

Suttavada Foundation

Transcript Online Retreat November 3 – November 12, 22, led by Delson Armstrong.

<https://youtu.be/PM-MkPaSRLU>

Day 0: Introduction and Instructions

An introduction to the Practice, the Teacher and the Program and instructions of the Practice.

Dhamma greetings.

Welcome to the 10-day guided or self-directed retreat program.

My name is Delson Armstrong and I'm very happy that you decided to embark on this journey of understanding and utilizing the Eightfold Path. Because this program is primarily centered around the fourth Noble Truth in that sense, of the Buddha's discovery or rediscovery of the Dhamma, as it is understood.

Throughout the next 10 days you will be understanding one or more of the components of each of the factors of the Eightfold Path. And understand how to practically apply them in your daily life, as well as in your meditation practice.

This particular program can be adapted according to your needs. The understanding is that obviously, since this is an online program, you don't have the ability to really stay within the confines of, let's say, a monastery or a secluded area, where you can fully absorb your mind into the studies and understanding of the Dhamma.

Having said that, I would encourage you to spend at least an hour to two hours for meditation, at the very least. Of course, you can probably begin with 30 minutes, if you are completely new to the practice. But as the days go on, you will see that your effort is so simple, so easy and so comfortable in the meditation practice - whether it's sitting or walking or maintaining the Foundations of Mindfulness in whatever other activities that you might be doing. They are so beautiful, so easy to manage, that it becomes quite pleasant, and indeed the desire to sit longer naturally flowers into your being.

So, take this program according to your pace, meditate as long as comfortably possible. I will always encourage you to make more effort towards your *practice*, rather than the study of this program – watching the pre-recorded Dhamma talks for each day, as well as reading the material that is in the reference page. Along with that are the q & a videos that you can access whenever you'd like.

If it feels like there's a lot of information, my foremost suggestion would be that you take time towards your *practice* more than anything else.

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Once you start to practice, the experience of the practice will inform you, and will verify a lot of things, that will be discussed throughout the days of this 10-day program.

In fact, you will start to recognize a lot of the different concepts, ideas and tools that are being discussed, as you deepen your practice.

I'll give you a little bit of an introduction about my own teaching experience and my own understanding of Dhamma.

My meditation experience began when I was 13 years old, where I was introduced to hatha yoga by a family friend. My very first time into the spiritual practices began with understanding the asanas, and practicing them. That deepened my desire to learn more about meditation and concentration exercises. And when I was 16 years old, I had a chance to go to the Himalayas, where I had learned from a lot of different masters about different philosophies, including Vedanta, Samkhya and deeper yoga philosophies that are rooted in the *Yoga Sūtra of Patañjali* yoga sutras.

In that process of studying and practicing these different meditation techniques, I got acquainted with other techniques within yoga, known as Kriya yoga. As well as what are their version of insight practices, in terms of understanding the mechanics of cognition from their philosophies, related to the connection between the *divine spark* as they would call it. The brahman, the cosmic entity joining, or being joined and immersed with that divine spark, which is considered to be the soul.

However, as I started to experience the different states of meditation on higher practices, what I noticed was that there wasn't much of a personality shift as I would have wanted, or as I would have expected. Having said that, I definitely acknowledge the benefits of having understood and seen through these various philosophies. It helped me to understand where I should be, let's say, focusing on, or putting my mind towards, and where I should not be.

Then, a few years ago, I was introduced to what is known as the TWIM practice, when I was watching a video by bhante Vimalaramsi. I signed up for an online retreat with his institute or his center – Dhammasukha Meditation Center. My teacher, David Johnson, at the time was the one who guided me through that online retreat practice for the 10 days. And I am most grateful, and I appreciate everything that David Johnson has done for me, in clarifying a lot of points when I began my practice. Since then, I have done a lot of self-retreats, and done a lot of self-study of the Suttas, understanding them better through the clarity of my own experiences in the practice. At this point, since the beginning of this year, I have decided to start teaching and guiding more people. Whether it is over the phone, Skype calls, Zoom calls, weekly Dhamma talks, or guided 10-day online retreat programs like this one.

I had begun my teaching experience, as an online guide, with Dhammasukha, and I continue to do that when I have the time.

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Of course, things are starting to get busier, as more and more people sign up for the online retreat programs. So, there are now two options, where people can do a self-directed program, at any point of time that they wish to do so. And there are also guided meditation retreat programs, in which they do one-on-one interviews with me, for about 10 to 15 minutes each day, along with some sort of a q & a session. Whether that is every day, or once in between the retreat, and once at the end of the retreat.

There are various different versions of the program, but the backbone really is the pre-recorded Dhamma talks, and the pre-recorded q & a's that are available on the channel. As well as on the reference page where, as I mentioned, you will find the book which is known as “**A Mind without Craving**”, which is the guide for this retreat, in terms of the guidebook. It is divided in each day, so each chapter is secluded for one particular day.

That is just a brief outline of the program. You will find that there are a lot of terms in that booklet, that are different interpretations from my experience of the Eightfold Path, in relation to translation choices. In brief, for example, the Eightfold Path has been translated a little differently:

- Right View is Effective Vision
- Right Intention is Effective Choice
- Right Speech is Effective Speech (or it could also be Effective Communication)
- Right Action is Effective Behavior
- Right Livelihood is Effective Living
- Right Effort is Effective Application
- Right Mindfulness is Effective Observation
- Right Collectiveness is Effective Collectedness

And then the last two factors, which are the **fruition** of the Path:

- Right Knowledge is Effective Insight
- Right Liberation is Effective Release.

You might notice that I decided to change the word Right to Effective, insofar as this program. Really, the Buddha's outline of the Eightfold Path is the effective manner in which one will attain Nibbana, without question. So, for that reason as opposed to an ineffective path, which is to say wrong View; wrong Intention; wrong Speech; wrong Action; wrong Livelihood; wrong Effort; wrong Mindfulness and wrong Collectiveness, I chose to say that it is the Effective versions of

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these. They are Effective to the extent that they will take you to the goal of Nibbana, and take you all the way to Arahantship.

So, that's just a brief outline and understanding of some of the word choices, and translation choices, that have been committed to the text material in the reference page.

I'd like to divide the meditation instructions into two components for this particular video.

Number one, there is the component of the Brahma Viharas.

Number two, there is the component of the Right Effort or Effective Application.

Let me just get into what the Brahma Viharas are, and why for this particular meditation retreat, the choice has been made to use the Brahma Viharas as the object of meditation. The object, or vehicle of one's awareness or attention, upon which it rests.

There are different meditation objects, that the Buddha has clarified in the Suttas. There is the Anapanasati Sutta; the use of the breath as reminder of staying with one's awareness of the present.

And there is the meditation object of understanding the impermanence of this body, through seeing each component of the body - or what is also known as the asubha meditation. Here, one sees the extent of the impermanent aspects of the body.

There is also the understanding of the impermanence of this body as a corpse, and so on and so forth.

The Buddha suggested various different practices and techniques, dependent upon the inclination and mindsets of an individual. And he was the first and foremost expert, within the Dhamma, to be able to understand what techniques were most useful for a person, depending upon their evolution in the Dhamma.

The whole purpose of this practice is to understand the Mindfulness aspect, which is rooted in Right mindfulness or Effective Observation. That evolves and naturally progresses into Effective Collectedness, which is the mind being within the jhanas. The mind bathing in the light of the jhanas, in the power of the jhanas.

The first jhana, for example, begins with what is known as thinking and examining thought, and imagination. This particular meditation object is the first Brahma Vihara, that is Loving-kindness. A friendly attitude, an attitude of benevolence. An attitude of happiness and joy, is most conducive to bringing up the first jhana. Here the factors present are:

- thinking and examining thought, and imagination
- Joy and bliss, which is Piti
- comfortable happiness, comfort and ease, which is Sukha.

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And indeed, when one starts to practice in this way with Loving-kindness, it is quite natural for the mind to incline towards joy and ease.

How do you begin the practice? First and foremost, you come up with an image that makes you most happy. It could be:

- the image of an infant, of a puppy or kittens, or any sort of baby animal, for example
- seeing the things that you are grateful for in this life
- the recollection of the Buddha, the recollection of the Dhamma and the recollection of the Sangha. In other words the recollection of the Triple Gem, the three Jewels
- the happy memory that you might have from your childhood. Indeed, that is what the Buddha had begun with, when he mentions that he went back in his mind and remembered and recalled a time, when he was sitting under the rose apple tree. There was quite naturally a pleasantness in his feeling, which was not born or originated from the five physical senses, but it was a mental clarity, a mental happiness, and a mental joy.

So, you come up with an image or use a memory or your understanding of what you are grateful for in your life. Along with that, verbalizing the wish *may I be happy; may I be at ease; may I be comfortable; may I be free of suffering* and so on and so forth, to ignite that feeling of joy. Which is that Loving-kindness, that friendliness and benevolence to yourself. You are effectively using thinking and examining thought – which is Vitakka and Vicara - and imagination, which is within that.

This is the beginning of the first jhana and quite naturally as you begin this way, your mind will be inclined towards paying attention to the feeling, towards the feeling of Loving-kindness.

Another way to ignite this feeling, is the Smile.

Let's get back to the beginning again, so that we have a clarity in terms of the practical aspects of the meditation.

Number one, you take a comfortable sitting position. That could be cross-legged, in a chair, on a mat, or whatever you find is most comfortable.

Keep your back relatively straight, but you don't need to stiffen it. You need to be in a sitting position that provides natural comfort to your body. This translates to natural comfort and ease of the mind, so take whatever position you are most comfortable with. Make sure that your head doesn't droop down, or you bend down or bend forward. Try to keep your back relatively straight.

Secondly, when you close your eyes, put a little smile on your face. It doesn't have to be a Joker smile, or a very wide smile. It could be a very subtle smile, like you would see in the iconography of the Buddha, and statues of the Buddha.

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Indeed, in the Suttas you will read that the Buddha , the arahants and all the monks on the Path, were quite happy. They always dwelled in pleasant abidings of mind. And though they may not have been smiling *all* the time, they were naturally in a happy state of mind, free of suffering and mental discomfort. So, the smile is very important as you will begin to see, as I continue with the instructions.

So, you close your eyes, put a little Buddha smile on your face, you can maintain a smile in your heart, maintain a smile in your mind, and maintain a smile in your eyes. And, of course, a smile on your lips.

When you close your eyes, you can take in a deep breath, if you wish, and deeply exhale, and feel the tension dissipating. Melting away from your body, as your mind and your body naturally incline towards comfort and ease.

Once you see this, allow the thoughts to be there, whatever they may be. But don't let your attention drift to one thought or another. Just let them pass on, like clouds in the sky, or watching traffic go, by as the cars go by on the road.

Maintain your awareness of the body, maintain awareness of the sensory experiences, that are coming in through the eyes. Well, through the ears rather, because your eyes are closed :-), through the nose if certain fragrances and odors come, or on your skin if you're outside and there's a light breeze, or whatever it might be.

What you're doing is slowly, gradually coming to the Four Foundations of Mindfulness and you're getting rooted in the body, in the mind, in the sensory feelings, and in the mental contents of the mind, without any sort of involvement. As you do this, come to the image or the feelings of gratitude, or the wholesome memory, and along with this, if you wish, mentally verbalize in your mind the words as I suggested. Whatever works for you: *may the mind be happy; may the mind be comfortable*, and so on and so forth. With the smile and that feeling of gratitude, wholesome image or memory, along with the mental verbalizations and wishes for yourself, it will surely ignite the feeling of Loving-kindness.

Once you start to feel that little inkling of joy, that little feeling of Loving-kindness, of friendliness towards yourself, rest your awareness on that. Let go of the mental images, let go of the wholesome memories, let go of the feelings of gratitude, and let go of the verbalization. Allow your mind to stay in the awareness of the feeling of Loving-kindness and joy, that has been naturally ignited because of those things. The reason you do this is, because as your mind naturally progresses to higher peaks of joy bliss and comfort and ease, your mind will let go of - through your intention - the thinking and examining thought. These, along with the imagination, are the verbalizations you started with, if you did, the wholesome images, memories, or the feelings of gratitude. This quite naturally progresses into the second jhana, in which there is this comfort, ease, joy and bliss.

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Now, as you maintain your awareness, you will find quite naturally that the mind becomes distracted. This is because of certain hindrances - five in particular - which we will discuss at a later time, in the 10-day program. Just understand the mechanics of what must be done, to understand and let go of these hindrances. This is the second component of the practice. What you are doing is essentially using the four Right Efforts.

Now you have been with your feeling of Loving-kindness towards yourself, resting the awareness in this Loving-kindness. Perhaps, when you are content with that, you naturally incline it towards a Spiritual Friend. This Spiritual Friend is someone you respect and admire. Somebody who naturally brings a smile to your face, when you think about them. Somebody who is alive and preferably of the same gender. You then allow the flow of this feeling to go out to your spiritual friend. If you are visually oriented, if it helps, you can imagine that feeling flowing out from your heart and connecting with the heart of your spiritual friend. It can also help, if it feels like it's too much of tension, too much activity, to imagine and visualize these things, to have the *intention* that you're sending it out. Letting your mind rest in the awareness and the feeling flowing out. Thirdly, you could also just feel like the friend is in your spiritual heart, and you are sending it out. Bathing them in your Loving-kindness and they are basking in your feelings of good wishes and feelings of benevolence towards them.

As you are doing this, the mind will naturally become distracted in the beginning, as you start your practice. But it's important to understand that the hindrances and the distractions should be welcomed, to the extent that you know where your attachments lie. The hindrances are your teachers; they provide you with an understanding of where the mind is inclined towards, in terms of attachments. Whether it is sensual craving; ill will; restlessness; doubt or sloth & torpor. Don't worry about what sort of hindrance it might be. This is not a meditation in which you are noting what sort of hindrances are rising. You know when a hindrance or a distraction has arisen, when your attention is no longer on the feeling of Loving-kindness.

I want to let you know, that you may experience certain thoughts in the *background* of your mind. But so long as your awareness resides with Loving-kindness, those thoughts behind, will dissipate on their own. Without any of the fuel of your attention, providing them nutriment in order to grow, and then beginning to distract you. If the mind has already become distracted and your attention is no longer on the feeling of Metta / Loving-kindness, what are you going to do is within the context of Right effort. Here we have the 6 R's. The 6 R's are a simplistic understanding of the four Right efforts; a way for the mind to easily absorb it and be able to practically apply it, so that you can return back to your meditation, and continue to stay in the jhanas.

The first Right effort, I will go over it very briefly, is to *prevent* any unwholesome states - that are the hindrances - from arising.

The second Right effort is to *abandon* the already arisen unwholesome states of mind.

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The third Right effort is to *bring up* a wholesome state, once one has abandoned the unwholesome state.

And the fourth Right effort is to *maintain* that wholesome state. That wholesome state, in the context of this meditation, is the Brahma Viharas, particularly, in the beginning, Loving-kindness.

When you get distracted, how do you come back to your object of meditation - the Brahma Viharas? When you notice that the mind is no longer aware of the feeling of Loving-kindness, and that it has drifted away - whether that takes you a few moments or a few minutes to realize, that doesn't matter. What's important is you *have* realized it, you have Recognized, which is the first R. You Recognized that you had become distracted, that the mind is no longer aware of its object of meditation. In Recognizing, you have effectively stopped the flow of those distractions from further moving forward. You have prevented - the very first Right effort - the flow of those distractions, those hindrances, or unwholesome states of mind, to continue.

The second R is where you Release your attention from those distractions. This is where you put your attention back on the mind and the body. And then you Relax the mind and the body. When you Relax, you are effectively doing what is known as tranquilizing the Formations. Tranquilizing the tension that may have arisen in the mind and body. Even if you don't feel the tension in the mind and body, there is a very subtle sense of that in the way of Craving, in the way of being distracted. As a means to let go of that craving, and let go of the tension from that distraction, you effectively Relax the mind and the body.

When you have Released your attention from the distraction, and come back to the awareness of mind and body, and then Relax it, you are Releasing your tension and Relaxing. These two are interwoven in the second Right effort, which is to abandon unwholesome states that have arisen. When you take your attention away, you are abandoning that distraction. When you Relax the tension, you are abandoning the craving that might have arisen from that. Which is actualized, or understood, on a physical level, as tension in the brain; tension in the mind; tension in the body.

Once you have Relaxed you Re-smile, which means you come back to the awareness of the smile. And you allow that smile to be an anchor point for you to come back to the feeling in your heart. The feeling of Loving-kindness, which is then generated as you smile. Allow the smile to be a memory point if you will, which lets you know that you can come back to the feeling. And quite effectively you will have again started the awareness of the feeling.

When you Re-smile and Return to the feeling, you are effectively doing the third Right effort, which is to bring up a wholesome state of mind, which, in the context of this meditation practice, is loving-kindness - the first of the Brahma Viharas.

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Finally, the fourth Right Effort is to maintain that wholesome state, so when you Return and continue to stay with the awareness of the Loving-kindness, you are effectively practicing the fourth Right effort.

And then you Repeat whenever necessary. That is to say; you Repeat whenever the mind is distracted again, and you continue doing that.

It might be that the distraction is particularly strong, in the sense that, after you have let it go, it might come back again. But because you are using the four Right efforts, through this process of the 6R's, you are weakening that distraction or that hindrances' hold on the mind. As you continue to let go of it through the 6R process, it will become weaker and weaker and weaker, until it finally disappears.

The whole purpose of doing this, is to recondition the mind from the unwholesome to the wholesome. But we'll talk about that more throughout the series of this program.

So, that is basically the technique in this video; understanding the Brahma Viharas and understanding the four Right Efforts, to continue to maintain an easy, comfortable awareness, without suppressing the hindrances. You see, the moment you suppress the hindrances, it will cause those hindrances to arise with full force, when you stop the meditation practice. You're not actually dealing with them and letting them go, but just for those few minutes, or maybe an hour or more, of that meditation practice, you are not allowing them to arise. But they will arise, unless you effectively and intentionally let them go.

So, this is the reason why you do the Right efforts. It's not to suppress, but to acknowledge, understand and let go, and transform the mind by reconditioning it in this manner.

I wish you a wonderful retreat, and I look forward to seeing you all, whenever we have our q & a's, or our individual interview appointments.

May you all be happy and may you all share in the wealth of the Dhamma, and attain Nibbana.

Sharing Merit

May suffering ones be suffering free,
and the fear-struck fearless be.

May the grieving shed all grief
and may all beings find relief.

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May all beings share this merit
that we have thus acquired
for the acquisition of all kinds of Happiness.

May beings inhabiting Space and Earth,
Devas and Nagas of mighty power,
Share this merit of ours.

May they long protect the Buddha's dispensation.

Sadhu, sadhu, sadhu!