Reflective Meditation

A Creative Path for Mindful Practice

Kim Knuth

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Introduction

From the Editors:
Linda Modaro, Wendy Liepman, Janet Keyes, and Erin Harrop

We are pleased to offer you this first edition of our eJournal: *Reflective Meditation: A Creative Path for Mindful Practice*.

Over the past two years, the recollective awareness community has gone through some painful changes. While we have experienced firsthand the dukkha and heartache of separating from friends and mentors, we also gratefully recognize the sukkha and joy that we have experienced from bonding with like-minded meditators, all of whom are drawn toward a peaceful path.

In this transition from centralized leadership to more widespread, independent sanghas and individuals, the glow of having a 'special' approach to meditation has rubbed off, paving the way for new understandings of our practice as students, practitioners, and teachers. We have experienced this period of change as a creative time, and want to share that creativity with each other. It seems important to capture both the diverse expressions and the evolving nature of recollective awareness meditation practice. With this eJournal, we want to provide a forum for cooperation, connection, and healing to our community.

But we started questioning ourselves. Why did we have a sense of urgency, the sense of wanting many voices to be heard? What was behind the determination to show *how* each individual's contact with the approach changed it? We were starting to forget why we started this process, until the submissions started coming in.

Over the years, we have heard people talk about their meditation sittings; we have been witnesses to how meditators' practice and inner lives blend. We have been privy to the way their minds worked through very intimate, vulnerable details. However, we rarely saw how they integrated their practice in their creative expression. Reading through the submissions to this first edition of *Reflective Meditation* has given us a rare glimpse into this unique process. Some of the contributors to this journal have demonstrated in poignant, relatable ways how their meditative processes are embodied in creative expression. Others have whole-heartedly offered the fruits of their meditation and creative practice —some through songs and paintings, others through sculpture, fiction, and academic prose. So, seeing, hearing, and reading the submissions touched us deeply, and reminded us—

Reminded us of our shared history. Reminded us of our deep commitment to meditation practice, done independently and together. Reminded us of the myriad of unique (and somehow familiar) meditative processes that we hear echoed in our own experiences and in the journal reports of other meditators. Reminded us of the bedrock of our approach: kindness, recollection and reflection, and the Buddhist teaching of conditionality.

Suggestions for reading

We have chosen to layout the submissions interspersing artwork, writing, poems, and audio. Rather than commenting on each piece in the compilation, drawing your attention to something that impacted us, in keeping with our method, we turn it back to you to take up each person and their offering by reading, listening, and viewing their works with the same conditions with which we start our practice:

— Consideration: Respect for and kindness toward each. How is this expression unique and at the same time universal? How do these artists and writers bring the Dharma into their unique lives?

— Choice: Follow your interest. Start where you want in the eJournal. It does not have to be at the beginning. Keep this link handy—make it a favorite, post it on websites and Facebook (or the equivalent), or forward this on to students and friends. We hope you will be drawn to look at it throughout the year, and come back to it when you want to re-look at the images, re-read the writings, and re-listen to the audio.

— Being human: Allow your initial reactions to surface and those that follow, being open to what you experience with your senses—seeing, hearing, thinking, feeling. Upon reflection, your initial reactions may inform further responses. This intentional engagement with the eJournal may deepen your awareness, just as our reflection deepens our meditation practice.

— Sharing with others: When you are comfortable, you might like to make contact with the people who offered their creative endeavors in this eJournal. Use this as a way to connect with others, and learn from a wide variety of meditators who have been deeply impacted by this Reflective Meditation practice. You might also want to share it with friends and others who are curious about this approach.

Our orientation to meditation offers a developmental path, and while you cannot do it wrong, it does take time to trust the practice and participate in it wholeheartedly. We invite you to participate in ways that feel comfortable for you, encouraging your own voice, no matter how wobbly or distant; for it is in the process of expressing, being listened to, being seen, and being heard that the true strength of this practice is revealed.

Recollective Awareness Meditation is an approach to early Buddhist meditation founded by Jason Siff. Since this practice has evolved over time by the people who are practicing it, we are choosing to title this eJournal, Reflective Meditation: A Creative Path for Mindful Practice.

Contributors

The recollective awareness and reflective meditation community is widespread, stretching across the globe. This eJournal represents an attempt to give voice to the diverse experiences of practitioners of this practice.

In March 2017, we (the committee) put out a request for creative submissions to the recollective awareness community through mailing lists from Sati Sangha, Pine Street Sangha, and Spokane Vipassana. Of course, these mailing lists cannot include everyone that has an affinity for or an interest in this approach to meditation. A wide variety of individuals and sanghas are affiliated with this approach worldwide, but there is no membership required. Indeed, many people who practice recollective awareness also identify with other traditions, or none at all.

There was no specific "eligibility criteria" for contributors to this eJournal. Rather, we simply wanted to hear from individuals who practice this orientation to meditation, and meaningfully integrate it into their lives. As it turned out, everyone who submitted something to the eJournal has been practicing recollective awareness meditation for many years, and we are grateful to witness how their practice is expressed through their creative processes.

This first edition of the eJournal is intended as simply that—a first edition. We hope to add many more voices to this project as time goes on. If you missed the initial request for submissions, please send your contact information to editors@reflectivemeditation.org so we can let you know about future editions.

We thank each contributor for your thoughtfulness, your creativity and for sharing your work with the larger sangha.

Experience the creativity of our meditation communities.

We are gratefully accepting dana, the practice of generosity, to reimburse Sati Sangha for the expenses incurred to bring this eJournal to fruition. If dana is a foreign concept, or you have no idea how much to offer, please give what comes to mind after spending some time with us through this eJournal. We would like to thank visual designer Jessica Taylor for her creative and technical skills on this project. All donations to Sati Sangha are tax deductible. You can donate via PayPal here. If you would like to mail a check, you can make it out to Sati Sangha and mail it to: 528 Arizona Avenue, Suite 208, Santa Monica, CA 90401.

Nina Asher is a clinical psychologist and child development specialist in practice in Los Angeles for over 35 years. In the past 15 years, she has been a practitioner of Vipassana meditation. She sees children, adolescents, parents, and individual adults for therapy, integrating psychodynamic/relational psychotherapy with insight meditation. She writes poems and personal essays about the therapy/meditation experience. You can reach her at drninaasher.com.

Brian Bush loves the Dhamma and appreciates the freeing qualities of recollective awareness, particularly its openness, flexibility, independence, and self-correcting nature. Meditation, discussion, study, and art all nourish his practice, perhaps helping him to become more aware of the context and fluidity of experience. He lives in Boulder, Colorado, and can be reached at contact@brianwbush.info.

Bill Cooper is a Dharma Teacher in Bellevue, WA. In recent years he has trained and taught with the Skillful Meditation Project and its senior teachers. He was president of the board in 2016. He began Buddhist practice in 1981, and was ordained a Zen priest in 1986 by Soyu Matsuoka, roshi. Bill is committed to trying to teach a Dharma and that is gentle and also open to the student's experiences and orientation, whether Buddhist or other. https://meditationinbellevue.com

Erin Harrop attended her first Recollective Awareness retreat in 2009 with Jason Siff and Nelly Kaufer and has been studying with Nelly since that time. She has also been part of a meditation teaching cohort and led weekly meditation groups for new practitioners in 2014-2015. She is currently working on her PhD in social welfare, while working part-time as a medical social worker. She enjoys spending quiet time outside basking in nature, creating fun art projects, and spending time with her family. She can be reached at erinharrop@gmail.com.

Nelly Kaufer has been practicing and teaching meditation for close to 40 years, though recently connected the ability to allow her meditation to roam freely with innovative creative expression. "It's both fun and liberating, especially since in childhood I identified as someone who wasn't creative." She is the founder and lead teacher at Pine Street Sangha, a meditation center in Portland Oregon dedicated to this orientation to meditation. Contact her at nelly@pinestreetsangha.org and meditate with us when you visit Portland.

Janet Keyes is grateful for the recollective awareness approach, which she believes saved her from many more years of meditation Dukkha. An avid practitioner, Janet leads small sitting and reporting groups in her home in Berkeley CA, meets with students on line, and co-leads residential retreats. Please contact her at jan8keez@gmail.com.

Kim Knuth is a lifelong native to the Pacific Northwest and has lived most of her life, along with her family, in Vancouver Washington. In 2003, she developed a serious interest in early Buddhist philosophy which included a vipassana meditation practice. Kim began working with recollective awareness meditation in 2007. She attends weekly sittings at Pine Street Sangha, led by Nelly Kaufer, has attended several retreats with RA teachers and has also participated in online cohorts with Linda Modaro. bettyday4@comcast.net

Wendy Liepman is interested in exploring the intersection of spirituality and creativity. She enjoys meditating, songwriting and performing, spending time in nature and connecting with clients in her job as an Occupational Therapist. She leads small monthly meditation groups in her hometown of San Luis Obispo CA, and is part of a long term recollective awareness cohort group. She can be reached at wliepman@yahoo.com.

Anna Markey lives in Goolwa, South Australia, where the River Murray spills out into the Southern Ocean. She has been exploring the Buddhadharma and meditation through various traditions for more than 35 years. She is the lead teacher at Coast and City Sangha in the Adelaide and Fleurieu regions. She oversees a variety of groups and teaches 2-3 retreats a year. Anna is interested in teaching meditation through an open, curious and gentle orientation.

Linda Modaro teaches Reflective Meditation through Sati Sangha. Much of her time is spent getting to know people and their worlds through ongoing Dharma conversations and friendship, and by watching current TV serials like Game of Thrones, Outlander, and Rectify. She also likes to walk in nature, especially forests. linda@satisangha.org

Josh Summers is a Yin Yoga and meditation instructor based in Boston, MA. He hosts a podcast, Everyday Sublime - Shedding Light on Yin Yoga and Meditation and conducts interviews for www.meaningoflife.tv. For more on Josh, please visit www.joshsummers.net.

Jenny Taylor is a visual artist and arts facilitator who lives in Alice Springs. Her work and dharma practice are strongly influenced by the cultural and physical environment of Central Australia. She believes that deep listening to the natural world, and to Indigenous voices, transforms one's understanding of place, and of the responsibilities that go with living in this time and place. jennifer.taylor0871@gmail.com

Lynn Taylor's art making has been influenced by a combined sense of curiosity and observation that has led to both lifelong travel and exploration of what is often called an 'inner journey'. Since adopting a practice of Recollective Awareness, Lynn continually appreciates a deeper understanding that there is nowhere to go and that active refining of consciousness can bring such nourishment. satva60@gmail.com

Sylvie Vanasse has been a corporate educator and facilitator for over 30 years. She has facilitated leadership and interpersonal skills programs with hundreds of people locally and internationally. Seven years ago, Sylvie recommitted herself to deepening her meditation practice by regularly practicing "Recollective Awareness" (RA), which she really enjoys. She also decided to give back to her community and started to work and volunteer as a counsellor and life biography writer with the elderly. She is also an emerging RA teacher and facilitates sangha talks and short retreats in the Sydney area. parlure@gmail.com

Bill Wellhouse is a long-time Buddhist practitioner who started practicing Recollective Awareness in 2012. Since then, as a student of Linda Modaro, he has participated in a number of retreats and study groups. When the teachers' training program was initiated in 2014 he joined the cohort and has worked with Linda to develop his skills in leading meditation groups. His familiarity with different Buddhist meditation traditions brings a unique perspective to his practice. Currently he leads a small group of meditators in San Diego. bwellhouse@gmail.com

Matt Young has been exploring meditation and mindfulness for over two decades. He believes these practices should — and can be — naturally rewarding and wholesome, relying more upon a practitioner's healthy instincts than the pedagogy of a teacher or tradition. His main interest has been to make meditation accessible; to demystify the subject, to make it easy to learn and do, and to customize it to the needs of contemporary folk. He likes to develop unique and innovative methods of meditation and to share strategies that allow students to develop healthy and harmonious relationships with their thoughts and emotions. He's also the founder of the Melbourne Meditation Centre and a member of the Meditation Association of Australia. You can learn more about Matt's unique take on meditation via Twitter, Facebook or his website.

Picnic at Alangarlkele

Jenny Taylor

How have we incorporated this practice with other practices?

I would like to say a little about how my visual art practice has been supported and extended by recollective awareness practice – and vice versa.

I am a painter, working 'en plein air' ('on the ground') in Arrernte country, Central Australia, where I live. *Apmere* is the Arrernte word for land/country, and its meaning is very broad. It encompasses everything that exists on and in the land, air and water, way underground and into space. It includes human, animal and plant life, as well as rocks, dust, water, fire – all are seen as related, and sentient. *Apmere* evokes home and hearth, language, and all forms of cultural expression of the relatedness of people and country. As a landscape painter, I take my cue from this radically inclusive, inter-related view of land and beings, and try to paint the life and strength within the country – its spiritual power, in fact.

Before going out to camp and paint I ask permission to enter, look around, and paint. Given the multi-facetted nature of *apmere*/country, being in country means apprehending not only the visible world, but also the history, mood and at times the unseen dimensions of place. These things are hard to put into words, but may find expression in a painting, and become visible there. The receptive stance encouraged in recollective awareness meditation has given me a model for abiding with experiences that are to a degree undefinable and emergent. I have adopted the practice of journalling to record and explore not just what happens in meditation periods, but also questions and observations that arise as I move about, watching and listening. Since I am often alone on painting trips, journalling gives me an effective way of noticing, questioning and integrating new or subtle experiences, and working out a language for them. Journal entries can later inform painting, and be referred to when writing about painting.

My experience of plein air painting in this region – settling into places, camping alone for a few days, quietly attending to what is there – has shown me how little I really know of places that once seemed familiar. Central Australia, like everywhere in Australia, has a colonial history of violent dispossession of Aboriginal people from their country. Racism continues to cause untold damage. While out painting, I experience emotions, memories and thoughts relating to the lives of the people here before me, and their families, alive now. This brings warmth and a feeling of connection, and also tremendous sadness and haunting. I see many ways in which the past is still present in land and people. Sometimes this is a comforting presence, but sometimes it brings unease, and raw pain. Injustices have gone unaddressed, many losses have not been acknowledged, and truths have been concealed. Coming to see the continuing impact of our violent past has been a gradual process. It has caused me to question views I have held for most of my life. This has been a grievous, at times fumbling, exploratory process, aided by being 'on the ground', engaged in both meditation and painting. It involves research, but also lots of time for conversations, sitting with things as they sink in, and trying to find ways to respond through appropriate action.

Prior to taking up a recollective awareness approach, I practiced Vipassana for many years. This history has given me confidence in going through the deconstruction of views and assumptions, and has stood me in good stead in terms of tolerating doubt and uncertainty. But it has been of limited help in moving beyond personal experience in meditation, into political and historical dimensions that are generally excluded from the scope of meditation practice. Recollective awareness practice removes the constraints of 'present-moment awareness' and shows a way to more thoroughly include and examine the presence of the past. It opens the way for empathically taking in and contemplating personal accounts and life-stories of others, and extending the understanding of suffering to include historical and cultural factors that perpetuate suffering. Recollective awareness is refreshingly different from my experience of Vipassana practice, in its support for the exploration of narratives through contemplation and dialogue. Such exploration can potentially foster the development of cultural and political awareness, not only individually but in practice groups and retreat settings, provided that such groups are committed to inquiry that extends to social action. However I have not seen much difference between Vipassana communities and recollective awareness groups, in terms of their engagement as a group with social action and inquiry. The degree of engagement seems to depend more upon the values of the constituents of each group, rather than on the nature of the practice they are engaged in.

I yearn for a practice community that commits not just to inquiry into the causes of personal suffering, but also to effective expression of our practice journey, and to engagement with the causes of suffering in the wider world. The wish to engage and make common cause with others drives my painting practice as well. I constantly question the usefulness of painting as a response to the beauty and damage I see around me. The question is alive, but I feel sufficient confidence in the process to keep going and see where it leads. At the least, painting feels like a way to bring together inner and outer worlds, and to express relatedness and appreciation. It is a way to love this world. It helps me develop strategies – small though they are – for affirming the claims of Arrernte people whose love and care for their country has been over-ridden and ignored for so long.

The painting reproduced here is an example of what I intend landscape painting to do. Its name, *Picnic at Alangarlkele*, is intended to disrupt the colonial view of country as empty of people and available to be claimed and exploited. This tall bluff in a riverbed is a local landmark and camping spot. It is generally referred to by whitefellas as 'Bloomfield's Bluff', after Louis Bloomfield, a pastoralist who claimed a lease over this part of the traditional lands of Eastern Arrernte people. I picnicked there with Agnes Abbott, a senior Arrernte woman who was born there and raised by her grandparents. For her, the bluff is an embodiment of her grandfather, who taught her its story and Arrernte name, Alangarlkele. This name evokes that old man standing up tall, looking out over the country and seeing lightning coming from far away. When Agnes goes to Alangarlkele, she feels the warmth and consolation of being with her grandfather, his spirit present and alive in the rock. She feels his authority and spiritual strength. She feels her unbroken connection, through him, with the deep creation stories of the place, and is deeply at home there. When Agnes suggested I paint Alangarlkele, I felt that the painting would have to encompass more than I could say in words. It would stretch my capacity to apprehend the place. In the process of making a painting, sometimes half-understood things come forward. Certainly I was reaching for a way to show that this place, like every place in Australia, has Aboriginal people who can speak for it, who belong to it, and for whom it is an embodiment of spiritual power and integrity. I do think something of Agnes' life story, and our friendship, inhabits the painting. You can see us there, in front of the little silver car in the panel on the far left.

Painting and recollective awareness practice are twin disciplines that hold me while I try to understand and integrate what it is to be alive in this time and place. They bring together many threads—layered histories, memory, European and Arrernte cultural frameworks and personal experience. Together they support the exploration of relations with country, neither evading nor becoming reconciled to cultural and environmental change and loss, but holding them up to view, for discussion and re-imagining.

Jacques Lusseyran wrote,

> *There is only one world. Things outside only exist if you go to meet them with everything you carry in yourself. As to the things inside, you will never see them well unless you allow those outside to enter in.*

Painting and meditation, together, show me the 'one world'. Both practices draw my attention to 'things outside' and 'things inside', their intertwining, and the inescapable mutual dependence of people and place. Over time, looking, listening, and thinking about country and people gives me a sense of how the land is alive, and how a landscape painting may actually be an intimate portrait, full of life, feeling, and relatedness.

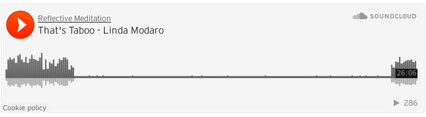
Meditation Prompts

Linda Modaro

Receptive Listening Series

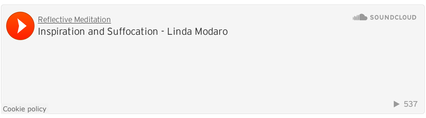
Short introduction, 20 minute silent meditation sitting, reflection

That's Taboo



Leaving Home, Coming Home

Inspiration and Suffocation



Reflective Meditation

Linda Modaro

These Meditation Prompts are offered from my desire to share our practice.

So many of the people I work with listen to *guided meditations*; they seem to be the most common introduction to mindfulness and meditation.

It is likely, most people do not know about our practice as an option.

So, if you find someone who:

thinks they can't meditate because they can't quiet their mind,

is having trouble getting themselves to sit, on their own, between groups,

is feeling the pain of the world and does not know what to do,

(or knows exactly what to do),

is skeptical and curious about many things,

can't sit up straight and wants to recline for meditation,

is interested in their emotional states,

is ready to listen, but not sure what they are listening for,

wants a more personal practice,

wants to cultivate peace and understanding,

please pass these along.

Or make your own, and pass them along.

We are the inheritors of our intentions and deeds.

Sharing this practice can be our legacy.

My Journey With Recollective Awareness: The Beginning

Wendy Liepman

I first started the practice of Recollective Awareness in 2000 when I attended a workshop given by Jason Siff, in San Luis Obispo. After hearing him talk I found myself feeling confused and confrontational towards this very different approach to meditation. I wrote him notes, saying, "I have been told to follow my breath and when it wanders to bring my attention back. Now you are telling me to let my attention wander. What gives you the authority? What did the Buddha really teach?"

Jason answered patiently and suggested that if I wanted to follow my breath it was ok, and when my mind didn't stay with my breath I could pay attention to that too.

Nevertheless, I felt compelled to try some concentration practices. I had read that it was strongly recommended to develop one pointed concentration and move through the Jhanas before attempting to develop insight and had heard similar statements from experienced teachers and practitioners alike.

With a lot of determination, I tried to concentrate but usually failed to do so. I noticed that by trying to force myself to stay concentrated, I became tense, frustrated and was plagued with feelings of inadequacy.

I also tried Metta practice in an effort to develop compassion. It was difficult for me to picture the people who I wanted to send my loving intentions towards. I tried describing them with words, but it felt inauthentic. I even brought photos of family members and friends, stared at them and tried to conjure up loving feelings. Still, I found it awkward. Jason told me that instead of trying to generate these feelings, to notice when they arose naturally, and then focus on them. There were times during sitting practice when I spontaneously thought about a friend or family member who was going through a rough time and wished for their troubles to subside. I became aware of compassion naturally arising in me and I focused on it.

Jason explained to me that much of what the Buddha supposedly said was "descriptive, not prescriptive," meaning that the Buddha was describing experiences of beneficial mind states, but did not expect that everyone could expect the same outcome by following the same instructions.

Often what the Buddha said was meant for a specific audience or person and was not to be taken globally as a prescription for all practitioners.

One of the things that I have come to love about this practice is the way it encourages kindness towards oneself. If I am feeling anxious, irritable, or filled with longing, I no longer try to push the feelings away. Instead, I may go towards them, which in the past seemed counter-intuitive. I explore the thoughts that feed the emotions, the bodily sensations, what preceded them or what follows. If something arises that is overwhelming, I can choose ***not*** to stay with it, but occasionally I feel I can tolerate staying with it a bit longer. It is as if I am standing at the edge of the shoreline. Sometimes I just look at the waves, sometimes I back away, sometimes I dip my toe in, and other times I jump in.

I believe that this open practice has actually helped me to develop concentration. I notice when my mind naturally settles on my breath I can often stay with it for a while. Or if I see an image, I am able to go deeper into it, noticing the colors, brightness or intensity of the object.

The most paradoxical thing I have learned is that an activity such as planning (which I would have previously dismissed as a worthless distraction to my meditation) has become a vehicle to concentration. By reflecting back on my meditation I begin to become aware that my body is more relaxed and there are gaps in my thinking, or places where the "volume" has been turned way down. The planning even drops away at times and there is a greater alertness along with some visual images or a strange phrase (which I have come to recognize as an indication of being in a state of absorption.) This doesn't always happen, but it is interesting to see that even planning can become an object of meditation.

It has been especially helpful having a skilled teacher ask me questions about my meditation and encouraging me to flesh out my experience. I am becoming more familiar with the ways in which my mind works and certain habitual patterns of thinking that I can now identify. Initially, I did not write down my meditations unless I was at a workshop or if I wanted to discuss my practice with Jason or Linda. Over time I began to see the value in journaling as a way to keep track of the changes in my practice. Sometimes I surprise myself with a new way of viewing a thought, story or emotion that may have been triggering in the past and notice that I am less reactive. Being part of a small group that is doing this practice together with a teacher has been valuable. It feels validating to be witnessed by others. By listening to dharma friends report, it gives me the courage to face myself.

Still Small Voice

Wendy Liepman

Coming round the Big Bend, in Western Texas
North to Colorado and the Great Divide
I followed the wind to California
Out where those Seven Sisters ride
And I'm looking to find that still small voice
That cuts like a whisper through the noise
The sound of the truth, the song of my life
Will I have the heart to hear that still small voice
You'd have thought that by now, throughout my travels
I'd have seen enough and heard it all
With a little hindsight, watch your world unravel
When the voice of freedom is just a siren's call;
And I'm looking to find that still small voice
That cuts like a whisper through the noise
The sound of the truth, the song of my life
Will I have the heart to hear that still small voice
That cuts like a whisper through
The sound of the truth, the song of my life
Will I have the heart to hear that still small voice
Will I have the heart to hear that still small voice

Poison

Wendy Liepman

Made it my business to leave my home and cross the lower forty-eight
I've already passed thirty-five and checking off each license plate
I had to find out for myself, figure out how to turn my poison into my wealth
Made a pretty good friend in a border town, still I never crossed the line
Caught myself looking out for you from some dark window in my mind
I had to find out for myself, figure out how to turn my poison into my wealth
No matter where I run to, no matter where I make my bed
I'm waking up to the same old, same old, same old storyline playing in my head
I had to find out for myself, figure out how to turn my poison into my wealth
No matter where I run to, no matter where I make my bed
I'm waking up to the same old, same old, same old storyline playing in my head
In my head
Turns out all I've got to show, this post-card chronicle state I was in
Notebooks filled with bad poetry, the prodigal's come home your long lost friend
I had to find out for myself, figure out how to turn my poison into my wealth

Self-Improvement

We like to think
that because we have learned to know
our various mind states
we ought to be able to order up our preferred
ones, like on Amazon

We think self-awareness should reduce envy
or, that if we are really good meditators,
we won't feel the sting of envy at all,
or the need for more chocolate

In any given moment we take on faith
the feeling This is Me, rather than seeing
how many different This is Me states arise
in a day, an hour, a moment

Instead of seeking to rid ourselves of
unwished for mind states, it turns out we're
developing self-awareness for its own sake

Knowing our own mind is the true path to freedom;
not to improve This is Me,
but to know her right now,
even as the box with the flying arrow strikes the porch,
and she rushes to try on the latest mental fashion

— *Janet Keyes*

My true self

So often I look back on my life
trying to understand who I am,
wondering if I am living up
to my own expectations.
Who have I spent years blaming
for my disappointments?
How did I begin to recognize
my own way?

My true self is a current
upwelling from a deep
spring of awareness,
contained sometimes by steep banks of belief,
joined now by streams of joy or sorrow,
spilling over now
onto the plains of toil or ease,

But still this onward flowing,
following its singular and lawful course
all the way to the sea.

— *Janet Keyes*

An Unconventional Glossary of Buddhist Qualities

In English translated from Meditative Experience and Pali*

Or the Meanderings of Nelly Kaufer's mind

Alphabetize: This glossary is "somewhat alphabetical". It's like our inner life, for a while we can alphabetize, order, structure and define it. Then we're accosted by wild, chaotic and creative forces. (See Definition)

Awareness: The great elixir. When awareness *(sati)* combines with gentleness and curiosity, transformation eventually follows. No need to conquer your problems or fix yourself—let awareness be the subtle yet powerful change agent.

Attention: Many people think holding "one pointed attention" on the suggested object of meditation defines meditation. A soldier knows how to come to attention. Attention focuses the mind, though not necessarily on the qualities we want to develop.

Absorbed: *"Intensely engaged: engrossed."* Oxford Dictionary.

Absorption: A state of profound concentration or stillness in which the mind becomes fully immersed and absorbed in the object of meditation. *(Jhana)*. Teachers and traditions hold varied perspectives about the value and function of meditative absorption. From my view, absorptions settle our mind and shift our perspective, but can also invoke grandiosity and distorted certainty. The Buddha mastered the deepest forms of absorption, they didn't liberate him, though they were, however, part of his path toward liberation. We each have different tendencies and abilities towards absorption and different paths towards liberation.

Aspiration: It's good to know what hopes, desires and intentions you bring to meditation. Hopefully, as your meditation and understanding of the teachings develop, your aspirations also mature. I used to believe that I could manipulate my aspirations to turn them into the "right" ones. I no longer believe I have this much control. Instead as I become more aware of my aspirations, they shift and change. (See Awareness, See Eightfold Path)

Broaden: When you broaden your descriptions of what happened in your meditation, you can break through limited perspectives and see more of the conditions that feed experience. That's part of why we ask for more description of what happened. Yes, it's challenging to put your experience into words—it's worth the effort. (See Awareness)

Boredom: Having unlimited stimulation in my pocket gives me the illusion that I'll never be bored. To keep this going, I end up feeling ragged and overwhelmed. Learning to tolerate boredom in meditation and life might be the needed relief.

Backache: Now that I sit with the support of a chair, I rarely feel back pain while meditating. I used to sit upright, toughing out the pain. I never noticed the grandiosity that was developing. "Look at me sitting so upright on my zafu." Other times self-criticism flourished. "Keep your eyes closed, don't look at me squirming and slouching". We're often unaware of what feeds the conceits.

Conceits: Involuntarily comparing ourselves to others, accessing ourselves as "better than", "less than" or "equal to". This tenacious, painful habit is one of the last to fall off before full liberation. It's based on an ignorance of conditionality. (See Liberation, See Conditionality, See Ignorance)

Conditionality: "Nothing arises in isolation, everything arises conditioned upon other things". This might be the most important teaching in Buddhism. A deep awareness of the flux and instability in your meditation and life, rather than an abstract understanding of conditionality, is crucial. This matters, in part, because when perceive the myriad conditions at play in any situation, you can no longer wholeheartedly blame yourself or others. (See Shame, See Dependent Arising)

Contact: When your eyes, ears, hands, feet, tongue, nose and mind contact something, experience develops. You might like what you contact or you might find it off-putting. Or you might not care one way or the other. All kinds of actions develop in reaction to this. This is a fundamental teaching in Buddhism.

Calm: Calm states *(samadhi)* naturally develop in meditation. Don't stress about trying to become calm. Instead look at the calm that's developing just under the radar of awareness. Validate myriad ways calm might develop in meditation (e.g. by making a detailed shopping list, seeing swirling visual colors, repeating lyrics of a song) along with the more usual instructions, (e.g. being aware of your breath and body, counting, chanting).

Centered: A state of mind with adequate focus and engagement. Although a common descriptor among meditators, I don't know a specific Pali translation. Having endured a bout of severe vertigo that seemed to have a physical cause, I have a new appreciation of centeredness. Mentally and emotionally I feel very fortunate to be centered on the dharma. The physical, mental and emotional weave together to form the web of experience.

Curiosity: Curiosity is a natural doorway into knowing more about your inner world and the conditions that shape it. This kind of interest enables you to become insightful, understanding and wise.

Cultivate: *"to promote or improve the growth of (a plant, crop, etc.) by labor and attention."* Dictionary.com.

Because he lived in an agrarian culture, Buddha used lots of horticultural metaphors, which are literally "down to earth". Consider how you till, plow, mulch, fertilize the positive qualities that you want to cultivate. How do you relate to your internal "weeds?"

Complex: Our inner worlds are intricately complex. Rather than recoil from this web of complexity, become more interested in it. This leads to a more poignant and rich life. Becoming too focused, for too long, on an object of meditation, such as the breath or a sound, can divert us from our complex inner life.

Creativity: Meditating in a receptive, open, unstructured way unearths flexible and creative ways to relate to your meditation, your life and your creative projects.

Definition: You might think you can't meditate because you have limited definitions of what meditation is and what meditation isn't. Please hold my definitions, and your definitions, provisionally. (See Alphabetize)

Dependent Arising: Conceptually the teaching on Dependent Arising *(paṭicca-samuppāda)* is easy to understand— "everything in our experience arises dependent on other things– nothing exists in isolation". Though we often get stuck believing things are solid and never changing, notice how things arise together, and differently at different times depending how they combine. The Buddha said to a student, "to understand Dependent Arising is to understand the Dharma" (most of the teachings are conversations between the Buddha and his students). (See Conditionality)

Dharma: Dharma is a Sanskrit word, though in such common usage, it has entered the English dictionary.

Indian religions define Dharma *(Dhamma)* in different ways. In Buddhism, it refers to the teachings; although a mouthful, Buddhadharma is a clearer designation.

Discernment: *(dhammavicaaya)* Discrimination helps us respect nuance and become more aware of conditionality. Everything is not the same—we are not consistent— we are not One. Can be mistaken for judgmentalness: discerning is most helpful when done with underlying respect. A factor of awakening.

Disciple: In his lifetime, many people became disciples of the Buddha, though he didn't demand this. Instead he encouraged people to contemplate and investigate their experience. He was opposed to blind faith, dogmatism and beliefs spawned from faulty reasoning.

Discipline: *1- "the practice of training people to obey rules, using punishment to correct disobedience. Synonym: control. 2- A branch of knowledge."* Oxford Dictionary.

Consider that both of these definitions impact you, even though they conflict inside of you. You want knowledge. To what degree do rules provide knowledge? How do you punish yourself when you aren't following the rules? Whose rules anyway?

Distraction: Distraction in meditation might be a label for what you devalue. When you describe what's going on as a distraction, question yourself "a distraction from what?" "might there be value in this?" And "what's really the problem with this experience?"

Down to Earth: Our approach to meditation is "down to earth", though full of depth. I'm interested in the messy life you're living. (See Transcend)

Dukkha: Experiences that are "hard to bear". Commonly translated as suffering —though often more subtle–more like things are not quite right or how you wish they were, like a "wobbly wheel". *Dukkha* has various translations such as pain, stress and hurt. Rather than concretizing concepts, the Buddha used words differently with different students.

Daydreaming: Being interested in your daydreams can reveal a great deal about your hopes and longing. Or, daydreams might be how your mind relaxes in meditation. Daydreams are often maligned or considered to be useless: I value them like all other meditative experience, worthy of our exploration.

Ethical: Buddhism is fundamentally an ethical path– learning to hurt yourself and others less. Ethics are complex, what helps and what hurts is rarely clear-cut. As awareness of your experience increases, you'll feel hurt more acutely. Then the only thing that makes sense is to be kinder. Kindness is a value shared with most religions.

Eightfold Path: The path to liberation that combines eight different internal limbs. The first concerns skillful views– that's why it's essential to know how and what you think. The other seven are the development of aspirations, energy, focus, awareness, speech, actions and livelihood. Training and progress on the eightfold path of liberation is best considered a lifetime undertaking.

Experience: *(the process of getting) knowledge or skill that is obtained from doing, seeing, or feeling things, or something that happens which has an effect on you:* Cambridge Dictionary.

Our lives and our sense of self are composed of a series of experiences strung together and organized internally in distinguishing ways. (See Contact)

Explorative Dialogue: The conversation with a teacher or mentor after meditation has many useful functions. Please know our intention is to help you gain more awareness of your experiences and to support your unique inclinations in meditation. It is never to improve or shame you. (See Awareness)

Extra-special: Believing that meditation is extra-special can get you stuck in all kinds of ways. If you think you're especially good at meditation, you will feel "better than" others and it will grow your grandiosity—that's the opposite of what we're cultivating. If you think others are extra-special meditators you may feel "less than" others which can lead to dehumanizing idealization. (See Humility)

Failure: There's no way to fail at meditation. Some meditation instructions and traditions espouse high ideals and although they are inspiring, they can set you up for failure. (See Humility, See Ideals)

Forgetting: People new to describing and journaling their experiences in meditation fear that they'll forget what happened. I tell them, "You will forget a lot, but what you remember will be enough". I am not sure this helps. Our meditations and lives are so complex. Over time you'll remember more—much like keeping a dream journal.

Forgiveness: When you understand the conditions that you and others labor under, you'll naturally become more forgiving about the multitude of ways that each of us miss the mark. (See Conditionality)

Friendliness: *metta*. One of the *"brahma viharas"* or the heavenly abodes, commonly translated as the realm of the Gods. Just think how heavenly it feels when you feel genuine friendliness towards yourself. Being gentle and curious about your meditative experiences cultivates this kind of friendliness.

Flame: The Buddha used metaphors of fire since this was an essential part of Brahmanism, the dominant religion of his time. Though he ingeniously turned the metaphor on its head. The Brahmans were Priests entrusted to keeping the ritual fires going. The Buddha defined liberation or *nibbana* as the squelching of the flames of hatred, ignorance and greed.

Gentleness: If you're conditioned to believe that progress comes from hard work, being gentle might seem frivolous. Consider that the developments that come from gentleness are of a different nature. You'll learn to be friendlier to yourself and erode the belief that you're in charge of how you progress. (See Humility)

Gratitude: Appreciation. In my morning's meditation, waves of gratitude washed over me– how fortunate I've been to live in the USA during decades when our government had some stability and integrity. This gratitude welled up on its own, after months of reflection about the current political situation. It was grounded in long-term contemplation. In my experience, this kind of receptive gratitude is more enduring than gratitude generated by intentionally recalling what I am grateful about.

Grounded: Feeling the tactile contact with the ground while meditating can be a perch to support and settle yourself. You need not stay there long– and can return when you need to feel more grounded.

Group: You might find it easier to meditate in a group with others, much like it can be easier to exercise at the gym. In our groups, we dialogue about meditative experiences—this expands your ideas about what's useful and beneficial in meditation.

Humility: *"The quality or state of not thinking you are better than other people."* Merriam-Webster Dictionary. Considered a virtue in many religions. Many of us more get caught in the opposite problem—believing we are less than other people. Believing we are "better than" and "less than" others are both harmful states of mind. (See Conceits)

Humiliated: *"To make (someone) feel ashamed or foolish by injuring their dignity and self-respect, especially publicly."* Oxford Dictionary. Sometimes, when speaking openly about our meditative experience, vulnerability turns into humiliation. Please know that this is never our intention. Let us know if you feel humiliated, so we can talk about the misunderstanding fueling this painful reaction.

Hindrances: Consider what hinders you from meditating. When you can't get yourself to meditate, take some time to reflect or journal about what's getting in the way. After you have a sense of what hinders you, you can look up the five hindrances that are commonly taught in Buddhism.

Ignorance: Having, or coming to conclusions about situations, people or ideas, based only on partial knowledge: we are ignorant primarily because we can't know the many conditions that led to the current situation (See Conditionality)

Ideals / idealization: *"the action of regarding or representing something as perfect or better than reality"* Oxford Dictionary. Meditative and spiritual traditions are bursting with high ideals; meditation teachers and spiritual leaders are fodder for our superhero fantasies. We long for something, someone, someplace that is better than our reality. Sadly, these fantasies can't help but betray us.

Inebriation: Certain meditative states alter consciousness; you feel great. The danger is that this can be confused with "I am great". Otherwise, this kind of inebriation is much healthier than street drugs with a more refined "high". (See Conceits)

Improvise: Understanding that experiences are in flux, it serves us well to improvise, that is, to creatively respond to what's in front of us. This is best informed by what we have learned from reflecting on experience. Since the matrix of conditions are never quite the same, this requires flexibility and awareness.

Integrate: As you gain greater awareness of experience, multiple aspects come together or integrate in a way that is healing. For example, my stomach churns, I tremble a bit—then hear the distant sound of a siren. I remember my recent hospitalization. This awareness combines and I feel tender towards myself. Often this process takes place below the threshold of awareness—but somehow I feel better afterwards. It feels like I have digested experience.

Journaling: Why write down your meditation? Isn't "higher truth" deeper than words? Maybe, though writing down your meditation has many benefits. Honor and listen to your experience like a trusted friend and more will be revealed. Your awareness, understanding and caring grows slowly. Your journal chronicles this, along with much else.

Liberation: *(Nibbana)* If you confuse *Nibbana* with heaven and believe it might happen sometime in the future, you might overlook the little liberations that come from meditation and reflection. For example, every other time your spouse said a certain thing about you, you became ragefully irate. This time you listened and considered that point of view. These are steps on the path. (See Flame)

Lonely: Sometimes you encounter a barren, destitute internal landscape seemingly only populated by an occasional prickly cactus, which never seems to flower. It's hard to believe that being with this loneliness is better than running from it. (See Tolerating)

Longing: A powerful tug demanding our submission, an insatiable hunger. A potent state of mind that can sabotage your ability to think clearly—just when you most need it.

Mentor: I'd rather be your mentor than your meditation teacher. I want to dodge your projections and idealization. Like you, I am trying my best to show up and wake up.

Mindfulness: Paying attention to what is happening in the present moment, being present. A relatively recent (1881AD) translation of *sati*. Hard to believe that when I went to graduate school in counseling psychology in late 1980's, I was "in the closet" about being a mindfulness meditator and teacher. Now it's almost unacceptable to not integrate mindfulness into psychological interventions. (See Awareness, See Recollection)

Mentalizing: A psychological skill. The ability to reflect upon and discern the impact of different states of mind, reflecting upon the underlying moods, desires, feelings, emotions and bodily experiences that provoke behaviors. Journaling and talking about meditative experience trains you to mentalize experiences that are hard differentiate and put into words. This ability, over time, can lead to more skillful actions. (See Eightfold Path)

Open Hearted and Open Minded: We've started to describe the Recollective Awareness approach to meditation as open hearted and open minded. These words inspire; but can be a set-up. What about when your heart is clenched in anger and your thoughts are rigidified in certainty? Might be a good time to learn more about what triggers you emotionally and what stabilizes you conceptually. (See Tolerating)

Onward Leading: What relieves your pain, hurt, and stress? This is tricky because what relieves in the short-run, might lead to greater misery in the long-run. This is how addiction works. To know what is onward leading, you best keep looking inward to discover what reliably sustains you over time.

Permission: You have permission to experiment in meditation, the choice to do any meditation practice you would like. Play with your mind and attentional focus. Like with all experiments, you'll see how it goes and likely adapt in the future.

Questioning: Lots has changed in the last 2500 years, since the time of the Buddha. What's similar is the exposure to an overwhelming number of spiritual teachers, ideals and beliefs. In the Kalama Sutta, one of the most popular Buddhist teachings in the West, the Buddha invites the Kalamas (the folks he was teaching) to question what they were hearing from the many teachers passing through their town. I, too, suggest you question the ideas I write here. See for yourself what lessens or reduces your stress and angst.

Quiet: Meditation quiets stimulation from the outer world to better hear the voices of your inner world. I think meditation is so popular now because it's an antidote to the noisy world we inhabit—where unlimited stimulation is only a mouse-click away.

Receptivity: Befriending experience as it is in meditation, rather than trying to generate a "better" state of mind. We'd like to believe that we are "the boss" of our inner world. It's vulnerable and humbling to know how much we can't control.

Reflection: Reflecting upon your experience is a fundamental aspect of our approach to meditation. Rather than being given a teaching to reflect upon (as is common in spiritual and meditative traditions), you'll find what interests you and dig deeper into that contemplation. (See Onward Leading)

Recollection: Using memory to reflect upon experience, a natural mental process. Our approach, often called Recollective Awareness Meditation, strengthens this capacity and infuses it with kindness and curiosity. (See Awareness)

Repetition: *Samsara: The cycle of death and rebirth to which life in the material world is bound.* Oxford Dictionary.

We're entrapped by patterns of thought, emotion and behavior that continually get reborn, that repeat and cause on-going difficulty. Consider that many of these patterns can't be changed by replacing them with the repetition of something better, as is suggested by some meditation instructions. These cycles can be transformed through attending to them, rather than running from them.

Reactivity: Your heart pounds. Your breath tightens. You break out in a cold sweat. You say things you wish you hadn't said. You'd like to eliminate reactivity, which some Buddhist teachers consider to be liberation. Be curious about what you react to. Something here really matters to you.

Refuge: *(a place that gives) protection or shelter from danger, trouble, unhappiness, etc.* Cambridge English Dictionary

Buddhists take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. I think of the Buddha as a human being who awakened, not a God. If he found relief this way, it's possible that we can too. When accompanied by an understanding of his teachings (Dharma) and reliable spiritual friends and teachers (Sangha), you'll find refuge from some of your habitual troubles and unhappiness. (See Sangha)

Relationship: The Buddha advises us to choose our relationships carefully, that "admirable friendship is actually the whole of the holy life". Neurobiology reveals that our brains develop and change, impacted by the primary relationships in our life. Everything in our experience arises in relationship to other things. (See Dependent Arising)

Respect: I respect the unique ways you, and each meditator, develop in meditation and life. Our groups are founded on a respect for this diversity.

Sangha: A community of meditators, historically monastics, now more commonly householders (those who have not taken monastic vows). In Asia in the past, where you lived determined your sangha. Now there are so many options for finding like-minded communities, including on-line sanghas. (See Relationship, See Refuge)

Settled: The ability to sit still in meditation and tolerate your complex and fluctuating inner world develops over time *(passadhi)*. It's like physical exercise: if you stick with it over time you'll become stronger and more flexible.

Shame: Shame is a view that I am completely responsible and culpable, that whatever happens verifies my horribly flawed "True Nature". This is complete ignorance or amnesia about the myriad other conditions at play. Blame is similar but directed towards someone else. Both shame and blame feel horrible and masquerade as certainty. Might shame be a psychological epidemic of our times? Shame and blame can't get such strangling grip when we see the many other factors that went into the situation. It no longer makes sense to see ourselves as fully responsible and bad at our core. This shift is quite liberating. (See Dependent Arising)

Standing: Standing near (experience), a useful translation of sati –which is often translated as mindfulness.

Standing is also one of the four postures in which to develop mindfulness, along with sitting, walking and lying down. Since all bodily positions are some variation of these four postures, you can become more aware in whatever posture you're in—physically, emotionally and mentally.

Structure: Structure grounds us and helps us feel secure. You'll discover the structure(s) that best support your meditation. Maybe you meditate most easily in the morning or mid-day at your lunch break or at the end of the day. Maybe you prefer meditating alone or with others? Like everything else, what works best changes over time.

Suttas: Discourses of the Buddha (sutras in Sanskrit). These were written down and codified over 200 years after the Buddha spoke them. There was no written word at the time of Buddha. That's hard to imagine, I can barely remember what it was like before the internet.

Thoughts: People have an ambivalent relationship with their thoughts while meditating. Common instructions suggest that "it's fine to think" and also "when you find yourself thinking put your attention elsewhere—like on your breath". That's a mixed message and most people come down on the side of believing there something's wrong about thinking during meditation.

Thoughtful: By welcoming thoughts into your meditation and reflecting upon them — you'll become more insightful. You'll also become a kinder person since you'll no longer try to avoid thinking, a basic mental function.

Thirst: *Tanha*. It's essential to know what we thirst for— some of it is good for us and some of it is harmful. We easily get hooked.

Tolerating: Let's face it, some experiences are hard to bear *(dukkha)*. By sitting relatively still, being curious and open to what these experiences are showing you—they become more tolerable and so do you. (See Dukkha)

Transcend: An enduring and seductive fantasy. If only we found the right meditation technique, spiritual teacher or tradition, we could rise above or transcend all that bothers us. I don't believe this is possible and am satisfied with feeling freer in the life I have, right here, on this earth. Then again, maybe I don't know how to transcend? (See Down to Earth)

Vulnerability: Talking honestly about your experiences in meditation can make you feel vulnerable. Though it's counter-intuitive, being more vulnerable makes you less scared. When there's less to hide, you're freer.

Visualize: Vibrant or detailed images can settle and focus attention, regardless of the content. At other times visuals function as a nuanced way of thinking things through. If you're not prone to visualize during meditation, trust that these functions are happening in different ways.

Verbalize: More awareness of experience is developed by verbalizing and describing. When we reflect and journal after meditation, we're articulating our experience to ourselves. During the explorative dialogue, we verbalize our experience to a teacher and others. (See Journaling, See Explorative Dialogue, See Relationship)

Zen: Zen Buddhism, a form of Buddhism that developed more than a thousand years after the death of the historical Buddha, was imported from Japan to the US in the 1950's and popularized by beat poets and searchers of that era. There are many different Zen Buddhist traditions, each with its own characteristics and perspective. The word "Zen" is now appropriated to market most anything— from pillows to lip balms, from soup to nuts. I doubt the Buddha would approve.

Zoo: At times, our inner world seems like a zoo. Learn to love these wild animals.

Yogacara “triptych”

Brian Bush

“The imagination of the unreal”
acrylic, aluminum mesh, and papier-mâché on wood panel, 12" x 14"

“The dependence on flowing conditions”
alabaster, 3" x 2.5" x 2.5"

“The external non-existence of what appears in the way it appears”
acrylic and vanilla extract on canvas board, 16" x 20"

Creative and Meditative Processes: Reflections on Leaving Things Untitled and Unsigned

Erin Harrop

This eJournal features two of my art pieces. One piece depicts a meditator sitting on top of a hill (or a heart), with images of other people scattered in the background (or foreground?). The other piece is a self-portrait, of a 20-something-year-old Erin, casually sitting, while journaling behind white bars (or perhaps they are not bars?).

Personally, I am not a fan of naming my art pieces for several reasons. Firstly, I have found that my pieces come to mean different things to me at different times. The meaning behind an art piece may mean one thing to me when I first create it, and then evolve to mean something different years later as my perspective changes. My process of artistic creation is similar to my process of meditation in this respect; I may start an art piece with one intention, and through the experience of creating, my intentions and views shift, and the art piece ends up being quite different than I initially envisioned. Much like a meditation sitting, when I follow my interest in the creative process, I am often surprised by what I find, and the "finished product" is rarely—if ever—what I have imagined at the outset. So, I find that the experience of naming an art piece is somewhat limiting and often inaccurate—it binds the "official meaning" of my art to a certain time, place, perspective, or self, and I would rather have my art remain more fluid and adaptable.

Secondly, I dislike naming my pieces because I don't like telling the viewer of my art what I think is most important about the art piece. I would much rather the viewer see my art piece, perhaps connect with it in some way, and then decide for themselves what it means, how it might be important, or how it may resonate with their experience. People often see things in my art that I didn't anticipate; hearing their interpretations broadens my own understanding of the piece, giving me a new appreciation for it. Through conversations with others about my art, I often feel as if I find some deeper insight into the themes of the art piece, or discover a new theme altogether. In this way, I think of the artistic process as one of co-creation. The viewer of the art co-creates meaning by viewing and interpreting the work of the artist, and thus, the viewer shares a part in the creative process. Similarly, when I create an art piece, I view this, too, as a co-creation—because others have shaped the views, ideas, concepts, feelings, and metaphors that I build into my art and try to visually convey. In this way, my art does not feel strictly "mine;" it is born of my experience, of which many people (friends, teachers, lovers, mentors) have been a part. I don't want to truncate these processes of co-creation and multiple views by assigning a static title. It is also because of this issue of co-creation, and interconnectedness that I rarely sign my art with a signature.

Lastly (and relatedly), I don't like to name art pieces, because I intentionally build ambiguity into my pieces, and I don't like to artificially resolve that ambiguity with a definitive title. Most of my art is an attempt to convey a complex set of emotions, wonderings, and ideas. I use art primarily as a way of engaging with and exploring ideas or feelings with which I am struggling. My art is a deliberate "working out." As such, my art often revolves around issues of grief, illness, love, abuse, beauty, hopelessness, illusion, self, and "reality." I use art as a way to explore (and cope) with the tensions and questions in these experiences (How do I recognize the illusions of my own mind? How and why do I understand beauty the way that I do? Why do feelings of love, betrayal, and disgust coexist in the context of abuse? What does it mean for a loved one to be physically dead? Do I truly view illness as "limiting?").

Not surprisingly, I don't find a lot of answers through my artistic process. I may discover more (or at least different) questions, I may gain a particular insight, or (more predictively), my view around the question might shift a bit, and I might start to relate to it in a different way. Because I never really feel a definite "end" to a piece, and I never really "answer" my questions, it is hard to know where and when to stop creating. When I reach a sense of peace or hesitant, conditional acceptance (rarely a sense of satisfaction or finality), I stop, and the piece is "done." To honor the unfinished, still-confusing, likely unknowable aspects of my wonderings, I build in some ambiguity into the artistic piece itself.

For instance, in the art piece with the image of myself journaling, I am sitting behind blank, white bar-like objects. As I created the piece, I loved the imagery of me writing and creating something (e.g. journaling—an act which I consider to be demonstrative of and requiring a certain amount of freedom) in the context of something which limits freedom. As I created this piece, I was wrestling with what it means to be truly free (while feeling trapped), or what it means to feel as if you are free (while failing to see the bars which entrap you). For years, this piece remained unfinished because I could not decide what should be drawn on the bars. I thought of writing words of self-doubt, thought of drawing various entrapments that I have experienced in my life, considered collaging them with magazine images of societal ideals, or of beautifying the bars to make them something ironically attractive. I considered turning them into prison bars, playground equipment, or a crib—something confining that I would soon outgrow. Each way of drawing the bars conveyed a different meaning or experience—but I didn't end up drawing any of them, because I didn't know which experience was most true. I saw a bit of truth in all of them. And so, ultimately, I left the bars blank, and called the piece "finished." If I had to choose a name for this piece today (knowing that the name might change tomorrow), I might call it "Sitting with the Aggregates."

If I had to choose a name for the second piece (the one featuring the meditator on a hill with many colorful figures behind them), I might call it, "The stillness of meditation." I would call it this humorously, ironically, because I have never experienced meditation to be truly still or unmoving. My most calm sittings usually have something else go on within them at some point. Within this piece, I was toying with the humorous juxtaposition of how still my body can be when I sit to meditate (and how calm and serene I may look to an observer), while inside my mind, there is no telling what I am experiencing. I could be experiencing a calm, samadhi state. I could be following my breath or very focused on the sensation of my glutes touching my cushion. I could be vigorously engaged in organizing the background section of my literature review for my dissertation. I could be reliving an old, painful memory, imagining a future self, or experiencing something that seems more like a vision or a dream. I could be rehearsing a difficult conversation or problem-solving something repeatedly, because each iteration seems to be forgotten as soon as it occurs. I could have lost sight and sense of my "self" all together and be experiencing some kind of expansive, connected sensation, wherein I am tumbling or twirling ever so slightly in a spacious place. Or, I could be practicing metta, wrestling with some concept of the dharma, or stumbling upon dharma without even knowing it. I frequently have this momentary wondering when I am on retreat, and I very slightly open my eyes a tiny slit to see some of my fellow meditators sitting serenely around me, still, quiet, and unmoving. I see their eyes closed, their breathing even, their bodies very, very still—and I wonder to myself what they are experiencing, because the possibilities are endless, and I also suspect that there is far less "stillness" occurring on retreat at that moment, than there might appear to be.

As I have engaged in writing this reflection, I am struck by the many similarities that exist between the creative processes I engage in while drawing, and the creative processes I engage in while meditating. It is no coincidence that you could re-read this reflection and interchange the words "art" and "meditation" frequently throughout it. The values that I have cultivated in my meditation practice are reflected in my art (e.g. following my interest and curiosity, appreciation for complexity, gentle engagement, the value in the unknown), though they did not originate in my meditation practice. Similarly, the values I express in my art, are also evident in my meditation and in my teaching of meditation. Just as I do not like to name pieces and give them an "official title," I hesitate to delve too much into interpretation of another person's meditation experience. Rather, I seek to probe and understand what meaning they have made of it. Similarly, just as I view my art and the viewer's interpretation of my art as an act of artistic co-creation, so too, have I come to understand my own taking up of the dharma through meditative processes. For instance, I may hear a dharma talk from a teacher, sit with those concepts, reflect on them during meditation, and then report my meditation to a teacher, who then inquires about my meditative experiences, and potentially alludes back to the same (or different) dharmic concepts. When (and if) I then come to a new understanding or insight of the dharma as a result of those experiences, this view has in effect, been co-created, or perhaps more accurately, dependently arisen from those experiences, through the careful cultivation of a teacher's care and wisdom, the complex conditions of my inner world, and my own taking up of the concepts.

As I reflect back on both my artistic and meditative processes, it is this view of dependent arising that is perhaps most precious to me in my current understanding of life and the dharma. For in this concept of dependent arising, I view myself as inextricably, irreducibly, and compassionately connected to others—neither my art nor my insights arise in isolation. Others give me a generous gift by viewing my art, relating to it, interpreting it in some way, and sharing it back with me. Similarly, my Kalyanamitra (my dharma friends) give me a great gift when they share their own experiences in meditation, inquire about my meditative experiences, or share their views of the dharma with me. Through this mutual exchange of ideas, insights, interpretations, feelings, and experiences, we each build each other up and help one another along our spiritual paths. It is an honor to share this path with so many generous dharma friends.

How To Meditate Better By Thinking More

Matt Young

PART I: Assumption

noun

1. a thing that is accepted as true or as certain to happen, without proof.

You probably came to meditation with a lot of assumptions. And even if you've been meditating for years, you probably still have a lot of assumptions — about what meditation is and isn't and how it works best.

Some of these assumptions might be about what you should do with thoughts:

- stop them
- witness them
- acknowledge them
- let them go (gently)
- observe them
- notice them
- detach from them
- challenge them
- question them
- be aware of them
- name them
- label them
- befriend them
- don't engage with them
- don't get caught up in them

Have I missed anything? Yes. I didn't include:

- let them go on, just as they are, or
- do nothing about them

These might be assumptions you have about what NOT to do with thoughts.

Where do all these assumptions come from? And what is their purpose?

Have you ever wondered why you are often asked to bring your attention back to the breath when you notice yourself thinking? And have you ever noticed what happens when you let your thinking go on?

If not, I encourage you to explore these questions for yourself. You might be surprised by what happens.

You may find that some of your ideas about meditation are helpful, but that others are unnecessary, outdated, limiting or just untrue (for you). You may find that your assumptions place constraints on what you are willing to experience or even what you think of as "meditation". And you may find that these constraints limit your freedom to explore and experiment. If you don't question them, your assumptions may prevent you from learning about new ways to be with — and to calm — your mind.

Interestingly, some assumptions mask deeper assumptions. What assumptions are being made, for example, if you feel the need to observe, witness, detach from or question your thoughts?

Perhaps:

- that thoughts will go on forever if you don't consciously stop them
- that when you're thinking about the past or future you are not present
- that thinking — if left unchecked — will spiral into endless repetitive loops
- that thinking about work prevents you from relaxing
- that peace of mind is not possible while your mind is racing
- that thoughts create or exacerbate stress
- that most of your thoughts are largely useless, trivial or mundane
- that thoughts need to be positive for meditation to work
- that you need to find the 'off switch' for the brain in order to feel good
- that thoughts need to slow down
- that thoughts lead to rumination
- that thinking will trigger depressive episodes or overwhelming emotions

And behind those assumptions, there may be the assumption (or worry) that some thoughts will always be problematic or bothersome.

This might be true, but how do you know? How can you develop the capacity to work with your thoughts in skillful and creative ways unless you allow them some uninterrupted air time (at least some of the time)?

Interestingly, whenever you assume that your thinking — or your mind in general — is problematic, you will probably relate to your thoughts with some degree of aversion. This creates a vicious circle, in which the aversion itself tends to perpetuate a problematic relationship with thinking.

For example, say you've had a busy and stressful day. You sit down to meditate, craving some inner peace, but your thoughts continue to jump all over the place. They just won't settle. You add to the cacophony by referring, perhaps slightly disparagingly, to this activity as *monkey-mind*.

What happens next? Do the thoughts suddenly stop because you've labelled them monkeys? Does this kind of commentary encourage you to be more or less interested in your thoughts? Does it encourage a more or less accepting internal attitude?

I'd like to suggest that even though the term *monkey-mind* might sound harmless (or even accurate), describing your mind in such a way will engender a bias (perhaps slight or invisible, but a bias nonetheless) in which you automatically devalue, distrust or dismiss your thoughts to some degree.

Test this out for yourself. When you meditate, notice what sort of biases you bring with you. What happens when you adopt a more accommodating attitude towards your thoughts? What happens when you remind yourself that thoughts aren't all bad? If you're like most people, you probably meditate in order to see things from new perspectives, to gain insights into problematic situations and to discover new and creative ideas. If you *value* these kinds of cognitive realisations then you're probably more likely to have them. Conversely, if you push your thoughts away, these insights may remain elusive.

PART II: Suppression and Repression

Just to make things clear, what I'm suggesting here is that you can safely allow your thoughts to go on in meditation. You don't have to try and stop or observe or acknowledge them. It's okay to get caught up in them. Thoughts aren't that dangerous!

Of course, you can stop your thoughts if you want to. You can try to observe them too. But you don't *have* to. Nothing needs to be done automatically, or out of habit. Know that you can choose *how* to relate to any given thought. You can also give your mind a chance to settle of its own accord.

Perhaps you think this all sounds a bit radical: "I want peace-of-mind. Why would I want to let my thinking go on as normal?" Or perhaps you're happy with the results you get from focusing on the breath or body (largely to the exclusion of thoughts and emotions). Or maybe you're wondering why you would even try such a strategy when almost everyone suggests you should do otherwise?

I'd like you to consider that any form of meditation in which you direct your attention away from thoughts and towards some other 'approved' object (such as the breath), no matter how gently, is a form of suppression.

In **psychology, suppression** is the act of stopping yourself from thinking or feeling something.

Some people argue that if you are naming, labelling, acknowledging or being mindful of your thoughts then you are not suppressing them. I would disagree. If you label a thought, that thought tends to get interrupted. It doesn't continue as it normally would. The thought therefore, is stopped. In other words, it's suppressed, at least to some degree. In fact, just the act of noticing a thought tends to have a suppressive effect. For example, if I ask you to stop right now, and notice your very next thought, you may find that you don't think at all. Or you may find that you have the thought "What's my next thought going to be!" Whatever happens, you're unlikely to be thinking in the unconscious or semi-conscious way in which you normally think (what neuroscientists refer to as the activity of the *default mode network*).

Furthermore, if you engage in such 'concentration' practices for long enough you may begin to automatically *repress* your thoughts and — by association — your emotions and sensations. In other words, suppression becomes automatic and unconscious. You don't even notice that you are suppressing your thoughts. This can leave you feeling peaceful and undisturbed. Concentration becomes a refuge, a security blanket from the vicissitudes of normal life. But do you really need such a refuge? I suspect that a mature person can ride the waves of their thoughts and emotions for the most part. A refuge may be required occasionally but it doesn't need to be your default response to each and every thought that comes along.

Don't get me wrong, suppression can be useful. As a mental strategy, it allows you to concentrate without being distracted by every passing thought. In life, it's often necessary, and in meditation, it can be a fairly reliable way to access relaxed and peaceful states of mind.

It can also be used effectively if you're feeling fragile or overwhelmed. Suppression provides a psychological defence against the thinking patterns and emotions which might otherwise throw you completely off balance. It works like a fuse, allowing you to 'short out' rather than blow up. Or you might choose to suppress certain thoughts and feelings because you don't (or don't *think*) you have the strength or psychological skills to manage them.

Suppression: the downsides

We live in a time and culture in which suppression seems to be the de facto response to pain. You might rely on entertainment, news and trivia to suppress your boredom. You might reach for painkillers at the slightest sign of discomfort. Drugs are prescribed for a range of normal emotions and some strains of pop-psychology suggest that you should always be upbeat, happy and positive.

It's no surprise then, that you might use meditation and mindfulness for the same purpose. But whether repressed or suppressed, the things you try to avoid remain ever present and alive. They will create conflict and tension in your meditation practice — and your life — as long as you try to keep them at bay.

If repression becomes a habit you may not even be able to recognise the ways in which buried thoughts and emotions are affecting or harming you. This subterranean material may distort your perceptions of yourself and others, the world and even your memories of the past and expectations for the future. It will probably prevent you from learning, growing and understanding yourself more fully. And it will likely remain unresolved, contributing to increasing frustration as you cycle through repeating behavioural patterns. These repressed thoughts and emotions may even become more difficult to identify and express, making you more reactive or manifesting as physical tension, numbness and ultimately depression or illness.

Suppressing your thoughts and emotions is hard work. It's exhausting. It may not seem that way whilst it offers a respite from some feeling you don't want to face. But in the long term it will wear you down.

A new way of meditating

So, instead of trying to calm yourself down in meditation by continually directing your attention away from thoughts and emotions, let yourself think freely. Let your thinking go on. This is how you can meditate better by thinking more.

Interestingly, when you stop habitually suppressing your thoughts you might make some surprising discoveries. There may be a growing sense of liberty and freedom, an unexpected confidence and ironically, a greater sense of control. The energy you were using to keep things down is now available for constructive use.

By allowing thoughts into your meditation practice you may also find that they change, slow down and occasionally stop of their own accord. You didn't actually need to play the traffic cop.

The standard assumption is that you can only access peace of mind by focusing your attention away from thoughts. But this isn't so. You can also become peaceful *through* thinking. Or by thinking through a difficult situation. Peaceful states of mind can arise spontaneously, without the need to control, direct or manipulate your experience. And these organic states of mind are often far more satisfying than the calm that you induce through suppression and control.

Perhaps the greatest reward though, is the realisation that you have the capacity to tolerate your thoughts and emotions. They usually aren't as problematic as they may have seemed. When you run away from something it seems like a threat. When you turn towards something you begin to see it more clearly. Over time, your thoughts become less and less threatening, more and more interesting.

In fact, it's possible to spend 90% of your meditation session ruminating, reviewing to-do lists, rehashing conversations and preparing meals — and to still feel relaxed throughout. In my opinion, this capacity to be with your thoughts is at least as useful as the ability to block them out and far easier than trying to artificially induce a state in which you are witnessing or observing thoughts from a distance.

Welcoming Thoughts & Emotions in Meditation

Matt Young

Grieving Awareness

Nina Asher

Six months have gone by.
So much has changed.

She says to me, "I am grieving."
"You have said that word many times but I couldn't take it in, or understand it. I used to feel myself tighten – how could I take in your compassion when I was so afraid?"

And yet, she must have or we wouldn't be where we are today.

She goes on: "I am grieving awareness."
I ask her to say more as I'm not sure what exactly she means.

"Grieving awareness"
"I can finally take compassion in; I feel met, and heard, and it feels so tender. And then I'm aware of all the grieving I wasn't able to do before; all the things I couldn't see; and I feel so sad for myself."

"You have found compassion for yourself," I say.

She knows it now when she and her husband hit an old place ridden with excuses and apologies for ongoing, old wounds that have left her feeling lonely and hopeless.

She goes on
"What I really want is for us to be able to say to each other how sad it is that we are in this place again; for us to stop the dance of defense."

I know her so from a well deep inside me.
She speaks
I see a snapshot of my marriage, I'm sure others have felt it as well, those moments of searing pain - defeat

I have bumped that place so many times –
Tormented, judging
when we are against each other once again
an old story plays out and it is met with defenses, wounding. Resentment builds a dark wall, finalizing hopelessness. There will be no change. I want to give up.

As we sit together
I wonder who is the helper, who is helped?
Or is it that we unite in the space between where hazy boundaries allow for unspoken connection?

I, like her, long for the wherewithal to drop down to what is real
Forgotten then, later remembered
"grieving awareness."

Choose Connection

Nina Asher

What thinking does it take
    to connect?

It's not after all a brain thing

And yet,
    the mind wanders here and there
    roller-coaster loops of indecision and reason polluting connection with doubt

This way and that, it tugs
Not at the heartstrings but rather at thoughts
    figuring out the perfect way to engage
    questioning the very act of wanting

A wise friend once said, "choose connection."
Let it override whatever the mind throws its way

    The truth is, once the reaching subsides,
    deliberating ceases as the pounding heart stills,
    opening

For a long time
    I focused only on how it would end
How many more minutes can I have this treasured moment?

Watch the clock, measure the time because at some point,
    the inevitable happens
    Connection drops

touch fades
the beep on the phone screams ending
tears dry on cheeks
the heart hurts longing for more

These days, being in connection
sits right next to these older fears
a delicate balancing act
not either/or, but rather
    both alive
    vibrant

Speaking clearly
adding form to chaos
compassionate steadiness exudes
    calming spaciousness

The watchful mind overthinking
A low flying bird circling before landing

Hindrances in Meditation

Bill Wellhouse

Traditionally in Buddhism, hindrances were considered obstacles or things that get in the way of concentration in meditation. Here is one list of hindrances that I found.

1. Sensual desire
2. Ill-will
3. Torpor and sloth
4. Restlessness
5. Doubt

Some of these—such as “torpor and sloth”—may sound a bit out of touch with our current meditation practice. “Doubt” here, I believe, refers to a lack of faith in the practice. These were considered conditions that got in the way of your meditation practice in the short term; they might appear in a particular meditation preventing strong concentration. They are not meant to be the same as the fetters: attachment or aversion to things, our views of self, or ignorance of how things are—deep conditions that tie us to samsara.

As I thought about this list, it came to me that I might come up with a few of my own that seemed to fit my current experience. So this new list is not meant to be exhaustive and not meant to fit everybody’s experience but I thought it might be useful to list them so that others might be able to identify them in their own meditation or perhaps create their own list.

Before I introduce my list, I wanted to mention that we tend to think of these conditions as negative—things to get rid of—but in our approach here, they are merely conditions or states for us to reflect on and examine. The problem, I think, is that these conditions, are ones that are easy to get stuck in and prevent me from moving around freely. They may also be conducive to losing interest or to devaluing what is happening in our meditation experience.

First, control. If I try to exercise too much control in my meditation, then not only does it take a lot of energy to manage what really does not want to be managed, but also limits the range of my experience. One of the goals in this approach is to broaden the possibilities of our experience so exercising too much control, trying to make your experience go in a certain way, prevents that.

Second, avoiding. I have found in my own experience that there are times when I avoid certain thoughts or states of mind—boredom, sleepiness, or thoughts about a particularly embarrassing episode in my memory. In this approach it would be more beneficial to allow these states, thoughts or feelings into my meditation so that I get to know what they are like.

Third, self-criticism. An obstacle I’ve noticed not only in myself but also in reporting groups is excessive self-criticism. Some self-criticism is healthy but if it becomes excessive and ongoing, I find I get discouraged, lose interest, and that it becomes a loop that’s pretty hard to get out of. Self-criticism is a rich area for investigation, looking at such things as the voice of the criticism and the conditions that cause it to come up.

Fourth, ill-will and self-justification. Ill-will appears on the original list and I find it a wide-ranging term that can include all kinds of angry reactions. The problem here is, again, that it’s easy to get into an obsessive loop of self-justifying thoughts when angry. This happens to me when I feel I’ve been unjustly criticized. The engine of self-justification gets started and it’s hard to stop.

In the discussion that followed the presentation of this list, several other possible hindrances were mentioned. The one that I most closely identified with was looking for an epiphany in our sitting. I can recall meditations where I kept looking for that sudden revelation that would make my life go easier and when it continued for a long period, I was unable to see or recall what else might be happening.

As I thought more about this list, it occurred to me that as certain qualities arise in our sitting, there is less likelihood of getting stuck. For example, as the quality of tolerance has increased in my meditation, I have been able to tolerate a bit more the difficult memories or thoughts that come up—stay with them longer, see what feelings they bring up. So there may be a relationship in our meditation—not necessarily in opposition to each other—between certain qualities and hindrances.

Kim Knuth

Early in 2015, I retired a bit early due to my husband's ongoing health issues and disabilities. I'd been practicing meditation for about 12 years at the time, beginning with Vipassana then switching over to RA in 2007. Wanting to keep my life meaningful and balanced, I knew that I would need to stay in touch with myself through personal investigation. After some time passed, I felt there was something missing, that there was some aspect of life that I had not tapped into. I don't recall the exact unfolding, but I knew that I needed to be more creative in my life. My gardening, which was, and still is, a great outlet for creativity, wasn't enough, because it is seasonal; not something I can dabble in throughout the year.

During this inquiry, I experienced what felt like an epiphany: I wanted to try painting. But how could I do this? I was almost 60 and had never picked up a paintbrush in my life! I began to investigate what might be holding me back from trying to paint. Having a receptive meditation practice was crucial in helping me see that many of my deeply held beliefs had blocked me from trying. It was difficult at first, the old messages that had held me back reared up time and time again. Some of my early attempts with watercolor could have been created by a young child. Even with all of my negative critiquing, however, I made myself put those childish paintings out on social media, for the very reason that I felt so uncomfortable to be seen in this way. Yet I also knew by this juncture, that I had enough courage to do so.

Meditation practice takes courage: the investigation and the allowing that occurs in meditation can be quite painful; it requires fortitude and tolerance. But how else do we gain insight? How else can we open up to our inner worlds to such a degree that we might see how the conditions of our lives have molded us? How can we develop a different relationship to our past and find some freedom?

So I continue on. I still feel that my painting is in very early stages. I have chosen not to take classes or find an art teacher. I want everything that I discover and portray to be organic and to express my own heart and mind, wherever that takes me, just like my meditation practice.

CANDLE
Sometimes I can identify what is inspiring my attempt at a specific image for a painting and other times not. I have painted a few candles, but I have yet to identify a precise answer as to why. What does a candle mean or represent that we find so appealing? Unity? Warmth? Focus? Security? Hope? the Sacred? I have asked myself these questions each time that I have painted a candle. In the Pali discourses, there is lengthy discussion of dukkha (the distresses in life) and the three fires that fuel our suffering: greed, aversion, delusion. It's often said that when these fires go out, so will our suffering. And yet, here we are attracted to, and finding meaning in the small fire of a candle. Maybe the candle also represents a shared struggle, a coming together, a middle way that neither holds on to meaning so strongly, nor discards it. And, just maybe, a candle gives the permission to question and to feel what we feel.

ELEPHANT
According to my mother, as a child I rescued and brought home any critter who landed in my path. I can still feel and remember that strong feeling of compassion; it's still with me. To my mind, animals represent the epitome of our planet's voiceless, always at our mercy, and yet adding so much to our lives. In an attempt to paint the feeling of compassion for all of our exploited sentient beings, I chose the majestic elephant.

CHERRY BLOSSOMS AND HUMMINGBIRD
With this painting I was thinking about anicca (impermanence). In fact, I had recently heard a dharma talk which contained a reference to the people of Japan's reverence for the spring cherry blossoms. This is certainly because of the beauty, fragrance and joy which they inspire, but it's also because the life of these flowers is so very brief. That talk was on my mind when I painted this. The Asian lettering says Happiness and Wisdom.

LOST DOG IN THE FOREST
This painting came through after very difficult family dispute which left us all with a feeling of grief and loss. Yet, combined with the heaviness of that day, there was still a feeling of hope for coming together again, for healing, and the certainty that nothing stays the same, that everything is fluctuating.

Integrating Recollective Awareness with Creative Processes

Lynn Taylor

During a two-year period making art in a country fondly known as the 'land of smiles' daily observations of human activity provided endless subject matter for my topic about environmental change. In Chiang Mai, Thailand, traditional indigo dyers use natural materials to fabricate their exquisite clothing. Over many years and much travel, indigo has become my artistic muse in the same way that Recollective Awareness has quietly become a supportive practice to live more consciously.

Qualities of the inner environment I experience when sitting sometimes need a few sketched lines to illustrate my journaling. These are very economical just like the shorthand notes I use for written recollections. Some provide revision and source material for transposing ideas into artworks later. Once I tap my memory to recollect those experiences, other thoughts arise, reigniting the cyclic process of observation. When focused on painting, I notice my thoughts arise in a similar way as when I sit with eyes closed. The two practices are woven into the fabric of my life as an artist.

The following recount outlines my journaling and tracks visual translations of my thoughts during the making a wax-resist artwork on linen titled: 'The Balancing Act'.

<u>Inspiration</u>
After happily riding my bicycle around traffic-free countryside shortly after moving into an outer suburb of the city, I cycled down a busy three lane road to visit a man who makes bamboo bicycle frames near one of the major city temples.

Instead of feeling advantaged to weave through heavy traffic, the experience felt like sailing against the wind, negotiating a sea of cars, Song-Taos, motorbikes and multiple hazardous road surfaces all at once.

I felt outnumbered and isolated in my effort to use a non-polluting vehicle in Chiang Mai. I remembered a similar feeling of defeat in 2005 when my tree-planting efforts to combat my carbon footprint seemed nullified by the news of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. I was so saddened at that time I made an expressive drawing of imagery I had seen on TV news of the flood, as illustrated. The artwork still makes me sad.

Hurricane Katrina 2005. Oil stick, charcoal and gesso on paper, 100 x 60cm.

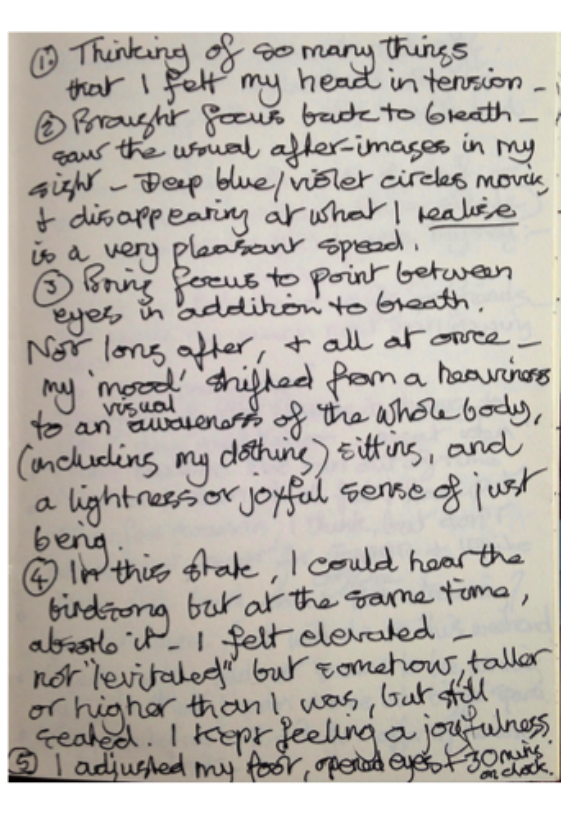
Recollective Awareness has since helped me find a more skillful way to observe emotional responses and feelings of helplessness, using a more investigative method by which to gain insight. My art making has developed a different style. So after my challenging and exhausting bike ride, I sat down to meditate.

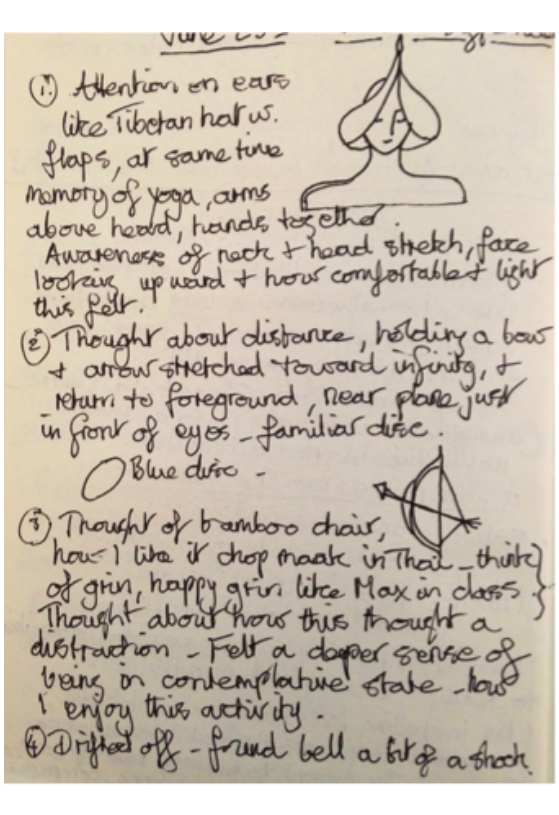
<u>Recollective Awareness Practice.</u>

Many of my journal records describe visual environments I observe as well as my thoughts and responses to sound. Recurring colours, shapes and spaces are commonly blue, elliptical or spatial with occasional appearances of horizons.

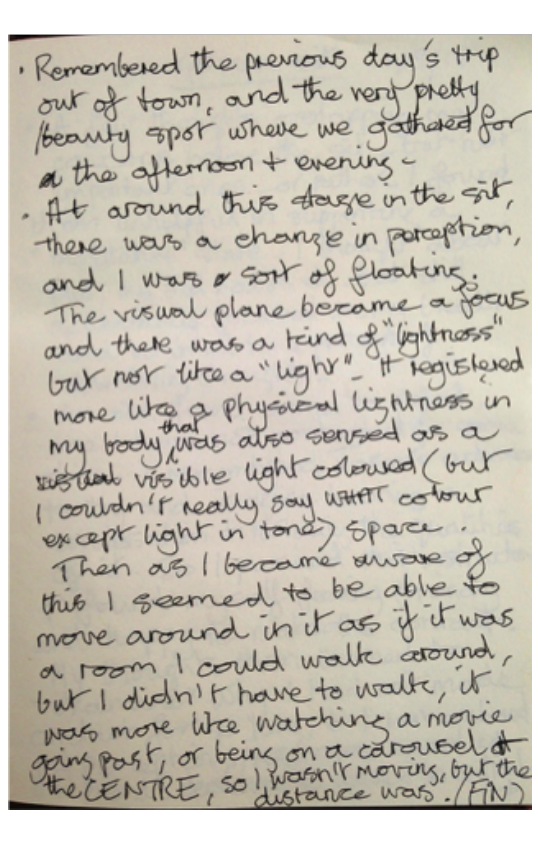
Following are four journal extract examples.

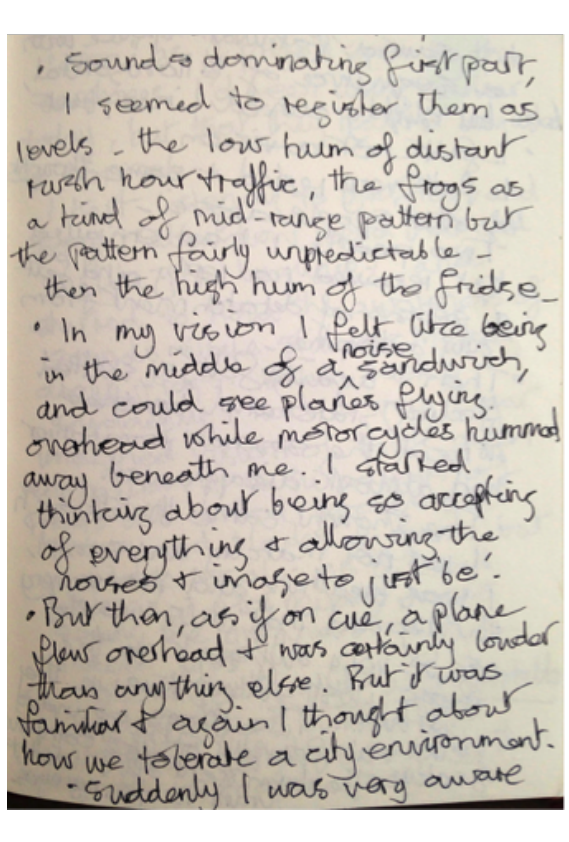
<u>Two recollections that include color (fragments).</u>


(1) Thinking of so many things that I felt my head in tension –
(2) Brought focus back to breath – saw the usual after-images in my sight – Deep blue/violet circles moving + disappearing at what I realise is a very pleasant speed.
(3) Bring focus to point between eyes in addition to breath.
Not long after, + all at once – my 'mood' shifted from a heaviness to an visual awareness of the whole body, (including my clothing) sitting, and a lightness or joyful sense of just being.
(4) In this state, I could hear the birdsong but at the same time, absorb it – I felt elevated – not 'levitated' but somehow taller or higher than I was, but still seated. I kept feeling a joyfulness
(5) I adjusted my foot, opened eyes


(1) Attention on ears like Tibetan horns. Flaps, at same time memory of yoga, arms above head, hands together. Awareness of neck + head stretch, face looking upward + how comfortable it felt.
(2) Thought about distance, holding a bow + arrow stretched toward infinity, + return to foreground, near place just in front of eyes – familiar disc. Blue disc –
(3) Thought of bamboo chair, how I like it chop mark in Thai – think of grin, happy grin like Max in class. Thought about how this thought a distraction – Felt a deeper sense of being in contemplative state – but I enjoy this activity.
(4) Drifted off – found bell a bit of a shock

<u>Two recollections that include spatial awareness and imagery (fragments).</u>


• Remembered the previous day's trip out of town, and the very pretty beauty spot where we gathered for the afternoon + evening –
• At around this stage in the sit, there was a change in perception, and I was a sort of floating. The visual plane became a focus and there was a kind of 'lightness' but not like a 'light' – it registered more like a physical lightness in my body that was also sensed as a visible light coloured (but I couldn't really say WHAT colour except light in tone) space.
Then as I became aware of this I seemed to be able to move around in it as if it was a room I could walk around, but I didn't have to walk, it was more like watching a movie going past, or being on a carousel at the CENTRE, so I wasn't moving, but the distance was. (FIN)


• Sounds dominating first part, I seemed to register them as levels – the low hum of distant rush hour traffic, the frogs as a kind of mid-range pattern but the pattern fairly unpredictable – then the high hum of the fridge.
• In my vision I felt like being in the middle of a noise sandwich, and could see planes flying overhead while motorcycles hummed away beneath me. I started thinking about being so accepting of everything + allowing the noises + image to just be.
• But then, as if on cue, a plane flew overhead + was certainly louder than anything else. But it was familiar + again I thought about how we tolerate a city environment.
• Suddenly I was very aware

During the sit after my real bicycle ride, unsurprisingly memories re-emerged. After a settling stage images of myself riding above the level of traffic emerged and I felt relieved to cycle in the opposite direction. This pleasant image generated thoughts about how going in the opposite direction to most people is challenging and can be fun too. Recording this solution in my recollection inspired me to later translate the imagery into an artwork for my topic.

<u>Development of subject matter and concept.</u>

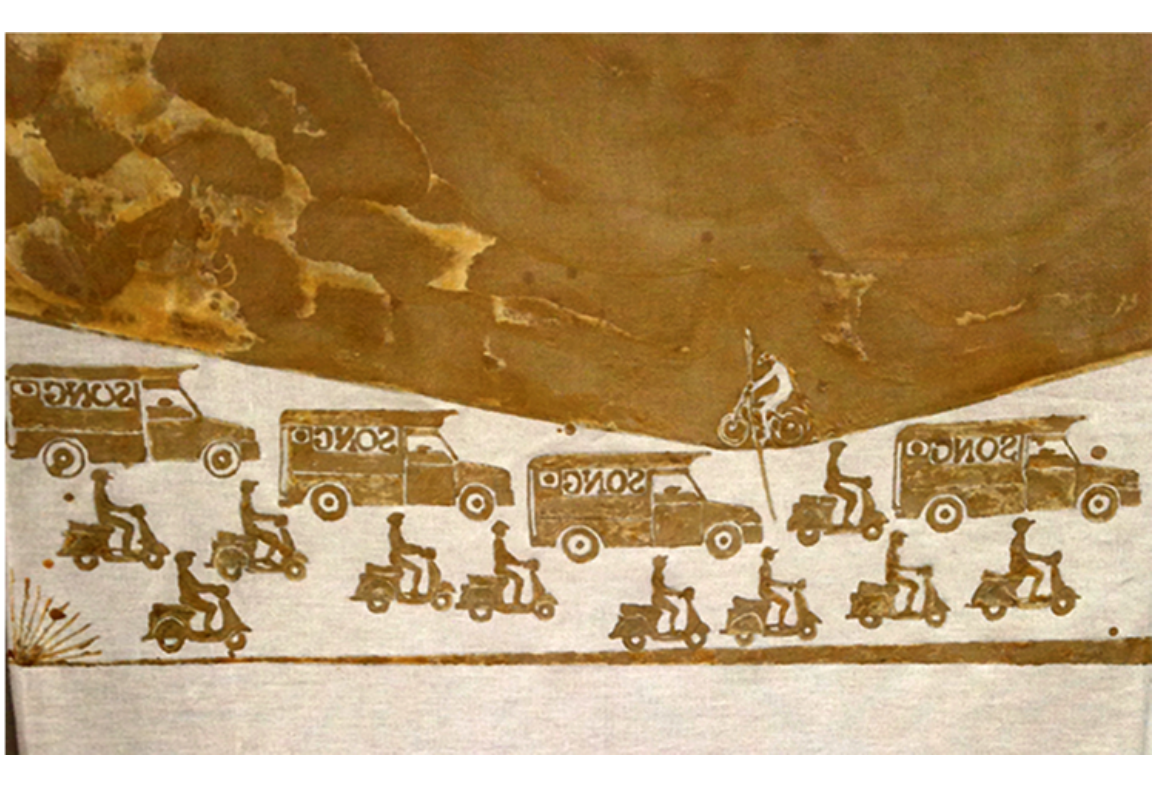
During the development of the artistic concept, a new more symbolic image emerged: a bicycle balanced on a tightrope, the rider wearing a green helmet to accent green transport. It was fun to imagine the trapeze artist, adding a balancing pole for the rider. This inspired the title, a message to achieve equilibrium in the fossil fuel issue.

My bicycle and lime green helmet.

'Cycling for Dad' annual bike day.

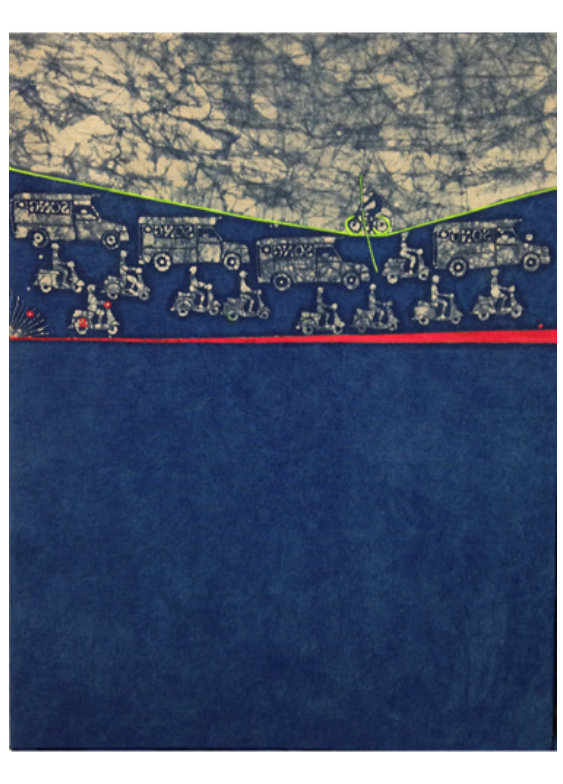
I created cartoon-like imagery to entertain the idea of cycling as fun. Graphic images suit wax-resist techniques, and using indigo represented an unpolluted sky. I created traffic by repeating a stencil of motorcycles and Song-Taos representing Chiang Mai culture. The name Song Tao literally translates as 2 lines so I wrote SONG in mirrored text as if going in a backward direction. Associated with the limit of no more than 2°C, the symbol helps present one way to reverse global warming. I added a 2° linear angle below the traffic and repeated this on a second linen panel, pivoted on the earth's curved surface, echoing the idea of achieving balance in a sustainable world.

<u>Making the artwork:</u> Wax resist defined my concept imagery on two panels of linen.



The waxed areas resist the indigo dye during the many dips in a number of vats to build the color on the surface of the linen.

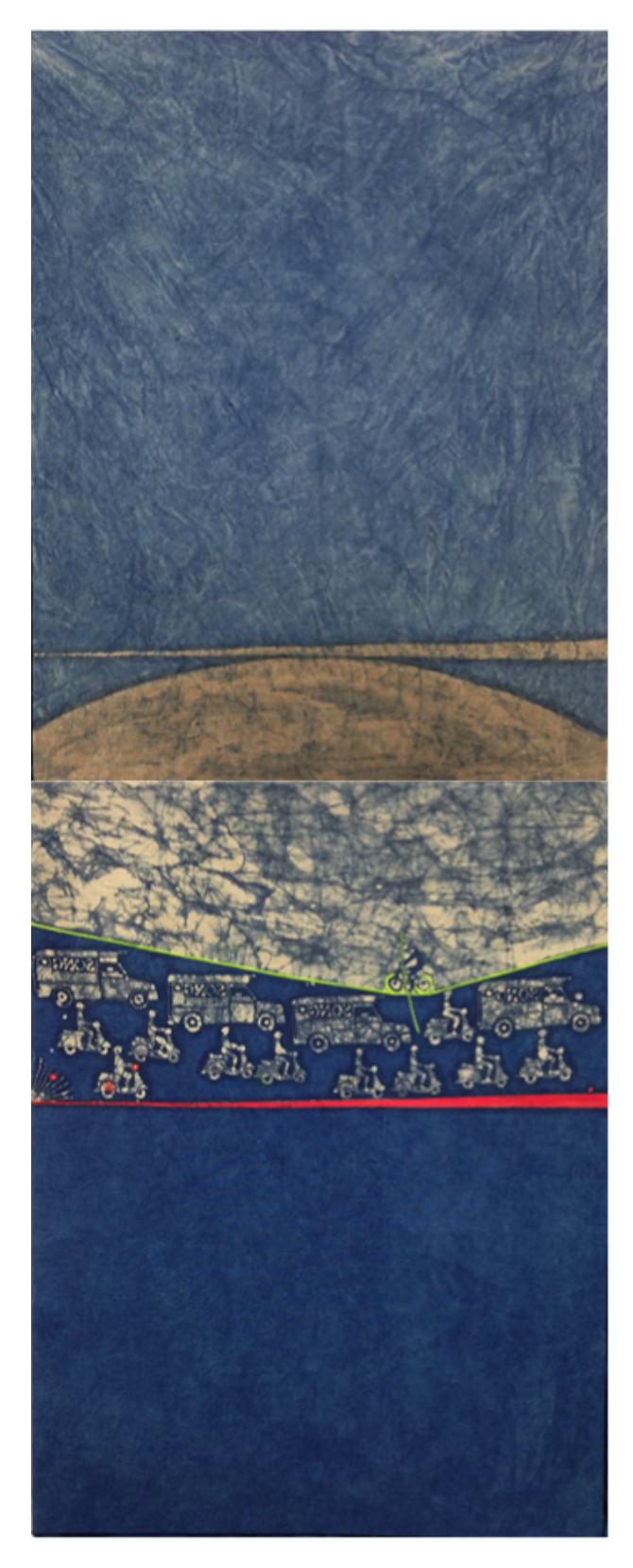
After dyeing, the cloth is rinsed clean before removing the beeswax with heat.



Above are the two indigo-dyed panels with wax removed and oil paint added.
Deliberate tonal variation results from different linen weights and flax colors.

Indigo has become my muse for many reasons. One of its qualities is to provide restful conditions for the eyes. Many people find it a calming or cooling color. In this series of artworks I deliberately rendered these visual conditions for audiences to calmly think about a confronting issue. They are an expression of some sitting experiences that I have found beneficial. It always feels good to share them.

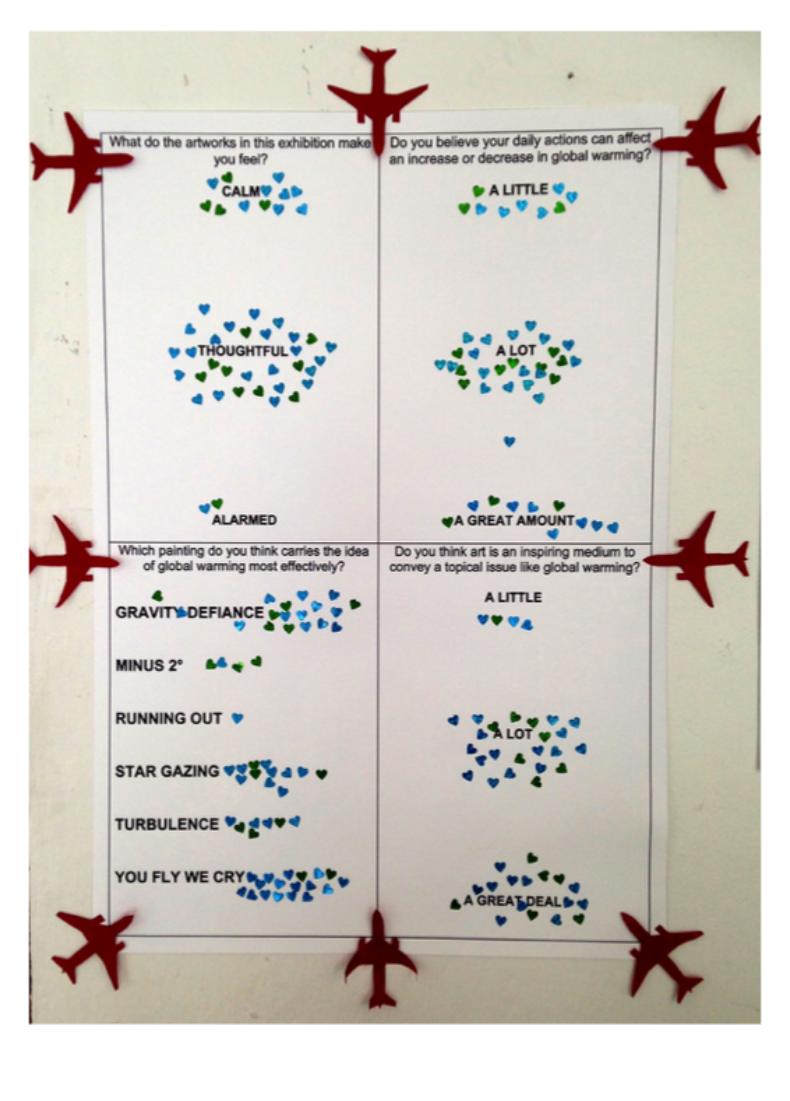
<u>Further development of subject matter and format.</u>
To emphasize the geometric angle representing 2°C warming, and strengthen the link to the second panel, I painted the 'warming' angle in red oil color. I added lime green to the acrobatic tightrope, bicycle and helmet to accent that section. I painted white stars to the sky of the second panel to symbolize nature's infinity. I joined the two panels together, the tall format emphasizing the idea of balance. Balancing the consumption of oil with alternative energy will reverse global warming.



'Balancing Act' 2015. Wax resist, oil and indigo on linen. 180 x 70cm.

<u>Conclusion.</u>
The practice of observation in Recollective Awareness seems never ending. However in retrospect there are certain changes or shifts I observe about my approach to everyday life that is different from before I adopted the practice. Observing my surroundings as stimulus for art making also seems endless to me. Sketching diaries are a common method for recording ideas used by many artists. The making of an artwork brings a sense of resolution to an idea, expressing thoughts silently to others.

I therefore regard the involvement of RA journaling as a very natural way to bring resolution to a sit, whether in words or sketches. For me, most recollections are discarded and never read again. I believe a trace remains though, like a silkworm thread wrapped in a potent cocoon that may later reveal something in a completely unexpected way. For this reason I am happy to share the outcomes of my painting exhibition intended to encourage audience reflection about global warming. According to the questionnaire feedback, my artworks mostly helped people think more than feeling calm or else alarmed. One viewer said he felt hopeful.



Story of the Novice Tibetan Bell Ringer

Sylvie Vanasse

Upon arrival at the 7-day Recollective Awareness Retreat, I spontaneously choose to ring the bells as part of my contribution. I have never done this before, and it sounds appealing and suitable to my skills. The task will compel me to attend the sits with diligence and will necessitate reliability and timeliness, strengths I believe I possess.

I feel pleased with my choice until the time arrives for me to ring the bells for the first time. A flood of questions, along with feelings of anxiety, suddenly emerges, 'when am I supposed to ring the bells? Right on the start of each sit or before?' It has to be before, but how long before? And how many times? And that small 'cowbell' on top of the larger bell, what is it for?'

Sworn to noble silence and seeing no one nearby who I can ask, I decide to strike the large bell three times and a few minutes before 7:15 am. This doesn't feel quite right, but I cannot be entirely wrong, can I?

My first sit is completely consumed by thoughts about my new task. Thinking about the 'cowbell', the image of a herd appears. It dawns on me that we are just that, a 'herd of retreatants'. Nevertheless, this herd likely wishes to arrive at the meditation sessions on time and rely on the calls of the bells. Oh dear! I can hear the recrimination of my fellow retreatants: 'Who is this lousy bell ringer?' I imagine feelings of frustration amounting amongst the herd. Did I also see someone looking at me with exasperation and a scornful eye as we sat for meditation?

I eventually seek advice from one of the teachers, who, in a reassuring voice, tells me not to worry, advising that 5 minutes before or after the schedule would be okay. He then adds: 'And do not get anxious about this Sylvie.' Is my emotional state so obvious?

I feel slightly reassured by the teacher's words, but my second sit starts with a most distressing thought: 'If I am to ring the bells at various times, people will never be able to rely on them.' This doesn't meet my needs for reliability and timeliness, and my anxiety returns. I am also starting to feel annoyed at myself for not having clarified the requirements of this task earlier.

I opt to explore my bell ringing feelings further. After all, isn't what this retreat is all about? Alas, my second sit is entirely populated by bells though my 'inner observer' starts to notice a slight progression in my thinking patterns. I am now focusing on the significance of time. I'm trying to be in the present moment, but all I can think of are my past failed attempts at ringing the bells. As with my future, it seems quite narrowly defined by my fears of being labelled the lousiest bell ringer of all times! Right now, these bells are ringing louder inside my head than outside the meditation hall.

I report on my experience at the group session, and we all end up having a good laugh at the defilements of the mind, of mine especially, of course. But the humour is only a light balm to my disquietude, which is still stubbornly lingering.

Will I ever find peace?

Visions of clocks populate my third sit! Well, I reflect, at least my thoughts do have some logical connection! Some of the clocks that I imagine are like Salvador Dalí's, elongated, liquid-like clocks sliding down the walls of the meditation hall. Others are like balls being thrown into a basket as if to symbolise the time that one can waste – like right now?

My back aches. Hum, isn't this the part of the body usually associated with over-responsibility? This story of bells is starting to resonate far too deep. Do I take every single simple task so seriously? Do I take myself so seriously? A part of me wishes to reflect on this further but is quickly usurped by another one, still more concerned about the workings of the bells than those of my mind.

It is lunchtime, and I feel exhausted. I return to my room and see that someone has slid a note under my door. It is from Laura, our retreat manager. It reads: '10 minutes before sit, strike large bell / walk with smaller bell.' I experience an immediate feeling of relief. Dear Laura, of course, she heard my awkward and untimely ringing! But believe it or not, that sense of relief once again eludes me like a gust of wind in the desert. Laura's brief instructions are not specifying how many times I should ring the large bell and where exactly I should walk with the small one. The grounds here are over 300 acres. I have never been here before, and I do not know the location of all the lodgings.

How complicated can this task be?

I see Laura in the dining room. Laura, my saviour! With her soft voice, she says: 'Sylvie, thank you again for accepting this task. About the bells, would you like to ring them your way or would you like me to share how I do it?' I think to myself: 'Ringing them my appalling way, are you kidding?' Impatiently anticipating the answers that would put an end to my angst, I reply: 'Please, please, tell me how you do it.'

Laura then goes on to explain the tradition of bell ringing, which, for thousands of years, has invited people to unite as one community to engage in the noble endeavour of transforming the mind. She also tells me how she listens to the tone and the entirety of the sound, how it swells and finally, softly, ebbs away, which helps ground her in mindfulness. She then goes on to explain about the number of strikes and what to do with the 'cowbell'. I feel touched by the meaning, beauty, and even the grace of accomplishing this task, and grateful for having the privilege of performing it.

The next day, I ring the bells joyfully, and their presence seems to have vanished from my sits. Oh, peace! Not quite a Samadhi state, but blissful enough for me. I can finally get to the 'real' stuff that is going on in my life.

Was this going to last? Of course not, because a new worry surfaces! Now knowing about the significance of the task, I want to do it well, and I realise how unskilful I am. For a discriminating ear, my bell ringing must be quite painful.

I have grossly underestimated this task.

The more I try to perfect my strikes, the worse they get. I either hit too hard, missing the bell entirely, or nearly missing it. Near misses are the worst because they make a very faint sound but a sound nevertheless, which makes them irrecoverable. They are definitively the most unnerving and frustrating.

I then try various strategies: focusing on a striking point; holding the hammer in different ways, like in tennis for instance; or calculating the length between the starting position of the hammer and the bell's striking point. All these seem to require situational awareness skills beyond my capacities.

I also try counting the seconds between each strike and varying the duration to see what elapsed time would be the most agreeable to the ear, but I get confused between counting the seconds and counting the number of strikes and get muddled up.

I now feel increasingly disappointed with each of my attempts and feelings of discouragement amount. Near despair, I suddenly think of all the novice bell ringers, throughout the ages, who must have felt like me. I then envision many other novices – children about to start or enter a new school where they know no one, those starting their first or new job, those about to give their first kiss, those about to become parents… The list is endless, and the entire world quickly joins me in my novitiate and its associated anticipation, excitement and fears. A world that is afraid of doing it wrong, of not being accepted, of not being good enough, a world afraid of being vulnerable, afraid of its imperfections.

The word imperfection then reminds me of the label attached to the Turkish drape that I brought to the retreat. It reads, 'this garment is hand loomed and bears little imperfections. It is these imperfections that make it authentic, unique and so beautiful. Handle with care.'

Never would I dream of removing any of these threads – these 10,000 imperfect threads – as they would create tears in the drape, even make it unravel.

I am looking forward to ringing the bells again, and again, and again.

Mindfulness of Thinking, or Running With Your Sneakers Tied Together

Josh Summers

I've looked at some of the potential problems that can develop within conventional approaches to mindfulness and would like to look more closely at how, as a meditator, you might consider working with the common experience of thinking. For many meditators, thinking in meditation is synonymous with failing to meditate.

Neuroscientist, Sam Harris, articulates this common attitude towards thinking in meditation, and Sam doesn't pull his punches:

> *"The principal enemy of mindfulness—or of any meditative practice—is our deeply conditioned habit of being distracted by thoughts. The problem is not thoughts themselves but the state of thinking without knowing that we are thinking. In fact, thoughts of all kinds can be perfectly good objects of mindfulness. In the early stages of one's practice, however, the arising of thought will be more or less synonymous with distraction—that is, with a failure to meditate. Most people who believe they are meditating are merely thinking with their eyes closed."* (Sam Harris, *Waking Up*)

And so the general approach is this: when people meditate they try to focus on their breath or body and not allow themselves to be distracted by their thoughts. That is, they try not to allow themselves to be drawn into thinking, or to get lost in thinking. I've received variations of this instruction from many well-meaning meditation teachers over the years: "Allow your thoughts, but don't get lost in them."

This teaching is further supported by compelling metaphors: your thoughts are like clouds, let them float through your mind without being carried away by them. Or, your thoughts are like trains; with mindfulness, you can stand on the train platform of the station watching trains come and go, but you won't get swept away by the various trains. These and similar metaphors have appeal. Wouldn't it be lovely to end the torment of the whirling mind? What's the problem?

The problem.

Some may not see this is a problem. This is, after all, a rather standard approach to meditation practice: don't get lost in or distracted by your thoughts. But in my experience, there is a problem with this view towards how to be with thoughts meditation. Here's the issue: whenever I try to establish enough mindfulness to be aware of thoughts as they occur, I find that my thoughts get interrupted by my own self-consciousness. That is, becoming aware that I'm aware has a way of cutting off the flow of my thoughts. This interruption doesn't occur when I bring attention to other experiences like my breath or my body. When I breathe, and I'm also aware that I'm breathing, the breath doesn't necessarily stop. Or, if I'm walking, and I'm also aware that I'm walking, and I don't suddenly trip or stop walking. But, when this same kind of mindfulness is applied to thoughts, I do find that, with sufficient present moment awareness, my thoughts no longer flow— they stop, or become fragmented and incomplete.

Observing this to be the case, a different metaphor has occurred to me. The instruction: "Allow your thoughts, but don't get lost in them," is a bit like telling someone to run freely. But before they start running, you secretly tie their laces together. They might launch off with all sorts of vim and vigor, only to be laid out on the ground, knees scuffed and elbows scraped.

One of my teachers, Jason Siff, brought this to my attention. He described how the instruction to "not be lost in thoughts," inevitably populates a meditation with reminders to "be aware," or "to be present." The result is that the meditator's experience doesn't flow naturally, rather it becomes a lurching, choppy process punctuated by meditative reminders.

While not exactly the same, imagine what it would be like if you were trying to read something, but that the text was strewn with reminders to "Be Aware" or similar such cues. Try reading this short passage from Proust and see how it flows:

> "We believe that we Be Aware! can change the things around us in accordance Be Aware! with our desires—we believe it because otherwise we can see Pay Attention; Are You Paying Attention? no favourable outcome. We do not think of the Aware, Attention! outcome which generally comes to pass and is also Be Attention favourable: we do not succeed Pay Aware in changing things in accordance with Allow Your Thoughts, but Don't…our desires, but gradually our desires change. The situation Be Aware That You're Aware that we hoped to change because it was Rest as Awareness, Itself intolerable becomes unimportant to us. We have failed Let it Go and Go Back to the Breath to surmount the obstacle, as we were absolutely determined to Thoughts Aren't Real do, but life has taken us round it, led us Let Thoughts Flow By Like Clouds in the Sky beyond it, and then if we turn round to gaze Notice the Impermanent Nature of Thoughts, How They Arise and Cease into the distance of the past, we can barely see Stay in This Moment; Just This it, so imperceptible has it become." (Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*)

How did that go? How much of the passage were you still able to comprehend?

No privileged way.

So, in meditation, rather than privileging just one kind of awareness during meditation — namely a present moment and self-aware kind of awareness — perhaps you might try to be more receptive to *all* of your inner dynamics that go on while meditating. This will include different modes of being with your thinking: periods of being lost in thought, periods of being aware that you're *consciously* thinking, and periods with relatively little thought. Of course, these are just three of many ways of thinking that you might come to see during meditation, but the point is this: by not privileging just one way of being with your mind, you may develop a more nuanced and complex understanding of what it's like for you to be you.

Wise Speech: Some Basics

Bill Cooper

I assume one reason the Buddha may have taught about speech is that we spend so much time doing it. And not only do we spend a lot of time speaking, but the quality and very life of many of our relationships depend on our speech. With so much at stake, and so much of our speech going wrong at times, the Buddha probably thought the people of that time would benefit from his guidance about speech. It would be hard to disagree. Twenty five hundred years later his teaching still applies.

So what is wise speech? The Buddha spoke about it in a number of places; here I'm referring to his teaching in sutta 58: *To Prince Abhaya* in the Middle Length Discourses. Initially the teaching on speech looks deceptively simple, and even familiar, as these principles are also embedded in our culture. When presented in bullet points, such as these, they do not appear particularly original:

- Abstain from false speech; do not tell lies or deceive.
- Do not slander others or speak in a way that causes disharmony or enmity.
- Abstain from rude, impolite, or abusive language.
- Do not indulge in idle talk or gossip. (Middle Length Discourses, Bodhi, p. 500).

Now the question we might ask is: if I were to better follow these four teachings is it likely that my suffering would be reduced? This is the fundamental direction of Buddhist teaching—to reduce suffering. Does telling the truth, not speaking ill of others, trying to be respectful of others, seem like beneficial ideas? Yes, it seems reasonable to believe that these teachings, if lived more intentionally, would lead to a happier life, certainly a life with fewer negative emotions and less suffering.

So far, so good. But there are at least two pitfalls for many of us. The first one is the pitfall of complacency, a tendency to interpret the above precepts as an excuse to avoid any confrontation. We may think this passivity is what is being taught in the above precepts, but it isn't. There are plenty of examples of the Buddha presumably irritating people by refusing their requests, remaining silent, chastising them for misrepresenting the Dhamma, and so on. He also consulted kings on matter of state, and seems to have been quite frank with them. He was not demonstrating, nor advocating complacency.

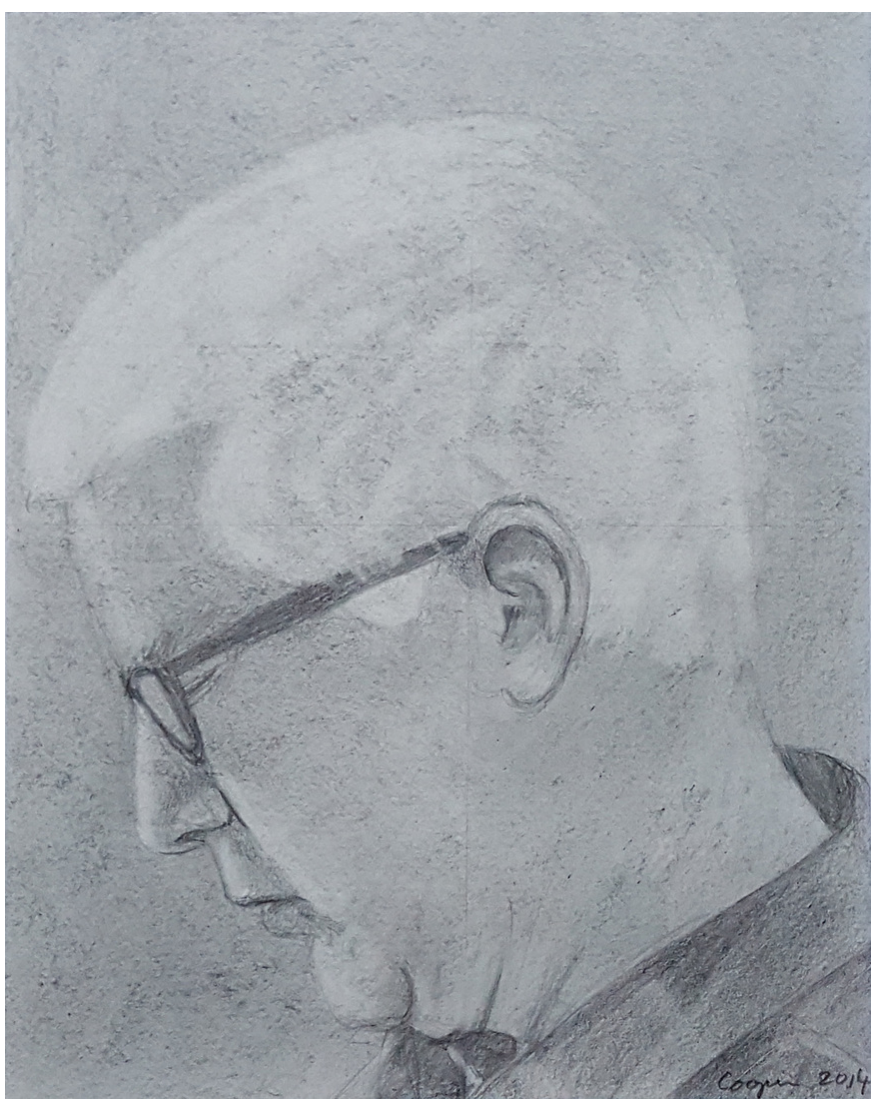
So, it seems this teaching on speech is not be as passive as it first appears. There do seem to be occasions when our speech needs to be delivered, despite the recipient's irritation or anger.

The second pitfall is the exception we make for ourselves in regards to our own speech. We often allow ourselves to fuel our anger, our arrogance, our belittling of the other. Some of this is volitional, we have control of our speech and we are choosing to make the situation worse. On what grounds?

This brings us to today's world and our various reactions to current political events. In these so-called difficult times, with some very bad things occurring for the planet and its people, how are we choosing to speak? When we do speak is it helpful? Or are we just venting our view, again? How do we avoid complacency and hopelessness? Lastly, what needs to be said, and how do we say it?

Fortunately or unfortunately, issues and questions like these are likely to arise in our meditation. (They are probably arising in everyone's meditation, regardless of technique.) But in the recollective awareness approach to meditation it's often a mistake to label thoughts like these as "wandering." These so-called wandering thoughts are "our life showing up," as Nelly Kaufer recently said. If we treat them with understanding and curiosity, rather than categorize them as worthless and wandering, we have the opportunity to carefully observe our life. And with that observing there is the opportunity for awareness… and wise speech.

The precepts, those idealized bullet points that we spoke of earlier, are an essential foundation of wise speech. They need to be there because they are clear guidelines. But obedience to a guideline only takes us so far. Ultimately we are left thinking about our experience and deciding for ourselves what to do, how to speak wisely. When speech is used, let's hope it improves on the silence.



drawing by Ellen Cooper

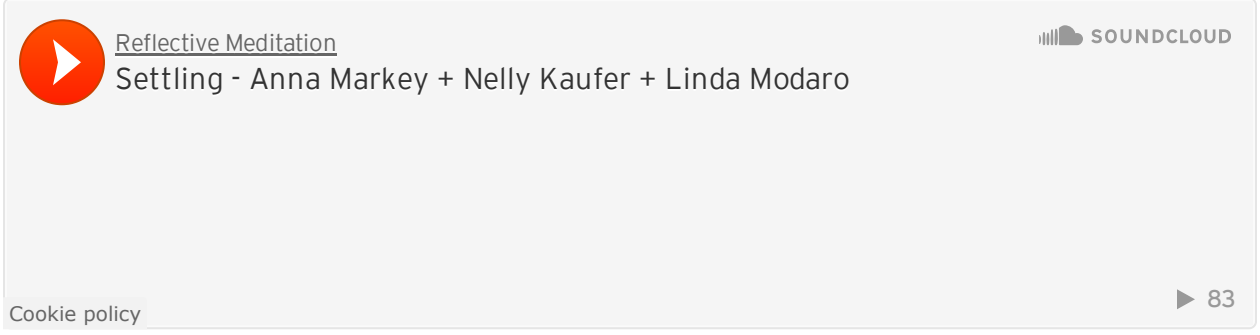
Learning the Dharma through Conversations

Anna Markey, Nelly Kaufer, Linda Modaro

Daily Meditation

Alive Practice

Settling



There are many different ways to deepen, to learn, to gain insight, to lean into life and to become in sync with her. One of my favourite ways is to have conversations with others. To listen and be listened to. To speak and be spoken to. To interact and merge a little. To gain and grow, there and then, from the ideas, thoughts and presence of others and then bear witness to their doing the same. It can be such a friendly, creative, connecting process. And besides...it's fun!

— Anna Markey, Coast and City Sangha

My spiritual friends and the dharma conversations we share are the heart and inspiration of my spiritual life. Buddha said to his disciple Ananda, 'Admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie is actually the whole of the holy life.' I hope you are able to cultivate these kind of friendships.

— Nelly Kaufer, Pine Street Sangha

So much can go *bongo tingo* in conversations, what with misunderstandings and mixed intentions... and yet, so much can go right to the heart of the matter. Bringing our meditation sittings into a conversation with another person changes the conversation to a relationship — one of developing trust, care, and collaboration. The Dharma is between us.

— Linda Modaro, Sati Sangha

Goodbye for now. We had no idea how this was going to come together. Thank you for your support and contributions. Please pass this along, and keep in touch!

To keep the eJournal alive and ‘in mind’, our intention is to hold a few online forums through Sati Sangha in 2018 to discuss some of the works presented in the eJournal. Please check this page for updates.

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