

INTRODUCTION

Approaching Deep Calm and Insight

*One who stops trains of thought
As a shower settles a cloud of dust,
With a mind that has quelled thoughts
Attains in this life the state of peace.*

—THE ITIVUTTAKA¹

THIS BOOK, *Wisdom Wide and Deep*, follows my first, *Focused and Fearless: A Meditator's Guide to States of Deep Joy, Calm, and Clarity*, which contains the initial instructions for developing concentration in daily life, overcoming obstacles such as restlessness and distraction, building conditions for tranquility and calmness, and establishing the deep meditative absorptions called *jhāna*. *Wisdom Wide and Deep* extends the training of concentration and insight by drawing extensively on the wisdom preserved in two traditional sources—*The Visuddhimagga*, a traditional manual for Buddhist practice, and the Abhidhamma, a branch of Buddhist philosophy that emphasizes a systematic and analytical approach to understanding the mind. The structure for these practices and many illustrations are derived directly from the teachings that I received from the meditation master Venerable Pa-Auk Tawya Sayadaw of Burma (Myanmar). *Wisdom Wide and Deep* is not, however, a strict presentation of Venerable Pa-Auk Sayadaw's work. Rather, I have infused each topic with related teachings, personal

examples, and wisdom gleaned from other Buddhist sources that have also supported my path of practice as a Western lay practitioner.

Wisdom Wide and Deep is an extended introduction to an in-depth training that emphasizes the application of concentrated attention to profound and liberating insight. With calm, tranquility, and composure established through a practical experience of jhāna, or deep concentration, meditators are able to halt the seemingly endless battle against hindrances, eliminate distraction, and facilitate a penetrative insight into the subtle nature of matter and mind. It was for this reason the Buddha frequently exhorted his students, “Develop concentration; one who is concentrated understands things as they really are.”²

The reader will learn how to establish jhāna using a host of objects: breath; body; colors; elements; immaterial perceptions of infinite space, consciousness, nothingness, and the stilling of perception; heartfelt social attitudes of loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity; as well as recollections of the Buddha, impermanence, and death. Each potential meditation subject has unique qualities that foster a deeper penetration of reality. Each concentration subject can usher the mind into sublime states of blissful absorption and then serve as an effective foundation for the clear perception of reality. This well-structured and time-honored curriculum cultivates a refined and focused attention that is capable of examining subtleties of mind and matter. It is a system of training in concentration and insight that will ultimately lead the meditator to a direct realization of the peace of nibbāna.

Some meditators will find jhāna practice easy; they will quickly experience deep levels of absorption and be able to periodically access jhāna during busy lay life. Other meditators may initially find jhāna practice more difficult and will progress slowly, gradually strengthening the spiritual faculties. They may shift back and forth between concentration and mindfulness practices while endeavoring to overcome distraction, self-interest, and hindrances. The majority of meditators have the capacity to succeed at jhāna practice if they dedicate the time and create the conditions for concentration. The Buddha compared the training of the mind to the taming of a wild horse. Some horses learn quickly, others develop slowly; some horses seem to enjoy the training, other horses resist.

Although everyone might hope for pleasant and rapid progress, our rate of development may not conform to our wishes as we each progress with pleasure or pain, quickly or slowly.³ The continuum of pleasant and painful practice experience is determined by how strongly our nature is disposed to lust, hatred, and delusion. And the sluggish-to-quick continuum is determined by the strength of the five controlling faculties of faith, energy and effort, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. These will be explained and discussed further in chapter 2. But whether your progress is quick or slow, pleasant or painful, is of little importance—a wise practitioner will strive to develop every aspect of the path, both the factors that come easily and those that require arduous effort. You can know for yourself bliss beyond sensory pleasures, directly experience transformative insight, and learn how to sustain deep joy and clarity within the complex dynamic of daily life.

Although it has been widely assumed that *jhāna* states are difficult to attain, and that even if they are attained in the protected conditions of retreat, they cannot be maintained in daily lay life, please do not allow these misconceptions to thwart your explorations. Even in the Buddha's time, some people denied the existence of the bliss of *jhāna* concentration, like a person born blind might deny the existence of color, arguing, "I do not know this. I do not see this. Therefore, it does not exist."⁴ Yet the Buddha taught *jhāna* practice to laypeople as well as to renunciates, enabling even busy merchants and political leaders to periodically abide in the bliss of *jhāna*.⁵ Although it will require effort, attaining and maintaining access to *jhāna* is a real possibility, even when immersed in a busy lay life.

We do not stop with the development of concentration. We apply this profound stability to the meticulous discernment, analysis, and contemplation of reality as it is actually occurring. You will learn how to sustain an in-depth examination of the nuances of mind and matter to unravel deeply conditioned patterns that perpetuate suffering. Based on the sturdy foundation of deep concentration, a pragmatic application of the Buddhist psychology of *Abhidhamma*, and a careful analysis of causes and effects, this training will culminate in a direct and unmistakable realization of liberation. It is the aim of this book to present a

practical guide for applying concentration and insight to the fulfillment of the Buddha's path.

Wisdom Wide and Deep is intended as a practice manual; it is not a scholarly or critical exposition. I have largely ignored the philosophical criticisms commonly levied against Abhidhamma scholasticism and the historical controversies that might keep practitioners from a pragmatic application of this course of training. The trainings contained in these pages illuminate the teachings of the Buddha as preserved in the Discourses of the Buddha, along with elaborations and interpretations offered by the tradition of practitioners who followed after the Buddha. The tradition offers us a remarkably effective training in virtue, meditation, and wisdom, and a direct path for realizing the peace of nibbāna.

There are many ways of applying and interpreting the Buddhist path. The approach described in this book is one that I have found to be profoundly effective. With full confidence in the efficacy of this method, I am inspired to present this training in a format accessible to Western lay practitioners. Readers will discover that most chapters include two parallel approaches. First, I have included refined meditation instructions that were derived from the *Visuddhimagga* and the methods taught by Venerable Pa-Auk Sayadaw. Many of these practices will be difficult to understand if you have not practiced in a retreat context with the guidance of a teacher who is trained in these techniques. Second, these rigorous traditional instructions are complemented by a parallel presentation of contemporary reflections that are set off in graphic boxes. These exercises encourage contemplation of the general concepts and support a broad integration of concentration, mindfulness, and insight into daily lay life. Such reflective exercises will be of benefit to all readers with or without access to retreat conditions, teachers, or jhāna attainments.

A strict adherent of the systematic approach may cringe when coming across casual passages that encourage a comparatively superficial contemplation of general concepts; likewise, the casual reader may skip over the technical instructions that seem like boring literature. This work, straddling two worlds, respects both formal and casual modes of exploration. At times you may sense a tension between the general and specific exercises; at times it is a struggle to maintain both balance and depth in

practice. I view this dual approach as an expression of my own dilemma as a Western lay practitioner with a deep love of this traditional training. In straddling these two worlds, I may occasionally offend the more traditional reader or bore the more modern seeker; however, I sincerely aim to provide Western lay practitioners with an accessible and yet challenging gateway to these profound teachings.

I hope *Wisdom Wide and Deep* will inspire you to redouble your efforts in practice. Although people often speak about spiritual endeavors as valuable, important, and rewarding, few talk about the sheer delight and bliss of meditation. Although this path may at times be challenging, it can also be extraordinary fun. Enjoying practice does not imply a trivial pursuit. When supported by the happiness of a concentrated mind, protected by the shelter of virtuous actions, invigorated by direct insight, and fueled by an unwavering commitment to freedom, even difficult practices may not be burdensome.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

There are many ways of approaching the liberating teachings—some students will respond to pithy brief teachings, other students will benefit by methodically detailed approaches. You might acquire a useful overview by reading the book from beginning to end, exploring the reflective exercises contained in each chapter, and maintaining a daily meditation practice that employs the breath as the meditation subject according to instructions outlined in chapters 1–3.

For the sake of presenting a concise and readable overview for the contemporary lay practitioner, I have not included every detail one would study when training with a master, but I hope this work will inspire readers to seek thorough training⁶ and supplement this material with the meticulously referenced and salient writings of the Venerable Pa-Auk Sayadaw⁷ and primary sources in the Pali Canon with its commentaries and manuals.⁸

Although the presentation is sequential, some meditators will benefit by undertaking the training with variations of order or emphasis. Some concentration subjects explained in section II, such as meditations on

the body and loving-kindness, can be developed prior to attaining jhāna with the breath. The unique and precise procedures for insight meditation (*vipassanā*) presented in chapters 11–18 require a substantial degree of concentration; however, jhāna is not a requirement. Most readers will need the support of a retreat context to develop sufficient concentration for a stable absorption and to develop mastery in the attainment of jhāna. Many of the highly structured and traditional meditation instructions contained in sections III and IV could serve as a manual during intensive meditation periods but might not be applicable for beginners who are practicing at home. As you read *Wisdom Wide and Deep*, you will quickly recognize the sections that support your aim, and may choose to skim through the more detailed instructions that might be more suitable for intensive practice periods.

The Buddhist tradition preserves an elegant, efficient, and effective structure for meditation. The path to liberation is open to us, but we must choose to make the journey. When the Buddha was asked why some people have reached nibbāna and others have not, he alluded to a road that connects two local towns.⁹ Although residents might know that the road exists, they will not reach the other town unless they travel the road for themselves. Similarly, although the Buddhist tradition has provided instructions, identified signposts, and showed the way to nibbāna, we must undertake the training of virtue, concentration, and insight. Now the choice is ours. How do we live and practice? Are you aware of this moment's breath? Are you aware of the impermanence of your bodily and mental experience? Do you endeavor to purify your mind of unwholesome states and cultivate wholesome states each and every day?

Just as the radiant flame depends upon the presence of a candle, wax, and a wick, wisdom arises with the support of concentration, discipline, effort, and skillful methodologies. It is the purpose of this book to offer an enduring training guide for meditators that explains, explores, and celebrates this exciting adventure into the depths of reality.