, we taste the fruition of buddhadharma – a natural way of abiding.

²¹ Instead of 'now', I'm tempted to write (k)now, in other words, 'now' with a silent 'k' preceding it.

²² For further writings of the Third Karmapa, see *Luminous Heart* translated by Karl Brunnholzl.

²³ For further writings of Yuanwu, see *Zen Letters* translated by Thomas Cleary, also found in his collection, *Classics of Buddhism and Zen*.

Ah . . . such balancing!

*One side, my physical experience,
rich, present, vibrant and
multi-dimensionally dynamic.*

*Another side, my thinking,
thinking about objects, or thinking about you,
rich, timeless, no-dimensionally dynamic,
where minding seems to be the only real thing.*

*Yet you – all you you-s – organic and inorganic alike,
are continually shaping my visceral life,
radiating implications,
ceaselessly adjusting my course;*

Chameleon dancer that I am.

Focussing on you, I risk losing me.

Focussing on me, I risk losing thee.

Needing each other, we learn our individual togetherness.

*And so we feel possibilities in translucency,
softly, gently, translucentising
everything and everyone,
in love.*

*And feeling this dancing matrix of I and you,
all of you;
I-s and you-s
eyes and 'u's
us~me~thee*

Knowings interfused,

Expanding into and through and by means of each other.

*Travelling with molecules, cells, organs, and process,
baggages of talent,
nothing left behind.*

*Reverberating in reverence,
wonderment,
and wide eyed awe.*

*A balancing going nowhere,
while being everywhere.*

*This ever refreshing poised-ness
delicate, detailed, exquisitely encompassing
yet strangely demanding,
Requiring all of our being and all of our beingness,
all our talents and intelligence,
the total cost of a life.*

The price of our total life.

*And so we find ourselves
giving everything.*

*Opening to include the stars,
and the unknown space between the stars,
and the unknown space between these thoughts.*

*Love, opening to embrace the universe,
this universe embracing itself*

*An unimaginable welcome-ship
in love,
so utterly simple,*

*Such balancing,
such lightness.*

*And blessings abound
in the singing of birds
and these three passion-hoppers on this curving leaf.
And the distant phones ringing
Announcing myriad yet to be's
With Thee.
This mystery . . .
This balancing . . .²⁴*

ESSENTIAL PRACTICE

In much of today's world, spiritual practice is frequently associated with artfully contrived exercises called meditation, contemplation or prayer, which we often individually appropriate and refer to as "my practice". Deepening maturity, however, will lead us to be less and less inclined to divide life up into rigid time slots and separated compartments. Instead, we will sense a heightening desire to grasp or perhaps even merge with this mystery of living, in its entirety. As the verse beginning this chapter says, "There is a wholeness about living. It's not cracked, not glued together . . ." It's not broken into sessions, retreats, spiritual practice and daily life obligations. Even though we may have begun with this fragmented attitude to meditation and practice, an intuition of all pervading wholeness can quietly creep up on us, as if by stealth, and suddenly it's simply obvious. At such times we

²⁴ *A Living Middle Way*, written Jan. 8, 2019, Orgyen Hermitage

might feel a growing determination to embrace our actual life and living as our Path of Awakening. When this happens, we are beginning to discern what I've come to think of as the 'essential practice'; a path of unfolding that can be fruitfully applied in any situation or circumstance.²⁵

The 'practice' part of 'essential practice' involves much more than rehearsing something over and over again until we become better at it. When I think about 'the practice of medicine', it brings to mind a vigorous discipline that continuously interweaves study, observation and sensitive experimentation. A doctor who doesn't work in this way is probably not a very good doctor. Essential practice is the same. It is inherently collaborative, experimental and always fresh. The phrase hints at a heart-felt approach to living; a dynamic matrix of engagement involving every aspect of our existence – a practice that will support a continual maturing of both wisdom and compassion.

Throughout this book we have used the five supports of smiling, breathing, present, appreciating and offering. Now we will add one short verse that although very simple can, when remembered at the right occasion, help us to remain grounded and present.

²⁵ I think this needs to be emphasised. Essential practice can take place in the midst of any activity: a particular form of meditation, participating in community, raising a family, going to work, involvement in social or political action, or pursuing academic enquiry, scientific research or artistic endeavours. It can be applied when we are healthy or ill, privileged or oppressed, inspired or just quietly trundling along.

*In the natural flowing of whatever is occurring,
cultivate a continuity of profoundly nourishing ease
suffused with serene alertness and vivid discernment.
Whether walking, sitting, reclining or standing,
allow everything to rest in its own place.*²⁶

Quietly reverberating with the five supports, sense the expanse of inter-being~inter-knowing that is both around you and within you, and in fact, *is* you. Now, whisper out-loud the words of this verse of essential practice. Imagine you were expressing something very intimate and precious to someone you love. Allow these sounds and ideas to resonate through your body; the words, like honey on your tongue, caressing your throat and chest, warming and softening. Don't fuss too much about the meaning. Just repeat the phrases; pausing to contemplate, pausing to receive these hints, to embrace them and take them deeply to heart. Over the course of days or weeks, do this a number of times until it seems that these words have become your own voiced intent.

Although each line could be read as an instruction, you will find it more empowering to regard them as invitations. "*In the natural flowing of whatever is occurring. . .*" Here, we are invited to investigate what is immediately taking place; to explore this here and now flowing of inter-being~inter-knowing, this continuous forming and emptying, birthing

²⁶ This pithy verse of "Essential Practice" can be found in *A Sadhana of Samantabhadra*, and various other postings on Green Dharma Treasury.

and dying. Invitations can open doors in many directions. I associate the word 'natural' with nativity and birth. This natural flowing of whatever is occurring is birthing one's experience of the world. It is the continual birthing of one's experience. In a sense, life is a never ending process of gestation; each moment giving birth to the next, which in turn is gestating another moment and so forth. This continuous interweaving through myriad domains and dimensions is surely a mystery worthy of respectful investigation and prolonged consideration.

"Cultivate a continuity of profoundly nourishing ease." To intentionally cultivate anything involves a rich and complex array of skills that have grown from the trial and error of earlier generations of cultivator/farmers. Cultivation involves preparing the earth, planting seeds, watering, feeding, weeding and harvesting. It involves careful observing, learning, remembering and continual composting. It involves patience, intuition, generosity, forbearance and a sense of sacredness appearing in the everyday and ordinary. To skilfully cultivate anything requires great attentiveness.

Please accept this invitation to explore the garden of your life. What does 'ease' actually mean for you, and more specifically, "profoundly nourishing ease"? Perhaps the 'profound' aspect of nourishing ease hints at relaxation in every domain of activity, whether subtle or grossly manifest: easeful physiology, easeful body, easeful emotions, easeful feelings, easeful speaking, easeful

listening, easeful thinking, easeful remembering, easeful planning, easeful fantasising, easeful analysing, easeful striving, easeful presence. Ask yourself; what does this mean to me; personally; intimately? We need to continuously hold this question until it blossoms in deepening understanding. How can we seed profoundly nourishing ease? Taking into account our present situations and circumstances, how do we water it, feed it, care for it and harvest it? A good farmer is continuously learning.

For some people ease might involve a tactile-kinaesthetic softening of physical tension. Perhaps it involves softening emotional compulsions or softening opinions, habitual preference and bias. For others it might involve cultivating forgiveness, or patience, or radiant love. Look into this again and again. How is my body, speech and mind functioning when it is ease-full and relaxed? Conversely, how is it functioning if I am feeling tense and anxious?

*Relaxation and ease,
smooth, fluid, continuous,
subtle, responsive,
malleable, workable,
effortlessly integrated,
ahhhhh!*

Exploring profoundly nourishing ease can be deeply engaging, but we need to extend it even further. Consider ease – “*suffused with serene alertness and vivid discernment*”. For some people, the idea of serene alertness is a bit puzzling. Alertness might be associated with feeling

slightly on edge, as if on the lookout for danger, while serenity might lean towards dullness and lethargy. In such situations you might find yourself alternating between hyper attentiveness and sleepy complacency; unable to make sense of a simultaneous serenity and alertness.

The next time you are feeling 'profoundly at ease', sensitively probe into the fullness of the experience. Moments like this are naturally reflective. In the quiet flow of contemplation you will probably find yourself appreciating a rich display of subtle detail. The more settled we are, the more alert and vividly discerning we are. Discernment sparks deepening interest which itself is nourishing and easeful. Of course, the reverse is equally true. When we are uptight, agitated and lacking in ease, we notice a lot less of what is happening.

Such blending;

relaxed presence,

a voluminous space of poised wakefulness,

a capacity for spontaneous effortless responsiveness;

a natural presence and presencing,

this ever-fresh nowness,

this unpretentious immanence.

Again and again, in different situations and circumstances, examine this dancing of "alertness and vivid discernment". While doing so, notice what is going on in your stomach and lower abdomen. How are these qualities of awakesness linked with digestion? How are your senses functioning? How is the entire universe of your experience, with all its

inner and outer relational complexities, functioning such that alertness and vivid discernment are present? These are just a few examples of explorations that can help to illumine these qualities. Exploring in this manner, we will begin to realise that ease~alertness~discernment is the energetic core of *samatha~vipassana*.

"Whether walking, sitting, reclining or standing, allow everything to rest in its own place." In Buddhism the phrase walking, sitting, reclining or standing is used to indicate all possible postures of activity.²⁷ In other words, in the midst of whatever it is you are doing, "allow everything", this includes yourself, and all the beings that comprise your environment, "to rest in its (or their) own place". The phrase "its own place" is not referring to an objective location that can be described with geographic coordinates. Each of us is a shifting web of dynamic relating. We are inter-being~inter-knowings, continuously enfolding in and through each other. Each one of us: whether bacterial, eukaryotic, plant, fungi or animal, is finding our way – 'wayfaring' – in and through this inter-folding of worlds. Being this process, is our 'own place'. Can we accept and allow each being that we meet to be the dynamic unfolding worlds that they are? Perhaps we should extend 'resting in its own place' to include allowing everything to 'function at its own pace'!

²⁷ In early Buddhism these postures were originally pointed out because they were common experiences for monks and nuns. In the modern 'lay' world they could be expanded to include bicycle riding, running, dancing, swimming and so forth.

Anthropologist Tim Ingold expressed this point this very well. "I mean letting things or persons be. I mean allowing them into our presence just as they are, so that we can attend to them, listen to what they are telling us, and learn from it. This is quite different from understanding them, explaining them, or embedding them in *a context of definitions*, which is what anthropology has traditionally set out to do. Everyone and everything must be taken seriously. This is another way of saying that they must be granted presence, and that we should attend to them."²⁸

How wonderful.

No need to embellish, to exaggerate or diminish;

all of me present with and for all of you.

A great surrendering,

a great allowing,

a great honouring and respecting;

Not you as I wish you to be

or even you as I perceive you to be,

But you as you are

in all your unknowable unfathomable fullness.

This essential practice invites continuity; not patchiness or on-off-ness. "In the natural flowing of whatever is occurring, *cultivate a continuity . . .*" Be attentive for any tendency to divide life into moments that are meaningful and moments that aren't. For example; "This is real dharma

²⁸ Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*, Routledge, 2000

practice!" or "This is mundane and unspiritual and not worth exploring!" In a cosmos in which each thing – each evolving process – is itself an expression of the entire universe-in-process, we begin to sense an equality to everything and everyone. Each moment is a display of wisdom ripening. Even challenging events such as cancer or Covid-19 or climate change can afford possibilities of fruitful deepening. This is a wonderful discovery; a *continuity* of profoundly nourishing ease, suffused with serene alertness and vivid discernment. Gradually, through practice and increasing familiarity, what likely began as occasional glimpses of relational wholeness will be seen as a continuum.

SUGATA AND A SMILE

It seems that for human beings all over the world, smiling is a fundamental expression of welcome. It is an organism's response to a fresh moment of pleasurable meeting. Encountering someone or something in pleasure, we spontaneously smile. Think of all the meetings, all the coming together, that take place in any hour of the waking day. Meeting is not an optional activity. It is the bread and butter of being alive. Every day we meet with the unexpected and the expected. We meet feelings and sensations, emotional qualities, perceptions, thoughts, interior events and exterior ones. We meet moments of joining, and moments of separating, and moments that feel they might last forever. Some days we meet life reluctantly, but we could at least

encourage the possibility of meeting the world in openness – with a willingness to engage with whatever is arising. Revealed in a movement of lips, or a twinkle in the eye, or a warm delight throughout the body, or very subtly as a quiet deepening of readiness to continue, this whole-organism-smiling is a stance of welcoming whatever and whoever we encounter.

Life is a boundless matrix of dynamic relationships.

Ultimately, every action

reverberates throughout the universe.

I responding to you.

You responding to me.

This responding to that.

That responding to this.

Responsiveness is the living heart of being and becoming;

atoms, molecules, organs and organisms,

families and societies;

entire ecosystems, biospheres, planets and galaxies;

All shifting, responding;

constantly changing.

Each birthing of this

is a dying of that.

Each dying of that

is a birthing of this.

Responsive change is the very nature and fabric of what is.²⁹

²⁹ These verses can be found in *Reflections and Prayers*, Green Dharma Treasury

A deep intent of Buddhist practice is to bring about a cessation of suffering for all beings. Since meeting is non-negotiable and since we often can't choose what and whom we will meet, it is vital to cultivate a capacity to spontaneously and effortlessly meet all the comings and goings of life with welcoming acceptance. This attitude is reflected in the word *sugata*, a term used interchangeably with Buddha. *Su* on its own means 'auspicious', 'good' and 'goodness'. It can also mean 'well' or 'wellness' in the sense of health and healthiness. According to Namgyal Rinpoche, the verb *gata* can mean 'to come', 'to go', or 'to be'. In a general sense it refers to any coming, going and being. *Sugata* is one who, through the ongoing process of their living – a process that involves coming, going and being, or arriving, departing and abiding – consistently does so in a way that expresses 'well-come' or 'go-well' or 'be-well'.

Can we meet each new situation with a stance that expresses openness and welcome? – 'Well-come!' Can we meet with departure, and loss in a similar way? – 'Go-well!' Can we meet with seemingly solid durability in a way that says – 'Be-well!' This is an attitude for fully engaging the world of experience, whether it is arising or passing or simply being. This smiling, welcoming response to all forms of experience is portrayed in many images and statues as a serene Buddha smile.

We smile, accepting fresh arrivals, accepting departures, accepting beingness. This part is easy to understand. But buddha-nature however involves more than just humans.

In ways appropriate to each creature, all beings are smiling; meeting, parting, abiding, being. The roots of plants are meeting micro-organisms. Insects meet flowers. Cells are meeting cells. From the perspective of buddha-nature, the whole world is smiling. Entering this breadth of understanding, we might glimpse a universality of serene detachment and unrestricted creative engagement.

*Ah, this loving,
welcoming
flowing
immediacy
attunement
blessing.*

In the natural flowing of whatever is occurring, we enter an ocean of smiling. In Zen this is called taking the position of the host. When we sit down into the fullness of living that we are, we realise that we are no longer going anywhere. We never leave home. Fully at ease in this living, I welcome all the guests that drop by: friends, strangers, thoughts, feelings and intuitions. As the host, it feels only natural to welcome the newly arrived and look after their needs, making sure they are well fed and comfortable, inviting them to feel at home, and when the time is right, seeing them to the door and wishing them well on their journey wherever it may lead. This is the story of sugata and a smile.

Knock, knock!

I open the door,

breathing welcome.

How lovely to see you!

Please come in and make yourself at home,

and ultimately . . .

find yourself to be always at home.

Sitting side by side,

in and through each other,

I am part of your furniture

and you, part of mine;

like Greycoat our cat, coming to live with us.

These days, she is family.

My home is your home.

This is not generosity.

It is insight.

What more can be said.

SEAMLESS ABIDING

As host, we have a deep conviction – intellectually, emotionally, and intuitively with all our corporeal wisdom – that this present unity of experience is all that there is to work with. Home is here. Realising this, ancient Zen masters might have said: "the bottom has dropped out of the bucket". Today perhaps we'd say our bucket-list is emptied. There is no other place we yearn to visit and so we might find ourselves letting go of everything; all

contrived effort, all structures and forms of practice. Surrendering into this fluid relational nowness, we become apprentices to the profound art of resting in and as the flow of what is happening.

When this occurs, allow your attention to function in a spontaneous and natural way. Perhaps you notice your breathing – feeling its rhythm in your bones, in your flesh – an inexplicable sense of everything breathing, exchanging; mouth to mouth, breath to breath, heart to heart, enfolding in and through each other. You find yourself smiling; spontaneous flickerings of welcome – molecules, cells, tissues, organs, creatures, biomes, planets everything at every level of being smiling – dancing with the tides of breathing, continuously presenting. And through it all, ethereal edges, volumes, pressures; knowing flowing through knowing, sentient worlds enfolding and unfolding this current experience of smiling and breathing and knowing and you releasing in wonderment, offering all the mystery, apprenticing to the teacher of 'knowness' revealing worlds in reverence and awe.

*Living this way,
seamlessly,
abiding where there is no abiding;
this dancing of everyone;
this ungraspable wholeness in action;
This in all its fullness . . .
This is the real 'nectar of naturalness'.*

Now might be a good time for another pause in your reading. Let's go outside under the wide open sky and sit together upon the earth.



Opening in sensitivity; every cell responding, feeling the breeze, smelling the world, listening to the multilayered conversations of beings all around.

Sometimes there is just smiling and we melt into mystery . . . Sometimes there is just breathing, heart to heart with everyone and everything; rhythmic attunement, a music of satisfaction . . . Sometimes all that's needed, is to remember 'presence', and we are blessed . . . Sometimes appreciating parses the universe and marvels at the self-organising miracle . . . Sometimes everything surrenders and we sink into the matrix of earth, returning to the ground of becoming.

What further offering is there to give? Again and again, deepening into mystery, utterly beyond words and understanding. And we begin to find our way home, abiding seamlessly and wondrously, this nectar of naturalness suffusing all in love.

ACTION:

Continuous Attunement

*He once said to me,
"Study the Eastern teachings . . . then walk on.
Study the Western teachings . . . then walk on."³⁰*

*Not side tracked in the sanctuary
of calm abiding and profound understanding,
life continues – universes blossoming
and so we engage.*

*Increasingly attuned;
abiding nowhere,
yet active everywhere,
helping everyone and anyone we meet on the way;
We walk on.*

³⁰ Pith instruction from Namgyal Rinpoche.

There are many ways of envisioning a 'spiritual life'. Some see it as an orderly progression of study and practice, starting as a novice or beginner and culminating with levels of ultimate expertise and realisation. Some see a path of freeing themselves from ever more subtle physical, behavioural, emotional and conceptual defilements, thus becoming ever increasingly pure. In this book we have encouraged the possibility of regarding the entire universe as an utterly interdependent process of inter-being~inter-knowing; a continuously creative mutual musing of everything and everyone. With this perspective, rather than being a journey of development from one place or level to another, a spiritual life involves embracing the whole of nature in all its fullness. This is our life-long work.

Do we act on the world?

in the world?

with the world?

as the world?

Ah, this union of passion, skill and non-doing!

As we have seen again and again, no phenomena exists independently. Everything arises with and from the interactive dancing of countless other things.³¹ Individuals depend on communal action while simultaneously, communal action is

³¹ I've used the word 'thing', implying any phenomena, whether physical or mental, real or imagined, micro or macro. The Buddhist term *dharma* conveys the same meaning.

affected by the action of each individual. The forming of one thing is continuous with the emptying of other things. All of us are unending inter-flowings; integrating and disintegrating, forming and emptying, being and process. This is our original nature and all of nature originates from this. With this understanding, we don't move through an already pre-existing world, rather we are continuously unfolding patterns of dynamic relational engagement. Our lives blend in and through each other with no absolute beginning or end. Appreciating this reveals the profound yet ordinary wisdom of living with humbleness; with cultivated sensitivity; and with joyful enthusiasm in experimenting and trying things out as we refine this art of dancing with others into the unknown of the next arising moment. How can we share and care and act in ways that minimise suffering and maximise possibilities of thriving? The heart of the matter and the task at hand is this: given the universality of this inter-being~inter-knowing world, how can we most effectively help each other to live well and fully?

*I lay down the path of my living
through living,
footsteps continuous
patterning without break.*

*Ground meeting soul
I and thee,
laying down paths of living,
living worlds templating this pathway of me.*

I grew up in Canada with long snowy winters. We lived in a suburb of Toronto with curvy streets and sidewalks and large Elm trees and grassy lawns. During the summer, most people would stick to the established paths but in winter, after a heavy snow, a new matrix of possibilities would appear. If you were the first person out after a snow storm, all the pathways that shaped our community vanished: sidewalks, roads, drainage ditches and so forth, and new possibilities opened up. Behind, your footprints revealed where you had been, but ahead there was a pristine expanse of undifferentiated whiteness and where you would next step depended on the myriad dancings of situation and circumstance and preference.

While it is clear that our life journey up to this present moment is somewhat describable – we can always make a story of where we have been – the path ahead is an open unknown. I don't imagine that algae in the Proterozoic Era had a clue that their living would lead to dinosaurs, or similarly that dinosaurs could imagine their living leading to the human dominated world of today. Where are we going? What are we aiming for today; happiness, power, control, omniscience, immortality, conformity, safety? In a deeply contemplative moment we might be able to admit that beyond perhaps inhaling just after we have exhaled, or exhaling after a preceding inhalation, we really don't have a precise idea as to what is going to emerge. While we quite likely have expectations or assumptions about what will happen, we can never have certain knowledge. This 'not-

knowing' isn't a flaw or a short coming. It is simply the reality of inter-dependent living where any specified action is birthed from a multitude of causes arising in various domains and dimensions. As Jiddu Krishnamurti observed, in this now famous phrase, "truth is a pathless land".

Accepting this as the situation, we might find a huge question arising. How can we, as seemingly unique individuals, best prepare ourselves to thrive on this ever-present threshold of the unknown? In particular, how can we skilfully navigate the myriad challenges of today? It seems undeniable that we are living in contentious times. There are so many life threatening issues facing us: climate collapse, disintegrating public trust, and the destructiveness of economies based on extraction, coercion and war. How can we skilfully respond to the complexities of famine and pandemic and the continuing social inequalities brought about by colonisation? How can we live well as families and extended communities so that our great-great-grandchildren can thrive? We might have a general idea of where we would like to be, where we would like to go, but our actual living takes place breath by breath, step by step, linked with a larger community that is beyond our ability to control. There are no detailed maps for doing this. The shape of the final destination is unknown and the specifics for getting there are equally unknown. Even so, dynamic relationship with companions on the path of living is our constant and continuing experience. This is what we have to work with. In truth, we have been walking into the

unknown for millions of years – collaborative life finding its way through the activity of the living that it is. This is our teacher, guru and guide. Can we become calm enough and clear enough and wise enough to move in tune with this?



Wisdom and compassion are the two legs we use to walk this pathless path of manifesting life. In human beings, wisdom is the realising of the ungraspable inter-being~inter-knowing nature of life.³² Compassion is the natural engagement – the caring, mutual nurturing and cooperative behaviour – that goes along with such knowing. Wisdom suggests there is nothing to do beyond the doing that we are. Compassion demands that we help each other, while together we step into the unknown of this instantiating present. In Buddhism, the two together comprise the heart of bodhisattva.³³

Grounded in wisdom and compassion and considering the tangle of challenges and problems we are facing, how then

³² Such realisation, in all its fullness, is referred to as *sunyata*, or as I have often written, "the spacious openness of inter-being".

³³ Bodhisattva; *bodhi* means 'awakening' (to the true inter-being nature of things), *sattva* means 'being'. A bodhisattva is an awakening being or being in the process of awakening. Since all living beings are manifestations of evolving collaborative relating, all living beings are bodhisattva.

are we going to comport ourselves? How are we going to live? This has been the central question of all bodhisattvas throughout human history. The answer lies, not in philosophical prescriptions (one should do this or one should do that) or contrived explanations, but in rolling up our proverbial sleeves and engaging in a fully integrated life of dharma. That is to say, engaging fully in resilient community action at many levels and dimensions.

*Not democracy
but biocracy.*

*Where everyone and everything
is respected.*

*The humblest creature
a valued contributor.*



In the past a young seeker might have gone to an enlightened sage and asked what they should do to deepen their confidence and competency in 'bodhisattvaship'. By way of an answer, they may have been given a sequence of meditations and texts to study and explore through the modalities of their body, speech and mind. I sometimes find myself imagining a similar situation; with a young person asking me how to approach and navigate the great challenges we are facing today. Without necessarily using

the term bodhisattva, I would suggest the cultivation of a broad palette of skills for sustainable living: practical, social, conceptual and contemplative skills.

The following list is quite tentative and general in nature but it will give you a sense of the universal down to earthness of what is required. These are not rarified or transcendent skills. They are not particularly religious. They are skills, often undervalued in today's world, that emerge from our creaturely co-evolution with the rest of the living world.

Practical skills: gardening and farming, food preservation and preparation, seed banking; general repairing (we can't keep throwing things away and replacing them with new ones), basic plumbing, electrical, wood-working and fabric skills; basic first-aid, healthcare and midwifery skills. These all involve working with our bodies.

Social skills: deep listening and measured speaking, child raising and experiential education in cultivating wisdom, knowledge and compassion, skills in conflict resolution and communal methods of maintaining and restoring balance and harmony within the community, processes for restorative justice, and skills in handling grief and loss. These are all skills in communication and empathy.

Conceptual skills: knowledge of natural history, social and ancestral history and intellectual history; ecology, biology and earth sciences all woven together in a deep

appreciation of universal *whakapapa*.³⁴ These are skills in analysis and broad thinking.

Contemplative skills: in relaxing through body, speech and mind; in cultivating personal and communal environments that encourage curiosity and enquiry, skills in smiling, breathing, present, appreciating, offering; in forgiveness, in unfolding more and more meaningful experiences of refuge. These competencies will together support bodies and minds in being more malleable, adaptable, workable, flexible, curious, compassionate, caring, confident and loving.

*Moving as this flow of compassion and deepening enquiry,
We engage with all beings, in ways
That support the integrity, stability and the beauty
Of the the entire field of life and living.*³⁵

³⁴ Whakapapa (pronounced *fau-ka-pa-pa*) — a Maori word meaning genealogy, family tree or cultural identity. One might trace one's whakapapa back through one's ancestors, all the way back to the land and its biota, its drainage systems and catchments and even back to a mythological time. I sometimes use the term in perhaps a wider sense than the traditional Maori usage. We are composed of many evolving stories: molecular, cellular, ontological, sociological and ecological; many distinct yet interweaving lineages, each of which is itself a weaving of myriad other life-lines of histories.

³⁵ This is extracted and adapted from a longer poem, *Contemplating Refuge on Southshore Beach*, in *A Sheaf of Poems 2001 – 2010*, Green Dharma Treasury

A MUSICAL METAPHOR

In general, all of these skills; practical, social, conceptual and contemplative, involve attunement and empathy. A bodhisattva musician would appreciate this.³⁶ Music arises from myriad domains and dimensions of inter-active attunement. So too, does the dance of living. On the music side, instruments must be crafted by a skilled artisan. All the component materials, wood, metal, strings, and skins, each with their innate capacities to vibrate with particular frequencies, are joined together so that their combined harmonics and resonances support a beautifully sounding and readily playable instrument. Musicians then need to attune themselves to the unique idiosyncrasies of their particular instrument, while at the same time learning to tune that instrument. This is not a one-off event. The very act of playing a violin, cello or guitar gradually stretches the strings out of tune. Beating a drum loosens the head thus shifting the pitch. Changing temperature and interior moisture content alters the tone of a flute. The musician needs to be exquisitely responsive to this so that they can sense when their instrument is in tune and when it is not, and then they need to know how to adjust things, either in

³⁶ In the book, *Something Beautiful for the World*, I draw a parallel between crafting and learning to play a musical instrument, and crafting and learning to be a well integrated and thoroughly attuned human being.

In, *Natural Awakening*, chapter eight – "Tuning the Instrument" – I give further practical suggestions for meditative attunement working with breath and body.

themselves or in the instrument, in order to bring it back into tune.

We can see from this that the need for attunement is continuous and ongoing but the full story is larger still. Musicians also play together in groups; from duos and trios all the way up to full symphonies with accompanying choir. This requires that they not only tune their instrument and remain tuned to it, but that they listen discerningly to the other musicians and adjust their instrument and playing to the rhythm and timbre and tone of everyone else. A non-musician might assume that a conductor is in control, or a composer, or an individual musician, but this is a short-sighted view that renders all the other participants as mechanical components necessary for the resulting music. This is not how music works and it's not how life works. At its innermost core, all music is improvisational jazz with no pre-written score, and no single conductor holding it all together. In truth, music is suchness in action.³⁷

Musical instruments embody the stories of their shaping; relational ancestries of cedar forest, or bamboo grove or coalesced star dust cycling as minerals through the geosphere. Musicians and audiences and concert venues, are themselves attunements of atoms, molecules, cells, organ systems, families and societies, traditions of

³⁷ "Suchness, *tathagata* in both Sanskrit and Bengali, means 'actuality as directly witnessed without conceptualisation'. Because it is not limited by the filtration of conceptual processing, the experience called "suchness" gives the impression of extraordinary richness and abundance." – Thomas Cleary, *Classics of Buddhism and Zen*, Vol 2, p412.

craftsmanship, along with a host of hopes, fears and aspirations. A shift or change in any one of these domains invites ripples of adjustment through the whole. Musicians respond to their instruments, to each other, to the audience and to the ambience of the surround. Instruments respond to musicians, humidity, temperature and atmospheric pressure and so forth. Audiences respond to instruments, musicians, fellow listeners and the surrounding ambience of people and place. Is this meditation or attunement or the dance of life in action? Perhaps all music, and for that matter all of life, could be seen as a never ending symphony of attunement.

Music is what we are.

*a weaving of notes and rhythms
and musicians and instruments
and hearts and ears,*

Music is the art-graced living fabric of existence.

Gardening is the compassion,

*a musician's work of growing the music;
food for everyone.
nourishing abundance.*

Music and gardening

This dharma of living.

*May it continue in joy!*³⁸

³⁸ This poem called *Music and Gardening* was written in response to an emailed question about integrating music, gardening and dharma. It can be found in *A Sheaf of Poems 2010 - 2019*

Smiling, breathing, present, appreciating and offering; these are always available tools for supporting a life of attunement. All the musicians – cells, organs, organisms and communities – coming into tune, and staying in tune with each other. Essential practice is another core tool. Each one of us is a dancing of attunement, learning the arts of being in tune, and so the world unfolds.

DEEPENING ATTUNEMENT AND EMPATHY

When I was young, my father would often debate contentious topics with me. In the 1950s he was deeply involved in a campaign to abolish capital punishment in Canada. On one occasion he insisted that we debate this issue and that I should argue in favour of capital punishment. I remember feeling very shocked and upset by this. "I can't!". "Why not?", he said. I can remember replying with quavering voice and tear-filled eyes, "because it's wrong!". Then he said something that has stayed with me all my life. He said, "I don't care if you think it is wrong. Put yourself into the shoes of someone who thinks that it is right and argue that side!" Little did I realise at the time that he was opening a precious doorway for me – a door of profound dharma exploration.

Deepening experience with the five supports and the essential practice will bring an increasing sense that the world we perceive around us is seamlessly co-arising with the functioning of our body~minds. In moments of

glimpsed unity, the world is me and I am the world. An awesome implication of this is that it equally holds true for every other sentient creature. Surely we have all had moments of 'putting oneself into another person's shoes', of trying to understand the way they might be thinking and feeling, and hence why they might be acting the way they are. Of course our ability to do this will reflect the degree of understanding we have for our own living. My father started me on this journey but years later Namgyal Rinpoche expanded it into a life-long practice.

In 1975, we (Rinpoche and a small group of students) were on an ocean-going freighter off the coast of Africa. It was a four month voyage and we were studying *abhidhamma*, the Buddhist analysis of mind, matter, consciousness and the process of awakening. At sea, we were mostly in retreat, attending classes, studying and meditating, but when in port we would go exploring ashore. On that voyage, Rinpoche had a small library of reference books. One of them was the *Larousse Encyclopaedia of Animal Life*. A heavy coffee table size book filled with photographs and illustrations and extensive text, it surveyed all the major groups of animals along with a section on protozoans, describing how they reproduce and grow, what and how they eat, the environment they live in, and so forth. Rinpoche suggested that since humans are inseparable from the entire evolving biosphere, to cultivate wisdom it was not enough to 'put ourselves into the shoes' of other humans. We also need to put ourselves into the shoes of all

the other creatures that together comprise this living world.³⁹

We were instructed to read one section of the book and then to contemplatively imagine being that creature, growing from a single cell, coming to maturity, reproducing, caring for their young, sensing their inner drives for food, shelter, sex, community, and so forth. It helped that we were occasionally going ashore and seeing a vast range of African wild-life in their native habitat – so different from urban North America! This practice touched me deeply, but animals are only part of the exploration. In the following years, I found myself studying plants and fungi and the worlds of micro-organisms and how they interact with geosphere and atmosphere and our local community of sun, moon, planets and stars. Gradually, my capacity to integrate contemplation and study became more subtle and refined and the web of evolving life became dense and evermore apparent.

Look around you. Who do you share the world with? Who is sharing their world with you? Put yourself into their shoes and look at their world as imagined by you. Put yourself into their shoes and then look back at yourself as perceived and appreciated by them. What are you to them? Where do you begin and where do they end off? How is it that we are individuals and at the same time interpenetrating

³⁹ Other books I have found useful in supporting these contemplations are: *Kingdoms and Domains*, Margulis and Chapman; *The Variety of Life*, Colin Tudge; and *What is Life?*, Margulis and Sagan

communities? What might this imply in terms of how we structure our lives?



This journey has no beginning or end. Each step is open to everything. At times the task of living looks complex and impossibly immense. Sometimes it appears with breathtaking simplicity as we find ourselves; smiling, breathing, present, appreciating, offering; rooted in essential practice; exploring this world as an enfolding and unfolding of worlds.

Our view of things has become all-embracing. Everything and everyone is included. Everything and everyone brings a necessary contribution. Our thoughts, feelings and understandings are increasingly in tune with every situation. All our actions spring forth from these realisations. Now, we might feel ripe and ready to fully embrace what Buddhists call the 'Bodhisattva Vow', an unshakable aspiration to a life of continuous attunement.

*However innumerable beings are,
I vow to meet them with kindness and interest.*

*However inexhaustible the states of suffering are,
I vow to touch them with patience and love.*

*However immeasurable the dharmas are
I vow to explore them deeply and thoroughly.*

*However inconceivable the mystery of inter-being,
I vow to surrender to it fully.*

*From this day forth,
with wisdom and compassion as my lamp and staff,
I dedicate all my life energies to the welfare of all beings.*

Each morning, before you head out into the unknown of the coming day, allow yourself a moment to sit quietly and remember the five supports. Feel them reverberating through your body and mind. Then, in this quietly expanded space, recite the Bodhisattva Vow. Some days, doing this will feel profoundly inspiring. Other days it may feel less so. Try doing this every morning for at least a year. You could think of it as a 'One Year Yoga' discipline. Gradually this aspiration will percolate everything.



Smiling; I welcome everyone and everything. This is the activity of an utterly-in-tune-self.

Breathing; Experience comes in and my being responds. Experience flows out and the world responds. Enfolding in and through each other, we breathe.

Present; A continual gifting (k)nowfulness of ever fresh immediacy. I see, and am seen. I hear, and am heard. I smell, and am smelled. I taste, and am tasted. I touch, and am touched. I know, and am known. Such co-mingling – wondrous! The world is arising for me while I arise for the world.

Appreciating; I glimpse sunyata, inter-being ~ inter-knowing; a mystery of 'no-self'; no-thing-in-particular manifesting the continuously rich matrix of everything.

Offering; Surrendering into this paradoxical, all inclusive totality of self ~ no-self ~ inter-being ~ inter-knowing ~ ungraspable sunyata. Drunk on this nectar of naturalness. En-blissed in this potion of caring.

When I think of nectar, I think of bees and honey and fields of flowers in the spring. I think of something moist and flowing and essentially nurturing. Look around you. Day and night we feed each other. Everything is flowing. Everything is nurturing. Everything is a nexus of relatings, a play of continuously instantiating viewing. All understandings are birthing~dying; they never remain still. Everything is nature-in-process.

Smiling, breathing, present, appreciating offering; this radiant lightness of understanding continuously broadens in scope and refinement, until all manifestations: physical and mental, collective and individual, self and other, inner

and outer, appear as a presentation of seamlessly integrated wholeness – utterly effortless and natural. Thus one abides: vast, profound, spacious, ineffable; this nectar of naturalness nourishes the world.⁴⁰

*Smiling,
a suffusion of welcoming serenity
midst coming, or going, or simply existing;
this inhaling,
this exhaling,
this effortless resting in pristine readiness;
this presence continuously presenting
myriad dimensions of form and forming,
compassion's play unceasing
appreciating
flowerings of universe,
offerings for all.*

⁴⁰ For readers who are finding these writings to be inspiring and useful, my 'song' / poem, *The Heart Breath of Timeless Living*, downloadable from Green Dharma Treasury, will be an additional support for your explorations.

ENDNOTES

In the early 1990s I was invited to give a weekend retreat for a group of mature adults who were unfamiliar with Buddhist concepts but keen to cultivate a meditation practice that would touch their lives in a deeply meaningful way. It was there that I introduced the five supports for their practice which I later referred to as a 'cycle of samatha'. Although these supports are quite simple – not difficult to understand – collectively they suggested an approach to richly engaged living that could inspire a range of people, from beginner all the way through to mature practitioners. Buddhists have characterised such broad teachings as being "good in the beginning, good in the middle, and good at the end".

In 1995, we produced a small booklet called, *The Cycle of Samatha*. It enjoyed a period of rich readership, and was translated into German and Portuguese, but for a number of reasons I was never entirely satisfied with the title. The word, samatha, though widely used by Buddhists, doesn't

mean a lot to people today and by using it in the title, I inadvertently made something that is readily available and universal in nature, sound like a foreign exoticism. Even more problematic, by drawing attention to samatha, calm abiding as it is often translated, something else that is an integral part of the cycling of being, namely clear seeing discernment vipassana, was not being explicitly acknowledged. In 2001, while teaching in Burma/Myanmar, the phrase, "*Nectar of Naturalness*", popped into mind. Ah! That's what we'll call it.

More than thirty years have passed since that sunny day at Wangapeka when I walked to the teaching hall wondering how to present meditation to a diverse group of beginners in a way that was simple yet profound, and at the same time non-sectarian in nature. At that time, I didn't imagine that five simple words would reverberate so strongly into my teaching and writings and into the very fabric of my life.

Over the years I have had the opportunity to refine these ideas with people around the world and the feedback, questions and sharings they have given have led to refining and extending this work and to the finishing of this book. My deep appreciation to you all is beyond expression. In addition I want to thank the people who have given their time and skills to reading, proofing and offering suggestions. Dan Burgess-Milne, Elizabeth Gutteridge, Stephen Martin-Rolsky, Andy McIntosh, Jacinta Nowland, Graham Price, and Anne Sharplin, you have helped make this a better text.

Finally, a heartfelt thanks to Mary Jenkins, my companion, partner, collaborator and teacher of so many years and so many explorations – we have done this together.

If these contemplations have touched you deeply, please share them with others. Share the book. Share your practice. Share your understandings. "Don't hide your light under a bushel." Let it shine!

*In the natural flowing of whatever is occurring
we find ourselves cultivating profoundly nourishing ease,
utter acceptance,
non-negotiable presence,
All suffused with serene alertness and vivid discernment.*

*Looking deeply,
we find nothing to grasp.*

*Resting graciously,
blissfully,
non-graspingly,
all forms are free to function.*

*And so, we abide where there is no abiding,
spacious and loving,
rooted in this immeasurable mystery
compassion flowering for all.*



I come from my mother, and mother I be, forest and sky and thee.