SATIPANYA BUDDHIST RETREAT

Noirin's Essays

Written essays and reflections on practice and ethics

Noirin Sheahan

SHROPSHIRE, WALES · UNITED KINGDOM

Contents

SHORT ESSAYS

POST-SURGERY ESSAYS

CLIMATE CHANGE ESSAYS

CHAPTER 1

Three Score Years and Ten!

Noirin Sheahan · 17 min read

In this deeply moving autobiographical essay, Noirin Sheahan traces her remarkable spiritual journey from childhood in 1950s Catholic Ireland to her 70th birthday spent in silent retreat in Portugal. Beginning with the family rosary practice at her grandmother's house in Cork, she describes how this early form of meditation planted seeds that would eventually flower into Buddhist practice decades later. The essay chronicles pivotal moments including a profound childhood spiritual insight at age eight, family tragedies including her brother's death and mother's mental illness, her career in medical physics, and a transformative mid-life crisis that led her to prioritize spiritual development above all else.

Noirin candidly shares her struggles between Christianity and Buddhism before committing fully to the Buddha's path under Bhante Bodhidhamma's guidance. She describes profound meditation experiences including insights into anattā (not-self) that brought both terror and liberation, her journey through cancer and major surgery, and her eventual move to Satipanya Buddhist Retreat where she now teaches. The essay beautifully illustrates how dukkha (unsatisfactoriness) can become a teacher, how mindfulness transforms relationships, and how the Three Jewels provide refuge through life's inevitable challenges. Written with remarkable honesty and wisdom, this memoir offers inspiration for practitioners at any stage of their spiritual journey.

Three score years and ten!

How did it come about that I should spend 12 hours of my 70th birthday sitting in silence or taking baby footsteps around a house in Portugal? And then come back here to Satipanya to celebrate my ‘official’ birthday with all of you?

I think it traces back to summer holidays in my granny’s house in Cork and the habit of the family rosary – everyone gathered in the evening, knelt down and said the prayer together. Ireland in the 1950s was very much a catholic country and Sunday mass and confession and so on were a big part of life. I don’t think many families still kept up the practice of the daily rosary but I’m very grateful that it was still alive in my Granny’s house while I was a child.

The rosary is a prayer that takes about 15 minutes. There are five ‘mysteries’ to contemplate, each one a different scene from the life of Christ – or from his death and resurrection and beyond. It somehow clicked with me – to hold an image in the imagina-

tion while saying a very simple, repetitive prayer – it gave me a way of taking to heart what was taught as truly important and fundamental in life. It was a form of meditation – bringing my mind to a quiet place where I could sense some connection with deeper truth.

After the holidays my mum, dad and brother Conor and I went back to Dublin. We didn't say the family rosary at home, it obviously didn't mean much to my mum or dad, and definitely not my brother Conor. He was a carefree and wild, always getting into some sort of trouble, whereas I was a dreamy child – at least that's how my granny described me and I think she was right.

So, maybe because I liked dreamy images from the life of Christ, I continued the rosary on my own, though snuggled up in bed rather than on my knees on the cold floor. Climbing into bed I'd be grumbling that I'd much prefer to daydream than say the rosary, but I'd make a bargain with myself to say just one mystery and then daydream, but when I got to the end of the first mystery, I'd decide to do a second mystery and then daydream …, and so on till I got through all five. By that time, sleep beckoned and I no longer had the energy to bother daydreaming!

In retrospect I'm very grateful for the family rosary practice –both because it put some limit on my habit of daydreaming and because it was my first taste of meditation – a quieting of the mind as it opens in awe. I lost the habit as I grew older. Though I've no memory of deciding to stop, it may have been after what you might call my first spiritual insight, which came when I was eight. I was praying one evening when I suddenly knew that there was a presence beside and around me that was separate to me. It seemed to drop like a thud into my mind. One moment I was the only one in the room, then suddenly there was also this mysterious presence which I took to be God.

While I didn't feel God's presence as threatening, I didn't feel it as loving either. It was just 'there', 'other'. The main way it affected me was to show me that I'd been making this big mistake – that all my thoughts of God and my prayers had all been make-believe, that I'd never known God till now. Maybe I got myself mixed up with the idea of false gods – from the first of the ten commandments – thou shalt love the Lord thy God and thou shalt not put false gods before me. To my mind I had committed a dreadful sin – made up a false image of God. The guilt multiplied up with the judgement that I'd never said any proper prayers in my life (hundreds and hundreds of sins), and because I'd never confessed these, I'd made bad confessions (each one a mortal sin!) and then I'd compounded the problem by going to communion with the mortal sin of a bad confession on my soul and so I'd made bad communions (more mortal sins!).

Within a few minutes I had clocked up several hundred mortal sins because in those days you went to confession and communion every week. The reason I know I was eight when this happened is because I had to multiply my two mortal sins per week (for my bad confession and bad communion) by 52 for every year since my first communion, which was when I was five, and I had to add in extra bad confessions and bad communions for all the feast days and Christmas days. And I found even more as I scoured through my little green catechism to be sure I got them all multiplied up correctly before my next confession.

I imagine I stopped saying the rosary after that – there couldn't have been any joy or peace in it. Although the guilt probably undermined me subconsciously, the episode didn't mark my life at the surface level, which was a good thing. Beyond making sure I got to confession as soon as possible to get all my sins forgiven I don't remember thinking about it much and I doubt anyone in the family or among my friends knew anything had happened.

So that was the first phase of my religious life – meditation, devotion, mystery, a thud of insight and then a plunge into guilt.

In many ways I had a happy childhood. My brother Conor was just a year older and we were very close and there were dozens of children our age living nearby, so always someone to play with. My dad worked as a weather forecaster at the airport and we didn't have financial problems. However there was always a background anxiety hanging over us, because my mother had bipolar depression. It was first diagnosed as post-natal depression after Conor was born and then again after my birth. In those days there was no psychotherapy available or even much kindness in psychiatric practice, just Electric shock treatment and heavy sedation. And so she never really recovered. For much of our childhood she was in bed and very depressed, and every six months or so she would have an acute flare up, and get into rows with family or neighbours, until eventually she had to be admitted to hospital again for more ECT and sedation. While she was in hospital, myself and my brother would stay with cousins, sometimes both at the one house, sometimes split up.

At the time, I didn't see this as a problem, I liked my cousins and enjoyed staying with them. But I know now that my mother's illness took a toll at a deeper level, and underlay my later mid-life crisis and the fear that suddenly emerged during a retreat in 1999.

Another major sorrow was that Conor's wildness caught up with him just after he turned 18 – he went out to a dance one Saturday night and never came home – he was killed in a road accident. That was a devastating blow for all the family as you can imagine.

But life went on. Although I had lost the habit of the rosary, I never lost the sense of mystery that it had kindled. There was a strong wish to understand the deeper truths of life which was why I opted to study physics after school, on the assumption that understanding the basic laws of physics meant I would understand life itself and be happy.

But even before I finished college, I realised I was onto the wrong track. Nothing I was learning was helping me understand life better or be any happier. Though that was disappointing, there were lots of compensations – the physics class was small – only 12 of us and we made good friends, hiking over mountains at the weekends, renting cottages in the country during holidays, playing tennis into the long summer evenings, frantic study before the exams, and of course many pints of creamy Guinness to help us put the world right – when I started college a pint cost 18 pence, by the time I'd finished it had gone up to a staggering 23 pence!

So college was a wonderful experience and our physics class still gets together frequently – in fact we're having a collective 70th birthday party next month as we've all reached this milestone during the year.

After college I did a teacher training course, only to discover that teaching wasn't for me either. At a bit of a loose end for a while, I was delighted to discover that there was a career called "medical physics" and jobs in this area in most big hospitals. The delight was from the thought that, even though I might not understand life deeply, I could contribute meaningfully to it.

My first job was in London, in the Royal Free Hospital, with a team who were researching lung function and especially the role of aerosols in diagnosis and in treatment. It was a dream start – a small friendly team, enthusiastic about work, curious to try new techniques, a very happy work environment. Plus a deepening relationship with Adrian, who I had met during the teacher training course. We were well suited and happy until my mother suddenly took a dislike to him. Once there was talk of the relationship becoming serious and him buying a house, he suddenly became, in her eyes, not good enough for me. And the sad thing was that I hadn't detached myself enough to withstand her disapproval. Once she lost confidence in him, I lost confidence in him. The joy in the relationship went out and eventually we broke up. In retrospect I can see that this failure to define myself as separate to my mother left me with a lot of bitterness and self-doubt.

But as always life went on, and after three years at the Royal Free, I came back to Dublin in my mid-twenties, working in a number of different hospitals until I took early retirement in 2007, aged 53. The first decade or so was a happy time – friendly colleagues, stimulating work with lots of fascinating research, enough challenges to make things interesting, enough routine to keep me grounded. I made good friends, we played tennis, squash, went hill walking, hired cottages together for holidays.

In retrospect, the most important incident was when colleague gave me the book 'The Tau of Physics' by Fridtjof Capra. This linked modern physics with Eastern mysticism, and opened up a whole new world for me. I was overjoyed to realise there was another way of understanding life that didn't involve maths and physics, but meditation. I found DT Suzuki's Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind and started practicing meditation. A while later I found a meditation group and another chapter in life opened up – weekly meetings, dhamma study, retreats, and perhaps most important of all, close friendship with others in the group – we are still good friends to this day.

One claim to fame for our little group was that we can say we 'discovered' Bhante Bodhidhamma, invited him to teach his first ever retreat in Dublin back in the mid 1980s, and he came back for several years afterwards to teach weekend retreats. Our group was also party to his first 10-day retreat which was held in Kerry in the late 1990s.

For a decade or more, I couldn't make up my mind between Buddhism and Christianity. I think some of it stemmed from fear of damnation because I was now definitely putting a false god before the true God of the catechism. And some was the sense of identity with the Christian story – I really wanted to believe it all, whereas the Buddha and the vague notion of enlightenment didn't appeal to me at that personal-story level. I did quite a number of silent meditation retreats with the Carmelite order as well as the weekends with Bhante or other Buddhist teachers and found both forms to be very helpful and inspiring. The main attraction of Buddhism for me was the friendship group, they were my own age, good fun, open to questions, we used to go out hill walking together, went away on a cycling holiday, celebrated Christmas and birthday parties. Whereas the people I met at the Catholic retreats were usually much older than me, more settled in life and more pious than questioning so there wasn't much discussion and I never developed any friendships.

I am so grateful that the spiritual aspect of my life opened up, because as middle-age approached, the lights went out in other areas. After the disappointment over Adrian, I never again managed to form a committed relationship, and the fun went out of medical physics once I became senior, had to take responsibility for services. It came to a

head in my mid-forties, while I was also doing a course in 'The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola' – a form of spiritual training in daily life developed by the Jesuits. The course is well known for making people more vulnerable than usual and in my case this plus a combination of work-stress and unexpected relationship issues brought on a mental-health crisis – couldn't sleep, couldn't stop crying, couldn't find anything to believe in.

I offered to hand in my resignation at work, but the hospital was very decent, they could see I was unwell, and persuaded me to take six months off to think about things and then make a decision.

During those months as I looked back on life, it seemed to me that the only thing that hadn't let me down was meditation practice. Career and relationships just seemed burdensome now. Family held no joy at all. Although I loved my father very much, and we had played bridge together for many years, but he died when I was thirty and my relationship with my mother, never strong to start with, went further downhill after that. I did have good friends from college days, and from work and from my meditation group. They were a support, but not a reason to live. The only thing that offered hope was the spiritual realm – I'd lost confidence in the world.

And so I made the decision that from now on, spiritual development would be my principle aim in life, everything else would come secondary to it. Being realistic, I knew I didn't have what it would take to head off into the hills as a hermit, and I was too old (45 at that stage) to be taken in as a novice nun. Also the recent breakdown showed me I needed to be gentle with myself, not expect too much, take baby steps rather than giant leaps. So I changed my work arrangement at the hospital, took a part time appointment at basic grade level so that I wouldn't have so much responsibility and could organise my work-time so as to take months off as needed for retreat and then work full time between retreats. This gave me the means to support myself financially as well as the time needed for spiritual development.

Although I was still undecided between Christianity and Buddhism, the decision was made for me, because the teacher who was guiding me through the Spiritual Exercises, cut me off completely once I had that breakdown. It wasn't done unkindly, it was just their policy. You go to a doctor for mental health issues and come back to spiritual practice when you're balanced again. Whereas when I told Bhante about the breakdown, he hardly blinked an eye, just told me to get back on the cushion and watch the emotional storm. From then on I never waivered, I realised Buddhism, at least in the form Bhante taught, was what I needed to hold me together in life.

In retrospect I can see that my life became happier from this point onwards. I had been happy as a child and young adult, because things were mostly easy, going my way. But the happiness that started growing now was coming from a deeper place, from the wisdom of the first noble truth, realising that nothing in life was going to satisfy, and the inspiration of the third noble truth, trusting in the possibility of being free from suffering, content and happy.

One way I first noticed this growing happiness was the transformation I found in my work colleagues. Many whom I had dismissed as foolish or unreliable before I had taken my 6 months leave turned out to be wise and trustworthy once I returned! I could genuinely enjoy their company again. I also began to see an improvement in my relationship with my mother. Having taken a decisive step in my own life, a new level of respect started to grow between us. By the time of her latter years, hatred had transformed to love and we were quite at ease with one another. I moved back to the family home to support her after she turned 90. Although I'd earlier dreaded the prospect of her becoming dependant on me, caring for her turned out to be as easy as tying my shoelaces, not blissful but just ordinary, not a problem.

Considering my earlier dread of her depending on me, and the contrasting simplicity of caring for her in her final year gave me vivid proof of the fruits of spiritual practice, and brought a lot of happiness.

But I've skipped forward 20 years there – back to my mid-life crisis now. It was around this time that Bhante started teaching 10-day or longer retreats in various locations in Ireland and the UK before moving to Gaia House as Spiritual Director. I became one of the regular attendees. It was towards the end of my first 2-week retreat that I had an insight, which was possibly a revisiting of my childhood insight of God as a real presence, separate to me. While I was walking along the garden path, I became aware of an expansive presence, a still, peaceful knowing, which filled the sky and pervaded everything around me. In that moment I knew that all my sensory experience was in total harmony with this presence: seeing, hearing, moving, these were not disturbing or disturbed by the presence. The only thing that was at odds was my belief in being a separate person, independent. I saw the experience as a demonstration of the truth of anatta, and in a flash knew that I would have to lose the identity I called Noirin if I was going to attain Nibanna.

Although I'd always wanted insight, as soon as it came I wished it hadn't! It brought up a huge surge of fear – felt like particles of fear were surging up my throat and out my mouth. While I hadn't felt the presence as threatening in any way, just peaceful, knowing, non-interfering, what frightened me was the knowledge that I'd been making

this huge mistake, identifying with the story of my life. Who could I rely on if not myself? And I obviously couldn't rely on myself because I was the one making the mistake of identifying as me!

This marked another turning point in life – a plunge into fear, but also a waking up. Bhante's support was wonderful, he radiated confidence that I could work with the fear, and I had begun to believe him even before the retreat was over. It wasn't easy though – since mid-life I'd always had problems sleeping and now sleep seemed out of the question. Also the fearful turbulence led to auditory hallucinations among other things - every now and then, it seemed as though a hurricane was blowing up, the wind was howling, trees smashing. Or else someone would be rubbing a packet of crisps right in my ear, or walking with very heavy footsteps round and round my seat. Fortunately the visual field wasn't affected so all I had to do was open my eyes to check that none of this was real and then go back to working with the anxieties and fear underlying all this strangeness.

What seemed even more fearful was that my face would twitch spontaneously, my tongue waggle around my mouth. The notion that I was not in control of my own body movements seemed to me horrific.

The twitching and hallucinations eased off after the retreat was over, though fear and anxiety accompanied me for a long time along with sleeplessness. The payoff was increased mindfulness because the fearful thoughts were even more upsetting than the present-moment feeling of fear, so for my own peace of mind I had no choice but to be mindful. "Condemned to the present moment" was how I thought of myself!

In time I started to see how I was benefitting – boredom, for example, was a thing of the past, and I had no time for hopelessness or negative thinking – the call to presence was too strong. In turn, all my relationships grew more trusting and appreciative. This was particularly true within the family. As the bond between myself and my mother strengthened, so also that bond extended to my many cousins, aunts and uncles. Although circumstances prevent me seeing them often, I sense them as a source of friendship, joy and care.

The deepest gift was the steadily growing faith in the Dhamma. Especially the truth of dukkha and how simply being mindful of dukkha led to positive change. I was very chuffed when, in 2003, Bhante asked me to assist him in teaching. I felt this as a great honour, and a confirmation that I had turned a corner in life.

Trust in the Dhamma was my saviour when, in 2005 I was diagnosed with throat cancer, which was treated with radiotherapy, giving me 7 good years until it returned with a vengeance leading to not just major but 'heroic' surgery in 2013 with only a 50:50 chance of survival. It also meant losing my voice box. I've written about that in some essays on the website, so won't say much here, except that this unwanted turn of events brought deeper faith and insight along with its natural share of sorrow.

And so lets skip forward to 2020, when after a fall in which she broke her hip, my mother died. A peaceful death, I'm happy to say, and I was with her at the time which was a gift I will always treasure.

By this stage I was long retired and had always thought of coming to live near Satipanya after my mother's death. She died in January 2020 and in March I came to Satipanya to join the final month of the winter retreat. But then the covid lockdown happened and I never went home!

Initially it was because it was considered unsafe to travel, but as the weeks and months went by, it became clear that there really was no good reason to go back to Dublin, and that I would be far happier staying at Satipanya. Luckily Bhante was also pleased to be able to offload some of the management responsibilities, and I was happy to take on more of the teaching, so the covid lockdown was, for me, a great blessing – opening up a new phase in life for me which I trust as very beneficial.

To mark this new phase, I took lay ordination in 2021, to help me take heart in the Dhamma as the inspiration for my life and dedicate the remainder of my time on earth to practice in accordance with the Buddha-Dhamma-Sangha. Part of this is an annual retreat, which I take during the winter months. As a treat for my 70th birthday I booked a house in Portugal from January last year till the middle of February, and spent my 70th birthday exploring the joys and woes of the inner life, opening some doors in my mind, making peace with those that remain stubbornly closed.

I honestly can't think of a more satisfying way to mark my 70th birthday.

A final word about friendship … One wonderful aspect of dhamma practice is that you meet the best of people, considerate, honest, good-natured, kind, making the best of life's vicissitudes, interested in spiritual matters. It's a heaven realm from that point of view and I want to thanks all of you reading this for the deep contribution you have made to my life.

I want to finish by thanking Bhante Bodhidhamma for forgiving my many mistakes and encouraging me at every opportunity. Although his joi-de-vivre can sometimes be infuriating (why can't he just get despondent and defeated like any normal human be-

ing? I'd be thinking to myself) there is always some small corner of my mind that's willing to trust his good humour as a guide through whatever difficulty is presenting. Just as the rosary guided me in childhood, Bhante's teaching, friendship, and unstinting support have guided my latter years, gentling the decline into old age, inspiring faith in what lies beyond.

CHAPTER 2

Satipanya Porridge

Noirin Sheahan · 2 min read

> *This intimate essay by Noirin Sheahan transforms the simple act of eating porridge into a profound meditation on the nature of existence. Beginning with mindful attention to the sensory experience of breakfast, the narrative unfolds into deep contemplation of predator and prey dynamics, both literally in the eating process and metaphorically in human nature. The author skillfully weaves together personal reflection with fundamental Buddhist insights, particularly anicca (impermanence) and the reality of dukkha (suffering and unsatisfactoriness). Through honest observation of her own reactions—from enjoyment to revulsion to acceptance—she demonstrates how mindfulness practice reveals the transient nature of all experiences, including our attachments to them. The essay continues through the washing up, showing how sustained awareness transforms ordinary activities into opportunities for loving-kindness and appreciation. This piece exemplifies how Vipassanā meditation extends beyond formal sitting practice into every moment of daily life, revealing the 'simple abundance of the present moment' and the profound teaching that 'just this is enough.'*

The spoon is raised, the head leans forward, mouth opens and warm, velvety porridge pours
onto the tongue, eclipsing all other experience. After a while the jaws start moving and raisins are torn open and nudged around the mouth. A smile settles into my face as I relax
and enjoy the first spoonful of porridge.
Savouring a raisin I am struck by the contrast between its soft juiciness and the hard sharpness of the teeth tearing into its flesh, destroying it. A TV image of an old bull being
eaten by lions comes to mind. The bull moaning, the lions feasting. My sympathies were all
for the bull when I watched the TV program, but now, although I feel for the vulnerability
of the raisin, my tongue demands its sweetness and my teeth tear into it without mercy.
I recognise in myself both bull and lion, predator and prey. Revulsion follows, not wanting
any part in this contorted human nature, and pinching, bitter sensations fill my head and

chest. After a while, although Im writhing inwardly, I am not above noticing that the fairly
neutral sensations of porridge feel much, much nicer than the bitterness in my own flesh.
There is some humiliation that the uninteresting taste of porridge (by now its even cold)
calls attention more than my anguish at the dilemma of suffering! In dismay I try to resist
the comfort of cold porridge, but luckily I dont seem to be in charge of this show! After
another few spoons there is only gratitude for the kindness of anicca (the transience of all
experience) which brings all suffering to an end. I notice again the sweetness of raisins
and there is a sad appreciation of their ready giving way to the reality of sharp teeth and
grinding jaws. I dedicate the merit of breakfast to the welfare of the moaning bull and of all
suffering beings.
Now another bowl of porridge is almost empty, and I notice I have become disinterested in
the business of eating. My mind recedes from the situation. I also notice however that the
porridge feels just as velvety as at the first spoonful, the raisins taste just as sweet, the jaw
and tongue movements are as vivid as ever. Its only my attachment to the activity which is
dying away. This gives me a foretaste of my own death, and the knowledge that everything
except myself will survive this unscathed. I shiver with fear and excitement at my growing
acquaintance with a consciousness which does not mourn my passing. But this notion seems
too much for me to handle, and instead a bitter-sweet acknowledgement of my share in the
cycle of life and death settles into my heart.
After breakfast, washing the bowl and spoon, the mood changes to appreciation for warm
water, the colours of suds and hands and sleeves and bowl and sink, the gentle movements
of lifting and rubbing. I am relieved at the mood change, but sense something missing,

something being held back, dammed up. For a moment Im puzzled but then the dam busts
and goodwill quietly floods the scene, loving each moment of the immensely rich interaction
process we call washing the dishes. Another smile settles on my face and I am thankful again for this meditation practice which has no favourites, finding each experience equally
worthy of full attention.
And so the day evolves from moment to moment, each self-made drama succumbing to the simple abundance of the present moment. Just this is enough I hear myself say, feeling
the softness of the dish-cloth, the weight of the bowl, a sigh of contentment. Just this is enough.

CHAPTER 3

The "Ouch" that Hurt

Noirin Sheahan · 5 min read

> *This deeply personal essay chronicles a profound meditation experience where the author encounters a "ball of scalding pain" moving across her chest during retreat. Through careful observation and surrender, she discovers that the real suffering comes not from the physical sensations themselves, but from her resistance, fear, and anticipation of pain. The narrative beautifully illustrates the Three Characteristics of existence - anicca (impermanence), anattā (not-self), and dukkha (unsatisfactoriness) - as they manifest in real-time during intensive practice.*
>
> *The essay demonstrates how our attempts to control and manipulate experience often intensify suffering, while acceptance and surrender lead to ease. A pivotal insight emerges when the author recognizes that anticipating pain actually generates pain, while trusting in the potential for peace creates peaceful conditions. This teaching exemplifies the Buddha's understanding that we create our own experience through our mental attitudes and reactions.*
>
> *Written with remarkable honesty and precision, this account offers valuable guidance for practitioners working with physical discomfort, emotional resistance, and the fundamental challenge of letting go of control. It shows how even intense suffering can become a doorway to deeper wisdom when approached with Right Awareness and compassion.*

The that hurt!
At a recent retreat I was sitting in meditation when suddenly a little ball of scalding pain
started darting all over my chest. I tried to relax and explore this calmly, but inwardly was
crying as the pain found one place after another to lodge and burn. My face would screw up
in alarm as the ball scalded me again and I would jabber to myself .
This went on for several minutes before I began to make some sense of the experience.
If I could relax and be anyway calm and accepting, then the pain would ease. But as soon
as I found this state of relative ease, the pain would dart to another part of the chest, and
calmness would flare into agitation as I tracked the movement to see could I relax this

new area and submit it to the pain. But relaxing these tissues was only possible if I could
also relax the fear and dread which drove the tension. I found it was the same fear and
dread that were driving me to say my inward . I would quiver on the verge of noting the
fervent wish to tense up and groan. The pain would grow as I veered towards groaning and
diminish as I veered instead towards an exploration of the heart and mind of dread. But as
soon as I felt myself relaxing the pain would dart away and the whole process would start
again.
Every now and then I noticed my body leaning towards the right as if being pushed over
by some huge force. If I wasnt careful I found myself straightening up in order to give me
renewed energy and confidence and for this battle of wits with the ball of scald! But this
state of heady confrontation only increased the pain to new levels of excruciation, until I
could again relax and admit that this was a battle I could only win by losing. Although it was
such a small little ball of scald, it was my complete master! I felt amazed and humiliated
at having to submit to its jabbing, but had no choice in the matter. I learned to make a
very deliberate intention to straighten up whenever I found myself leaning too far to the
right, noticing but not acquiescing to the wish to regain the upper hand by pulling myself
upright. I also noticed that the pain played fair here: while I was making the intention and
straightening there were no mean little pinches! I began to appreciate the peace and beauty
of pure movement as never before. As soon as the spine was straight however, the battle
would recommence in earnest!
After some time I made peace with the fact that I was at the mercy of the ball of scald
and had no role to play here but relax and submit at every available opportunity. In a
moment of clarity that followed this, I noticed that the scalding sensations were actu-

ally
quite bearable. It was the that hurt! I felt this as a horrible rejection of the state of suffering
I was in. Understanding this brought forth compassion and I found it easy not to groan. A
mental state of fear or dread would be felt alongside the scalding sensations. But instead
rejecting all this in a groan in anguish, I could now relax and acknowledge the suffering with
some tenderness and compassion.
But as soon as I seemed to get the hang of the process it speeded up dramatically, and
a much sharper level of awareness was required to reach the before it was empowered.
I felt myself (my identification with the need to stop suffering) and awareness in a race
towards each . Agitation would search frantically for itself, growing ever more agitated
and frantic until it was big enough to recognise itself. Only then could agitation relax into
itself and disappear. Hatred at the possibility of self-rejection might then flare but the pain
would grow commensurately, and hatred would turn to humility, acknowledging defeat.
The pain stuck to the original rules and faded away as each wave of resistance faded. The
process kept accelerating and eventually was happening much faster than my normal mind
could cope with. Several times each second I found myself in a new mind-state as the pain
darted to and fro across my chest. Thoughts were slow sluggish things crawling through a
process that was completely beyond the control of thoughts and beliefs. A horror of being so
totally out of control slowly evaporated and I was surprised to find myself growing to trust
this state of affairs. Gradually I came to enjoy being beyond the help of rational thought,

completely at the mercy of anicca (the transience of all experience) and anatta (no-self or
the uncontrollability of all experience).
No sooner did I start to enjoy myself than the process stopped, the ball of scald

disappearing from view. But at a sitting later that day, it reappeared. Once I felt its first jab I got ready for the chase. I relaxed into the emotion prompting the first but before the next dart of pain I sensed something that stopped the process dead in its tracks. I had felt my anticipation that the pain would grow a fraction of a second before the pain started to grow! Slowly the understanding sank in: anticipation of pain was generating pain! My breath stopped and for a while I was rigid in horror, trying to come to terms with what this implied. The only way out was to stop anticipating the pattern of suffering I had learned to cope with. I had to admit that I hadnt a clue what was going to happen next! The unknown of the next moment loomed large but the option of fearing this had been removed, as I now knew what suffering this fear would bring. Gradually fear, anticipation and the ball of scald all faded and my breathing started again gingerly. Now I had no option but to let go of anticipation, to relax with the complete unknown of the next moment. I found this implied trusting to the potential for ease in the next moment. Amazingly trust in the potential for ease brought forth ease! Each breath came more freely as I stopped looking for trouble and instead explored the possibility that peace could manifest out of the unknown of each moment. Thus I learned that anticipation of pain leads to pain, while trust in the potential for peace leads to peace. I learned how I create my own experience of life.

So ended a very worthwhile teaching about the peace which lies beyond the selfs attempts to manipulate and control. To the extent that I tried to maintain control, I suffered. Gradually, the agonizing pain persuaded me to forget my pride and trust to the possibility that something other than myself would know how to deal with the situation. And sure enough I was rescued by the truths of anicca (transience), anatta (uncontrollability) and dukkha (that suffering results from opposing the truths of anicca and anatta). To the extent that I could relax and trust to the kindness underlying the true nature of experience,

suffering disappeared. What remained was an eager willingness to experience this truth
again and again each moment.
How ironic that this willingness soon succumbed to the truth of anicca and changed into
a desire to hold on to this very willingness, thereby destroying it! Thus one experiential dhamma talks ended and another began!

CHAPTER 4

Coming Down to Earth

Noirin Sheahan · 2 min read

> *In this deeply personal essay, Noirin Sheahan explores her relationship with the earth element as part of Buddhist contemplative practice. Drawing from her experience with the 'Back to Beginnings' program by Tara Rokpa, she examines how awareness of the five elements (mahābhūta) can cut through the delusion of a separate self and provide a gateway to truth beyond opinions and prejudices.*
>
> *The essay chronicles Sheahan's initial resistance to earthly, physical reality and her preference for the mental realm. Through honest self-examination, she discovers her tendency to dismiss concrete experience as 'beneath her,' preferring the energizing challenge of uphill struggles over the relaxing descent that 'promised nothing.' This resistance mirrors a broader pattern of clinging to ideas, dreams, and ideals while avoiding direct embodied experience.*
>
> *As the author learns to acknowledge and work with her aversion to the earth element, she begins to trust physical reality and discovers the 'peaceful experience of non-opinionated flesh.' The essay beautifully illustrates the interconnection between mind and body, showing how mental resistance manifests as physical tension and how acceptance allows both to soften. Concluding with the Buddha's teaching about finding the entire universe within the body, this piece offers valuable insights for practitioners seeking to integrate meditation wisdom into embodied daily life.*

Coming down to earth.
It helps me see to through the delusion of a separate, isolated self when I let go of thinking and instead notice how experience can be felt in terms of the five elements: earth, water, fire, air and space. This provides an exploration of life which is not so easily
clouded by my opinions and prejudices. Ironically, this more immediate encounter with the world is showing me unacknowledged prejudices and testing my most cherished opinions! It‟s a gateway to truth.
Earth is perhaps the easiest element to notice. Right now I can feel my feet pressing into the ground and the hardness of the table that my elbow leans on. Sometimes I am more aware of the earth element within myself – heaviness becomes very obvious as I race up
the steps at Connolly Station, and (especially if I miss the train) tension in my jaw!

But my relationship with the earth element began badly. As part of a therapy program (the „Back to Beginning's" program offered by Tara Rokpa – see www.tararokpa.org and the book "Restoring the Balance" by Dr. Akong Tulku Rinpoche) some years ago, we were asked to spend a month exploring each of the five elements, starting with the earth.

We were encouraged not only to feel heaviness, touching etc, but also to immerse ourselves in the physical earth e.g. gardening, hill-walking or literally mucking about! Although I could feel my feet touching the ground, I found I didn"t much like to be cognitively aware of the ground beneath my feet – even quite beautiful parkland. It seemed somehow alien, even threatening, and I found myself dismissing it quickly as „beneath me". Once I was running along some open ground and, despite being tired, found I preferred the uphill struggles to the downhill stretches! I enjoyed the mental energies generated by the uphill challenge e.g. a sense of power, determination, anticipation of the summit. The easy run downhill called only for relaxation, promised nothing. It felt like loss.

As I began to acknowledge my relationship with the physical earth I saw my preference for the mental world and my disdain for more concrete reality. As always, acknowledgement heralds change, and I am slowly coming down to earth! As I let go of clinging to opinions and dreams and ideals, and feel my way through the fear and sadness of their loss, I find it easier to relax physically, trusting the earth to support me instead. I am more and more willing to explore that within me which is devoid of ideas, and I"m beginning to appreciate the peaceful experience of non-opinionated flesh! The links between mind and body become more fascinating e.g. if I get a fright I can feel a wall of tension solidifying in my jaw, as my mind pushes away from the body saying „No,
not this, no, no, no!". And then I feel waves of sourness chipping away at the wall as I acknowledge my aversion. Eventually I sense the quiet joy of acceptance as I relax and let
the wall crumble. In meditation there is the whisper that the softness of relaxing flesh might be an experience of truth more trustworthy than all my heady visions. I begin to appreciate the Buddha"s words: "Within the fathom long body can the entire universe be
known".

CHAPTER 5

Extending the Limits of Good-Will

Noirin Sheahan · 2 min read

> *Noirin Sheahan offers an honest and relatable examination of how good-will (mettā) can be compromised when we encounter difficult people or situations that 'push our buttons.' Through the vivid example of a neighbourly visit gone wrong, she illustrates how quickly irritation can infiltrate our well-intentioned actions, leading to self-righteous anger and interpersonal conflict.*
>
> *The essay demonstrates how meditation practice provides crucial insight into these emotional patterns, showing how the body's wisdom can guide us toward shame and forgiveness rather than defensive pride. Sheahan explores the kammic consequences of ill-will and the challenging but necessary work of recognizing our own role in creating suffering through self-centring and rigid attachment to 'my way.'*
>
> *Practical guidance emerges through three key strategies: examining the untested assumptions that skew our good-will toward self-interest, strengthening sati (mindfulness) to catch irritation before it solidifies into defensive patterns, and cultivating the courage to turn away from familiar territories of self-justification toward the unfamiliar freedom of genuine openness. This teaching offers valuable insight for anyone working to develop authentic loving-kindness that can withstand real-world challenges.*

Extending the limits of good-will.
People who push my buttons show me the limits of my good-will and I find this very humiliating! For example - good-will suggests that I visit an elderly neighbour. It‟s a lovely day, I just know she would appreciate being taken for a drive and walk, maybe lunch in a café. (In retrospect I might see that I didn‟t know this at all – I just assumed so!) Instead I find her morose, not particularly welcoming, and am quickly saddled with sheets that needed washing and ironing. Into the heart of good-will, irritation insinuates
itself quietly.
Oh that I could simply be aware of the irritation, or that my heart would go a step further
and choose compassion instead! Compassion for myself, in my disappointment and injured pride. Compassion for my neighbour trapped in bad humour. From that a gracious willingness to help may emerge, and in all likelihood we would both cheer up naturally.

But what if irritation sets itself up as master without my noticing? A supposedly helpful suggestion comes out as a barked order: „Don't do it that way". My neighbour snaps back: "You're doing it all wrong, let go and I'll show you" and we both tighten into our respective knots of „my way", glowering at one another. The kamma of ill-will has been set in motion and how hard it is to stop! Angry, self righteous thoughts storm through "She has no right to make me do this work… no wonder she gets so few visitors … she hasn't a clue how to look after herself…" Somewhere in the midst might be a sinking shame for having let the visit deteriorate into a dog-fight. A recognition that I have let myself be caught in the powerful bind of self-centring. Once caught, how much effort it can take to refuse to tighten the smug binding of my way, my opinions versus her ridiculousness, her hopelessness. By comparison, shame"s suggestion feels humiliating: that my neighbour is simply someone who I am rejecting in anger?

Sitting in meditation, memories like these come up. Letting go of thoughts, the body finds it easier to relax into shame than to tighten into self-righteousness. Perhaps that"s what we mean by „body wisdom" – our body can lead us to truth which our logic can deny. In time shame eases into forgiveness and a deeper commitment to good-will. Then,

when it comes to neighbourly visits that degenerate into dog-fights, I can no longer pretend there is no option but to stew in self-righteous anger. Eventually I might summon the energy for an embarrassed smile and an apology for having made a fuss. Very often this is rewarded by a kindly response, and we might both be relieved to find ourselves back in the happier, easier realm of friendliness.

Three ways I can extend the limits of good-will: Spot the untested assumptions which so easily creep into the heart of good-will, skewing thoughts towards my happiness rather than my neighbours. Strengthen mindfulness so that I spot irritation before it creates a tight familiar world of my way, my opinions etc and from which all intruders must be repelled. Turn away from that familiar world whenever I find myself defending it, groping my way towards an unfamiliar freedom where there are no intruders and nothing to defend.

CHAPTER 6

Mettā for a Cold Heart

Noirin Sheahan · 2 min read

> *This compassionate essay by Noirin Sheahan addresses one of the most challenging aspects of mettā (loving-kindness) practice: working with states of deep anger, resentment, and emotional coldness. Drawing from personal experience and wisdom, she explores how vipassanā meditation naturally reveals the self-torture inherent in holding onto enmity, showing how greed, hatred, and delusion fuel our cycles of vengeance and self-judgment.*
>
> *The essay offers practical guidance for those times when traditional mettā phrases like 'May I be well and happy' feel impossible or even repugnant. Sheahan describes how deep seeds of hatred can be excavated by meditation practice or traumatic events, making loving-kindness practice initially more painful than insight meditation itself. She draws on Thomas Merton's wisdom about prayer becoming impossible when the heart turns to stone, reframing cold-heartedness as a revelation of deep suffering worthy of honour rather than condemnation.*
>
> *With gentle wisdom, the essay suggests treating our closed hearts with the same patience we would show an injured animal, emphasizing that even the coldest heart-states ultimately respond to sustained patience and gentle investigation. This teaching offers hope and practical approaches for practitioners struggling with seemingly impenetrable states of anger and emotional shutdown.*

Metta for a Cold Heart!
A cold heart is the antithesis of the friendly goodwill of metta. The coldness may seem impenetrable, but if we mindfully follow the process of enmity we might see how it is generated by greed, hatred and delusion. We may notice the enticement of delusive, unanswerable questions like „why did this happen …how could you do this?“ the seductive longing for the downfall or our enemy, as well as self-judgement which condemns such vengeance. As we let the thoughts go we might feel ourselves caught in a sore, hurting state. Vengeance pulling the heart and mind and flesh in one direction, self-judgement blocking their path, delusion compounding the misery with its attempts at explanation. If we watch all this drama until we see that this is self-torture, then we accept defeat. We cannot knowingly torture ourselves forever. At that point it‘s often possible to find, buried within the confusion and humiliation of defeat, the willingness to move towards peace, to acknowledge what is good both in ourselves and in our enemy.

Thus vipassana naturally undermines our tendency towards enmity and develops our capacity for friendliness and forgiveness. But the seeds of greed, hatred and delusion are sown deep within us, and the whole battle can be re-enacted with even the slightest encouragement. Metta, the Buddha taught, is the antidote to hatred. We develop goodwill for ourselves and others by repeating phrases such as „May I / you be well & happy'. A sense of kindness may arise and we might feel our body soften. These healing feelings further encourage us towards peace and reconciliation.

Sometimes a deep seed of hatred can be excavated by meditation practice or by some traumatic life event. At those times, practicing metta may be even more painful than vipassana as we feel ourselves squirm away from any possibility of goodwill or trust or forgiveness. Instead of feeling soft and warm we may feel the tension of anger rising and gripping us. The words „May I / you be well' may seem ridiculous and be rejected in derisive scorn. This can lead to even deeper turmoil. How rotten can I be that I can‟t even wish myself well, or my friends or family, or even my dog!

At such times I find it helpful to remember the words of Thomas Merton, „Prayer and love are learned in the hour when prayer becomes impossible and your heart has turned to stone.‟ I encourage myself to see cold-heartedness as a revelation of deep suffering, a state to be honoured rather than despised. If we saw a dog injured on the roadside, would we kick it and say "You disgusting animal, clean up that wound before I see you again." But yet we can easily compound our emotional hurt with such self-disgust. I try to tread very carefully here – noting the self-disgust, the wish to turn away, as well as the turmoil or coldness I am turning from. Sometimes the words of metta may seem aggressive – a desperate attempt to cover up a wound even with a dirty bandage. If so I relax as best I can into the simple experience of the hurting state. Sometimes it can seem OK to receive goodwill from friends, family (or the dog!). At other times receiving is also out of bounds. But if I keep gingerly investigating my condition I may eventually

find a chink in my armour. Then I might be able to turn towards my closed heart, saying perhaps "For as long as you need to be closed that‟s OK, I‟m willing to wait, I will wait." Even the coldest heart-states ultimately succumb to patience.

CHAPTER 7

The Fourth Noble Truth

Noirin Sheahan · 9 min read

This essay examines the Fourth Noble Truth - the path to the cessation of dukkha - through the framework of the Noble Eightfold Path and its three traditional divisions. Noirin Sheahan explores how wisdom develops through direct experience of the Four Noble Truths and understanding of kamma, showing how investigation of our anger and fear can lead to greater courage and perspective. The morality section reframes ethical conduct not as constraint but as a means to deeper happiness, examining how Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood create harmony within ourselves and society. The concentration section details how the Seven Factors of Awakening work together like a flock of geese, with Right Awareness as the lead, supported by calming factors (concentration, equanimity, tranquillity) and energizing factors (energy, investigation of Dhamma, joy). Throughout, the essay emphasizes how these three divisions support each other in a continuous cycle of development, leading practitioners toward the ultimate goal of Nibbāna - perfect harmony and peace.

The Fourth Noble Truth – The Way to the Cessation of Dukkha.
When we get a glimpse of the peace that comes with letting go of the dukkha-drama of our life, we want to steer our life towards Nibbana. This final truth clarifies the way we can do this. The way is also termed the 'Noble Eight-fold Path'. The final week's notes of the previous course spelled out each of the eight steps in detail, while this reflection considers the broad divisions of the path: Wisdom, Morality and Concentration.
Wisdom:
Buddhist path builds trust / faith based on our own experience one as opposed to requiring blind faith in the teacher / scriptures. We might start off with the willingness to give this path a fair try, to see whether it works. To the extent that we prove for ourselves that suffering comes from the desire that things be other than as they are right
now, we build a faith in the Dhamma (the Buddha's teachings). But we can't simply hold on to our present understanding! Try it for yourself: the next time you find yourself angry or afraid for example, bring to mind your belief that the desire that things be otherwise is the cause of this anger or fear? Does this belief allow you to come to peace? If it does, then your faith is deep enough to match the situation. But very often the thoughts prompting anger or fear don't simply dissolve and we find ourselves justifying our anger, falling back into fear. The challenge then is to discover whether in this

situation, the four noble truths apply. So far, this process has always taught me how to loosen up around habitual thoughts and attitudes. For example, meditating on the experience of fear might teach me to let go of persistent thoughts like ‘I can’t …’ which are based on self doubt, or thoughts like ‘they won’t…’ which are based on distrust of others. After a while these thoughts might change to ‘Perhaps I can …’ or ‘Maybe they would …’ as fear edges its way towards courage. I find myself more willing to go beyond my comfort zone and discover what I can do or what others will accept. Similarly meditating on anger might teach me to loosen up around thoughts like ‘Its so unfair …’ or ‘They shouldn’t have …’ which are all based on the assumption that my beliefs are the
true ones, that my wishes and needs and agenda are of greatest importance in the world.

I then find myself more willing to see the broader perspective and work with the way things are. Although it’s humiliating to discover (yet again!) that it was my narrow perspective that was causing so much turmoil, there is always relief in coming back into
harmony with the world. I discover again that turning towards the dukkha with curiosity,
to discover its cause, leads me to happiness. Thus my faith in the four noble truths is deepened with each challenge in life.

Wisdom also cultivates happiness within this world from an understanding of the law of
kamma. Kamma is essentially an act of will which generates thought, speech or action. If
we think, speak and act so as to promote harmony, then we ourselves grow more happy.

If we think, speak or act so as to promote enmity and division, then we ourselves grow more hateful and divisive. It is the motive that matters as regards our future happiness. If we intend to do good, then even if harm comes of our action, we still promote our own
happiness. What we are essentially cultivating is a mind that is tending in the direction of friendly good-will, and friendliness is a pleasant, happy mental state. On the other hand whenever we intentionally create enmity, we are cultivating in ourselves the tendency towards hatred. The mind filled with hate is not happy – it is tightly controlled,
sees things only from its own view-point, and fearful of the enemy it perceives.

We can also reflect on the wisdom of various attitudes e.g. the attitude of letting go, or relinquishing. How much happier could life be if we were able to relax our grip on our wealth and possessions for example? Do we need every new fashion that comes on the market? Do we need the latest model of car? I remember hearing that the fastest any of us can go is at the pace of a bicycle! If we add up the time we put into earning enough money to pay for the car, its maintenance, insurance, petrol etc as well as the time spent driving, searching for a parking spot, washing the car etc we find we are actually driving at around 10 miles an hour! We put lots and lots of unacknowledged effort into holding on to our wealth and possessions. Are there any we could let go of in favour of a simpler life? How about other areas of over-indulgence e.g. alcohol, food, drugs? Would moderation bring more happiness into life?

Similarly we can reflect on the benefits of the attitudes of good will and compassion. Do I feel happier when I am wishing others well or when I am feeling enmity? Which would I prefer to cultivate as a habit? When I see someone in difficulty, does it feel better to ignore them or to see if I can find some way to help? Which would be better to cultivate as a response? Reflecting like this we can build up attitudes of good will and compassion to guide us through life. These are wise attitudes which bring about our own happiness and the happiness of others.

Thus wisdom forms the first division of the path. A form of happiness comes of understanding ourselves and the world better. It gives us the confidence to act out our part in life. This brings us to the next division of the path: morality.

Morality:

When we think of morality we usually think of obligation and constraint – perhaps even of punishment. We can see ourselves as inherently bad for having desires and lusts, and the moral code as a form of well-deserved punishment for our badness. But in the Eightfold path morality is intended as a means towards deeper happiness.

The underlying idea is that we are happier when we are in harmony. There are many levels to this harmony. Within ourselves we achieve greater psychological harmony when we speak and act with kindness. On the other hand, if we habitually use violence to get our own way, or snap at others angrily or sneer sarcastically, we damage ourselves

psychologically. Our inner harmony or disharmony is usually reflected in our social lives
– habitual violence and anger breeds dysfunctional family and social relationships. In turn dysfunctional relationships feed into social unrest, street violence and crime. At the
national and international level, distrust and greed can lead to war. On the other hand, kindness breeds happy, supportive relationships, which promote friendliness, co-operation and trust at the broader social level. Society works better when it is peopled by
those who are motivated by good-will, and this good-will also generates international co-
operation and willingness to share the world's resources.
The eight-fold path invites us to promote harmony in our speech, our actions, and our livelihoods. Do we ever lie for example? Lying disrupts social cohesion as we no longer know who or what to trust. Lies also tend to proliferate – what starts off as a small concealment can multiply into a labyrinth of deceit as we defend ourselves against accusations of false-hood. By contrast, a person who is known to be truthful is usually respected and trusted, and doesn't have the stress of concealment. Do we speak harshly or gently? Harsh speech tends to undermine others which usually means they are less able to perform well. This invites further harshness and so the knot of dukkha tightens.

Gentle, timely speech can bring out the best in others, and so the knot of dukkha unravels.
Our actions too can promote harmony or discord. At the most discordant we can kill another human being out of cruelty, hatred or greed. This has obvious repercussions for
suffering. It also dismisses as irrelevant the Buddha's claim that all human beings have the potential for enlightenment in this very lifetime. Killing or harming animals for such
motives is also immoral as animals feel suffering and wish to live. To promote harmony we act kindly and compassionately to other humans and to animals. We can be honest in
our dealings and even generous. We can avoid the many interpersonal difficulties which
come of sexual misconduct e.g. the deep misery that can result from child sexual abuse, or the jealousy and mistrust that can come of infidelity.
What value does our livelihood promote in the world? Does it contribute to a more just society, to joy, to education? Or does it promote greed, stupidity, or even hatred? Often the answer is somewhat mixed – e.g. even working with the health services where the

principle is one of compassion, we might worry about the greed or aggression sometimes
evident in the health care sector or the pharmaceutical industry. In our complex society we cannot isolate ourselves completely from its less savoury aspects of e.g. material greed. However we can reflect deeply enough to see how we can minimise our contribution to suffering within our livelihood, and how we can maximise our contribution to well-being, joy and contentment.

When our speech, actions and livelihood are in harmony with our inner wisdom, then we
can relax more easily, we can focus on the higher development of our mind in meditation. This brings us to the final division of the path: concentration.

Concentration:

Good concentration allows us to focus all our attention on the task at hand – whether this is reading, gardening, cooking or whatever. When our attention is thus focussed on the question of what causes dukkha, and what diminishes dukkha, we find the answer in
our own experience. Concentration is one of the seven Factors of Enlightenment. These are can be symbolised as a flock of wild geese. Mindfulness is always the lead goose. Then on one flank we have the factors which help to calm the mind – concentration, equanimity and tranquillity. On the other flank we have the factors which stimulate the mind – energy, investigation of Dhamma, and the joy of interest. They are all mutually supportive, so each time we develop any of these we are also strengthening our concentration.

Deep concentration is disturbed by the hindrances1 and so concentration is strengthened
every time we let go of a hindrance. Thus developing concentration needs a sustained effort - to cultivate the factors of enlightenment and let go of the hindrances. For example, the effort to let go of the wandering mind: Every time we find ourselves lost in thought we make a gentle yet determined resolution to stay focused on present experience. This develops mindfulness and concentration and lets go of whatever hindrance is driving the wandering mind. We give ourselves some calm focus for our attention e.g. the breath, thereby developing tranquillity and letting go of restlessness. If
we find ourselves falling into rage we try to calm ourselves down before engaging with the difficulty, thereby developing equanimity as well as letting go of aversion. We can

1 Desire, aversion, sloth & torpor, restlessness and doubt.

read the Dhamma or go on retreat, thereby developing our interest in investigating the Dhamma and letting go of sceptical doubt. We can find some way of mindfully noting the experience of drowsiness rather than falling into sleep, thereby developing energy as well as letting go of sloth & torpor. All these are examples of efforts we can make to develop what is supportive and let go of what is disruptive for our concentration.

Mindfulness is particularly important here. Mindfulness involves an intimate, non judgemental knowing of whatever we are experiencing – knowing the feeling of the foot on the ground for example. This increases our sensitivity to sensory experience as well as our own emotional life. When mindfulness is highly developed we become sensitive to the first signs of a hindrance which makes it easier to let go of. Similarly we recognize a slight imbalance between tranquillity and joy for example2, thereby preventing our mind from sinking into a peaceful stupor (too much tranquillity) or over-excitement (too much joy). When mindfulness is strong enough to keep the hindrances at bay, and keep the factors of enlightenment in balance, we can concentrate all our attention in present experience. This gives the conditions for insight – a first-hand experience of truth. We see for ourselves how dukkha arises and how it ceases. When we eventually see this at the deepest possible level, we access Nibbana. All sense of imperfection or discord in life will then be over and we will be in peaceful harmony with all things. Surely that is a worthy goal for life!

Thus the final division of the path cultivates wisdom – which brings us back to the first division. And so we can reflect more clearly on the way we want to live our life, which in turn affects our moral behaviour, which stabilizes our mind for concentration and so on.

The eight-fold path turns and turns upon itself as our life evolves into deeper harmony with the truth that liberates us from all discord and brings us to peace within ourselves and with the world.

2 The two flanks of the Factors of Enlightenment need to be in balance for mindfulness to be stable – e.g. too much energy and we tend towards restlessness, too much tranquillity and we loose

interest in our
ultimate goal which is to fully understand dukkha and thereby know how to escape from it.

CHAPTER 8

Struggling with Anattā

Noirin Sheahan · 2 min read

> *Noirin Sheahan offers an unusually honest and intimate account of grappling with anattā (not-self), one of Buddhism's most profound and challenging teachings. Moving beyond intellectual understanding, she describes the jarring transition from romanticized notions of expanded consciousness to the stark reality that anattā literally means the absence of 'self' - a realization that initially brought horror rather than liberation.*
>
> *The essay explores the deep psychological resistance that arises during meditation when approaching the direct experience of not-self. Sheahan vividly describes the internal struggle between the ego's desperate attempt to maintain control and the natural flow of experience that occurs when we truly let go. She maps the physical sensations of this resistance - the tension, the gasping for breath, the familiar comfort zones - alongside the profound ease and friendliness that emerge when fear finally dissolves.*
>
> *This candid reflection reveals how anattā manifests not as a philosophical concept but as a lived reality that challenges our deepest assumptions about control and identity. The essay offers valuable insight for practitioners who may struggle with similar resistance, showing how the very qualities we most value in ourselves - peace, friendliness, ease - are discovered to exist beyond our control or understanding, pointing toward the liberating truth of not-self.*

Struggling with Anatta.
The idea of anatta (often translated as „not-self“) used to fascinate me – inspiring a lovely image of an
expanded mind which covered the whole universe. Some texts mentioned fear – but I just knew I
wouldn“t be afraid … until I caught a brief glimpse and realised, to my horror, that the expanded mind
didn“t include me – that “I” was left behind for that brief moment and that “I” would always be left
behind in the experience of anatta. It was so obvious – the words not-self said it plainly – but I skipped
over this till the moment of insight.
Now I don“t often think about anatta … there are no nice images to entice me and thoughts fade into

vagueness. It‟s a relief if my mind simply relaxes, gives up on the question. I feel the breath going in
and out, and am relieved to know that the whole system functions, that life happens, even though it‟s
all beyond my understanding.
But in deep meditation I still fight hard against this truth. I may be experiencing the rising and falling
of the breath, with thoughts and emotions coming and going, and forget myself within the flow of
experience. But if there comes a sense of something strange and new, then a strong sense of “me”
emerges, straining to master the situation. On the out-breath, I feel myself daring to relax, wondering
“what is it that I am experiencing?” I can feel various sensations – softness or heat in various tissues
perhaps – these are comforting, suggesting there is nothing to be afraid of. But there is usually tension
as well in other tissues, and a scary gap opens up between „me‟ (where it‟s all soft and warm and safe
and known) and „that‟ (whatever lurks in the vague, unexplored, seemingly uninhabitable tension).
It feels as if I must die to cross that gap into the unknown. Having been at this juncture so often, I can
encourage myself the only thing to die will be fear. But I have to let go of these thoughts and memories
in order to relax completely into the felt sense of my present experience.
Fear wins and I snatch at the next in-breath, tensing and gasping in an effort to hold on to all I know, to
prevent myself dissolving into the unknown. This effort in turn becomes unbearable and the wish to
relax and trust persuades me to breathe out again. The struggle continues until somehow fear dissolves
and my senses can explore what was previously beyond my comfort zone. To my surprise I find I
recognise a newfound depth of friendliness and ease within myself – as if it were a place I once
inhabited within my psyche but had long forgotten. Although I would love to hold onto this experience
forever, I find I must forgo all temptation to interfere. Friendliness cannot be

imprisoned and any
attempt to control obliterates ease.
The truth of anatta sinks in a little deeper as I learn that I am not in control of what I most value within
myself. At my best, I am beyond my own understanding and control. As Mary Oliver says in the last
lines of her poem “Sleeping in the Forest”:
All night I rose and fell, as if in water,
grappling with a luminous doom. By morning
I had vanished at least a dozen times
into something better.
Noirin Sheahan

CHAPTER 9

Temporary Ordination

Noirin Sheahan · 3 min read

> *In this deeply personal essay, Noirin Sheahan shares her experience of taking temporary ordination as a Buddhist nun with Ayya Ariyañani at Passadhi retreat. What begins as a dutiful commitment to deepen her connection with the Dhamma becomes a profound journey of self-discovery and acceptance.*
>
> *The essay candidly explores the unexpected challenges of temporary ordination - not the shaved head or robes, but the difficulty of accepting her new Dhamma name 'Puñña-nadi' (Rejoicing in Merit). Sheahan's initial resistance to the name becomes a mirror for her habitual patterns of rejecting unwelcome aspects of life, including the reality of aging, sickness, and death. Through mindful observation, she transforms this aversion into a tool for greater self-acceptance and courage in facing difficult truths.*
>
> *The retreat experience, combining silent meditation with discussions about monastic life in Burma and elsewhere, provides space for the deep implications of ordination to unfold. Sheahan reflects on how temporary ordination offers a powerful opportunity for symbolic rebirth - a chance to make more skilful choices supported by wisdom and community. The essay concludes with her contemplation of whether this temporary experience might lead to a more permanent commitment to monastic life, leaving readers with the question of how deeply we are willing to transform ourselves in service of the Dhamma.*

Temporary Ordination
When the opportunity came to take temporary ordination with Ayya Ariyañani at the retreat in
Passadhi earlier this year I took it almost unquestioningly. Not that I was overjoyed, or even terribly
enthusiastic. To some extent it was the urge to do my duty, to pay respect to the people and to the
tradition that makes sense of life for me. Underneath this weight of obligation trickled the trust that
something good always comes of taking every opportunity to deepen my commitment to the
Dhamma.
My mind didn’t dwell long on the challenge before me, but some instinct drew me to a wig shop so

that I could conceal my bald head after the retreat! Once I had the wig in place I found the courage to
tell my mum of my plans. To my surprise she took it fairly easily – I had been anticipating massive
grief because my mum and her generation were, like me, brought up as Roman Catholics. Although
this issue is still unresolved for me, it was very encouraging that my first disclosure was gently
received.
All in all, then, I approached the retreat with a fairly light heart. Having my head shaved didn't
disturb me much - apart from the bitter cold of the first night bald as a baby! I found the peachy-pink
robes quite attractive and easy to wear. To my utter surprise it was my new name which upset me.
When I heard Ayya Ariyañani say the name 'Puññanadi' the sound sank into my psyche and echoed
back 'Poo' and 'Puny' and 'Punitive'! I vaguely heard the translation as 'Rejoicing in Merit' but my
heart was too busy with misery and anger to be consoled.
The following meditation was a turmoil of rejection – how could I own such a horrid name? What on
earth had I taken on here? Who would want to know someone called Puññanadi? But mindfulness did
its quiet work and even before the meditation had finished my thoughts were converging towards
acceptance of this stranger, Puññanadi, who had just come to live within me, and a determination to
do my best to befriend her.
The battle re-ignited time and again over the next few days, until it came to me that, if I could have
the courage to tell people that my name was Puññanadi, then I could also tell them all kinds of other
unwelcome news – including news of old age, sickness and impending death. I reflected that
concealing bad news was an automatic habit of mine and often very unhelpful. This aversion towards
my new name would give me exactly the opportunities I needed to undermine this habit. The name,

Puññanadi, now seemed like a net I could cast around me to catch all unwanted thoughts rejected out
into the world around me. Once caught I could draw them into my heart and learn to live with them. I
felt stronger and happier now that I had this new tool to help me live my life, and so myself and
Puññanadi began to make our peace.

The retreat allowed for silent meditation and also for discussions and DVDs illustrating the life of
nuns in Burma and elsewhere. This mixture allowed us to take in the meaning and implications of
ordination and let it sink deep. On reflection, the retreat provided a powerful opportunity to make a
symbolic new start in life – this time with the wisdom and support to make more skilful choices.
My thanks to Ayya Ariyañani, to Ayya Aggañani (Marjo Oosterhoff) for organising the retreat and all
my ‘sisters’ in temporary ordination.
Now the question is, could I do take on the robes again – this time without a time-limit?
CanPuññanadi take long-term residence in this body, this life?

CHAPTER 10

Retreating and Re-engaging: A Year of 'Special Effort'

Noirin Sheahan · 7 min read

In this deeply personal reflection, Noirin Sheahan shares her transformative experience of a year-long retreat practice consisting of three separate 3-month retreats at different centers. The essay chronicles her journey from initial trepidation about leaving her responsibilities to the profound insights gained during intensive vipassanā practice. She explores key themes including the arising and passing of doubt, the direct experience of impermanence as expressed in the traditional chant 'anicca vata saṅkhārā,' and breakthrough moments in mettā (loving-kindness) practice where she encountered unconditional love. The account honestly addresses the challenges of re-entering ordinary life after retreat, including attachment to pleasant meditative states and the shock of losing easy access to peace and clarity. Sheahan's narrative demonstrates how intensive practice can transform one's relationship with difficult mental states like fear, anxiety, and self-doubt, while also revealing the ongoing work required to integrate retreat insights into daily living. The essay offers valuable guidance for practitioners considering extended retreat and provides realistic expectations about both the profound benefits and practical challenges of intensive Dhamma practice.

Retreating and Re-engaging; A Year of ‘Special Effort’.

Several years ago Bhante suggested I make a year-long retreat. The idea was exciting but

also daunting. How could I just disappear? What about my teaching? What about my mother?1 For a long time I could hardly think about it, but eventually plucked up the courage to commit to Sep 2011 as the start of my ‘year of special effort’.

That was about 3 years ago and once I’d made that first step, the rest evolved. I started telling people at the hospital where I teach Mindfulness that I wouldn’t be available for that year. Every time I said the words, my commitment grew. Although Bhante had suggested a full year retreat in the East somewhere, I eventually decided 3 retreats of 3-months each separated by a month at home was as much as I could undertake, given my

situation with respect to my mother.

I started with the annual 3-month retreat at the Insight Meditation Society, in Barre, Massachusetts. Then I spent December in Dublin and joined Bhante and three others for

the Satipanya winter retreat till March. The final three months were spent in Gaia House,
Devon, which has a separate wing for up to about 20 yogis doing personal retreats. There is nothing like an ambitious program to show up delusion! Now that it's all over and I struggle to take up the threads of life again, I remember the delightful relief of not having to fill my diary with dates for meetings etc. last autumn. The freedom of it – a whole year with no responsibilities, no roles, not having to be somebody! All I was expected to do was to breathe and walk and let the Dhamma filter through – and that's my favourite pastime anyhow! I was in such giddy delight that, before I even met them, I
loved everybody on the IMS retreat! What a come down then, to find myself confused and tongue-tied during most of those first few days when we were encouraged to chat and
get to know one another. The first Dhamma teaching filtered through as a painful lesson in over-expectation - it was a relief to enter the silence.
Naturally there were many ups and downs during each retreat. Doubt, especially self-doubt is perhaps my mind's favourite dead-end, and I found myself hammering away at the walls of this prison again and again, protesting my need to know exactly what was going on and what would happen if … until eventually I would relax as a crack in the wall appeared to reveal the open space beyond where no assurances were needed. For a
while I would breathe easily in a gentle universe where I don't need to know so much, and that which I do clearly know e.g. sensations and feelings, dissolve willingly into the unknown moment after moment. As the year went on, it became easier to discern this opening into freedom, and to accept it gratefully when it came my way. A few lines from
our morning chant sometimes floated through as a reflection on the experience:
Truly all that is conditioned is transient;
It is their nature to arise and pass away;
1 My mum, Maire, is now 86 years old and still living independently at home. But, since the death of my
brother, Conor, and my father, Maurice, I am her main support. Happily she also has support from others in
the family as well friends and neighbours, but still ... the deep mother-daughter attachment is hard for both
of us to bear, and even harder to let go!

Once arisen, they disappear;
Their cessation is happiness2.
It was the last line especially, that become clearer, more heartfelt: cessation is happiness
As one who is usually so attached to precise definitions, I began instead to relish this possibility of release from definition. The analogy of birds in the air leaving no footprints
in the sky seemed apt, and the soaring joy of this traceless existence captivated me so completely I could willingly forgo my usual preference to mull over truth in my mind. These moments confirmed the Dhamma as my deepest love in life, my escape from the limitations of what I already know and understand. But the walls of the prison would rebuild themselves and less noble thoughts pull me back to 'reality' – worries or regrets perhaps – and my lofty idealism would have to do battle with guilt and fear and the host
of emotions which limit and darken our view of ourselves and the world. The battle would rage within me: my recent insight into freedom, peace and stillness insisting on my
own and others' potential for goodness, the opposing emotions denying this vehemently,
until some compromise would emerge and I would find myself more willing to forgive myself and others our past misdeeds, our present limitations. Thus, from those few precious moments of feeling myself at ease within a peaceful universe, a new level of confidence and optimism established itself in my psyche, undermining that old rogue - doubt – until the next challenge!
Looking back through the year, I can see how those moments of peace became more frequent and prolonged and even ordinary. Having gone through many years of intense fear and anxiety, it was a wonderful relief to be able to relax and enjoy watching the bees
at work in the vegetable garden at Gaia House. The joy of simplicity! I am so grateful to have had this opportunity to let the Dhamma work its way into my heart, reassuring me
of the possibility of total release from suffering.
Fear had cast a particular shadow on metta practice, with just the thought of metta being
enough to send me into a spin of self-conscious performance-anxiety. Once, sitting with the anxiety of the comparing mind, I noticed a quiet radiance between the polarities of 'good enough' and 'not good enough'. The radiance gently reassured me that it wasn't remotely interested in whether I was good enough or not good enough. It was equally at

ease with either scenario, or neither. I recognised this as the experience of unconditional
love. It was pouring forth quietly, unobtrusively, demanding nothing in return. This was
perhaps the most beautiful experience of my life, and yet the ‘doing’ mind soon wanted to turn away and get on with the next thing. The fact of being in a universe where unconditional love flows freely was so hard to assimilate – what did that imply for all my
anxious ‘doing’? Was it all unnecessary? My mind went into a quiet stupor for a day or so, numbed by the immensity of the revelation, until I found myself gazing into the branches of a great maple tree, murmuring “I’m not separate from all this”. The relief of
knowing I was truly part of the universe broke through with tears. After the tears, I felt a
lazy, hazy, satisfied attachment to this great prize – wanting to pack my bags and go home! Thus, happily for the ‘doing’ mind, it recognised there was a lot more work to do!
2 A stanza from the Vipassana Verses: Anicca vata sankhara, Uppada vaya dhammino, Uppajjitva
nirujjhanti, Tesam vupasamo sukkho.

But from then on metta arose more and more frequently and this helped me to bring confidence to the formal metta practice, quelling the demons which habitually insist ‘you
can’t do this’ – or at least giving them a good run for their money!
The most challenging aspect of the year has been the re-entry into ‘ordinary life’. There were three such re-entries after each of the three retreats. In all cases the loss of easy access to pleasant mind-states came as a shock. On retreat they feel so simple, so obvious, and I fail to acknowledge the multitude of fortunate conditions which support these e.g. the silence, the space, the inspiration from teachers and other retreatants, the way good food appears on my plate without me having to shop and cook and worry about
the cost!
Back in the world, it’s been disappointing to see how easily I am captivated by sense pleasures like food and TV, how deep is my attachment to ideas of how life should be. But when I’m not being too deeply challenged, it has been wonderful to feel a new level of heartfelt goodwill for friends and family, and more compassion for the disappointment
of things not going entirely my way. And when the deeper challenges come, I can more easily resist the temptations of the old rogues of fear, anxiety, doubt, jealousy etc. and

choose a more hopeful scenario to fasten onto while I get through the mire. Or if the rogues capture me I can relax more deeply into their tight embrace, searching for the nugget of wisdom or kindness at their core; after all they are just deluded aspects of my mind trying to keep me safe in a world they do not understand or trust. Who could blame
them for such fierce love? Again, we come to some compromise and I breathe more freely, letting freedom trickle through all the rogues which accompany me in life.
My resistance to life outside of retreat highlights an attachment which, although it has the
benefit of enticing me into the practice, is also an obstacle. It means I am clinging to the freedom and wisdom gained from this. To undermine this attachment I can endeavour to
share these goodies I so dearly cherish! I can do this at the mental level, by wishing others the peace and bliss of nibbana. I am also in the privileged position of being able to
embody this wish by teaching at Satipanya and elsewhere. Thanks to all future retreatants
who thus help me along my path. May we all experience the peace and bliss of Nibbana.
Finally, may I express my gratitude to all those who helped me in this year of special effort. Sincere thanks to my mother for bearing with loneliness and all other challenges that came her way (including a leaking roof!) without disturbing my retreats, and for her
warm welcome on each return. Heartfelt thanks to all who supported Mum in my absence. I am grateful to my friends for their kindness, their interest in my ramblings, and
for helping me engage with life outside retreat. I am also indebted to my teachers at IMS
and Gaia House for their skilful guidance and compassion.
My especial thanks to Bhante Bodhidhamma for suggesting, encouraging and supporting
this retreat. For this and all his teachings and guidance over the years, may he be greatly
blessed!
Noirin Sheahan

CHAPTER 11

Homeward Bound

Noirin Sheahan · 4 min read

> *This contemplative essay explores the universal experience of transitioning from intensive retreat practice back into everyday life. Noirin Sheahan candidly examines how quickly old patterns of attachment reassert themselves after a month-long winter retreat at Satipanya, using the example of food and eating to illustrate how greed (lobha) can override the clarity gained during formal practice. Rather than falling into despair, she demonstrates how to meet these patterns with mudita (appreciative joy) and self-compassion.*
>
> *The essay offers practical insights into working with attachment and aversion in daily life meditation practice. Sheahan describes how to investigate emotionally charged feelings with curiosity rather than suppression, allowing pleasant experiences while remaining aware of their impermanent nature. She shows how the breath can serve as an anchor for developing metta and gratitude even amid the pull of worldly concerns.*
>
> *The piece concludes with the profound recognition that all beings are 'homeward bound' - drawn by an innate longing for freedom that transcends worldly attachments. This teaching resonates with the Buddhist understanding that once we glimpse the path to liberation, there is no turning back from the journey toward awakening, even as we navigate the challenges of integrating practice with daily responsibilities.*

Homeward Bound.
In the last days of retreat, my mind starts longing for home, projecting delight into the release from
the rigours of the schedule, the inward focus and constant noting. In more sober moments, it
laments the fact that my current commitment to the path will surely suffer when I’m let out into the
big bad world.
I’ve just finished a month of the winter retreat at Satipanya, and sure enough, both predictions came
true. There was the joy of release and my heart soared happily into the world beyond the gates of
Satipanya. And there was the disappointment of seeing how quickly attachments reasserted their
stranglehold. Take food for example: I had resolved to make a special effort at mudita

(appreciative
joy) at mealtimes on retreat. A surprising bonus was the ease with which I could listen to stomach
sensors telling me when enough was enough. With this came the quiet joy of non-greed – seeing
how much happier I was when I could confidently declare that that two modest meals a day is really
all I needed. Over the past years, some inner demon had chosen food as an excuse to torture me
with anxiety - what a relief to be able to chat quietly to this demon at last. So much un-necessary
suffering! But on the journey home the demon gobbled up sandwiches, chips and a scone without a
by-your-leave, and I tried lobbing a few thoughts of mudita in its direction to stem the guilt when
another scone and apple tart followed at tea time!
Contemplating the fall from grace brought a temptation towards despair. But what good is that? The
demon of greed isn't going to be overcome by aversion. I was glad to be able to detect and develop
thoughts along the lines of "OK I'm far from enlightened, but I know the right direction and I'll get
there eventually" to nudge my attitude towards acceptance and self-forgiveness.
In meditation I let myself feel the deep attachment to home amidst the backdrop of the seated
body, the waves of breath. Every sinew strained outwards towards the roof and walls, the people
beyond those walls, the memories and assurances that these walls contain. Attention was drawn to
parts of my body associated with a mental brightness which proclaimed the story of 'me' and 'mine'
in defiance of those darker regions where attention could barely skim. But as usual, curiosity got the
better of me. Exploring those darker regions, defiance crumpled into gratitude that there is more to
me than my proclamations. And that this 'more' is forgiving. Just acknowledging its presence stirs
compassion for the dukkha that currently limits my self-knowledge.
In that sense, meditation is no different at home than it is on retreat. I'm always

working at the
limits of my understanding. At home though, pleasant feelings are more abundant what with the
delights of relationships and news and entertainment not to speak of scones and apple tart! It's easy
to lose mindfulness and follow pleasant fantasies. The wake-up moment then sets the meditative
challenge. Can I allow myself to feel the pleasure generated by the associations with home? The
temptation is to quench the pleasure, assuming it represents only greed, hurry back to more neutral,
manageable sensations like the breath. It takes courage to look a bit deeper and explore the
emotionally charged bonds of attachment.
Although there is greed, this can be held in check by curiosity. Taut lines of tension clutch at feelings
of delight and the wisdom of non-greed can only creep in tentatively. As my body relaxes its grip,
delight takes on hues of anxiety & resentment as I sense myself losing my frail grasp on pleasure.
These feelings clamour for attention, and it's easy to overlook suggestions of strength and

confidence seeping in with each breath. Acknowledging these is key. Breath by breath, the bonds of
attachment transform to mudita.
Walking a tightrope between neediness and the fear of loss, the breath whispers gratitude for walls
and floors I usually take for granted. Various people and circumstances that shape my life hover
tentatively in mind, evoking their emotional footprint. In the space of meditation these dissolve into
a bewildering flux of sensations and feelings. The pleasant ones stir joy and various shades of metta,
the unpleasant ones confirm that everything dear to me will soon pass away. For a while my being
finds a precarious peace in that blessed state of non-clinging where there is the courage to love a life
that is forever slipping through my fingers, dissolving and disappearing, beyond any

possibility of
grasping or control.
Despite the new depth of understanding, it's easy to forget all that as soon I get off the cushion and
launch into everyday life. The main challenge has been to count the blessings of home, rather than
bow to the demons who insist that this just isn't good enough. With that bit more appreciation for
what is usually taken for granted, I find more compassion for what disturbs me, more trust that all
those I meet (even my nearest and dearest!) have the potential for full enlightenment, and thus are
fully deserving of my care and attention.
In the deepest sense, we are all homeward bound. The draw towards freedom exceeds all worldly
attachments. Once we sense this, there is no escape! The homing instinct keeps calling us back to
presence, to our frail grasp on wisdom, to the path of non-attachment.
Noirin / Ayya Punnyanandi

CHAPTER 12

All in the Mind

Noirin Sheahan · 2 min read

> *In this insightful essay, Noirin Sheahan challenges the common dismissive attitude toward problems that are 'all in the mind,' revealing instead that all suffering is fundamentally mental in nature. Drawing from her meditation experience, she demonstrates how physical pain and mental reaction are entirely separate phenomena - the broken leg simply heals while the mind creates the drama of suffering around it.*
>
> *Through vivid examples from walking meditation, Noirin illustrates the Buddhist teaching of the six sense spheres (āyatana), showing how sight, sensation, and mental awareness operate in distinct dimensions of experience. This direct insight reveals that while the mind weaves these separate streams into a coherent narrative, each sense door offers an alternative refuge from mental reactivity.*
>
> *The essay culminates in a powerful personal account of working with anxiety, where Noirin discovers the voluntary nature of thought and the courage required to step away from mental proliferation. Her experience demonstrates how attention can be redirected from anxious thinking to simple sense contact, offering immediate relief from suffering. This practical wisdom shows how understanding the six sense spheres provides multiple doorways to freedom, making meditation not just an academic exercise but a direct path to liberation from mental turmoil.*

Its all in the mind.
Noirin Sheahan
If we suffer a physical disease, a broken bone, a bereavement, we might get sympathy and attention. But if people suspect our problems are ‘all in the mind’ they usually want to get away as fast as they can!
And yet suffering is ‘all in the mind’. The pain of a broken bone is physical. True we might writhe in agony, convinced our leg is where suffering is located. But the leg just gets on with the business of tissue repair. It’s only the mind that panics, thinks ‘this is unbearable’, gets us moaning and contorted in an effort to sooth ourselves.
When the mind is still in meditation, we can sometimes see that physical sensations are separate from mental reactions like emotions and thoughts. In fact all of the six senses (five physical senses plus the mind which forms the sixth sense in Buddhism) occupy distinct ‘spheres’ within experience. I first saw this during walking meditation. I noticed that the sight of the foot swinging forward was totally separate

from the sensation. It was as if they occupied separate universes, different dimensions. One contained colours and shapes, the other sensations. There was no possibility of communication between the two, and it was a third dimension, the mind, that put the information together and decided they both described a foot moving forward. I was amazed that I could walk so easily even though my legs, eyes and mind were confined to separate dimensions!

This isn't just academic. The Buddha's only purpose in teaching was to point us along the path to the end of suffering. In meditation we begin to see for ourselves that suffering 'is all in the mind'. The fact that we can also experience other dimensions, where there is no suffering, allows us train the mind to stop causing us to suffer.

I learned this one time when my mind was afire with anxiety and I was only vaguely aware of sounds and sights in the environment. They seemed irrelevant by comparison to questions like - what was going on? Why couldn't I get on top of this anxiety? But for one blessed moment, attention came to rest on the sound of a bird singing. My mind relaxed momentarily but as soon as I noticed this, I went back to the more urgent business of fretting. As I did so I felt the voluntary nature of thought. I sensed myself choosing to indulge anxiety in much the same way as I might have chosen to pick up two heavy suitcases.

Now I was forced to make a choice. Would I continue burdening myself with anxious questions? It felt scary beyond words to stop, to accept the reality of not knowing what was going on, or how to get on top of anxiety. It was like taking a step over a cliff. And yet, something deep within commanded that I stop fretting, accept that I did not know any answers. With my heart in my mouth, I surrendered to that truth. Next moment, anxiety disappeared without trace!

Luckily, suffering is 'all in the mind'. And we have access to five other dimensions of experience which show us the way out. At each and every moment we can rest attention in sense contact, learn to recognize the possibility of not reacting, not picking up heavy suitcases of anxiety, depression, woe and misery. We can choose

sense contact rather than thought as our guide, step over our mental cliffs, fall into freedom.

CHAPTER 13

Summer Meadows

Noirin Sheahan · 2 min read

> *In this heartfelt personal essay, Noirin Sheahan shares her journey of discovering the wildflowers blooming at Satipanya Buddhist Retreat, sparked by reading Joanna Macey's 'Active Hope' on facing climate crisis through gratitude. What begins as an overwhelming encounter with nature's abundance becomes a profound dhamma teaching as she observes the arising of aversion, then greed, and finally doubt in her relationship with the natural world. Through mindful observation of flowers like Herb Robert, Red Campion, and Stitchwort, she learns to work skillfully with these mental formations rather than being overwhelmed by them. The essay beautifully illustrates how every aspect of life—from butterfly walks to political activism—can become part of our spiritual path. Sheahan demonstrates how mindful encounters with the vulnerable, fleeting, and unreliable aspects of nature mirror the Buddha's teachings on impermanence and offer opportunities for developing compassion and wisdom in our daily lives.*

Wildflower Wisdom

Oblivious to the pandemic and all its consequences, the wildflowers have been blooming here at Satipanya and giving me a few dhamma lessons in the process. My interest was sparked by reading Joanna Macey's 'Active Hope' last year, a guide to facing the climate crisis. One danger, she says, is that we get so overwhelmed by anxiety that we do nothing. To combat this, we need to start with gratitude: to develop and express appreciation for the natural world that supports us and is now so deeply threatened. Whatever actions we may take to combat the threat will then stem from good-will and be more effective and sustainable as a result.

So when Eddie, one of our dhamma group in Dublin, suggested a butterfly walk, I was enthusiastic. Luckily it was a beautiful sunny day and butterflies fluttered in abundance. It was a bit of a downer therefore to find aversion showing up. It all seemed so overwhelming – so many different butterflies, so many different wildflowers, so much beauty and profusion. My brain ached!

I kept reminding myself of the motivation – to develop and express appreciation for the natural world – as I adjusted myself to the news that this was going to be a long journey, that the heart was only going to open chink by chink to the biosphere. 64 years of ignoring the 'weeds' under my feet weren't going to be pushed aside that easily!

By the time those 'weeds' started blooming this year, aversion had given way to a

tentative curiosity. Little pink flowers (from a photo Eddie identified these as Herb Robert) became differentiable from a companion pink (Red Campion). When I went out for my walk, these became friends greeting me on the roadside. With their encouragement little white flowers (Stitchwort) began to form a niche in consciousness, soon followed by the taller white ones (Yarrow) and yellow ones ….
As you can probably guess, greed was now triumphing over aversion, my heart aching with desire to know and name all the flowers peering at me whenever I glanced at the hedgerow. Doubt crept in – what was the point in making my daily walks stressful? Would I not be better off to cultivate tranquility, just feeling my feet on the ground as I walked?
Remembering the motivation – appreciation for nature as a way of countering the paralyzing anxiety associated with climate crisis – I could see that the stress was worth bearing. On this side of enlightenment what relationship is free from greed? I could work with it mindfully and balance it out by spending more time admiring each flower, letting them draw me deeper into this new relationship, wishing them well as they coped with weather changes now and to come.
Maybe thanks to Joanna Macey's strategy, I now find myself on the biodiversity policy group of the Green Party. Although my expertise on Herb Robert might not save the planet, I will surely be able to compile an email list or in some way contribute to this work. No doubt greed and aversion will make their appearance here too. But that's OK, they have their place in life. Greed counters laziness, my tendency to ignore what I don't yet understand or value; aversion tells me when I've had enough, need to relax, let someone else compile that email list.

Nature, politics, committees can all be part of our path to freedom. The truth seeps in as we follow the breath in meditation, contribute to a meeting, discern one pink flower from another. Each mindful encounter with the world is to care for what is vulnerable, fleeting, unreliable – the perfect Dhamma teaching.

CHAPTER 14

As Winter Approaches

Noirin Sheahan · 2 min read

> *In this contemplative piece, Noirin Sheahan weaves together personal memories of her mother with profound Dhamma reflections on the changing seasons. Using November's transition into winter as a starting point, she explores how our dependence on physical conditions like warmth and light reveals our deep attachment to bodily experience. The essay offers an accessible introduction to the four elements teaching—earth (solidity), water (cohesion), air (movement), and fire (temperature/light)—showing how these fundamental aspects of our embodied existence provide a gateway to understanding the nature of attachment and aversion. Sheahan demonstrates how seasonal changes, particularly the 'November blues' many experience as daylight fades, can become opportunities for deeper practice rather than sources of suffering. She encourages readers to move beyond the mind's commentary and preferences to develop intimate awareness of direct physical sensations—the cold of toes, the warmth of hands—as a foundation for insight. The essay beautifully illustrates how embracing rather than resisting challenging conditions can lead to a 'welcome counterpoint to the unending chit-chat of the mind,' ultimately pointing toward our capacity to find peace even in darkness and discover the 'vibrant stimulation' in what we typically label as unpleasant experiences.*

As Winter Approaches.
Traditionally, November is the month of the dead, the ‘Holy Souls’ in Christian understanding. It’s a time to remember those we have lost. My mum died in January and I am remembering her and how she used to love this time of year - closing the curtains early and looking forward to long evenings by her fireside. For many people November has the opposite effect. As the days get shorter and the sunlight fades a gloomy depression mounts. Its humbling to see our dependence on physical basics like daylight and sunshine for optimism and good humour.
It’s also an opportunity to reflect on the teaching on the elements – earth, water, air and fire – the basis for bodily experience. Earth represents solidity; we sense this as pressure, hardness, softness, weight. We experience the water element when it spatters into our face as rain, lets eyelids skim over the delicate surface of the cornea. The air element represents movement – we sense this when we turn our head, when the legs swing forward while we walk. The fire element is responsible for the November blues; changes in temperature and light tell us that this element, like the others, is not to be taken for granted, not ours to have when we want it to discard

when we want something else.
We're very attached to bodily experience! As a baby it was our main source of pleasure and pain. Later the mental world became more prominent – the pleasure of reading, socializing, achieving, the pain of misunderstanding, rejection, failure. Delusion allows our mental life to take over the show; like James Joyce's Mr. Duffy, most of us live "at a little distance from our bodies".
The fading of heat and light at this time of year provides a wake-up-call. Warmth is the vital sign of life while light has spiritual as well as physical significance – near death experiences often report moving through a dark tunnel towards light. No wonder we are so deeply attached! To go to the root of the problem we need to rediscover the pleasure and pain of the embodied life, rest attention on cold toes or warm hands. There's the simple physicality of warmth or coolness; there's also the overlay of commentary, liking, disliking, desire & aversion. As we watch, the overlay simplifies down, and when conditions are right, stops. What a relief! An easy intimacy grows, but so delicate! It shatters with any grumbling for more heat, brighter light … Slowly and painfully we learn to drop our preferences, be grateful for whatever sensations the body offers. These sensations provide our footing in reality, a welcome counterpoint to the unending chit-chat of the mind. With our feet planted firmly in reality, our true nature can take shape.
I like to remember my mum's November evenings when she gladly turned away from the hustle and bustle of life to rest by her fireside, read her books. I can follow her lead, retreat into my body, let it become my focus for winter evenings, curl up with the book of Dhamma – the real-life one printed on direct experience. The chapter on the elements is always a good place to start. What better way to greet the cold, dark days of November than by learning to love the vibrant stimulation we term 'cold', discovering peace in darkness?

Thanks for the memories, Mum.

CHAPTER 15

2020 Lockdown Christmas

Noirin Sheahan · 2 min read

> *Written during the COVID-19 pandemic, this essay offers compassionate guidance for handling the uncertainty and stress of disrupted holiday plans. Noirin Sheahan draws on Buddhist understanding of anattā (not-self) to explain why uncertainty feels so threatening - our constructed sense of self doesn't know how to respond when we can't categorize experiences as pleasant or unpleasant. She explores how the same confusion we encounter with neutral feelings in meditation mirrors our struggle with unpredictable circumstances.*
>
> *The essay introduces a practical mantra for difficult times: "try not to make things worse than they already are." This approach emphasizes realistic expectations over spiritual perfectionism, acknowledging that we'll likely experience irritation, frustration, and other challenging emotions. Rather than adding guilt about our reactions, the teaching encourages self-care through honest preparation for difficulties.*
>
> *The piece demonstrates how Buddhist wisdom applies to everyday challenges, showing how mindful action - even without solutions to our problems - can lift spirits and build resilience. It concludes with the possibility of transforming the initial survival mantra into "let's make the best of things," illustrating how acceptance can create space for unexpected joy.*

2020 Christmas Mantra “Try not to make things worse!”
How can we prepare for Christmas this year? We might not know till a week beforehand whether we will be able to meet friends and family. Should I book a flight home? Will there be twelve people for dinner, or will it just me and the dog? Would it be irresponsible to visit my gran? How will she feel if I don’t? And don’t even start thinking about New Year and Brexit!
Uncertainty is hard to bear. We sometimes see this in meditation when we explore neutral feeling. Because we can’t decide whether the sensations are pleasant or unpleasant, we also can't decide which of our habitual reactions to choose: Should I be grasping at this, trying to hold on tight? Should I be pushing it away? The 'self' we construct in our attempts to navigate the world is in a dither! It can feel very threatened. Sitting with the fear, we learn the difficult but liberating truth of anatta 'not-self'. That we can stop constructing a belief 'this is me'; and when we stop this construction process, we stop grasping at pleasant feelings, struggling against unpleasant ones, getting into a dither about neutral ones. Such relief!
Then we get up from the cushion, remember Christmas, Covid, Brexit, and another

self gets constructed in a flash, asking the same old questions, demanding answers! Until we're fully liberated uncertainty will be hard to bear. It brings out our habitual demons like irritation, depression, even total panic. These are made ten times worse because the expectation is for happiness at Christmas. On top of all that our lofty spiritual ideals might add in hefty doses of guilt and shame for every transgression. Because of living such a quiet life here at Satipanya, I'll be spared this turmoil. But if I was out in the world, I would start practicing my favorite mantra for hard times: "try not to make things worse than they already are!"

I'd take time to sit down and envisage what the 'festive' season will really feel like - probably more stressful than joyful; that I'll have to expect to be irritated, frustrated, exhausted much of the time; that I'll probably see myself shooting second and third arrows – grumbling & blaming and mulling over how unfair it all is. The motivation here is not to depress myself. It's self-care. If I'm expecting my demons, I'll be in the best place to look after myself wisely when they arrive.

I've heard the spiritual life described as one of ever decreasing expectations! Delusion easily persuades us that we can be good-humored and serene in all circumstances. But this makes any fall from grace extra painful. With practice we learn to embrace our shortcomings. The mantra "try not to make things worse" provides a reasonable goal – not too lofty, but very practical.

When the demons appear I would recite my mantra, summon all my willpower to resist their temptation, find something purposeful to do, do it mindfully. Even when we have no practical answers to all our pressing questions, its amazing how a few moments of mindful action can lift the spirits, make us feel more hopeful,

stronger. With that I would change the mantra to "let's make the best of things". Wishing for the best, preparing for the worst, it's entirely possible that we might have a happy Christmas after all!

CHAPTER 16

Exiting Lockdown

Noirin Sheahan · 2 min read

> *In this timely reflection, Noirin Sheahan examines the spiritual challenges and opportunities that arise during transitions, particularly as we emerge from periods of enforced withdrawal like lockdown or retreat back into active social and work life. She identifies the common patterns we experience during such transitions: projecting excessive happiness into future experiences, only to face disappointment when reality doesn't match our expectations, or conversely, becoming attached to withdrawal and dreading the return to busyness.*
>
> *The essay presents mindfulness as the key tool for navigating these transitions skillfully. When caught up in pleasant expectations, Noirin suggests we pause to savor the anticipatory joy itself as a form of muditā (appreciative joy), cultivating gratitude while grounding our expectations in reality. When experiencing dread about re-engagement, she encourages us to fully feel this unpleasantness as a direct experience of dukkha—the unsatisfactory nature of conditioned existence and the First Noble Truth.*
>
> *Drawing on fundamental Buddhist insights about suffering and liberation, Noirin transforms what might seem like mundane psychological challenges into profound opportunities for spiritual development. She emphasizes the importance of patience with our inevitable mistakes and the value of community support and daily mindfulness practice in navigating life's transitions with 'minimal misery, maximal learning and deeper gratitude.'*

Exiting Lockdown

As the restrictions start easing again, many of you will be engaging with social and work life more fully. Similarly for us here at Satipanya, as the winter retreat closes, we start looking outwards, forwards, planning outings, visits, work.

Transitions are tricky. We so easily lose the run of ourselves, expect too much of whatever is on the horizon. You might be dreaming of booking a meal in your favorite restaurant, on retreat we're dreaming of the first breakfast when we can chat. We project too much happiness into these and get disappointed, bewildered, angry when the initial happiness fades, leaving us as grumpy as ever! Or it can be the other way round, we suddenly realise how attached we've grown to the enforced withdrawal of lockdown, of retreat, and dread all the coming busyness. Most of us suffer from both afflictions – expecting wonders one moment, dreading change the next!

The good news in all this is that transitions are also rich opportunity for spiritual

practice. Its where we see our attachments and delusion most clearly, and thereby find a precious opportunity to work with these, find new ways of responding.
As always, mindfulness is key. Can we tune into whatever emotions are driving our thoughts, actions, speech? Say we're being fired up by expectation. Stop a moment, acknowledge and explore this experience. Expectation usually has a pleasant, happy flavour. Stopping to savor that is a form of mudita – appreciative joy. It is good to be able to look forward to things, to have faith that we can enjoy life. Anyone who has suffered from depression knows what a great gift this is. Stopping to enjoy our anticipation of happiness cultivates gratitude for mental well-being as well as whatever we are looking forward to. Stopping also grounds us, makes our expectations more realistic, lessens any disappointment if things don't go exactly as our dreams predicted.
Say we're being driven in the opposite direction – dreading the thought of going back into society. Can we feel the unpleasantness, allow it to register fully? There is truth here too – going back into society will not bring us lasting happiness. Though this insight is painful, we have the good fortune of knowing that the Buddha saw value in this pain and formulated it as the first noble truth; he told us we must fully understand dukkha (the unsatisfying nature of life) to become liberated. Knowing that the pain we are experiencing is also a spiritual insight lifts our spirits. The burden of dread diminishes, and we might even start looking forward to a meal in our favourite restaurant – after all its another opportunity for spiritual insight!
As we see-saw between these extremes we learn to savor here and now the happiness we're projecting into the future, and to embrace the unhappiness that teaches us the first noble truth. None of this is easy however, and we need to be patient with our many mistakes as we fly up into the sky with false expectations and get rudely dumped on the ground with disappointment and bewilderment. Transitions are precious. Transitions are tough. Good friends and a daily mindfulness practice help us transit from our various lockdowns back into society with minimal misery, maximal learning and deeper gratitude for all that society offers.

CHAPTER 17

Mindfulness meets mettā

Noirin Sheahan · 3 min read

This essay by Noirin Sheahan explores the intersection between vipassanā and mettā practice through the lens of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10). While classical loving-kindness meditation involves bringing people to mind and wishing them well, Sheahan reveals how the Buddha's teaching on practicing the four foundations 'internally' and 'externally' offers an embodied form of mettā rooted in direct awareness. She demonstrates how 'external' practice—such as being mindful of others walking nearby while doing walking meditation—naturally cultivates connection and goodwill toward others while remaining grounded in present-moment awareness. The essay provides practical guidance for this approach, addressing both the joyful connection that can arise and the challenges such as irritation or self-consciousness that may surface when opening awareness to include others. Through examples like sitting on a bus or walking in a park, Sheahan shows how this practice helps develop resilience in interpersonal situations, reduces feelings of isolation, and strengthens our fundamental interconnectedness with others—all while maintaining the precise, moment-to-moment awareness that characterizes mindfulness meditation.

In classical metta practice we bring people to mind and wish them well. Often this is placed in contrast to vipassana, or mindfulness practice. However, one of the exercises in the Satipatthana Sutta – the teaching on the “Four Foundations for Mindfulness” - can be seen as a form of metta practice which is very firmly embedded in mindfulness.

In this teaching, the Buddha describes a number of exercises which bring us along the path to liberation. He starts with mindfulness of breathing and other exercises relating to the body, follows with the various feelings we experience, then the different mind-states we can notice, and ends with his core teachings, showing us how we can study these mindfully, moment after moment.

After each exercise he gives a number of options for practice. The first option – to do the exercises “internally” or “externally” – can be used as a form of metta practice. The most common interpretation is that ‘internal’ means our subjective, felt experience, while ‘external’ means knowing objectively what is happening. We can feel angry (internal practice) and also know that we are angry (external practice). Knowing experience both subjectively and objectively is the essence of mindfulness – knowing what we’re experiencing while we’re experiencing.

Another interpretation for this exercise has ‘internal’ referring to our own experience and ‘external’ to that of another person. Becoming aware of others as they walk is to practice walking meditation ‘externally’. This gives a very practical way of sensitising ourselves to others.

Say we are walking in a park. We bring awareness to sensations - the feet lifting and falling, the knees bending and straightening, the arms swinging. After a while, we broaden the awareness to notice anyone else walking nearby. Their feet are also lifting and falling … knees bending … To keep ourselves focussed we note “he / she is walking … walking”. This is to practice walking meditation ‘externally’.

Sometimes it brings a sense of joy and connection to practice externally. We suddenly feel quite friendly towards whoever is walking nearby, interested in them. The link with metta is obvious here. It helps to bring attention back regularly to our own body so as to keep the meditation grounded, remind ourselves what the other person might be experiencing. This often strengthens goodwill.

Sometimes the opposite happens, we don’t want to acknowledge that others are walking nearby. It might bring up irritation, we might suddenly feel hostile to a complete stranger. Or we might feel self-conscious or shy, perhaps even intrusive, as though we’re peering into their private experience. External practice can show up underlying issues we have in relating to others, and is thus an excellent way of helping us work skilfully with these.

It's helpful to bring awareness back inside our own body when an emotion becomes strong. This has a steadying effect. Instead of noting “he / she is walking” we note ‘irritation’ or ‘self-conscious’ or whatever word fits. As we bear with the emotion mindfully, it starts to burn out. Within a few minutes we may even feel friendly towards whoever disturbed us. This gives confidence that we can move beyond negativity triggered by interactions with others, strengthen resilience in the face of interpersonal conflict.

Practicing mindfulness externally isn’t always a challenge – it can be uplifting and a bit of fun! As we’re sitting on a bus, we feel our sitting posture and then reflect that others are sitting nearby. The heightened awareness of others can stir joy. When we’re feeling happy, we remember that there are others who are also feeling this way. This helps to ground the happiness, prevent it spinning off into excitement and daydreams. Likewise, when we’re feeling tired and worn out, we can remember that this is being experienced by many others right now. Suddenly we don’t feel so alone.

The exercises offer a very practical and embodied way to strengthen our deep connection with others. Why not give them a try?

CHAPTER 18

Everyday Mindfulness

Noirin Sheahan · 3 min read

This essay explores the Buddha's teaching on 'full awareness' (sampajañña) in daily life, moving beyond formal meditation practice to integrate mindfulness into ordinary activities. Noirin Sheahan examines the Buddha's specific instructions for maintaining awareness while 'going forth and returning' and 'looking ahead and looking away,' showing how these simple practices can transform routine activities like commuting to work or shopping for groceries into opportunities for insight.

The essay demonstrates how broad-brush noting techniques differ from detailed Mahasi practice, using phrases like 'going to work' to maintain contextual awareness alongside present-moment sensation. Through practical examples, it reveals how everyday mindfulness can expose hidden emotions and attitudes - such as reluctance about work or the subtle dukkha of transience when activities fail to deliver lasting satisfaction.

Particularly valuable is the distinction between full awareness and self-awareness, clarifying that mindfulness doesn't require constant self-monitoring but rather clear engagement with present activity. The teaching offers accessible methods for maintaining continuity of practice throughout daily life, supporting practitioners in developing consistent awareness that extends far beyond formal sitting meditation.

Full Awareness

The Buddha asks us to act in ‘full awareness’ when we go about the ordinary tasks of daily life. The first exercise he prescribes is full awareness while going fourth and returning.

Say we are walking to our workplace. As we note the sensations of walking in the legs and feet, attention is drawn into the present moment. For full awareness the context must also be born in mind: we are going to work. Full awareness requires a broad understanding of our actions alongside the stream of sensations that accompanies them.

Instead of the detailed note we use for Mahasi practice, broad-brush phrases work better here. On our way to work we can note: ‘Going to work… going to work.’ Sounds obvious but how easy it is to forget the bigger picture. We go to work on autopilot, so

familiar with every step of the journey that we can devote our time to worrying or daydreaming. The note ‘going to work’ lifts us out of the doldrums, lets us feel more purposeful, helps us appreciate our surroundings.

Reminding ourselves of the broader context can expose hidden emotions. We might feel a deep reluctance to note ‘going to work’, for example, but feel happy later in the days as we retrace our steps, noting ‘going home’. This highlights a negative attitude to work. If we do not make the note, that negativity might later sneak out as carelessness, not bothering to finish tasks properly, alienating colleagues and making the situation worse.

However, if we note ‘going to work’ the weariness or anxiety or depression we associate with work comes to the fore. Although it might feel worse than heading for the job on autopilot, bearing with the feelings means the negativity can be acknowledged. Acknowledging suffering is a form of self-care and has a very beneficial impact psychologically. We are much less likely to act from negativity once we’re aware of it. We might note some satisfaction in completing a task, find pleasure in cooperating with colleagues. Imperceptibly, perhaps, the situation starts to improve.

Even for less emotionally charged activities, the experience of going forward can differ from returning. Say I have to nip down to the shop for groceries. I may be bright and purposeful at the outset. My step is light and I look with interest at the neighbour’s gardens. Coming home my steps might be more plodding, my eyes downcast. What I am seeing here is the dukkha of transience. Each new activity offers a glimmer of hope that this world can make us happy. But when the choice between carrots and broccoli, biscuits and cake have been made and all the money spent, it becomes clear that my shopping spree has not delivered the goods I was secretly hoping for.

Of course the pattern can vary. For instance, the prospect of meeting friends may find us brighter on the way home than heading out. Worthwhile noting as it helps us appreciate our friends when we see how they lift our mood.

The second task the Buddha prescribes is to be fully aware when looking ahead and looking away. Say we are returning from the shops on autopilot, rehashing our problems, eyes vaguely scanning the pavement. Now and again, we look up and ahead in a semi-automatic health-and-safety check of the broader environment. If we have primed ourselves to see ‘looking ahead’ as worth registering, that automatic check might remind us to be mindful. Looking ahead reminds us of our destination, so we can return to full awareness instead of being lost in negativity.

While looking ahead is often stimulating, looking away often carries subtle dukkha. A friend practising mindfulness of speech found that when reacting against what another person was saying, her head turned slightly aside. Once she had detected the pattern, she was then able to use this as a ‘wake-up’ call to notice aversion and her communication could then be much more honest and straightforward.

Full awareness does not mean self-awareness. Say we are preparing dinner. We may be cutting carrots, too absorbed in the task to note ‘preparing dinner’ or ‘cutting carrots’. Then suddenly we become aware of ‘me’ who is cutting carrots and worry that we weren’t being mindful because we hadn’t been self-aware. That’s a mistake. If we hadn’t been lost in thought while cutting carrots, then we were being mindful. The sense of self comes and goes and can disappear altogether when we are fully absorbed in an activity.

Following the Buddha’s exercises for Full Awareness supports mindfulness throughout all aspects of daily life. Instead of taking ourselves and our situation for granted we wake up to the extraordinary treasure we call awareness.

CHAPTER 19

Healing the Mind-Body Relationship

Noirin Sheahan · 3 min read

This essay explores a specific meditation exercise from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10) - noting 'There is a body' during formal practice. Noirin Sheahan guides us through the transformative process of objectifying our relationship with the physical form, moving from taking the body for granted to experiencing it as neither 'me' nor 'mine.' Through detailed experiential descriptions, she reveals how this simple noting practice can lead to profound shifts in perception - from identifying with the body to recognizing its objective nature, from ownership to gratitude, from delusion to clarity. The essay addresses the complex psychological dynamics of our mind-body relationship, acknowledging how we oscillate between identifying with physical sensations and mental formations like feelings, perceptions, and consciousness. It offers practical guidance for healing our relationship with embodied existence, recognizing the body as a reliable partner in meditation that grounds us in reality and provides a stable foundation for awareness practice.

There is a Body: Exploring the mind-body relationship.

One of the exercises given in the Satipatthana Sutta (often considered the most important teaching because it guides us along a ‘direct path’ to liberation and is suited to both lay and monastic practitioners) is to note: “There is a body” while sitting in formal meditation.

This might provoke the thought “Of course there’s a body, I’m sitting here, what’s the point in stating the obvious?” A perfectly reasonable question. But remember we’re in formal meditation, so questions are just another thing to be aware of. So we note ‘’questioning … questioning’ and explore the experience of questioning. What flavours do we find here? The flavour of uncertainty perhaps? That’s one I find quite easily in meditation – at least one thing I can usually count on!

Changing the noting word to “Uncertainty … uncertainty…” allows me relax into a new view of experience. Sometimes I need to relax and allow uncertainty show me its nebulous aspect. Clouds of doubt may seem to be puffing out of the body. Where am I in all this strangeness? Sometimes I seem to be centred in one or other of the puffing clouds. Sometimes I seem to be lured back inside the tissues of the body. The noting

words might change to “heaviness … heaviness …” as I register the earthy nature of the body. The closer I get, the more certain I feel. Something seems reliable at last. For a moment!

For a moment I know the hardness and heaviness of the bones in the arms, the back, the legs, the skull, and then uncertainty creeps in again: Whose arms? … There seem to be arms hanging from my shoulders as usual. And if I try, I can lift them. But the notion ‘my arms’ doesn’t seem to fit. The phrase “There is a body” comes back to mind and now finds resonance. This no longer seems to be stating the obvious, but a lifeline, a way of making sense of a strange and unsettling situation.

Knowing the body objectively as fostered by the phrase “there is a body”, I sense gratitude for its stability, its powers of movement; for the life it offers, moment after moment. And yet it is, in this moment at least, quite obviously not me, not mine. Another question arises: How can something so close, so intimate, be other than me and mine? In answer, fear and aversion displace gratitude, compete for dominance, struggle to proclaim their story. But neither can get a lasting grip on the situation; the body simply breathes through them. It takes no notice, bless it!

The body-mind relationship is complex. At times we identify with the body, at other times with some aspect of the mind: feelings, perceptions, habits, consciousness. Its like being made up of a squabbling committee! And yet all our complex mental life, our hopes, fears, ambitions, dreams – all depend on their being a body breathing away quietly in the background, heart pumping, stomach digesting, feet walking.

In our delusion, we take this miracle of biology totally for granted. Not a healthy way of relating to our earthly nature. The Satipatthana exercise of noting “there is a body” gives us a practical way of healing the mind-body relationship.

Like all intimate relationships, the mind-body one is a challenge. Who likes being totally dependent? And yet here we are, tied up within a very unreliable, mortal body, full of blood, sweat and tears, liable to feel pain at any moment, prone to illness, growing older and less able day by day. No wonder the mind tries to deny such an unedifying relationship, escape into fantasy!

Luckily the body holds no grudges. And luckily, greed, hatred and delusion are no more permanent and reliable than gratitude, compassion or any other state of mind. Within the gaze of mindfulness, the body is the perfect partner. It puts a limit on fantasies of hope and fear, and gives delusion free reign to express distress and displeasure at being tied up in chains of mortality. When the storm abates, its there, ready to get on with the practicalities of life.

Try the exercise sometime: sit in meditation and note “There is a body”. Let the reflection take you on whatever merry-go-round it likes, trusting this as the Buddha’s suggestion for how we might heal our mind-body relationship.

CHAPTER 20

Nibbāna is Close at Hand!

Noirin Sheahan · 2 min read

This essay examines the Buddha's initial reluctance to teach after his Awakening, revealing profound insights about the nature of liberation. Noirin Sheahan draws on the Buddha's own experiences to challenge romanticized notions of transcendence, showing how even after Awakening, the Buddha remained fully human—concerned about frustration, aging, and physical pain. The essay explores how true wisdom manifests not as detached bliss, but through the brahmavihāras (divine abodes): mettā (loving-kindness), karuṇā (compassion), muditā (appreciative joy), and upekkhā (equanimity). Rather than delivering us from worldly concerns, liberation deepens our sensitivity and connection to others. The Buddha's equanimity when facing rejection of his teachings, and his joy (muditā) in witnessing others' spiritual progress, demonstrate how Awakening transforms rather than eliminates human experience. The essay concludes with the powerful insight that Nibbāna is not separate from ordinary life but represents 'ordinary life known for what it is'—a knowing that accompanies us through daily decisions and life's inevitable changes.

Nibanna is Close at Hand!

As you may know, when the Buddha became enlightened he first thought that there was no point in trying to teach others how to follow in his footsteps. He felt that the enlightened understanding he had achieved was so subtle, so hard to see, that nobody would be able to understand him and teaching would only be frustrating. It was the Dhamma teacher Rob Burbea (now sadly deceased) who pointed out the irony – the Buddha's first thought as an enlightened being was to avoid getting frustrated!

This irony challenges simplistic notions of transcendence. The Buddha's wisdom protects him from suffering because he knows better than to identify with his body or mind. But this does not make him carless of what happens to his body, indifferent to the contents of his mind. Carelessness and indifference don't appear to be options for an enlightened being. Transcendence only manifests in some form of goodwill – friendliness, compassion, appreciative joy or equanimity.

The latter quality, equanimity, comes to our rescue when life disappoints or frustrates us. The Buddha only undertook the hard work of teaching after being persuaded that there were some who would understand and follow in his footsteps. Disappoint-

ment at those who rejected his teaching could then be offset by knowing the immense value of his work overall. And so the Buddha could remain equanimous when people disputed, dismissed or scorned his teaching.

The joy of seeing that some people were able to accept, work with, and at times even to understand his teaching would also have been an enormous support to the Buddha's mission. This is a form of mudita: appreciating the potential for liberation as he sees it manifesting, taking shape, affecting change, in another being.

Going back to his earlier reluctance to tire himself out by attempting the seemingly hopeless task of teaching: The incident reminds us of the humanity of the Buddha. He never claimed to be anything other than a normal human being and as we see here, took care to minimize distress for himself even after enlightenment. As an old man, close to death, the Buddha describes his body as wracked in pain from morning to night. He says this in response to Ananda's request that he prolong his life for the sake of all those he could help. This story too shows us that the Buddha was not superhuman and was deeply cognizant of his aging body and physical limitations. He was not operating from a lofty blissful plane outside of his feeble and painful body.

These incidents from the life of the Buddha remind us not expect that liberation will deliver us to a state of bliss where we're oblivious to the problems of the world. Instead we grow ever more sensitive, feel our connection with others more keenly.

It also reminds us not to imagine Nibanna as separate to ordinary daily life. Nibanna is close at hand! Perhaps we could imagine it as a knowing which is in intimate contact with humanity, accompanying us through decisions on how to live and what livelihood to follow and when to relinquish our hold on life.

Ordinary life, in other words. Known for what it is.

CHAPTER 21

Greeting the Devadutta

Noirin Sheahan · 6 min read

> *This deeply personal essay chronicles Noirin Sheahan's journey through major throat cancer surgery and recovery, framed as an encounter with a 'devadutta' (messenger from the gods). The essay begins with her diagnosis requiring removal of the pharynx, oesophagus, and larynx, leaving her unable to speak or eat normally. Rather than viewing this as pure catastrophe, she recognizes the illness as a profound teaching on impermanence - showing how all pleasures, including speaking and eating, must eventually end.*
>
> *The narrative follows her from pre-surgery meditation sessions supported by the sangha community, through the initial post-operative nightmare of fear and disorientation in intensive care, to gradual acceptance and healing. She describes the terror of inhabiting an alien body, the loss of familiar sensations, and overwhelming anxiety. Yet through mindful engagement - deliberately turning her wrists and ankles as acts of choosing life - and sustained by the mettā of friends and community, she finds moments of profound communion with truth beyond the self.*
>
> *The essay illuminates how physical crisis can become a gateway to deeper Dhamma understanding, demonstrating practical approaches to working with aversion and fear while emphasizing the crucial role of sangha support in times of great dukkha.*

Greeting the Devadutta!
It has been a challenging but very rich time for practice these past six months. I won't attempt a full
report here, but maybe over the next year I'll reflect and write some more if it seems useful. Here I'll
just focus on the time around the operation.
As many of you know I'd been having throat pain and difficulty swallowing for over a year before a
major cancer was diagnosed in July of this year. The news was grim: major surgery required to
remove the tumour, which would also mean removing the pharynx (linking the back of the mouth
with the rest of the throat) the oesophagus (food pipe) and the larynx (voice box). The surgeons would
then take a section from the jejunum (small bowel) to replace the oesophagus, while the

trachea
(wind pipe) would be diverted to the front of the neck, so I would breathe through this opening rather
than through the nose and mouth. Even with all this surgery, the odds were only 50:50 that the
outcome would be successful, with the first two weeks post-op being critical. Because of losing the
voice box, the only way to speak after the operation would be with an electro-larynx (a mechanical
sound source held against the throat), and perhaps several months later a ‘voice valve’ could be
inserted in the throat. How well I could speak and swallow food would depend on how well the tongue
and jaw and other tissues healed after the operation.
And that was the best scenario! If, on opening up the throat they found the tumour had grown too
close to major blood vessels then the surgery would have to be aborted, and no other treatment could
be offered.
With only two weeks between the diagnosis and the surgery my mood swept between bright “it will all
work out somehow” bravado, through to fear, confusion and all shades in between. There were
moments of calm too, and the faith that my core desire for this life, to come to know and understand
the Dhamma, would not suffer. Indeed I could only profit from this ‘devadutta’ (messenger from the
gods) showing me the reality that all pleasures, including the pleasures of speaking and eating, must
sooner or later come to an end. Bhante reminded me that 50:50 odds weren’t all that bad, and
optimistically predicted that that within a year I’d be well enough to help him with some interviews at
Satipanya. His vision helped me meet the devadutta with some enthusiasm.
Messages of goodwill started pouring in from friends and family and from so many of you who I had
met on retreats or through teaching. I thought I’d better try to harness all this good energy, and the
evening before the surgery friends from our Dublin meditation group gathered round

my hospital bed
for a sit. At the same time, Bhante led a sit at Satipanya dedicated to my healing and friends all
around Ireland and even throughout Europe joined in. The collective outpouring of compassion and
goodwill lifted my spirits and by the following morning I was in good heart for the surgery.
I woke, twelve hours later, to find my great friends Margaret and Pat, beaming at me. The operation
had gone well – no hitches. In my post-anaesthetic blur, I was also euphoric and, unable to speak,
kept tracing out the letters 'love' in the air. But when I woke the next day it was as if into a nightmare.
I found myself terrified of my new reality, terrified of life, wanting to curl up into a ball and shut out
the whole world. My body felt alien, a strange new entity from which my mind recoiled in dread. I
didn't have much pain, but it was as if I didn't recognise much of my body. Partly this may have been
the effect of the anaesthetic, and partly, as I found out later, that many nerves were cut during
surgery, so that I had lost sensation in much of my neck and tongue. I could barely move and
strange-tasting secretions flooded my mouth and throat. I couldn't swallow them back - surely I
would drown? It took a long time to trust that my airway was now separate from my mouth so the
flood couldn't drown me.
I was in the semi-darkness of ICU (Intensive Care Unit) hooked up to a ventilator to help me breathe,
heart and blood pressure monitors, a urinary catheter as well as several other tubes draining away
fluid from the wounds in my neck and stomach. Every so often a nurse would insert a tube into my
mouth or windpipe to suck out secretions. All around me machines clunked and bleeped.
My body burned with anxiety and I felt weak, helpless and immensely frightened. Where was peace or
goodness to be found? Remembering the meditation of the pre-op day and the many

cards and
goodwill messages I had received, I sensed that the surrounding ocean of goodwill was the only thing

carrying me through. As for myself, I felt myself to be completely out of metta or courage. But
goodwill there was, though I could not acknowledge it at the time: through little gaps in the mayhem I
would murmur in my heart ‘this is the Dhamma unfolding’ to help me remember the greater truth. I
found I could turn my ankles and wrists. Each turn was a deliberate choice to engage with life,
especially with this new body which frightened me so. Turn by turn the seconds and hours slipped by.
During those first nightmare days, my friend Margaret was the up-front manifestation of all the wide
ocean of goodwill that surrounded me. For hours she sat there, holding my hand, or placing cool
cloths on my forehead and limbs. Her presence was calming. It was calm I craved, not stimulation of
any sort. What conditions could favour calm? I tried to minimise input from the world. Even opening
and reading the cards that were still arriving brought up emotion. I opened just one or two a day, and
so, over several weeks, the huge outpouring of compassion for my situation trickled gradually into my
heart.
Conversation mostly brought a host of emotional reactions, now that I could only scrawl words on a
whiteboard to reply. How to make visiting hours a support as opposed to another challenge? I asked
family not to call – I reckoned the dukkha of attachment to my previous ‘caregiver’ role would be too
much to bear in my vulnerable condition. I asked for only a few women friends whom I sensed as
calming ‘yin’ presences, and who I felt would be happy to sit quietly and just ‘be there’. Most men
with their more stimulating ‘yang’ energies were barred for those first weeks!
Touch became an important means of contact, now that speech was gone. There were

precious
moments when I felt a warm, calm energy flowing from my friends' hands into my heart and mind.
Then I would be alone again, working as best I could with aversion; turning my wrists with mindful
deliberation, turning my ankles, choosing the reality on offer.
When I could relax deeply I would often come to a scared stiff edge of reason with my mind
desperately afraid of some dark reality being presented through my body. But time and again I found
some channel through the darkness – a channel of 'unknowing' I called it – a meeting with that which
lies beyond the self. This was always a wonderful experience. Each time that blessed channel opened
I knew again that the deepest desire in life is not for good health or any of the wonders that world can
offer, but for this deep communion with truth. At these moments I could greet the devadutta gladly.
These moments inspired me to continue the work with anxiety and other aversive mind-states, to
keep turning towards them rather than being overcome and defined by them. And, with the aid of
doctors and nurses and the whole health-care system and medication and those machines that
clunked and bleeped, my body started to recover. As I grew stronger physically, some of the anxiety
receded. I began to feel my way back into social life with the understanding and encouragement of
friends. When I could bear the thought of the outside world, I could look through my cards and know
there was a deep wellspring of compassion and goodwill around me. And so, little by little, I began to
relax into my new life.

CHAPTER 22

Laryngectomy

Noirin Sheahan · 18 min read

> *In this profoundly honest and moving essay, Noirin Sheahan reflects on her experience of losing her natural voice following laryngectomy surgery. She explores the practical challenges of communication through whiteboards and electronic devices, the social isolation that can arise, and the deeper psychological and spiritual implications of such a significant physical change. The essay traces her journey from initial denial through miraculous thinking and daydreams of healing, to eventual acceptance and recognition of grief as a natural response to loss.*
>
> *Drawing on key Buddhist teachings, Noirin examines how physical disability challenges our sense of identity and self-worth. She references the final link of paṭicca samuppāda (Dependent Origination) to understand how we 'take birth' in concepts of ourselves, and explores the arising of shame, anger, and the desire 'not to be' when reality doesn't match our self-image. The essay sensitively addresses misconceptions about kamma and disability, while finding profound Dhamma lessons in the experience of living with a significant physical limitation.*
>
> *With characteristic humor and insight, Noirin shows how even the most challenging circumstances can become teachers, referring to her condition as 'Devadutta' - a messenger of difficult but valuable teachings. This essay offers valuable perspectives for anyone facing illness, disability, or major life changes, demonstrating how mindfulness and Buddhist wisdom can transform suffering into understanding.*

Laryngectomy Dhamma.
Hello again! First an update: I'm living in my own home again – just came back last week. Many thanks
to all my friends and family for helping me get this far, and especial thanks to Margaret and Pat with
whom I have been staying since I left hospital in September. For their friendship, tireless care,
encouragement and quiet, unfussy kindness, I am truly grateful.
What follows is another reflection on life since my laryngectomy (removal of the vocal chords) last July..
This time I'm going to explore my experience of living without my natural voice. I'm only scraping the

surface of this teaching. In fact this essay is my first attempt to reflect on the experience. But for what
it's worth ... here goes.
At many levels its easier than I could have imagined. Like the way shopkeepers hardly bat an eye when I
write on the whiteboard instead of asking them verbally for what I want. Texts and emails still work
fine. And among friends, when discussions get deep, the slow pace of writing can be OK. It gives time
for relaxation and reflection by contrast to the fast pace of speech. And at times it can be great to be
able to take a back-seat and listen to conversations without any pressure to contribute. Once, when
someone came to dinner and I was exhausted by the effort before we even sat down at the table, I felt
so relieved to be able to stall the pace, writing slowly, giving myself time to take a few breaths and
recover some good humour.
I'm still using the whiteboard for many interactions – only beginning to attempt the electro-larynx in
public though using it more and more among friends and family. The electro-larynx l is basically a buzzer.
If you press it against the throat the buzz penetrates to the vocal cavity where it can be modulated into
speech sounds by moving your jaw and tongue and lips just as you would when speaking normally. A
wonderful device really ... but ... do you remember the Dalecs in Dr.Who? That's what to expect when
we meet! The first thing Bhante asked me to say was "Exterminate them!"
Children love it – I'm a great novelty for them. And sometimes it gives me a laugh too. Those are the
good days. But it's hard work by comparison to natural speech. My tongue and other muscles round my
neck have been damaged by the surgery, so I can only speak quite slowly and have to make a big effort
to articulate. It feels like I'm shouting. And often I have to repeat words again and again or throw in a bit
of mime in order to be understood. So it gets tiring. Writing on the whiteboard is more calming for me,

but quite cumbersome for any level of detail. I've experimented a bit with some speech synthesis
software, and found an Irish female voice which I was able to install on my computer. It has been useful
for telephone calls where I can prepare my questions in advance, but so far I haven't got much use out
of it for face-to-face conversations, mainly because of my slow pace of typing.
So a lot of things get left unsaid. Sometimes it's because I don't have my whiteboard or whatever to
hand when I think of something I would like to say. And many things that I would ordinarily have
mentioned to others now just don't seem worth the bother of writing down, or 'shouting' with the
electro-larynx. So I noticed myself more often 'doing my own thing' without reference to others. This is
uncharacteristic and could cause misunderstandings or hurt, and again I have to thank Pat and Margaret

for their patience and understanding here. I do have good fun in conversations on occasion but lots of
opportunities for light-hearted interaction get lost.
During the initial recovery period and the radio / chemo treatments, I hardly thought about losing my
voice at all. I had plenty of fear, anxiety and other forms of aversion, but they weren't connected to
coherent thoughts of having lost my voice. The only thoughts that came up were mildly consoling ones.
For example, I often thought "I don't need to talk right now" or "You don't need to talk a lot of the
time". But the down-side of my situation was literally unthinkable.
Then a friend gave me Colm Toibin's book 'The Testament of Mary'. This opened Pandora's box and the
snakes came sliding through! I wondered why the book was making me so happy (it's a powerful but
not at all a happy story). I found I was buzzing with the delightful thought of Jesus's miracles! I had
never reflected much on that aspect of the Christian story before. But now ... the possibility of a miracle
.. and maybe for me ... a glimmer of hope was born! At one level, of course, I could

laugh at myself. But a
moment later I was sucked in again. Miracles happened then – why not now? I could go to Lourdes,
Knock, Medjugorje! Or why not a Buddhist healing – that would be more appropriate! Bhante's
Bodycare. The Medicine Buddha. And sure, while he was curing my throat, couldn't he give me back my
strength and mobility in my arms and neck and shoulders as well? How about the body of a thirty-year-
old? That would be grand. Smiling happily, heart soaring, I just knew the healing was coming my way
soon. Then a wave of rationality would wash over: 'Come on Noirin, get a grip!'
The daydreams didn't come up in formal meditation but for days or even weeks they flared up again and
again in daily life. This was my first emotional reaction to the laryngectomy – getting high on the
thought of reversing it all! The high certainly lifted my spirits, but the effort of continually reigning in the
delusion was exhausting. Eventually I got fed up with the daydreaming mind and really wanted to stop
buying into the delusion. But ... how to do this without suppressing the hope, and the desire for well-
being? I noticed it only happened when I was in good humour. The mind would catch on to the good
humour and build a great future of health and strength. Why couldn't I just enjoy the good humour
instead? I tried the note 'dreaming of now, dreaming of now' to help bring me back to the present
moment. I could feel the happiness, and on the edge of this, my painful flickering attempts to grasp at it,
to make it mine, to project it into a wonderful future. As I focused on these feelings, the other aspects
of 'now' sank in: no miracle, no voice box, no speech. Happiness turned to sorrow, but I preferred it to
delusion, and my heart began to open, grateful for the Dhamma lesson, glad to be touching at last on
the grief of losing my voice.
With that the heady daydreams disappeared and I was able to start thinking rationally about the reality

of my situation. I had been wondering when it would hit me. Now that I could recognize the grief I could
also see it had been lurking, unrecognised, in my earlier fear and anxiety. I had been turning away from
the obvious reality in terror, having no idea how to live without a voice. I was reminded of the opening
words of C. Day Lewis's "A Grief Observed": No one ever told me that grief that was so like fear. It was a
relief to be able to name it as grief. With that, compassion arose and I could acknowledge the loss. It
was as simple as saying: Yes Noirin, this is tough. But that simple recognition meant everything. I felt
more able and willing to care for a being who lives with laryngectomy.

Sometimes, when I want to talk but cannot, I feel tremendous shame. For those moments I am a failure,
a lesser being. Remember the last link the Wheel of Dependant Origination: Conditioned by birth, there
follows ageing, death , sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair. I have 'taken birth' in the notion of
myself as someone who can talk. Someone who can say hello, contribute to a conversation, make a
point, ask questions, laugh, chant and sing (probably out of tune but still!), lead meditations, talk about
the Dhamma. I liked the sound of my own voice. Now it's time to learn from the results of this birth.
The desire not to be manifests again and again. Not to be someone who sounds like a dalek. Not to be
someone who brings a whiteboard and marker to the shops. Not to be someone who's rasping cough
makes heads turn all around.
When I have the time and space for deeper meditation, I am always reassured that I haven't lost
anything of real value. The beauty of the Dhamma is still open to me. That's all that matters ultimately.
But then, in daily life, this wisdom can desert me. Occasionally when people see I can't speak they
assume I'm deaf too, or intellectually impaired. Sometimes they join me in writing on the white-board,

or ‘mouth’ their words silently. If I’m in good humour, this can be amusing. But if I’m not, it can trigger
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that I didn’t understand what he was saying (in fairness to him I wasn’t even nodding to acknowledge his
message, just glaring at him - so you could say I got what I deserved! Such is the cost of expressing anger
angrily. His response was just a reflection of what I was putting out into the world). He started speaking
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an option. When he left I paced the room, dragging my drip-stand with me, livid with rage and
frustration. Later, I remembered the Buddha’s words: What the world finds ugly, I find beautiful.
Everything around me and within me seemed despicable and horribly ugly. And yet the Buddha would
find this beautiful? Tears of rage and self-pity flowed into the incomprehensible consolation of his
vision.
Then again, there is the temptation to find fault. Someone must be to blame for all this. Myself? For not
taking the warning signs seriously enough? My doctors? My kamma? The Buddha taught that misfortune
can occur for many reasons – e.g. heredity or environment as well as resulting from past misdeeds. So I
cannot assume that this is a fruit of ‘bad kamma’. Intellectually I accept this, and am very glad that I
don’t have to see this as punishment. But when a neighbour called and, probably troubled by my
condition, said: “I don’t know what you did in your previous life but I hope you enjoyed it at the time!” I
saw how little I understood the teaching at depth. I reacted with deep anger at her judgement but once

again I was saved by the slow pace of the whiteboard and her visit passed off cordially. Good thing too,
as it was Christmas eve! But later as I reflected on her remark and my reaction, I saw my deeper fear:
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hindrances! Exterminate!
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Dhamma is still open to me. That's all that matters ultimately. But then, in daily life, this wisdom can desert me. Occasionally when people see I can't speak they assume I'm deaf too, or intellectually impaired. Sometimes they join me in writing on the white-board, or 'mouth' their words silently. If I'm in good humour, this can be amusing. But if I'm not, it can trigger rage. One time, when I was in a sulk, a nursing attendant assumed my incommunicative state meant that I didn't understand what he was saying (in fairness to him I wasn't even nodding to acknowledge his message, just glaring at him - so you could say I got what I deserved! Such is the cost of expressing anger angrily. His response was just a reflection of what I was putting out into the world). He started speaking loudly, one word at a time, miming and gesticulating in his efforts to communicate. I wanted to shout: "I'm not stupid, I'm not deaf, I'm just furious can't you see!" But of course I couldn't (just as well or I would have had plenty of 'wrong speech' to regret!), and scrawling it on the whiteboard didn't seem like an option. When he left I paced the room, dragging my drip-stand with me, livid with rage and frustration. Later, I remembered the Buddha's words: What the world finds ugly, I find beautiful. Everything around me and within me seemed despicable and horribly ugly. And yet the Buddha would find this beautiful? Tears of rage and self-pity flowed into the incomprehensible consolation of his vision.
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Intellectually I accept this, and am very glad that I don't have to see this as punishment. But when a neighbour called and, probably troubled by my condition, said: "I don't know what you did in your previous life but I hope you enjoyed it at the time!" I saw how little I understood the teaching at

depth. I reacted with deep anger at her judgement but once again I was saved by the slow pace of the whiteboard and her visit passed off cordially. Good thing too, as it was Christmas eve! But later as I reflected on her remark and my reaction, I saw my deeper fear: this speechless condition was a sign to all that I was being punished for my misdeeds. With that my resentment toward the neighbour diminished. I saw that what was troubling me was not her judgement but my own confusion, at the heart level, regarding the law of kamma.
I was shocked and depressed by that glimpse of my judgemental mind's reaction to having a disability. Another deep layer of dukkha needing exploration. What could give me heart for the journey? I remembered my

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Noirin Sheahan

CHAPTER 23

Stumbling towards Gratitude

Noirin Sheahan · 5 min read

In this deeply personal essay, Noirin Sheahan explores the complex relationship between gratitude and suffering following her laryngectomy surgery. Drawing from her experience at a meditation group meeting where communication difficulties triggered intense frustration and anger, she demonstrates how satipaṭṭhāna (Right Awareness) practice can transform negative mental states. The essay beautifully illustrates the Buddha's teaching on dukkha (unsatisfactoriness) in everyday situations, showing how physical limitations can become devaduttas (divine messengers) that deepen spiritual understanding. Sheahan's honest account of moving from self-pity and separation to acceptance and compassion offers profound insights into the practical application of mindfulness during difficult circumstances. Her reflection on the 'merciful separation of consciousness' reveals how understanding the limitations of human connection can paradoxically lead to greater peace and gratitude. This essay demonstrates how consistent meditation practice creates a reliable refuge where even ingratitude can be acknowledged, understood, and ultimately transformed into wisdom.

Stumbling towards Gratitude.
Since my laryngectomy, I've joined a web-based support group called Webwhispers. Most of the members are American so in November they are particularly focussed on Thanksgiving. It made me think about why it is that I'm not feeling grateful more of the time. I have so much to be grateful for: the Dhamma, great friends, a lovely home, a pension, my mum and other family, a body that work pretty well. And so much more.
Yet it's so easy to get upset at small things. At our last meditation group meeting for example, we were meeting in a nursing home where Jimmy is recovering from surgery. Normally we meet at Jimmy's house on Wednesday evenings, do an hour's meditation together, discuss some text and chat over cup of tea. I've been going to the same group (though venue has shifted all over Dublin as new people joined and others move away) for almost thirty years now. That's another thing to be grateful for. And the friends I've met through that group – my best friends now. They have put themselves out time and time again to help me especially since my operation last year. Shouldn't I always feel grateful to them?
And yet ... those little things ... the trouble started when I dropped into a supermarket on my way to the nursing home to get a mug of tea and then got

distracted by so much enticing stuff on the shelves and stuck in a long queue at the check-out and the assistant not being able to find 'mug of tea' on the check list and having to call the supervisor ... and realising I would be late and trying to hurry with my backpack full of groceries and a mug of tea in my hand and electro-larynx jiggling around my neck and headset microphone slipping off and the loudspeaker (tied around my waist) bumping my tummy as I stumbled along getting hot and sweaty, and arriving breathless and seeing that they had all signed in ahead of me (damn why couldn't one of them be late!) and finding them all chatting by Jimmy's bed. How is it such pleasant sounds come out of their mouths without any effort whatsoever? My mind is feeling small and peevish. They say hello – I put my face into a smile and nod vigorously at everyone, but can't reply with my hands full (you need a free hand to use an electro-larynx) and nowhere obvious to put my blessed (blasted?) tea, and then struggle to get my coat and

backpack off – also my jacket and cardigan as it's hot in there. All the time they're chatting and laughing– so annoying - my ill-temper finds fault with everyone and everything.

Then they decide to go to the chapel for meditation as Jimmy is now sharing his room with another man. Others gather up my jacket, cardigan, backpack, coat, tea as we head out. Why is it so hard to feel grateful for these small kindnesses? Instead I'm feeling irritated, dislocated, a nuisance, a burden to myself and everyone, bad humoured. I haven't yet said a word and when Margaret asks a simple question about my car I misunderstand her and answer 'no' for 'yes' and then seeing my mistake, try to explain while my electro-larynx refuses to find a sweet spot (an area on the neck where the sound transfers into the throat). I get more annoyed that she doesn't understand me as I bellow (feels like a bellow, sounds like a whisper) through the din of the electrolarynx "I'm still waiting to hear from Toyota". She looks puzzled "you're wanting to head for Tullow town?" she asks. I feel the voluntary component to the grimace that purses my lips and lifts my eyes to heaven, but don't have the necessary humility to arrest these, so annoyance and exasperation settle in deeper. At last we arrive at the chapel and sit down, Emer with my jacket and Margaret with my bag, Patricia beside me trying not to knock over my tea, Jimmy at a safe distance from my anger and ... blessed silence.

I'm steaming with annoyance and irritation, up tight, miserable. I feel separate from the others – no, I want to be separate from them. My mind huffs: "They don't understand what it's like not to be able to speak easily ... they don't care". Alongside anger and self pity the habit of mindfulness brings some perspective and I begin to feel that sense of separation more objectively, my flesh searing

with indignation, shrinking away from the world and clinging to my bones, my breath rapid, my head high and haughty. After a while of acknowledging my internal miseries, and against all my expectations some buried goodwill pushes my attention outwards and it seems that a new source of energy is coming from a point outside me somewhere in the midst of our little group. My flesh still shrinks away, trying to resist, but a flow of goodwill streams into my stomach and heart and gathers at a point in my neck where my voice box used to be. After another

while my mind can allow the notion of the others as friends. I'm still pulling back, tense and mistrusting, but aware also of a compassion that surrounds my nonsensical reaction, like a mother cradling a squalling child. My mind forms itself around the source of indignation: 'they don't know what it's like not to be able to speak'. As the meditation goes on I feel more and more the truth of this. They don't know. They can't know. Very slowly I begin to feel both the sadness and the beauty in that. We are separate beings. They would probably like to be able to share the burden, but what can they do? Stop talking in my presence? I start to make some peace with the practical limitations to human love and care. They don't know and it's OK that they don't know. They have their own troubles to bear, their own devaduttas. And because of this merciful separation of consciousness into separate beings, I am shielded from their troubles. So they chat with lovely melodious tones, they chuckle or laugh out loud. It's OK. For the moment anyhow. In this chapel with its blessed silence.

This is something to be truly grateful for – this mindfulness practice that allows negativity be acknowledged and transformed. Even if I don't feel grateful much of the time, I can trust mindfulness to lead me to a deeper place where that very ingratitude is allowed to be expressed, acknowledged, understood, and when the time is right, released.

With my friends and other sangha to support me in this wonderful practice (nowadays I think of it as the Buddha-dhamma), I can trust the devadutta of laryngectomy to keep leading me to deeper understanding and peace.

CHAPTER 24

Mid-winter Darkness

Noirin Sheahan · 4 min read

> *In this deeply personal reflection, Noirin Sheahan explores how her laryngectomy surgery opened unexpected doorways to contemplative insight. Writing in the format of a letter to 'Lary' (her laryngectomy condition), she describes morning meditation experiences where both light and darkness become objects of contemplation. The essay beautifully weaves together the Buddhist understanding of longing and aversion with the raw reality of living with serious illness. Noirin examines how her initial terror of the medical condition led her to discover what she calls 'peaceful darkness beyond' - a space where restless desires can find resolution. The piece demonstrates how physical trauma can paradoxically deepen one's meditation practice, offering glimpses of what lies beyond ordinary life and death. Through mindful attention to breathing and bodily sensations, despite fear and aversion, she cultivates the courage to rest with difficult emotions. This honest account shows how the Buddhist path of bearing witness to suffering - including anger, frustration, and loss - becomes a doorway to peace.*

Mid-winter Darkness.
Since my laryngectomy, I've started writing a column on living mindfully with this condition for a laryngectomee support group called Webwhispers. The column is called 'Dear Lary'(Lary being short for 'Laryngectomee') in an effort to cultivate a friendly relationship with this new phase of my life. Here is the column I wrote for the January edition – I hope it speaks also to the Satipanya Sangha.
It's Sunday morning, 21st December, the mid-winter solstice. From now on the days will start to get longer – such a lovely thought! I love springtime and am always so sorry when 21st June comes along and know the light is starting to ebb away again. I snuggle back into the bed-clothes and luxuriate in their warmth for another five minutes.
Five minutes turn into ten as thoughts and feelings rise and fall away. I love this time of day, and if I can get my mind to settle, can appreciate the wonder of just being alive and warm and comfortable. Then the various pressures of my 'to do' list die into the background. I often forget about you altogether at these times Lary, as well as the other troubles of the world. (I still think of you as trouble, Lary, though deep down I have to admit you may actually be a blessing.)
I suppose I've always been a bit of a dreamer. Maybe that's why meditation appeals to me so strongly. As I relax, I notice a bright light in my mind. It's very ordinary – just a mental image, not any kind of apparition. Just as you might have an image of your

friend or husband or daughter in your mind. Or your sitting-room, or the colours of sea and sky as you remember a day at the beach. It's the same thing. But I've only recently started to notice it. As soon as I do, I feel a surge of attraction towards it – as if I want to swallow it up, to let it light up my whole being. But from experience, often bitter experience, I've learned that my longing to get closer to this light, to get more of it, to swallow it, are all in vain. It's always tantalisingly beyond my reach. I tune into the feeling of breathing to try to keep myself grounded, not get so lost in my passionate desire for this ... this what? A dream of light? Of life? Of love? Or all the beauties of the world?

The feeling of breathing, by comparison, that sensation of the tummy and chest rising and falling with each breath, seems strange ... light years away ... a different world altogether. It even frightens me for some unknown reason. But over the years of meditation practice I've learned to appreciate the body despite all its associated strangeness and fear. I know that attending to simple sensations cultivates kindness and

courage and other strengths. So I bear with my aversion for the body. And then, another

miracle, I sense a darkness which is equally as enticing as the light. While the light seems to represent life, the darkness represents something equally beautiful beyond life.

I first noticed it on the night after my laryngectomy – after meeting you Lary. Since then the darkness has become my best friend. And it's very close to my own body, as if my

breath is just barely brushing against it. Something so peaceful, completely beyond words. For a while all my wishes and longings die out willingly into the darkness. It's such a relief to know there is this outlet for deep longings. When I can't find the dark channel this longing for life and beauty and love just fire me up with restless energy and

the frustration of unfulfilled desire. But for now, they flow unobstructed and die away peacefully into the blessed darkness.

So this is something I have to thank you for Lary. Perhaps it was the terror I felt for you that drove me to this edge of my known world, to sense the peaceful darkness beyond, and the possibility of dying in peace.

I can't yet rest for long with this pouring of my life energies into darkness. Sooner or later my mind wanders, or I get pent up with desire to know just a little bit more about the light or the darkness, or to sense a deeper peace. Basically my natural human longings tip me off balance. Then it's the work of bearing with the sense of loss or frustration or anger or whatever surfaces. The light and darkness still hover as mental images but now it's a struggle to see them through the turmoil of emotion. But I know

that this is an equally valuable stage in meditation – learning to bear with emotions, to name them, allow them come and go without judgement or any effort to change them for any preferred state of love or bliss or wisdom. I'm more and more willing to bear with this struggle, trusting to this painful path towards peace.

So, Lary, on this mid-winter's day, let me thank you for what you have brought into my life - a love for darkness. And in the darkness, some glimpse of what lies beyond life. Once you showed it to me, you planted a seed in my heart and now there is a growing trust in this ocean of peace into which all our energies can sink.

May we both rest easy in the peace of mid-winter, Lary.

CHAPTER 25

Teaching through an Electro-larynx: The Oval Age-Old Bath

Noirin Sheahan · 4 min read

This inspiring and candid essay explores how Noirin Sheahan (Ayya Puññyanandi) adapted her Dhamma teaching after laryngectomy surgery required her to use an electro-larynx device. With characteristic humor, she explains the technical challenges of speech - how 'The Four Noble Truths' might sound like 'Deplore Mouldy Dudes' and the 'Noble Eightfold Path' like an 'Oval Age-old Bath.' The essay details the innovative solutions developed for retreat teaching: pre-recorded talks, assistive technology for hard-of-hearing adapted for group communication, and collaborative reading formats that enhance discussion. Through retreatant feedback and practical examples, Noirin demonstrates how physical limitations need not impede the transmission of Buddhist wisdom. Her account reveals how the Dhamma community's willingness to adapt and support each other allows the teachings to flow through any obstacle, transforming what might seem like tragedy into an opportunity for deeper connection and understanding.

Teaching through an Electro-larynx: Deplore Mouldy Dudes? The Oval Age-Old Bath?
Why might a Dhamma teacher be asking you to deplore mouldy dudes? Like the Buddha's teachings,
the answer is 'in this fathom long body'. So put a finger on you Adam's apple. Now say "T". And then
"D". Feel the difference? Say "Sssss". And now "Zzzzz". Getting the picture? Your vocal chords
vibrate for some consonants and not for others. That's how our ears tell one from the other. And
while an electro-larynx is a wonderful invention, it doesn't have the magical capability of our vocal
chords to shut itself off for a fraction of a second while we say "T", or "P" or other consonants.
Physiology lesson No 2: Try saying "Shhhhh" while you hold your breath. Do the same for "S" or "F".
Not much luck? These need a little stream air flowing through narrow gaps between your teeth, lips
or tongue as these shape themselves into funnels to convey these various hissing sounds. You can

make a muted impression of them by first opening your mouth and then closing it rapidly to puff
some air through the gaps. This is the best you can do after laryngectomy, when you breathe
through a little opening (stoma) in the front of the neck rather than the nose and mouth.
Basically, an electro-larynx preserves the vowel sounds reasonably well, but the consonants provide
a guessing game for your ears. And so, when I intend to say The Four Noble Truths, your ears might
hear Deplore Mouldy Dudes! And when I encourage you to follow the Noble Eight-fold Path, you
might think I'm asking you to wallow in an Oval Age-old Bath!
On top of that the electro-larynx sounds mechanical and robotic. How could I possibly teach with a
voice like Daffy Duck? I thought that phase of life was surely over. But Bhante wasn't having any of
that nonsense! He gave me a year to recover, but then … Onwards! He scheduled me in for three
week-long retreats during 2015. As usual, he was right. People rise to the challenge – it's heartening
to see how true this is. It can even be fun to watch the Dhamma seep through a few Mouldy Dudes
and other obstacles! In my youth, the only robot models were the evil Daleks in Dr Who. But one
younger retreatant said she would listen even more intently to meditation instructions from Seven
of Nine!
But, if you're not a Star Wars fan, don't worry! If you come on retreat with me (and I hope you will)
you won't be struggling to translate an electro-larynx drone for the evening Dhamma talk. Earlier
this year I wrote out my talks in advance and my friend Finola read and recorded these. We'll update
these as needed. So far, the retreat facilitators have been willing to do much of the remaining talking
for me – short readings now and again to punctuate the day and inspire us to greater things. My
communication is good enough for interviews and for occasional reminders. Bhante

has recorded all
the chanting as well as the evening metta guidance, so we use these for the morning and evening
pujas. Basically it will be the same as normal – just an unruly mind and aching body to contend with!
During the summer I came across some technology designed for the hard-of-hearing and used this
during the October retreat. It's just a microphone, portable amplifier and earphones. Normally the
hard-of-hearing person uses the earphones. I reverse this and ask others to wear the earphones
while I speak into the microphone. This means I can turn the volume of the electro-larynx way
down, as even a whisper can be heard quite clearly using the earphones. This cuts out the loud
background noise and means I can talk quietly to someone in the interview room without disturbing
others in the walking hall. We also used it in the meditation room for group interviews and
whenever the spirit moved me to say something. A bit strange having all this techy stuff in a

Dhamma hall – but as one retreatant commented it can also be quite touching when we're all wired
up together!
For the local-group meetings on Thursday evenings I decided again to write out the Dhamma talks in
advance and each person read a part aloud. This is something we have done in our own meditation
group in Dublin for many years. We agree on a book, and then read a few pages together – each
person reading out a paragraph or two. Reading aloud like this often gets over whatever self-
consciousness we tend to feel in talking about the Dhamma, and the discussion afterwards is the
richer for this. Similarly in the Satipanya local group, the shared reading made for a more open and
enjoyable discussion afterwards. And luckily I enjoy writing but have to steel myself before giving a

Dhamma talk, so this format makes life easier for me. Giving a Dhamma talk can be exhilarating and
deeply moving, but it can also be a bit daunting unless and until you relax into the experience. I'm
spared all those collywobbles nowadays!
I asked the people who came on retreat this year to give some feedback on what it's like to be led by
a laryngectomee, and the responses have now been posted on the website (in the section with my
profile). It was very heartening and quite humbling to hear how positive people were in their
evaluation. Although the sound of the electro-larynx sometimes grated, what came through loud
and clear was people's willingness to work together to let the Dhamma unfold and express itself in
this post-laryngectomy phase of my life. To quote from one retreatant: when something tragic
happens, we can all rally and something quite wonderful fills the loss.
Teaching the Dhamma is truly a great privilege and a joy. I am deeply grateful to Bhante for his
leadership, encouragement and persistence in prising me out of my comfort zone and onto the
podium with or without a voice-box! I am also very grateful to all who have come on retreat with me
either pre- or post-laryngectomy. May your implied respect continue to gladden my heart and
encourage me along this path to freedom, happiness and peace. And may all the Mouldy Dudes and
the Oval-Age-Old-Bath eloquently map the way!
Noirin / Ayya Puññyanandi

CHAPTER 26

Ethical Maxims for a Marginally Inhabitable Planet

Noirin Sheahan · 32 min read

This essay presents six ethical maxims developed by bioethicists to address the moral challenges of the Anthropocene and coming climate catastrophe. Drawing from decades of experience in ICUs and hospice care, the authors propose practical wisdom for navigating environmental and social collapse projected for 2031 and beyond. The six maxims are: work hard to grasp the immensity of change; cultivate radical hope beyond ordinary optimism; have a line in the sand regarding what you will not do; appreciate the astonishing opportunity of living during this extraordinary transition; train your body and mind for physiological and psychological resilience; and act for future generations of all species. Unlike abstract principles requiring cognitive analysis, these maxims function as practical guides for embodied moral action during extreme circumstances. The essay acknowledges that traditional bioethics has neglected environmental ethics, arguing that the field must expand beyond biomedicine to address the broader ethical challenges of living on an increasingly uninhabitable planet. Each maxim is grounded in clinical experience with patients facing terminal diagnoses and impossible choices, extrapolated to the collective human predicament of climate emergency.

Ethical Maxims for a
Marginally Inhabitable Planet

David Schenck *and Larry R. Churchill†*

ABSTRACT Bioethics has largely neglected the Anthropocene and its ethical challenges. This essay asks which ethical norms will serve us well in the face of the coming climate catastrophe. It sketches the climate changes likely for the year 2031 and offers six adaptive maxims, drawn from bioethics work in ICUs and hospices, to guide us through the devastation and transition following environmental and social collapse. These six maxims are: work hard to grasp the immensity of the change; cultivate radical hope; have a line in the sand; appreciate the astonishing opportunity of life at this time; train your body and mind; and act for the future generations of all species. Because we are already in an environmental collapse and the beginnings of social collapse, these maxims are relevant today as well as for the future.

The new solidarity of fate is as yet nowhere matched by the solidarity of our feelings, let alone our actions.
—Z. Bauman (2009)

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very person living on the planet now, and all who will be born, will be impacted by the climate emergency of the Anthropocene. In this essay we challenge bioethicists specifically to think about what resources our field may have to offer for addressing the moral crisis this development represents, as well
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as the new moral challenges and dilemmas it will generate. In particular, we address this essay and its thought experiments to our junior colleagues and former students, who will be the ones among us who will confront the moral, social, and environmental crises most directly.

We are both now in our 70s. Like almost all working in bioethics, we have been asleep at the wheel for more than three decades. None of us has paid nearly enough attention to the fact that bioethics ought primarily to be framed as ethics for the bios, not merely for biomedicine. Van Rensselaer Potter's Bioethics: Bridge to the Future (1971), deserved far greater attention than it received. And there have been others seeking to awaken us. In 1999, in his book The Great Work: Our Way into the Future, the geologian Thomas Berry argued for a larger scope for medicine, and concomitantly, for bioethics:

The profession of medicine must now consider its role, not only within the context of human society, but in the context of the Earth process. A healing of the Earth is a prerequisite for the healing of the human. Adjustment of the human to the conditions and restraints of the natural world constitutes the primary medical prescription for human well-being. The medical profession needs to establish a way of sustaining the species as well as the individual if the human is to be viable as a species within the community of species. (69)

But these voices went almost completely unheeded. With a few exceptions scattered over the last 15 years (Brody 2009; Johnson 2016; Lee 2017; Moreno 2005; Pierce and Jameton 2004; Richie 2019), the field has remained steadfastly focused on biomedicine and its issues. But now the larger viewpoint—what Berry (1999) called "macrophase ethics"—is being forced upon us. The role of tipping points and cascade effects is now much clearer and more terrifying. The higher qual-

ity of data has shown how much faster things are moving than was previously thought, and the new amounts of historical data have shown us how quickly change can happen. On top of that, better modeling shows us more clearly just how impossible things will get on an Earth at an increase of 3° Celsius (C)—or even 2 or 2.5.

A Barely Conceivable Challenge

The specific aim of this essay is to explore what ethical maxims might guide us in the year 2031. Our assumption is that the current devastating trajectory for global warming will continue, or deviate only slightly. We wish we could be more optimistic, but there is little reason to think that technological remedies of sufficient scale are achievable any time soon, or that needed lifestyle adjustments in energy consumption are feasible—especially for American culture. Hence, a 2.5° C rise in global temperature over preindustrial levels is a strong possibility, possibly as early as 2041. If this is the case, humanity will be facing social, finan-

cial, and political collapse on a global scale. There will be death and suffering from immediate climate events of unprecedented magnitude, such as frequent and severe storms, flooding, heat waves, and fires, resulting in famine, food and water shortages, pandemics, wars large and small, and economic and social insecurities on a level only the poorest of nations have ever experienced. We can always hope for less devastation, but typical American optimism at this juncture bespeaks either ignorance or denial. Had we responded 30 years ago, when the science was already clear enough to motivate different policies, we might hope for more, but now, in 2021, the task is increasingly difficult, and the timeframe for adjustment is radically shortened. Given these assumptions, it becomes important to ask what kind of ethics—what kind of moral guidance for living in this severely depleted environment—will be needed. The challenge of getting our bodies as well as our minds around the hyper-complex phenomenon of the Anthropocene is staggering enough. But when combined with the projected ethical challenges and existential agonies these environmental transformations will entail, the prospect becomes almost unthinkable. Yet we must face these issues, for the alternative is moral nihilism.

It is important to grasp that our situation constitutes a singularity. There is no previous extinction event in recorded history to reflect on and learn from. As Mark Lynas (2020) has observed, one would have to “wind the geological clock back about 3 million years, to an epic called the Pliocene, to encounter a world where global temperatures averaged 2–3 degrees higher than at the start of the

20th century.” We do have five other mass extinction events to bring to our consideration of this sixth mass extinction event, and we also have the extinction of other species who reached an evolutionary dead end, all of which we could use to model the possible eventual end of Homo sapiens. But just as knowing that other people have died is not the same as realizing that we ourselves will die, so too knowing that other species go extinct is not the same as fully grasping the possibility of the extinction of our own species. And, of course, making the leap from our own personal death—hard as that may be to grasp—to the possible end of human life itself will hardly be easy. Human extinction is not currently on the horizon, but as the planet becomes less and less hospitable to other species, we can no longer assume that it will always be hospitable to us. How to cancel the assumption that human life will go on indefinitely after our individual death? To even pose this possibility is to generate, for most of us, a degree of anxiety and distress that makes it difficult even to continue the inquiry.

But that precisely is the point; that precisely is why it is important to push on. And what we suggest is that we would be well served to look in new directions for resources. So far, we have relied on scientists and investigative journalists to keep us informed and to rally us to action. But their work has induced a curious, counter-intuitive phenomenon: the domestication of horror. Scientists study and measure; journalists interpret and report. The better job scientists and journalists

do in analyzing and explaining things, the more they tame the horror of what is coming. Furthermore, they teach us to approach the Anthropocene as observers, but this is problematic: no one will be an observer at an increase of 3° C.

We must move from a cognitive, observer understanding of our situation to a felt embodiment of our predicament, from intellectual knowledge to bodily acknowledgment. Resources for reflection may possibly be found in practical disciplines developed for dealing with human extremes, such as refugee communities, famines, and end-of-life scenarios. Resources may also be found in communities that have faced immense suffering: indigenous peoples, survivors of concentration camps and solitary confinement, and oppressed or enslaved communities of color. We are recommending, in short, that we consult people who have dealt with situations where one set of hopes, and all fantastical thinking, have to be abandoned, and new radical hope has to be found. Our own contribution to this discussion will draw on our decades of experience in clinical bioethics consultation, which has focused on care and decision making in catastrophic, life-threatening, and end-of-life situations.

We make no claim to finality or completeness for the ethical maxims we will highlight below. Our intention is to contribute to the nascent conceptualization and discussion of the barely conceivable and yet largely undiscussed catastrophe of global warming. We encourage other bioethicists, as well as those with experience with endangered communities, to join this discussion. All of us as human beings are finally being forced to confront this climate emergency: it is not off in the future. The recent Australian and European flooding is climate flooding, just as the California fires of 2020 and 2021 are climate fires. Confronting our predicament means facing head-on the oft-avoided and grim fact that our children and grandchildren, and their descendants on down the line, will be dealing with the ramifications of the Anthropocene for decades and centuries to come.

The World in 2031

So what will the world be like in 2031? Start here: we are carbonizing the atmosphere at an alarming rate. Half of the total carbon pollution on Earth has been emitted in the last 30 years, notably after there was scientific consensus that greenhouse gases (GHGs)—carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide—are a grave threat. Temperature accelerations are causing polar ice to melt, permafrost regions to shrink, and oceans to warm and rise. Hurricanes and other severe weather events are increasing in number and severity. Houston has had a so-called "once every 500-year storm" in each of the past three years. The fires in California and Oregon are unprecedented and promise to worsen in frequency and devastation. Meanwhile, tropical rain forests in places like Brazil, which store and thus help control carbon emissions, are being systematically cleared for farming and ranching. Changing consumption habits have also fueled the rise of

GHGs. The increase in meat eating in developing countries like China is a notable example. It is estimated that the GHGs emitted from all livestock globally accounts for 14.5 % of all GHGs (FAO 2020).

What will be the effects of global warming? The Paris Agreement of 2015, signed by 196 nations, is an aspiration to keep global warming to below 1.5° C above preindustrial levels. We are currently at 1.1, and a rise to 2.3° is already locked into the atmosphere from the carbon we have emitted in the past 30 years, even if we went to zero emissions today. Just how soon we will reach the 2.3° level is uncertain, but every day of continued emissions brings it sooner. If we link temperature change to sea level rise, 1.5° C in global warming translates into a rise of 1–2.5 feet. If this goal is not met, a 2° C rise in temperatures means a sea level rise of 3–6 feet, affecting everyone on the globe. Perhaps most notably, the

number of climate refugees from flooding, fires, and drought would enlarge, to as many as 245 million people. If global warming reaches 3.5–4° C over preindustrial levels, sea level rise will be 22–25 feet, with devastation of almost unimaginable magnitude (Maslin 2014; Wallace-Wells 2019). Massive deaths, especially among the world's poorest populations, will occur as a result of uninhabitable land, food and water shortages, and the subsequent breakdown of economies and national governments. To use potable water as just one index, currently a quarter of Earth's population is water stressed. This means that 1.95 billion people currently struggle to meet their daily needs for clean water. By 2030, the increased salination of irrigated farmland, the evaporation caused by increased heat, and frequent flooding of coastal areas will mean that an additional billion people will be without a safe source of drinkable water (Maslin 2014).

Another index is infectious diseases. Vector organisms, such as mosquitoes, are sensitive to changes like water-surface temperature, humidity, moisture, and deforestation. Climate warming would affect both the scope, intensity, and seasonality of infectious diseases such as malaria and cholera. In general, global warming will mean a substantial increase in transmission of disease worldwide (Maslin 2014). This is to say nothing of health events such as heat emergencies, mental health disorders, and broader health problems caused by declining food supply, food safety, and its consequences (Jameton 2016).

How fast will all this happen? If a business-as-usual pattern prevails and warning signs are ignored, a 2.5–3° C rise could occur as early as the early 2030s, 3–4° by mid-century, and a 5–6° rise by 2100 (Lynas 2020). Much depends on which scientific modeling of climate change turns out to be the correct one. For example, it is still unknown whether temperature will rise at a predictably steady pace with the rise of GHGs, or whether there is a tipping point, caused by a complex of feedback loops, beyond which devastating changes cascade and accelerate (Bendell 2020). What we know about past climate changes is that they appear to have been abrupt, and climate models for these sudden changes are hard to simulate. Nonlinear, cascading changes in the severity of global warming

and its accompanying catastrophes is a high probability. Much depends as well on how quickly the world can move to green technologies like solar and wind power, electric cars, and built structures with zero GHG emissions (Miller 2020). Yet scaling up technologies such as these usually requires decades. And even if massive technological changes in how energy is produced all work perfectly, all over the globe, they will be insufficient if the cultural patterns of consumptive

capitalism, economies based on growth, and habits of increasing—rather than curtailing—energy use persist.

Mitigation and Adaptation, Collapse and Transition

Mitigation and adaptation represent two prominent ways to talk about surviving global warming. Mitigation means lessening the degrading effects of the Anthropocene, usually through technological ingenuity. Adaptation means accommodating to a new human experience through moral, social, economic, and political adjustments. These are not, of course, mutually exclusive, since any mitigating strategies will also involve adaptations, and successful adaptations both require some degree of mitigation and may also uncover novels strategies for lessening the rate of environmental degradation.

There are numerous reports of the promise of mitigating geotechnologies for carbon capture, such as vacuuming carbon dioxide out of the air and sending it into space or turning it into rock, reforestation, shooting particles into space to block sunlight, and quick conversions to solar and wind energy to replace coal and other fossil fuels (Kolbert 2021). Yet a true turnaround of our carbon-based economy will not come easily or quickly. Even in the US and Europe, where global warming is perhaps most widely understood, the political obstacles are daunting. The fossil fuel industry has hidden its own decades-long research showing the degrading effects for the Earth resulting from rapacious coal, gas, and oil production. Their legislative lobbies are well entrenched and powerful, and these companies—much like the tobacco companies in the mid-20th century—have shown clearly that they are willing to tolerate a great deal of human suffering in order to pursue profits. In addition, it is highly unlikely that the growing carbon footprints of China, India, and other rising industrial giants will be sufficiently curtailed. Reliance on mitigation through technological innovation looks more like fantasy and folly than prudence. While we believe that an all-out effort to engineer and adopt cleaner technologies should be mounted, counting on these as the solution grossly underestimates the magnitude of the task and amount of social and political change required. Thus, we are focused in this essay on moral and social adaptation.

If, as is likely, mitigation is too late, or if it fails completely, adaptation will be the task. And thinking seriously about adaptation means thinking about collapse—for some forms of collapse seem inevitable and part of what adaptation

will have to take into account. “Collapsology” is a nascent field (Servigne and Stevens 2020), and thinking in this way is not a matter of counseling people to

give up. It is suggesting the cultural equivalent of “advance directives.” If you find yourself in a spot where mitigation has failed, and adaptation is what must be done, what will you be focused on? Will it be anger, regret, competition, survival? Or will it be living what life is available with as much quality as possible? We think it likely that by 2031 mitigation will be seen to have largely failed, and that adaptation to social and environmental collapse will be the task that is left. We assume that this means major portions of the planet will be facing the kinds of major transitions that people face in hospitals, ICUs, and hospices every day.

It is impossible to know with any certainty how severe the environmental and social collapse will be—in most places, it will probably not be as bad as the total lawlessness of “Mad Max” scenarios. Yet radical shifts will be required everywhere to manage a future more altered in living conditions and expectations that anything in human memory.

The second pairing, collapse and transition, is needed because both environmental and social “collapse” have to be part of any realistic assessment. And while neither kind of collapse is likely to be total, we must talk also of “transition.” If a total collapse (of either kind) occurs, it is more likely to come from engineering misadventures in the efforts at mitigation, not from global warming per se. (Shooting particles into space to block the sun’s rays seems a likely candidate for this kind of blundering hubris.) Good adaptation methods figure heavily into whatever transition may be possible, making for a softer landing and shorter horror, with more resources surviving to power recovery on other side. But to be clear, some environmental and social collapse seems unavoidable, meaning suffering and death on a scale no one alive has ever seen. Hence, a caveat: the use of these pairs of stark terms—mitigation and adaptation, collapse and transition—when used as a shorthand, as we are now doing, can become an intellectualized, distancing force shielding us from the horrid realities under discussion. We must move with care so as not to leave the distress behind, stewing in our bodies and psyches, while we talk abstractions. Any hope of mitigation or adaptation, or transiting out of social collapse, will require all the cognitive and emotional resources we have—minds and bodies all working with knowledge and in acknowledgment, and in concert.

Six Ethical Maxims for a Time of Collapse

Unlike principles, which are guides for how to think, pointing out moral values which could guide our cognitive processes, maxims are short guides for how to act, and they suggest practices to which we should become habituated. They often take the form of wisdom sayings and draw less from modern philosophy than

from ancient philosophy and wisdom literature. Maxims are less how to analyze and choose and more how to be. They constitute ideas that must be practiced to be fully understood. In this way they resemble more the moral virtues than principled decision guides so familiar to bioethicists.

When describing the need for striking and memorable maxims, Pierre Hadot (1995) puts it this way:

when the time comes, they can help us accept such [catastrophic] events, which are, after all, part of the course of nature; we will thus have these maxims and sentences "at hand." What we need are persuasive formulae . . . which we can repeat to ourselves in difficult circumstances, so as to check movements of fear, anger, or sadness. The exercise of meditation [on maxims] is an attempt to control inner discourse, in an effort to render it coherent.

Thus, in the sense we employ here, maxims are slogans, mnemonic reminders, and ultimately spiritual exercises. In a crisis, shorthand reminders of core values work better than principles that require reflective interpretation and application. In addition, the basic principles we now use most often in bioethics were crafted for an age of relative abundance, stability, and progress. Meditating on maxims ahead of time helps to shapes a more realistic view of the world and habituates us, so that when the time comes, we are more likely to behave in a way ethically appropriate to the reality before us. In short, maxims can be especially useful in times of moral crisis and major cultural change. They help establish conditions that will preserve moral creativity and resourcefulness. They can be essential moral components for surviving the inevitable transitions before us.

Maxims present means of living one's life in a coherent and honorable way in the midst of great trouble. This is in significant part why we are proposing maxims, and not principles or theories. An autonomy-driven ethic, pictured as enacted by rational, independent agents—whether deontological or utilitarian—fits all too well with the neoliberal world order, under which regime the Anthropocene has accelerated. Both the dominance of the hyper-individualistic autonomy ethic characteristic of neoliberalism and the attendant ubiquity of the utilitarian calculus—and indeed the neoliberal order itself—are inconceivable without the abundance, even superfluity, sponsored by fossil fuels. We thus endorse the critique of principlism and utilitarianism found in the ethics of care. But we are here looking deeper—we are looking for how the very idea of ethical behavior can survive in extreme conditions. Because we know that often it does not.

And this is where maxims and bioethics comes together. The maxims have ancient origins. Variants of them have been followed when dealing with human catastrophes in the past, mostly in periods in which there was far less optimism,

reliance on rational analysis, or faith in technical ingenuity. But, equally as decisive, we have seen these maxims at work in hospitals and hospices. Much of what we know about them has been learned from patients and families while doing

ethics consultation or working in ICUs and hospices. And while it is true that collapse will involve a collection of large-scale events, all impacts will be individual and personal as well. What we have observed in the field confirms, we would argue, teachings of the world's wisdom traditions that have stood the test of times of scarcity and hardship, of social disruption, of natural catastrophe.

To be clear, we are not arguing that these maxims are the total ethics needed for the Anthropocene. To begin with, the complicity of our ethical traditions in creating the Anthropocene must be acknowledged, and this ought to prompt a revolution in approach to the foundations of bioethics. Perhaps an ethics of care should come to the fore, and an ethic of biophilia, as expounded by Eric Fromm (1973) and especially by Edward O. Wilson (1984)—developed in Bioethics: A Path Forward (forthcoming) by Nancy King, Gail Henderson, and Larry Churchill—should be carefully examined for its value as a foundational norm. And then there will be the many specific activities aimed at mitigation of the ongoing crisis that will certainly be needed. What we offer here is but a bare beginning. Our intention is to provoke discussion and to provide a fruitful place for that discussion to begin.

For each of the six maxims that follow we provide:

• Maxim: a formulation cast as an injunction, as is common in wisdom traditions;

• Basis: vignettes and examples from ethics consultation and bioethics that illustrate or clarify the injunctions, and texts from the 20th and 21st centuries that have been helpful to us in our reflections on the Anthropocene;

• Extrapolation: suggestions of how the maxim and basis will be useful in a time of climate emergency.

Maxim 1: Work Hard to Grasp the Immensity.

Realize how fiendishly difficult it is to grasp the scope of climate devastation oneself. Realize how hard it is for others. Effective strategy, as well as compassion, require carefully assessing the capacity of one's listeners. In keeping with this, these maxims suggest a progression. One step at a time. Begin small. Asking people to go beyond their capacity can be cruel and is generally counterproductive.

Basis. As every clinical ethics consultant knows, it is always difficult to accept

bad news that has a finality to it, like a terminal or crippling diagnosis. But some things are even more difficult than that. Some turns of events demand a change in one's whole view of the world. We are thinking here in particular of cases in neonatal units where young, often first-time parents face their newly born children who have startlingly awful diagnoses and conditions. One of the very worst we have ever worked with is a severe case of Osteogenesis imperfecta, a condition

where the bones in the newborn's body break incredibly easily. Bone formation is flawed. There is essentially no reliable skeleton, and nurses changing diapers know they are breaking bones every time they move the child. This is not only a tragedy; it is something that goes beyond the bounds of the conceivable for many young parents. The world simply cannot be the kind of place where this can happen. And yet it is. And so the parents must reconstitute their world simply to be able to acknowledge what is in front of them.

Likewise, working with end-of-life scenarios, ethicists become acquainted with all manner of premature and tragic deaths. We can all think of cases of this kind that stretched our moral sensibilities: the young mother dying of undetectable cancer, leaving three kids behind; the star athlete dying of heat stroke through the neglect of his coaches; the healthy middle-aged man born with a Berry aneurysm that suddenly ruptures and kills him. Senseless events. How can the world be like this?

But to move beyond them, as we know from working with patients and families, it is essential to grasp just exactly what has happened. We also know that when that is done, new possibilities can be found on the other side of what looked like the endgame.

Extrapolation. The very possibility of environmental and subsequent social collapse is similarly inconceivable for most of us. How can humans have had this much impact on the natural order itself? Can we possibly unknowingly have perpetrated the extinction of thousands upon thousands of other species, and untold suffering of our own species?

The tragedies of bioethics work can give us insight into the moral nihilism senseless suffering can open onto. By moral nihilism we mean not only that past norms seem to lose their validity, but that 'right and wrong' as ways of interpreting our world are no longer anchored anywhere. And yet this sense of moral vacuity can in turn help us appreciate how difficult it is to face the Anthropocene directly. Moments of moral paralysis seem, in fact, to be a common experience for those coming to grips with the climate emergency and all that it implies. A

dose of moral nihilism may actually be essential for getting to the end of ordinary hope and allowing us to come truly into radical hope—to tap the resources that lie on the other side of ordinary hope, optimism, and reasonableness.

Maxim 2: Cultivate Radical Hope.

The kind of hope that reappears after optimism has died is hope that can be relied on. It is generally a hope that doesn't talk about or think of itself as hope. This means realizing the dangers of optimistic hope, of fantasyland and magical thinking. First, we must own our grief and anger. Second comes the realization that blaming ourselves and others doesn't help. Only when one reaches a certain level of despair can new resources of hope emerge, in oneself and in the new world in which one finds oneself. What is called for is a faith in a possible future,

however improbable, embedded in action totally oriented to the situation (Lear 2006).

Basis. All of us who have worked in ICUs and with palliative care and hospice teams have watched patients and families adjust to what had seemed a hopeless situation. We recall one formerly homeless patient saying to us, "Well, Doc, if it weren't for AIDS, I'd be dead"—meaning that in coming to terms with AIDS, he had gotten himself off the street and had broken his addictions. We are also familiar with studies showing that survival rates for certain kinds of cancers are better for patients in hospice than out. By accepting a terminal diagnosis and re-defining what counts as healing, an unexpected path for extended life opens up. Confirming this, the bioethicist Judith Andre (2015) talks about "open hope"; Joanna Macy speaks of "active hope" (Macy and Johnstone 2012); and Gabriel Marcel (1978) speaks of the hope that can arise when "hope-for" is released. Likewise, Albert Camus's 1947 novel The Plague and his 1946 essay Neither Victim nor Executioners are essential resources.

Extrapolation. How will you behave when there is no ordinary hope? What are the kinds of things you will always want to do—the way you want always to be, whether there is hope or not? For example, consider the central virtues of the hope that emerges beyond optimism: being kind, not abandoning people, behaving with integrity. The key is knowing that there is almost always room for something positive to be done. There are always openings, always gaps in the gloom. Practice for how you will behave when there is no more left to do—that is, when no telos-action or results-oriented action of any kind is possible.

Maxim 3: Have a Line in the Sand.

Know that there are some things you will not do, some modes of living you

will not embrace. Know that there are lives worse than death. Be prepared to die.
Basis. This maxim is the core insight behind the practice of formulating advance directives. At what point is it time to stop? We are thinking of hospice patients who asked that their tube feedings be stopped, and the candidate for a brain surgery to de-bulk a benign tumor who declined the procedure, because life in the hospital and rehab was simply unpalatable to him. (Interestingly enough, he lived far longer than his projected life expectancy had he had the surgery.)
For those of us in health care, there are the sobering lessons from the horrific situation that developed at Memorial Hospital in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, as recounted in Sheri Fink's outstanding book, Five Days at Memorial: Life and Death in a Storm-Ravaged Hospital (2013). As floodwaters rose in the days after the storm, the hospital lost power when the grid failed, and then lost backup power when their generators were swamped. With no power, the ventilators and other life-supporting machines stopped working. There were no functioning monitors. Without air conditioning, temperatures in the sealed units rose rapidly. As the days went by, shortages of food and medicine developed. Gunfire was

heard in the streets; police withdrew from the area because of the danger. Under these conditions, impossible triage decisions were made, and finally, over a dozen critically ill patients were injected with lethal doses of morphine and sedatives.
Extrapolation. Post-Katrina New Orleans presents us with the kinds of scenarios that can be expected to be a regular occurrence as natural and social collapse unfold. Useful reflections on how to behave in such extreme situations come from the concentration camp writings of Victor Frankl and Etty Hillesum. There is also the example of Ludwig Wittgenstein, who urged his student Drury, who was preparing to go into combat in World War II, to decide ahead of time not to engage in hand-to-hand combat, but to be willing to be killed instead (Monk 1990).
Know what you will do, and what you will not. Max Weber formulated it this way in his classic lecture "Politics as a Vocation" (1919):
it is immensely moving when a mature man—no matter whether old or young in years—is aware of a responsibility for the consequences of his conduct and really feels such responsibility with heart and soul. He then acts by following an ethic of responsibility and somewhere he reaches the point where he says: "Here I stand; I can do no other." That is something genuinely human and moving. And every one of us who is not spiritually dead must realize the possibility of finding himself at some time in that position.

Considering the likely realities of collapse and transition, it seems probable that many people will find themselves facing these kinds of decisions, and something like an internal, ethical "advance directive" could prove beneficial. This is why, for example, emergency responders run through practice scenarios. The body and the imagination need to be encouraged to engage directly that which lies outside the normal. True, drawing lines in sands that are constantly shifting in a tricky business. One must be prepared, as well, to pivot and go in unexpected directions. But these pivots are more likely to be done well if one has prepared by imagining the worst and drawing practice lines in the sand.

Maxim 4: Appreciate the Astonishing and Unique Opportunity.

Appreciate the opportunity you have to accompany humanity in this extraordinary transition and to be present to the earth and the biosphere at this time. Appreciate how amazing our bodies are, as a perceiving sensorium, as movement and in activity, sponsoring emotion and thought. Be amazed at the interconnectedness of things and their astonishing complexity. Think small, alongside thinking very big.

Basis. One of the privileges of doing ethics consultation and research in clinical bioethics is the opportunity to meet remarkable people who handle their physical challenges with courage and grace. All of us who have done this work can think

of examples. We cite here one from our book What Patients Teach (2013). The patient has abdominal cancer and is in the last weeks of her life:

There is no blessing like friends. I've had friends who came out of the woodwork, friends I hadn't seen in a long time or who I only saw infrequently. I have been treated so lovingly; it's just been overwhelming to me. I'm so very grateful that I had this year to spend this time with these people. It's interesting. The two friends who have helped me the most have both said to me that they consider it a privilege to be able to do this. Which goes to show that many times the people in your life are willing to do more to help you out than one might have guessed. (109)

There are also well-known accounts of illness that confirm the blessings that can come in extremity if one is prepared to receive them. At the end of his account of his long dying of AIDS, Harold Brodkey (1996) says: "Peace? There was never any in the world. But in the pliable water, under the sky, unmoored, I am traveling now and hearing myself laugh, at first with nerves and then with genuine amazement. It is all around me" (177). And Arthur Frank (2002) summarizes his reflections on his own illnesses, and illness in general, this way: "The ultimate

value of illness is that it teaches us the value of being alive; this is why the ill are not just charity cases, but a presence to be valued . . . . Illness restores the sense of proportion that is lost when we take life for granted" (120). Cultivating gratitude: What could be more important? This is the message—from our patients, from the dying, from our great teachers.

Extrapolation. Our patients, and many people who have faced ethical extremity, teach the importance of the "little things." We are thinking of Masha Gessen's interview with the former Gulag prisoner talking about his old camp:

You should see it [Site Perm-36] in the summer. Some evenings there—the light is special, and the air—sometimes you'd be going behind the outhouse, because inside it was rather unpleasant and inconvenient and you avoided it if you could, so there you'd be, taking a piss behind the outhouse, and the air was like you could touch it, and the smell of those linden trees, and the sound of the birds singing. (Gessen and Friedman 2018)

This marvelous passage brings to mind the woman we interviewed years ago who had lost fingers in a textile mill, but whose main memory of work, the memory she stressed in her account, was of how beautiful the afternoon sunlight was as it shone on and through the running threads in the very spinning looms that had claimed her fingers.

Learn then to appreciate how amazing nature is, even in (or especially) the face of loss and change. Think of the amazing greens one finds when walking in landscapes after intense wildfire, or of the astonishing color photographs of Rich-

ard Mosse capturing the (admittedly unearthly) beauty of the devastation of the Amazon (Maher 2021). Joanna Macy's teaching work is especially helpful in its insistence on the blessing of our being alive during this amazing time: appreciate that there is anything at all, and that we have witnessed it (Macy and Johnstone 2012).

Maxim 5: Train Your Body and Your Mind.

Learn breathing exercises. Develop the physiological capacity to deal with despair. Despair isn't just psychological, it's physiological.

Learn skills for getting beyond ego—not just the cognitive limits of ego, which many are at least familiar with pondering, but the emotional and physiological limits of ego.

Basis. Those of us who have worked with colleagues in health care on issues related to moral distress and burnout are familiar with the power of bodily practices to mitigate and eventually assimilate trauma of all kinds. Included in such

practices would be mindfulness, yoga, cognitive-behavioral therapy, trauma release exercises, and wellness programs (nutrition, exercise, sleep patterns).
A useful advanced skill is the capacity to shift timeframes. In imagination, go out to geological, evolutionary, planetary, cosmic scales to get a different view of the Anthropocene. Consider, for instance, that the merger/"collision" of the Milky Way and Andromeda galaxies, which will take place over a period of 5 billion years, has already begun. Next, practice returning to the timescale of the human life cycle. From there, descend into an examination of the moment-by-moment construction of experience. At that level, as well as at the level of the galaxies, the Anthropocene, which looms so large for us, is invisible. Finally, come back once more to the human cycles of days, weeks, years, generations. If one doesn't return to the human cycles, one becomes a monster. But staying always here in the human ego timeframe, one will likely die of grief or rage (both of which have their own specific fast and slow tracks).
Extrapolation. As we have seen with the COVID-19 pandemic, in time of severe social stress, moral distress and burnout can spread quite widely. They impact not just health-care workers and emergency responders, but also food workers, teachers, and mass transit personnel. Physical, psychological, and spiritual trauma are likely to become widespread as the climate collapses. Training body and mind to cope will be essential to survival and to whatever sort of human flourishing is possible on a vastly depleted planet.
Maxim 6: Act for the Future Generations of All Species.
Speak for those without voice: the poor, the future generations, other species.
Speak for the forests, the seas, the mountains.

David Schenck and Larry R. Churchill
Act, personally and politically, to limit the damage being done to the biosphere. Every 0.5° C increase avoided is a major victory and achievement.
Basis. For the bioethicist, the COVID-19 pandemic has been a clinic in the interconnectedness of ethical problems, as well as the intertwining of the fates of nations and species. Think here of the interconnections between and among fresh meat markets in China, violated natural habitats, global trade patterns, and their economics; the disparities in health care and vulnerability among nations, and among populations within nations; the multiple failures of the health-care system in protecting its workers and its patients; the catastrophic failures of political leadership and the undermining of confidence in science and medicine. And then boil all this down to triage policies, and staffing decisions, and the allocation of PPE. All connected, all one giant web.

Extrapolation. It is essential to find creative ways to cultivate an in-depth, emotional as well as intellectual understanding of interconnection, so that when we act for a species or a group, we are acting for everything in the global web. We are all in this together, all tied together, all forming a multiplex unity. Acting with a sense of solidarity, involving mutuality and reciprocity, the development and maintenance of trust, is essential for decent survival. This understanding is the only intelligent basis for strategy and research. This insight is the foundation for the basic compassion involved in the stress on equity, distributive justice, and the acknowledgment of the gross unfairness of the basic fact that those who have contributed the least to the carbon catastrophe will bear the brunt of the chain of disasters it is initiating.

The Process Has Begun

What in many ways is hardest to realize—yet must be realized—is that the collapse is already here. The following is a list of symptoms of systems already badly out of kilter: the COVID-19 pandemic; the recent Houston storms; the wildfires in California and Australia; and the grid collapses in Texas and California. It is clearly too late to avoid the climate crisis or mitigate it in any definitive way. Adaptation and collapse have begun, albeit in slow motion.

Unfortunately, the numbing has begun as well. We are already far too tolerant of massive amounts of suffering. We are currently moving toward 600,000 COVID-19 deaths in the US. This is more deaths than in all our 20th- and 21st-century wars combined. There have been over 3 million deaths worldwide, and yet life moves along in a quasi-normal state for most of us.

Alongside this process, the temptations and provocations to ruthlessness, competition, and violence will be constant. But our greatest moral threat will likely remain the creeping normalization of catastrophe.

Which brings us back to the fundamental questions addressed by the maxims: what kind of person will you be, and what will you teach and model for your colleagues, your students, your families?

Ethical Maxims for a Marginally Inhabitable Planet

We ourselves find this list of maxims daunting. But this is how maxims work. Maxims have to do with how we do everything we do—a tone and style of living—as well as with the implementation of certain practices. Maxims are, in significant part, about keeping morality itself alive in a catastrophe. They demand of us that which we have difficulty demanding from ourselves. This is why we put forward for discussion this list of six maxims: precisely because they are so difficult, but also—in our view—so necessary.

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CHAPTER 27

Full Catastrophe Ethics

Noirin Sheahan · 3 min read

Noirin Sheahan examines how to respond skillfully to the overwhelming reality of climate change and potential social collapse. Drawing from a bioethics paper endorsed by Buddhist scholar Joanna Macy, she presents six ethical maxims for navigating environmental crisis: grasping the immensity of what's coming, cultivating radical hope beyond optimism, maintaining ethical boundaries, appreciating this unique historical moment, training body and mind for resilience, and acting for future generations of all species. The essay explores how common reactions to climate news—anxiety, rage, numbness, despair—can be transformed through these practices. Sheahan connects each maxim to the potential for deeper Dhamma practice, suggesting that climate collapse presents both unprecedented challenge and spiritual opportunity. She emphasizes how Buddhist principles of interconnectedness, non-attachment, and compassionate action provide essential resources when external securities fail. The essay concludes with an invitation to explore how these maxims align with Buddhist teachings and can be integrated into meditation and daily life practice, offering a framework for maintaining integrity and purpose amid civilizational uncertainty.

Full Catastrophe Ethics.

How do you react to news of climate change and forecasts of ice-caps melting, cities flooding or burning, widespread drought and famine, breakdown of essential services like water and electricity, hundreds of millions of refugees seeking homes in temperate regions like ours? Do you shrink into a ball of anxiety and disbelief? Weep? Pound your fists in frustration and rage? Numb out? Feel totally out of your depth and inadequate? Trust the scientists to find a way out?

Any or all of these happen for me depending on circumstances. Afterwards I might be prompted to read some relevant articles, sign a petition, donate to an environmental cause, re-commit to living sustainably, toy with the possibility of learning basic survival skills. Then I'll turn back to more immediate concerns. Till the next depressing news bulletin.

The 'out of my depth and inadequate' feeling I find particularly troublesome. It begs so many questions. Surely there is something I can do to help myself face what might be coming down the tracks?

I was relieved and grateful therefore to come across a bioethics paper suggesting ethical maxims that we can practice to help us face the environmental and social disaster that the authors see coming as soon as 2031 – only nine years away!!!

The paperi was publicized in a recent Zoom event featuring Joanna Macey, the renowned author, climate activist and Buddhist scholar in conversation with the authors of the paper. She enthusiastically endorsed their suggestion to prepare ourselves so as to behave with as much integrity as possible in the face of environmental and social breakdown. Here's a brief summary of their suggested maxims:

Work Hard to Grasp the Immensity. The possibility of environmental and subsequent social collapse is inconceivable for most of us. We enter a fog where we no longer know how to think, where right and wrong become meaningless. And yet that incomprehension may be a necessary steppingstone to the next maxim.

Cultivate Radical Hope. This not based on optimism that some solution can be found to restore the social security we now enjoy. Having worked through grief and anger and a depth of despair, hope takes the form of faith that some values are worth preserving to the end - kindness, not abandoning people, behaving with integrity. Radical hope sees openings for positive action, finds gaps in the gloom.

Have a Line in the Sand. Know that there are some things you will not do, some actions you will not embrace. Be prepared to die rather than cross your red line.

Appreciate the Astonishing and Unique Opportunity. Acknowledge what an extraordinary transition is coming for humanity and the biosphere. Appreciate what is vanishing before your eyes, be glad for every blade of grass that is still green, every tree still standing. Practice gratitude for being alive now, able to breathe now.

Train Your Body and Your Mind. Develop the capacity to deal with despair. Learn skills for getting beyond the limits of ego. Climate collapse will bring widespread physical, psychological, and spiritual trauma. As our physical and social resources shrink, our mental and spiritual resources will become ever more valuable to ensure human survival and flourishing.

Act for the Future Generations of All Species. Think beyond yourself and your immediate circle. Act for the benefit of the poor, future generations, other species, forests, seas and mountains. Act, personally and politically, to limit the damage - every 0.5° C increase avoided will save millions of lives, species, resources. We are all in this together, interconnected, a multiplex unity.

The authors of the paper aren't proposing these maxims as absolutes, but as a bare beginning that will provoke discussion. Personally I feel very grateful to have this skeleton upon which I can begin to take on board the spiritual challenge that is to come.

Over the coming months I hope to examine each maxim in more depth, see how it ties in with the Dhamma, see how we could put the maxim into practice in our meditation and daily life. I hope to be back with a series of tips on the subject and if

any of you would like to practice alongside me on this, please get in touch.

i https://media2-production.mightynetworks.com/asset/39337730/Schenck_-_Ethical_Maxims.pdf

CHAPTER 28

First Maxim: Work Hard to Grasp the Immensity

Noirin Sheahan · 3 min read

This essay examines the first of six ethical maxims for preparing for climate change: 'work hard to grasp the immensity.' Noirin draws profound parallels between the Buddha's teaching on death contemplation (maraṇasati) and our need to face the reality of environmental and social collapse. Just as the Buddha encouraged followers to contemplate corpses to overcome denial of mortality, we must deliberately expose ourselves to the reality of climate change's consequences. The essay explores how mindfulness practice can help us develop authentic relationships with both nature and social structures we depend upon - food systems, infrastructure, governance - while they still function. Through personal examples of mindful walking in nature, Noirin demonstrates how paying full attention to trees, wildflowers, and birds can become a gentle teacher of impermanence (anicca) and vulnerability. She describes working skillfully with emotional reactions like dread, guilt, and grief that arise when contemplating environmental collapse, showing how mindful awareness can transform our relationship from attachment or aversion toward acceptance. The practice extends beyond nature to appreciating social supports like electricity, water systems, and civic institutions, cultivating gratitude while preparing psychologically for their potential absence.

Preparing for Climate Change - First Ethical Maxim

This follows from the August tip describing six maxims that we can practice to fortify ourselves for
the environmental and social consequences of climate change. The first maxim asks us to “work hard
to grasp the immensity”; this tip won’t discuss the likelihood or extent of the consequences we can
expect (if interested you could read the paper that suggested the maxims) but explore some links
between the first maxim and the Dhamma.

The maxim fits perfectly with the Buddha’s advice that we come to terms with the fact that
everything inside us and outside is in flux, vulnerable, dependent on circumstance. We plan our
career, family, diary, around the presumption that we will continue to have a stable food and water

supply, electricity, public transport, schools, internet, the rule of law, government. All of these are
put in jeopardy because of climate change. But their absence is, for most of us, unthinkable. The
mind skims over the implications, we might feel blocked or frightened or we might doze off or
restlessly seek distraction. Soon we're back to 'business as usual'.
This parallels with they way we ignore our own mortality. Intellectually we know we will die
someday, but rarely do we think about this. To overcome this reluctance, the Buddha asked his
followers to deliberately expose themselves to the reality of death - to look at dead bodies, smell
them, see the flesh rotting, the maggots feeding, the residue of bones and dust, reminding
themselves "one day this will happen to my body; I am not exempt from this fate."
To follow this approach regarding environmental and social collapse we could read relevant articles
or watch documentaries. We could talk the matter over with friends or family or look for on-line
support in coming to terms with the situation.
We should also remember that the contemplation of death is the final exercise that the Buddha lists
for mindfulness of the body. He starts with mindfulness of breathing and posture and everyday
activities. We get to know the body very intimately in life before we contemplate its death.
Similarly, we can become more mindful of the environment and social structures as they now
function to fortify ourselves for their impending collapse. We can walk in nature, paying full
attention to grass, trees, birds, sky, all the while being aware of our emotions e.g. enjoyment,
boredom. Acknowledging our reactions honestly allows us forge a deeper relationship that will
eventually transcend attachment, indifference, aversion.
This mirrors Joanna Macey's advice to develop our relationship with nature in order to strengthen
ourselves for the challenge of climate change. After reading her book "Active Hope" I

started taking
a deeper interest in nature. My daily walks slowed as wildflowers and grasses and bird-song
demanded attention. After some time I began to dread winter when the verges would be muddy and
drab, the birds silent. I worked mindfully with this anxiety and dread till one day I noticed an
underlying guilt, a feeling that I should somehow be able to give each flower the gift of everlasting
life and was failing in my task! Once I became aware of this delusion I could smile at it and enjoy my
walks again. I started to appreciate the grasses, flowers and birds as dhamma teachers. Their
message of transience and vulnerability became a gentle way of learning about my own mortality.
More recently my daily walks help me assimilate the possibility of environmental collapse. Walking
by a tree I reflect that it might not live out its natural lifespan, that its roots might already be

detecting degradation in the soil, its flowers noticing the lack of insects. Grief or anger might emerge
but sometimes these resolve into a bitter-sweet 'hello, goodbye' as we meet on our journeys
through life and death.
I find this next part more difficult but am trying to extend the practice to include social supports such
as food in the shops, water pouring when I turn a tap, electricity flowing when I press a switch. I
remind myself to be grateful for whatever services now work – transport, schools, hospitals, internet
and the social norms that allow me feel safe on my daily walk. The more I value these wonders, the
better I will be able to contemplate living without their immense benefits.
I also appreciate the support of others in this endeavor. If you think you might similarly benefit you
could join the Satipanya forum dedicated to practicing with the Six Maxims. Email Noirin for further
information or to register.

Some resources that are helping me ‘grasp the immensity’:
Hothouse Earth, Bill McGuire, Icon Books, 2022
This Changes Everything, Naoimi Klein, Penguin, 2014
Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal, Noam Chomsky & Robert Pollin, Verso, 2020
What society might look like as its structures collapse:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lcem_tutbGc
https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20170418-how-western-civilisation-could-collapse
Gwen’s tip from the September newsbyte contained many additional resources and after our second
Climate and Dhamma Zoom session, Gwen shared Caroline Bird’s poem “Prepper”:

CHAPTER 29

Second Maxim: Cultivate Radical Hope

Noirin Sheahan · 3 min read

This essay examines the second of six maxims for facing climate change: cultivating radical hope, which Noirin identifies with the Buddhist concept of saddha (trust/faith). Unlike ordinary hope that depends on specific outcomes, radical hope represents an unconditional trust in the value of present-moment awareness, regardless of circumstances. Drawing from the Buddha's teachings and mystics like Julian of Norwich, the essay shows how saddha provides confidence that simply being aware—even of misery—is noble and worthwhile. The practice of vipassanā meditation naturally cultivates this radical hope by training us to let go of outcomes and rest in present-moment awareness. Each time we overcome obstacles like pain, boredom, or doubt in meditation, we build spiritual resilience for potentially catastrophic climate conditions. The essay argues that mindfulness practice serves as training for finding meaning and minimizing suffering even in appalling circumstances, when conventional social structures may collapse and we must rely on deeper human qualities like kindness and mutual care for survival.

Radical Hope, Saddha.
This continues a series of tips based on the six maxims[1] which have been suggested as a
way to fortify ourselves for the environmental and social consequences of climate change.
The first maxim challenges us to ‘grasp the immensity’ of the risk to our environment and
social structures and possibly even to our civilization, posed by climate change. The second
maxim asks us to cultivate radical hope.
Normally we think of hope in terms of a particular outcome. We hope for good news or recovery from illness. This is ‘hope for’ and the six-maxim authors1 distinguish radical hope from this; radical hope is not based on optimism that we will find a way to restore stability to the climate and nature; its a form of hope that will survive ever deteriorating
weather conditions with harsh consequences for the environment and mankind. It would
inspire us to make the best of things even when our home had been burned by a wildfire.

Having nowhere to live and only scraps of food to eat, it would motivate us to eat those mindfully, with gratitude.

In Buddhism this is termed ‘saddha’, normally translated as faith, but the better translation is trust. Saddha gives us confidence in the teachings of the Buddha. Even if our circumstances were totally miserable and the outlook equally bleak, saddha lets us trust that simply being aware of the misery is noble and worthwhile.

Radical hope, saddha, has no preferred outcome. It’s not driven by desire for any goal we can envisage. It trusts a goodness beyond the surface appearance of things, found in simply being present, aware of things as they are.

Mystics from all religions find radical hope. Julian of Norwich lived at the time of bubonic plague and the 100 year war but could confidently believe the inner voice that told her “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well”.

Fortunately, saddha is naturally cultivated by meditation practice. Every time we drop our daydreams, plans, worries, and bring attention to the here and now we are letting go of outcomes. We learn that all we really know are present sensations and feelings; the future is but a thought of what might happen. Since we don’t yet know what’s to come, why waste energy worrying?

“Its one thing to do that in meditation practice” our inner sceptic argues “where we’ve decided to sit down and watch the breath. Its quite another thing to be facing a future where millions are competing for scarce food and water.” True, it will be a greater challenge. But its one we are training for every time we overcome some obstacle in meditation. When pain makes us irritable or we grow bored, restless, dozy, or when doubt persuades us we’re wasting our time. We're tempted to give up; we don’t want to endure these miseries, we want to be entertained or to be doing something, achieving something.

Can we see all such challenges as spiritual muscle-building, preparing us for serious

horrors
which may come our way? Bringing a gentle curiosity to every experience we develop resilience to physical and mental discomfort, learn that we don't always need to be achieving
goals or distracting ourselves.
These traits will help enormously in the event of climate catastrophe, when there may be little

we can do to avoid hardship for ourselves and for those we love. Saddha, radical hope, will
bring out the best in the changed circumstances; for example we may be relieved that the
delusion of human dominance over nature has been shattered along with and the 'greed is
good' message of consumerism.
With the loss of illusion, deeper humanity may come to the fore. During bereavement or
serious illness people discover the value of family and friends. Neighbours who had hardly
known one another before COVID helped each other during lockdown. Kindness and care
may become our best survival-tools when climate change really bites and we can no longer
rely on the social structures we now take for granted.
Radical hope will let us play our part to minimise suffering in what may well be appalling
circumstances. Mindfulness practice is our training ground. We can use any worries about
climate change to motivate our practice. We may not be able to persuade governments to
avert the disaster, but we can persuade ourselves to be ready for disaster, ready to find meaning in being present, just breathing, even if the future looks horrifying.
[1] Ethical Maxims for a Marginally Inhabitable Planet David Schenck* and Larry R. Churchill,
Perspectives in Biology and Medicine, Vol 64,4 2021 https://media2-production.mightynetworks.com/asset/39337730/Schenck_-_Ethical_Maxims.pdf

CHAPTER 30

Third Maxim: Draw a Line in the Sand - b. Working Mindfully with Red Lines

Noirin Sheahan · 3 min read

In this practical exploration of Buddhist ethics in the face of climate change, Noirin Sheahan examines the third of six maxims for fortifying ourselves against future challenges: drawing clear moral boundaries or 'red lines.' Using her personal experiment with not eating after 7pm as a case study, she demonstrates how resolve (adhiṭṭhāna) - one of the ten pāramī or perfections - can be cultivated through mindful practice with smaller challenges to prepare for greater tests of character.

The essay reveals the psychological dynamics of working with training rules, showing how initial rigidity can give way to skillful resistance to temptation, and how even failure can deepen understanding and strengthen resolve. Sheahan connects this personal practice to the broader Buddhist framework of sīla (ethical conduct) and the practical necessity of maintaining moral integrity when external pressures intensify due to climate-related scarcity.

This teaching offers valuable insights for practitioners seeking to develop inner strength and ethical resilience, whether facing personal challenges or preparing for uncertain times ahead. The essay emphasizes the importance of community support and honest self-reflection in maintaining spiritual discipline.

New Year Resolutions and the Third Ethical Maxim

Resolve is one of the ten ‘Perfections’, the virtues developed by the spiritual life. We perfect resolve by practicing it and I’ve learned a lot from working with the resolution not to eat after 7pm. I undertook this mainly to practice the third of the six maxims suggested to fortify ourselves for the consequences of climate change. This maxim asks us to draw our red lines. When poverty, hunger, homelessness come to our own doorstep, what will we not stoop to as we struggle to adapt and survive?

Last month’s tip looked at this from the point of view of Buddhist ethics. These provide the rationale for whatever red-lines we draw. New Year resolutions present the perfect opportunity to strengthen our resolve to keep within these when temptation arises.

The monastic rule not to eat after mid-day has always been a challenge for me. I manage OK during retreats, but as a way of life it’s been a step too far. I eat something at tea-time for health reasons, but the 7pm red line means I can’t indulge

the comforting delight of end-of-day snacking.
The practice has been an eye-opener! The precepts are described as ‘Training Rules’ so I’ve never seen them as commandments. When I started to think of 7pm as a serious red line an inner despot emerged, locked me into a straight-jacket in anticipation of bad behaviour!
In time a few chinks loosened, and I could enjoy watching the despot dismiss temptations before they had even a remote chance of success. But after a week or so resolve waned and temptation got stronger. I recognised this as the point where previous resolutions had been quietly put aside. The usual excuse popped up “You’re so hungry … you’ll never be able to sleep…” tapping into a barely voiced undercurrent: “Ah go on, give in, what does it matter?” Hard to resist this familiar, comforting laziness.
I reminded myself of the wider context: climate change, competition for food, water, shelter; how violence erupts when scarcity threatens; how to avoid back-sliding into savagery; the need to be strong, heroic even, to choose good over evil. Also, that I was going to have to write up my experience in this tip, admit to my transgressions! These thoughts were enough to reinvigorate resolve.
It boosted my confidence to have held fast when I would previously have given in. Joy arose and I warmed to the practice. I kept an emergency banana by my bed in case the usual excuse proved valid, but happily I slept soundly. It simplified matters to have an absolute rule to cleave to. It also removed the guilt of indulging night-time comfort-food. Such a relief.
Then one evening, out of the blue, I just gave in. I had been feeling out of sorts, fractious and as soon as temptation arose, I capitulated, didn’t even try to argue. Afterwards, somewhat shocked and ashamed at having crossed the red line, I reflected on the experience, remembering the savage energy desire had evoked and how instantly I had caved in. Contemplating this, a new level of resolve took shape, based on aversion to being enslaved by such a brute, unthinking, force. This has been enough to get me through subsequent temptations … so far anyhow. Resolve is an on-going practice, and I’m eager to continue its lessons.
I’d urge you to see your New Year resolutions in the light of the ‘Red Lines’ maxim: Reflect on how much resolve you may one day need to resist harming another because of hunger or other basic need. Let others know of your resolution - the shame of reporting failure increases motivation! Watch temptations mindfully so as to learn how to resist future, more serious temptations to betray your inner goodness, your true nature.
If you wish to investigate this or the other maxims more deeply, consider joining the Satipanya Forum dedicated to these. Contact Noirin for further information.

CHAPTER 31

Fourth Maxim: Appreciate the Amazing and Unique Opportunity - From Suffering to Faith to Gladness

Noirin Sheahan · 3 min read

This essay examines the fourth of six ethical maxims for addressing climate catastrophe, drawing parallels with the Buddhist teaching of Transcendent Dependent Arising (paṭicca samuppāda). Rather than avoiding the distress of climate change, Noirin Sheahan suggests embracing it as an opportunity for spiritual development. The teaching shows how dukkha, when met with mindfulness, can become a condition for faith (saddhā), which in turn gives rise to joy. This process mirrors the traditional twelve-step sequence that leads from suffering to liberation, though here applied to contemporary environmental anxiety. The essay provides practical meditation instructions for working with difficult emotions, encouraging practitioners to develop intimate awareness of dukkha rather than pushing it away through distraction or escapism. By cultivating faith in our innate capacity to work through difficulties, we can discover a life-affirming energy that transforms our relationship with suffering. The teaching bridges traditional Dhamma wisdom with modern challenges, offering both vipassanā practitioners and those facing climate grief a skilful means for finding transcendence within adversity.

Fourth Maxim: Appreciate the Astonishing and Unique Opportunity.
After a break, I'm looking again at the six maxims suggested as ethical preparation for climate catastrophe, teasing out some links with the Dhamma.
Instead of focussing on the horrid side of climate change, the fourth maxim asks us to embrace our good fortune to be living through this crisis. This parallels with the Dhamma teaching on Transcendent Dependent Arising.
"Dependant Arising" refers to a step-by-step process by which one thing leads to another; the first step lays down the conditions for the second and so on. Many of you will be familiar with this teaching, showing how ignorance leads to dukkha (usually translated as suffering but including even minor irritations). Transcendent Dependant Arising completes the process, showing how awareness of dukkha sets off another chain of conditions which culminate in liberation.
This teaching is better known in Jhana schools but also applies in vipassana, though it needs some steadiness of attention to discern the links. I've found it helpful and encouraging at times of distress and thus an apt support for this maxim.
There are twelve steps in the process, though we may repeat these a million times

before we reach the end of suffering. For simplicity I'll focus on the earlier stages.
The starting point is dukkha. The anxiety we feel as we contemplate climate change is an 'astonishing and unique opportunity' to cultivate the path to transcendence.
This may seem fanciful, naive. How could drought, wildfires, social breakdown and the like facilitate transcendence? And yet there are countless examples of how acute suffering led people to spiritual renewal.
Our usual mistake is to keep suffering at arm's length, fretting about how awful things are, comforting ourselves with food, alcohol, escapism. Transcendence requires intimacy with the sensations and feelings of dukkha. As we explore these mindfully, we find something within us that refuses to capitulate, insists that we will somehow find a way through these troubles.
Thus, dukkha, examined mindfully, becomes a condition for faith in our innate ability to overcome dukkha. This is the second link in Transcendent Arising - faith that we will find a way through difficulty.
Luckily we have access to the Dhamma. Faith can find refuge there, knowing there are teachings, practices, and a sangha to guide us. In these supportive conditions, the determination to overcome dukkha can be experienced as a form of joy – a positive, life-affirming energy that carries an intuition of goodness. Thus, faith is a condition for joy, the third step in the series.
I'll stop here for now, describe some following stages next month. If this teaching is

new to you, I hope you'll examine it, see whether it could be a helpful support for your troubles, whether these centre around climate change or more personal issues. Reflect on your practice with dukkha and whether this has or could stir faith; whether faith could be a source of joy in life.
To help the teaching sink deeper, try to spot these links in vipassana. First settle yourself in meditation, then bring the difficulty to mind; does the distress overwhelm mindfulness, or can you feel the feelings? How might you describe whatever keeps you practicing? Would it be the faith that mindfulness will somehow show you a way through?
Well done if you've managed to make that first link in the path to transcendence. If not, try again tomorrow. If and when you can perceive faith arising from dukkha, explore this. Does faith have an energetic manifestation in the body, are there associated feelings, tensions? Practice meditating on faith itself.
In subsequent meditation sessions, as you get more confident that dukkha, observed mindfully, leads to faith, it may become possible to detect joy within the experience of faith. Not an excited giddiness, but the joy of having the courage to be mindful in the face of dukkha. Learn to relax with this joy, feel its energy within the body, how it affects the breath. We may still seem far from transcending dukkha, but we can enjoy

the path thereto.
Although the problem of climate change remains as a real existential threat to humanity, this teaching helps us make the best of a bad situation, appreciating this astonishing and unique opportunity to forge a path to transcendence.

CHAPTER 32

Fifth Maxim: Train the Mind and Body

Noirin Sheahan · 3 min read

This essay examines the fifth of six ethical maxims for climate catastrophe preparation, focusing on training both mind and body to handle despair. Noirin Sheahan draws parallels between contemporary advice for climate resilience and core Buddhist teachings. The essay explores how the Ānāpānasati Sutta's breathing exercises align with recommended physiological preparation for despair, noting that suffering is fundamentally mind-made as taught in the opening verse of the Dhammapada. The discussion covers the Buddha's own journey from luxury through asceticism to the Middle Way, illustrating how physical well-being supports spiritual development. Key themes include the three mental training aspects of the Eightfold Path (Right Effort, sammā sati, and sammā samādhi), the physiological manifestations of emotional burdens like greed and hatred, and the teaching of anattā (not-self) as liberation from ego limitations. The essay concludes that Buddhist practitioners who develop mindful responses to climate despair will play crucial roles in maintaining hope and preventing societal chaos, making Dhamma practice both personally liberating and socially essential.

Fifth Maxim: Train your Body and your Mind.

This tip looks at the 5th of the six maxims which have been suggested as ethical preparation for climate catastrophe. The authors, David Schenck and Larry Churchill, believe that we are heading towards social collapse due to the unstoppable consequences of Climate Change and that the trauma of losing so much of what we take for granted – like food, water, social stability – will lead to huge levels of stress and mental illness. My purpose in writing these tips is to tease out some links between these maxims and the Dhamma.

The fifth maxim advises us to train the body and mind. Here’s what they say: Learn breathing exercises. Develop the physiological capacity to deal with despair. Despair isn’t just psychological, it’s physiological. Learn skills for getting beyond ego—not just the cognitive limits of ego, which many are at least familiar with pondering, but the emotional and physiological limits of ego.

Training the mind is central to the Dhamma. Three strands of the Eightfold Path are to do with cultivating the mind: Right Effort, Mindfulness and Concentration. The first verse of the Dhammapada tells us that all our suffering is mind-made: we don’t suffer because of what happens to us in life, we suffer because of our reactions – wanting this,

hating that. Although the body plays a central role in the Buddha's teaching, it is always as a method for training the mind. In a similar vein, the six maxim authors aren't advocating fitness for its own sake, but for the sake of dealing with despair. Thus their advice has a number of resonances in the Dhamma:

Breathing exercises: The Anapanasati Sutta lists a number of breathing exercises. These start with mindfulness, knowing when we're breathing in and when we're breathing out, and go on to include the kind of yogic breathing exercises David and Larry are indicating e.g. using the breath to calm the body and mind, to develop pleasant feeling, to gladden the mind & develop concentration.

The need to deal with despair: Despair was what fuelled the Buddha's quest for enlightenment: his early life of luxury was rendered meaningless once he realised that this would end in sickness, aging and death. His whole teaching, he said, could be reduced to a simple statement: there is suffering and there is an end to suffering. Having transcended his own despair we can be confident that the Dhamma will teach us to do likewise.

Develop the physiological capacity to deal with despair: The Buddha's first attempts at spiritual development started with deeply concentrated forms of meditation. Seeing these gave only a temporary respite from despair he went on to practice strenuous asceticism. On the verge of death from starvation and hardship he abandoned this approach, accepted a bowl of rice-milk and went on to discover his own path to liberation. Taking the rice-milk indicates the need for physical energy in order to make his spiritual breakthrough. While physical health isn't lauded as a virtue in his teaching, he encouraged people to maintain good health e.g. to do walking meditation so as to develop energy, health and aid digestion; to eat healthy food like rice-gruel so as to enjoy health, strength and a comfortable abiding.

Ego limitations manifest not only cognitively, but emotionally and physiologically: In Dhamma terminology, we suffer because we cling to the wrong view of self. This suffering manifests as emotional burdens like greed and hatred, which have physical aspects – for some it might be muscular tension, for others headaches, stomach upsets, breathing difficulties.

Getting beyond the ego: This is one way of describing the teaching on 'Not-Self'. Believing there is a substantial core to the person we call 'me', we suffer when things go wrong for us – when we get blamed or mistreated, when we get ill or incapacitated, when we lose those we love. The Buddha does not deny the suffering, or the fact that it is happening to the person I call 'me'. Caring deeply for that person, he would respond

with compassion, while knowing the suffering as unnecessary, based on mistaken identification with body and mind, with the person called ‘me’. All our practice is aimed at seeing through this illusion, so as to gain the peace and joy of liberation.

This penultimate maxim resonates well with the Buddha’s teaching. Despair will emerge of all of us as we witness the increasing impact of climate change on nature, on vulnerable communities and as our own food supplies and social structures grow ever less reliable. Can we take the coming storm to heart, prepare ourselves as advised in the 5th Maxim? If we care for our body as the necessary basis for learning the Dhamma, train body and mind according to the Anapanasati and other suttas, we will be ready to let it become part of our path to the end of suffering.

When despair becomes widespread in society, those of us who can meet it mindfully will become ever more important in preserving hope, preventing a decline into chaos.

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32 essays · Noirin Sheahan

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