

## More on the First Great Stage of Meditation

### *Becoming absorbed in the breath*

#### Levels of concentration:

The first Great Stage of meditation, which we have called Calm, is actually a continuum, from the first faltering steps we make, in which our mind is easily distracted, to very deep absorption, in which nothing can distract us. The Buddha spoke of levels of absorption, and although it's unlikely that you will reach the deeper levels during this course, you may have some experience of the earlier levels.

#### The first level of absorption:

This begins when our mind becomes a little stiller than usual – our thoughts are less frenetic, and less frequent. There are gaps in our thinking, in which we're awake and alert, concentrated on the sensations of the breath, without any thoughts at all. Any thoughts that do occur are fairly easy to let go, so that we can come back to the breath once again.

This absorption in the sensations of the breath is very satisfying and enjoyable – it feels good! There are two aspects to this – a quiet, calm feeling of satisfaction, and also, perhaps, a more exhilarating feeling, an upsurge of joy and delight.

#### The second level of absorption:

If you notice this happening, you may want to simply enjoy it, or you may want to go a bit deeper – into the second level of absorption, in which you have no thoughts at all, just a very vivid experience of being joyously alive.

To move from the first to the second level you simply turn your attention from the sensations of the breath to the feelings of pleasure in your body. By doing that the pleasure will intensify, and that will be so absorbing that your thoughts will drop away completely, and all you will experience is a concentrated happiness.

#### The danger of goal orientation

The danger of describing these levels of absorption is that you may now try to attain them, and trying to attain them is a pretty sure way not to experience them! There is a useful idea called *the paradox of meditation*. Everyone who learns to meditate does so because they want to make their life better in some way. They have a goal of some kind – greater happiness, less stress, the ability to concentrate, enlightenment! - that they are trying to get to. But how do we get there?

The paradox of meditation is this: if you want to get from A to B, you have to really be at A. That is, simply be with your experience, just as it is. If you're distracted, just notice that you're distracted. If you're feeling anxious, just notice, and be with, your anxiety, all the while bringing your mind back again and again

to the breath. In this way, relaxing into your actual experience, not trying to change it, B tends to come to you.

Which means that all you have to do is practice patiently, learning to be with your experience, whatever it is, bringing your mind back to your breath over and over again. It's as simple as that.