

# ‘Stilling And Seeing Through’

– how I introduce our meditation system on a led retreat –  
Smritiratna  
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An earlier version of this article appeared in Shabda (May 2008) for Order Members but it is open to all.

## Why this article?

I am writing this article in order to (1) explain how I have been introducing insight contemplations at Friends level, over the last three years, especially on “Stilling and Seeing Through” retreats, (2) describe what happens on these retreats, (3) outline their doctrinal background, (4) explain how I see all this contributing to our work and (5) invite you to attend and invite your comments and suggestions.

## 1. Who are these retreats for?

Well the retreats are for Friends, Mitras and Order Members and currently feature in the ‘Regulars’ section of the Dhanakosa programme as follows ...

“This retreat offers a way to use your mindfulness and metta meditations (stilling) as the basis for cultivating insight (seeing through) into impermanence, interdependence and the Dharma refuge. The Dharma refuge is a way to find your balance in the midst of the inter-flowing nature of reality, and then take heart. This ‘balance’ depends upon many supportive conditions. Drawing upon the Buddhist tradition, we will be exploring these conditions as the ethical, devotional and meditative basis for developing insight. Meditation retreats are generally held mostly in silence. However this introduction to insight meditation will include a shorter, 3-day silent period.”

So they cater for those who already know the standard FWBO meditations, pujas and some of the basic principles of Buddhism, but are not necessarily Going for Refuge effectively as yet. They aim to show how the various meditation practices can help you to grow towards that new basis of confidence, the Triple Refuge, the term our tradition employs to point out the only effective basis for happiness.

A number of Order Members have also been attending these retreats, either as team members or as guests; in recent times, Adarsha, Amoghavajra, Munisha, Nityabodha, Sasanajyoti and Vajrahridaya. Paul Thomson (ex-Dharmapala) has also been attending.

Any peace and confidence that ignores the realities of impermanence, can easily be swept away the next time your ceiling falls in, or your car breaks down, or your health breaks down, or you lose your job, or your lover, or your best friend’s mother dies. These events will not wait until our Friends are effectively Going for Refuge; they happen to ordinary people all the time. I am trying to help prepare them. Of course I am by no means the first to introduce such reflections to Friends and Mitras: we have had retreats introducing insight meditations at Vajraloka for many years, and countless study retreats on this, right across the FWBO. This is simply a description of the way I have been teaching.

## 2. What happens on a ‘Stilling and Seeing Through’ retreat?

**Arriving on Day One**, I’ll point to the Eightfold Path as our overall system of practice. Each of us begins the retreat with some conception of the Dharma (something of Right View, a glimpse of the Buddha’s Vision) and then acts accordingly, through devotion, right speech, considerate action, appropriate effort, but especially through mindfulness and meditation practice. Thereby the inspiration, the “visionary devotion”, with which we began the retreat, motivates us to discover its meaning through putting it into practice. Thereby our initial vision, such as it is, can be clarified and enriched through firsthand experience.

On most days, we’ll have two longish periods for meditation, at 7am and 4pm. Each consists of alternate sitting and walking meditations over a two hour period. Most of these meditations are open, not led, simply

a bell marking the start and finish. Retreatants can choose their own practice at such times. In the late morning however, I'll introduce and lead a meditation to draw out the theme for that day. Each evening we divide into small groups for 'mindful sharing', speaking spontaneously out of the silence or else listening with empathy – a valuable insight practice in its own right. Afterwards, we have devotions: some sort of puja. Sometimes it is a simple recitation like the Threefold Puja with readings. Sometimes it is the description of an archetypal Bodhisattva - 'image of what you could become' – followed by a silent communion with that figure then their mantra and offerings at the shrine. Sometimes it is the Sevenfold Puja. All these enable the active and receptive practices of visionary devotion. Recitation and mantra are active practices whereby the Buddha Vision is actively called to mind. Just Sitting is the receptive practice: sitting on, in the light of that Vision, letting it sink in. Both Puja and Just Sitting are encouraged every day. Even to salute the Buddha on the shrine then to practise just sitting, as if in His presence, is the receptive practice of those first two limbs of the Path: visionary devotion.

**On Day Two**, our theme is 'Staying Present, Kindly Breathing'. I'll point out that the cultivation of mindful concentration, through our 4-stage Mindfulness of Breathing, can only be effective when all three factors are present: mindfulness, kindness and that focus for concentration to gather.

**On Day Three**, the theme is 'Sky-like Mind'. Here I'll encourage everyone who has established that kindly presence of mind with breath as the focus, to then take a greater interest in the space around that. Through this broader awareness of the immediate sense experience, we can find the freedom to observe the arising of thoughts (and even mental hindrances) without getting entangled. The 'sky-like mind' is that spacious awareness, which doesn't react to the sensations passing through it. If they get troublesome they can be gently labelled and relinquished, like passing clouds. I'll encourage this sky-like attitude to hindrances especially because it is already a contemplation of transience. Such non-reactive spacious awareness is the foundation of mindfulness (satipatthana) upon which all our insight contemplations can take place. A handout on sky-blue paper, especially for Day Three, depicts the Five Mental Hindrances as clouds within a sunlit blue sky.

**On Day Four** our theme is simply 'Metta Bhavana'. Without metta, the sky-like attitude would degenerate into a cold and selfish detachment. Through metta bhavana, you focus on the kindness and share it with others. Taking you beyond your superficial likes and dislikes, metta bhavana helps you tap into the unconditional humanity solidarity beneath. It also helps you to soften the boundaries between self and other, in preparation for Day Five. Incidentally if a retreat community seems a bit cold, I'll sometimes make Day Three into the metta day and have mindfulness on Day Four. All this is subject to variation depending on the people.

**On Day Five** the theme is 'Beyond Self and Other'. Reflection on the natural elements (inner and outer) enables us to try letting go the self-other duality for a while to discover what life feels like without it. This provides a special opportunity to glimpse the Buddha's vision, through a temporary suspension of self pre-occupation. This introductory reflection on the elements is not 'The Six Element Practice' as taught within the Western Buddhist Order which includes contemplation of death. On this retreat we leave death until the next day. On Day Five, I describe a very simple reflection on the six elements, inner and outer, and then, weather permitting, take them outside for to commune with the natural beauty of Loch Voil, before returning indoors for the staged meditation. Stage six is simply a contemplation of awareness, one's own then that of others then both simultaneously – as in the Satipatthana Sutta contemplations of vijjāna: 'internal' then 'external' then 'internal and external' together.

**On Day Six** we have 'Transience and True Refuge' as our theme. I generally leave a pile of bones below the shrine for the last two full days, so people can just sit with both the bones and the Buddha. I introduce the theme by talking as much about the Triple Refuge as about impermanence. True and false refuges distinguish themselves so clearly in relation to impermanence. Therein lies the beauty of this ancient practice. The breath rises and falls, the 'ten thousand things' rise and fall. An acceptance of impermanence cuts right through the illusions of mundane refuge. After a while, the only refuge that makes any sense any more, is about making your peace with the reality of things in this way. When you reflect on impermanence with a kind heart, that is Dharma practice. If you find a peace within that, you are

beginning to discover the Dharma Refuge: that way of balance in the midst of transience, in solidarity with the Buddha and Sangha - the other two Reality Refuges.

**On Day Seven**, our last full day, we return to the first theme, 'visionary devotion', for the Eightfold Path is a spiral path. The practices have had their effects though it's perhaps too soon to be fully aware of their effects. But here at the end of the retreat we are changed, for personal growth is like death and rebirth, over and over. The end of the retreat brings us to a new beginning wherefrom our personal future opens out. With a renewed vision, this is the time to start looking at how to devote the rest of our lives, in the light of that new vision.

The Buddha's vision cannot be known until it starts to be lived out and understood through practice. Book study has to be combined with meditative contemplations if the body and emotions are to be engaged. Seven days is only a short time to explore these practices but they always do have their effects. More especially, such a week gives people a useful overview of how the different practices complement and fit together into the overall scheme. I drew up a 'mandala of meditations' to illustrate it (see diagram on p.7).

### 3. The Doctrinal Background

#### 3(a) this mandala of meditations

These are primarily meditation retreats so I do keep doctrine in the background. Retreatants are given a sheaf of handouts as they arrive, of which they can read as much or as little as they wish. The mandala is included for those interested, along with the following explanatory notes (abridged)...

This mandala has been devised in harmony with two systems of Ugyen Sangharakshita. His 1967 system (known as 'the Five Basic Methods of Meditation') presents five traditional practices as antidotes to the Five Mental Poisons. For distraction, practise mindfulness of breathing; for anger, metta bhavana; for conceit, the six element practice; for craving, the contemplation of decay; for ignorance, contemplation of the 12 nidanas. See 'What is the Dharma?' (pp.188-198) or 'A Guide to the Buddhist Path' (pp.151-4).

Sangharakshita's 1978 system (also known as 'The FWBO System of Meditation') outlines a series of developmental stages. It then gives examples of meditations that can help to bring each stage to fruition. For the stage of integration, practise eg. mindfulness of breathing and 'mindfulness ... in general'; for assimilation, the Just Sitting; for the stage of positive emotion, practise eg. metta bhavana; for assimilation, the Just Sitting; for the stage of spiritual death, practise eg. six element practice (including death contemplation); for assimilation, the Just Sitting; for the stage of spiritual rebirth, practise eg. sadhana visualisation of a Buddha or Bodhisattva; for assimilation, the Just Sitting. See 'A Guide to the Buddhist Path' (pp.145-150).

This mandala arranges four of the Five Mental Poisons as they appear in the Mandala of the Five Buddhas. These mental poisons 'stand between us and our own innate Buddhahood' [What is the Dharma? p.188] like clouds obscuring the blue sky. Some of the meditations from the two earlier systems appear in the mandala, offering ways to actively dispel these obscurations. Then the Just Sitting is vital as a way to assimilate the effects of your efforts. One 'just sits' in the light of one's vision of the Three Jewels. The Three Jewels symbolize the vision, and your devotion to realising that lies at the heart of the mandala. Devotional practices include contemplating the shrine, bowing to the shrine and reciting mantras or verses to imaginatively evoke the Buddhas. This too is a vital part of the whole.

#### 3(b) The Eightfold Path

Bhante clarifies something in his intended, though unpublished, prefatory note to 'The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path' (2007 edition) – see Shabda (announcements section, January 2008). He explains that the path can initially be traversed on the basis of mundane right view as the first limb. In this case, all eight limbs are only mundane attainments. When the first limb is attained as a transcendental insight however,

that insight permeates all the other limbs so that they too are transcendental attainments. Strictly speaking, it is when traversed on this transcendental level by the Arya Sangha, that it becomes the arya (i.e. Noble) Eightfold Path. Right at the end of the last chapter of the book itself, Bhante presented this as, in effect, a spiral path, likening those moments of transcendental Perfect Vision to rainfalls upon a growing tree, each one spreading a new wave of growth throughout the whole tree, that is, the whole of one's being: 'This process is repeated over and over again, at ever higher levels, until at last the entire being is completely transformed, and nothing is left unchanged. One is entirely pervaded by the light of Enlightenment.'

Without wishing to deny the distinction between mundane and transcendental attainments, I have recently presented the Eightfold Path in general as a spiral path. Thus whatever level of right view you have attained as the first limb, its effects will spread through all the remaining seven limbs (the rest of your life). This in turn will stimulate new insights (albeit mundane) that will further deepen and clarify the initial vision (albeit still mundane) which in turn initiates a new wave of growth. Sooner or later, these successive waves of growth could arouse transcendental insights and thereafter the spiral path can be traversed on successive transcendental levels as portrayed by Bhante's growing tree.

Calling the first two limbs 'vision' and 'devotion' respectively, every practice within the whole Path takes place in the context of one's 'visionary devotion' and it is this that lies at the heart of the mandala of meditations.

### 3(c) Just Sitting (now also known as 'formless meditation')

'Just Sitting' in Bhante Sangharakshita's System of Meditation (1978) was a period of total receptivity alternating with the active meditations – activity, receptivity, activity, receptivity and so on. Well Just Sitting appears in our mandala in this sense: an essentially non-doing practice. Yet it is a non-doing in the context of the Buddhist vision.

When we bow to the shrine we do not bow to a lump of brass. We imagine that rupa to be the Buddha and we bow to Him. We can then sit down as if still in His presence. Well to consciously sit in the Buddha's presence can be a very potent practice. It is to sit in the living presence of a human being who became a Buddha, knowing that 'what the Buddha attained, I too can attain ...' Three years ago I realised that I could make more of the opportunity a shrine provides. Those images on the shrine are there to remind us of the Buddhist Vision. Those images of Buddha and Bodhisattvas, those flowers, candles, incense or bones: all are symbols of the Buddha, Dharma and Arya Sangha. I have come to see this imaginative renewal of my own vision of the Three Jewels, to be the most important thing I do when I begin my daily practice. And having actively contemplated the meaning of the Three Jewels, I always begin meditation by receptively experiencing them, through a period of Just Sitting. This is an entirely receptive way to experience that first limb of the Eightfold Path. I imagine it had a strong precedent during the lifetime of the Buddha, in the ancient practice of Taking Darshan. On those full-moon nights when the monks sat for hours in the living presence of the Buddha, perhaps they spent at least some of that time Just Sitting in this sense; gazing upon Him and letting the knowledge of His extraordinary example have its rousing and prospering effects on the body-mind.

This is why Just Sitting appears in this mandala as illuminated by the Three Jewels. It is the practice of being entirely receptive to their light without my own little doings getting in the way. The original idea for depicting Just Sitting in this way came from Tejananda. Two years ago I modified my own version of the mandala to harmonise with his, and incorporated this feature at the same time. Tejananda's mandala is also centred upon Buddhahood, yet he especially emphasises its latency within us all.

I have attended Tejananda's 'opening to awareness' retreat at Dhanakosa every year since 2004. He once described his approach as 'the sky-like attitude extended from an antidote into an entire practice'. This is basically how he teaches Just Sitting. In the context of the Threefold Way (morality, meditation, wisdom) he recommends Bhante's 1978 System of Meditation. Then he introduces Just Sitting by expounding the basic Dharma vision, that human consciousness is not limited to small-minded selfish ways, that it is capable of liberation, and that the selfless qualities of liberated mind are ever present, at

least in embryonic form. In other words, greed, hatred and delusion are not the whole truth about human consciousness. Their opposites, selfless Openness, kindly Sensitivity and an objective Clarity, can always be found there too. The sky-like attitude is a way to regard these sky-like qualities (the 'big mind') as fundamental, while regarding selfish greed, hatred and delusion (features of the 'small mind') as merely extraneous like passing clouds. I already quoted Bhante Sangharakshita's presentation of this same sky-like attitude (3a above) and to me it is simply method. Regarding one's mind as essentially pure, while regarding the accompanying mental poisons as extraneous, simply makes it easier to dis-identify from them and let them go. Tejananda's approach is thus quite traditional: to expound the Dharma vision and then to let us Just Sit in the light of that. He likes to draw inspiration from Milarepa and Padmasambhava whereas on my retreats I prefer to source everything back to Buddha Sakyamuni. However I regard our approaches as entirely in harmony, and in harmony with Bhante Sangharakshita.

### 3(d) Contemplating the Elements Without Death

As explained above, our contemplation of the elements here is not The Six Element Practice as taught on ordination courses. For many of my retreatants, this is their first time meditating on the elements. I therefore teach a simple way to contemplate first the element within, then the element outside the body, then to drop that self/other distinction and simply see the element everywhere. This is plenty to be doing for a beginner to the practice, without bringing death into it. Likewise, the Buddha teaches a five element meditation to Rahula without mentioning death (Majjhima Nikaya 62: Maharahulovada Sutta). As in that Sutta, I teach reflection on impermanence as a separate meditation, during this retreat. Nonetheless I do realise that including death reflection within a six element meditation can make it a more potent practice when the practitioner is ready for it. My own teaching is only a preparation for that more advanced practice. Bhante said (on our preceptors weekend in April last year) that he regards death reflection as an important part of the Six Element Practice for Order Members - the renunciation aspect - and I agree. However to this preparatory contemplation of the elements, as I described it to him, Bhante has also shown warm encouragement.

### 3(e) What about sadhana visualisation? And why the bones?

In our Movement, people are initiated into a sadhana practice of Bodhisattva visualisation only when they are deemed ready for ordination. That is why sadhana visualisation does not explicitly appear in this mandala – accessible as it is to Friends and Mitras too. However some of the key elements of sadhana visualisation are there in contemplating those bones at the foot of the shrine. After all, a sadhana visualisation commences with the blue sky – that is, contemplation of the transient sky-like nature of all conditioned things. Within that infinite space there is nothing anywhere to hold onto. Then, as if to encourage you, the Bodhisattva appears. She is made of light and She cannot be clung to either ... but She encourages by example, for She has achieved that serene poise in the midst of it all and now radiates compassion in all directions. Encouraged by Her example, you too are able to stay open-hearted in the midst of the transience, even after She has faded from view, at least for a while. It is that open-hearted way of being, in the midst of transience, which I have described as the Dharma Refuge. And to become such a being, Who utterly dwells in the Dharma Refuge, that is surely the whole purpose of sadhana – indeed, the purpose of our entire spiritual tradition.

To sit before a shrine as if in the living presence of the Buddha or Bodhisattva it depicts, and to contemplate the transience of all conditioned things, as symbolised by the pile of bones beneath the shrine, this is simply another way in, is it not? Admittedly it lacks the subtlety of an effective sadhana practice. But in the absence of an effective sadhana, is it not a valuable practice in its own right?

On a 'Stilling and Seeing Through' retreat, I introduce this practice very gently. In my introductory talk, 'Transience and True Refuge', I'll point out the sheer common sense of finding a better refuge than dependence on any apparent permanence of conditioned things. I know full well that only some of those present have already established an effective Going for Refuge however. This is why in the meditation itself, I'll lead them into to a kindly mindfulness, then leave them to find their own way, gazing quietly at the bones before the Buddha.

On our last 'Stilling & Seeing Through' retreat, the day after our death contemplation, a mitra who'd been regularly meditating for ten years, said he would have liked me to have led that meditation with more prompts about the facts of impermanence. Then someone who was regularly attending a Centre but had only been meditating for two years said that even the meditation I had led (with no such prompts) gave her a scary dream that night. The mitra was then able to see for himself why I had led the meditation so gently. I advised him to use his own initiative to contemplate impermanence, as far as he felt ready to go – taking care not to go too far in any one day, as meditation can have delayed effects. Meanwhile my advice to her was about developing her mindfulness and metta and her friendships in the sangha, then contemplating transience and true refuge only as and when she felt ready to do so. The plain fact is that impermanence will keep on showing itself in her life over and over again, like it or not. The sooner she can come to terms with it, the better. In the meantime, I am very glad to have introduced her to this contemplation, albeit gently and in the supportive context of the other practices.

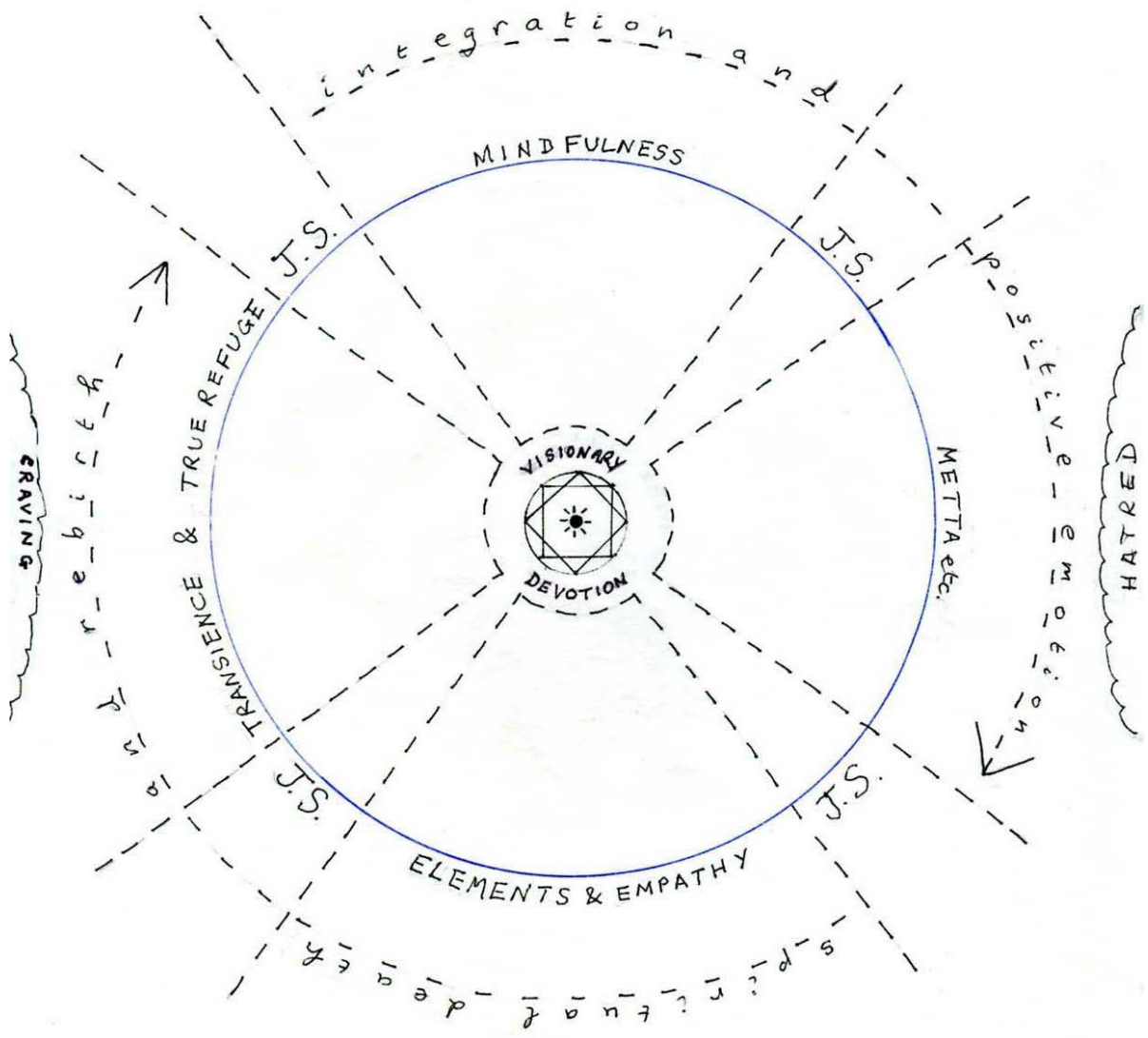
#### **4. How do the 'Stilling & Seeing Through' retreats contribute to our work?**

A week's retreat can provide particularly supportive conditions for insight meditation, if it is set up properly. The only way to learn how to do that is to carefully try it and gradually gain experience. Kamalashila pointed this out to me three years ago. As we gain in experience, we can learn from each other. We increasingly build up a body of teaching experience thereby. When something goes wrong, we can learn from that too. I do not wish to make recommendations as to how other Order Members should teach, that is their own responsibility. I only wish to share and explain what I have been doing. Like the insight meditation retreats that have long been held at Vajraloka and elsewhere, retreats like this complement the Dharma talks at FWBO Centres and the Dharma study groups that go on around them. In order for an acceptance of impermanence to penetrate beneath the merely intellectual level though, it has to be introduced in a meditative context. If that is done well, people will see more clearly the value of the Triple Refuge and, if they wish, go for it. Whether or not this takes them into the Order, they will have begun to discover the Bodhisattva Path to the liberation of the many.

#### **5. All Welcome!**

Well Order Members are especially welcome to attend. The next 'Stilling and Seeing Through' retreat is for men only and will take place at Dhanakosa, 22-29 December 2008. Then in 2009 there will be another two, for both men and women: 13-23 March at Vajraloka, then in December at Dhanakosa. In the meantime, please write to me if you have any comments, queries or suggestions regarding this article.

DISTRACTION



DRAWING

HATRED

CONCEIT

J.S. = Just Sitting  
 ~ Smritiratna