

*dharma contemplation*



DHARMA  
CONTEMPLATION

*meditating together  
with wisdom texts*

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The Metta Foundation  
Orcas, Washington  
2011

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This first edition was printed to share  
at the Western Buddhist Teachers Council meeting  
in Garrison, New York, June, 2011.

This book is a dana publication.

Since the Buddha's time, the teachings have traditionally been  
given freely from teacher to student, from friend to friend.  
This book is offered as part of that stream of generosity.

*Cover design & book design by Martha Lee Turner*

This book  
is dedicated to the monastics  
of all Buddhist traditions  
who carry the teachings  
in an ever-contingent world.

### *Acknowledgment*

I would like to acknowledge the immense contribution that Martha Turner made to this book.

Her work with me on this book ranged from substantive editing of existing manuscripts to sometimes questioning me about the practice and gathering our conversations and notes into coherent first drafts. She crafted bridging text, made certain I was comfortable with my descriptions of and claims for this practice, and sifted through earlier drafts of the book to pull out the materials most relevant for this edition.

Her incisive intellect, knowledge, and hard work on everything brought clarity, nuance, and discernment to this work and, indeed, to my own thinking. I am deeply grateful.

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## MEDITATING TOGETHER WITH WISDOM TEXTS

Dharma Contemplation is both a reading practice and a meditation practice. As a reading practice, it brings the discipline and techniques of meditation to the task of understanding a text and embracing the wisdom it offers. As a meditation practice, it takes the process of reading as the object of contemplation for the heart-mind. Both the words and the wisdom to which they point help focus the mind, supporting calm awareness and the recognition and release of reactions. Dharma Contemplation cultivates intimacy with the text and with moment-to-moment experience.

### *Origins of Dharma Contemplation*

The four part structure of Dharma Contemplation was initially inspired by *lectio divina*, a Christian practice that developed in the context of life lived according to the monastic hours—a rigorous daily cycle centered around sacred texts. *Lectio divina* describes and supports the mind’s movement from hearing or reading a text through deepening stages: allowing the text to confront one’s life, prayer around the themes of the text, and wordless contemplation.

Like *lectio divina*, Dharma Contemplation involves the movement of the heart-mind through several phases in relation

to a text, but there are essential differences in practice and intention. Dharma Contemplation focuses its entire attention toward the immediacy of lived experience. The emphasis is on fully receiving the text, examining its explicit content, feeling in the body the truth that it offers, and testing its truth claims against experience. We notice the situated, acculturated, conditioned nature of our reactions and understanding, while maintaining clear awareness. Then we allow the text's wisdom to impact our human lives in the world.

Dharma Contemplation is much more than a setting of *lectio divina* onto the foundation of Buddhist psychological principles with intriguing results, however. As we shall see, this practice has strong parallels in traditional Buddhist practice, particularly in some methods little used in the West of introducing and developing meditative practice.

### ***What Dharma Contemplation Looks Like***

In Dharma Contemplation, we immerse ourselves in a short excerpt of text and allow it to transform us. First we hear the text, then read it repeatedly so that it comes to saturate our minds. Layer after layer, we deepen our experience of the teachings.

*Silence.* The practice begins with silence, calming the mind and helping us to be fully present to experience, to the words of the text, and to each other.

*Words.* After a period of silent practice, one participant reads the text aloud; after a pause, another reads the same text. Then we keep the printed text before us, gently reading and rereading,

ruminating. Words and phrases find a home in memory. When the resonance of individual words and phrases is strong, we speak them into the silence. We speak just the words and phrases of the text, without commentary. The silence is lightly patterned, dotted with the words and phrases that touch us.

*Felt Responses.* From the beginning, the mind has been responding to the text with images and sensations. In the Felt Responses phase, we attend to these powerful currents. Where in the body does a word resonate? What is our felt response to a teaching that challenges our comfort or values? What inspires us, and what does inspiration feel like? We attune to resonances in the body that have been evoked by the text. We notice mental images that arise. We attend to shifts in mood and mind state, open and vulnerable to how this teaching vibrates the heart. When a feeling or image endures or has poignancy, we may speak it aloud to the group. We listen mindfully as others speak the felt responses they notice.

*Meaning.* Now we begin to explore the meaning of the text. We question things we do not understand, out loud or internally. Are we missing technical meanings? Could something in the excerpt's structure unlock new understanding? What is the cultural basis of an image or concept? The mind is on the lookout for its limiting assumptions, open to multiple interpretations of the text, sensitive to nuance. Unabashed and energetic application of the intellect coexists with a commitment to calm concentration. Silence surrounds and supports our inquiry.

*Dialogue.* The text has entered our minds through the doors of hearing and sight, intellect and emotion. Now we stop reading and contemplate how its teaching touches life as we actually live it. In this very moment of practice, what is revealed about the human experience, and about our specific experience? We turn from the text to experience in the moment. With mindfulness and tranquility, we open to thoughts and feelings as they arise.

We speak the truth of this moment; we give full attention to listening deeply to the words and silences of others. What light is shed on my life? Where am I, now that I have been touched by this text? Beyond all postures, beyond even inquiry, we attend to what is true in this moment, to wisdom.

*Closing Silence.* The heart-mind rests in silence. Whatever has been stirred is released. Diligent practice and the text's message have conditioned this moment. Silence invites us into stillness. There are no questions now, no seeking. The fruits of our contemplation settle as they may, ready to rise up when evoked by life's conditions.

### ***Some Uses of Dharma Contemplation***

This practice was developed by a Buddhist to support contemplative access to the root texts of that tradition. Using excerpts from the suttas, it has been taught extensively at retreats and in networked groups.

Many people have found the suttas difficult to approach. Technical terminology and obscure (or obscurely translated) language can get in the way. And the texts themselves are challenging: they question cherished assumptions about life's

direction and meaning. The multistep approach of Dharma Contemplation provides would-be readers of the suttas with an accessible doorway into this rich vein of wisdom.

Dharma Contemplation is suited to a skeptical and multicultural era. The Buddha challenged his hearers to test things for themselves rather than taking things on authority. This practice supports the reader in coming to understand a truth claim—any truth claim—well enough to check it against one’s observation or life experience. It fosters both respectful receptivity and careful evaluation.

Dharma Contemplation has been adapted (as Reading Meditation) for use in several faith traditions, in interfaith dialogue, and in non-religious settings; it is offered to those of any tradition who wish to work with it, perhaps in new or unexpected ways. An inherently beneficial practice, it trains participants in wholesome and helpful mental qualities. The progression of its phases tends to create a safe and equal meeting ground for participants, even around difficult or contested issues.

Here, however, we will focus on its use with core Buddhist texts. The practice of Dharma Contemplation may reach its fullest potential when the teaching of the text and the dynamics of the process are in fullest alignment.

### ***Introducing Meditation through Text Contemplation***

As popularized in the twentieth century in the West, Buddhism has too often been taught as primarily about meditation—and meditation has almost exclusively been taught as a silent, sitting discipline. A beginning meditator may be given little instruction beyond posture and some means of stabilizing awareness. In its

home contexts, however, Buddhist meditation—that is, practices involving Right Mindfulness, Right Calm Concentration, inquiry, and other wholesome mental qualities—can be approached in other ways.

The memorizing, chanting, and contemplating of texts—especially the discourses of the Buddha—is an accepted way of introducing meditation in traditional Buddhist cultures. As both a meditative and a reading practice, Dharma Contemplation parallels these older practices and can serve, as they have, to introduce meditation through sustained encounter with core texts.

Dharma Contemplation is a specific application of Buddhist psychological teachings about what happens when we encounter a sense object, and how to weather such an encounter in a wholesome and constructive way. In Dharma Contemplation, the sense object is the text, which is encountered by the wakeful and receptive heart-mind.

### ***Meditation and the Conditioned Mind***

Dharma Contemplation is derived from a Buddhist understanding of mental development. This practice works with the conditioned nature of the mind and its responses.

By “conditioned” we mean the quality of depending upon past circumstances and conditions, and also of arising automatically in us whenever certain present conditions occur. These are the senses in which “conditioned” is used in this book.

The stages of Dharma Contemplation bring us again and again into awareness of the automatic and conditioned nature of our reactions and responses. Some words have a certain

coloration for us—a coloration neither in their dictionary definition nor derived from culture, but rooted in individual experience. Other responses come from the culture in which we grew up. We may catch ourselves, sometimes, making judgments that our adult thinking minds do not even approve of! And we typically make many assumptions about what others mean, and assumptions about what any text must say. When we encounter other perspectives, we may harden almost reflexively around our own position.

Texts, too, depend upon and encode circumstances, conditions, and expectations. Every word that can be used is redolent of its other uses, other senses. The text's author had a personal history, with particular joys and sorrows, hopes and traumas, all of which have had a part in making the text what it is. The text encodes many of these expectations. This is not to say that the text does not also convey wisdom, perhaps very deep wisdom pertinent to our lives. But this text, like every text, is also a conditioned artifact.

If we are practicing Dharma Contemplation in a group, we also hear brief indications of the conditioned reactions of others in the group. The fact that these do not match our reactions can be a tremendous help in recognizing that such conditioned reactions are universally human. This helps us to relax in the midst of our reactions.

The stages of Dharma Contemplation help us to recognize these responses as merely conditioned—neither the whole truth nor imperative in their urgency—and so to relax around them. From the insight that experience is conditioned, and that all people share in this conditioned nature, compassion naturally arises. The pain of thrashing about in views, reactions, and longings becomes clear and poignant.

With compassion, accompanied by awareness, equanimity and curiosity, we can receive what the text has to offer and the contributions of co-meditators. The ways we feel separate and different—including religion, ethnicity, and culture—need not be feared. Examined more closely, they become simply the places where we meet as fellow human beings.

### *An Invitation to Wisdom*

Meditative practice, as understood in Buddhist tradition, is aimed at coming to know the truth about the human condition in a direct, firsthand way. It is based on the observation that certain truths, if directly apprehended, can radically shift one's experience of the world and liberate a person from the cycle of self-elaborated suffering. As a result, Buddhist tradition has been focused on how we come to deluded beliefs and how we can attain a direct knowledge that diminishes unnecessary suffering. In other words, classical Buddhist teachings were concerned with eliminating ignorance. Understanding how the mind works was essential to this effort.

In Dharma Contemplation, we present a text to awareness and watch what happens. We attend to the text, to our reactions to the text, and to awareness itself. We remain calm and receptive during that contact, diligently cultivating mindfulness, inquiry, calm concentration, and equanimity. We also allow the text to challenge us ethically, to challenge our beliefs and our ways of living. As a meditative practice, Dharma Contemplation is not limited to abstract mental skills or aesthetically pleasing experiences—it can touch the entirety of our lives.

## BEGIN WITH SILENCE

*We begin with silence.*

*Nurture openness and receptivity to the teachings.*

*Prepare for a meeting with the unknown.*

For sounds to be intelligible, there must be silence. Words arise out of silence; silence defines the edges between one sound and the next. If there is no silence in the heart-mind, words cannot be received: like an already full cup, there is no room to add anything more. And so the first step we take in Dharma Contemplation is to gently let go of our own words, our inner noise.

To begin with silence is also to create a gap, to separate from day-to-day concerns. Silence is beyond thought, beneath emotion. It is simple. Usually, we are not simple. Usually, the mind hardens in complexity, grips to take care of its duties. We allow the silence to soften that grip, to breathe its balm through that complexity.

Thus, we do not dive immediately into the text. First, we let go of our to-do lists, our agendas. We allow our most demanding inner monologues to quiet down. Even soft sounds can be heard in a quiet room. We begin in silence, in order to open a space for something new.

### *How to be Silent*

It might be helpful, at the start of this silence, to call to mind the sources of truth that have proven reliable in your life, whatever those may be. Consider these reliable sources of clarity in your life, hold them in your attention and let them calm the mind. It can also be helpful to reflect, even briefly, on your intention in entering this practice. Quietly make an inner commitment to follow this practice, for the duration of this one session, and establish a receptive attitude. Above all, allow the mind to become quiet.

Then, notice where there is tension in the body, and invite ease. Relax the muscles. If there are thoughts that won't go away, these can be known as gifts. Notice whether any bodily sensations are associated with the thoughts, and again invite ease. But even in this invitation, it is not helpful to try to do anything—to force the thoughts to change or go away, or to make the muscles relax. Just sit, subject to the laws of nature. Thoughts and emotions are not an identity; they are just thoughts and emotions; they are arising now because there is some space for them. Given no heed, they soon vanish. More may come. These, too, will vanish, transform, like steamy breath on a cold day. So much activity, so quickly gone.

Notice also the sounds that are around you: the small sounds a building makes, traffic sounds, machinery, voices, or the sibilance of trees or running water. Rain, wind, or waves, maybe. Sounds touch the ears, touch the mind, touch the moment; there is allowing. There is letting go: touching and letting go, touching and letting go. With each touch, we recognize the awareness that is touched. It does not matter whether awareness is touched by bodily sensation, sound, or

thought. We turn toward the knowing, toward awareness itself. We recognize that which is not the noise.

As we sit, the heart-mind may careen along its usual noisy routines. In silence, the mind usually proliferates all by itself, based upon prior thoughts, words, and actions. Thoughts and feelings related to Dharma Contemplation may arise: “Why am I doing this?” or, “I’m looking forward to this.” Feelings of anticipation, fear, desire, curiosity, faith, skepticism, or impatience may arise and proliferate. Or we may think about what we have to do when the session is over. All this is just the overactive cortex, firing away because it does not know any better. We can meet this familiar din with kindness. We smile: “I know you. It’s okay; you can take a rest now.”

We notice that there is a body sitting here. We notice again that the sensations of that body are just what they are: sensations rising and falling from the bed of emptiness. The body’s clamor—pain, itching, discomfort—may also pull at us; this is not new. We notice the tension inherent in this pulling and pushing. When we don’t fight it or feed it, this noise falters. We recognize—perhaps with a sheepish grin—how empty this clatter is. It is no different from the silence, only more tense.

### ***What is Happening Here?***

In beginning the practice of Dharma Contemplation with silence, we are simply and naturally establishing the quality of mindfulness, *sati*. The mind is present with full attention in the present moment, remembering to notice the awareness of experience. This attention is broad, neither narrowly focused nor dispersed by automatic thoughts. The mind is invited into a state of quiet observation. With no text to attend to, no social

demands to meet, attention can rest inwardly. How do I feel now? Is the body holding tension? Is the mind busy? Mindful, present attention allows us to observe and monitor activities and states as they arise and vanish.

By settling in the silence and not being pulled away by thoughts and feelings, we are preparing to be less pulled by reactions to the text. This beginning silence sets the tone for our entire session of Dharma Contemplation. It nourishes the meditative qualities of mindfulness, tranquility, and equanimity.

For most of us, a period of silence in which we are not trying to accomplish something is a break from our normal routine. This break helps create a sense of boundary, a distinct beginning to our Dharma Contemplation. By defining the meditation period more sharply, the beginning silence helps us honor the practice and engage in it with diligence.

Silence also offers a reference point by which we can recognize how habitually busy the mind is. When a thought, an emotion, or an image arises in this silence, it can be recognized while it is arising. Such recognition gives us a new opportunity: we can also choose not to identify with it and pursue it. The watching mind becomes more familiar with its own tumult, and becomes steadier.

As the mind calms down, it also becomes able to recognize the quality of knowing awareness, as distinct from the content that is known. This is the beginning of a relaxed, sometimes joyful concentration. The experience of the moment becomes simpler. The mind need not be pressed into service; it settles. A mind that is relaxed—not tense and reactive—is naturally concentrated.

Beginning with silence is essential because—almost by definition—wisdom texts are challenging. If we wish to absorb

some of their distilled power, we must empty ourselves of preconceptions and preoccupations. A *mélange* of feelings and images await the heart, a blend of challenge and delight. Layers of meaning, possibly dense and certainly nuanced, await the intellect. We may find some insight or new perspective for our lives. Now, on the threshold, we become quiet, open, receptive.

And so we begin with silence. Alert, we can learn to recognize it even when words are being spoken, to notice the silences between words or between speakers. We can also notice silence in the mind, between one thought and the next, or as the backdrop behind thoughts. We recognize the silence between the body's impulses to shift, and even as we move. Being still, we can notice the stillness of awareness.

We enter the practice watchful, vulnerable, yielding, and ready to be transformed.

## TOUCHING THE WORDS

### PHASE ONE OF DHARMA CONTEMPLATION

*Speak the words and phrases that touch you;  
listen deeply to words shared by others.  
Speak only words of the text and ruminates;  
let them find a home in memory.*

Into the opening silence of Dharma Contemplation, the passage is read, twice, aloud. In group practice, two participants read the text, one after the other: two human voices, inevitably differing in inflection, tempo, emphasis. In individual practice, it is still helpful to read aloud, and to read twice—but when necessary, the text may be read through silently, twice, at the speed of ordinary speech, silently “hearing” and “tasting” the words.

After these two readings, we keep the printed text in front of us, silently reading and rereading, or letting our eyes roam across the page, noticing which words and phrases draw our attention. If the energy associated with a word endures, we may speak it aloud to the group. Practicing alone, we might speak such words aloud, or in our minds, or maybe write them, or underline them, or tap them: whatever small gesture supports our dwelling with them and noticing to ourselves—just noticing—their resonance for us.

Other meditators also speak aloud the single words and phrases that drew their attention. We listen deeply, noting with

receptivity and balance what has drawn their attention, letting the mind respond and then let go. Ample silences surround this sharing; the spoken words merely dot the silence. The Words phase generally takes around ten minutes, more or less; in group practice, a seasoned group feels when to move on, or a facilitator discerns when it has run its course, and marks the transition to the next phase.

### ***What Is Happening Here?***

The Words phase of Dharma Contemplation depends on mindfulness developed in the preceding silence, and serves to further develop that mindfulness. Mindfulness means remembering to stay in touch with the present moment, noticing what is going on inside us when we contact the text. Mindfulness is not an abandonment to the present moment in which we are carried away, like a bubble on a stream; rather, it is a relaxed, collected awareness that can monitor events as they unfold. The Buddha likened mindfulness to the gatekeeper of a town, to a careful chariot driver, and to someone balancing a bowl full of oil on his head.

The Words phase of Dharma Contemplation challenges mindfulness by providing it with a compelling object and a way of handling that object. When we read, the mind contacts an object, the text. Sight, hearing, somatic and emotional responses, conceptual frameworks all become activated. Whenever there is contact with an object, there is the danger that we could be pulled into grasping or aversion. In order to follow the notice-and-release protocol of the Words phase, we have to become aware of these responses before they have

completely taken over our attention. Mindfulness must remember what we are trying to do: screening what comes to the gateway of consciousness. Informed by mindfulness and supported by persistence and effort, we pay full attention to the words and briefly note the resonances they have for us—feelings and mind states that come up in association with the words of the text. We will be investigating those resonances later, not yet, so we tell them to wait. We also drop any concern for the narratives and conceptual frameworks that we have elaborated around those feelings and mind states.

Simply attending to each moment of contact with the text, while maintaining enough recollection that we are not carried away, in itself strengthens mindfulness. Looping back to the words of the text rather than following their resonances, or giving attention to our responses to other meditators' shared words, takes energy and persistence. This is not the usual way of reading. And because the mind is accustomed to following its own interests and to interpreting any interference with those interests as boring or aversive, it takes some energetic application to follow the protocol for this phase. Bringing the mind's focus back again and again builds concentration.

While the focus of the Words phase may seem narrow compared to "normal" reading, there are several things to attend to. We attend to the words of the text, to the resonances that arise for us around those words, and to others' spoken words. As we do so, we are also beginning to learn how attention can move gently between what we are aware of and our response to it. We can learn to move with ease and fluency between the external and the internal, aware of both. This, too, is an exercise of mindfulness.

Attending carefully and slowly to just the words is also a practice of Right Effort. We repeatedly release habitual reactions. We release the urge to rush ahead, to interpretation or evaluation or application. We release the conditioned patterns that usually shape our reactions and understanding in favor of simply noting the places in the text where these patterns surface. We release both urgency and boredom in favor of spending time in a very simple intimacy with the text and with ourselves and with each other. As we summon and exercise the effort required to follow the simple protocol of the Words phase, mindfulness, patience, and equanimity are nurtured.

Thus Dharma Contemplation, even in the Words phase, provides a kind of training for encountering anything at all: a training in which the heart-mind learns to stay attentive, in the present moment, rather than flying off into reaction. The text furnishes an object for practicing this encounter, an object that is stimulating but not too stimulating. The context of group practice surrounds us with patterns and reminders of noticing and releasing, of present-moment awareness, and of human compassion. In individual practice stronger intention may be required, but the structure of the practice itself provides the reminder to notice and release, to return to this present moment and to the text.

The Words phase of Dharma Contemplation may also begin a deep intimacy with a challenging wisdom text. As we practice in the Words phase, we develop a fine-grained familiarity with the text. We hear words we might have overlooked as others speak them into the silence. We notice patterns and repetitions, the shape of the text. Without specific effort, we find that much of the text has taken up residence in our memory; it will be available to us in life's further challenges.

***Pointers To Good Practice***

The Words phase of Dharma Contemplation grows out of silence and honors that silence, even when words or phrases are spoken aloud. Remain aware of the literal, auditory silence, and aware of your inner silence—the silence of not chasing after each reaction to the text. Notice and protect and sustain that inner silence. Renew it at once, without fuss, if you notice that it has been lost.

Even while the text is being read aloud at the beginning of the Words phase, automatic responses and fragmentary interpretations will flicker in the mind. Notice these, but do not follow them; set them aside so that you can continue listening. It is not that they are bad, or lack value, but that setting them aside is necessary in order to take in the whole passage. In this way, you begin to build, even now, your capacity to dwell adjacent to the text.

Later in this phase, as eyes and attention roam through the text, more responses will arise. Over here, in this word, you may feel the tug toward grasping or aversion; in that place, that phrase, a tug toward daydreaming or worrying. Just notice these movements of the heart-mind, and let them guide your attention to the words and phrases of the text—and then, release them. If you find yourself already distracted, note this with kindness and return to the practice. Pause and relax into the silence that surrounds and supports this phase.

Take your time. The racehorse mind may need to be reminded to slow down. The form of this practice—noting and speaking only single words or short phrases—supports this slowing. Remain present with the letters, the words and phrases, the resonances. Don't try to interpret or to push away. By dwelling with the text in a detached and mindful way, the

meditating mind calms down. It isn't helpful to follow your reactions, but neither is it helpful to suppress them. Merely note where they are, and the words that trigger them.

If a particular word continues to resonate in you, if it endures or is strong, that is the time to speak it. By waiting a bit before speaking to see which resonances gain strength, by allowing some to gain a little strength, we stretch and extend our ability to be present with those reactions. There is no action to take other than to become present again to awareness itself, to the words on the page, and to the words being spoken by others.

In group practice we also listen, with receptivity and balance, as others speak the words that have drawn their attention. The other meditators, too, are triggered by the words, often by different words that trigger different histories, but the principle of conditioned response is the same. Notice what has drawn their attention; allow it to make you aware of different things about the text. Notice how you share with them the state of conditioned response; understanding and compassion may begin to appear even in the Words phase. Allow the mind to respond briefly to the others, to resonate—and then let go and attend to the text again.

The support of practicing with others is a big help in the Words phase. In individual Dharma Contemplation, the Words phase is perhaps the most fragile. Practicing alone, once the text has been read through, the initial flush of reactions has come and gone. As you touch again the words that evoked stronger reactions, this simple act will evoke further responses. Without the need to wait for the group, the eyes run forward eagerly, the mind processes meanings and erupts with felt responses. To give the Words phase its due, all this must be slowed down—meanings and felt responses noted and set aside—so that

attention can loop back to the initial moments of contact with the text. In individual practice, discipline and diligence are essential—especially at first, when old reading habits tend to take over.

### *Wisdom and Adjacency in the Words Phase*

In the Words phase, we spend time with the text without the usual pressure of trying to construct an interpretation of it. The guidelines for this phase offer no opportunity for sharing or even framing an analysis, judgment, or opinion about the text. Freed from the rush to interpretation, we can relax and take in the details of the text more clearly. We come to appreciate the text as a complex and variegated entity, something external to us, not simply equivalent to our reactions to it. The Words phase calms the mind and creates a space for a wakeful and non-anxious encounter between text and reader, a space in which new understanding can arise. We become able to be truly addressed, and perhaps instructed, even by a text that is alien to us.

In the contact and release pattern of the Words phase we also become familiar with experiencing and enduring the first brush of reactivity without following it. We scan the text looking for words or phrases that are resonant for us, that begin to trigger us. We wait just a bit to see if the resonance is strong, but we do not (in this phase) ask what the reaction is, or taste it carefully. The choices are simple, here: if the resonance proves strong, we may choose to speak it. Whether we speak or not, we then release the word—and the resonance—and return to the text. The release is not about suppression; we honor what we find and then let it go. This firm and rather limiting structure allows

us to practice knowing reactivity, coming close to it and touching it briefly, without falling in. Not falling into the heart-mind's construction is an essential step towards wisdom.

In the Words phase there is neither need nor opportunity for the usual conversational routines in which we search for shared interests, commitments, and personality traits. Within the narrow confines of attending to the words of the text and the resonances we feel around them, we can rest a bit from our constructed identities.

Yet even in the Words phase of Dharma Contemplation, we are more aware of others' presence than in traditional meditation retreats. We hear the words that resonate for other participants. We speak certain words aloud, words that evoked resonant response in us, knowing that others hear and receive our spoken words. Without dropping the meditative mind established in the beginning silence, we start to relax around the simple fact of the others' presence, relax around their awareness of us. The slight interactions of the Words phase allow us to be near each other, adjacent, in a radically more simple way. We begin to strengthen our innate capacity for mindful adjacency, which will continue to build, through the stages of Dharma Contemplation, into interpersonal meditation.

NOTICING FELT RESPONSES  
PHASE TWO OF DHARMA CONTEMPLATION

*Remain absorbed in the words and turn towards resonances in the  
body.*

*What emotions are evoked, what images?*

*What is the experience of the body?*

*Speak only those felt responses related specifically to the text.*

In the Words phase we became familiar with the words of the text and with the places in it that evoke some resonance from us. We developed some steadiness and calm in contemplating both text and resonance. In Felt Responses, we stop looping back to the initial moments of contact, let go of the touch-and-release of Words, and attend to the evocative power of the text's message and imagery and to the responses evoked by them in the heart-mind.

This phase of the practice shares much with the way one approaches and is touched by poetry. We continue to read and re-read the text, extending our attention to notice the bodily sensations, internal imagery, mind states, and emotions evoked in us by the text. Images and feelings seep into the moment, subtle crosscurrents that reference things about us that we are not usually attuned to, yet we stay near the text. We may be aware of some story behind our felt responses, but we need not follow that story.

When a felt response has energy, we share it aloud with our co-meditators. A simple statement might be, “When I read *this*, I feel *this*.” When others speak, we listen deeply, notice how their responses affect us; perhaps we turn our attention towards that particular part of the text. As that evolves or fades, we return to the text as a whole. We also remain present to signs of wisdom resonating between the text and the wakeful mind. We do not know what is going to emerge; we attend to these sensations as messengers of intuitive understanding.

We remain stable and aware as memories, feelings, and thoughts unfold. We remain calm and recollected enough that we are not carried away by the experience; or, if we are carried away, we learn what it is to fall into reactivity and to come out again. We are beginning to experience how it feels when reactions and awareness are adjacent to each other.

### ***What Is Happening Here?***

It is our greatest habit to identify with emotions and moods; when we do so, they become invisible to us. The discipline and practice of the Felt Responses phase set up conditions in which we can know these heart responses as emergent qualities of the moment rather than as “self.”

In this phase, we work with the somatic responses, mind states, and emotions that lay behind the resonances we noticed in the Words phase. These phenomena are foundational to lived human experience. Bodily sensations include sensations like tightness in one’s body associated with a particular image in the text, or a faint tremor somewhere, or a raggedness of the breath, or a sigh. The body is the messenger of the mind’s timid recesses; subtle sensations accompany even weak or apparently

neutral movements of the mind. Moods, states of the heart-mind, and emotions form a second group of responses. These include such phenomena as distraction, concentration, worry, doubt, energy, joy, anger, disgust, and excitement. All of these responses are body-mind phenomena. Felt responses also include spontaneous visual imagery. Many meditation traditions work with these areas of response because such responses both reveal the inclination of the heart-mind and continue to shape it.

These felt responses are often evoked by contact through the senses directly, as when we see or hear or taste something, and feel a response. When working with a text, however, most felt responses arise from the mind's contact with the words of the text, and from the images, associations, and meanings that arise in response to them. In this sense, the felt response is a translation from concept to sensation. While we stay close to the text in this phase, the object of attention is the emotional and somatic responses to the text generated by our conditioned being. We can notice these felt responses without becoming identified, dwell intimately with them as they unfold.

In Felt Responses, we choose to let the mind and emotions unfold in the vicinity of a text, while a stable awareness knows this play of phenomena. We taste and feel and know what emerges in the body and mind, but always in relation to the text and always within limits. Our grounding in mindfulness maintains the meditative center of the practice. With mindfulness we can know when we are pulled toward a memory; we can choose whether or not to allow it. In this phase, we choose to experience and know those responses by drawing the mind near to them. As we do, we are extending and strengthening our ability to recognize and remain present with them; mindfulness, investigation, tranquility, and equanimity

are all in play here. We dwell with felt responses, tenderly, as one might be present to a young child; we feel whatever we feel, but we do not get lost in the response.

In Felt Responses, our mindfulness naturally broadens. Mindfulness, *sati*, involves a state of relaxed receptivity that is able to hold the different facets of the present situation in mind simultaneously. This breadth of attention allows us to be close to felt responses because we remain grounded in awareness of the body, of others around us, and of the text. It allows these responses to unfold without suppression or interference, while a balanced mind remains established. When we identify with our felt responses—our emotional weather systems, moods, and mental states—we lose this breadth of vision

In group practice, we also speak our felt responses when appropriate, and listen to the words of others who speak from this experience. If we have fallen into reaction, hearing others speak reminds us what we are doing, calls us back to mindfulness. Being present to our co-meditators and to their spoken contributions supports being present to ourselves and to our felt responses.

Other meditators' spoken contributions demonstrate vividly how we all share in conditioned being. Hearing their felt responses to the text we discover that we are all sensitive, changeable, contingent, prone to perpetuating our confusion, and suffering the consequences. Realizing that we are all in this together helps release judgment and self-judgment; as we do so, patience, lovingkindness, and compassion arise naturally.

Several kinds of balance come more clearly into play with Felt Responses. Throughout Dharma Contemplation, we balance between internal and external attention, learning to keep some balance as we shift between the text and inner responses,

between co-meditators and inner responses. And listening when another begins to speak naturally requires a rebalancing between inner and outer attention; this rebalancing depends upon mindfulness.

### ***Pointers to Good Practice***

Felt responses are easy enough to find: they are the resonances we noticed in the Words phase. Continue to read the text, or roam through it, until you notice something—then stay with it, watching it with kindness and interest. What is here? What does it feel like? Scanning the body, or turning investigative attention to some body region that seems involved in a felt response, can help clarify the response.

The experience of Felt Responses will not necessarily or even usually be calm or blissful. Often, what surfaces around the text is difficult in some way: painful, or a matter of doubt or disappointment, something unresolved. Even the excitement of a useful learning or insight can throw us off balance. It is important to stay with the text and with the response, and not spin off into story. It takes some effort to turn away from the familiar explanatory narrative in order to watch the uncooked response, but the watching itself is a relaxed receptivity, mindfulness.

If we lose track of what we are doing and fall in, it doesn't mean that it has been a bad meditation: we can always return. Returning from a state of identification or automatic reactivity is an important life skill, as well as a meditative gain. We don't need to be so scared of falling in that we don't get close to felt responses; this only leads to a distanced experience of the world, of the text. Remaining aware while these things unfold

strengthens mindfulness, but so does realizing that we have fallen into reaction and recollecting ourselves. Within the practice of Dharma Contemplation—with guidelines, other meditators, a facilitator or teacher, the text—we are supported in locating awareness even as experiences rumble on.

Felt Responses is perhaps the most internally focused of the phases of Dharma Contemplation. Emotions and images can be rich fare—exciting to experience and stimulating to hear about. It is important to stay in touch with the centered calm of traditional silent meditation practice. Re-center in the body. Take sufficient pauses to monitor whether there is equanimity or whether the body-mind is agitated. Invite tranquility; invite balance. Also, stability can be found in the holding power of the group. If necessary, give particular attention to those who appear silent and alert. Pay attention to your posture or your breath before returning to the text. Prioritize balance. Only in this way can the mind become stable enough to maintain intimacy with these inner responses and still maintain keen and clear awareness.

You may also experience a pull to understand or figure out more about what this text means to say. It is not yet time for this. Meanings will manifest anyway: in the quick act of perception we cannot help but see potential meanings in the text. But for this phase, the thinking mind is relaxed while bodily awareness glows full. Attend to what emerges, mindful of the body, internal images, and mind states. Wait. Listen within and without. This phase of the practice is profoundly somatic.

### *Wisdom and Adjacency in the Felt Responses Phase*

In Felt Responses, the text and our felt responses come into full contact. We let ourselves respond, yet without losing mindfulness; we listen to the text and to ourselves at the same time. And our relation to the text is transformed. We begin to see that our initial reactions to the text arise mostly from our history and our habits. We begin to allow the text to be other, to be strange to us, without pushing it away. As we dwell near this unknown text, our felt responses no longer seem like the truth of the text, but as our side of a dialogue. We begin to listen to the text with curiosity and with a different kind of respect.

Some of our felt responses will center around impressions that the text “rings true” or that we sense a false note. We test what we read against what we know of life and truth, aware that our knowledge is partial. We listen to our intuition. The Felt Responses phase helps us dwell with feelings long enough, and with sufficient detachment and intentionality, to arrive at a finer and fuller sense of our relationship with a text.

As we become aware of the conditioned nature of our felt responses, we also begin to realize that this human-made text, however lofty, was also formed in a certain confluence of history and habit. Outward-looking mindfulness opens us to view with compassion the conditioning of the author, of the tradition that carried the text within its bosom, or of the translators. With patience and tranquility, we hold this conditioned text and our conditioned viewpoint in awareness. By becoming intimate with our felt responses to this text, holding them in awareness without judgment or grasping, a larger perspective becomes available to us. Just as the text is conditioned—it speaks from a particular worldview and contains the assumptions of that worldview—we, too, are conditioned. As we see how ubiquitous our reactions are, we

gain freedom to question both ourselves and the text, with respect and compassion. Tacitly, the heart is asking, Is there some kernel of wisdom here that is universal, that might be a transmission?

In Felt Responses, we also become familiar with the delicate details of what it is like to be triggered and still know it is happening, to react but not lose our way in the reaction. Allowing ourselves to feel whatever we feel, without losing mindfulness, is a form of intimacy with our inner contents and impulses, intimacy with ourselves. It requires some self-acceptance, and builds more self-acceptance. The somatic states and emotions we are calling felt responses can be the locus of strong clinging and strong aversion. As we stop living in denial, pretending to ourselves that we don't have *this* response, or that we are experiencing these teachings with complete objectivity, we become more settled, simple, in line with truth. We can dwell adjacent to our felt responses with an uncomplicated factuality.

In this phase we also hear from our co-meditators about their felt responses, their conditioned reactions to the text. This sharing goes beyond the sparseness of Words, but is something other than the give and take of normal conversation. The emphasis on the text and the structured nature of the guidelines support meditative presence and openness to each other. In such a way of being together, wisdom might come from anyone.

## INQUIRY INTO MEANING

### PHASE THREE OF DHARMA CONTEMPLATION

*Explore the meaning of the words and phrases.*

*Inquire. Do not be afraid to analyze.*

*Notice how threads of meaning are woven.*

*Are there ambiguities, metaphors, contexts?*

*How clearly can these words be understood?*

In the Meaning phase, we continue to read and reread the text, but now we apply critical intelligence in order to understand its content and message. The mindfulness developed in the earlier phases of Dharma Contemplation blossoms naturally into inquiry, supported by a relaxed concentration. This concentration is applied as we read the text and think about what it means.

Along with our internal investigation, spoken contributions refer to specific elements in the text. We ask questions: what a word means, how the elements of an analogy line up, what a metaphor suggests. We ask how the logic works, and whether it is sound. We also observe our own minds as they attempt to construct meanings; we listen to other people's contributions with the same realization. We enter a universe of possible interpretations humble, open, and fresh.

We also share knowledge. Someone may be familiar with another translation, or know something about a key term, or about the cultural or historical context. Insights based in

scholarship or those grounded in meditative experience can be received and pondered, even while we remember that all learning is conditioned and partial. When there is no such knowledge within the group, we can still apply critical intellect and pool our insights.

The conceptual mind becomes fully engaged in the Meaning phase of practice; we need not shy away from specific and penetrating inquiry. We engage the discourses with the same precision we would bring to instructions for shutting off the water flooding the basement. We pause frequently, allowing our insights, doubts, and conjectures to settle. Mindfulness remains with us.

We remain focused on the text rather than falling into reactivity and identity making. In group practice, we attune to the collective wisdom that emerges. While we can recognize the meanings we discover as partial and conditioned, these meanings can nevertheless challenge—even restructure—our interpretations of our lives and of the world around us.

### ***What Is Happening Here?***

In the Meaning phase, multiple intellectual frameworks are activated: what the text seems on the surface to mean; what it might have meant when the Buddha spoke it, or to those who heard and remembered it; whether it has any relevance to our lives, and so on. We are very interested in the little bits that do not quite make sense—they may point to something we have missed, a need to reframe our overall understanding. We wonder how our culture and conditioning contribute to how we hear the text; we wonder what the text could have looked like in another time, place, and culture. We may be greatly surprised

by how different it looks to our co-meditators. This inquiry requires openness to new ideas, the capacity to hold multiple elements in the mind simultaneously, and the relaxed awareness that facilitates making connections between information. These are classical aspects of mindfulness, *sati*. The demands of the task call out these aspects of mindfulness naturally; and mindfulness is strengthened as it is exercised.

In group practice, mindfulness and tranquility also help us stay open to our co-meditators. There is more give-and-take in the Meaning phase than in the phases before it. Because it is a cooperative effort to understand the text, a sense of group investigation replaces habitual selfish behaviors and mindsets. The tendency to identify with one's ideas, to protect them and claim credit for them, fades as ideas are shared. Generosity grows stronger and more natural. We become freer to engage in the group inquiry without the burden of asserting we are right, being embarrassed if we are wrong, or being intimidated by others. We become willing to receive others' intellectual offerings; there is no need for argument, only a shared commitment to discerning the multiple meanings in the text. Truthfulness and humility become natural.

It takes effort to stay on track with the Meaning phase as meditation; the intellect is easily drawn into abstractions and clinging to early interpretations. By continually bringing the mind back to the text, and back to inquiry, the meditator is concentrating the mind. The mind that flitted from one thought to the next becomes less scattered, calmer. As practice deepens, the mind can become strongly focused and unified in the attempt to understand the text. This concentration has much in common with the concentration of intellectual exertion—mental work such as trying to understand a philosophical or

mathematical concept—but here it arises out of the preceding stages, and out of the surrounding silence. This is a concentration saturated in tranquility.

Although we remain primarily concerned with the text and its meaning, as we investigate it with the meditative mind we can also observe the processes of constructing meaning. As we practice mindful adjacency to experiences of knowing, being confused, constructing answers, and struggling with the absence of certainty, we can observe the processes by which we construct identity and meaning. We may see that this idea no longer seems so necessary; that understanding, formed in some half-forgotten pain, feels irrelevant to the present moment. Mindfulness supports inquiry into these constructions, and inquiry, in turn, supports letting go. We sometimes glimpse the constructing process through the contributions of other meditators, too; when the mind does not cling, patience and compassion arise naturally.

### ***Pointers to Good Practice***

The Meaning phase is the most outwardly directed phase of Dharma Contemplation, but it is not a time to lose ourselves in intellectual questions or in the dynamic of collaborative inquiry. Good practice requires silence around vocal contributions. Each contribution stimulates the inquiry of all the participants. Yet the attitude is slow and patient, firm at times, and always open-minded. Pausing into present-moment awareness helps us keep our bearings as we explore the text, and supports our engagement with the text and with each other.

Good practice also requires each participant's self-modulation between inner- and outer-directed attention. If you

notice your participation speeding up, or lagging languidly in a sense that you have nothing to contribute, it is an indication that the inward/outward balance needs attention. You might relax and let the text just resonate against the knowledge you have, the critical moves you could make. Or if you have become isolated inwardly, you can relax and open to the energy of the text and of the group, or notice the sweetness of being able to contribute to collaborative truth seeking.

It is also helpful, even in this phase, especially in this phase, to return awareness to the body. This is part of balancing attention between the inner and outer. It freshens the intellect, gives perspective, and keeps open the doorway to body wisdom.

It is essential to fully engage the mind in the Meaning phase. You may sometimes notice yourself shying away from asking hard questions, or from volunteering information that doesn't seem to fit with someone else's expressed view. Remember to trust that whatever emerges from fully engaged inquiry will be beneficial. Being present to the text and to each other with every bit of your intelligence is an act of generosity, a gift far greater than deference to others' assumptions.

Becoming intimate with a wisdom text is not a trivial thing; it may challenge assumptions about the nature of mind or of life itself. If laziness emerges in the face of something complex or challenging, energy may need to be intentionally called forth. Keep re-inviting examination, investigation of the difficult or new. This is all the more needed when the group discerns multiple possible interpretations.

It may not be easy to consider multiple interpretations of a text simultaneously. Does the mind want to jump to the safety of conclusions, or can we suspend such comfort in favor of a new understanding? Can we listen to the text and listen to

others' questions and interpretations with clear attention and balance? Are we willing to share what is vague? Are we willing to assert what may seem radical but that nevertheless feels true?

If no one in the group has any external knowledge of the text, this can provide a challenge. Ask questions, look for patterns. If you are practicing alone, you might even do a bit of research. But don't be too quick to fill in the gaps. Notice what it feels like not to know. Observe the mind's constructing activity. The goal is not the perfect interpretation or even advancing the frontiers of scholarship, but the growth of wisdom, for yourself and among the participants.

### ***Wisdom and Adjacency in the Meaning Phase***

The meditative frame of the Meaning phase supports understanding the text. Outside of practice, we habitually hear what we want to hear, ignore what we do not want to hear. We interpret and misinterpret according to our views. Maybe we prefer to avoid challenges, or to rest in religious or scientific superstitions. When we project our own expectations or desires onto the text as its meaning, we can encounter only limited wisdom.

The first meanings that emerge from a text are going to be those we are already attuned to in some way. This is a basic dynamic of human understanding; it will not change, and must simply be met with acceptance. But as we question our assumptions and nurture curiosity about new perspectives, our understandings begin to shift and broaden. In a group, our co-meditators may voice alternate interpretations or emphasize different aspects of the teaching. Awakened by such new input and focused by the underlying silence, the intellect is able to

penetrate the surface of old ideas with the care and precision of a surgeon, or of a gem-cutter. A new landscape begins to emerge from the text, a varied and fertile landscape of new ideas and alternate perspectives. With awareness, our cultural, historical, and personal conditioning become the ground for understanding rather than a source of prejudice.

In the Meaning phase, conceptual thought is held in awareness; the two are adjacent. We dwell intimately with an idea as it plays across the mind, now touching into awareness, now back out into the idea, and back to awareness, to stillness. We can play with, work with, mental constructions while maintaining this mindful adjacency. The wisdom of patience manifests: ideas come and go; we wait, we watch, we listen.

Mindfulness, *sati*, helps us to stay with the task, stay open to others, and to know reactions. It allows and manages the balance of adjacency. Other qualities manifest, called out by the phase's tasks. Concentration, in our strong focus. Energy to engage fully. Balanced equanimity helps us deal with the realization of the ubiquity of conditioning: the text before us, the other participants in the group, our own interpretive preferences and agendas—all are located in a certain culture, language, and set of assumptions about the world.

Inquiry is perhaps strongest in this phase. We investigate what this text means, but we also have the opportunity to investigate the experience of making meaning, of knowing, being confused, constructing answers, or struggling with the absence of answers. We are already meditating, and we have engaged this process directly in seeking the meaning of the text. We are stimulated to construct meaning by the words of others as well as by the text. The Meaning phase presents an

uncommonly clear opportunity to become familiar with the constructing process itself, to look frankly at it.

## DIALOGUE WITH WISDOM

### PHASE FOUR OF DHARMA CONTEMPLATION

*Join together in the immediate experience of the Dhamma:  
the way things actually are.*

*Release the text; trust that it will inform the present moment.*

*Speak to present experience, sharing observations, pain, insights.*

*Listen deeply.*

*There are ample silences to soak in each and every spoken word.*

In Dialogue, the final phase of Dharma Contemplation, we set the text aside and join in the shared human experience. We sit with each other in present-moment experience. We speak from that present-moment experience. What touches us now? We share mundane observations, pain, and insights. We listen deeply to each participant's contribution, and to the resonances they stimulate. There are ample silences to take in every spoken word.

We have let go of the text in order to join together in the present experience of the teaching. How does the message of the text—the Buddhadhamma—touch and influence this lived experience of natural law, of Dhamma? What is realized in this moment? How can we live these teachings and use this moment to support one another on the path? In this moment, conditioned by the time we have spent with the text, how are things right now?

Arising thoughts, sensations, and emotions are received with acceptance, respect, and care. Old issues, experienced through the lens of our reading experience, appear in a new light. New ideas or feelings are met with gentle curiosity. How does this text's teaching touch and influence our lives?

As thoughts or issues surface from our life, we attune to inner experience. When a thought or feeling endures and stands out as true and right to share, we speak it into the silence. We share mundane observations, pain, and insights. We speak subjective truth—the truth of experience, not of theory or from an image as to how things should be. As we speak, mindfulness endures. We speak what we think, perceive, and intuit in this moment, in the present tense. In the container of meditative dialogue, where experiences are shared and received with wakefulness and calm, the powerful dynamic of interpersonal contact is at work. One person's insights inform or soften another's; the quality of your mindfulness heightens my own.

### ***What is Happening Here?***

The Dialogue phase is characterized by a shift from intimacy with the text to intimacy with immediate experience and with each other. Here, Dharma Contemplation reflects the personal immediacy of insight meditation set into the context of a listening and speaking practice. Mindfully, we speak of and from the texture of this lived experience. We are awake and receptive as we listen to others. In our confusion and our clarity, we remember that our capacity for non-grasping follows us into everyday life. We listen deeply to each other's sharing. The mind, delicate and alert from more than an hour of meditation practice, listens inwardly to sensations and mind states, then

extends this same sensitivity outward to the between of the group. Even if the mind is not still, awareness of rising and falling experience remains stable, so we sit adjacent to all that arises, wisdom and confusion alike. These are the fruits of mindfulness, investigation, and concentration. We accept the compassion of others and offer our own, recognizing the complexity and vulnerability of human life.

In the earlier phases of Dharma Contemplation, the object of awareness—the text—may have been multilayered, but it was still easy to locate—at least in comparison with the totality of presently arising experience. We have now shed the anchor of the text. Turning inward, we become aware of bodily sensations, thoughts, and mind states that arise not in response to the text, but in response to our entire environment, internal and external. In this moment we also meet responses that emerge from our unseen, beginningless history. Because we have encountered the text with mindfulness and with the clear intention to absorb its wisdom, the memory traces from our reading will be unusually clear. Now, memories intermingle with worries about next week, juxtaposed with echoes of the text we just read.

The Dialogue phase resembles traditional meditation practices more than the earlier phases of Dharma Contemplation because immediate human experience, not text, is the main object of awareness. Sitting quietly, we are aware of thoughts, sensations, and emotions as they rise and fall, and we meet each moment with acceptance, respect, and care.

While all meditation practices that include mindfulness and tranquility foster intimacy with experience, this Dialogue looks different from more familiar forms of silent meditation because it includes interpersonal contact and interaction: it involves

speaking and listening. Aware internally of thoughts, feelings, and so on, we are also aware externally of what others speak into the silence. Our practice has led us to a stability of mind that has allowed us to rest adjacent to the text and to our emotional and conceptual responses. Now that same meditative capacity supports clarity and stability of mind as we meet other meditators. Listening to the others, we hear the textured voices of their hearts. As we hear their struggles, kindness and compassion grow naturally within and among us. When we hear the insights and witness the successes of our fellow meditators, sympathetic joy arises spontaneously. These human connections are tempered by the equanimity of our meditation practice. Mindfulness knows the human experience, knows the transient nature of all these wanted and unwanted experiences, and begins to flow with them rather than resisting or grabbing at them.

As the meditative capacities of compassion and joy develop, habits of fear and separation soften. Our body-minds begin to yield to the changing moment. The mind becomes more supple, the experience of the moment less individualistic. We learn to cultivate a broad, open awareness in which internal and external are known simultaneously. Self and other co-arise in each moment into this shared human experience. Habitual modes of interaction drop away; wisdom conditioned by the text joins the insights born of participants' life experience. This enables fertile group wisdom, and this is now received by the bright and available mind. Each moment is welcomed without expectation.

In the Dialogue phase, the edifice of our conditioned thoughts and emotions is saturated and further conditioned by factors outside itself, factors that have been inclined towards wisdom by a text and a practice. It is here that our Dharma

Contemplation may most directly effect how we see ourselves and the world, and so change how we live. Whether we are experiencing confusion or clarity, meditating with others helps us remember that our capacity for non-grasping follows us into this everyday life. This dialogue calls us to honesty, courage, and compassion. What is emerging from the stew of the moment? Is there a voice of confusion or hope? Is there a wellspring of wisdom? What seeds have been planted in this garden that, in the warmth of others' listening, will bloom into the present silence?

### ***Pointers to Good Practice***

Developing a relational meditation practice calls us to step out of habitual modes of interaction. The basic guidelines of Insight Dialogue—*Pause, Relax, Open, Trust Emergence, Speak the Truth, and Listen Deeply*—can be very helpful here, but explicit knowledge of Insight Dialogue is not required for Dharma Contemplation.

It is helpful to pause intentionally from the mind's entanglements and come home to this very moment of experience. Notice the pauses presented by fellow meditators as a reminder to return to the moment, to remember awareness. In the moment of noticing, intentionally relax the body. If the mind is excited by emotions or thoughts, a gentle internal reminder to relax and accept things as they are can stabilize awareness. Pausing and relaxing nurture intimacy with present-moment experience.

It is from this mindful state, where we are not fully blinded by and grasping to habitual reactions, that we begin to distinguish internal and external awareness. If mindfulness has

been focused internally, extend it now to include your surroundings and especially those with whom you are meditating. Opening attention externally and interpersonally is the crux of mutuality: we can be mindful and steady even while we are engaged with others.

This internal-external balance supports sharing our present reflections on where the text has left us, and listening as others speak. But so many thoughts are emerging now; which do we speak? We are supported in this discernment by our inner listening. Which thoughts or feelings endure, which are most clear? What reflections have the ring of truth, the quiet urgency that would motivate us to speak them into the silence? Attend inwardly. Wait, meditating. The text, by the sheer force of momentum, is still ringing across these silences and conditioning this moment. At some point, possibly for no reason we can name, we speak, we share what is true for us right now: we speak aloud the truth that mindfulness and intuition have uncovered.

When others speak, we listen deeply. We are delicately attuned to whatever arises, but the voices of others, our fellow humans, are given special attention. Perhaps just now they hold wisdom's key. Listen to their words; listen to the quality of their voices that reveal the teeming past from which they speak. And we see them speak, their faces and bodies giving a parallel discourse. Listen also to the group as a whole. Attend to the flow of words and silence, of attentional energy and distraction. Trust what emerges and fades, arises and vanishes in awareness. Meditation deepens while remaining fully relational. We share of and from the human experience.

Together, these moves—pausing in mindfulness, relaxing and accepting present experience, opening beyond the shell of

the skin, and trusting, surrendering to the moment's impermanence—these incline us towards deeper intimacy with internal experience and with each other. Specific mental notes to “pause,” “relax,” or “trust emergence” can be helpful. Then, as we speak and listen in meditation, the mindfulness and tranquility of the mind, its diligence and brightness, are robust. This is the shared field in which understanding can find a home in the body.

The mind may resist this open field, preferring instead the safety of the text. Such fixation on the text may be a retreat, an attempt to protect against intimacy. Meditators have spent the past hour with a text and have gained some measure of comfort there. Now is the time to venture out of that comfort, into the wilds of the full and messy human experience. To move back to the text now limits the meditative depth of the practice; our own humanity, and that of our partners, eludes us. Ultimately, so does the wisdom offered by the text.

In the Dialogue phase, there is great freedom to participate at your own pace. Having released the text, welcome each moment without expectation. Notice when you are mindful and when you are not. When mindful, the recognition of awareness makes clear that the knowing faculty and what is known are not the same thing. Identification with thoughts and feelings vanishes. Sometimes these moments of recognition are fleeting. But sometimes—especially when wakefulness is clearly acknowledged and supported by the reciprocity of relational practice—this responsive, non-identified, and alert state endures. In these moments, there is spontaneous compassion for ourselves and for others, natural intelligence and insight about the text's wisdom, and a deeply felt sense of freedom.

Settling and skillfully guiding our practice calls us to adaptability of mind, a flexible balance of inner and outer, awareness of all sense doors, and the resting point of awareness itself.

*Wisdom and Adjacency in the Dialogue Phase*

In this last phase of practice before our closing silence, the wisdom of the text resonates within each individual and throughout the group. We are no longer reading, but we are still engaged with the wisdom of the text and still meditating. Deep truths of the human experience have been shared; they now take root, become clear, and may replace former attitudes and interpretations.

This emergent wisdom did not arise alone; it arose in relationship. Even if we were meditating alone, we were in relationship with the text. The sparks of insight that left trails in the darkness arose from the contact of text and consciousness. Consciousness arises in each moment, dependent upon our history; our contact with the text has also been contact with our entire life of thought and action. Intimate with the text, we have also been intimately present to ourselves. We have felt this contact in our bellies and our hearts. We have allowed the sparks of images and sensations to rise and vanish. Whatever insight or caring has emerged was birthed by this relationship of text and mind.

As we dwell with experience, there is a realization of the knowledge encoded in the text. Do we see things differently as a result of our practice? Do any specific actions or attitudes take rise in us? Has our understanding deepened, or shifted? What of our faith: our confidence in either these teachings or in ourselves? Have we seen in ourselves something that is more awake, kind, and compassionate, something we did not see before? Have new perspectives arisen? We begin to live the truth of the teaching. We have, in some way, understood what we have read; reading becomes wisdom.

If we have practiced with a group, we have also been in relationship with each other. We have lived this time adjacent to this text, and adjacent to each other. We have shared with each other whatever humble light we could, just as we have shared our confusion. I have offered you my knowledge and my insight, but I have also offered you my heart. You have given me the kindness of your insight and your confusion; you have given me generous words and been kind enough to receive whatever I have offered you. This mutuality may have unlocked something deep and real from this text. In the precision of your love, perhaps I have yielded to the text's injunction in ways I never could have alone. By speaking and listening in the full light of meditation, we have worked together towards this new understanding. If our practice this time was dry or incomplete, our generosity was no less full; our meditation, and our care for each other, has been its own reward.

## END WITH SILENCE

*We end in silence.*

*We use words when helpful, let go when unnecessary.*

*Experience ripens.*

Our practice has delivered us to silence. We no longer read; we dwell directly with the experience that has unfolded. Whatever our experience has been, now, in the silence, we recognize that it is past. We rest in awareness. Silence provides the background for a meditation that is mostly beyond words.

In this silence, we may naturally recall the words, images, and feelings that now saturate the heart. We may be aware of the body as it resonates with recent experience. We may sense the quiet energy of the group. All of this is known as it rises and falls.

This closing silence is a time of effortless rest, of settling. We cannot hold onto the past—not even the fruits or pains of practice. If something lingers, we notice this. Perhaps we experience gratitude, perhaps sadness. There is no attachment or aversion to any of these resonances. There is only presence and acceptance. The attitude now is one of letting be.

Here, we move from contemplation of the text to silent meditation. Silence is our natural home. Together, we offer our meditation partners the gift of our silent practice.

In this silence, consolidation happens. With no effort, intentions become more clear, this human experience becomes

more deeply understood. As we sit quietly, the habit mind may look for something to do. We may seek to understand that bit of the text, or to relive an insight or pleasant feeling from our practice. When these thoughts and feelings are known by mindfulness, they can be understood as signs of conscious and unconscious processing. The personal process and the group process have set something in motion that we cannot fully access or understand. Realizing this, we turn towards simple awareness. We rest quietly in the present moment as experience yields insight.

It is important that we honor this silence. Sometimes, impatience may arise and the silence may be cut short—by us, by another practitioner, or by the facilitator. Or people may keep talking, not offering from the silence some economical pearl of insight but just motivated by discomfort or the pressure of social habit. When this happens, we can support the practice with an answering silence. There is compassion for each person here, and indeed for all suffering beings. In this poignant moment, at the close of our exploration, we offer patience and a tender attitude towards this shared human experience.

## ASSESSING YOUR PRACTICE

One can assess one's practice of Dharma Contemplation in a broad way or a more fine-grained way. Both kinds of assessment should be done with any kind of practice. Assessment is essential for directing one's practice and one's life.

The broadest assessment would be to determine whether the practice seems worth continuing or not. The criterion for such a broad assessment would be how the practice is helping one's life, or contributing to the things that help one's life. Which mind states are increasing, which are decreasing? Are the factors of awakening increasing? Does Dharma Contemplation lead to more mindfulness, investigation, energy, joy, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity? Are the hindrances of sensory lust, anger, agitation and worry, laziness and sleepiness, and doubt decreasing? Has my meditation practice improved? Do I have a clearer understanding of, or more interest in investigating, the workings of desire and freedom in my life? Does my interest in these wisdom texts grow? This kind of assessment helps one determine whether a given practice is helping keep one's life on course with the Dhamma. It makes sense, however, to hold off on such a global assessment until one has considerable experience with the practice.

It is also possible, and helpful, to assess the finer grain of one's practice. Fine-grained assessment can be done right from the beginning. Such ongoing assessment leads to more fruitful

practice; it is crucial for our practice to mature. Without it, we do not even give a practice a fair try—instead, we sample a hybrid of the intended practice and circumstantial influences.

At root, the assessment criteria for a session or part of a session are the same as for larger-scale assessment: what is happening? Can I see the factors of awakening? The hindrances? Do I find myself more or less compassionate or joyful? One should also ask, Am I really following the practice, and the intent of the practice? But it is possible to offer assessment guidance that is more specifically tailored to the specific challenges and opportunities of Dharma Contemplation.

The opening silence should not be dull or blank, but one in which one is aware of the silence and of the quality of one's mind. Such awareness implies mindfulness—the remembering to attend to the fact of one's awareness, or to some framework such as the body or mind states. If mindfulness is present, does the mindfulness seem lively? Is it accompanied by energy for investigation? By tranquility, or by any of the other awakening factors? Noticing the quality of one's mind in the opening silence is not an evaluation of that Dharma Contemplation session, but a reading of one's beginning state. The noticing is itself an act of remembering that strengthens mindfulness. As an initial reference point, it allows one to compare one's mind state in the opening silence with the quality of one's mind state in the silence at the end of the practice. That change is one measure of the quality of that session for you.

If mindfulness, tranquility, and other meditative qualities are observed in the opening silence, one can notice that and be glad: joyful noticing will itself increase and establish the mind states noticed. If not, mindfulness is the place to begin: give attention, in the silence, to the body and the mind.

It is also helpful, in that opening silence, to nurture a full-hearted commitment to the practice for the duration of that session, and a desire to discover what one may learn from the practice and from the text. If a warm sense of confidence in the suttas or in Buddhist teaching comes naturally to you, it would be good to briefly touch into that confidence.

The Words phase is marked, above all, by the quality of non-clinging mindfulness. The mind notices when attention is attracted to individual words or short phrases, and speaks those words when they are resonant enough, and listens to the words spoken by others, but the discipline of this phase keeps the mind close to the text. It takes effort and concentration to persist in this touch-and-release activity without allowing the mind to wander off. In that effort, we are learning how to endure our own reactivity without being triggered into grasping. We know we are practicing well when the mind rests easily with the text and with this practice, not wandering off. Am I seeing the resonances that arise and speaking or releasing each in turn?

The Words phase is also an exercise in moving between internal and external focus of mindfulness. Does the mind tend to get stuck in either internal or external focus? Am I fixated on the external input of the text or of other's contributions? Am I getting stuck with my internal responses? If little is noticed beyond the words of the text, or the words spoken by others in the group, the focus is too external; if the mind wanders or is carried away by its own reactions, the focus is too internal. Is the mind supple? Does it move easily yet remain focused? As a participant, it is our responsibility to watch over our practice, and to make course corrections as needed.

In the Felt Responses phase, the attention is not quite so restricted as in Words. In this phase, we do not so quickly

release our responses to the text in order to cycle back to its words. Rather, we allow feelings and mindstates to unfold in response to the text. This is not the same as allowing the mind to wander off, triggered by some image in the text! Assessing our practice, we notice whether we are remaining mindfully aware of the process and do not stray from the images provided by the text. We are learning about our own reactivity in this phase—both as it might hinder our understanding of the text, and as it might provide the context for understanding it. We are also learning to endure that reactivity with kindness for ourselves. We are also taking guidance from the felt responses shared by others. The most basic assessment criterion for this phase is whether we are able to stay with our emotions while staying in the vicinity of the text and (in group practice) aware of each other.

To assess the Felt Responses phase, we can also notice whether the body-mind is becoming more serene and settled. Are both equanimity and courageous investigation present? If we are practicing in a group, how is the mind responding to the spoken contributions of others? If we get caught in reactive proliferations, we are likely to become agitated and out of touch with either the text or the group, or both. If we suppress our reactions entirely, we become out of touch with ourselves and with this phase of Dharma Contemplation practice. Can we balance our attention between inner and outer stimuli? Is agitation increasing or diminishing? Is my sense of intimacy with the text increasing? Whenever we become more calm, the “signal-to-noise” ratio can be expected to increase, resulting in greater ability to notice more subtle felt reactions. Do we observe this happening?

The Meaning phase is the most externally focused of the phases of Dharma Contemplation: we take the text, as a fully objective other, as our focus. Yet we remain grounded in mindfulness and tranquility even as we take something wholly external as our primary object. It will take Right Effort to remain aware of the body, and of feelings and mindstates, as we attend to the intellect. But without that effort we will get lost in an intellectual inquiry that is not, for the time we are lost in it, a contemplation. It will be helpful again to recall any confidence we have in this text, or in Buddhist teachings in general, and to entertain that confidence in balance with wholesome doubt and vigorous investigation.

One kind of imbalance in the Meaning phase looks and feels like a debate: attention is devoted too exclusively to the external text. It is also possible to have too much external focus directed towards the group's members: the intellectual tone might then look like attack, or it might conversely manifest as an avoidance of rigorous questioning lest anyone feel uncomfortable. Do you notice this happening? Either of these point to both an external over-focus and a failure to transition into the selfless inquiry of the Meaning phase. As a participant, our main responsibility is to re-adjust our own practice: focusing more outwardly or inwardly as needed, perhaps also recalling to mind that the search for truth is not a personal matter.

In the last phase of Dharma Contemplation, the Dialogue phase, we drop explicit attention to the text in order to attend to our present experience and wisdom. In group practice, this attention is in dialogue with each other. It is influenced by our reflections on the Dharma Contemplation text, but not tied to it. What wisdom have we reached? It might or might not be in close agreement with the text—that no longer matters. Trusting

what emerges, we speak the truth of the moment with each other and listen deeply. In assessing this dialogue, we may ask if we are calm and relaxed, open to the wisdom that emerges within us, open to one another in the moment. Is the dialogue balanced by pauses? Do we receive others' truth gently, with interest and wonder? Do we find the energy to share our truth?

The quality of the ending silence, too, is a place for assessment. If we have practiced well, it will be almost palpably different from the beginning silence, because our mind states will have shifted significantly. Greater tranquility. Brightness of mind. Presence with experiences, including resonance with text, presence with other people, but no attachment; just not isolated. Does the silence also glow with some enthusiasm for awakening?

We may encounter confusion or diversion in any given phase of the contemplation, even when everything seems lined up for good practice—the physical environment, clarity of purpose, balanced energy, practice partners. But basically, Dharma Contemplation is straightforward and not difficult to practice. It provides a way to reconnect with the keen mind and open heart that dwell behind the veils of habit. If we are diligent, our practice will find places of balance and breakthrough.

Individually we take responsibility for our meditation, and as a group we share in the responsibility for the whole process of evolving the practice. In the absence of outside advice or supervision, where else will this impetus come from? Here, cause and effect can be seen at work: when we practice in this way, these are the results; we acknowledge our active contribution to what happens. Together, we harvest the results; together, we open to the touch of wisdom.

## INTIMACY, DISRUPTION, AND TRANSFORMATION

Dharma Contemplation presents an alternate way of introducing meditation, one well suited to contemporary culture and its challenges. It incorporates several aspects of life that are often divided. It brings conceptual guidance from textual sources together with meditative approaches based on the direct apprehension of experience. It extends mindfulness into the encoded realm of language and information. As a practice that ends each session with fully interpersonal meditation, it forms a bridge between solitary meditation and interpersonal relationship. Its gains transfer easily into everyday life. It is a practice readily accessible to those new to meditation or new to wisdom texts.

Dharma Contemplation is an essentially disruptive practice. It disrupts our habits of reading and processing information, it disrupts our preconceptions about meditation, and it disrupts the social routines by which we construct commonality. In their place, it supports intimacy with responses and concepts arising in the moment. It fosters inquiry both into wise texts and teachings and into mental formations. It disrupts our habitual ways of relating with each other, opening the possibility of unconstructed intimacy.

### *An Alternate Way of Introducing Meditation*

Dharma Contemplation could seem a radical departure from the silent, seated awareness practices that have dominated the

teaching of Buddhist meditation in the West, yet it parallels older and more traditional ways of introducing meditation. Like some traditional approaches, Dharma Contemplation combines meditation with the learning and pondering of core teachings, and enlists meditative processes to bring inquiry, an experimental approach, and open-ended questioning to the wisdom of the tradition.

In some traditional Buddhist cultures, instruction in meditation might begin with working with texts that embody the core teachings of Buddhism: hearing them, chanting them, memorizing them, but above all taking them as the object of meditative contemplation. In such contemplation, the beginning meditator both encounters the text as a challenging object of meditation and learns and absorbs the wisdom of the tradition. Such text contemplation is both a meditative intervention in the habitual cycles that cause pain and an education in the Buddhist understanding of how those cycles work.

Dharma Contemplation is a meditative protocol that disrupts our usual reactions and provides an alternative to them. While the text excerpt is the formal focus of attention—and much meditative activity happens in relation to the text—simply having such a focus gives us a vantage point from which to observe our mind states and reactions. The mind's excursions from the practice, for example, when agitation or doubts arise, are themselves enfolded into the practice and encountered in a beneficial way.

In the Words phase, the instructions reference the words and phrases of the text, the action is to look for “resonance” appearing around the words. This resonance is the beginning of response to the text. We look for those resonances, wait with them a bit to see if they become strong, then either speak them

and go on, or simply go on. We are beginning to investigate such responses, in this first pass without straying far from the words of the text; in this way they anchor and stabilize our attention.

In Felt Responses, mindfulness has grown and we dare to stay intimate with these responses longer and to explore them more fully while remaining aware. In the Meaning phase, we engage still more, while shifting from somatic and emotional responses to the use of the intellect. The dynamic of this multiphase process can be viewed as one in which the text and the meditative protocols involving the text stabilize and anchor awareness, allowing a progressive investigation of mental phenomena. Mindfulness dwells adjacent to the text in Dharma Contemplation, but even more, mindfulness dwells adjacent to these contents of subjective experience.

The meditation of the Dialogue phase is based in *vipassana* or insight meditation practices, but the form (as in Insight Dialogue) consists of dialoguing with other participants mindfully and with calm concentration. In this phase we are able to watch our relational hungers in real time without identifying with them. We support each other, and are supported, in releasing those hungers.

### ***Bridging Meditation and Language***

Dharma Contemplation is a meditation practice that works with certain challenges typical of contemporary life. In this way, it provides some bridges between meditation and “real life.”

Some of these challenges involve language-encoded information. We live in a sea of symbol- and language-encoded information: myriad competing faiths, exploding scientific

knowledge, and commercially motivated manipulations of credibility choke the media. In our “information society,” the Buddha’s admonition to investigate truth claims and see for ourselves if they are true has never been more urgent. Yet few meditative practices offered in the West involve textual or linguistic objects—leaving us few opportunities to learn how to bring the mind’s focused power to such objects.

Dharma Contemplation provides such an opportunity. Traditional teachings are taken seriously and respectfully, yet questioned rigorously. It is a potent meeting of faith and radical inquiry.

Dharma Contemplation’s support for seeing the conditioned perspective of texts helps bridge the gap between meditation and the world of information and text. That support is mostly an extension of becoming aware of the conditioned nature of our responses and those of co-meditators. When we see that, with equanimity, an important analogy becomes easy to grasp. The person or people responsible for the text lived, just as we do, with the conditioning influences of culture, including expectations about human roles and the meaning of things. The wisdom expressed in the text is encoded in language, patterned by cultural expectations—any text encodes many expectations and assumptions beyond its principal message. As we see this, we grow in compassion and in the patient diligence needed to tease apart the true from the relative, the useful from the transitory.

Dharma Contemplation also provides an approach for engaging a wisdom text while meditative qualities of the mind are strong; it is not afraid to do so with the full force of the intellect. Many contemporary meditators are wary of conceptual thought, concerned that it will hijack the pristine processes of

simply being present to experience with awareness and compassion. This is understandable, given the domination in our culture of rationality and the marginalization of intuition, somatic experience, and mystery. But we need not be alienated from the power of the mind, nor from the guidance of wise texts. As we learn to integrate meditation with text, calmness with inquiry, we become more able to navigate in our digital information culture. Dharma Contemplation can help heal the split between direct apprehension of present-moment experience and the conceptual processes engaged whenever language is involved.

### ***Bridging Meditation and Relationship***

Another major challenge in the life devoted to awakening centers around relationship. Human beings are inherently relational, yet we meditate in solitary silence, or in a meditation hall where we carefully avoid interaction. Maybe we remember to be personally mindful in everyday circumstances. Maybe we cultivate compassion for all beings. But the specific other is usually left out of meditation practice. Most approaches to meditation stay within these limited relational patterns.

Because Dharma Contemplation builds from a sparse interaction in Words to fully interpersonal meditation in Dialogue, it can help bridge this basic gap in our lives. Solitary meditation is beneficial in many ways, but the meditative gains made in interpersonal meditation transfer more readily to everyday life with others. Insights, skills, and habits learned in interpersonal meditation are already adapted to the challenges of relationship.

***Benefits of Relational Meditation***

In the fourth phase, the steadying anchor of the text is released, and the practice becomes a form of fully interpersonal meditation. The text inhabits memory even without volitional effort, and its message provides the topic for dialogue by priming the meditators' minds with its message. The constraints of the first three phases have allowed us to share with each other the fact of conditioning and reactivity while circumventing the search for mutual identification with these reactions. We have learned to be together in a very simple way, without playing on the monkey bars of our shared reactions. Entering the fourth phase, we are ready to trust what emerges much more radically, sharing what we discover.

In interpersonal meditation, participants support each other in many ways. When we see others maintaining the balance between mindfulness and reactivity, or between inward and outward focus, we are reminded of that balance and steadied in it. Energy and concentration increase naturally when they are mirrored back and forth between people. Mutual interest keeps attention focused on the practice. When relational elements in our nature are engaged, the meditation is often perceived as fuller or more interesting. Inquiry thrives on shared energy and pooled insight. When we speak our present-moment experience, other participants' awareness reflects and enfolds that experience, again steadying us. Difficulties can be received by the compassionate support of others, giving rise to ease and to the courage to face challenging teachings, to ask hard questions.

When we stop constructing a personalized self, even for a moment, the barriers to individual freedom and mutuality collapse. The cravings and insecurities that emanate from the constructed self are, for that moment, just not arising. In these

moments of unconstructed intimacy—especially if they are combined with calm concentration—we see the tension inherent in our emotional edifice. Wakefulness conjoined with ease becomes a real possibility, even when we are engaged with other people and with a text.

We see also the inherently compassionate nature of awareness. When we pause from the frantic activity of social construction, we can relax into a larger, simpler space. We find we can meet constructions with steadiness and love. Without love's receptivity, we hold and freeze the constructions: they are reified by tension. Love is essential because it offers steadiness; without that steadiness, the opportunity for insight vanishes.

### *An Accessible Practice*

Dharma Contemplation is a practice with very clear, concrete instructions; participants with little or no background in meditation, and those who are weak in concentration, take to it readily. The action of returning to the text provides a very natural anchor that is engaging to the untrained mind and not at all subtle or hard to find. This practice is easy to do and easy to stick with.

Because the form of Dharma Contemplation is broad in scope, it can help people alienated from somatic and emotional phenomena to discover these aspects of human experience that are so essential to embodied wisdom. The practice helps people alienated from conceptual thought to see its benefits (and limitations) for meditative inquiry. It helps those who are alienated from their relational nature to offer, and receive, the support and wisdom of experience in relational practice.

It is also a strong form, at least in its first three phases, and this helps discipline the mind and gives a structure that provides clarity and rigor. The structure of Dharma Contemplation can be thought of as a funnel that starts out very narrow (in Words) and opens out progressively (through Felt Responses and Meaning) into a quite open form of practice (in Dialogue). Through those first three phases, attention is carefully channeled in a way that keeps participants in the moment, noticing shared conditioning but without much opportunity to stray into story, role, or the search for shared allegiances. It also allows participants to become used to each other's presence in the meditation, and accustomed to speaking and listening mindfully and calmly.

This sequence sets the group up for fruitful interpersonal dialogue in the fourth phase, which is much like the practice of Insight Dialogue, without the need for a skilled facilitator.

### ***Disruptive Wisdom, Disruptive Practice***

By their nature, wisdom texts are disruptive. They invite us to confront views and opinions, attachments, and fears that we usually overlook or avoid. Because Dharma Contemplation helps guide the practitioner to recesses of the heart-mind that would otherwise likely be missed, it invites these disruptions of wisdom deeply into our lives. Thus practice can change us in the direction of wisdom.

For the deep learning of this meditation to happen, we are called to allow these disruptions. To engage the practice, we disrupt our notions of meditation, our ways of reading, and our ways of interacting with each other. More than anything else, though, Dharma Contemplation can, if we allow it, disrupt the

beliefs and attitudes about ourselves and about life that hold us in thrall. Habits of blind faith are disrupted by rigorous inquiry. The habitual mode of isolation is challenged by the invitation to fierce and loving meditative engagement with others. Habits of inadequacy, fear, and pomposity are disrupted by mutual practice at the boundary of awareness, and by the somatic experience of liberating truths. The root habit of ignorance is disrupted by allowing wisdom to actually become known: with the intellect and with the entire body.

When concept and direct apprehension are allowed to meet, when individual effort is joined with the power of relational practice, and awareness is skillfully maintained in the face of the mind's incessant construction projects, perhaps something in the heart just lets go. Perhaps the intimacy of formal meditation leads us to an intimacy with all of life. Text, other people, and our internal processes can all be received.

*resources for dharma contemplation*

## FACILITATING A DHARMA CONTEMPLATION GROUP

Group Dharma Contemplation practice does not require a highly skilled facilitator. Reading this book or participating in a Dharma Contemplation group (online or face-to-face) is all you need to start a group or to introduce this practice into an existing group or class.

Dharma Contemplation is about the text and about cultivating the qualities of meditation. The wisdom that participants encounter is the wisdom of the text, not that of the facilitator. We are not teachers in this practice, even if we introduce Dharma Contemplation in the context of a class we teach or a study group we lead. Rather, we are providing a space, convening participants, sharing the practice, and supporting the quality of the practice.

And the practice itself is intrinsically wholesome. Becoming inwardly quiet, noting the words we respond to in the text, listening to the wisdom of our bodies and emotions, attempting to understand, and engaging mindfully in dialogue with each other—these meditative actions are beneficial in themselves, apart from the message of the text.

Participants grow in understanding; profound teachings come alive within and between people. This happens naturally because of the practice; it is not something the facilitator needs to or even can make happen.

For these reasons, you can have confidence that a Dharma Contemplation practice group will benefit people. As a

facilitator, your job is to present the practice clearly and help keep it on track. The question is, how?

### ***Planning for a Dharma Contemplation Group***

Locate a suitable space: clean, odor free, and simple. Uncomfortable seats, inadequate light, and unsuitable temperature can sap energy from the practice, as can excessive noise. Telephone or online practice can also suffer from network noise, making the experience more wearing, and perhaps generating a sense of distance and isolation. Try hard to find a place with a minimum of distractions such as ambient noise or intrusive artwork. Telephones ringing, people going in and out, and animals begging for attention should all be kept to a minimum.

Contact people who might be interested, and briefly explain the practice. Your initial description of this practice will influence participants' conception of it. This is not a "study group" in any traditional sense, nor is it a traditional meditation group. Dharma Contemplation is a hybrid of reading and meditation. It nurtures meditative qualities such as mindfulness, inquiry, energy, joy, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity. It also allows us to examine a range of feelings, mind states, and conceptual frameworks with the power of the meditating mind. Dharma Contemplation is also a form of dialogic meditation, though this blossoms into fullness only in its final stage. We dialogue in the awareness of what has touched us, then return to silent meditation. We leave each session repatterned, to some extent, by the teaching of that session's text.

Prior to your first session, send the practice guidelines and perhaps a summary description of the practice to your

participants. This will save time at your first gathering, and give people opportunity to formulate questions.

Decide how long your session will be. We recommend 90 minutes or so for practice, and not longer than two hours, including sitting meditation, hellos, and goodbyes. The logistics of deciding on times are best thought through outside the session, so they can be handled quickly and cleanly—otherwise, they can take precious time and energy from the practice. Details such as who should read the excerpt aloud, how timing is handled, and which texts are selected for use should be determined in a clear and harmonious way.

Because Dharma Contemplation is a practice of group or interpersonal meditation, anything that establishes a difficult or awkward dynamic within the group, however trivial it may seem, creates a situation that must be overcome. The group starts one or two steps behind. The facilitator's job is to take care of such logistic issues so that a wholesome group dynamic can form around the practice.

In the first session, if people do not already know each other, we recommend you leave extra time for people to get acquainted. It's fine if you want to have a get-acquainted period at the beginning of each weekly session, but make sure it has a time boundary that is respected, and establish an unambiguous beginning to your silent practice.

In the first session you will also need to leave extra time to explain the practice. We recommend you give a brief overview of the practice, emphasizing its meditative nature, then explain each of the four phases. Here are a few points that may help.

### ***Introducing the Practice and its Phases***

The practice of Dharma Contemplation is an invitation to an intimate relationship with wise teachings. In it, we saturate ourselves in the words of the chosen text, allowing it to touch us on many layers of experience.

For this to happen effectively, participants need to be clear about the “how” and “why” of the practice. If these simple, basic questions are not addressed, the resulting confusion can sap energy from the meditation, causing a group to wander aimlessly through a text. If participants confuse Dharma Contemplation with study or group discussion, for example, the opportunity for more subtle experience is diminished.

Confusion about the practice can lead to awkwardness, insecurity, and holding back. Because Dharma Contemplation in its group form is a speaking and listening practice, not an exclusively private practice, it is important that participants are secure enough in their understanding that they feel comfortable participating in the group’s dynamic.

It will prove helpful if you initially offer participants the following pointers:

- Speaking loudly and clearly is an act of compassion and generosity towards one’s meditation partners. When participants can’t hear well enough, they tend to feel disconnected; offering others our words in a clear manner invites them into practice with us.
- Allowing time between speakers lets each person’s statement sink into experience. It shows respect and care, and deepens the group’s exploration of the text.
- Dharma Contemplation begins and ends with silent meditation. As a starting point, silent meditation allows us to calm down and

prepares us to inquire into how things actually are. Wordless meditation helps us realize the transformative power of words.

- The practice itself is divided into four phases: Words, Felt Responses, Meaning, and Dialogue. The first three phases center around the words of the text, facilitating our immersion in the text and our understanding of it. The meditative focus developed in the first three phases supports the more open practice of dialogue in the fourth phase, when we have set aside the text.
- In the Words phase we focus on reading and re-reading the text, noticing which words resonate with us or arouse curiosity.
- In the Felt Responses phase, each participant's contributions remain fully referenced to the text, not to each other's emotions. The guiding notion is, “What do you *feel* as you read these words?”
- In the Meaning phase we expand our inquiry to include the meanings of words, phrases, and the teaching as a whole.
- The Dialogue phase is more a phase of deep dialogue than far-ranging dialogue—a deep look at our current experience. We speak the truth of that experience in light of the words of the text.
- The concluding silence is a time to rest, consolidate, ripen. Dropping deeply into the interior and wordless unfolding of our practice requires less outer stimulation, as we sink beneath emotions and conceptual thinking.

You will need to give substantial time in the first session to introduce the practice, and will likely need to review it in the next session and possibly even the third. But avoid taking too much time in explanation. Simple experience will clarify many things.

### ***Running the Session***

Before each session, you will need to choose a text and make copies of it. It is helpful if the copies can be made on the same page as the brief guidelines. This practice is founded on early Buddhist texts, but other wise texts can be worked with.

As people arrive, make sure they have what they need to settle into meditation. A reminder to turn off cell phones may be helpful.

Before each session begins, invite two people to read the text aloud and determine who will read first. Make sure they understand that they will be reading the words of the excerpt, not the guidelines. Let them know that they should begin reading ten or twenty minutes into the sitting; you can adjust this time as you feel will work best for your group. As people prepare for silent practice, hand out the excerpt, showing the respect you have for these teachings by offering it to them mindfully. Ask them to place it face down in front of them, not reading it at this time. Make sure the group understands how the phases of practice will be introduced, then settle into silence.

Begin the silent meditation. After about twenty minutes you can gently signal for the first reader to begin. This may be a bell, an audible movement, or just a nod. The timing is up to you—enjoy a longer silence if your group is ready for it. The person designated as the first reader should read the text aloud, slowly and mindfully, but naturally. After a brief pause, the second reader reads the text.

After the text has been read twice, you may invite people to pick up the page and silently read the text; this invitation will not be necessary after the first session or two. For most groups, you may need to model the speaking element of the Words phase by just saying those words of the text that touch you in that moment. This will usually be just single words or very

short phrases, not whole sentences. Other meditators will likely follow suit.

Your first challenge is likely to show up about this time. People may speak out a lot of words, leaving few spaces for contemplation and resonance. How can you guide them into slowing down and letting the words soak in? First, unless the speedy practice lasts a while—more than half a minute or minute—it is best not to say anything. But don't let it go on more than a couple of minutes. Offer something like, “I'd like to suggest we leave some spaces between words to let them soak in.” Say this very simply, with kindness. After the first session or two, this may not be much of a problem.

After maybe ten or fifteen minutes, the Words phase will be exhausted. It could be longer than this range, but almost never shorter; you must determine this based upon your thoughts and feelings in the moment. Avoid acting from impatience; this practice can unfold slowly and beautifully if we have patience.

At the right moment cue the group to the next phase, either by ringing a bell or by saying something like “Let's move into the Felt Responses phase.” Or you can mark the phase transitions by example, but you should tell the group before beginning that you will be making the transitions in this way; now your example is their cue that they can speak their own words in addition to those of the text. Maybe you say, “The word ‘alertness’ arouses energy in my solar plexus,” or “When I read ‘good person’ I shy away”—whatever is your truth in the moment. People will understand and join you in the Felt Responses phase.

People new to Dharma Contemplation are less likely to understand the Felt Responses phase—it might be unclear to them how to turn to the body or to mind states, or how to relate those to the words of the text. Sometimes people feel shy about

sharing feeling reactions. In addition to explaining this at the beginning, you may need to model it, which in turn requires being clear about your own practice. You may occasionally need to remind people to come back to the body and to the immediate experience of the teachings. Patience is important. People are sensitive. Don't jump in too quickly—some imbalances correct themselves. When you do offer direct guidance, do so simply, kindly, and economically.

When Felt Responses has worked itself through, usually in fifteen or twenty minutes, ring a bell, announce the transition, or indicate the movement to the Meaning phase by example.

And here is your next big challenge: People will ask questions, and how these are met will impact the meditation and the group dynamic. Questions are a natural, important part of the practice. Do you have the answers? Do you feel you should have answers, or want people to think that you do? Be kind to yourself as you explore the facilitator's role. And observe the group. Are answers coming too quickly, from you or others? Are answers even needed, or does the inquiry itself hold its own rewards? Are positions being taken, assertions made? This practice is a form of meditation, so silence is always our touchstone.

If things get too fast or too conceptual, you might gently remind people to come back to a pace where each person's contribution can be fully absorbed. And you can remind people, if necessary, to stay close to, intimate with, the words of the text, and that this takes time. But again, be careful about becoming too directive. Sometimes there will be a wave of activity that subsides of its own accord. Let it be; trust the process. Stay attuned to your own thoughts and feelings, your own intuition.

And what if you do have some answers to religious, philosophical, aesthetic, historical, or other questions? Should you offer them? Yes—with qualifications. You will need to discern when it is supportive of contemplation, rather than disruptive, to say something like, “This word is usually taken to mean...” or whatever it is you have to say. Say it simply and briefly. Your background knowledge can be a gift to practice; remember that others may offer this gift in addition to yourself.

It is okay if you don’t have answers. Questions that remain with us sensitize us to new perspectives and wisdom.

Teacher-led groups may take a different form, where one person’s knowledge is consistently offered to the group. This is not a problem if acknowledged ahead of time. The practice has been used this way with Sri Lankan monks teaching and exploring with lay people the Buddha’s discourses. Humility remains important.

When this phase has worked its way through—usually after fifteen or twenty minutes—signal the next phase, Dialogue. The Dialogue phase may be more difficult to clearly model by example rather than by bell or invitation.

Now the participants are dwelling with the text in relationship to this moment, to their lives as they are right now. Most statements are “I” statements. We let go of direct reliance on the text. While we may refer to the text, it will be nearly memorized by now; it will inevitably work its way into the moment. Thoughts and feelings about our lives do not need to be dredged up; these things come up naturally, in the silence of meditation or stimulated by the words of others. We speak the truth of experience in relation to the teaching we have been contemplating. Speaking itself is mindful and unhurried. Silences invite us time and again out of identification with our

thoughts and into clear awareness. Deep listening is most essential to this phase of practice.

This is a sensitive time. Mostly, the practice should unfold on its own. Ideally, it will do so without any intervention. But if things get too speedy, too abstract, or too far from the essence of the excerpt, a gentle word or two may be helpful. Keep an eye on your own motivations. Are you speaking from discomfort with silence, discomfort with emotions, a need to be seen and heard as a special member of the group? If so, note the stress associated with this, relax the body-mind, and rest in silence. But if you are moved primarily by generosity, you are clear about what practice calls for now, and you can say what is needed gently and briefly, for example, “Some silences might be helpful to absorb these rich observations.” Your role as facilitator is a gift to your own practice, and what arises for you in connection to this role is also part of your practice.

When the Dialogue phase has run its course—usually another twenty minutes or so—you might ring a bell or say directly, “Now we’re moving towards meditation, gradually letting go of the outer words,” or whatever feels right to you. The silence then begins. After ten minutes or so of mostly silent practice—more or less as you see fit—ring a bell to end the session.

When the Dharma Contemplation ends, we advise against bursting into miscellaneous conversation. Let people take these teachings home with them. Perhaps end with a brief lovingkindness practice, or with simple “thank yous” and “good-byes.” If you feel some sharing for closure is important, it is up to you whether your group does this.

### *Assessing Group Practice As Facilitator*

If you are the facilitator of a group, it will be helpful for you to reflect briefly on the practice after each session. What went well? Why did it go that way? Did the group encounter difficulties? If so, do you have any idea why? Maybe you have a question that you want to remember, ponder at another time, or ask someone. You will also need to assess how the session is going; sometimes gentle course corrections, or clear modeling of the instructions, are needed.

In the Words phase, too external a focus manifests as speeding up, or sometimes as falling into a pronounced rhythm; in contrast, a too internally focused group will be mostly silent. If the problem persists, a facilitator can nudge the group's focus towards a more even balance, or perhaps note aloud how awareness of mindfulness is needed for the nimble balancing and re-balancing required.

Most course corrections needed during Felt Responses consist of reminding or modeling the balance of staying with our emotions while staying near the text and aware of each other. A tendency often arises to become highly engaged and identified with emotional reactions, one's own or others'. The quality of remembering gets lost and this can be amplified if several people in the group are reactive. Coming home to the text and to one's felt responses to it will be helpful. So will fostering some pauses in the conversation, providing time for people to calm down and again become present.

A group that has become unbalanced in the Meaning phase might look like a debate or even an argument. Another form of imbalance here is the group too focused on its members and their feelings to attempt rigorous questioning—this is both a failure to fully transition into the Meaning phase and a kind of external over-focus. If we are facilitating a group that has lost its balance in the Meaning phase, we can try modeling the

approach that seems missing, or gently ask how the mind is, noting how precious the silences are, or we might encourage fearless inquiry.

Imbalances that can occur during the Dialogue phase include losing mindfulness, getting conceptual, and becoming lost in stories. There might be too few silences for really absorbing what is spoken or experienced internally. or participants might falling back into reliance on the text. Diminishing concentration shows as wandering from one thing to another without depth.

Another way to think about diversions in practice uses the ideas “too hot” or “not hot enough.” This simple way of seeing can be especially helpful to the less-experienced facilitator because it applies to all the phases. Practice that is too hot usually moves too quickly. Practitioners lose contact with the power of silence to reveal what is essential in the text and in themselves. Identification with our reactions, and recycling and amplifying those reactions in a group or in our own minds, keeps practice tumbling forward, ungrounded, noisy, and unproductive. When we experience this quality of practice, it can be helpful to consider that such practice contains a lot of energy. The problem is that the energy is unfocused. A brief period of “too hot” practice often corrects itself, and it is usually best to let it do so; if the speediness continues, a gentle reminder may help harness such energy.

When practice is not hot enough, the group or individual tends to become very internally oriented and dull. Silences may be long but they are not alive. If we observe our mind states, we will see an absence of inquiry, energy, and joy. The hidden gift in such times is the easy access to tranquility, and the opportunity to turn indifference into wakeful equanimity. Sleepiness can turn to ease in a moment if we stop to remember what we are doing, and why. Longing for wisdom, compassion,

insight, or the encouragement or energy of the others may reawaken the spark of curiosity. As facilitator, a short run of dull or cold practice is best left alone: the group often rights itself as its individual members notice and self-adjust. But if the dullness is prolonged, a word of encouragement may be in order, or your own sincere contribution when you notice an enlivening influence in yourself or another. If you see closed eyes, suggest opening them. Brighter lighting may help.

Facilitators sometimes find it fruitful to ask participants for feedback, perhaps sending an email the next day asking a few questions about their experience of the session. A brief questionnaire may be in order around the midpoint of a series, or at its end.

The Metta Foundation would be pleased to hear about groups that are formed, and how they are going. It is our intention to support Dharma Contemplation groups; in this way we also learn. Facilitators of Dharma Contemplation groups can benefit from remaining in contact with the Metta Foundation ([www.metta.org](http://www.metta.org)), meeting online with other facilitators, and continuing to develop their understanding of this meditation practice.

## INDIVIDUAL PRACTICE OF DHARMA CONTEMPLATION

Dharma Contemplation is not limited by our ability to practice with others; it can be practiced individually. Practicing alone affords flexibility of scheduling, text selection, and approach. Individual practice presents somewhat different challenges and opportunities.

When we practice Dharma Contemplation alone, the silences and the four elements of the practice are the same as in group practice. The meditation can unfold in distinct phases or, in unphased practice, be applied to the text freely. At our own pace, we have the flexibility to move and dive, to dwell and crawl, in and through the text in a very intimate way. Our mood, our energy and curiosity, rather than the needs of a group, can dictate how the practice unfolds. It is also possible to practice in a rigorous and fixed way, setting times for each section and an alarm to remind one to move on.

In individual practice we lose other people's perspective on the meanings or other textual elements, but we gain the ability to rest with the most delicate attention wherever the mind is drawn. There are no voices to disturb us. When triggered by the faintest scent of wisdom, we may pause into a silence as deep as any silent and wordless meditation. Perhaps we just read the word "freedom" or "yielding" and a tiny lift in the heart was noticed. We stop, and listen within.

Individual practice, especially unphased practice, may not offer the energetic support of other meditators applying themselves and thus reminding us to do the same, but it does

allow us to fully apply ourselves in precisely those areas where the mind is strong in the present moment, where the heart is most open. Cognitive clarity comes and goes for most people. Practicing alone, we can engage the meaning phase to its fullest when our mind is inclined towards intimate conceptual inquiry. Questions, online research, other books, and even outlandish doubts can be brought forward, with no risk of disturbing others. And sometimes, the heart is particularly open and soft. At these times, alone with our felt responses, we can let sadness, or delight, or awe touch us fully. Again, there is no obligation to listen to someone else or to move on. The silence at the end of the session takes on another dimension, as challenging truths vibrate within and we yield to them undisturbed.

### ***Beginning Individual Dharma Contemplation***

We recommend a clear beginning to personal Dharma Contemplation practice and (at least while learning the practice) explicit reference to the stages of practice. Clarity here will support deeper practice later on.

Individuals can draw texts from the recommended sources, or they may wish to use other sutta passages or excerpts from other wise texts that resonate with them. Experimentation with shorter or slightly longer excerpts can be fruitful. After becoming familiar with the practice, an individual practicing alone might simply read until he or she encounters a passage that bears deeper exploration, and begin the phases of Dharma Contemplation then and there.

In individual Dharma Contemplation practice, we sometimes have the opportunity to sit as long as we like. We might bring the text to our meditation cushion or chair, place it before us,

and sit quietly until the heart feels ready to begin. We might recognize readiness when the mind becomes more still, or when we become aware of the mind's busy-ness in a way that is not so caught up in it. However we experience it, we feel awake enough to meet the text on its own terms, temporarily free from the most pressing forces of our conditioning.

### ***Touching the Words***

Before beginning to read the text silently, it is helpful to read the text aloud. This may feel awkward at first, like we're speaking to nobody. But, as we read, we listen to our own voice, notice how it feels to be reading, and turn inward to see how the heart-mind is responding to these words. Reading the text aloud is not required—it can be dispensed with if inconvenient. Reading aloud is helpful because it can reveal nuances of the text that might otherwise be missed. We feel the words in the mouth, listen to their sounds, notice how one word flows into the next, and pause wherever necessary.

Having read the text, we pause into silence and wait. We may feel inclined to read the text aloud again, noticing where our attention moves. Do we notice particular words or phrases? Do we feel any strangeness while reading to ourselves? Has anything changed between the first and second reading? Can we locate any sense of receiving the words as well as speaking them? Again, we pause.

Now we engage with the words of the text. Reading and re-reading, we allow the mind to notice individual words that resonate. We may speak them aloud, but more often we just dwell with these words and phrases. There is no rush, no push to move in and around the text. We proceed at our own pace and watch as the body-mind responds to these words. When

practicing alone, it may be difficult to stay with words in and of themselves; the mind may seek more entertainment. The mind may be tempted to move quickly, drawn by our habitual approach to reading for content or completion. Whenever we observe this tendency, we consciously, intentionally, slow down. It can be helpful to return time and again to certain words and phrases. Notice how the response changes each time. We might stop and close our eyes. We might remember what a gift it is to be alone and intimate with this text. We re-engage, letting an easy awareness permeate our reading practice.

### *Noticing Felt Responses*

After we have stayed with the words a while, maybe five or ten minutes, we pause again and prepare to explore our felt response to the text. We have noticed our attention moving naturally to a quiet discourse with the body. Now we let the mind settle and notice the body—its posture, its sensations. One of the beauties of individual practice is that there is the freedom to rest, uninterrupted, on any nuance of sensation. We return time and again to the text, remembering that each sensation, each emotion, indicates something of value. If an inquiry into meaning rises up, we notice it, find new resonances, and drop back down to the felt sense of the text. Again, we present the text to the eyes, the mind, the heart. We must be careful to read slowly: the bodily responses need time to ripen and be known. Perhaps we close the eyes and see with the mind's eye. We notice the sensations that swirl like smoke through the caverns of this fathom-long interior.

In individual practice, we do not have the expressions of others to draw us out of our own sometimes patterned responses; we alone are responsible for the freshness of our

practice. We also lose the power of group practice to hold a space of compassion and equanimity when tender places are touched. But what we lose in breadth with other meditators, we perhaps gain in depth. What we lose in the holding power of kindness, we may gain in the safety of solitude. Our practice can become quite subtle if we allow the mind to soak, undisturbed, in the spontaneous felt response to the text. A quiet intimacy is possible. If the mind reels in its emotions, we remember to meet reaction with receptive awareness. We remember the knowing mind: the mind that is conscious of these words, this reading, these reactions. We settle. The mind goes deeper, alone with its felt responses. As subtler sensations and mind states are known, the heart may grow quieter. We become more intimate with the text and with the present moment. We stop reading and rest in the riches of sensation and awareness.

### ***Inquiry into Meaning***

After another fifteen or twenty minutes, we begin to attend to the meaning of the words and the text. The mind will have been curious from the beginning, Where are the questions? Do we wonder about the definitions of certain words? Is there curiosity about the meaning of a unique phrase or simile? The challenge in individual practice is seeing beyond our assumptions about what any given part of the text means. We lack the perspective of other meditators and must be very particular in this exploration, bringing to it a powerful quality of inquiry. Strong effort may be necessary to drop assumptions. This means stopping at words we think we understand, even words as simple as “equanimity” or “mindfulness.” As we practice alone and explore the meaning of whole phrases, unexpected similes,

and subtle allegories, the need is great to return to silence, over and over again, asking ourselves, What does this mean? What is being said here? Do I truly understand?

The questions that are fruitful are the ones that help move our inquiry beyond our current views and frameworks. We might inquire into the historical context of the teaching, or ponder the specific audience of this discourse, or reconsider the definitions of technical words. Especially when we are meditating alone, it is possible to supplement our individual Dharma Contemplation with research. We may search on the Internet for definitions, interpretations, or expository texts, think about and remember these perspectives, then bring them back into Dharma Contemplation, where the new information can be deepened by our silence. We may consult a dictionary, perhaps in the source language of the text, or a commentary or concordance. Such research sessions should remain brief and mindful, however. Upon re-entering our text, we should pause and re-establish the patience and intimacy of Dharma Contemplation.

### ***Dialogue with Wisdom***

Eventually, we set the text aside. We are now meditating with just those experiences arising in consciousness. The text has lifted and lowered us, powered by the energy of conditioned reaction and new wisdom, and steadied by the cultivated perspective of mindfulness and alert tranquility. Images and feelings, ideas and words, may recursively arise in the mind. We step out of any identification with them, but remain receptive and present. How does this touch me? we wonder. How has this moment been conditioned by this text? What is known about this shared human experience now that was not

known before? How do these words, these teachings, touch my life? Now, when the mind wanders, we know that where it wanders to can indicate a conditioned urge to escape the teachings, or what emerges in the mind can indicate some lesson, some fragment of wisdom. Why did this thought arise? we ask. What longs to be known?

### ***End With Silence***

From this inquiry, we allow the mind to drop further into silence. We meditate as long as we care to. If there is an urge to get right up, we pause, let go, and check if this is really the time to stop. Or, if we have reached the end of a time set aside for this meditation session, we relax in these last unfolding moments. We remain open to insights even in this silence. We rest in the body that breathes, the mind that knows. Before we end our meditation session, we pause again, and sit with gratitude for the practice, the text, and the opportunity to carry forward into the world whatever good has presented itself.

As one becomes more practiced at the form, individual Dharma Contemplation practice may become more organic; the individual stages may rise and fall fluidly. While the formal, four-stage practice is helpful, one may choose to sometimes move back to meaning, back to words, and forward to felt responses several times. As the mind becomes supple and clear, there is benefit to this adaptability. If the mind gets diffuse or lazy, or avoidant of some phase, this can be recognized and a more disciplined approach used to bring focus back to the practice. In the end, it is not the practice form in and of itself

that will yield benefit—it is the cultivation of tranquility and insight, together with immersion in profound teachings.

## PHASED AND UNPHASED PRACTICE

Dharma Contemplation is best learned as a practice organized into four stages or phases taken in sequence. This is by no means the only way to practice. Dharma Contemplation is a flexible pattern, not a tightly prescriptive plan. It can be adapted, though it is good to evaluate the results of adaptation. Understanding its inherent logic will help in both adapting and evaluating.

The four stages of Dharma Contemplation—four characteristic gestures or ways of engaging with the text—are framed and supported by silence and enlivened by mindfulness. They take as their stable reference point the bare awareness that underlies the experience of reading. We meet the text as a collection of words and encounter our reactions to these words. We pay attention to somatic response to the text, to the imagery it evokes, and to the play of mind states that emerge. We engage in intellectual exploration of the text's meanings. Finally, we attend to experience in the moment as conditioned by this intimacy with the text. These four elements, taken together, provide access to many facets of the heart-mind, and support familiarity with multiple layers of experience.

Phased practice provides a clarity and discipline that helps us meet the text in ways that transcend established habits of reading, responding, and thinking. It reminds us to return to our own experience, for there alone is wisdom made actual. Phased practice invites the meditator to develop each element fully. It has an inherent logic that can support new insights into the text and foster refined meditative development.

Unphased practice is also possible, and offers some distinctive advantages. It also involves a risk: consciously or unconsciously, we may avoid the kinds of engagement that seem difficult or unrewarding.

### *The Logic of the Four Phases*

The sequence of the four phases is designed to nurture meditative qualities of the mind and to gradually build the foundation for experiencing the wisdom carried by the text. The Words phase, which includes the initial reading of the text, comes first in phased practice because it helps us encounter the text with some objectivity. It also builds familiarity and memory that support later phases. In this phase we spend time with the text in a new way, a way that interrupts habitual, fast interpretations. Looking without urgency to interpret, we become familiar with the text. This is the first step towards intimacy with the text. Internally, we also become familiar with the mind's reaction to these particular words, and begin to see that we can endure those reactions. Interpersonally, it is also a first step into the process of group exploration.

The Felt Responses phase follows. We were experiencing many kinds of responses even while attending to the Words—somatic, associative, emotional—but now we build on this base of noticing and releasing these responses to entertain them, to inquire into their nature. This wide field of emotional responses to the text serves as an entry point to subtle, non-cognitive “meanings,” and allows those meanings to take root in the body. It can be important that this happen before the move to conceptual meanings, as often the noise of the conceptual masks the subtler meanings of the heart. This phase marks the next step in intimacy with the text. Meditatively, the observation of

subtle sensations and moods inclines the mind towards refinement of attention, concentration, and delicacy. Our meditation may become smoother and steadier as it is brought fully into the body.

The meanings phase benefits from the steadiness of mind cultivated in the felt responses phase. It prepares the mind to take a hard look at the text's content without getting carried away by intellection. But the thinking mind is our ally. If we do not know what words or phrases mean, or have not looked beyond the first meaning that occurs to us, our meditation and understanding of the text will remain unnecessarily shallow, narrow, partial. The Meaning phase constructs in the mind a scaffolding of information that allows some objectivity. By examining the layers of the text, subtle meanings, some of them unexpected, are received and held in awareness. Holding multiple views further concentrates the mind and helps to establish the equanimity that will be crucial to the Dialogue phase.

The last phase brings these benefits home. We contemplate our present experience and how the text touches our lives. The Dialogue phase is enriched by the embodied and analytical practice of the preceding phases. We live in the light of the text because we have been intimate with it over time, on multiple levels, through multiple lenses. Practicing a multidimensional meditation now enables a multidimensional investigation of present-moment experience. We have become intimate with the body's compass; intimate with our own thoughts; more comfortable with our co-meditators. Thus the prior phases deliver us to the door of dialogic meditation. The Dialogue phase can also further deepen the meditative quality of the practice, as it invites us to equanimity, ease, and often to joy.

The phases are not intended as a description of how reading “should” go or how it “naturally” or “normally” goes. Their order reflects a logic, but that logic is not absolute. Following them in order—that is, phased practice—ensures that each is attempted with some care and attention. Restraining the mind in order to follow the phases in order is, in itself, a wholesome exercise. On the other hand, unphased practice is also possible, and an interesting and useful variant. A clear understanding of these phases and of the logic of their order can provide a grid or checklist for unphased practice.

### *The Logic of Unphased Practice*

Unphased Dharma Contemplation is a potentially valuable alternative to phased practice. All of the elements remain the same: words as such, felt responses, meaning, and wisdom. But rather than distinct phases, the meditation is more an organic wandering through the field of possibilities that has been defined by the practice. We meet the text guided by our understanding of the constituent elements of Dharma Contemplation.

This kind of unprogrammed movement from one element to another does seem more natural. It reflects more accurately how the mind usually reads. There is the risk, however, that some practice elements will not be thoroughly explored. The note-and-release attention of the Words phase establishes the capacity to endure our emotional responses to the text; if we jump right into those responses, they may be so compelling that we get carried away by them, grasping and proliferating the feelings. Mindfulness and concentration may be disturbed. Important layers of meaning may not be investigated—the mindset required for analysis may go unvisited, perhaps even

avoided. Or more generally, whenever practice is weak in discipline and specificity, the four elements may be half-hearted and washed out. The practice may become more discussion than meditation. Felt Responses may not drop to meditative subtlety but remain at the level of emotional reaction. Intellectual inquiry may be either lightweight if the group is tired or lazy, or heavy handed and divisive if the group is so inclined. In short, clarity and meditative balance may be lost.

Group process may also suffer. Repeated shifts of focus may pull too much attention towards the group dynamic, away from the text, and away from the interior-external balance. Interpersonal interaction, even when held by the message of the text, may incline towards emotional reaction in the Felt Responses phase, towards arguing or proliferating points of meaning in the Meaning phase, or towards wandering off into undisciplined and fuzzy conversation in the Dialogue phase.

Because of the challenges of unphased practice, phased practice may be a better starting point for most people, and probably for all groups. Unphased practice can be helpful for individuals and groups already well acquainted with Dharma Contemplation. Supported by mindfulness, by silences that are awake with commitment, by some ability to modulate attention between internal and external focus, and by a balanced application of the phases, unphased practice can provide an enlivening alternative.

## SOME TEXTS FOR DHARMA CONTEMPLATION

Here are a few sample texts for use in Dharma Contemplation. We have found that it is very helpful for participants to have the guidelines in front of them as well as the text to be contemplated. They have been formatted with the guidelines on the left-hand page and the excerpt on the right, so that the double-page span can be photocopied easily for group Dharma Contemplation use.

More excerpts can be found on the Metta Foundation website (<http://www.metta.org>). Resources such as Access to Insight (<http://www.accesstoinsight.org>) can, of course, be used to supply many more. Chose texts for Dharma Contemplation with care; consider the length and the level of challenge. It is generally safest and most beneficial to stay with wisdom texts.

*We begin with silence.  
Nurture openness and receptivity to the teachings.  
Prepare for a meeting with the unknown.*

WORDS

*Speak the words and phrases that touch you;  
listen deeply to words shared by others.  
Speak only words of the text and ruminate;  
let them find a home in your memory.*

FELT RESPONSES

*Remain absorbed in the words and turn towards resonances in the body.  
What emotions are evoked, what images?  
What is the experience of the body?  
Speak only those felt responses related specifically to the text.*

MEANING

*Explore the meaning of the words and phrases.  
Inquire. Do not be afraid to analyze.  
Notice how threads of meaning are woven.  
Are there ambiguities, metaphors, contexts?  
How clearly can these words be understood?*

DIALOGUE

*Join together in the immediate experience of the Dhamma:  
the way things actually are.  
Release the text; trust that it will inform the present moment.  
Speak to present experience, sharing observations, pain, insights.  
Listen deeply.  
There are ample silences to soak in each and every spoken word.*

*We end in silence.  
We use words when helpful, let go when unnecessary.  
Experience ripens.*

“Monks, a friend endowed with seven qualities is worth associating with. Which seven? He gives what is hard to give. He does what is hard to do. He endures what is hard to endure. He reveals his secrets to you. He keeps your secrets. When misfortunes strike, he doesn't abandon you. When you're down and out, he doesn't look down on you. A friend endowed with these seven qualities is worth associating with.”

AN 7.35

*We begin with silence.  
Nurture openness and receptivity to the teachings.  
Prepare for a meeting with the unknown.*

WORDS

*Speak the words and phrases that touch you;  
listen deeply to words shared by others.  
Speak only words of the text and ruminate;  
let them find a home in your memory.*

FELT RESPONSES

*Remain absorbed in the words and turn towards resonances in the body.  
What emotions are evoked, what images?  
What is the experience of the body?  
Speak only those felt responses related specifically to the text.*

MEANING

*Explore the meaning of the words and phrases.  
Inquire. Do not be afraid to analyze.  
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the way things actually are.  
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Speak to present experience, sharing observations, pain, insights.  
Listen deeply.  
There are ample silences to soak in each and every spoken word.*

*We end in silence.  
We use words when helpful, let go when unnecessary.  
Experience ripens.*

“Suppose, Bhikkhus, a wise, competent, skilful cook were to present a king or a royal minister with various kinds of curries: sour, bitter, pungent, sweet, sharp, mild, salty, bland.

“That wise, competent, skilful cook picks up the sign of his own master’s preference: ‘Today this curry pleased my master ... or he spoke in praise of this bland one.’

“That wise, competent, skilful cook gains clothing, wages, and bonuses ... because that wise ... cook picks up the sign of his own master’s preference.

“So too, Bhikkhus, here some wise, competent, skilful bhikkhu dwells contemplating the body in the body, ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, having removed covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world. While he dwells contemplating the body in the body, his mind becomes concentrated, his corruptions are abandoned, he picks up that sign. He dwells contemplating feelings in feelings ... his mind becomes concentrated, his corruptions are abandoned, he picks up that sign ... mind in mind ... his mind becomes concentrated, his corruptions are abandoned, he picks up that sign ... phenomena in phenomena, ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, having removed covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world. While he dwells contemplating phenomena in phenomena, his mind becomes concentrated, his corruptions are abandoned, he picks up that sign.

“That wise, competent, skilful bhikkhu gains pleasant dwelling in this very life and he gains mindfulness and clear comprehension. For what reason? Because, Bhikkhus, that wise ... bhikkhu picks up the sign of his own mind.”

*We begin with silence.  
Nurture openness and receptivity to the teachings.  
Prepare for a meeting with the unknown.*

#### WORDS

*Speak the words and phrases that touch you;  
listen deeply to words shared by others.  
Speak only words of the text and ruminate;  
let them find a home in your memory.*

#### FELT RESPONSES

*Remain absorbed in the words and turn towards resonances in the body.  
What emotions are evoked, what images?  
What is the experience of the body?  
Speak only those felt responses related specifically to the text.*

#### MEANING

*Explore the meaning of the words and phrases.  
Inquire. Do not be afraid to analyze.  
Notice how threads of meaning are woven.  
Are there ambiguities, metaphors, contexts?  
How clearly can these words be understood?*

#### DIALOGUE

*Join together in the immediate experience of the Dhamma:  
the way things actually are.  
Release the text; trust that it will inform the present moment.  
Speak to present experience, sharing observations, pain, insights.  
Listen deeply.  
There are ample silences to soak in each and every spoken word.*

*We end in silence.  
We use words when helpful, let go when unnecessary.  
Experience ripens.*

“Suppose, monks, a carpenter has an axe and its handle shows the marks of his fingers and thumb. He will not know that so much of the handle has worn away today, so much yesterday, and so much at other times; but he will just know of what is wasted that it has worn away. It is similar with a monk who applies himself to the meditative development of his mind: though he has no knowledge that so much of the taints has worn away today, so much yesterday and so much at other times, yet he knows of what is wasted that it is worn away.”

AN 7.67



### ***About The Metta Foundation***

The Metta Foundation was founded in 1989, offering traditional *vipassana* meditation retreats and groups; it began pioneering online meditation practices in 1994.

Today, the Metta Foundation is home to a global community of practice informed by a relational understanding of the Dhamma. The community is gathered around the interpersonal meditation practice of Insight Dialogue.

Distance learning communities thrive. In the Whole Life program, learning cohorts combine Internet telephone-based Insight Dialogue practice, Dharma Contemplation, in-life contemplations, and talks and discussions on the Dhamma. These programs help meditators understand and live a path that includes their relational lives and a vivid and relevant understanding of early Buddhist teachings.

Residential Insight Dialogue and Dharma Contemplation retreats continue as well.

Metta Foundation also offers training for facilitators and teachers of Insight Dialogue, and professional training for psychotherapists based in Insight Dialogue.

For more information about the Metta Foundation, please visit <http://www.metta.org>.

### ***About Gregory Kramer***

Gregory is a meditation teacher, author, guiding teacher of the Metta Foundation, and visiting faculty member of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies in Massachusetts.

He has been teaching *vipassana* since 1980, and was trained by Anagarika Dhammadina, Ven. Balangoda Ananda Maitreya Mahanayaka Thera, Punnaaji Maha Thera, and Achan Sobin Namto. He earned his PhD in Learning and Change in Human Systems.

He is co-creator and developer of Insight Dialogue, and teaches this practice and Dharma Contemplation worldwide. He is author of *Insight Dialogue: The Interpersonal Path to Freedom* (Shambhala).

For more information about Gregory Kramer, Insight Dialogue, see <http://www.metta.org>.