

**SUPPORTIVE
CONDITIONS
FOR PRACTICE**

teachings by

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2003 - 2011

(edited version 2014)

DEDICATION

To my main teachers

John Garrie Roshi, Namgyal Rinpoche and

Norbu Namkhai Rinpoche

who tirelessly shared their wisdom and compassion,
and to the many students who attended the teachings.

A bow of deep gratitude for your support.

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Supportive Conditions – Revised Edition

Foreword

In consultation with Sonia it was decided that the original edition of the “Supportive Conditions” booklet would need further editing. Unfortunately that could not be carried out while she was still alive, so I took on the responsibility to complete the project.

I have left out any elaborate descriptions of exercises that are already amply covered in the “Body Work” booklet; likewise any repetitions of teachings already dealt with in other booklets.

The original booklet was compiled from talks given in the context of particular retreats. I have taken great care to keep Sonia’s wordings as close as possible to those spoken at the time of her teachings. All of which made complete sense in the context of that retreat but appeared not always clear when written down in isolation. Where felt necessary I have taken the liberty to amend some of the wording and add others in order to make them more easily understood in isolation and supportive for your practice in the setting of daily life.

My sole aim has been to present you with a booklet that will indeed supply you with an as clear as possible description of “supportive conditions for practice”. I hope I have succeeded in that and in the process made Sonia’s invaluable teachings more accessible.

Ch. I A supportive container

I.1 Motivation

What is the purpose of my practice; why am I doing this?

Having clear motivation, stating our aspiration, is a necessary ingredient in our practice.

It is very important to state your aspiration, to have the bigger picture. Free of suffering for ourselves is the first step. But you have to fill your cup, so it overflows for all other beings – humans, animals, insects. The bigger view is ‘may I awaken speedily for the sake of all beings’. Spend a moment to touch on this aspiration for yourself, contact the feeling of this. The practice doesn’t ‘dead end’ at yourself, it doesn’t stop only with you. If you allow the practice to stop just for yourself, you are going to become quickly bored, lose interest. If you are losing interest, maybe you are not sufficiently focused on others. You have to state in your mind the intention that your practice will be for the benefit of all sentient beings. The mind state is the most important aspect; check from time to time throughout the day if you have this aspiration alive in your mind, or whether you are just going through the motions. When the going gets tough, make it your practice to support other beings, so your life is of service to other beings. You should welcome suffering, pain; you are going to become so wise, so compassionate – it is true! When you have an illness, an emotional upset, being aware of having this will make you more able to help other beings.

We have to review our motivation regularly, to keep it up to date; to keep on our toes, not to fall into complacency. In our human condition, we easily fool ourselves with “all is well”.

Our motivation may also change over the course of our life; it must do as we are changing too.

In the “**Motivation**” booklet, Sonia starts with the bodhicitta aspiration: “*to practise to become awakened, a wiser person, for the sake of being able to help all beings*”.

To start out with that aspiration may feel too big. It is important though as we should not set our aspiration too low! We have to aim big, to become big, to cultivate an expansive mind.

However, you can start out with the motivation to become as the Dalai Lama once said “a better human being”; to develop a wholesome mind state, to avoid hurting others through our body, speech or mind. In the course of our practice we will find that that spontaneously will lead to the bodhicitta aspiration.

I.2 The Four Contemplations to turn the mind to the Dharma - practice

The following contemplations will support us in keeping our aspiration alive.

- *the preciousness of a human birth; the favourable conditions we are born in; don't let them senselessly be wasted*

*“Having attained this precious human existence,
Like a ship that crosses the ocean of samsara,
Without falling into distractions or laziness of mind through ignorance,
Allow yourself to awaken to the preciousness of this moment”*

- *death and impermanence;*

*“The three realms are as impermanent as autumn clouds.
The birth and death of beings are like a dance performance,
Flashing by like lightening in the sky, the life span of beings races swiftly like a waterfall over a
steep mountain.”*

(NB: the three realms refer to the past, present and future)

- *karma – cause and effect; the respective consequences of our actions of body, speech and mind are inevitable; it matters what we do.*

- *samsara, the perpetual wandering, the same “merry go-around” in our habitual patterns, from one birth to the next.*

More guidance on these is to be found in Sonia’s booklet on “Motivation”.

1.3 Taking refuge:

By taking refuge we are stating what our priorities are.

Maybe it is just having an easy life without too much suffering, comfortable, “don’t challenge it”. Is our refuge a superficial satisfaction, a piece of chocolate, a nice movie?

Nothing wrong with those but we do have to ask ourselves whether they actually lead to a sense of deep ease, contentment and lasting satisfaction.

We will have to remind ourselves, again and again, of our true refuges. Like the four contemplations, they will support our motivation and keep us on the path.

There are two forms we can use for this, each to be recited 3x:

The traditional Buddhist form:

***In the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha most excellent,
I go for refuge until enlightenment is reached.
By the merit of generosity and other good deeds,
May I attain Buddhahood for the sake of all beings***

Or, a more general form composed by Tarchin Hearn:

*I take refuge in wisdom,
I take refuge in compassion,
I take refuge in non-clinging awareness.
May I develop the six perfections and
Awaken speedily for the sake of all beings*

The six perfections, or paramis are: generosity, ethical conduct, patience, energy, calm abiding and wisdom (see Par. III.5).

This second form expresses beautifully the ultimate meaning of the first one: we don't take refuge in a Buddha out there as a god to help us, but in our own innate Buddha nature. We may start with taking refuge outwardly, but ultimately we have to take refuge inwardly.

In a formal practice period, you can take refuge and recite the four contemplations at the start of a sit. This is done in many traditions and we also do that each morning at The Orchard.

I.4 The Four Brahma Viharas – The Four Sublime Abidings

You may prefer to start your sitting with reciting or chanting the Four Brahma Viharas. On retreats at The Orchard we frequently chant the *Brahma Viharas* together in *Pali* three times at the beginning and at the end of each day's practice. This is also what we could do as individuals at home on waking in the morning and before going to sleep at night. This provides a supportive container for the day.

Drop the attention into the belly, noticing the movements as you breathe in and out. When the breathing has calmed down, notice the totality of the body. Feel that your body is there from the head down to your toes, in this room, sitting. Then do the chanting: (either in *Pali* or in English, or both)

*Aham avero homi, abyāpajjho homi, anigho homi,
sukhi attānam pariharāmi.
Aham viya sabbe sattā avera hontu, abyāpajjhā hontu, anighā hontu,
sukhi attānam pariharantu.*

May I be friendly, calm and free from ill-will and may I live in happiness.
As I am, so may others be friendly, calm and free from ill-will
and may they live in happiness.

Or:

*May all beings have happiness, and the causes of happiness.
May all beings be free from sorrow, and the causes of sorrow.
May all never be separated from the sacred happiness which is without sorrow.
Without loving dear ones only, or being unfriendly to others,
may all live more peacefully and abide in equanimity*

You can also choose to use "Peace to All Beings" (see Appendix-1)

Any of the above will do, according to your own preferences. You may also wish to change from time to time.

1.5 Informal practice – day-to-day

Whether as part of a formal practice period or as a common part of your daily life, start and finish the day with any of the above texts to keep your motivation alive.

As a support throughout the day, just silently recite for yourself any of the above texts as often as you wish.

1.6 Dedication – sharing the merit

At the end of a formal practice time or a day of practice, we share the merit. This is to remind us that we don't do this practice just for our own self interest, but for the sake of all beings.

There are various texts you can use for that, according to your own preferences:

Through the power of these wholesome activities, may my life be rich with awakening. Through the endless storm of birth, illness, old age and death, may I help all beings to cross the ocean of suffering of this world.

May the power of these wholesome activities be for the benefit and uplifting of all beings

If you know the Pali text:

Idam te puñña kammam āsavakkhaya vayam hotu (3x)

Or, you can recite again the *Four Brahma Viharas* or the last part of the “*Peace to All Beings*”.

1.7 Homage

At the beginning of a formal practice period or a day of practice, we pay homage to Shakyamuni Buddha, who is the origin of all the teaching. So by paying homage to him, you pay homage also to the teaching. Without Shakyamuni Buddha the teaching would not exist, the Orchard retreat centre would not exist. So we pay homage.

*NAMO TASSA BHAGAVATO ARAHATO
SAMMA SAMBUDDHASSA
Adoration to him, the blessed one, the purified one,
the fully enlightened one!*

Ch.II Structure and formal practice

Physical posture, organising time for regular practice, routinely doing a review and dealing with obstacles – structure is an important aspect of meditation practice, providing a secure and stable foundation.

II.1 Bodywork

Bodywork can be done as a meditation in its own right and/or as a preparation for sitting practice.

In the tradition followed at The Orchard, bodywork is done for two reasons:

- as part of samatha - calm abiding- practice. The practice of just resting in the “here, in this body” and “now, in this moment”; neither being pushed by our past nor being pulled by the future. Through it we are cultivating a deep letting go – if it happens in one part of the body, it will spread to other parts. It is a lifetime process and a preparation for the final letting go, our final out-breath at the point of dying.

- relaxation, letting go of habitual holding patterns and tensions as reflected in posture, breathing, facial expression, gestures.

If there is an area that will not give, the key is *interest*; know it, maybe rest for a while longer with the breathing into that area, or try another exercise, a new movement.

Relaxation and letting go lead to ease, to loving-kindness for self and others. What could be simpler? Just resting in full open, non-clinging awareness to reveal the essence of our true refuge.

Choose what you need to do, an exercise or movement that is helping you to loosen, to soften; keep it gentle.

Detailed descriptions of specific exercises and movements as used in Sonia’s teachings, are to be found in her booklet: “Body Work”.

II.2 The postures

There are four postures for meditation: sitting, walking, standing, and lying down. Sitting and walking practice are what we normally do.

2.1 Sitting posture

It is recommended before a sitting meditation to do some bodywork or some walking practice. Always enter the sitting wide awake, alert, fresh and with a relaxed body.

The room should be fresh rather than hot; if necessary you can put a blanket around you rather than turning up the heating.

If you are able to, take the traditional *vajra* (diamond) sitting position, i.e. the ‘full lotus’ posture with each foot resting on the opposite thigh, the left leg inter-locked under the right. Or the ‘half lotus’ with the left leg resting on the floor and tucked in against the body and the right foot resting on the left thigh.

In both cases the left leg is supporting the right. The left representing the female, wisdom aspect, the intuitive side, *yin* and the right the male side, the intellectual, skilful means aspect, *yang*. Thus skilful means is supported by wisdom.

Alternatively, cross the legs and rest them in front of the body with the left tucked in closest to your body.

Your bottom rests on a cushion or on a meditation stool, tilting the pelvis slightly backwards, ensuring the knees are lower than the hips, ideally touching the floor.

So the sitting body rests on a triangle of support made by the legs and your coccyx, giving a secure base. The belly leans slightly forwards into the centre of that triangle, keeping the back upright and soft.

If you are not able to sit comfortably on the floor, you can sit in a straight-backed chair with both feet flat on the ground with the thighs and lower legs forming a straight angle; the feet are shoulder width apart and parallel.

NB: This is also the posture of *Maitreya*, the future Buddha, his feet firmly in the world.

It is very important to settle first the external physical posture, checking your back, relax your posture, softening the hips and lower back, with an even distribution of weight between right and left sides.

Now bring your attention to the spine. Feel supported in the back, which relates to your history, where you are coming from; feel you are supported by your history, your ancestors. You can imagine a big cushion behind you, leaning on it, relaxing and softening the muscles of the back. Keep the spine straight, alert - creating spaciousness, mindfulness, joy, intelligence. At the same time don't let the spine become rigid: the straightening of the spine is not done by muscular effort but by visualizing the chi rising up from the tailbone to the base of the skull.

Bring your awareness to the *hara* point (three fingers' spread below the naval) and imagine a line connecting your *hara* point to the earth, the centre of the earth.

Then let your attention rest on the belly and feel for the tiny movements of the belly as you breathe in and out. Focus on the rising and falling of the breath - the here and now – this is our starting point. It doesn't matter what the breathing is doing, just stay with it.

All this is just setting things up. When you are focused on the belly and settled, you have a viewpoint from which to train the mind.

If the posture is correct then the breath is something that just happens – you receive it and the experience of breathing feels relaxed. It is not something that you do, it is something that happens through you, into you. Breathing is an experience of continually changing sensations (Namgyal Rinpoche).

The eyes can be half open, focused with a soft gaze slightly angled downwards, maintaining awareness of the space you are in. See Note-1 for other eye positions.

If you wear glasses it would be better to take them off.

Have the lips slightly open, in a half smile. The tongue is touching the roof of the mouth just behind the top front teeth. If you wear dentures, take them out.

The most common position of the hands in sitting practice is in the *mudra* of concentration: bring the hands together at the belly, palms facing upward, the right hand resting in the left with thumb tips touching and little fingers touching the belly, just below the navel. It brings the body slightly forward, a posture of questioning, inquiring, creating an alertness in the whole body.

To help you focus inwards, you may imagine that your hands are inside the belly; either the hands have shrunk or the belly has extended to enclose the hands.

See Note-2 for other hand positions.

Now you are ready for whatever is going to be the focus of your sitting practice – it could be ‘bringing the mind home’ (see below), a Loving Kindness meditation or a specific visualisation (like the Medicine Buddha. John Garrie Roshi used to say now you put in the cassette with the actual practice.

Note-1: alternative eye positions

There are various instructions about the position of the eyes during meditation depending on the kind of practice you will be doing.

Eyes closed: this is common, but has the danger of falling asleep and of being too focused inwards. It is therefore preferred is to keep them open as suggested above.

Eyes open and facing slightly downward is recommended for calm abiding practice, while for insight practice one lifts them to slightly above the horizon.

In neither case does one look at something specific, just let the eyes rest, relaxed; receiving what comes in. One stays alert and aware of the space one is in, but without being distracted by it.

Note-2: other mudras – hand positions

- You could experiment with other mudras, but always stick to one during the length of a sit:
- the hands, palms down, resting on the upper legs; this is ease, softness, non-clinging awareness; thoughts come and go.
 - the *mudra* of generosity: the right hand rests on the right knee, with the palm fully open while the left hand remains as in the *mudra* of concentration.
 - for the earth-touching *mudra* of *Shakyamuni*, the historical Buddha, bring your right hand over the right knee (palm facing the knee) and point towards the earth with the middle finger. The left hand remains as in the *mudra* of concentration. This is the *mudra* for earthing and stability.

II.2 Sitting meditation practices

Bringing the mind home

- be kind to yourself, soften the body, soften the mind
- imagine your body hollow, empty, from the top of your head down to your toes. Imagine just the space inside your body, as if you were a balloon, a bubble; take your time
- within that space notice the movement of your belly. Do not try to do anything special or change anything, just notice and feel the tiny movements of the belly as you breathe in and out. Mentally you can name ‘rising - falling’ or ‘breathing in - breathing out’
- try one time, just one time, to be really present, to be right there
- gradually the body and the mind will settle. Don’t use thoughts to stop the thinking; when thinking arises, note and just keep coming back gently to the movements of the belly. Equally, when something else arises, like a distraction – rest and give it space, whatever it is. Give it space, rather than seeking a remedy, and return to the breathing.
- you have to come from a place of stability, not too agitated. If the body is still and steady, the mind becomes calmer, more restful, more attentive. Whenever your mind wanders, be it towards an itch, a sound, a smell, a thought, an emotion: don’t push them away or pull them in; notice them and relax, keep bringing the mind home by returning to the movements of the belly.

NB: This practice is also called “calm abiding with support”; the support being the breath, i.e. the object we keep returning to.

Q: *The mind is busy, but when I come back to the body I feel this is because I can see that it is busy.*

A: Now you have time to see.

Q: *Busy mind, but it’s always busy.*

A: It is very important how you bring the mind back home; no thinking, no drama, just return the mind to the rising and falling of the breath.

During half an hour of sitting: focus on the belly, every time the mind goes away bring it back. So, if the mind goes to an event of yesterday, bring the mind home to the movement of the belly, gently but firmly. If the mind fantasizes about the future, bring the mind home; bring the mind home to ‘here in this body, now in this moment’. Train the mind, like training a puppy. So eventually the mind knows there is no need to go anywhere because it will have to come back. At some point you will experience great stillness in your body, no conversation, no thinking – this one moment will change you forever.

But then it changes and the mind start wandering again and you have to repeat it again and again. This is the practice of “bringing-the-mind-home”.

Just Watching

In this meditation there is no specific object to focus on, you stay in a relaxed state of mind (and body) and witness whatever is passing through, neither rejecting nor holding on; just let it pass. This is called “calm abiding without support”.

Start with the hollow body as in bringing the mind home.

The spine is upright, the mind is spacious. You are awake, alert, relaxed.

- Let go of trying: don't try to meditate, don't try to get it right, just be present with whatever arises in the body and the mind.
- Being present with the breathing, not changing it; being present with the sensations, not changing them; with a sound, your thoughts, your moods, don't push them away or draw them in. Be present with whatever is presenting itself.
- Be aware of the grasping, how we grasp at our likes and dislikes.
- If you do get carried away, then bring your attention to the centre of your body just below the navel. Rest in your belly and feel for the movements of the belly as you breathe in and out, just witnessing, not changing anything. Feel the rising of the belly, the falling of the belly.
- Once at rest, don't stay focused on the breathing but bear witness again of whatever passes through.

Memories and thoughts will come and go; let them come and go, do not follow them or push them away. So you take your seat as though you were at the cinema, watching the show – happy story, unhappy story, indifferent story, notice them and relax.

- Firmly stay in your seat of mindfulness, of observation at the centre of your being; do not leave your seat, watch the dance of the mind, the play of the mind. It does not matter if it is a good thought, a bad thought, an indifferent impression; meet it with the same spaciousness, gentleness, openness. Meet it as it is.

Sitting practice - final points - questions and answers

Always follow the three steps into a sit:

1. Rest your hands in the *mudra* of concentration and watch the breathing in the belly with non-judgemental awareness until it starts settling down. This can take a long or a shorter time. You know the breathing has settled when it becomes calmer, more regular, more subtle.
2. Whole body breathing: be aware of the totality of the body, the whole posture; the whole body breath. Don't do or fabricate anything, just observe.
3. Scan the body for parts that feel a little uncomfortable, take the breath into them, let them soften with the out-breath. Do this just for a few breaths.

Coming out of the sitting, you do the reverse process: when the gong goes, you let go of the cassette and bring awareness to uneasy parts and soften them, then awareness into the whole body, then take the breath more onto the surface, deepening it. Follow the three gongs with these three steps. Don't move the body until after the third gong.

The same three steps can be taken into and out of walking practice.

Q: *Why do we do this?*

A: To do the three steps at the beginning and then again at the end is equally important. It is to ease out, to let go, to have completed an activity in order to go into the next one afresh, not carrying on with the same feeling from the previous one. It is all to do with letting go in life, coming back to the here and now, again and again.

Different postures manifest different beings, different becomings.

Q: *Should we do the nine breathings before sitting?*

A: Yes, but you don't need to do the nine breathings (see App.-2) before every sit. These are a device to settle the breathing, so if you already have settled the breath e.g. after walking, then there is continuity of practice.

Q: *My back sometimes feels too weak to hold me up.*

A: There are methods you could try for adjusting the posture if your back is weak and the posture is collapsing:

- tuck in the chin, place the hands on the thighs pointing inwards, thumbs on outside of the thighs; this opens the belly, the belly moves forward
- breathing in tilt the pelvis slightly and lengthen the chest; breathing out, soften into the back, soften into the pelvis
- expand, bring the in-breath up into the upper chest, like Buddha statues; this sharpens the mind and straightens the body

Try to make a habit of always returning to the breathing – if the breath is held, the mind will go crazy and this amplifies any pain or difficulty, so come back to 'rising and falling' of the belly.

If you start falling asleep during a sit, press the thumbs very hard together and the tongue hard against the roof of the mouth, then relax; do that three times.

Or, take three deep breaths and return to the practice.

For reviewing the practice, see Par. II.4

3. *Walking meditation*

In this section, Sonia describes various walking meditation practices as used on different occasions working with a specific aspect of the teaching.

Depending on what you wish to focus on in your practice you can choose the relevant one. Alternatively you can start by choosing the one you feel comfortable with and works for you and progress from there.

Gentle, easeful walking

In normal, easeful walking, I want you to find a rhythm, a pace. Each time you go out – to wherever – you establish the same pace of walking, so there is a continuity. Explore which is the pace that makes you most comfortable, most at ease. I want to see you always at the same pace. Not too fast, not too slow – this is how to maintain awareness, the same rhythm. I want you to feel the quality of being at ease with yourself; it feels very soft.

You may find that the pace changes. That's OK, then set a different pace. Set your own pace but not too slow. It can be done when going for a walk.

I want you to get away from the idea that meditation has to be so formal, put your coat on and go for a walk down the lanes in the rain.

Lifting, moving, placing

You can start a walking practice with walking backwards and forwards.

- Place your attention in your feet and name the movements of the feet: 'lifting, moving, placing'. The point is to be in your body; so the moment you lift the foot you say 'lifting', followed by "moving" and the moment you place the foot you say 'placing', and notice whether the mind is with the body, or behind, or ahead! Not judging, right or wrong, just noticing.
Feel the sensation of your feet touching the ground.
- As you walk backwards you rest in your back which is your support, your ancestry; it is a beautiful movement for the pelvis and the spine.

Walk naturally – lifting, moving, placing.

The big toe is in line with the knee - that is part of the geometry of the body and important for balance; have two fists space between the knees.

Be aware of how the walking movement starts with the hip, then the knee, lower leg and foot. Each movement is done softly with awareness. Gently keep the spine upright. There is not a right or a wrong way of doing it, just keeping your awareness.

If you approach life and meditation in this way it is soft, joyful, casual. If you try to 'get it right', "to get somewhere", you approach it with tension. Just "lifting, moving, placing". Nowhere to get to— it gives you a lot of time.

I - Sva - Su

At the start of this walking practice, establish the hollow body: visualize the body as empty from the top of the head down to your toes, just the space inside.

(Then, if you know this practice: do three times the *Om Ah Hum* with the sound, and the gesture, or *mudras*. Go more internally with the sound.)

Now you start walking and this time you use the syllables *i sva su - su sva i - I sva su, etc.*; one syllable per step. Say the syllable mentally as you place the foot. Don't go too slow or too fast. This or any *mantra* is a support in training the mind, to stay with what you are doing at the time.

I find this a very important practice every time you walk and which can be easily integrated in your daily life situation: when walking to the Zendo, to Maitreya House, to your cabin, lifting and placing your feet and saying *i sva su - su sva i*.

When placing, the foot should feel firm on the ground. So you have to be with what you are doing, be with each step to calm the mind, to train the mind.

The naming is very much going to help you to be with the body; not ahead of the body, not behind the body.

During the retreat I would suggest that every time you walk, even in the night when you go for a pee, you mentally say *i sva su - su sva i*.

I would like you to make a contract with yourself: how many hours in a day when you are walking you will practise saying *i, sva, su*: one hour, two hours, three hours; from now until lunch time, or from three o'clock to six o'clock? Or if you feel you can only hold it in the Zendo, 'from now until going out of the Zendo I will say *i, sva, su*'. Be honest, make a commitment to yourself – but I would like to know it! I am curious. It is good to make it realistic, creative for you. I am sure you will forget, but the point of mindfulness is that when you know you forgot, you start again.

You can choose to do either the *i sva su* or the 'lifting, moving, placing'. Stay with one or the other. The point is to be in your body. Not judging, right or wrong, just noticing.

Both these practices are done as "pacing", i.e. not too fast, not too slow.

Seventeen paces

Later in the retreat we do slow walking practice in a formal way for seventeen paces. For that, find a stretch outside that is your space, you choose a path and you stay with this path for the whole day. Then count seventeen paces of just a foot's length each and mark the start and the end of the measured stretch.

Begin with a few breaths standing and looking at the path in front of you, hands on the belly. Do the measured walk. At the end of the marked stretch, stop for a moment then notice the intention of turning, then you turn; all in awareness, putting your intention on what you are doing.

Turn by swivelling on the heel, not lifting it, to reverse and mentally name 'turning' then stand for a few breaths. Briefly look at the stretch you have just walked – this is important, looking at where you came from - then walk again.

Or you could return by walking backwards – once you have made the choice, stick to it. When walking, say mentally *i* when you lift the foot, *sva* when moving the foot, *su* when placing the foot. Don't force yourself to go slowly, just let it happen. As you are more focused you automatically go more slowly, no need to force it.

If something arises during walking practice and you get distracted, bring your attention back to the walking practice. And don't admire the scenery, that is an extra that you don't need for this practice.

Namgyal Rinpoche's instruction was you mark the moment of lifting, moving and placing, almost like catching the intention. But don't force yourself to find it; go a little bit slower, marking the moments of change. Take small steps and keep your attention in your feet without too much attention to the detail, just slow down. The quality of the moment of attention is not so dependent on going slowly. In the quality of the *i* you can be so present you have the same satisfaction as going slowly. Allow yourself to naturally go slower.

When you notice the intention of moving, ask yourself if it is coming from the mind or the body? Is the mind telling the body what to do, or is the body deciding to do it and the mind follows? Ultimately, the idea is that it happens at the same time.

General comments on walking practice - questions and answers

Walking practice is the most delightful practice, and it is very efficient; you make more progress with walking than with sitting. So many things are happening where you place your attention, approach it with great respect.

Q: *Why do we measure seventeen steps?*

A: Because there are seventeen steps to attain full enlightenment.

Q: *What do we do with the hands?*

A: You can position your hands, with the left hand holding the right wrist; loosely, or with the middle finger pointing to the earth, if you need more earthing. Or as in the meditation *mudra* of concentration, that is supporting the heart. You can also keep the hands crossed at the palms over the belly or behind your back, that is a good one also, to feel your back-up. Don't just let the hands hang by your side, as for maintaining focus it is better to have the hands together.

Q: *Are we to go barefoot for walking practice?*

A: Barefoot is better because it gives us direct contact with the earth. If that is too cold for you, you don't have to go barefoot.

Q: *Can we do walking meditation with closed eyes?*

A: Do it with open eyes to integrate, to stay in touch with the space around you. The eyes are slightly angled downwards, seeing the ground about 15 – 20m in front of you.

Q: *I'm noticing a lot of thoughts coming up, also a lot of tension in my lower back.*

A: Do you know what to do with the thoughts? The thoughts are part of the story. Come back to the walking, to your feet. The point is to be in the sensation of the walking, not so much in the thinking.

Q: *Do we bring attention back to the belly?*

A: To the body, to the feet.

Q: *Is there meaning in the syllable, or is it the sound?*

A: It is the sound, there is meaning also but for now it is not intended to be like this, it is the sound.

Q: *What does 'i sva su' mean?*

A: they come from *Pali* words: "i" is the first syllable of the text taking refuge in the Buddha; *sva* is the first syllable of the text taking refuge in the *Dharma*; *su* is the first syllable of the text taking refuge in the *Sangha*.

So there is a lot of meaning in these words; effectively when we say *i, sva, su* we are taking refuge in the *Buddha*, the *Dharma*, and the *Sangha*.

In walking practice and whenever you walk, use the three syllables - going for tea, going to the toilet. Walking wherever, whenever.

4. Standing

According to Namgyal Rinpoche, a meditator should spend equal times in each of the four postures. Standing still and upright is physically the most stressful posture. So you may need to limit the time spent standing during sequencing, maybe to five minutes at the end of each stretch in walking practice before turning around.

For standing have the knees soft, slightly bent, so the weight settles towards the front of the feet. The legs should be soft and relaxed.

The arms can hang loose at the side or in one of three other suggested positions:

- hands on the belly, as in walking;
- lower arms crossed over the chest (called the Egyptian position), or
- the prayer position against the heart area.

NB: explore for yourself the effect of these positions; they give different quality of energy to the standing.

Eyes as in sitting practice.

Be aware of the rising and falling of the breath; receive your body, just resting in the awareness of the body; feel the contact with the earth; stay alert and open to the space around you.

Some recommended standing practises:

- standing in front of a tree, watching the movements of the leaves (impermanence)
- inside: standing and watching the movements of the mind (like leaves moving in the wind)
- standing in nature, opening up to the space around you, feeling for the inter-connectedness between you and the space; softening the boundaries between “you” and the world.

If necessary, support the body by leaning with your bottom against a wall.

5. Lying down

Lying down is the posture of the reclining Buddha - and I am going to tell you something - Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha, had a back problem. When he had the back problem he was teaching lying down, in the reclining position. It is the inner posture that matters. Having a back problem means he was human.

You lie on the right side to protect the heart, the neck in line with a straight spine. The palm of the right hand goes under the cheek or under the neck or, if either is too uncomfortable, the arm can be straight out at right-angle with the body; the left hand rests on the thigh with the left elbow a bit out.

If needed you can rest your head on a small cushion. The eyes are half-open, with a soft focus straight ahead.

The legs are kept together and slightly bent.

Feel the points of contact with the ground on the right side and be aware of the rising and falling of the belly.

The lying down posture could be taken instead of the sitting posture if you have a back problem. But ensure you keep fully awake. Don't use it when you feel sleepy!
You can also use this position in bed as a mindful way of going to sleep.

II.3 A whole day of practice

The following three paragraphs refer to a day at the end of a retreat but they also give us some guidelines for a day of practice at home together with the flavour and attitude towards the practice. Appendix-3 shows a practice programme as used by students on personal retreat at The Orchard giving you another suggestion for a day of practice at home. Make that a regular event in your life, for example once a week or once a month.

Formal sequencing

This is the day on a formal retreat when everything comes together, no more input, we just practise. You are in silence of course. Begin with bodywork, deciding what does the body need: calming, strengthening?

Then do four blocks of thirty minutes each of walking, sitting, and any other particular practice which we may have done during the retreat. That could be to contemplate a text – read, with a good posture, a few times first; then choose an aspect to go deeper into by associative thinking. Or it could be to spend time outside looking at the aspect of impermanence – the changing light, the movement of clouds, of leaves; everything is transient.

For walking practice: take a path in the grounds, measure seventeen steps. Choose to use either *i sva su, su sva i*, or 'lifting, moving, placing'. The idea is that you name the movement while it is happening – not ahead, not behind. At the end of the measured path you stop, you turn, you stop again and you look at the path you have just walked. Before or after each turn you can do some standing meditation. So this should tidy up your mindfulness.

For sitting practice, sit in the Zendo facing the wall; sit together to maintain the strength of the group energy. Choose a place to be yours for twenty-four hours practice; return to the same place, put your cushion there so that you are not searching, fighting for your place. When sitting, go directly into the belly, you become aware of the movement in the belly as it is happening, not behind or ahead. When a story comes into your head, go immediately back to the belly. I want you to be right there, more present, more alert. Noticing everything that is happening in your being at this moment. The key word is 'directly', no gap, no space for a story to come up. If you are too loose there is a lot of possibility for thinking, day dreaming, falling asleep. You sharpen your attention; if it helps to do this you can open your eyes, looking straight ahead with a soft un-focused gaze, slightly above the horizon.

Repeat the sequence, half an hour for each stage. You are looking for continuity of attention between different forms of practice.

The spirit for a day of un-interrupted practice

On a long retreat, it is important to have at least twenty-four hours where there is no in-put. Instead, have a big chunk of walking and sitting practice. Decide what to do, your own programme at your own pace. No body work – the walking is the body work. No bell, keep your own time. Start with breathing practice first thing in the morning, but after that go straight into sitting. Sit facing the wall. In sitting meditation, have no object (***just watching***), but if you get too much into the busyness, return to the breath. I don't want you to feel too rigid, don't set yourself a task, but at the same time I want you to focus.

Check your level of loving-kindness: 'am I too hard on myself?' In a sit, whatever arises, meet it with loving-kindness. It is not an endurance test – you want eagerness, interest, new-ness.

To go deeper into uninterrupted practice, do one two-hour session in the morning between breakfast and lunch time. Before starting the block, set up your aspiration, what it is you want to focus on.

After each session I want you to review the practice you have done and to make a few notes for yourself and spend time on integrating what has happened. In the afternoon do three hours, you can break it into two hours and one hour. Be aware of the rhythm of the day: is the focus better at different times of day? Do some of the practice outdoors.

Have meals on time and be in silence of course.

Before going to bed, put in mind the intention 'to get up as soon as I wake up and I am going to have an exciting day'.

This is a time for you to be alone in the practice. It is important that you feel a sense of freedom with what we have done – in any order you want, make it your own; allow yourself to go deeper into your being, play with it. If you don't know what to do, ask your heart. Sometimes the head has one idea and the heart another, so we corrupt the heart to agree with the head. Find your own rhythm, your own pace; play with all the things we have done, make it light. And just once, within a period of sequencing: 'let the horse loose': the instruction is to do anything you want, so long as it is not 'practice'. That is going to test your practice, you are going to meet your desires, your fears.

Q: *I'm very tired, can I rest after lunch or should I carry on practising?*

A: No, take a nap. You have to take care of your body, have a balance between practising and exhausting yourself. Ask your heart.

The last full day of a retreat

This is a very important day, it is a day when you are not so intense so things will come up. This is why we let go of the intensity of the slow walk and the sitting, to be more casual, to let it happen. Go for a walk, lie in the sun. It is easing out while maintaining mindfulness, not going crazy. Then the effects of the practice will come to the fore, to the surface. Don't feel that you have missed on something, you have not. The rest of the time is as you wish but ask yourself what is best for you to do, to integrate. I am not suggesting you start being busy, just no formal practice.

It is important advice that Namgyal Rinpoche gave us: at some point we have to let go of formal practice and see what is there without the structure. You are responsible for how you spend today. Notice how quickly you let go of the formal practice, or how quickly you want to return to the safety of the formal practice.

The greatest gift that students can give to a teacher is their practice. So I thank you for your beautiful practice. There is an aura of attention at The Orchard when this practice is going on. The texture of loving-kindness, mindfulness - you cannot see it but it is felt. A feeling of grace.

II.4 Reviewing the practice

After a sitting, walking or body work meditation or at the end of the day, we need to do a review. A review means to see what happened during that twenty minutes or half hour, or after a whole day's practice.

Before reviewing, allow the breathing to settle, nothing special. If there is tension in the body, cultivate ease.

1. *The first question you ask yourself is how much conversation, how much dialogue, was going on in your head during the meditation?*

We may be in silence during a workshop or retreat, so you are not speaking to someone else, but you are speaking to yourself a lot. So that is not really being in silence. Sometimes when you cannot speak to someone else, the speaking in your head becomes louder! All the channels of the radio are playing at the same time in your head! So when you review your meditation, look at it from the beginning to the end, or from the end to the beginning. Maybe at the beginning there was not so much conversation; in the middle you were busy chatting about this and that, or a lot of fighting in your head and then calming down again by the end – maybe! You could write notes, or drawing is sometimes easier like a graph from 0 to 10 maximum. A review is not a criticism, it is not an apology, it is just what happened! It is honest – it is not ‘oh I was bad, oh I’m so sorry, oh my meditation today – so much conversation’. No measure of emotional judgement on it. How was it at the beginning, the middle, at the end? So you will see there is a pattern to your concentration. For example at the beginning no conversation, a little conversation in the middle and at the end no conversation; that is my pattern. So it gives you information and now you know that you have to be more vigilant in the middle to make the conversation less,.

2. *The second question is about your body, you are asking how much physical ease did you experience in the body?*

At the end of a sitting practice you could be thinking of the leg or shoulder that was hurting, the head or whatever and you forgot that there have been also many moments of ease, of calm, of softness in the body. So now we are focusing also on what is good, what is positive, not always on what is difficult. Maybe the left side of your face felt suddenly very soft, or your right hand touching your left hand felt very comfortable. So the feeling of ease at that moment is almost like beauty, beautiful, calm – they may be short moments, sure, but they happened. It could have been just briefly in one part of the body. What this review does, is that the next time you sit you will be more alert.

You can take the physical ease of this sit into the next sit, to be more ‘with it’. Ease, calm, softness, beauty in the body – these are positives. But if you are too comfortable, for example lying down, there could be too much ease; that is a stupid meditation with no alertness going on, no wisdom.

3. *The third question is, how focused were you, how engaged, how absorbed in the practice?*
 Meaning when the mind was going away, were you able to bring it back? You need to have been focused in order to do this review. So if the mind goes, that is normal but having been focused means that you knew it was going and that you brought it back. It means that you did not lose the focus of your meditation. It is quite an important point that when the mind thinks of the future, that you notice it and bring it back – this is focus. When the mind has a moment of thinking of the past, you notice it and you say 'no – here, now'. That means you did not lose your focus. We are training this monkey mind and when the monkey plays, you see it playing and you bring it back. You bring it back very gently; you simply say 'here, now' like you are training a puppy. But if you are too strict, too severe with the puppy it will go crazy, so you have to do it softly. You have to do the same with the mind. If you say 'here! now! don't you move!' it becomes very restless, very frightened, rebellious. You want to keep the mind soft, spacious. That is really important because the voice in our head – you know, the 'mother' criticisms – can be so hard, hitting ourselves: 'you got away again!' You can see that 'here' and 'now' are words, but they have a quality. So at some point if you are really in the here and now it has a quality and you don't need to say 'here and now, here and now', you just stay with the quality and the mind will come back. But when the mind goes you watch it and if it doesn't return by itself you bring it back by saying 'here', and you will see it is fun!

4. *The fourth question is how clear, how sharp was the focus, how much clarity, clear present mindfulness?*
 Sometimes we have the focus but it is still blurred, misty, foggy; it is not very sharp when it should be crystal clear. Clarity is like a sunny day.

5. *The fifth question is an impression of what happened to the breathing during that twenty minutes or half an hour?*
 Was it short, deep, shallow? What is your impression? So again maybe draw it to make it visual. You cannot remember every breath, but you need to have an idea of what happened with the breathing in sitting, walking and the body work; not just in sitting, the sitting is only one aspect. And how often did you come back to the breathing, or did you forget to come back? If you stay in touch with the breathing it means you are also in touch with thoughts that take you away from the focus on breathing.

We know from doing the review that for example in the middle of the sitting there is more conversation, more problems with the leg, so we have to be like the warrior, we have to watch, mentally note, not give up. From the reviewing do you see a bit of a pattern? The practice is to understand that pattern and see that it keeps changing. This is the aspect of impermanence, it is not fixed. We are all sitting for half an hour, looking as if nothing is happening, that we are doing nothing. But you see how much is happening and this is the aspect of the training of the mind; getting to know the pattern and seeing how it changes, how it comes and goes.

Through the reviewing we create a continuity from one session to the next. As Namgyal Rinpoche said: each session becomes like a bead on one mala, all connected rather than being isolated events.

Q: I get distracted by rain falling on a leaky roof of the meditation hall; what should I do about it?

A: You hear the rain so you say ‘hearing’ and then you return to ‘here, now’; but if you pretend ‘I have not heard the rain – here! now!’ it will not work because it is there! You lose the focus when you start making another story. But to know that it is happening and making a mental note and then returning, that is not losing the focus.

You have to maintain softness and this is a very important aspect because some of us are too hard on ourselves, hitting ourselves, fighting. We want some change in our life but we do it with “you must, you must!” and of course you do it for a short time but then you rebel which you should because you are putting yourself in a prison. So we have to train with softness, giving space, and that actually is the best training, the best mindfulness. You are watching, not criticising, not bringing back all the time so quickly, so short, too strong. We let the monkey move a little bit around but we are watching it, the main thing is that you are there watching. When in your practice you feel aggressive, angry or frustrated you have been too tight with yourself. I know it is not easy, it is the biggest problem.

You are in a way the best judge of this. In a sense the practice that we are doing is aiming at making you well, happy, soft, generous, patient, giving you energy, compassion, loving-kindness, and wisdom. Anything else that is happening somewhere along the line means you are doing something too strong, or not enough. The practice is meant to make us grow, blossom, become a beautiful human being in order to help other human beings. But – this is how we cultivate the tools, the mindfulness – you have to measure for yourself. Sometimes you do too much then too little. You will know when it is exactly right because then there is this ease in the body, the mind is open and spacious and you have a lot of warmth for all beings – even your enemy.

‘Enemy’ is a bit of a too strong word, it is anything that creates difficulty in your life, a situation, a person. You feel good, you feel well and you wish them well and happy. You have a moment of feeling soft, warm, generous, with loving-kindness towards that difficulty in your life, that situation, that person.

This is the effect of the practice.

You can also do a review of your meditation and aspects in your life of what went on in terms of the ‘four foundations of mindfulness’, i.e. mindfulness of the body, of feelings, mind states and mind content.

During the practice, what was happening in your body? Did you notice changes in posture, breathing, movement, temperature, tensions. See the physical sensations in terms of the elements: the change aspect itself is the water element, solidity the earth, temperature the fire, quick movement or changes in the body the air element. What was actually happening: look at it with mindfulness, not in terms of ‘good’ or ‘bad’.

You do the same with feelings, mind states and mind content.

If you are not aware, not reading your meters, you are likely to go into an old state, an old being and you get trapped in it. The whole picture is that gradually you get to know how you get triggered, what is pressing your buttons, what induces happiness or unhappiness. In a calm state you can get images, tastes, sensations maybe from the past. Stay with it mindfully, name it, give it space and its associations may come up and with it a release from something in the past.

Whatever you do, keep awareness of the four foundations of mindfulness and note which is the more dominant: body, feeling, mind state or mind content.

If you feel that your practice is not getting anywhere, you need to check the aspect of generosity, of giving, in your life. Practising on your own can be very self-orientated. Giving, letting go, are more important than concentration. Generosity, *dāna*, is the first of the *paramis* (see Par. III.5). The opposite of generosity is holding on. Generosity is letting go. So if you feel your practice is going nowhere, practise *dāna*.

II.5 Obstacles in meditation

Your review may reveal obstacles to meditation, to concentration. They are the mind states of distraction: a scattered mind, dullness, mental laxity and mental excitement.

The *scattered mind* is the inability to remain focused, too much conversation. You get carried away by your ideas and thoughts. The scattered mind is agitated, it has quite a lot of energy. So if your mind is scattered during sitting, what do you do? The first thing is to recognise and name it as 'scattered mind' – 'it's not me, it's a condition'. When your mind is scattered it needs something very big, very obvious, something solid to gather it back in. So you need to go back to the body, to the posture, to the earth element, like focusing on your knees touching the ground, something tangible. It is the same in life, if your mind is scattered bring the attention back to the body, to the 'here in this body, now in this moment'.

The remedy, the antidote to scattered mind is mindfulness, a continuity of awareness throughout the day. The mind runs away, mindfulness brings it back. And you will need patience: keep bringing the mind back again and again, back to the body, return to the breath in the belly.

On retreats be aware that you are in the Zendo, mindful of what is done in the Zendo. If there are a lot of external stresses, do body work and walking meditation.

Your life is not your obstacle, it is there in your *dāna* bowl for a good reason. The problem is how you respond to your life – in a state of suffering or freedom, imprisonment or liberation.

If you don't recognise your mind state, you start to project it onto others.

Dullness, drowsiness, sleepiness, boredom, in a sense is the opposite of the scattered mind. At the gross level of the body this is more physical, it is quite a coarse state. Blanking out, disappearing is a sort of dullness. An under-current of thoughts that you cannot see or identify is dullness; too loose, too relaxed, not creative, no spontaneity.

If your mind is sleepy, a bit dull, what should you do? Sometimes it is simply a matter of an external condition: the room is hot, not enough fresh air, or maybe that you simply are too tired. Know it and do something about it.

Usually when you fall asleep it is to do with the level of energy in your body. So you need to have a cold water wake-up before you sit, and sharpen the mind with some fresh air. Energise through posture and breathing and find more interest – for example through attention to detail. Check the practicalities – maybe your diet is not suitable for this work (avoid too much sweet food, potatoes), or you are getting insufficient sleep. If you are very tired, choose walking meditation instead of sitting.

Mental laxity: what do you do when your mind is present but not quite sharp, not quite clear?

This is more subtle than the previous two states. It is often the case in meditation that you are present but not very sharp, not crystal clear; not really 'with it'. There is a sense of going through the motions. What you should do, is have more fire, more joy in your practice, more spark. It means that you need to have more interest.

The remedy is to lift the spirit, so checking your motivation is good; doing the loving-kindness chanting before sitting is also good. Focus on the positive, arouse interest through investigation and turn the mind towards others. In meditation, if mental laxity creeps in, drop the attention into the belly and concentrate on the *hara* point (two fingers' width below the navel), putting fire into the belly. You can also practise this at other times, not just in sitting but in everyday life.

Mental excitement: what do you do when you are very agitated, too elated? Excited with positive, pleasurable experience in meditation; too much stimulation, you cannot just watch the rise and fall of the belly. You get caught, hooked in that high state. The problem is attachment, clinging. You need something to bring the mind down. The remedy is grounding by for example pacing outside and usually by focusing on impermanence or death – that should do it! - and the suffering of others.

You can experience all four obstacles just in one sit; meet them all with awareness. When your practice is stable you don't need these remedies, antidotes. Just observe the mind states; give them space and they liberate themselves. It should be enough to just notice it as it is. First see your mind state, don't take it personally ("me", "mine" or blaming the situation)), then do something about it – sooner rather than later.

If the mind is dull you can visualise a white pearl (a *bija*) at the brow, between the eyebrows, and focus on that for a few minutes, breathing – this will sharpen your attention straight away. It has to be very white, radiating, a bit shiny. Take your attention in and up, so your attention is on the pearl. It is basically to wake you up.

If the mind is restless, imagine a black, oily, shiny pearl at the base of the spine, where you sit, deep below the navel in the root *chakra*. This also a technique to fall asleep when you are agitated.

If you don't know which you are, imagine a shiny blue pearl on the ground a few feet in front of you, at the end of your shadow – blue is for clarity. The intention is to stabilise so you don't shift into dullness or restlessness. You need to learn to know when you could tip into either of those states.

Q: *What is the oiliness for?*

A: It is to make it more alive, more vibrant.

What other states of mind do you need advice on?

- *Numbing out?* Contact the earth, feet on the ground; contact the fact that you are alive, you are here. You need to occupy your space, through the earth.
- *Increasing pains in the body?* Take it as the focus of meditation, make a big study of impermanence, it comes and it passes away. You go into the sensation, you give it space and you notice how it doesn't last; it changes in shape, in colour, in intensity. Don't make a big story about it. Study the body, notice, experience it.

And if you have good wholesome moments dedicate them to all beings' awakening, for just a few breaths. You could also recite *the four divine abidings* (see *Par.I.4*).

II.6 The Four Powers or the Four Efforts

Sati – mindfulness means being aware of your mind state and also being aware of what puts you in that state of mind. Furthermore, in case of an unwholesome state, to ensure that the conditions which led to that state of mind don't happen again. Similarly with the wholesome, to be aware of what put you there and ensure it does happen again and again.

This is the practise of the “*four powers*” which are also called the ‘*four efforts*’. I like the word ‘effort’ because it means you have to do something, it is not going to happen by itself!

1. The effort to recognise unwholesomeness occurring in your body, speech or mind and to stop it. For example by reciting the mantra “may all beings be well and happy”, every time when you notice that an unwholesome thought has arisen. Or by returning to the awareness of the breathing till that mind state has changed.

Awareness of when an unwholesome state arises, knowing the unwholesome – this is *sati*, you have to develop a strong mindfulness.

2. You need to know the causes and conditions that led to that unwholesome state and make sure it doesn't happen again. What were the ingredients that gave rise to this emotion, that action? Watching, recognising, you need to be mindful all the time. Sometimes we reinforce an unwholesome state by ignoring it, not being aware of it, or by suppressing it. We need pure awareness; it all comes down to motivation, intention.

NB: a ‘condition’ is not always psychological, it could be the weather or something you ate.

3. The ability to recognise when something wholesome has arisen – *sati* again – and sustain that wholesome state.

4. To know the conditions that led to that wholesome state and knowing the skill and means to develop those conditions so that it can happen again – this is mindfulness of the *Dharma*.

Look at the wholesome seeds in your life and how they were watered and the beings that helped you to water them. The wholesome in life is that which supports growing and expansion in your life; unwholesomeness is what blocks it, contracts.

As Thich Nhat Hanh tells us: ‘what seeds are you watering?’”

Q: *Is it about positive and negative?*

A: It is not that linear. ‘Negatives’ can be wholesome because they force you to move forward, to overcome what is holding you back. In a wholesome situation you can get stuck and that holds you back, from going beyond, so it becomes unwholesome.

The practice of mindfulness is for grounding, so you are not stirred too much by physical and emotional ‘events’. There are three different approaches here, or levels through which a practice normally progresses:

1. We don't want suffering, we want it to stop. This is the first motive for practising meditation. It is oriented towards the self and it usually is the start of practice because there is too much suffering and you are seeking calm. So first we deal with our own unwholesome states, what makes me unhappy in my life and develop tools to stop it.

2. You have pacified what distresses you and now you are looking for more positives in life. You feel stronger, the orientation is different; it is more aligned to the positive, but still for the self. You begin to have more strength and skills to look at things as they are. Your well-being can now overflow to others. You can become a giver, a nurturer which in turn makes you feel better.
3. You are no longer trying to calm the negative or accentuate the positive, but cultivating an attitude of remaining calm whether things arising are good or bad. Just looking at what is going on, nor rejecting the bad or drawing in the positive, no preferences, everything becomes the focus of meditation. Abiding in non-clinging awareness, without preference, witnessing. This is more skilful because it doesn't depend on what conditions you have; whether inner or outer, you just watch it transform.

This is insight practice which leads to spaciousness. You have enough tranquillity so you don't fall into either negative or positive. Though there still may be days, times, when you need just to stop the pain or augment the positives. Go deep enough to watch the coming and going of good and bad with equanimity, it doesn't matter – just watch what arises as it arises and passes away, bearing witness.

The study of impermanence, everything that comes into being is certain to pass away: once an arising has occurred, there is no way to prevent its passing away – bear witness again and again. You need care and respect, to be gentle with yourself; impatience and bullying yourself don't work.

Ch.III Outer and inner conditions of support

In order to do this deep work we do need supportive conditions, they are the ground from which change can happen.

III.1 General conditions

1. *One outer support is to have a conducive environment.* Here at the Orchard we have beautiful peaceful surroundings in nature and the Zendo is a very special place for practice, where so many hundreds of practitioners have gone before. It will be different for you at home. There is a big Zen centre in central Manhattan – a place of stillness surrounded by the bustle of New York City. At home you could set aside just the corner of a room for practice with maybe a simple shrine, a picture of the teacher; it does not have to be elaborate.
2. *Another important outer condition is the support of the sangha,* the community of practitioners: the support of other students being together during workshops and the wider *sangha* when you are at home. And, most important, always being mindful of the *teacher's presence*, and the back-up from *the lineage*, wherever you may be.
Discussing and reading about the Dharma also fall in this category.
3. *An unbroken continuity of awareness,* not so much peak time and then dropping it. Flowing, one activity at a time, being ‘here in this body, now in this moment’, not in the ‘there and then’. Being aware of the aspect of impermanence – whatever arises, it doesn’t last, ‘this too will pass’. You need repetitive practice of tools that bring you back to deep calm, a stable centre. Don’t forget a sense of humour, not taking it all so seriously! These are inner conditions - reciting a *mantra* helps with that.
4. *To have care and respect* for the practice, for yourself and for other students, to be more sensitive. Slow down, being in silence. Joyful perseverance is an aspect of ‘care and respect’; coming from a place of joy and loving-kindness, mindful of the ‘potentials and leisure’s’ provided by our precious human birth. These are all inner supports.

See also the earlier chapter on a supportive container for the day and motivation.

III.2 Silence

I would like to talk about silence in the practice with you now. What sort of silent practice do you want, how deep do you want to go? I am talking about the form, tell me what form of silence do you want? For the benefit of all beings?

Q: *We are practising opening the heart so it is good to have some contact without talking. I want to avoid the pollution of chatter.*

A: So there is no talking. You can have eye contact, you can smile, but you don’t talk. Maintain physical space; drop the concepts of having mental and emotional space.

I would prefer you not to read any books, stay with “right here and now”.

Silence is not a punishment, it is increasing the mindfulness, respecting the energy. I find that silence increases our respect for other people. I am not looking for strict silence here. If sometimes you have eye contact it is OK, but don't speak – think of it as being soft around the edges. I want you not to be too close together, avoid touching, respect the space of other people, their auric field. Especially when you are queuing for food. Give space, open your heart. You are always in dialogue, even in silence. Watch how you use silence; it can be used aggressively to push others away, in order not to face yourself. We are body, speech and mind.

Being in silence does not mean cutting yourself off from others. Think of being in an aura of loving-kindness and you might find a different way of relating to people.

Silence is very important in the kitchen – the food is like medicine, so what you think and say while cooking we will eat later on. I would like all those who are working in the kitchen to have a *mantra* going in your head: “*sabbe sattâ sukhita hontu* - may all beings be well and happy”. If you feel the impulse to talk, you say the *mantra* three times.

When you are in strict silence it means no communication at all, so the energy that normally goes out is taken back into ourselves. Be serious with it. If someone talks to you, bow and walk away. Practise silence more thoroughly than you have ever done. No reading except practice texts from the teacher. No listening to music, no phoning. This is strict practice - no interruption, no eye contact, any stimulation interrupts the rising of stuff from the depths, positive potential and also negatives; you are in preparation to hear vibration from the depths.

When practising silence at home, bear witness – don't engage with people, phone, open mail, no heavy digging. You need to protect the meditation environment; you cannot handle the mundane and the sublime simultaneously.

The Orchard is happy that you are in silence, there is a feeling of settling. The flowers are not so frightened any more! It is very noticeable, you must notice that yourself.

At home, give yourself a day of silence on a regular basis. A gift to yourself!

III.3 Support from the Dharma

There are two meanings of the word dharma: *dharma* (with small d) means all phenomena; *Dharma* (with capital D) specifically refers to the teachings of the Buddha.

Mindfulness of the *Dharma*: remembering and reflecting on the skills and tools that have been provided through the teaching, will be a continuing support for when you go home, in everyday life.

I have spoken of the need to be aware of what puts you in an unwholesome state. So, what unwholesome states most commonly arise in everyday life? The teaching tells us that there are ten *unwholesome actions* of body, speech and mind. They all have to do with taking from others and doing harm to other beings. We need mindfulness, and check our motivation.

You need to be mindful of this list so that when one of these states arises in you, you can do something to avert it; then you will have more *sukha*, good feeling, and less *dukkha*, suffering – and so will those around you!

The three unwholesome actions of body:

1. *Taking life, killing intentionally.*

In everyday life we are doing a lot of un-intentional killing – walking on the ground, eating food, digging the garden. This may be necessary to sustain life. If you send good thoughts, energy to an animal that is being killed that way, that can be regarded as wholesome – transfer the merit of the practice to the meat you are eating. Make a good connection with that being. It comes back to awareness of what you are doing.

2. *Stealing, taking what is not given, not offered.* Also refers to envy, for example you could manipulate to get something you want. Look at what happens at meal times in Maitreya House! Not assuming that anything that is available is given, that you can take it, can be seen as an aspect of generosity, the *parami* of *dâna*. You are creating an air of generosity, of making things available. It is the same with support, advice. But it may come to a stage where for the giver it feels like taking, it is too much. It can be wholesome to set clear boundaries. If you start to practise wholesome actions it can have a ripple effect, others join in. At death you cannot take any possessions or people with you, only the virtues, the wholesomeness you have accumulated. So every moment in the day is an opportunity to practise. See the inter-beingness in everything – not self-cherishing, less self-referencing.

3. *Sexual misconduct*, including over-stimulation of the senses. Inflicting harm or hurt, hurting someone's feelings, causing distress – for your own pleasure. Stop and review, check where you are coming from, what is the intention. Take this as the basic principle in all things, and your behaviour changes.

There are four unwholesome actions of speech:

1. *Lying, not telling the truth* in order to deceive for your own gain; or holding back information so you appear in a better light than someone else, self-cherishing. Intention to give misinformation, to fool or confuse someone for your own gain, your own benefit. It can also be not speaking, not saying something, holding back when you could be speaking to help another.

2. *Slander, creating disharmony*, stirring up suspicion about someone for your own benefit; it can be very subtle. Creating suspicion, saying something that is not true about someone. The result of this can be the breaking up of a community, of a friendship. On this retreat we are attending to wholesomeness in speech through silence and the recitation of taking refuge.

3. *Harsh speech* – speaking with the intention to harm, saying something you know is going to hurt someone, to disturb their peace of mind. It can be softly said but it is done from a place of anger and nastiness. This has *karma*, it will come back to you.

4. *Gossip*, this is probably practised more than the other three. Idle chatter, spreading rumours, not telling truth, fantasising. We should use speech in a precious way.

In all speech, watch what you say. When out of silence, watch what your preferred behaviour in speech is. The Buddha advises us 'not to associate with fools', not to associate with people who are not practising or studying the mind. Your circle of friends may change.

During retreats at The Orchard we are trying to maintain quietness, silence, talking only about the practice or practical matters. We know how powerful thoughts are, all the more so when they are translated into speech. We use speech to end suffering, not to cultivate suffering: right speech, good speech. Ask yourself whether your speech is helping to end suffering. When you talk with someone, maintain awareness of where you are coming from, of your intention.

In all actions, if the intention is generosity it is not unwholesome.

There are three unwholesome actions of mind:

1. *Envy*: this is like stealing. It is unwholesome because you are focusing on your negatives, on what you don't have - beauty, popularity, wisdom, skills. It is an attitude of poverty and that is very depleting. There is an idea of separation, that the other who has the success (or whatever) is separate from you. So when this emotion comes up, focus more on your qualities, on what you have got.
Open your heart and be generous to yourself and cultivate *mudita*, sympathetic joy, being happy for others. So share in their happiness, it is also your happiness; it overflows, and you benefit from it too.
The wholesome has a tendency to expand, to ripple out. The unwholesome has a tendency to contract, to create separation.
2. *Wishing harm*, suffering to another; hateful behaviour, malice. This breeds hatred, aggression in the mind.
3. *Wrong view*, ignorance: not having the full picture, having only a partial view in everything we do. If you have too much opinion, you push away or draw in. Watch your opinions, views, they are not the truth. Only fully enlightened beings have a full view, the rest of us have some unwholesomeness in our views. So we must watch the mind. It all comes back to training the mind.

III.4 The Precepts

The five precepts are a commitment, reminders, derived from traditional monastic vows. Their advice will help you not to live this life driven by the ten unwholesome actions of body, speech and mind. They are a very important support. Recite and reflect on them daily.

Traditionally the precepts address unwholesomeness through abstinence, a bit like the Christian commandments '*thou shall not kill*'. A contemporary form of the precepts takes a positive approach, they are given to support life:

The Precepts in positive expression (from Tarchin Hearn):

I will train myself to support, extend and appreciate the life of all living beings. I will live with a sensitive and responsible awareness for the whole ecology of life.

Respect for any being, you could take this one as an antidote to aggression driven by hatred.

2. *I will train myself to dwell more and more in the mind of spontaneous generosity. Daily I will give material support, emotional support, and an example to others of awakening in action.*

Spontaneous generosity – an antidote to stealing, to greed; feeling richer leads to more spontaneous generosity.

3. *I will train myself to use the senses to further awakening, explore Dharma, and to come to know the world more profoundly and more compassionately.*

Focus here is on how we use the senses. Develop the senses to grow into a fuller human being. Use beauty, pleasure, to go further into the practice, not as focus for attachment. In the *traditional precepts* there is a sense of denial of the senses – no music, perfume - renunciation, no attachment. The five positive precepts show us how to use the senses and life in positive ways, not ‘no, forbidden’. This way there is more expansion, richness, wholeness.

4. *I will train myself to communicate in a skilful and compassionate manner.*

We can do so much damage with speech; be more in silence.. Speech must be aligned with intention and action. *Karma* is intention, volition and its translation into action

5. *I will train myself to be ever more directly aware of how nutriments affects the mind and body. I will eat, drink and nurture myself and others in a way that supports awakening.*

Nutriments are all around us, anything that we see, hear, touch, smell. How does what I take in affect what I put out and become? The basic is food and also touch and human loving-kindness. We all need to be touched well, by a look as well as by physical contact. Even objects – before you touch anything, or eat, regard it with loving-kindness. Doing this sort of mindfulness in everyday life is really the test of your practice.

III.5 The paramis - the six perfections

The *paramis*, or *paramitas* mean literally “going beyond” or ‘to cross over to the other shore’, to the ‘golden city’, to awakening. Cultivating them helps us to go further, beyond our limitations – they are an inspiration, both an inner and outer support. They are the seeds to be watered.

1. *Generosity, dāna*: look at it as an opening, a letting go. To be more open and generous of mind, heart, body, to all beings – not just to loved ones, ones in authority or ones you hope to get something from. To **all** beings – why do we have to be generous and helpful to all? Contemplate how essential other beings are to you for survival in this life, you are totally dependent on other beings We can do nothing on our own. In order to let go of the unwholesome in body, speech and mind and to cultivate the wholesome, the first virtue we have to focus on is the *parami* of *dāna*. Stepping into the Zendo, have the intention to practise for the benefit of all beings, not just for yourself. If all beings feels too much, think of all the beings living at the Orchard –including birds, cats, insects. Dreariness, exhaustion will vanish at a flash because you are opening the heart by not just focusing on ‘me’. You have to set the condition before you step into the Zendo. Feel that you are nurturing this being so that you can help all sentient beings. Just this feeling fills you with energy.

We are receiving a massive amount all the time. We are the product of so much input, attention. It is your responsibility, your duty, to pass it on. Your practice will never flourish if it is just about you. If you really develop generosity towards other beings, you will receive from others beyond your imagination, in ways you could not have foreseen.

2. *Ethical conduct, sila*. Check your behaviour, in terms of body, speech and mind, to see if there is anything that could disturb someone else, like physical intrusion into the space of others while in silence. Talking during silence – this is disturbing the mind of others who are trying to practise. In the *sangha*, if one person can act like this for the benefit of others, it ripples out for the benefit of all. Be more aware, careful. Check where you are coming from – it is the practice of purification, of awakening, of letting go. See the precepts in the previous paragraph.
3. *Patience, ksanti*. Opening up to someone's mistakes, not just tolerating them. The *Pali* word *ksanti* means peaceful, not to get agitated by the mistakes, the wrongs of others. You do wrong too, they are like you.
4. *Energy, viriya*. Imagine the heart open, focus on the good of others, so your energy is not bound by conflicts, pushing, pulling, avoiding, hiding, showing off, emotional upsets. That way you will have lots of energy which can be given to the practice. This is directly related to the first three *paramis*.
5. *Concentration, samadhi*. If you are cultivating the first four, if you have energy, you will have concentration.
6. *Wisdom, prajna*. This is often what we want but we forget to go back to the first five. Wisdom arises as consequence of all the other *paramis*

Don't see these as too linear, if you practise just one of the *paramis*, you practise them all as they contain each other.

Namgyal Rinpoche said that when our practice gets stale, when we don't progress, we need to look at our *paramis*.

Dedication

May the Dharma as presented in this booklet be for the benefit and uplifting of all beings.
May all beings be well and happy and free from fear.

Notes

The intention has been to present Sonia's words as she spoke, to preserve the flavour and the spirit of her teaching. Anything else is in italics: contributions from students, texts, editing links, other languages (mainly *Pali*).

Acknowledgements

This text of teachings are based on notes taken by Gill Blair over the years of 2003-2011. I would like to thank Gill Blair for her dedication in taking hours of notes over the past nine years and for editing and seeing this project to completion for the benefit of the larger *sangha*.
I also would like to thank Ad Brugman who spent much time in editing the original texts.

New edition December 2014: edited by Ad Brugman

I am grateful to Jane Sethi and John Burgess who have given me their helpful comments and suggestions during this exercise.

Appendix-1

PEACE TO ALL BEINGS

*Peace to all beings,
may all beings be well and happy and free from fear.*

*Peace to all beings,
whether near or far, whether known or unknown,
real or imaginary, visible or invisible,
born or yet to be born,
may all beings be well and happy and free from fear.*

*Peace to all beings,
within and beyond the imagination,
in the world of ideas, in the world of memories,
and in the world of dreams,
may all beings be well and happy and free from fear.*

*Peace in all elements,
of earth and air, fire and water,
fulfilled in space,
peace.*

*Peace in all universes, from the smallest cells in the body,
to the greatest galaxies in space,
peace and light rising.*

*Peace to all beings,
within each being here,
those beings that are of the past,
and those that are yet to be in the future,
may all beings be well and happy and free from fear.*

*Peace and love and comfort and ease to all those in need,
may they all be well and happy and free from fear.*

Appendix-2

The nine breathings

We do this practice at the beginning of each sitting meditation, or before each block of practice if you are on retreat. It is to clear and balance the fine energy lines which lead from the nostrils, up into the brain at the top of the head, round the side of the skull and down the spine, gathering at the hara point below the navel.

Sitting in meditation posture, start with breathing in through both nostrils, then:

- For women: with the middle finger of the left hand, block the right nostril and breathe out forcefully through the left nostril;
- Then with thumb block the left nostril and breathe in through the right nostril, long and slow and gently.
- Repeat the sequence twice more
- For men: do it all the other way round, using the right hand, blocking left nostril, etc.
- Then, same for men and women, hands on knees, breathe in through both nostrils and out sharply, bending forwards at the pelvis while keeping the spine straight, to expel all air.

Repeat the sequence two more times.

Appendix-3

Retreatants' Daily Programme

The theme of personal retreats is the practice of *Calm Abiding and of Bringing the Mind Home: "Here in this Body, Now in this Moment."*

<p><i>Prior to Group Sitting at 8 am ease into the day with:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ 30mins.: exercises or walking med. <p>08.00 am</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ 30mins Group Sitting (in zendo) <p>08.30 – 09.30am <i>Breakfast</i></p> <p>09.30 am <i>meeting in zendo with Ad</i> or</p> <p>09.30 – 11 am:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ 30mins <i>Body work/exercises</i>, with emphasis on the quality of "<i>just resting</i>"▪ 30mins <i>Walking meditation</i>▪ 30mins <i>Sitting</i> meditation <p>11 am - 12.30 pm <i>kamma yoga</i></p> <p>12.30 - 2.30 pm <i>Lunch and resting</i></p> <p>2.30 – 4.00pm</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ <i>Time in nature</i>: this is an exploration in nature of impermanence; to contemplate and observe that nothing is fixed or lasting, that everything is transient and in movement, from the changes of light, colours, temperature, to the passing of thoughts, of feelings, of ideas, storylines, emotions, etc.	<p>4.00 – 5.30pm:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ 30mins <i>Body work/exercises</i> with emphasis on the quality of "<i>just resting</i>"▪ 30mins <i>Walking meditation</i>▪ 30 min. <i>Sitting meditation in zendo</i> <p>6.00 - 8.00pm <i>Dinner and resting</i></p> <p>The evening time is for softening, i.e. no new input that will stir you. So, choose a gentle activity such as drawing, reading a text or walking. In this way you go to bed with a good feeling.</p> <p>8.30 – 9.00pm</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ 30 min: Group Sitting meditation in MH
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"Happiness cannot be found through great effort and great willpower, but is already there in relaxation and letting go" [Gendun Rinpoche]