Chapter 2: Instruction, Learning, and Practice at Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre

1 Introduction

The Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre (BMIMC), in the tradition of the late Mahasi Sayadaw of Burma, provides facilities for the teaching and practice of Vipassana/Insight meditation. This chapter explores the way in which socialization into the Theravadin worldview of Vipassana practice is facilitated by the activity at the centre. It also seeks to outline how learning takes place in a meditative setting that permits minimal social interaction between participants. At base, socialization refers to the process by which the roles and norms of a group are learned. In the context of religious resocialization, the group’s worldview becomes a frame of reference for newcomers, within which they reorder their view of the world. Although social theorists agree that socialization involves both cognitive and social factors, theoretical approaches differ in the emphasis placed on the role of other people in the socialization of individuals. Two extremes are represented by the views that socialization is the process of accepting the opinions of one’s ‘significant others’, or that it is an active process of negotiation.

Because social interaction at the centre is limited by the constraints of its retreat-style format, socialization into the practice and its Theravadin worldview depends largely on the instruction given by teachers, and on the opportunities taken for practice by the participant. This necessarily emphasizes the practical and experiential orientation to learning in this setting, because the student spends much time effectively isolated in meditation practice. In this chapter, meditation practice is

133 Wentworth, W. Context and Understanding: An Inquiry into Socialization Theory, Elsevier North Holland Inc., 1980, p65; p85. Wentworth sees socialization as the activity that structures the entry of nonmembers into an already existing world, but as an active as opposed to a passive process.
134 The constructivist view, that all experience is mediated by language, as it applies to the study of religious experience, was influenced by the work of Katz in the 1970s. Those who disagree posit the existence of a form of pure experience, take the experiential state attained in concentration meditation, called the pure consciousness event by Forman, as their test case. This position is untenable in this instance for two reasons. First, the employment of bare attention to immediate experience necessarily involves the processing of mental content, and second, the purpose of this
conceptualized as a technology for marrying concept and experience, with the further aim of comprehending the practice’s supporting worldview. Practitioners learn the technique and its interpretive framework by learning and applying conceptual maps to their experience. For this reason, much attention is devoted to understanding the relationship between experiential states and their interpretation according to Buddhist doctrine.

This chapter is divided into four sections. Sections 1 and 2 outline the centre’s social structure, and the doctrinal foundations and textual sources for the practice, respectively. Sections 3 and 4 outline how the practice is taught and learned, respectively. In that they describe two aspects of the same process: teaching and learning, these latter sections are complementary. Section 3 outlines those aspects of activity that facilitate access to the practice and its doctrinal foundations. Considerable space is devoted to an exposition of the nature of beginners’ retreats, in terms of the consistency of doctrinal material imparted despite the variation in individual teaching styles. Section 4 describes the conceptual and experiential acquisitions facilitated by participation, practice, and learning. As shown by the data from participant observation and interview, all of these aspects of learning and experiential development are common to practitioners’ experiences. My treatment cannot be seen to be exhaustive of the range of meditative experience and doctrinal interpretation that it is possible to engage with through Vipassana practice, but I have found that it is representative of practitioners’ experience.

2 The Centre’s Organization and Activity


Two phenomenological approaches to meditation, those of Shaner and Preston, employ the concept of bodymind, taken to denote the existence of an original unity in Japanese Buddhism. Shaner cites textual evidence which suggests that the emphasis on bodymind inseparability was an inherited tradition in Japan. However, the method of both scholars depends on isolating a practice from its doctrinal framework. In the context of learning a religious practice, understanding the relationship between the experiential foundation for the practice and its doctrinal elaboration, is necessary. See Shaner, D. *The Bodymind Experience in Japanese Buddhism: A Phenomenological Study of Kukai and Dogen*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1985; Preston, D. *The Social Organization of Zen Practice: Constructing Transcultural Reality*, Cambridge University Press, 1988.
community. There is a small resident community, with occasional vacancies, which may be filled by people with from considerable to almost no experience with the centre. The centre is run by a management committee, which appoints a manager, and sometimes an assistant manager and other support staff to assist with day-to-day running. During the period of my fieldwork at the centre, the committee has consisted of about eight members at any time. Volunteers help in regular maintenance and on community work days, and with administration, shopping, cooking and cleaning during retreats. Certainly the centre aims to provide a conducive space and atmosphere for practice of and development in the Vipassana technique.

However, several organizational features limit the amount of social contact possible between most participants and practitioners. First, Noble Silence is kept on most retreats, and therefore, social activity is limited in several necessary ways during the retreat. In addition, the community at BMIMC is small, and in continual flux. Participants may build Buddhist social networks within the centre by volunteering, or outside the centre by attending other centres, or at the Buddhist Library in Camperdown, Sydney.

3 The Practice and Its Doctrinal Underpinnings

Vipassana is a meditation practice derived from the Sutta Pitaka of the Pali Canon. It is outlined in two suttas: the Satipatthana Sutta from the Majjhima Nikaya, and the Mahasatipatthana Sutta from the Digha Nikaya. The homepage of BMIMC’s website refers to the practice as Satipatthana Vipassana in the style of Mahasi Sayadaw, and gives the centre’s inspiration as the Buddhist Theravada tradition. Data gained from participant observation and interview demonstrates the instruction given by the centre’s teachers to be thoroughly loyal to the method outlined by Mahasi Sayadaw. Similarly, data demonstrated a strong conformity to the meditation technique and its doctrinal position outlined in the Satipatthana Sutta by teachers. From this it can be seen that the Satipatthana Sutta is the source of religious authority for the practice. For ease of explanation of everything to follow, the basics of the practice, the Vipassana method of Mahasi Sayadaw, and its doctrinal foundations, beginning with its relation to the sutta, are discussed. This will serve two related

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136 The website for the Blue mountains Insight Meditation Centre is www.meditation.asn.au.
139 At www.meditation.asn.au.
140 See Venerable U Silananda. The Four Foundations of Mindfulness, Wisdom Publications, 1990. Venerable U Silananda, a student of Mahasi Sayadaw, draws attention to the importance of these two suttas for Vipassana practice.
purposes. First, it is necessary to understand this connection in order to appreciate the doctrinal and practical uniformity of instruction underlying the apparent diversity of emphasis on points of doctrine and technique demonstrated by individual teachers. Second, a clear outline of the practice and its doctrinal matrix, will aid the discussion to take place throughout the thesis, of the learning and application of the practice by practitioners, and their resultant commitment to Buddhism.

3.1 The Vipassana Technique of Mahasi Sayadaw

The aim of Mahasi Sayadaw’s Vipassana method is the attainment of Nibbana\textsuperscript{141} through the cultivation of mindfulness, the awareness of immediate experience, which Mahasi Sayadaw defines as concentrated attention\textsuperscript{142}, Bhikkhu Bodhi as ‘the capacity for attending to the content of our experience as it becomes manifest in the immediate present’,\textsuperscript{143} and Kornfield as observing ‘the natural sequence of changing experience’.\textsuperscript{144} A popular term for mindfulness among students and teachers is Nyanaponika Thera’s bare attention, ‘the singleminded awareness of what happens at the successive moments of perception as presented either through the five physical senses or through the mind’.\textsuperscript{145} Development of mindfulness and insight is effected by contemplation on the four satipatthanas, translated as foundations of mindfulness, outlined in the Satipatthana Sutta: the body, feelings, mind, and dhammas. Dhammas, the Pali term for the fourth satipatthana, is sometimes translated into English as mind-objects.\textsuperscript{146} Several notable scholars, for instance Nyanaponika Thera\textsuperscript{147}, Analayo\textsuperscript{148}, and Silananda\textsuperscript{149} advance strong reasons as to why this rendering is unsuitable, and so I leave the term untranslated throughout the thesis.\textsuperscript{150} The reader is referred to Chapter 3, Section 2.1: The Satipatthanas as Categories of Change, for discussion of the relationship between the nature of the phenomena classified under this satipatthana and the transformative effects of their contemplation by Vipassana practitioners.

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\textsuperscript{142} Mahasi Sayadaw, 1971, *op.cit.*, p20.


\textsuperscript{144} See Kornfield, J. Intensive Insight Meditation: A Phenomenological Study, in *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 2 [1], pp41-58, Transpersonal Institute, California, 1979, p42.

\textsuperscript{145} Nyanaponika Thera, 1956, *op.cit.*, pp17-8.


\textsuperscript{149} Venerable U Silananda, *op.cit.*, p95. U Silananda states that no English word covers the full meaning of the Pali word dhammas.

\textsuperscript{150} Coincidentally, during a talk given by Venerable Antonio Satta at Vajrayana Institute on Friday 7 January 2005 which preded a two-day Vipasyana retreat, he translated the four ‘objects’ or satipattanas as body, feelings, mind, and dhammas.
That the Satipatthana method is the true way for the realization of Nibbana is stated in the second paragraph of the Satipatthana Sutta. Although the precise nature of Nibbana is frequently debated, when associated with the goal of Vipassana or insight practice it is often described as ‘absence of craving’ or as ‘liberation from suffering’. Nyanaponika Thera sees the practice as having two goals: Nibbana and mindfulness in everyday life. The latter, as a goal in itself, is attainable in both religious and secular settings, to the point where concern is expressed that Vipassana, isolated from its traditional framework, may be reduced to therapy in the West. In either setting the aim of practice is insight into the nature of psychic functioning, outlined as three objectives by Nyanaponka and Deatherage: to know one’s own mental processes, to have the power to shape or control them, and to gain freedom from the condition where they are unknown and uncontrolled. However, BMIMC supports practical instruction with dhamma talks that provide schooling in Buddhist philosophy and ethics.

The aim of all Vipassana meditation instruction given during retreat is the development of mindfulness. By directing participants to be aware of whatever mental or bodily experience is predominant in each moment, the immediate aim is to train the mind to observe and note the succession of physical and mental phenomena that appear to it. To this effect, Mahasi Sayadaw’s method utilizes two techniques: sitting and walking. The difference between the two lies in the nature of the primary object, that object used to anchor the mind in present experience. Sitting meditation uses the in and out movement of the breath as primary object. Meditators observe the rising and falling of their abdomens while the movement occurs, noting the ‘rising … falling … rising … falling’. Walking meditation invokes contemplation of the actions of stepping. The recommended noting technique is ‘lifting … placing’, which, with practice, is extended to “lifting … moving … placing … shifting”. Meditators may note either the movement itself or the resulting sensations from the soles of the feet.

152 See Nyanaponika Thera, 1956, op. cit. He states that aim of Satipatthana is Nibbana as the final liberation from suffering.
156 Deatherage, G. “The Clinical Use of ‘Mindfulness’ Meditation Techniques in Short-Term Psychotherapy”, in The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology 7 [2], pp133-143, Transpersonal Institute, 1975, p133. The Satipatthana method also dispenses with any concentrative attainment prior to insight training. Williams maintains that in much of the Buddhist tradition, it is not held necessary for jhanic achievement before commencing insight. Williams, P, with Tribe, A. Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition, Routledge, 2000, pp81-2.
157 Kornfield, op. cit., p42.
Beyond this, Mahasi’s method and the centre’s teachers stress some basic principles of technique. ‘Do not think of the processes of rising and falling, and lifting and putting, as words, but be aware of the process of movement. When the mind wanders, it should be noted, for example, ‘reaching’. After this, begin noting the rising/falling, lifting/putting again. Make a mental note of each object observed, every item of mental behaviour as it occurs, thoughts and mental functions; after the disappearance of the object, return to the primary object, the abdomen or the walking. Failing to note and dismiss such distinctive objects, such as sounds and sights as they occur, may allow the meditator to fall into reflections about them instead of proceeding with intense attention to the rising and falling, or lifting and putting’.\footnote{158}

Fundamental to the Mahasi practice is the categorization of the range of objects into \textit{primary} and \textit{secondary} objects. The \textit{primary} objects include the rise and fall of the abdomen and the two for walking meditation given above, all of which belong to the first foundation. \textit{Secondary} objects are any other objects that appear to the mind, and are important for maintaining strict adherence to the Vipassana technique. When the untrained mind rests on one object for too long, whether it be the breath or the soles of the feet, it may slip into concentration practice. With respect to the secondary objects used for the practice, my interview data show that there is a difference between those listed in the \textit{Satipatthana Sutta} and those that are typically used by practitioners at the centre. In the \textit{Satipatthana Sutta} objects are categorized according to which of the four satipathanas they belong: body, feelings, mind and \textit{dhammas}.\footnote{159} Under ‘body’ are listed mindfulness of breathing, the four postures (walking, standing, sitting, and lying), foulness in the body parts, the elements, and the nine charnel ground contemplations.\footnote{160} ‘Feeling’ is divided into pleasant, painful, and neutral, and further into worldly and unworldly. ‘Mind’ or mental states consists of mind affected or not by lust, hate, and delusion. Similarly, ‘mind’ may or may not be contracted, distracted, exalted, surpassed, concentrated or liberated. \textit{Dhammas} includes the hindrances, the five \textit{khandha}/aggregates, the six bases, the seven enlightenment factors, and the Four Noble Truths.\footnote{161}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[159] A comprehensive diagram of the objects listed in the \textit{Satipatthana Sutta} is to be found in Analayo, \textit{op.cit.}, p19. Both the four satipathanas and the relevance of Analayo’s diagram for self-transformative practice is discussed in Chapter 3, Section 2.1: \textit{The Satipathanas as Categories of Change}.
\item[160] See Analayo, \textit{op.cit.}, p153, who phrases this last one as the corpse in nine consecutive stages of decay.
\item[161] These are listed in the \textit{Satipatthana Sutta}, in the \textit{Majjhima Nikaya}, \textit{op.cit.}, pp145-54.
\end{footnotes}
Data from participant observation and interview show a consistency among the range of secondary objects that practitioners tend to use for contemplation. This range excludes the charnel ground contemplations and meditation on the foulness of the body. These seem to be most removed from immediate body-based experience when considered alongside the range of objects belonging to the body, the first satipatthana. Another notable and more surprising omission from practice is the lack of referral by practitioners to the five khandha/aggregates belonging to the fourth satipatthana. On several occasions throughout my period of fieldwork, it was clear that both doctrines model the view of the person employed in Vipassana meditation. Because the Mahasi method utilizes the former, practitioners habitually think of the self in this manner. This view of the self is given considerable attention in the discussion in Chapter 3.

3.2 Doctrinal Texts and Teaching Resources

The Buddhist worldview is imparted to students and practitioners through a range of reading material. As discussed above, the doctrinal foundations of the practice are the Satipatthana and Mahasatipatthana Suttas from the Nikaya Pitaka of the Pali Canon. Of equal value are the writings of Mahasi Sayadaw that outline and explain his approach to the Vipassana practice. Reference is sometimes made to the Anapanasati Sutta, the sutta devoted to the Mindfulness of Breathing. Other sources include writings by Western interpreters, commentators and teachers of Vipassana, such as those of Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield, writings by Eastern teachers who have popularized Buddhism for the Western mind, and writings by teachers associated with the centre, for example, Venerable Pannyavaro, Patrick Kearney, and Steve and Rosemary Weissman. Some of the writings in this latter category may be downloaded from the BMIMC website.

The Buddhist worldview and the doctrinal foundations of its practice are ever-present in the meditation instruction given at the Centre. During retreat, the participant begins to encounter the fundamentals of the Buddhist worldview almost immediately through teacher instruction and dhamma talks. This fundamental framework consists of the Four Noble Truths, especially the Noble Eightfold Path in its three aspects of Panna, Sila, and Samadhi—wisdom, ethics and meditation—and the three marks of existence, Dukkha, Anicca, and Anatta—suffering, impermanence and no essentially existing self.

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162 Analayo, op.cit., pp152-53, makes the point that this last meditation, on the corpse in day makes use of visualization and reflection, since the meditator must compare their own body to these images.

163 In a one-day workshop given in early 2005 at the Buddhist Library, Camperdown, Sydney, the aggregates and their utilization as contemplation objects in Vipassana were the subject of considerable discussion by the teacher. This was the only time in my several years’ involvement with the Centre that I recall discussion of this doctrine in the context of practice.

164 Other writing popular among some practitioners includes much material by authors from many Buddhist traditions writing specifically for the Western Buddhist.

165 Several sets of teachings are available on the website, www.meditation.asn.au, and can be downloaded as PDF files.
Materials from the latter categories of literature above appear to be generally popular with practitioners. However, preference for a type of literature is an individual matter, and does not directly correlate with development in the practice. Generally, however, interest in and familiarity with the Pali Canon tends to develop with experience in the practice. Some preferences expressed by practitioners were for the Abhidhamma, the Dhammapada, and for the study of particular suttas such as the Anattalakhana Sutta. However, most practitioners express a preference for the Western commentators and interpreters of the Vipassana practice and Theravada tradition. Nyanaponika Thera’s Heart of Buddhist Meditation is very popular. Some preferred the writings of the lay Buddhist teachers because such writings were ‘easy to read’ or ‘accessible’. Examples are Joseph Goldstein’s The Experience of Insight, and writings by Jack Kornfield or Sharon Salzburg. These several are quite possibly more widely read than Mahasi Sayadaw’s writings. However, these were mentioned by some practitioners. Some read the ‘satipatthanas through other literature’, such as The Four Foundations of Mindfulness by U Silananda. Others are drawn to teachers within the tradition, such as U Pandita. Other Buddhist authors from various schools mentioned were Ajahn Chaa, Tenzin Palmo, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Pema Chodrön. Overall, whether practitioners wanted light reading in bed, something inspirational to reflect on, or instruction in the practice for clarification of technique or insight into meditative experience, the general consensus was for material that practitioners could relate to and apply to their daily lives, and which could put their own experience into perspective.

4 Contexts for Learning and Practice

The centre does not hold regular Buddhist teachings or philosophy sessions, but doctrinal material, imparted in practical instruction and in dhamma talks, informs the practice. Activities conducted at the centre or affiliated with it can all be viewed as learning contexts, and fall into three categories. First is the weekly meditation night. Beginning at 7pm, the usual program is for a half-hour’s sitting, half-hour’s walking, another half-hour’s sitting, and then a dhamma talk for about a half-hour. A roster of four teachers takes turn to lead the night’s session.166 Second, teachers affiliated with the centre often give one-day meditation workshops or study courses at the Buddhist Library or elsewhere. Examples of such courses are the Sutta Study Weekend held in August 2003, which concentrated on the relationship between Samatha/Concentration and Vipassana/Insight Practice, and the annual series of Sutta Study Classes entitled Evam Me Suttam, held at the Buddhist Library, Camperdown, Sydney.167 All of the learning contexts associated with the centre include instruction

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166 Since this fieldwork was undertaken, the time and venue have both changed. The weekly sessions are now held on Friday nights at 7pm, but at the Life and Balance Centre, 132 St Johns Road, Glebe, Sydney.

167 Recent courses include 4 October to 8 November 2001, on the oral nature of the early suttas and how the suttas that analyse the meditation process are read in the contemporary world; 2 April to 7 May 2002, which focussed on texts that teach dependent arising, and August/September 2004, which focussed on some key suttas from the Majjhima Nikaya. See the BMIMC website.
in the practice, and instruction in its doctrinal underpinnings. The third and most significant of these learning contexts is the Vipassana retreat.

4.1 Retreats

Nearly all of the teaching and practice conducted at BMIMC takes place as a live-in arrangement. Participants remain at the centre for the duration of the activity, which may be a workshop or a retreat. While a workshop might be for one day or a weekend, retreats are typically two,\(^{168}\) four,\(^{169}\) or nine days,\(^{170}\) or for a month.\(^{171}\) All activities are highly structured. Set periods are scheduled for sitting and walking meditation, **dhamma** talks, meal breaks, personal activities such as washing, and chores which are referred to as ‘mindfulness jobs’. In general, the one- or two-day workshop or retreat is for beginners, and the four- or nine-day for beginners and advanced meditators. There are also retreats of one month’s duration, some of which are self-retreats, meaning that no teacher is present. These are for advanced practitioners only. Despite the variation in length of retreats, the only observable differences between them are in the amount of instruction about meditation and in the time set aside for meditation. From time to time a teacher sets shorter times, eg half- or three-quarter-hour periods instead of the typical hour for sitting and walking, during beginners’ retreats. Retreat descriptions, outlined in the retreat program or available from the website and the printed newsletter, prescribe the proficiency level at which a retreat is aimed: beginners, beginners and advanced, or advanced. Some retreats intended for the last will specify that no meditation instruction will be given.

Sometimes there is an option to take only a portion of a longer retreat, for example, the first weekend of a nine-day retreat, or fifteen days of the thirty-day retreat in January. Participants are encouraged to stay for the length or portion of the retreat that they have chosen, but they they are not prevented from leaving if that is their wish. However, teachers view this as the mind’s creation of resistance to the practice. Some teachers discuss this during the course of the retreat. As will be discussed later, recognition of resistance to the practice and the deepening awareness that it fosters can be used as a meditation object. Teachers try, in private interviews, to help practitioners to deal with problems that arise from their participation in a retreat.

\(^{168}\) See Appendices 2 and 3: Beginners’ Weekend Workshop Schedule, 29-30 May 2004, and Long-Weekend Retreat Schedule, 12-13 June 2004, as examples.

\(^{169}\) See Appendix 4: Four-Day Retreat Schedule, 14 to 17 February, 2004, for example.

\(^{170}\) See Appendix 5: Nine-day Retreat Schedule, 23 April-2 May 2004.

\(^{171}\) A typical daily schedule for most retreats conducted at the Centre is outlined in Weissman, R and S. *With Compassionate Understanding: A Meditation Retreat*, 1999, pxiv.
4.1.1 Mindfulness Training Practices

Vipassana meditation is taught as the primary practice during retreat. However, it is supplemented with a range of practices, all with the aim to develop practitioners’ mindfulness. These support practices include daily mindfulness jobs, *Metta*/loving-kindness meditation and thought reflection. Daily mindfulness jobs include such chores as cleaning, washing-up, sweeping and the like, and time for these is included in the daily timetable. Each participant chooses to perform a chore that aids the routine operation and maintenance of the centre, and also encourages mindfulness during its performance. Metta practice, as Fronsdal has noted, is promoted by American teachers, a practice which many of BMIMC’s teachers also tend to promote. However, his observation that North American teachers tend to teach mindfulness independent of *Metta*/loving-kindness, *Sila*/ethics and *Dana*/generosity is not supported for this setting. Teachers emphasize mindfulness as the foundation of mental transformation. While the inclusion of Metta practice is at the teacher’s discretion, practitioners in interview expressed strong approval for the development of equanimity and compassion for others that it engenders. As shown in Chapter 3, Section 1.2, the ultimate function of *Metta* is to transform habitual attitudes so as to hold all beings as of equal value. *Thought reflection* is introduced by some teachers to complement the Vipassana, and uses a chosen principle for reflection during, for example, washing or eating.

4.2 Introductory Retreats

4.2.1 Orientation and Introduction

Workshops and retreats at BMIMC commence either on Friday night or Saturday morning. Before the introductory session in the meditation hall, supper (Friday) or breakfast (Saturday) is served in the dining room. This is the only opportunity for participants to talk to each other before the retreat officially begins in the meditation hall with a welcome and orientation talk by the centre manager. This defines the retreat schedule, and housekeeping matters such as the selection of mindfulness tasks, for example, cooking, washing up, and cleaning. If the retreat is to take place in *Noble Silence*, this is also explained. Other practical matters, such as what to do if you need to speak to someone, or contact the outside world, are explained. The manager then introduces one or more teachers to begin the retreat with a short introduction to the practice and instruction for sitting meditation.

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172 Fronsdal, *op.cit.*, p174, maintains that when *Metta* practice is taught in Asia, it is seldom mixed with Vipassana.
173 *ibid.*, p172.
The introductory session presents some background to the practice, such as its place within Buddhism, and some information about Mahasi Sayadaw and his popularization of the practice amongst lay people. The teacher may include some explanation of key Pali terms such as *satipatthana*/foundations of mindfulness, *Vipassana*/Insight, and *Bhavana*/Meditation. Key notions are also explained in more colloquial terms. One teacher defined Vipassana as a Pali word that translates as ‘seeing clearly’, and by extension, ‘being honest about what we see’. Teachers then typically draw attention to the emphasis on direct experience in Vipassana meditation. One teacher outlined the Buddha’s view that the essence of the practice is experience, not belief. Thus the purpose of the retreat was to explore, from the perspective of experience, how meditation works. Consequently, ‘progress in meditation takes place at the level of direct experience where the conceptual is helpful’.

Another teacher explained that the practice involved *praxis*, the combination of theory and practice. However, his explanation took a more formal approach from a doctrinal perspective. He briefly outlined the eightfold path by discussing *Panna*, defined as ‘wisdom, overcoming defiling mind-states’; *Sila*, defined as ‘ethics, moral foundation, being gentle in word, deed, and thought’, and *Samadhi*, defined as ‘concentration, absorption, and meditation practice’. Another teacher again expressed the same ideas, as ‘bring beginner’s mind to the practice, also called bare attention, meaning that every moment is unique, a new beginning’. The practice was to ‘observe what is happening as it arises and passes away’, and to ‘observe with mindfulness the physical and mental process; what’s happening in the mind and body’, adding that ‘right effort’, mindfulness and concentration all come into play with practice.  

From these introductions it can be seen that teachers explain the ideas of formal doctrine in accessible language. Their introductory comments provide participants with an initial conceptual orientation to the practice. One of the teachers above, to illustrate how defiling mind-states are created, expressed the process as ‘thought manifests into word, which manifests into deed, which manifests into habit’. Another teacher, with a background in psychology, likened the practice to therapy, expressing his appreciation for a ‘method for understanding what’s going on inside us’. Ideas expressed in this manner are easy to follow for those without prior knowledge of Buddhism. At this point, teachers may draw attention to the relationship between the nature of ‘suffering’ and the goal of Buddhist meditation practice. As a Buddhist form of meditation, the goal of Vipassana is to achieve happiness and to overcome sorrow, pain, and suffering. It is thus concerned with suffering and the end of suffering. Some teachers refer to *dukkha*, and outline its common translations as suffering or unsatisfactoriness.

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275 This is a reference to the three *Samadhi* factors of the eightfold path.
After the introduction to the practice itself, the teachers discuss any remaining matters of retreat housekeeping, such as behaviours encountered from and expected of practitioners. For example, some practitioners may bow to show respect for the Buddha. The practice of Noble Silence is explained: no written, spoken or body-language exchanges with others; no reading or listening to music, because these call forth extra thinking. The introduction of Noble Silence is left to the discretion of teachers, and is introduced with the aims of the retreat and level of experience of the participants in mind. For instance, on my second retreat, Noble Silence began on the Saturday morning from waking onwards, whereas on the first it was in effect from 7pm on Saturday until 10am on Sunday. For the present retreat, the teacher explained that there would be silence wherein things, including the self, would be confronted moment-to-moment: ‘Talk can function to communicate, but it can also allow you to hide from experience’.

The teachers continue with an introduction to the precepts. The five lay precepts are given as abstention from: killing, stealing, false speech, sexual misconduct, and taking intoxicants. Some retreats observe eight precepts, the additional three being abstention from food after midday, high or luxurious beds, and entertainment. Generally, introductory retreats limit themselves to the first five. One teacher explained that the precepts are taken to establish participants in Sila, or ethical practice. Another explained that ‘they are not as in Christianity’, in being related to notions of sin and redemption. They are instead related to the principle of right motivation producing correct action. The precepts were explained as one of two supports for the practice. The first, Dana/ generosity, is an Asian-derived practice that involves giving to others, for instance, the voluntary work of the cooks and helpers during a retreat. The second is Sila/ethics, the foundation for practice. In this retreat we were asked to follow a set of rules: to agree to act in a way that was harmless (no killing or hurting); to act with trust and respect toward others; not to steal or take without asking; not to engage in sexual activity or take intoxicants; and not to use false or harsh speech. He directed that most of the retreat should be in silence, and that we were to limit eye-contact with others. On this occasion, the teacher asked us to make the commitment quietly to ourselves.

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177 These other three precepts are outlined in Harvey, P. *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values, and Issues*, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p87.


179 Harvey, 2000, *op.cit.*, p61. Harvey describes *dana* as the primary ethical activity.

180 This beginners’ retreat took place on the 12th and 13th of February, 2005. I have not included the schedule for this one as an appendix, as it followed a standard retreat pattern, akin to those outlined in Appendices 2 and 3.
At other times, observing precepts has been left to individual choice. It was up to participants whether we observed them or not for the duration of the retreat. One teacher expressed it so: ‘As yogis/meditators we are not required to believe in anything. We can take it on conditionally’. For some retreats, refuge and precepts are taken formally at the beginning of the retreat, and first thing each morning. How much explanation about taking refuge and precepts is left to the teacher’s discretion, but as these examples show, teachers invariably emphasize that the precepts facilitate a conducive state of mind for meditation. Teachers give as much explanation as is necessary to establish the relationship of precepts to the practice.¹⁸¹

### 4.2.2 Initial Meditation Instruction and Practice

At the end of the introductory session, some fundamental meditation instruction is given, followed by a sitting practice period. Participants are first instructed in the various ways of sitting correctly and comfortably, using meditation cushions, stools, or chairs. The purpose of finding a good meditation posture is to be comfortable enough not to be distracted from meditation by discomfort, but, at the same time, not so comfortable as to fall asleep. Initial instruction involves description of the significance of the primary and secondary objects for the practice. Meditators are told to take the abdomen as primary object, and while breathing normally and steadily, to observe and note the rising and falling, or the in-out movement, of the abdomen. The secondary object is anything that appears in the mind, or anything else that the mind wanders to, and this can be noted as ‘wandering, wandering’, or more specifically. For example, in an imagined meeting of someone, note ‘meeting … meeting’, and further, ‘bored … bored’, or ‘happy … happy’, as appropriate. The important consideration is to be aware of everything experienced in the mind and body without entering into internal dialogue about it. In the words of one teacher, ‘What matters is to know or perceive the object, not what you say to label it’.

Teachers draw attention to the noting of physical sensations such as stiffness, pain and tiredness. ‘If these sensations impel a change of posture, as they often do, instead of moving immediately note the urge as ‘wishing to change’, ‘rising … moving … touching’, &c.’ Practitioners are instructed to make the note before the move, because that aids development of the patience necessary for the practice. During sitting periods of introductory retreats, teachers often employ statements such as ‘just be present with your experience’, to keep meditators in the present, and to discourage them gently from allowing discursive thinking or daydreaming to taking over. This excerpt from my retreat notes exemplifies the above:

To begin with, C drew our attention to two important things involved in this practice. First was concentration, the placement of attention on an object, and second was the fine-tuning of that attention. He then gave some preliminary

¹⁸¹ This introductory session is also described in McIntyre, op.cit.
instruction for sitting meditation, beginning with the primary object. This followed the standard instruction for sitting meditation: ‘Keep the back erect, the eyes closed, and the hands resting in the lap. Focus on the breath at the abdomen, the in-out movement of the abdomen.’ He then went on to explain the nature of, and to direct us toward, secondary objects: sounds, thoughts and the like. There was ten minutes of this instruction, and then ten minutes of meditation. C began with, “Settle into the body. Be aware of the feeling against the cushion. Note the physical sensations”.

Teachers may now give some walking meditation instruction, or leave it until later in the retreat. Alternatively, in beginners’ retreats or workshops, some teachers have introduced another form of awareness exercise before the sitting and walking practice. The following two examples show how a teacher may ease participants gently into the principles and experience of Vipassana:

At this point in the first retreat we were directed to go outside for ten minutes, pick three objects, observe them, ‘take them in’ in detail, and observe our reaction to our observations. On our return to the meditation hall, the teacher commented that from a Buddhist perspective, it is not what we notice, but how we notice things. He offered the following comments on the qualities of such observation. First, we note with precision, ‘I’m seeing this, not that’. We saw, observed things outside ourselves, but meditation is largely internal and deals largely with internal things. The second is sharpness, to note with clarity ‘the object and things going on around it’. Awareness is necessary for finer levels of observation. Third is movement, ‘things shift, they don’t stay the same’, an observation which related to ‘the recognition of impermanence’. Fourth is insight, ‘new ways of seeing’, ‘I saw some things in my reactions’. The teacher explained that insight is not conceptual, but ‘observing the reaction space’. Five is aesthetics, ‘being there with simple things’, ‘happiness arises in the smaller things’, ‘the underlying experience of joy’.182

The introductory session in the February 2005 retreat consisted of a discussion about our previous meditation experience, and an introductory mindfulness meditation.183 The teacher split us up into four groups in order to discuss our previous meditation experience with each other. It seemed that many of the people present had tried other forms of meditation, and the views of several held it to be almost an undirected stream of images, sensations, and thoughts. After some clarification, the teacher suggested that we view this meditation as a way of perceiving and understanding our own experience. Between morning tea and lunch, he led us in an experiential session which consisted of a body scan exercise where we placed our mind on each part of the body in turn, beginning with the feet and working our way up the body, a short guided Metta meditation, which as he explained, is not the main practice but is

182 See Appendix 2: Beginners’ Weekend Meditation Workshop Schedule, 29-30 May 2004. This is a description of the Awareness Exercise conducted at 10 am.
183 The purpose of this weekend retreat was as a gentle introduction to the practice.
used to encourage a sense of acceptance, and a half-hour of sitting, where the primary object is either the breath at the abdomen or the whole body. The body scan is a practice that this teacher employs frequently. It consists of sweeping each part of the body with one’s awareness, in order to place it on the body as a unitary object. This teacher’s approach emphasizes the need to see the body as the foundation for the practice, especially to students whose occupations tend to keep them ‘in their heads’. After this, we were again split into four groups to share our experiences of the half-hour sit, beginning with the question, ‘What was the primary object?’ This was followed by a short question-and-answer session.

4.2.3 The First Day (After the Introductory Session)

For ease of explanation, each example retreat will be outlined separately and consecutively, for each of the two days. During the introductory workshop, the first session after the introduction consisted of a discussion of concentration, and then a practice session. Concentration was explained as fixing the mind on an object such as the breath. The teacher said, “You must have good concentration before practising mindfulness. You must be able to hold the mind on one object before turning to place it on a succession of objects.” The concentration exercise itself consisted of sitting for twenty minutes, focussing on the breath where it felt clearest, for instance, at the nostrils, throat, chest, or abdomen. Then followed a discussion.

During the early afternoon, there was a Meditation and Awareness session, in two parts. The first was walking meditation, which included instructions about what to do, where to place the attention, and about noting. For faster walking (at normal pace or slightly less), note ‘right … left’. At even slower pace, note ‘lifting … moving … placing’. The teacher directed us to register the sensations in the feet, as our practice for the moment. He explained that the slower walking provided the opportunity to register more sensations than the faster walking. Walking meditation was for half an hour, followed by group discussion of our experience with it. The second part was an awareness exercise: we were directed to look at our pen and imagine what it would be like to be that object, in order to ‘see what experience would be like from the inside’. The teacher asked each person to report one observation that they had made, observing afterward that some people had ‘picked up’ on the notion of experience from another perspective. The rest of the day was devoted to alternating sitting and walking meditations.

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184 See Nyanaponika Thera, 1956, op.cit., p40. He draws the reader’s attention to the body as the foundation for the systematic meditative practice, despite the necessity to cultivate all four contemplations.

185 Both the Theravadan and the Gelugpa views of the mind and body see them as ontologically distinct. One of two positions taken to their relationship outlined by Shaner, is to see them as ontologically distinct, as in Platonic, Cartesian, and Samkyan philosophy. From this position the aim in meditation is to discover how they interrelate. Shaner, op.cit., p4.

The *dhamma* talk that night was entitled *The Story of the Buddha and Buddhism*. The talk recounted the well-known facts about the Buddha’s birth, family of influence, how the Buddha’s father tried to protect him from the real world, and about the four sights the Buddha saw after leaving his family’s palace. Further comments concerned the Buddha’s renunciation and his finding the Middle Way, the point of reaching enlightenment, and his insight into the nature of existence: impermanence, suffering and no-self. Under the teachings of the Buddha, the teacher outlined the Four Noble Truths. He explained the relationship between the first truth, the truth of suffering, and the three poisons greed, hatred and delusion, and further, our clinging to the ‘I’. He then described equanimity as not getting caught up in good or bad things. The second Noble Truth was stated to be craving as the cause of suffering; the third as the cessation of suffering, and the fourth as the Eight-Fold Path. The teacher briefly outlined the eight aspects and their grouping into three: Panna, Sila, and Samadhi. It was clear from the brevity that he intended to provide an introduction to the fundamental notions and their import, which could be amplified by the participant for themselves later.

The mid-morning session of the June Long-Weekend retreat\(^\text{187}\) consisted of a walking session and a question-and-answer session. The instruction given was: for fast walking, note ‘right … left’, and for slow walking, note ‘raising … dropping (the foot)’. When we could register and note the raising and dropping with some mindfulness, we were encouraged to move onto the next level of registering and noting ‘lifting … moving … placing’. During question time, participants discussed their experiences with the practice so far: inability to hold their minds on the primary object, drifting-off and the like. The teacher fleshed out his answers and suggestions with much practical detail, espially about the wandering nature of the mind. He outlined the hindrances, and the fact that everybody experiences them, and emphasized that, with practice, they get easier to label and deal with.

During the morning session of walking-meditation instruction we had been given instruction in preparation for the group interview in the afternoon. We were asked to be aware of how we were observing the primary and secondary objects. At the beginning of the group interview each person was asked, in turn, how they observed the primary object. Some responses were: ‘Walking is easier because something is happening’; ‘Trouble with breathing’; ‘Trouble with thought’. At this stage there were some comments on progress with noting. Some people commented about feeling distracted by the cold weather, and were instructed to use the sensations of cold and shivering as mindfulness objects.\(^\text{188}\) Here the teachers asked, “What sort of noting are you making?” The responses were, ‘lifting … shifting … dropping … pressing’. One person answered, ‘awareness of birdsong … looking … freshness on the skin’. We were told, “You can note it, or just be aware of it”, and “You can bring


\(^{188}\) *ibid.*
the mind back to one object”. Other responses included ‘tiredness … headache … emotional stuff’. The teachers’ advice was to accept the experience, just to note whatever was happening, and that this would lift the energy level.

The teachers then asked us about our observation and noting of the breath. Were we following the rising and falling? In the feeling of the breath, was there tightness? Were we aware of the length and pressure of the breath? For instance, was there any unevenness within and between breaths? On a related point of practice, in response to a question about why we would discriminate between thinking and remembering, since these were both forms of thinking, we were instructed that each mind-state will arise with different qualities, and to be aware of the differences. The teachers’ concluding remarks were something akin to, ‘Why do we practise? Our minds are quite out of control, being caught between craving and aversion. We can live in this way or choose to do something about it. Living thus is to be continually in suffering. The practice is not easy, and takes time to pick up.’

The dhamma talk that night was an introduction to the set of central Buddhist concepts, and illustrated the subjects that may be covered in an introductory dhamma talk. Topics included the Buddha as Bodhisattva, the Tripitaka of the Pali Canon (Sutta, Vinaya, and Abhidhamma pitakas), and the systemic and cross-referenced nature of the Canon. The bulk of this dhamma talk was devoted to an outline of the four Noble Truths and the Eight-Fold Path as two maps within the Pali Canon that can show the way to liberation. The teacher likened these two doctrines as maps in that they ‘indicate a direction to go in’, and ‘tell us about the environment’. He stressed that, theoretically and by development through practice, other maps emerge. To this latter end, showing how other maps emerge through practice, he went over the elements of the Eight-Fold Path, showing how they related to the Vipassana practice. During the weekend retreat in February 2005 participants were largely left to their own practice when the introductory session had ended. During the sitting period at 5.30pm, the teacher remarked that this was a difficult time in the retreat. In his experience it was the time when the mind begins to quieten, and anxieties, tiredness, or obsessive thoughts may come to the surface. He told us to be gentle with ourselves and just be with our experience. A dhamma talk was given later that evening.

On all three retreats, during the introductory instruction and practice period, and for several sessions on the first day, teachers attempted to engage participants with their own immediate experience in various ways. Of these retreats, Retreat 2 was the most typical, in that practical instruction consisted of the standard instruction for sitting and walking meditation. The awareness exercises given during Retreat 2 directed our attention to specific objects: concentration on the breath where it was clearest, and on the soles of the feet during walking. During Retreat 3 we were instructed in a number of short exercises: group discussion of previous meditative experience, a body-awareness exercise, some Metta, a sitting period and discussion. This session
allowed participants to settle into the retreat setting, to sample the practice, and to begin to work with the mind.

4.2.4 The Second Day

The second morning typically begins with some further instruction for the practice. During the February 2005 retreat, in the sitting period just before breakfast, there was instruction from the teacher about just being with our experience in whatever is happening, what we were doing, whether it be standing, walking, or otherwise. If we found ourselves lost in thought or thinking, we should gently bring ourselves back to the primary object. Overall, there was minimal instruction during this retreat compared to the other two. Much of the time was given to personal practice of sitting and walking.

On the second day of the May 2004 Weekend Workshop, we broke Noble Silence at 10am with an Awareness period. The teacher began by asking participants about their experiences of observing Noble Silence from 7pm onward the night before. Feeling ‘irritation’ was one response. He spoke about the way the silence makes us more aware of what goes on inside us ‘a lot of the time’. He used this response to exemplify how meditation practice can make us aware of mental content without creating ‘the story’—the need to attribute cause and meaning to the mental states we experience—in this case, irritability. The teacher elaborated by pointing out two aspects of consciousness that apply in meditation: the knowing aspect or being aware, and mind states such as sleepiness or irritability.

The teacher drew attention to the difference between direct experience through the senses, and indirect experience such as labelling. He had made reference to the difference between the conceptual and the experiential earlier when talking about the stories we put around our mind-states. He elaborated on this distinction. External direct experience involved the senses, whereas internal direct experience consisted of bodily sensations and emotions, both of which could be pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Sensations and emotions are both aspects of, and covered by, feeling. Mental states are in this category also. One can have direct experience of thinking, but with the content or story, the consciousness or direct experience is lost and it becomes indirect experience. Similarly with memories: we know that we are having a memory, but it is removed from immediate experience. We were directed to ‘get to know the space of mindfulness’ for the rest of the day. For the three meditation periods between 11am and 12:30pm, we were instructed to pay particular attention to specific experiences. In the first sitting we were to observe the relationship between the breath and other things going on in the body: the breath as primary object, the other things as secondary objects. During the walking, the aim was to be aware of all sensory information: sight, hearing, smell, and touch. In the second sitting, we were

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directed to focus on the breath while being aware of mind-states such as sleepiness or irritation.

The mid-afternoon *dhamma* talk was a brief look at the historical development of Buddhism. This began with India’s change to Buddhism under Asoka’s leadership, and continued to the spread of Buddhism throughout Asia, the conntion of Vipassana with Burma and Thailand, and its travel to the West via the influences of Achan Chaa, S. N. Goenka, and Mahasi Sayadaw. The teacher finished by rapitulating and elaborating on some points previously made during the retreat: the fact that the weekend had dealt largely with concentration—which was nesary to establish mindfulness, and for progression in Vipassana—including experience of more of the hindrances. In time, he assured us, we would come to notice things such as intention, and get a richer sense of things such as impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, not-self, greed, hatred and delusion.

Some brief instructions for the two final periods of the retreat were given. In the walking meditation we were directed to be aware of the arising of thought and the content of thought; in other words, to distinguish between process and content. In the sitting meditation we were to be aware of feeling, including emotion, as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. During the final discussion, the teacher focussed on the way that thought and emotion arise from feeling, that they have feeling around them when they arise, and that the base feeling is either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. The retreat ended at about 4pm.

In the early morning of the June Long-Weekend retreat, additional instruction from the teacher built on the previous day’s instruction. Returning to the topic of observing the breath, he drew our attention to ‘the spaces’ which may occur in meditation. He pointed out that in sitting meditation, there will often be a gap at the end of the falling; the mind will ‘go’, that is, through the seeming loss of the object because of the gap as the movement of the breath is momentarily imperceptible. Then occurs a gap wherein the mind falls into the habit of identifying with its mental contents. The teacher instructed us to return our attention to the sitting, and note ‘sitting’. There was then some discussion about the path of Insight which is sequential in nature; rates of progress are an individual matter, but each person has to negotiate the same stages.

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190 Bikkhu Bodhi, 2001, *op.cit.*, pp150-51; p1194 (note 58). The *Satipatthana Sutta* lists the hindrances: sensual desire, ill-will, sloth and torpor, restless and remorse, and doubt, under mind and dhammas. See Appendix 6 for notes on investigating the hindrances.

191 *Satipatthana Sutta*, in Bikkhu Bodhi, 2001, *op.cit.*. This distinction between a pleasant, painful, and neither pleasant nor painful feeling, is outlined on p149.

The dhamma talk that night was about *The Place of Faith in Vipassana Practice*. The flow of ideas was: we come to the practice with some faith based on previous experience, or some initial faith engendered by having heard about the benefits of meditation. The faith provokes some effort. The practice is about learning a technique that uses body, mind, and mind-states, using trial-and-error. Here the five controlling faculties were listed—saddha/faith, *virya*/effort, *sati*/mindfulness, *samadhi*/concentration and *panna*/wisdom—and briefly discussed. The teacher added that *sila* is central. It supports the five faculties, which reduce and remove the impurities.

Causes for developing these faculties were given as: attention directed to impermanence; a careful and respectful attitude to the practice; continuity of awareness; supportive conditions (such as food, posture, *Noble Silence*, &c); reapplication of conditions remembered to be supportive; courageous effort; patience and perseverance; and unwavering commitment. It was stated that, given practice, the hindrances: sense-desire, aversion, sloth and torpor, restlessness and doubt may start to reduce, and the enlightenment factors: mindfulness, tranquillity, investigation, energy, joy, concentration and equanimity may start to arise. The teacher continued, “Mindfulness is the main factor involved in Vipassana. Concentration is the focus on the breath. Mindfulness is being aware of what you are doing. Mindfulness stops the hindrances, purifies the mind, and makes it more flexible.”

There was discussion about the application of effort and concentration. These were seen as opposing factors. Too much concentration can lead to mental laziness. Too much effort without concentration makes the mind restless. The teacher then returned to the subject of faith. It ‘clears the mind of doubt and aversion’. Faith needs to be balanced with insight and wisdom. *Verified faith* brings together the five controlling faculties and clarifies them. Initial energy applied repeatedly is the cause of concentration and mindfulness. Concentration helps the mind adhere to the object, pulling it away from defilements and unwholesome states, but without mindfulness no insight arises. The teacher distinguished between continuous—where concentration is fixed on the object—and momentary concentration. We use the latter here. Finally, he commented that concentration, energy, wisdom, and faith all work together.

The last session of this retreat contained a dhamma talk on *Metta* and a short meditation, one of the *Four Brahmaviharas*: compassion, *metta*/lovingkindness, sympathetic joy and equanimity, which are developed through Vipassana practice. It is also one of the *Protective Meditations*. These were given as: Buddha meditations or recollections of the noble qualities of the Buddha; *Metta Bhavana*, contemplation of the loathsomeness of the body, and mindfulness of death, a meditation used to overcome the fear of death. These meditations contribute to the mind-states of faith.

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193 The teacher stated that when the hindrances become weaker, other faculties such as the enlightenment factors, become stronger.
joy, and happiness. It was also explained that Metta is a *Samatha* practice, and is complementary to Vipassana. The wording for Metta meditation was given as (using the first person), ‘may I be free from danger’, ‘may I have mental happiness’, ‘may I have physical happiness’ and ‘may I have ease of well-being’. Clarification was given for the second phrase, ‘may I have mental happiness’, as having fewer unwholesome mind-states and more wholesome mind-states. In Metta we first direct these things to ourselves, then second, to a benefactor who is alive, who is not an object of desire, who has helped us and toward whom we feel respect and gratitude. Third, we direct these things toward a good friend; fourth, to a neutral person; fifth, a difficult person, and last, toward all beings.

### 4.3 How to Maintain a Practice After the Retreat

The Vipassana teachers associated with the centre often give advice on how to establish and maintain a regular practice. They do this because their teaching experience has shown them that many people find this difficult to do. Busy lives mean that time for meditation may be rare, depending on individual circumstances. In addition, teachers are aware that while retreat experience and learning may induce an immediate resolve in the participant to cultivate mindfulness in daily life, in reality the demands of daily life seem inimical to maintenance of a calm, clear mind. Compared to the concentrated meditation practice during a two-day or nine-day retreat, personal practice at home may be irregular, and as short as a few minutes a day. Several teachers have observed this, and therefore try to help practitioners to put some ‘safeguards’ in place. They point out that meditation practice in daily life is different from retreat practice.

One teacher noted that, in shorter meditation periods, more time is spent on keeping attention on the primary object, and therefore mindfulness is not as deep. As another said, compared with the kind of development that takes place during a retreat, daily practice periods of half-an-hour or so involve going back to the ‘baby steps’; the mind doesn’t achieve the depth of mindfulness or concentration possible on longer retreats where it has more continuous time in which to settle and focus. Therefore, the advice for daily meditation is to abandon the expection that the retreat milieu can be replicated. The teacher suggested that to make progress in daily practice, one chooses a regular time every day for at least three months. If daily practice lapses, do not give in to the distraction or resistance, but choose to be attentive as if on retreat and resolve to work with whatever condition you are in. One suggestion I heard at the end of a retreat was to observe and be aware of what conditions our choices in daily life. In this we can be guided by the five precepts. I gathered from this that the teacher concerned was drawing our attention to the use of the five precepts as a framework for identifying the mental states behind our actions. He went on to describe meditation as part of a broader path that includes ethics and wisdom, how they are related, and the way they come together in meditation.
4.3.1 Monday Night Meditations

Teachers often recommend finding a community, such as that at the regular Monday night meditations at the Buddhist Library, Camperdown, with whom to practise. If there are enough newcomers to warrant an induction to the practice, the teacher takes them into a side-room, where they are given an introductory talk and some meditation instruction during the first sitting or the walking session. Alternatively, such induction may be achieved by the basic meditation instruction given during the first two sessions, and the opportunity to talk to the teacher at the end of the night. For instance, on the several occasions I have sat with one particular teacher, he has taken newcomers apart during the walking meditation period in order to orient them and give them basic instruction. On one occasion when I joined this group, the teacher gave them basic instruction in the practice, after going around the room and getting everyone to introduce themselves and say something about how they went in the previous sitting period. I commented on the difficulty I always have in holding my mind on the primary object, and after short successful periods, feeling very mentally tired.

Instruction given during the first sitting meditation is to keep the mind on the rise and fall of the abdomen. ‘When the mind wanders, note the wandering, and bring the mind back to the breath’. After a time, say ten minutes or so, the teacher might tell us to bring our attention back to the mind by, for instance, asking (rhetorically) whether our minds were still on the abdomen. Instruction for the walking meditation is similar to that given at the beginning of retreats. The second sitting session is typically the same as the first, but generally with less instruction from the teacher. The topic for the night’s dhamma talk is left up to the teacher. It may range widely, from an aspect of the practice such as the relation between ethics and meditation, or about an aspect of Buddhism, such as women in the sangha.

4.4 A Summary of Instruction in the Practice

This outline of instruction given at introductory retreats is intended to demonstrate several significant features of the learning context and participant experience at BMIMC. First, all teaching and learning activity falls into three interdependent categories: doctrinal, practical, and experiential. The practical dimension, instruction in the technique and its execution, relates the doctrinal and experiential dimensions. It facilitates engagement with immediate subjective experience: bodily and sensory impressions, feelings and mental states, for which the four foundations of mindfulness provide an interpretive framework. During retreats, the first and foremost task of the teacher is to orient the student’s mind to the practice. This initial step is facilitated during the first session of the retreat, orientation and introduction to the practice. The next task is to engage students with their immediate experience, and to teach them how to observe such experience. A significant proportion of the

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194 This took place during the session on Monday 15 March 2004.
instruction given during retreats is devoted to this. All three retreats taught the basic practices of sitting and walking, and the latter two introduced Metta meditation. But by comparison with the first two retreats, instruction in Retreat 3 was minimal, allowing more time to be spent in practice. The teacher emphasized basic body awareness, directing us intermittently throughout the retreat just to be with our muscular and joint pain, and to ‘be present with our experience’.

The teaching during the first two retreats had more practical content than the third. The teacher at Retreat 1 gave significant attention to instruction about how to observe. Much of the instruction during Retreat 2 focussed on the practical detail involved in the noting technique, for instance, to note the gaps that occur while watching the breath. Each retreat also differed in the nature and amount of doctrinal material introduced, and its manner of delivery. The teachers at the first two retreats gave more dhamma talks. The teacher at Retreat 1 introduced some key Buddhist frameworks: the three marks of existence; dukkha, anicca and anatta; the Four Noble Truths; and the historical development of Buddhism. The teachers of Retreat 2 paid more attention to doctrinal material that applied to the path, and to understanding the nature of mind from a practical perspective. Topics were the Noble Eight-Fold Path—espially Panna—Sila, and Samadhi; the Pali Canon and its cross-referenced nature; the hindrances and the enlightenment factors.

Instruction during Retreat 1 made more use of everyday language rather than formal Buddhist terminology, which made instruction easy to understand in terms of everyday experience. This can be seen as a method of preparation for a deeper appreciation of the rationale for the practice and the philosophy behind it. For instance, the teacher spoke about suffering, impermanence and no-self, rather than referring to them as the three marks of existence. This can be viewed as directing the beginner’s mind to the experiential sense of the object or concept concerned rather than providing a list of terms and ways of categorizing existence that may not meaningfully engage the beginner. The teachers on the second retreat introduced more Buddhist doctrinal frameworks, for example, many of the lists that go to make up the maps referred to in one of the dhamma talks. For students, hearing the same material expressed in these two ways, begins to form a bridge between the commonsense view of the everyday world, and the Buddhist worldview. It is evident that the concepts introduced and explained during these introductory retreats, are both fundamental to understanding the practice and how to efft it, and

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195 Preston focusses on the mundane aspects of Zen practice that allow the beginner to participate in the activity of Zen bause of his belief that Zen is not adequately grasped by Western categories of thought. He maintains that if there is no philosophy nessarily attached to sitting, the objtified meaning of and the learning of the activity can be dealt with by the sociologist without denying its broader implications or validity. Preston, 1988, op.cit., p56. This belief is shown to be untenable with respect to Vipassana, largely because, as the material in Chapters 3 and 6 shows, practitioners come to appreciate the practice as an embodiment of the doctrinal and ethical dimensions of Buddhism.
sufficient for giving the participant an initial orientation to the Buddhist worldview: to provide access to interpretive frameworks that become meaningful through experience with the practice.

The purpose of this exploration has been to demonstrate that despite the variation in style between teachers, the same techniques and principles of practice are taught. The most significant difference between retreats is in the amount of instruction given, and in the amount of doctrinal material imparted. Interview material indicates that one’s first retreat facilitates access to, and engagement with the practice, and a sense or feel for the relationship between practice, philosophy, and immediate experience. Beyond that, the marrying of concept and experience that is needed in order to understand the practice, is acquired through ongoing practice and study, and the attendance of many more retreats.

5 The Stages of Experiential Development and Conceptual Acquisition

The nature of instruction in the practice and its supporting doctrine given on introductory retreats was explored in Section 3.2, where it was shown how the student is taught to begin to access experience normally hidden by everyday awareness. This section describes how the meditator makes progress in the practice, and begins to acquire a set of references for the interpretation of meditative experience. These reference points begin to form an interpretive framework once their interconnections are understood according to Buddhist doctrine. Comprehension of the Buddhist frame of reference occurs by learning to experientially identify, label, and conceptually categorize mental states. Accordingly, an understanding of the processes of apprehension and comprehension that practitioners undergo necessitates an exploration of the experiential states, and their labelling and categorization, according to Buddhist terminology and meaning.

An overview of the experiences with Vipassana described in the interview material suggested that experiential development be categorized into three stages. The first stage consists of those experiences especially common to new meditators that are attributed to a lack of mindfulness: poor concentration, a distracted mind, reactivity to pain. The second occurs when the development of some mindfulness allows the meditator to note these mental distractions and label and investigate them as mental states. With this degree of mindfulness and skill with labelling, the meditator begins to notice, explore, and attribute meaning to types of meditative experience, while experientially part of everyday awareness, that have special significance within a Buddhist frame of reference. These experiential types are commonly interpreted as sukkha/pleasure, dukkha/suffering and anicca/impermanence.

The excerpts from interview transcripts reproduced in Section 4.3 onwards show that, at this stage, engagement with the practice depends on the combination of developed concentration and mindfulness with the acquisition of conceptual
structures to frame their interpretation. The deeper, more intense experiences involve both the prolonged placement of the mind on an object and deeper, sharper observation of objects or phenomena. The capacity to reach this level of mental stability depends both on length of time as a practitioner, and on regularity and intensity of commitment. The remainder of the chapter outlines these stages in experiential development and conceptual acquisition. These experiences and their classifications are not intended to be exhaustive of the possibilities that present themselves during retreat participation, but are intended to represent the most common and significant sets of meaning-constructs that are acquired during the learning process, and in turn to show how derived meaning is applied to further practice and personal exploration and transformation, the subject of Chapter 3.

5.1 Being on Retreat and Being Mindful

Participants on their first retreats at the centre typically choose a day or weekend workshop, or a weekend, four- or nine-day retreat that caters for a range of beginners’ abilities. Generally, a first Vipassana retreat is an extension of an experimental journey that may include other forms of meditation, alternative health practices and other forms of Buddhism. Although novices vary in familiarity with Buddhism and meditation, most attempt to be open to the experience at least for the duration of the retreat. As KT expressed her feeling on her first Vipassana retreat, a ten-day retreat, that the first two to three days had been ‘weird’, and she was ‘not sure’, but on the third day she dided to suspend her doubt because the teachers seemed to know what they were talking about. She dided to do what they said for the duration of the retreat. This mixture of resistance, engagement and willingness to ‘take it on’ appears to be a common reaction during a first retreat.

This initial resistance is indicated in the interview material and in my own participant observation notes. At best, it will take a new practitioner some time to acclimatize to the retreat situation. At the beginning of a retreat, during the introductory session, the manager requests that ‘yogis’ move slowly, applying mindfulness to all their actions. However, it often takes time for new practitioners to slow their movements down. In my notes from several retreats I have commented that it appeared that some participants had had trouble slowing their movements down and being mindful. Their actions, such as closing doors, fidgetting with personal possessions and making eye contact, all displayed a palpable agitation. Many people spent considerable time sleeping during meditation and rest periods. While it is recommended that the retreat schedule be adhered to, it is not enforced, and people are at liberty to alter it slightly to suit their own needs. Some practitioners spoke openly about their favourite avoidance tactics: staying in their

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196 Information about retreats and teachers is obtained by word-of-mouth, from the newsletter, or from the website at www.meditation.asn.au.

197 On nine-day retreats, managers expect that many participants will miss periods for the first few days, and allow for the fact that people arrive tired and stressed at the beginning of a retreat.
room, reading, doing their washing. Most are simply unused to the continual effort to be mindful that is encouraged by the teachers.

It was noted in Section 3.1.1 that all retreat activity contributes to the development of mindfulness. The resistance towards being constantly mindful can be used as a meditation object in itself. When one begins to see how all of the expected retreat behaviours and meditation practices relate to the development of mindfulness, the mind begins to slow naturally and one’s resistance usually becomes more manageable. There is a visible change in participants’ behaviour: they begin to move more slowly, and those who were absent during some meditation periods begin to attend more sessions. In addition, the quality of one’s practice changes after the establishment of some mindfulness. While this may not happen on the first retreat or even for several, meditators reach a point where the mind feels sharper, there are fewer gaps in noting, objects are clearer, and mental states are easier to distinguish and label. Before this point is reached, however, many experience: inability to focus or concentrate the mind and to stop the internal chatter, and the constant distractions from physical pain and strong sensations.

5.2 Early Experiences with Vipassana

Many report that the inability to concentrate, and to remember to note the object as it appears to the mind is a difficulty at this stage, and many say that their minds ‘wander everywhere’. Learning about the naturally unruly tendencies of the untrained mind often serves as an incentive for the practitioner to keep trying. One said, “I can chart my progression over the last four years or whatever, and it took probably two years of nothing much happening, not much of a shift or anything, just going and listening and stuff.” This lack of ability to concentrate is usually accompanied by self-annoyance and self-judgment. EC recalled:

EC: You’re told a thousand times, you know, ‘Just be in the moment, and whatever’s happening, just observe it and don’t buy into it’, and all this sort of stuff. But when you’re there and experiencing it emotionally, and of course it’s a silent retreat so you’re not talking, you’re dealing with it by yourself. I was beating myself up about it, and so the more I tried to do it properly, the more I wasn’t because I was just getting into this vicious circle of ‘Oh no. It’s not working’, and because it wasn’t going to work while I was thinking like that, so like I’ve had very few meditation sessions where it is just calm and blissful. You know my mind is usually racing at a thousand miles an hour, but I just learned to accept that. I mean gradually, just by doing the meditation I’ve got better at it, and probably more so in the last year.

A common problem for meditators in this early stage is the accompaniment of the inability to focus by an almost constant self-judgement for one’s lack of ability. This reactivity extends into feeling annoyed with objects external to oneself. After
persistent effort, one’s noting becomes more consistently applied, and one’s reactivity subsides. The same practitioner continues:

EC: I got better at accepting what’s happening in that sit, that’s just what’s happening, like I remember when I first went to the Buddhist library, everything used to annoy me, like the urn turning off and the noises because I kept honing in on them and they just became real issues, and I just gradually realized over time that I was letting go of those external things, and it’s just been like a process of osmosis, sinking in and being able to practice what you are told all the time.

Another problematic occurrence for meditators, at this stage and for some time to come, is distraction by one’s internal dialogue. As Nyanaponika Thera’s notion of bare attention conveys, mindfulness is ideally an accurate, non-discursive registering of events. In Vipassana meditation, discursive thought is minimized so that it does not replace the meditation object as the focus of one’s immediate attention. Nyanaponika Thera lists three phases of the perceptual process: the first as an indistinct picture of the object, the second as closer attention to its details and its relationship to the observer, and the third as the coordination of experience—related to associative thinking from psychology—which enables the mind to compare the present perceptions with recollected similar perceptions. Until mindfulness becomes strong one aims for an object with minimal conceptual elaboration. Recollections and associative thinking are to be avoided, as they deflect the mind from noting the immediate present. One teacher explained to me that minimal internal dialogue is necessary for noting and investigation of the object, “Otherwise the meditation just becomes concentration”.

The experience of bodily pain from sitting in the same position for up to an hour is possibly the principal hindrance to mindfulness in the initial stage. One is encouraged not to ease the pain by changing posture, but to observe and note the pain as a meditation object. By maintaining one’s posture, one takes the opportunity to observe the nature of the pain. The following account is representative of early retreat experiences described by many practitioners.

HD: There was this beginning stage ... I was the sort of person who had to move every ten minutes. I suffered extreme pain. I could not follow two breaths in a row. I’d go to the teacher and they’d be very encouraging, and I think it was only the fact that I was going along to the American teachers who I could relate to and who talked about pain ... I gave someone my car keys on my first retreat so I couldn’t run away. They had group interviews, and I’d see that everyone

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198 Another quality of mindfulness is its nonjudgmental quality. See Kornfield, 1979, op.cit., p42.
was struggling the same as I was, so I kept at it, not very well. I’d skip a lot of the walking sessions and do my laundry, and I’d read, and I’d go and look at the notice board ... But for some reason I kept going, I don’t know why. So every time one of those teachers would come out to Australia, I’d do a ten-day retreat.202

The resistance eventually gives way to more mental engagement with the practice. Even before this point, meditators occasionally report the experience of a quiet, calm mind in meditation. At this stage, too, certain experiences are noted and begin to be interpreted according to a Buddhist perspective. Many connect with the notion of suffering through the bodily pain that arises, and when bare attention is successfully applied to the rise and fall of the breath, it may be used to observe impermanence.203

Becoming aware that one is prepared to work with whatever presents itself, and that the mind is noting objects as opposed to becoming lost in blind reaction, are taken as signs that mindfulness is developing. Gradually, with persistence, one develops a feeling of equanimity toward one’s immediate experience. RN, a practitioner of many years, puts it thus:

GE: So your actual approach to do with method is to note it (the object)?

RN: Yeah. Just be aware and see what happens to it. It may stay around for a while, or it might just disappear in a moment or whatever, to just observe with awareness, see what happens to it.

GE: And the trick is, from what I understand, you suddenly become aware that you’ve let the mind go into something or attach to something and so all you can do is just bring it back to the primary object.

RN: Yeah. Just bring it back to whatever you use as your focus of concentration, because it’s just a tool to use without clinging onto ... because if you cling onto the primary object, then it’s just a concentration practice.

When some equanimity towards one’s immediate experience has developed, the mind becomes more conscious of moments when it loses the object, and returns to it more easily. With this increased stability the mind can investigate, label, and discriminate between mental states without identifying with them. However, before this can happen, one must learn to distinguish concentration from insight, otherwise the afflictive states of mind that must be overcome so that Vipassana meditation can progress, do not arise.

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202 See the full transcript excerpt in Appendix 7.
203 Nyanaponika Thera, 1956, op.cit., p45.
5.3 The Distinction Between Concentration and Insight Practices

In order to distinguish concentration from insight, the difference between concentration—the ability to hold the mind on an object—and mindfulness—the ability to know where the mind is placed—must be understood. Concentration entails placement of the mind on one object and allowing it to remain there, while insight needs momentary concentration sustained on a changing object. The Mahasi Vipassana practice dispenses with the concentration practice and the attainment of the jhanas outlined in the Satipatthana Sutta, and it focusses exclusively on insight. Accordingly, practitioners are not taught concentration practice at BMIMC. As their practice progresses they may experience its effects by inadvertently focussing on and limiting awareness to one object, eg the abdomen, instead of applying momentary concentration to the primary and secondary objects. Teachers and advanced practitioners note that remaining on an object continuously, without noting any change, turns their practice into concentration. In my experience this may happen when the difference between the two practices is not clearly understood, and when the noting technique is not strong. It is easy to slip into concentration unwittingly during insight practice, as my own retreat notes illustrate:

Friday 30 April 2004. During the walking meditation period from 3:15 to 4pm, I began with my usual problem of the chattering mind. I decided to just focus on what was immediate to my experience as I walked, which was awareness of the body (mostly my feet and breathing), the sights passing by my eyes as I walked, and the sounds around me such as the wind, and the occasional bird. There was minimal thought, possibly some in the background, but these other things were definitely in the foreground. This describes my ‘experiential field’ of the moment. In truth, my attention was probably shifting very quickly between these things. Each object registered, that is, I was aware of each object as my attention fell on it. I didn’t label the objects with words, I was simply aware that my awareness had shifted and was shifting between these objects. I also noticed, and was thinking in words at this point, that in this more aware state, you seem to register the object more fully: colours and shapes seem brighter, more vivid, or ‘something’. The dominant sense of the state was ‘awareness’.

During the sitting or standing meditation period between 4 and 5pm, my mind was again a bit ‘all-over-the-place’ during the sitting meditation. At 4.45pm, the teacher indicated that it was time for standing meditation for those who wished to stand. I got myself into the lying posture instead. I found myself concentrating on the breath in the abdomen, which is easy for me in this

204 Goleman, D. The Varieties of the Meditative Experience, Rider and Company, 1978, p22. Goleman draws attention to the balance between concentration and mindfulness best for successful insight practice. He maintains that the one-pointedness of access concentration is essential in adopting the habit of bare attention, because mindfulness is applied to normal consciousness, and from the first jhana on, these normal processes cease. At the access level, perception and thought retain their usual patterns, but concentration is powerful enough to keep the meditator’s awareness being diverted from steadily noting these patterns.


206 Goleman, op.cit., p22.
position. Because of the mind-agitation, I tried focussing on the breath at the nostrils for a while, which seemed to help calm the mind. I remember shifting focus between the two places (the abdomen and the nostrils), and still having some awareness of my surroundings in the background. The same thing happened as in the walking meditation. I was clearly noting the shift in attention between objectecs. After a while I noticed that my attention had primarily settled on the abdomen, and my mind had calmed. There were no racy thoughts, no narratives, no mental pictures except of what my mind was focussed on. I had an awareness of alertness but calm, and a sense of the fact that all other mental states were agitated by comparison. The dominant sense here was one of mindfulness and calm, the same as in the walking meditation, but with more calm. When it was time to get up and go outside for the walking period, I moved my arm and placed my left hand and forearm on the floor in order to help myself back up into the sitting position. This produced a particular feeling in the mind that I labelled as ‘agitation’. I was about to get up and go about things at the pace and in the mental state that I normally experience. Instead, I caught this habitual pattern before it manifested, and deliberately kept focussing on the breath while moving very slowly. There was much more of a quality of calm, alertness, awareness, as I got up, walked to the door, opened and closed it, put my shoes on, and began to walk.

My own understanding of the difference between the two meditation periods was that the former was insight, and the latter predominantly concentration. While the state of mind in each case could be described as focussed awareness and calmness, each gave rise to its own dominant quality of mind. The insight was predominantly focussed awareness, and the concentration was calmness. The lying position seemed to facilitate an almost exclusive focus on the abdomen—my mind rarely drifted from it—which produced a concentration-type response. The concentrated mind proved to be a good vantage-point from which to note the passing stream of objects, and this was the first time that I had experienced both concentration and mindfulness in this close relationship. Two months later, during the June long-weekend retreat, I recorded the following:

The teacher began with, “Settle into the body. Be aware of the feeling against the cushion. Note the physical sensations.” I ral1 something about the mind and the five senses. While listening to the meditation instructions I found, at least for a few minutes, that I kept my awareness on my breath, with thoughts, sleepiness, and the semi-dream state being caught before they took over. There was the breath-awareness and the secondary object awareness, but my mind remembered the primary object more easily and constantly compared to previous times. Gaps in mindful attention still occurred, but for shorter periods, and when they did occur and were noted, the mind shifted back to the breath more easily. It seems to me that this quality of remembering the object, this direct awareness of where the mind is placed, and of how much of one’s attention is placed there, is ‘mindfulness’.

Concentration experiences are those that people generally equate with meditation: states of mind that are peaceful, blissful, while at the same time clear and focussed.
Often people trying meditation for the first time come with this expectation. Even those with some experience of Buddhism may view, with awe, the possibility of attaining the *jhana* that result from concentration practice. One teacher made commented about the expectations that often accompany the subject of Samatha practice and the *jhana*:

HU: And you say *jhana*, and people go, “Oh! *Jhana!*” All of the Buddhist stuff is a continuum. It’s not like you’re in or you’re out. It’s just this progression of the whole teachings. They weave in with each other, and you just understand at a deeper level, or that your practice becomes at a deeper level. The first jhanic factor is initial application, and the next one is sustained application. And then there comes what they call rapture, and the other one is the one-pointedness. That’s it. That’s the jhanic factors, and obviously if you practise long enough sitting on the breath and they take on a very different perspective, but they’re just normal things that we’re all familiar with ...

Some meditators bring to the practice a previously developed concentration ability and an acquired appreciation of its meditative value. HR first encountered the Samatha and Vipassana practices, and the difference between them, through reading a book, the technique for the latter being given as to ‘fix attention on whatever comes along’. When she tried concentration practice some time later, she found it useful as a support for the Vipassana. Her concentration strengthened, her mind was calmer, more centred, and did not wander as much. SI described her prior experience with concentration practice at the Sydney Zen Centre before taking up Vipassana:

SI: The bliss? It was just very deep, and I went into the state of nothingness and timelessness, and I kept on losing the body. That’s in my first meditation. When I came out of it I found it didn’t really relate to daily life, and that the way you could get the best techniques was in meditation, and then it didn’t give you any help to deal with ordinary daily problems or difficulties that arose.

Both practitioners had arrived at their own conclusion about the value of concentration practice prior to their involvement with BMIMC, but many others learn to attribute value to these two types of experience through practical instruction and *dhamma* talks given during retreats and in workshops. Much debate takes place in Theravada Buddhism about the relative values of concentration and insight practice, but Mahasi Vipassana practitioners view concentration primarily as an aid to the development of mindfulness and insight into the nature of existence, which brings about *nibbana*, or release from the cycle of existence. Engler describes the difference as concentration leading to withdrawal from sensory input in progressive states characterized by increasingly refined tranquility and bliss. This induces conflict-free functioning by temporarily suppressing the operation of the drives and the higher perceptual-intellectual functions. Conversely, insight leads to the observation of sensory input in progressive states of knowledge of the nature of all
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phenomena.\textsuperscript{207} With respect to the goal of practice, the experiences arising from the two practices are classed roughly as productive or unproductive\textsuperscript{208}. Sukkha experiences that arise from concentration are accepted as part of the practice, and as a sign that concentration is developing, but not as ends in themselves.

5.4 ‘Right Effort’

This example serves the twofold purpose of first demonstrating how a concept can be grasped experientially without necessarily much training or development in the practice, and can be used by labelling an object—to isolate it in the mind—in order to investigate it further. Second, application of the concept can lead the practitioner to an understanding of the concept’s place in a broader interpretive framework.

In one of the Monday night meditation sessions in 2004 the teacher introduced the use of Right Effort in meditation practice thus.\textsuperscript{209} During the second sitting we were instructed to keep the mind on the rise and fall of the abdomen. ‘When the mind wanders, note the wandering, and bring the mind back to the breath’. A while later the teacher instructed us to put effort into keeping the mind on the primary object, as much effort as we needed to, and to note the effort involved. After about five minutes, he asked us to divide into groups of two or three to discuss our experience of using effort in this way. Some comments were ‘more awake’, ‘felt like I was waking up’, ‘with more effort I was more successful but tired’, and ‘the effort made me feel tired’. The teacher had us apply effort for a further five minutes, and note the effort but with more emphasis on the noting. Noting in this instance meant to be continually aware of how much effort was involved from moment to moment. Discussion followed, with the comment from the teacher that when the effort is noted, less effort becomes needed, because the system somehow rights itself. By extending the second sitting into the discussion, the teacher built effectively on the experiential state established in the meditation. Practitioners had identified and established in their minds the factor of right effort.

By learning to work with right effort in this way practitioners could go on to develop an understanding of the relationship between the three concentration factors, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. In explaining the development of the three concentration factors of the Eight-Fold Path, Ven. U Silananda draws attention to the phrase from the Satipatthana Sutta, ‘ardently, clearly comprehending and mindful’. ‘Ardently’ here refers to investing energy into being mindful, and

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{207} Engel, 1984, op.cit., pp27-8.
  \item \textsuperscript{208} See Bhikkhu Bodhi (ed.), \textit{In the Buddha’s Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon}, Wisdom Publications, 2005, p228. Bhikkhu Bodhi, as do many others, states that the attainment of the jhanas silences the defilements, it does not eradicate them. Many practitioners refer to the fact that concentration only suppresses the hindrances, preventing the mind from using their identification as a disciplinary aid to the development of mindfulness.
  \item \textsuperscript{209} This session was held on Monday 22 March 2004 at the Buddhist Library, Camperdown.
\end{itemize}
therefore the energy you invest, ‘when you have mindfulness combined with energy or effort, the mind can stay on the object for some time, and therefore has concentration’. He adds that the three aspects of the group of concentration must be practised together\textsuperscript{210}. This example, like the one before it, has an experiential base which is easy to access and identify with the aid of the labelling technique. The broader conceptual framework takes a period of time to comprehend.

5.5 Identifying the Hindrances

The five hindrances to meditation: sense-desire, aversion (usually experienced as anger), sloth and torpor (usually expressed as laziness or tiredness), restlessness (when the mind is distracted), and doubt (about the efficacy of the practice), are found and discussed under \textit{dhammas}, the fourth \textit{satipatthana}.\textsuperscript{211} The hindrances are held to be the main inner impediments to the development of concentration and insight,\textsuperscript{212} and training in their identification may be introduced early into one’s practice as part of mindfulness training. The early experiences mentioned above demonstrate the action of the hindrances on the mind before its training to identify them. Inability to hold the mind on the breath is often a result either of sleepiness or restlessness, and one’s immediate reaction to physical pain is aversion, wanting to push the pain away. Daydreaming, thinking about a favourite television program can be classed as sense-desire. Teaching addresses these by drawing attention to what goes on in the mind habitually. This was the purpose of observing \textit{Noble Silence} between 7pm and 10am on one beginner’s weekend retreat. When asked to describe experiences with the period of \textit{Noble Silence}, one person’s response was ‘irritability’. The teacher explained that the purpose was to notice the effect that silence has on our registering and noting of mental states. The arising and ceasing go on all the time in daily life, but we don’t notice them. We don’t need to get annoyed with ourselves for having them, but just to observe their arising and ceasing, their effect on the body, and their quality.\textsuperscript{213}

Participants on a four-day retreat ranged from beginners to advanced.\textsuperscript{214} To cater for this range of experience, the teacher held a \textit{Beginner’s Mind Group} from 5pm to 6pm, and scheduled interviews for advanced practitioners in the afternoons on the first three days. The purpose of the group was to discuss problems arising in meditation, how to deal with them, and to clarify points of technique. Among the teacher’s responses to the range of questions put to him in the session on the first day of the retreat, the following related to the subject of the hindrances:

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\textsuperscript{210} U Silananda, 1990, \textit{op.cit.}, pp20-21.
\textsuperscript{211} Bhikkhu Bodhi. “Satipatthana Sutta”, in \textit{The Majjhima Nikaya}, \textit{op.cit.}, p151. The sutta lists the hindrances as sensual desire, ill-will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and remorse, and doubt. The terms I have used here reflect those in common usage by teachers and practitioners.
\textsuperscript{212} See note 158 in the \textit{Majjhima Nikaya}, \textit{op.cit.}, p1194.
\textsuperscript{213} See Appendix 2: Beginners’ Weekend Workshop Schedule, 29-30 May 2004.
\textsuperscript{214} See Appendix 4: Four-Day Retreat Schedule, 14 to 17 February, 2004.
1 Where sleepiness is a problem in maintaining a focus on the breath, pay attention to connection between the breath and the sleepiness. Does sleepiness occur on the in-breath or out-breath?

2 When pain comes, focus on it. Do you notice aversion? Then switch your attention to the resistance. Notice the quality of the labelling so as to be more aware of the quality of the resistance—to the sensation, and to being aware—for example, ‘dislike’. Notice the sensation and the relationship to the pain. Try another posture if the pain is really distracting. This is better than fidgetting and losing concentration.

3 In dealing with aversion, eg thinking about getting through the next three days of the retreat, ‘don’t believe the story’. Here the teacher explained that the ideal is not to get involved with the content of the story, or with thinking about the various things and issues that arise in one’s mind, such as life’s events, or things that need to be done after the retreat. The idea is to note the mental content accurately, then return to the primary object. For example, is the thought of getting through the next three days aversion?

In the examples above the two teachers used minimal doctrinal categorical terminology, referring to the hindrances as ‘mind-states’ or distractions, and states that people typically report experiencing and having difficulty with. Learning occurs through noting the different mental states experienced during meditation, with the purpose of training the mind to acknowledge and understand the nature of distraction. From this perspective, aversion and avoidance are seen as a strategy for dealing with existential pain. Another function of training in recognizing the hindrances is to learn to work with them correctly in order to break down our natural resistance to being aware. These were the purposes of a nine-day retreat in April-May 2004.

5.5.1 The Nine-day Retreat in April-May 2004

During this retreat the five hindrances were treated both as meditation objects and as a labelling system for the mental states experienced during practice. In this way a more developed framework was introduced, a typology for noting, identifying and discriminating between mental states. In brief, the method was to note and label the state, and to explore its quality without ‘buying into any surrounding story’. The teachers explained that one may find that the story has already begun to unfold as the mental state is noted. This was held to be more likely with sense-desire and aversion, because they are more object-directed than sleepiness or restlessness. The

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216 See Analayo, 2003, op.cit., p269. He refers to the discussion in Sutta 137 in the Majjhima Nikaya, of desire, grief, and equanimity as the three satipathanas. Also see U Silananda, 1990, op.cit., pp22-3. He notes that the phrase in the Satipatthana Sutta, covetousness and grief in the world is a reference to desire and aversion, the two grosser of the five hindrances, where ‘in the world’ refers to the body, the five aggregates. He states that the Buddha meant that removal of the hindrances
state was to be identified through selection of the hindrance that best described it. During the retreat a small number of talks was devoted specifically to the subject of the hindrances. They were named and described, and how to work with them in meditation was addressed. For instance, on the sixth day, the morning talk described their role in the excuses we make for not being able to meditate properly. These included the like of blaming the schedule, or the length of meditation periods, or the noise made by other meditators. This method of investigation and recognition for correction was the backbone of the retreat.217

The technique was supplemented with two others: application of compassionate understanding, and thought reflection. When we think of our own problems and difficulties, we direct feelings of compassion towards ourselves, not least when we develop aversion to our own inability to meditate successfully because we have allowed the hindrances to meditation to dominate.218 The practice of compassionate understanding was applied to training in the hindrances by labelling them and objectifying their content. This allowed participants to see the process instead of getting caught in the story. By observing the effect of the content on the body, emotions, and mind, we directly experienced the suffering caused to ourselves. This demonstrated cause and effect, and also engendered compassion for others, because we understood what others experience. I recalled one of my experiences from this retreat in conversation with HU, one of the teachers from the centre.

GE: When you were talking about feelings of discomfort, in just letting be, it’s interesting because that’s one of my own problems. There’s that real wanting to get away from unpleasant things. It actually dominates a lot of my meditation.

HU: That’s a realization, that’s what’s happening. The hard thing is this thing of beating up on yourself, this ‘I’m no good, I can’t do this’, or whatever … That’s generally what happens next when you have this sort of realization … so that’s the next thing. ‘Ah! I’m judging myself.’ So it’s kind of like working through all these different strategies we have, that the hindrances essentially block us from observing what’s really happening, and they’re just different mental processes, different values or interpretations we put on the experience.

GE: That’s actually an area where I had an experience akin to what you’re talking about: if you let it be, it changes. I did nine-day retreat earlier this year, where the teachers were working a lot with the hindrances. They were saying, “Note the mental state, label it, and then go back to the breathing.” Well, I was amazed! It took a few goes to do it, but I’d been really, really, sleepy. That was when I’d first noticed it, and instead of just going with it, I noted it and literally,

results from good meditation. It appears that learning to deal with desire and aversion effectively is significant for the development of concentration and mindfulness.

See Appendix 6.

The two teachers are known for their focus on techniques such as compassionate understanding and thought reflection.
in words, told myself to ‘be more mindful’. So I sat there focussing on the breath while I was aware of the sleepiness, and it started to change. And I thought, “Oh. That’s how that can be used!” That was my first awareness of that, because before, I was just going with it.

My retreat notes about the above experience read:

At one point during the retreat I was having considerable trouble with drowsiness, as I often do. I found that by labelling the mental state ‘sleepiness’, and further, by sitting with it while focussing on the feel of it, rather than discussing it internally and getting annoyed, I was able to maintain a mindful focus on the state, even while I was experiencing the state at the same time. It seemed that my mind had two states concurrently until a short time had passed, the drowsiness subsided and the state of mindfulness remained.

This was both my first experience of being able to direct or control my own mental state in meditation, and a striking instance of the direct application of a doctrinal framework to the contents of immediate experience. It may appear that experience is being interpreted in its immediacy, but this learning process has distinct experiential and conceptual components. As with the noting technique generally, the identification and labelling of the mental state functions to keep internal discourse to a minimum. The bare attention to the state, applying mindfulness to the experience as my example demonstrates, prevents the mind from identifying with the state itself. After a while, the state itself begins to change and mindfulness remains. This is a clear example of the transformative function of mindfulness at the experiential level where all conceptual activity is about the experience, and internal discourse is minimal. As with learning to distinguish concentration and insight practice, the process has two aspects. The first is learning to identify the hindrances experientially by applying the labelling system to the contents of experience. The second is learning the meaning and value attributed to them by Buddhist doctrine.

In Buddhism the classification of mental states as wholesome or unwholesome is a consequence of their role in one’s progress on the path to enlightenment. This categorization is exemplified by the relationship between the hindrances and the enlightenment factors as negative and positive, unwholesome and wholesome mental states respetively. This doctrinal stance was explained during one of the dhama talks during Retreat 2. It was stated that with practice, the hindrances: sense-desire, aversion, sloth and torpor, restlessness, and doubt, may start to recede, and the enlightenment factors: mindfulness, tranquility, investigation, energy, joy, concentration and equanimity may start to arise. U Silananda makes the statement that the hindrances are removed only when they make room for more wholesome mental states, suggesting that they will not be removed from one’s experience.

before the enlightenment factors themselves are cultivated. He adds that the enlightenment factors are the components of knowledge of the *dhammas*, which knowledge begins with ‘discerning the arising and fading away’.

Temporary removal of the hindrances occurs in meditation when one is mindful. However, it can be seen that lasting self-transformation involves development of habitual positive mental states. The impetus for sustained application is the experience of the absence of the hindrances in meditation—and how clear the mind itself feels when it is not experiencing one of these mental states—coupled with their designation as unwholesome states.

### 5.6 Insight Experiences

When mindfulness is developed to a degree whereat the noting technique is rigorously and constantly applied, and the practitioner has learnt to identify and have some direction over the hindrances, the practitioner’s mind becomes more stable in meditation. Generally, progress is discerned in the fact that practitioners realize that their minds have lost their tendencies to wander, and they are capable of more prolonged and deeper levels of concentration and mindfulness. They can sustain attention on a single object without slipping into concentration because the technique of constant noting is strong. In the following excerpt, the practitioner, also a teacher, was commenting on his appreciation of the aspect of the practice involving the primary object. However, within his reflection about Mahasi’s instructions to do with following the secondary object later in the practice, is a description of how the mind can settle on objects once the hindrances have been dealt with.

HU: I mean, the whole thing with that, the whole relationship with the primary object, is quite a difficult one to come to terms with because there can often be a sense of pushing this other thing away and coming back to the primary object, and that’s not necessarily the skillful way of doing it, either. It’s like pushing this thing away. It’s like there’s an aversion there.

GE: And that can be the very thing that gives you more understanding of what’s going on?

HU: I mean, that’s one of the things with the Mahasi system, that it tends to—in my way of thinking—tends to overemphasize the primary object. It’s funny because it’s presented as a mindfulness practice. If you look at it, it’s essentially a concentration practice. If you’re continually bringing your attention back to this one object, then it’s concentration. But if you actually read the Mahasi stuff, later on after he’s gone through all this detailed explanation, ‘watch the rising and falling’, there’ll be a paragraph saying, ‘later in the practice, if other things arise you just note them. Don’t worry about the rising and falling.’ But it’s kind of like a little addendum here. But to me, in many ways, that’s the practice. My understanding is that at a later point, when a lot of those

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hindrances and the mental stuff have started to drop away, it’s not so much an issue, whether it’s the abdomen or some other object, that the mind will naturally rest on a particular single object or process, and concentration will be there naturally without this kind of struggle. To me, mindfulness is in some ways a tool to concentration, a way of dealing with all of this other stuff, you know, the self-judgment, the doubt, the aversions, all the rest of it. It’s like these are all the things that are happening, and after a while, after watching all the different things we throw up, they just all start to drop away. And then there’s a much clearer object, there’s the body or the breath or whatever, and not all this other stuff. But if we just try and go for the object, and all this other stuff’s happening, then we don’t really know how to deal with it. And then we’re in this struggle between ‘Oh, come back to the abdomen. Oh I’m no good at it. Come back to the abdomen.’ It’s just this constant struggle.

KBN adverts to his ability to select and maintain focus on a specific object:

KBN: ... Vipassana, which I understand as taking whatever phenomena present themselves as predominant to the attention. So one brings attention to the primary object. I’ll expand on this. The primary object is the breathing for me, like I’ll always look at the breathing, but the breathing is never a very dominant object. It’s always something else, and in retreats it’s often just the sitting. So I’ve come to slowly realize that the actual sitting, the contemplation of sitting itself, the whole body sitting, is actually an object, the most common object I’ve used, so the breathing is somewhere within that and I can zoom in onto the kind of smaller phenomena. The sitting as a whole is what I use, being in that sitting and within that there are objects within that. So that hardness of the cushion or the seat itself which is earth element, that hardness itself can be an object. One can have one’s attention on that quite a lot. It gives you a base to look at other things.

This practitioner’s reference to the seat as the earth element is a reference to the *dhatu*, the elemental aspects of experience. The four elements are a conceptual scheme to map out direct experience. Instruction about use of the elements in this manner was given during a four-day retreat for beginners and advanced practitioners in February 2004. It was explained that their purpose is to develop accuracy and precision of awareness. They relate to basal responses: movement, tingling, sensation, pressure, heat and light, labelled as: earth/resistance, air/movement, fire/heat and cold/water, moisture and cohesion. As the above example illustrates, application of this scheme to mapping of experience is not advanced practice. However, development of mindfulness is necessary for practitioners to be able to hold their minds on objects in order to note the changes in their experience of them.

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Footnote 221: See Appendix 4.
Another aspect of one’s practical development at this point concerns the relationship between the experiential state and its labelling. The range of experiences described above, and even their labels in most instances, are common to the realm of everyday experience. This includes the inability to concentrate the mind, the chattering mind, and being distracted by physical pain. Even the hindrances in both effect and terminology are part of one’s everyday reality. However, beginning with the discrimination of concentration and insight, experiences become harder to make sense of without understanding their relevance from a Buddhist perspective, and without reference to the Buddhist frameworks that support the doctrinal constructs.

For instance, many people appreciate suffering and impermanence as concepts, the experiences of which do not take much mindfulness to identify in meditation. One can identify them as physical pain and the changing stream of sensations that dominate the mind’s attention. However, the deeper experiences relating to these constructs that advanced practitioners describe cannot be accessed without a high degree of mindfulness. It appears that with the development of mindfulness and access to deeper meditative states comes the need to utilize Buddhist terminology and frameworks in their understanding. The experiential account below illustrates a range of experiences that are often reported by practitioners with considerable experience in the practice:

**HD:** My experiences so far I sort of put into three stages. There was this beginning stage. I had to move every ten minutes. I suffered extreme pain. I could not follow two breaths in a row ... A little bit of concentration started to develop. I could use pain as a concentration object. Then I noticed that the pain was not constant, that when I watched it, it would break up, and on one retreat I found I could be mindful all day long. I could feel more sensations than the day before. I had so much energy, I didn’t need to sleep, and I’d observe many aspects to the rising and falling. I used to do extremely slow walking meditation, like we’re talking an hour to do ten metres. I could see all these minute sensations. And yeah, one afternoon I was doing meditation, and suddenly nausea started overwhelming me—it was just extremely unpleasant—and fear as well. I couldn’t sleep. I’d turn over and my body was just vibration. In the second period, when everything got more exciting, and interesting and fascinating—and it was really pleasant—the body’s really pleasant. Then the dukkha decade followed. That was the third stage, which was basically the ’90s, I suppose. A large part of that was very unpleasant sensations in the body, and I believe that this stage of where you’re gaining insight into dukkha very strongly, is very short for some people, and very intense and long for others.222

At the time of interview the practitioner felt that her practice was moving into a new phase, wherein she was experiencing changeability from one sitting to another during intensive practice; from pain in the body to pleasant sensations in the body; to equanimity, to frustrating sits where there was little sensation in the body and no discernible object. She had interpreted this as the mind’s reviewing mental states

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222 See the full transcript excerpt in Appendix 7.
such as desire and aversion, with a view to ‘giving them up, releasing them’. This excerpt, reproduced in more of its entirety in Appendix 7, is the clearest and fullest account of a practitioner’s experiential progress in the practice that I was given. Generally, practitioners do not relate their experiential progress in the practice, including specific instances of learning or leaps in understanding. Instead, when asked about their experience—either routine or unusual—with Vipassana, they tend to recall either one experience or one kind of experience that occurs regularly. With the development of mindfulness, a practitioner’s experiences, means of interpretation and skill in the practice appear to accumulate with time, and specific instances appear to contribute to this sense of overall accumulation, adding to the practitioner’s stock of knowledge. Most typically, deeper meditative experiences tend to be experienced as pleasurable, interpreted as sukkha, or experiences of dukkha/suffering and anicca/impermanence. While the excerpt above shows how the practitioner concerned found her experience dominated by one type or another, sukkha, dukkha, or anicca at specific times, the latter two, dukkha and anicca tend to dominate reports generally, and appear to be related in practitioners’ experiences. By this stage of the practice they are well acquainted with foundational Buddhist doctrines such as the Three Marks of Existence and the Four Noble Truths. Some advanced practitioners recalled experiences of deep sukkha. Instance the following:

KBN: I was sitting, sitting, sitting, and then I noticed I had built up some saliva. I was swallowing mouthfuls of saliva, and then I had ... I was like a rocket ship, vapours streaming off me. There was a complete lightness of being, feeling I could just ... someone said to me it was like a rebirth experience, remembering your mouth being full, so I rushed off to see (the teacher) and he said, ‘You’re just experiencing a deep level of sukkha’, but I think, “What was its significance?” It was just extreme comfort, which is probably an effect of deep concentration.

Many advanced practitioners recalled experiences typically associated with Vipassana practice, and related to dukkha and anicca, the first two of the Three Marks of Existence. Those practitioners who reported these experiences, either directly or indirectly, had been practising for roughly between six and thirty years. Some practitioners reported experiencing dukkha in ways that went beyond the registering of the physical pain that occurs from sitting for long periods. The following excerpt, which illustrates the practitioner’s development of mindfulness and ability to meditate on pain, also indicates the beginning of what is commonly interpreted as the experience of anicca, impermanence:

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223 The practitioner who had been committed to the practice for six years is a particularly intense meditator. She had had considerable experience with both Transcendental Meditation and Zen before coming to Vipassana, and therefore, her concentration was already strong. Chapter 6 addresses such issues as personal religious history and prior relevant experience with other meditation techniques.
HD: For some reason I kept going, and then I suppose a little bit of concentration started to develop. I’d do a ten-day here and a twenty-day there, and I still thought I was hopeless. But I kept doing it, and then I … yeah … I did start to notice that I could use pain. I used to get a sheet of pain in my back. Then I noticed that the pain was not constant, that when I watched it it would break up, and there would be vibration in the pain, and I think I remember telling the teachers that some of the vibrations are painful and some aren’t. So that was quite exciting, and I sensed that the teachers … they would say, “Oh, keep going.”

As indicated, the concepts of suffering and impermanence are easier to identify and interpret in one’s experience, and easier to utilize in the construction of one’s frame of reference. These concepts have been shown to be related to bare experiences that lend themselves easily to specific interpretations. Some experiences can be interpreted afterwards, as was noted above, and some experiences seem to come as part of an experience-concept package in that they have already been shaped by doctrinal material. During participant observation, in the teachings and instructions from several retreats and Monday night meditation sessions, and from interview material, I observed how certain lists—conceptual maps—are employed to map out experience, and how the teachers introduce these concepts to aid learning and understanding of the practice.

Mahasi Sayadaw states that the practice in Vipassana meditation is to observe and contemplate the swift and successive occurrences of mental phenomena that seem to occur simultaneously, but in fact occur sequentially. With practice comes the ability to observe the arising and vanishing of each process at the very moment of its occurrence.224 Some practitioners reported the experience of the arising and passing away of phenomena, and some referred to the experience of the breakdown of phenomena, which they took to be an experience of anicca. The experience of arising, and its connection to anicca, appears to have formed the basis of reflections and contemplations about Dependent Origination for one practitioner. When asked about specific meditative experiences, she responded, “I suppose the teaching of Dependent Origination is something that comes into my mind now, just watching the way things arise, and relate it to other things like the connections between things.” Without further description it is hard to tell exactly how the connections are observed, but the meditator’s words indicate that she used the basic experience of the arising of phenomena to contemplate the doctrine of Dependent Origination. Dukkha and anicca were recalled as dominant in SI’s experience of the dukkha jnanas, the insight knowledges of suffering, while on a one-month solitary retreat:

SI: … and they took me to depths of concentration that I have never experienced before in my life, nor since, and they took me through. It’s still in the dukkha jnanas. You’ve probably read about them. The dukkha jnanas are the

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three insight knowledges you know when we see impermanence for the first time. You know how we all experience impermanence, but it’s quite mental. We’re still living in it, you know. They take you to a point where you see mind-moment and nothing else.

GE: So you’ve actually got to be quite concentrated.

SI: You actually see that there is no mind moment before and there is no mind moment yet to come. There is non-existence except for that one moment, and I’d seen it some time before. They wanted me to get through the dukkha jhanas as soon as possible, and so I still live in the past and future and all of that, but I actually know, I have seen, that they don’t exist. It comes instantaneously like a flash, but your behaviour takes years to catch up with your insight, and when they took me through it was like it just happened (inaudible) most horrific experience of your life, and Joseph Goldstein describes it as the time when a yogi picks up their mat and goes home. It’s just pain, absolute mental pain. It lasts for about three days—I can’t believe it—it’s too hard.

From the examples above it can be seen that experiences of dukkha and anicca are easy to understand and accept, and further, how certain experiential phenomena lend themselves to specific interpretations. Many experienced practitioners have direct experiences that lend themselves easily to interpretation as dukkha or anicca. Only one practitioner interviewed reported a direct experience of anatta, or non-self. Mahasi Sayadaw outlines the goal of practice as the realization ‘that the self, the living entity, exists as a continuous process of elements of mind which occur singly at a time and in succession’. The experience of anatta is a stated outcome of the practice. However, comments during interviews reflect the practitioner’s own thoughts and contemplations about the notion, as opposed to their direct experience of it. I commented to one of the teachers that the practitioners generally had some understanding of dukkha and anicca, but seemed to have trouble with anatta, and that they take it on more as a given. The following is a paraphrase of the response:

EBS: They don’t really have any experience of it, because when people come to Buddhism from Christianity, the key representative of the objective space of being is God. The representative in the subjective space of being is me. So this relationship between the two is really significant. So I think where this leads people is that there’s fear around not-self for a lot of people. People are not fearful of anicca because they can see it, and they have experience of the notion of suffering. They have experiences of not being happy, and the notion of ‘just when I think I’ve got my act together, on some level I don’t feel happy’. So

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225 This practitioner is a Vipassana teacher with considerable scholarly and meditative experience. Many remarks made by him in classes and workshops address the resistance to change and the desire to cling to forms of self-identification, experienced by practitioners. His comments have suggested that this resistance is responsible for practitioners not accessing the experience of anatta.

they’ve kind of got it, right? The same with impermanence it’s pretty obvious. You can see things arising and passing away. It’s actually not a threat to my existence that things arise and pass away. What is a threat to my existence is that I don’t have everyday experiences of this. Everyday experience provides everyday data, and I reckon this is one of the things you only get by intensive meditation.\(^{227}\)

It appears that the notion of \textit{anatta} and its somewhat anticipated experience, serves as an aim and inspiration for continued practice in that it is taken on as a proposition to work with. In this way it serves the same function as the notion of \textit{emptiness}, dominant in the thought and discourse of the Vajrayana practitioners discussed in Chapter 4. Two further doctrinal frameworks need mentioning in this respect. The first is Mahasi Sayadaw’s \textit{Thirteen Stages of Insight}, which practitioners refer to and use mainly as a confirmation of their progress in the practice. The second is the \textit{Noble Eight-Fold Path} and its three groupings, \textit{panna}/wisdom: right view and resolve; \textit{si\=la}/ethics: right speech, action, and livelihood; \textit{samadhi}/concentration (in this context I take it to refer to meditation generally): right effort, mindfulness and concentration.\(^{228}\) All participant observation and interview data collected for both centres, BMIMC and Vajrayana Institute, indicate that this doctrine plays a sizeable role in the commitment process for both groups of practitioners. Bhikkhu Bodhi’s and Keown’s comments, that the path is cumulative, not linear, where the eight factors are practised simultaneously,\(^{229}\) is relevant to a consideration of the learning process for Vipassana practitioners. Although the tradition holds \textit{samadhi} to refer to concentration and \textit{panna} to wisdom in the sense of insight or Vipassana,\(^{230}\) and Western practitioners come to this understanding with time, in the early stages of involvement, two of the three terms hold slightly different meanings. \textit{Samadhi} appears to refer to both Vipassana, and Metta as a concentration practice, while \textit{panna}/wisdom is understood in the sense of knowledge: the application of Buddhist doctrine to experience. Throughout one’s engagement with Vipassana and Buddhism, the combination of \textit{panna}, \textit{si\=la} and \textit{samadhi} provides continuous orientation to the practice.

5.7 \textbf{The Four Noble Truths in Concept and Experience}

From this perspective, the doctrine of the \textit{Four Noble Truths}, which is an over-arching framework for the interpretation of experience and existence, is probably the one least able to be experienced directly. People come to an appriation and acceptance of it through reflection on its import. The following practitioner’s experience on his

\(^{227}\) These comments were made alongside considerable discussion about the Western understanding of self, especially in relation to a Christian upbringing. They will be treated more fully in forthcoming chapters.

\(^{228}\) Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2005, \textit{op.cit.}, p225. The eight factors are outlined here.


\(^{230}\) This view was outlined in a \textit{Sutta} Study weekend facilitated by Patrick Kearney on 30-31 August, 2003, at BMIMC.
first retreat indicates how the notion of *dukkha* can be grasped experientially, and how it may lead to an acceptance of the *Four Noble Truths*.

GE: So, with that first retreat, when you said you were starting to get a sense of the Four Noble Truths and the nature of suffering, how did that apply to your meditation?

EBS: I think it was this realization that there was a way of thinking about my existence that I never thought about before, and that if I applied the scientist approach, to just keep collecting data, that it seemed like it all made sense. Because the way I often describe insight to people is you can kind of do it with those dot drawings that the kids have, that if you join them all up according to one-two-three-four-five, it might turn out like it’s a donkey, but if you join them up a different way, it’s the same dots, all of a sudden you see an elephant. So it’s the same data, but you’re seeing things quite differently. So for me, notions like the Four Noble Truths. So the notion of suffering is the First Truth. I think the first retreat was mainly around that, but the other Noble Truths are quite … it takes you a while to really get them, so the notion that the cause of this is craving. So it’s like … to get that, I think you often need a really good sense of suffering—*dukkha* just arising—because then you can watch out for the next bit underneath it, which is the craving. So you can’t just go straight to craving. I think it does go one-two-three-four. You’ve gotta get the picture of *dukkha* in yourself.

GE: In retreats, was that just reflecting on life experience, like watching thoughts and things come up, or was it more to do with physical pain?

EBS: It was more to do with physical, actual experience. So I think in the first retreat, the general notion of *dukkha*. To get that, I need to have a lot of detail, specifics of *dukkha*, to get a general sense of *dukkha*. So I think that Goldstein and Salzburg were very good, the way they were running their retreats, because it’s about working at a minute level with pain. So ‘Just keep sitting. Just keep watching what the mind does with that pain. Just stay with it a little bit longer. Another ten seconds. Just watch that.’ So this notion of working moment-to-moment with what’s going on, and seeing moment-to-moment how *dukkha* arises—and it arises everywhere, in your body, in your mind—and it was a sense of being pointed like a scientist would be to the data. Keep looking at it. And don’t just understand it theoretically. Find it in the next moment. You’ll find it five seconds later, five seconds later, five seconds later, so it’s ‘keep bringing it back to what’s going on now’. This is the sensation.

6 Conclusions

Exploration and discussion in this chapter has focussed largely on learning as the process of attribution of meaning to experiential states. Familiarity with the practices, experiential states and their interpretive frameworks can be seen to
constitute a stock of knowledge that practitioners acquire from their participation, learn to work with individually in the practice, and begin to use in reflection upon experience more generally. This stock of knowledge is acquired through two processes: apprehension as the experiential identification, labelling, and conceptual categorization of mental states, and comprehension as the acquired understanding of the relationships between these categorizations within the Buddhist frame of reference, according to Buddhist terminology and meaning. Apprehension can be seen to take place in three general stages of experiential development and conceptual acquisition, outlined in Section 4 above. The first stage consists of those experiences especially common to new meditators that are attributed to a lack of mindfulness: poor concentration, a distracted mind, reactivity to pain. The second occurs when the development of some mindfulness allows the meditator to note these mental distractions and label and investigate them as mental states. With this degree of mindfulness and skill with labelling established, the meditator begins to notice, explore, and attribute meaning to types of meditative experience, while experientially part of everyday awareness, that have special significance within a Buddhist frame of reference. These experiential types are commonly interpreted as sukkha/pleasure, dukkha/suffering and anicca/impermanence. Generally, experiences belonging to the first two stages are easy to recall and articulate; even the hindrances are within the realm of everyday experience. These later, stage three experiences become harder to discuss without recourse to Buddhist doctrinal terminology, and without conceptual preparation and mediation beforehand.

From an individual perspective, several factors may affect one’s progress in learning the practice. In Section 4.1 above, it was shown that learning on a first retreat has two facets. The first is understanding the purpose and structure of the retreat setting and acclimatizing to it, and the second is one’s learning and understanding of, and development in, the practice. With respect to the first, in reality it may take a new practitioner more than one and usually several retreats to get used to being on retreat, but as was pointed out above, it does not take more than a few days for even the most agitated participant in the group to begin to settle into the routine. The nature and rate of one’s development in the practice can be aﬀected by the number, frequency and length of retreats attended. From the above it can be seen that shorter retreats give a taste. A novice learns the basal technique, some of the fundamental concepts and their practical applications. Longer retreats give the mind time to settle and to let go of one’s everyday life and mental state. When the mind slows things may come to the surface, and this allows for more prolonged observation. The practitioner may gain a clearer picture of what is normally masked by an everyday mental state. For instance, longer retreats allow more time to identify, observe, and work with the hindrances. However, the learning process is somewhat different for each practitioner. The acquisition of a stock of knowledge will continue with participation in retreats, workshops, weekly meditation sessions, or by attending Buddhist talks and classes.

231 Greil, op.cit.
The nature of this stock of knowledge will be affected by: the nature of practical instruction and doctrinal tuition given, what is dominant in practitioners’ experiences during a given retreat, practitioners’ own responses, and by what supplementary practices and dhamma talks they encounter. The process of learning Vipassana must be understood as more than a matter of learning the outer behaviours of a meditator, and learning the concepts and their meanings associated with the practice in the way that one learns a new language. Learning becomes more self-directed by success in accessing states of awareness normally obscured in everyday awareness. Beyond the experience of the distracted mind, the meditator accesses mental states that normally have no meaning or existence outside of everyday life. For instance, many have trouble identifying mindfulness initially, as a quality of mind within their own experience. The effort to do so means that one must learn to marry concepts with experience not part of one’s normal taken-for-granted reality. This also means that role-learning becomes more self-reflexive without a concrete model for one’s action and experience, in the way that Dawson’s notion of reflexive role re-enactment suggests, that role-taking becomes increasingly about role-making.

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232 See McIntyre, op.cit.
233 See Schutz, A. The Phenomenology of the Social World, Northwestern University Press, 1967, p74. He defines taken-for-granted reality as the level of experience not in need of further analysis. Also see Chapter 1 Section 2.2: Berger’s Phenomenological Sociology.