

**Dangerous Dharma, Death, and Depression:  
The Importance of ‘Right View’ for Practicing Contemplation  
within a Western Buddhist Tradition**

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**Introduction:**

The set of contemplations known variously as ‘the four mind-turning reflections’ or ‘the common preliminary practices’ appear in some form in various Buddhist traditions, and incorporate reflections on the preciousness of life, on death and impermanence, on karmic actions and consequences, and on the sufferings of cyclical existence. In the Tibetan traditions where this practice is formulated as part of the initial scope of ‘lamrim’ meditations, our inevitable death is linked to the trajectory of subsequent rebirth, and human suffering is placed in the context of our ultimate liberation and enlightenment. The Buddhist practitioner is encouraged to contemplate these ‘facts of life’ in order to develop the motivation for further practice and a greater insight into reality.

However, in certain Western Buddhist contexts, where a belief in rebirth or even enlightenment cannot be taken for granted (due to cultural residues of Christianity and the countervailing prevalence of atheism and secularism), and such beliefs are even presented as optional, the repeated discussion and contemplation of suffering and death tends to be undertaken out of their broader philosophical context. The consequent focus on death and suffering in isolation can produce unintended effects that are psychologically unhealthy, particularly for those who are susceptible to depressive illness: ruminating on negative future events (such as suffering and death), without the leaven of positive future events (such as liberation and enlightenment), leads easily to mind-states such as pessimism and nihilism, as has been proven by primary research in the field of mental health studies by Nolen-Hoeksema and others. This paper thus provides a critique of some aspects of the teaching in the group known as Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (also known as Tiratna) on the grounds that its secular and agnostic tendencies can misrepresent the Dharma, in ways that could prove counterproductive or even harmful to some.

The paper encourages the development of a holistic context of ‘right view’ in Buddhist teachings, so that such reflections can instead realize their potential for increased insight and mental well-being in the practitioner. The original Buddhist teachings of the Four Noble Truths and the Twelve Links of Conditioned Existence constitute a more positive framework into which these challenging contemplations can be fitted (as provided by the Dhammacakkappavattana, Sammādiṭṭhi and Mahāhatthipadopama Suttas from the Saṃyutta and Majjhima Nikāya collections of the Pali canon): the Third Noble Truth, pointing to the possibility of the cessation of suffering, is the crucial gateway that distinguishes Buddhist soteriology from mere endurance of life and makes spiritual practice possible and worthwhile. Furthermore, starting from Buddhaghosa’s discussion of the suitability of certain meditational practices for particular temperaments, a different balance of practices can be recommended for the practitioner who is prone to low mood. Thus when practised

correctly Buddhism has beneficial results to offer for the welfare of those whose mental health is most at risk but has potentially the most to gain.

### **Contexts - the institutions and the impetus:**

The impetus for this paper derives from two experiences I had on a regular weekly basis. One was a Buddhist study group where we read various formulations of the Dharma and discussed their application to our lives; the other was reflecting on this experience before the group with a close friend. My friend Josie and I had both spent several years studying and practising with two successive Buddhist organizations; my own meditation practice began in 1995 and I had formally become a Buddhist in 2004. Having for some time been part of a group known as the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (or 'FWBO', now known as 'Tiratna'), first Josie and then I moved to an organization called the New Kadampa Tradition (or 'NKT'), with which for various reasons we both later became disillusioned. I underwent some independent Dharma study through an online course with a different organization, but gradually drifted back to the FWBO and its 'mitra studies group' in 2008; whereas Josie became disillusioned and stopped practising yet remained nostalgic for the positive elements of Buddhism we experienced.<sup>1</sup>

Josie and I have both suffered from depressive illness, she from self-diagnosed dysthymia (a chronic low mood that falls within the depression spectrum, with additional episodes of major depression),<sup>2</sup> and I from clinically-diagnosed seasonal affective disorder (a form of depression with seasonally-fluctuating symptoms).<sup>3</sup> One reason for our concern and ambivalence towards the Buddhist teaching and contexts we had experienced was that certain aspects of the teaching in these groups appeared to worsen our symptoms of depression and increase our malaise. Since Buddhism purported to offer a more constructive state of mind and an increased sense of benevolence, we were nonplussed and frustrated with these instances of what we termed 'depressive Dharma', but also keen to analyze what might have gone wrong. The aim of this paper is not to critique the western adaptation of a guru-based approach to group structure and the interpersonal difficulties that can arise from this system in organizations like the NKT.<sup>4</sup> Instead I wish to discuss the Dharma teaching that formed the content of the FWBO's Mitra Studies group during one particular module based on 'the four reminders'. My studies and reactions during that module formed the initial foundation for this response and contribution. In this sense then this paper begins from a point of self-ethnography but draws on both Buddhist sources and

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<sup>1</sup> This paper has been written in consultation with Josie and has her full support and approval.

<sup>2</sup> 'Dysthymic disorder is a chronic, low-grade depressive condition that affects as many as 6% of individuals in the community.... Although dysthymic disorder is characterized by mild to moderate symptoms, more than 75% of individuals with dysthymic disorder have exacerbations that meet the criteria for a major depressive episode' (Daniel N. Klein, Stewart A. Shankman, and Suzanne Rose, 'Ten-Year Prospective Follow-Up Study of the Naturalistic Course of Dysthymic Disorder and Double Depression', *American Journal of Psychiatry* 163:5 (2006), pp. 872–80: p. 872).

<sup>3</sup> Timo Partonen and Norman E. Rosenthal, 'Symptoms and Course of Illness', in *Seasonal Affective Disorder: Practice and Research* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 11–18.

<sup>4</sup> Some relatively balanced discussion of the organisation by ex-members and defenders can be found at <http://buddhismnewkadampa.wordpress.com/>. A historical critique of the NKT, though omitting more recent developments, is given by David Kay, *Tibetan and Zen Buddhism in Britain: Transplantation, Development and Adaptation* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004).

research in mental health in order to move to a broader and more objective perspective.

### **Contemplating Suffering and Death:**

The set of contemplations that we studied under the name ‘the Four Mind-Turning Reflections’ (or ‘the Four Reminders’) in the FWBO comprised ideas about the preciousness of life, on death and impermanence, on karmic actions and consequences, and on the sufferings of cyclical existence.<sup>5</sup> The members of the group were encouraged to contemplate these facets of existence in order to develop the motivation for further practice and a greater insight into reality. The origin of these reflections is in the traditional Tibetan cycle of meditations known as ‘lamrim’, where they form the early stages or ‘initial scope’ of practice. Although the overall inspiration for this cycle, and its structure into three parts, came from the 11<sup>th</sup>-century teaching known as ‘Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment’ by Atisha, this text itself does not feature the topics under consideration, focusing instead mostly on bodhichitta (the altruistic aspiration) and the wisdom of emptiness.<sup>6</sup> The ‘initial scope’ topics were added into later forms of the practice by other teacher–scholars, notably Gampopa (1079–1153, an initiator of the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism) and Je Tsongkhapa (1357–1419, the founder of the Gelug school).<sup>7</sup> Table 1 shows the sequence of reflections in each of these traditional redactions, alongside the contents of the two parallel contemporary western sources I have studied. (The relevant topics are shaded in grey, with the other contextualizing meditations described briefly in italics.)

The NKT views itself as a Gelugpa tradition following Je Tsongkhapa, and so the *Meditation Handbook* that is a central and compact resource for their lamrim practice<sup>8</sup> accordingly follows the outline of that teacher’s treatise. The meditation on ‘Our Precious Human Life’ reflects on how fortunate we are to have been born with sufficient human faculties to study the Dharma, so that ‘we can become free from uncontrolled rebirth and attain the peace of liberation’ (p. 35). Proceeding to the contemplation of ‘Death and Impermanence’, one is encouraged to ‘mentally repeat over and over again “I may die today, I may die today”’ (p. 37) in order to remember life’s unpredictability and avoid wasting time in mundane pursuits. In the ‘Danger of Lower Rebirth’ reflection that follows, the importance of karma is emphasized, and we are asked to generate ‘a strong fear of taking rebirth in the lower realms’ as an animal, hungry ghost, or hell being (p. 42). The culmination of this sequence is in ‘Going For Refuge’ in which we recognize the power of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha to ‘permanently eradicate [ ] all our delusions and free [ ] us once and for all from suffering’ (p. 43). The final contemplation is on ‘Actions and Their Effects’,

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<sup>5</sup> These are sometimes referred to as the outer preliminary practices, to distinguish them from another set of (inner) preliminary practices, comprising refuge, bodhichitta, purification, mandala offering, and guru yoga (see for example The Third Dzogchen Rinpoche and Cortland Dahl, *Great Perfection: Outer and Inner Preliminaries* (New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2007)).

<sup>6</sup> The root text can be found on pp. 151–59 of *Atisha’s Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*, with commentary by Geshe Sonam Rinchen, trans. and ed. Ruth Sonam (New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Gampopa’s lamrim text is available in English translation as *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, trans. Herbert V. Guenther (Boston and London: Shambala, 1986). Tsongkhapa’s *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* is published in three volumes (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2001, 2004, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, *The Meditation Handbook* (Ulverston: Tharpa Publications, 1995).

which develops conviction in the operation of karma and thus a determination to perform only virtuous actions.

In all these sources the emphasis is towards possible negative outcomes, which are expressed in a serious and potentially terrifying way; reflections that one may die today and even be reborn in hell are intended to jolt the practitioner out of any residual complacency.<sup>9</sup> In the longer-length NKT lamrim handbook, *Joyful Path of Good Fortune*, the hideous torments of the hell realms and the imminence of death are even more strongly labored.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, the remembrance of our inevitable death is shown within the trajectory of subsequent rebirth, and the awareness of human suffering is placed in the context of our ultimate liberation and enlightenment, which are at the heart of the intermediate and higher scope of the practice.<sup>11</sup> The sequence of these contemplations of the ‘lower scope’ provides a preparation for the function and destination of the ensuing practices, such as renunciation, bodhichitta, tranquil abiding, and the realization of the wisdom of emptiness, as they do in the later parts of Tsongkhapa’s treatise.

In the form that we studied these practices in the FWBO mitra study group, however, the contemplations of the lower scope were isolated into a self-contained unit, and were relabeled, reinterpreted and trimmed of any extraneous or supporting reflections. The principal study materials were not traditional sources but recorded talks by members of the organization, reflecting freely (and sometimes tangentially) on what each subject evoked for them.<sup>12</sup> Although the material dealt with the principal subjects, ‘The Preciousness and Rarity of Human Life’, ‘The Transitoriness of Life and the Certainty of Death’, ‘Karma and the Consequences of Our Actions’, and ‘The Defects and Dangers of Samsara’, the topics of rebirth and enlightenment were not emphasized; when in group discussion I referred to rebirth, the typical response from members of the organization was along the lines of ‘well yes, if you believe in that’ with the strong implication that it was optional or even eccentric. The view that as Westerners we cannot be expected to believe in rebirth (or even enlightenment), and that such beliefs are detachable from being a Buddhist, was one of the central differences I noticed between the FWBO and other (Tibetan-based) organizations such as the NKT (and also the FPMT or Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition), where the view was that rebirth and enlightenment are the case and that one had better come to understand them in order to proceed with valid practice.<sup>13</sup> From the latter perspective, unpicking the doctrine of rebirth leads to a

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<sup>9</sup> That Western practitioners may not possess the psychological resilience of the Tibetan practitioners for whom these teachings were intended is attested by the much-circulated account of the Dalai Lama’s astonishment on hearing of Westerners’ problems with self-hatred, a concept and phenomenon that simply did not exist in his own culture. See Susan Piver, *How Not to be Afraid of Your Own Life* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2007), pp. 76–77.

<sup>10</sup> Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, *Joyful Path of Good Fortune* (Ulverston: Tharpa Publications, 1995), pp. 144–88. Gampopa is more even-handed in discussing the so-called ‘happy existences’ of humans, asuras, and gods, but still focusses on their ‘misery’ (pp. 63–68).

<sup>11</sup> E.g. Gyatso, *The Meditation Handbook*, pp. 51, 61.

<sup>12</sup> The series of talks is called ‘The Four Mind-Turning Reflections’ and is available for download from the Free Buddhist Audio website at <http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/series/details?ser=X25>. The constituent talks (given in 2005) are as follows: ‘The Four Mind-Turning Reflections’ by Dhammadinna; ‘The Preciousness and Rarity of Human Life’ by Dhammadinna; ‘The Transitoriness of Life and the Certainty of Death’ by Vajradarshini; ‘Karma and the Consequences of Our Actions’ by Ratnadarshini; and ‘The Defects and Dangers of Samsara’ by Maitreyi.

<sup>13</sup> Indeed the necessity of accepting rebirth as a working hypothesis as a basic prerequisite for engaging with this practice is supported by the implications in Atisha’s root text that there are practitioners of small, middling, and great capacities, and that those who ‘seek for themselves no more than the pleasures of cyclic existence’ are those

weakening of the operations of karma as an explanation for what happens to us in this life (such that we have to fall back on the ‘luck of the draw’ in the form of environment and genetics, making us powerless to affect our circumstances except in worldly ways); and without the full operation of karma the reach of dependent origination is much curtailed,<sup>14</sup> potentially leaving little of the Buddha’s key philosophical insight remaining.<sup>15</sup>

The centrality of rebirth is questioned in the fourth recorded talk of the Mitra Studies course, where Ratnadarini acknowledged that ‘the teaching of karma is obviously very bound up with the idea, the concept of rebecoming or rebirth’ but claimed nonetheless that ‘you don’t have to necessarily embrace both [karma and rebirth]’. Of the latter she reassured her listeners that ‘we don’t have to take it on, it’s foreign to our culture; it may take a bit of time to see whether it fits for us, whether it makes sense for us’.<sup>16</sup> That accepting rebirth is an optional part of being a Buddhist in the FWBO is confirmed by the book *Exploring Karma and Rebirth* by Nagapriya, an ordained member of the organization but an overt agnostic on the subject. Nagapriya speculates, ‘Had it emerged from a different cultural background, would Buddhism have taught rebirth at all?’, concluding that it is not necessary for practice and serves primarily as means of social control and encouragement.<sup>17</sup> The British Buddhist writer Sangharakshita, who founded the FWBO in the late 1960s, and whose books provide the study material for much of the organization’s teaching, set the tone when he reflected as follows:

It must be admitted that the topic of karma and rebirth is not as fashionable in Buddhist circles as it used to be. [This is so despite] the central importance of this teaching to all schools of Buddhism... Nowadays many people seem to be able to contemplate with some degree of equanimity the possibility that after death they might not continue to exist... The present generation of Buddhists are less interested in karma and rebirth, because they are more concerned... with realization here and now.<sup>18</sup>

Sangharakshita opines that ‘one cannot isolate the history of Buddhism in the West from Western religious history in general’, and that western religious history was dominated by Christianity until the later nineteenth century, when, due partly to the prominence of scientific theories such as evolution, many people started to rebel intellectually against Christian beliefs and look for alternatives. Whilst in the early

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of the least capacity (p. 151). The implication is that striving merely to improve one’s lot in this life does not meet the entry requirement for spiritual practice (see also Gyatso, *The Meditation Handbook*, p. 6–7).

<sup>14</sup> Nagapriya, *Exploring Karma and Rebirth* (Birmingham: Windhorse Publications, 2004), pp. 28–35, 53–56, and *passim*.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Now this has been said by the Blessed One: “One who sees dependent origination sees the Dhamma; one who sees the Dhamma sees dependent origination”’ (*Majjhima Nikaya* 28.28, Mahāhatthipadopama Sutta (‘The Greater Discourse on the Simile of the Elephant’s Footprint’), in *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, trans. Bhikkhu Ñānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 1995), pp. 278–85: p. 283).

<sup>16</sup> Ratnadarini, ‘Karma and the Consequences of Our Actions’, track 3 (02:30-02:49 and 03:41-03:55).

<sup>17</sup> Nagapriya, *Exploring Karma and Rebirth*, pp. 131–32.

<sup>18</sup> Sangharakshita, *What is the Dharma? The Essential Teachings of the Buddha* (Birmingham: Windhorse Publications, 2000), pp. 35 & 39–40. This book was edited together from talks given by Sangharakshita ‘over the years’ (Editors’ Preface, p. 2) and thus represents views that would have been in circulation prior to its publication date.

days of Buddhism's adoption in the West, Victorians may have found the potential for life after death comforting, as it echoed the Christian notion of heaven, throughout the twentieth century the scientific, atheistic worldview has become more widespread and many find it implausible that any continuity can survive the death of a body.<sup>19</sup> Hence the resistance to such doctrines even amongst those wishing to engage in spiritual practice.

In general, Sangharakshita's books and the teachings and discussions of the FWBO are 'double coded' such that they can be understood by listeners who accept rebirth in the traditional sense but also by those who are interested merely in its weaker sense of 'the way life unfolds from day to day [and] choos[ing] the direction our life will take'.<sup>20</sup> Similarly Ratnadhari's talk states that even though the realization of rebirth is said to have been a fundamental part of the Buddha's enlightenment experience, and it is a traditional doctrine held by Buddhist schools through the ages, still if we prefer 'we can see the workings of karma and karma-vipaka simply as they operate in this lifetime'.<sup>21</sup> Liberation (or Enlightenment) is less overtly questioned in the writings of the FWBO, and some feel we have the possibility of getting enlightened in (and for the duration of) this one life only.<sup>22</sup> Sangharakshita's chapter on 'Nirvana' in *What is the Dharma* prefers to skip quickly past the question 'What is nirvana?', presumably again in order to avoid alienating those who are sceptical, focusing instead on questioning the wisdom of goal-setting and suggesting that our interest in liberation may be merely curiosity, duty or vanity.<sup>23</sup> One might question whether it is possible to be a Buddhist without a clear belief in the centrality of Enlightenment; without it, 'the Buddhist saint becomes a human exemplar, not a cosmic superman',<sup>24</sup> and what remains of Buddhism is a humanistic self-help program with an ascetic flavor and rather vaguely-defined outcomes.

I will focus the potential problems of tone and content using a pair of written contemplations on death and suffering taken from the journal *Madhyamavani*; this is an FWBO publication in which senior practitioner-members of the organization can present their perspectives on 'the timeless principles of Buddhism in ways appropriate to the modern world'. In the text by Vishvapani on 'The Four Reminders', the flavour (or tone) of the contemplation again is relentlessly negative and shocking, as can be gathered from the sample below.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., pp. 36–39.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>21</sup> Ratnadhari, 'Karma and the Consequences of Our Actions', track 3 (02:49-03:41, 03:55-04:14).

<sup>22</sup> 'If we discard rebirth as conventionally understood... we are aiming... to shake off our spiritual fetters in this very life.... If we have just one life, we will have to get a move on' (Nagapriya, *Exploring Karma and Rebirth*, p. 137).

<sup>23</sup> Sangharakshita, *What is the Dharma*, pp. 69–76. He adds that 'my approach in this chapter will appear to some people... to be perhaps rather unorthodox' (p. 71).

<sup>24</sup> Nagapriya, *Exploring Karma and Rebirth*, p. 137.

<sup>25</sup> Vishvapani, 'The Four Reminders' (emphases added), *Madhyamavani* 8 (2003), available online at <http://madhyamavani.fwbo.org/8/reminders.html>. A written account of 'the four reminders' closely based on this text can be found in Vajragupta's *Buddhism: Tools for Living Your Life* (Birmingham: Windhorse Publications, 2007), pp. 11–18.

## Reflection on Death:

One day I will die.  
*I cannot avoid it.* It comes to everyone, and it will come to me....  
I am [like] a fish caught in a net.  
I am like a prisoner condemned to execution.  
I am like an animal in a slaughterhouse.  
In my fantasies I am exempted from the general truth of death.  
But that is a delusion, and death will come to me, even me, as well....  
Even if I live a full span, that is just a few decades.  
But death could come at any moment – in a few years, or a few weeks, or even today.  
There are many causes of death in addition to old age: illness, accident, disaster and violence.  
Every day people die in these ways, all of them having expected to live longer....  
*Everyone I know will die as well.*  
All my friends, all my family, everyone I know, everyone I love, *everyone who loves me.*  
In a hundred years we will all be gone....

## The Defects of Samsara:

Suffering is part of my life.  
*Everything I experience is tinged with incompleteness.*  
*I cannot escape unsatisfactoriness.*  
*My life involves stress, striving and struggle.*  
The same is true of others.  
Almost everyone I know is searching for something their lives do not give them....  
People's lives include *many other kinds of suffering.*  
There is illness and physical pain: that goes with having a body.  
There is the mental anguish of depression, fear, madness and many other afflictions. *The possibility of such experience goes with having a mind.*  
All this is within the spectrum of experience I occupy.  
This is human life, and these things can happen to me....  
Nothing is solid, or final; *nothing can be fully relied upon.*  
Consider this present moment, and you see this is true.  
Look around and you see *it is true everywhere.*  
I want the world to be substantial and knowable, but it isn't.  
This causes me to suffer. These are the defects of samsara.  
*It's futile to expect the world to make me happy...*

Here death is presented as terminal (in that we will 'all be gone'), and the expectations that the world can be knowable or that we can be happy described as 'futile'; the advice given is to 'change the way I see the world', 'establish positive

conditions’, and ‘be free from regrets’<sup>26</sup> (with vague final references to practising the Dharma though no specifics of how to do so). The emphasis is on our own powerlessness and the all-pervading dismalness of life; the call to pessimism and despair is almost irresistible in the face of this description of life as ontologically torturous.

This FWBO version of the contemplations covers the four topics of the precious opportunity, death, karma, and the defects of samsara, but does not mention rebirth or enlightenment as such, except to say that the Dharma can offer us ‘a path away from being trapped in Samsara’ (defined merely as suffering)<sup>27</sup>. The author refers in a preface to what he considers the ‘inaccessible character’ of Buddhist doctrines such as the sufferings of ‘non-human beings’ (i.e. hungry ghosts and hell beings) – presumably inaccessible since we are not convinced that we could become such beings – and the ethical implications of karma. Given that ‘many features of the traditional accounts are somewhat alien to people who have not been brought up in a traditional Buddhist culture’, Vishvapani says that he decided in his text to ‘discard[ ] concepts and references that raise difficulties’, preferring a common-sense approach based in this single life.

In traditional Buddhist thought, then, death is understood to lead to rebirth (both negative and positive) as part of a natural process; and suffering is presented in the context of leading to liberation from suffering. Without these balancing beliefs to motivate our practice and draw us forward, all we have left is the chilling prospect of suffering and death. In response to this prospect, we have only palliative options: we can choose meditation, rather than some other means (such as hedonism, materialism, or philanthropy), to make our time alive as pleasant as possible, but none of these will fundamentally change our mortal predicament; alternatively we could choose to recoil from life through self-medication, stoic pragmatism, or lying down and giving up. Furthermore, dwelling on these terminal aspects of existence can be actually injurious to our quality of life, and one might wonder why we would bother when there is nothing much we can do about them. These are the implications of a stripped-down ‘westernized’ Buddhism that can cause problems for those who already sense the difficult and hopeless quality of human life.

### **Research: depressives are vulnerable to rumination on negative topics:**

Whilst I intuitively felt that the effect of musing on the inevitability of suffering and death so intensively, without the leaven of rebirth and enlightenment, is likely to be unhelpful and possibly even dangerous for people prone to depression (as well as to repel many of those who prefer to keep what is thought of in the West as a ‘positive mental attitude’), I wished to investigate the literature on mental health to see whether this intuition was borne out amongst a wider selection of people. My first inkling that those prone to depression should ‘strictly avoid frightening ideas’ had come from reading Norman Rosenthal’s pioneering book on Seasonal Affective Disorder, in which this piece of advice is offered amongst others drawn from a first-century Roman medical guide (including ‘live in rooms full of light’, ‘take massage,

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., in sections 4, 3, and 2 respectively.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., section 4 and opening section.



baths, exercise, and gymnastics’, and ‘indulge in cheerful conversation and amusements’).<sup>28</sup>

More recent academic research supports this advice that dwelling on frightening or negative ideas is potentially injurious to those with depressive tendencies. In a study which is particularly pertinent here, daydreaming about death has been found to be an attractive pastime for some severely depressed people, who use it ‘as a method of mood regulation (including increasing positive affect)’.<sup>29</sup> This is the more so when death represents an escape from the pain and suffering that are thought to pervade life; in such cases death replaces other future life events that one might look forward to.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless such preoccupation can have ‘maladaptive and pernicious’ consequences: by habituating a depressed person to the prospect of death, it has been linked to increased likelihood of suicide attempts (and also physical self-harming).<sup>31</sup> There is some logic to this; after all, if life is only suffering, and death is inevitable – and final – why wait and suffer more in the meantime? (Indeed, an online article by an FWBO member cautiously defends the practice of suicide, based on a misreading of certain suttas, against the conclusions drawn by non-FWBO Buddhist writers elsewhere.)<sup>32</sup> Whilst the controversial cases of suicide recounted in the Pali canon are by monks said to have already reached or approached enlightenment, for the rest of us attempts on our own life are likely to be harmful acts – certainly from an everyday perspective but also in Buddhist terms, if only because they violate the first precept of avoiding killing,<sup>33</sup> meaning that in subsequent lives perpetrators ‘must partake of the fruit of their action’,<sup>34</sup> and are likely to endure further suffering. Thus while meditating on death might appear, perhaps paradoxically, to be an enjoyable activity, it nonetheless represents a pitfall for anyone with depressive potential, as it can draw one away from making the most of our precious human life.

Meditating on the pervasiveness of suffering can likewise be harmful. Further research has shown that ‘depressed people and people at risk for depression have trouble preventing negative material from entering and remaining in WM [working memory]’, and these ‘inhibition deficits’ lead them ‘to rehearse, or to ruminate about,

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<sup>28</sup> Norman E. Rosenthal, *Winter Blues: Seasonal Affective Disorder, What It Is and How to Overcome It* (New York and London: The Guilford Press, 1993), p. 151. The cited source, Cornelius’s Celsus’s *De Medicina* (book III), advises those caring for melancholics that ‘melancholy thoughts are to be dissipated... and [the patient’s] mind slowly and imperceptibly is to be turned from the irrational talk to something better... causes of fright excluded, good hope rather put forward...; his depression should be gently reproved as being without cause; he should have it pointed out to him now and again how in the very things which trouble him there may be a cause of rejoicing rather than of solicitude.’ (Celsus, *On Medicine*, vol. 1, trans. W. G. Spencer (London: Heineman, 1935), vv. 18.10, 18.17, transcribed at [http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Celsus/3\\*.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Celsus/3*.html).)

<sup>29</sup> Edward A. Selby, Michael D. Anestis, and Thomas E. Joiner, ‘Daydreaming About Death: Violent Daydreaming as a Form of Emotion Dysregulation in Suicidality’, *Behaviour Modification* 31:6 (2007), pp. 867–79: p. 867.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 868.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 868 & 878.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Attwood (also known as the FWBO order member Jayarava) claims that ‘Although it would seem that in principle suicide is self-harm, some of the cases cited in the Pali Canon are exceptions in that they result not in suffering, but in the complete release from all suffering!’ (‘Suicide as a Response to Suffering’, *Western Buddhist Review* 4 (2004), online at <http://www.westernbuddhistreview.com/vol4/index.html>). Attwood cites the Harvey and Keown sources detailed below, but does not reach the same conclusions.

<sup>33</sup> Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 286–92, considers this and other doctrinal implications.

<sup>34</sup> Keown, ‘Buddhism and Suicide: The Case of Channa’, *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 3 (1996), pp. 8–31: p. 11 (quoting E. Lamotte, ‘Religious Suicide in Early Buddhism’, *Buddhist Studies Review* 4 (1987), pp. 105–26). Keown distinguishes between condonation and exoneration of suicide, arguing that the Buddha practised the latter after the event, not the former (p. 18).

negative content'.<sup>35</sup> Depressed people differ from others 'in the degree to which they are able to repair their mood once they experience sadness or other negative emotions',<sup>36</sup> hence a small amount of frightening or saddening material (such as we have already examined) may have a profound effect on them. Because 'negative mood yields activation of mood-congruent cognitions', with 'difficulties... in accessing mood-incongruent material to repair the negative affect',<sup>37</sup> the sad mood tends to lead to other sad and depressing thoughts in an inescapable downward spiral.

This negative thought process is known as 'rumination', and there is considerable evidence to show its unhelpfulness for those with symptoms of distress. Extensive research by Susan Nolen-Hoeksema and others has confirmed that the consequences of rumination 'make it more likely that initial symptoms of depression will become more severe and evolve into episodes of major depression'.<sup>38</sup> This happens through several mechanisms: rumination enhances the effects of depressed mood on thinking, interferes with effective problem solving and action taking, and if prolonged erodes social support for the ruminator.<sup>39</sup> These effects were particularly noticeable if dysphoric people were *induced* to ruminate for a set period, for instance about their long-term prospects and the meaning of their current feelings; by contrast, an invitation to reflect on a neutral stimulus such as a fan rotating served as a distraction and temporarily improved dysphorics' mood.<sup>40</sup> Unfortunately, inducing rumination not only prolongs the experience of negative mood in dysphoric individuals but also leads them 'to appraise their problems as overwhelming and unsolvable'; it saps such people's motivation and initiative, and even when they think of a worthwhile solution to a problem 'may impede him or her from implementing it'.<sup>41</sup> All this has negative implications for inviting Buddhist participants with depressive tendencies to meditate on suffering and death, with the aim that it will encourage them to embrace the Dharma actively and give them energy to practise meditation, since it is thus more likely instead to make them passive and discouraged. The FWBO contemplation which ends 'It's futile to expect the world to make me happy.... Therefore let me commit myself to practising the Dharma', as well as being a non-sequitur in that context, is hence likely to seriously backfire for many people. Rumination, certainly in the forms we have seen here, 'provides depressed individuals with evidence that their situations are uncontrollable and that further action is futile'.<sup>42</sup>

One clue to the difference between depressed and non-depressed thinking is that the former think that they have little positive in their life to look forward to. When depressed and non-depressed participants in a study were asked to brainstorm things that were likely to happen to them in the next week, year, and 5–10 years, and then to rate the likelihood and welcomeness of those events, the depressives generated

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<sup>35</sup> Jutta Joorman, 'Cognitive Inhibition and Emotion Regulation in Depression', *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 19 (2010), pp. 161–66: p. 161.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 161–2.

<sup>38</sup> Susan Nolen-Hoeksema, Blair E. Wisco, and Sonia Lyubomirsky, 'Rethinking Rumination', *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 3:5 (2008), pp. 400–24: p. 401.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 400–1.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 402.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 402–3, citing Sonia Lyubomirsky, Kari L. Tucker, Nicole D. Caldwell, and Kimberly Berg, 'Why Ruminators are Poor Problem-Solvers: Clues from the phenomenology of dysphoric rumination', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 77 (1999), pp. 1041–60.

<sup>42</sup> Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, and Lyubomirsky, 'Rethinking Rumination', p. 418.

similar amounts of negative expectation to the others, but far less positive expectation. The study concluded that ‘reduced anticipation of future positive events is a defining characteristic of depression’.<sup>43</sup> It is easy to see that telling people that their life is mostly suffering, that impending death is its key feature, and that there is nothing potentially enjoyable to look forward to<sup>44</sup> would thus play into the hands of any depressive tendencies that may be lurking ready to be triggered. In fact, ‘recurrent thoughts of death’ is one of the nine diagnostic indicators for major depression presented by the DSM-IV,<sup>45</sup> along with depressed mood and diminished interest in activities.<sup>46</sup>

### **The Context of ‘Right View’ and Suggestions for Skillful Practice:**

In rejecting this kind of contemplation on death and suffering as an option for those prone to depression and dysphoria, I propose three alternatives whereby Buddhist practice can instead be healthy and nourishing for them: the first is to embed these ideas appropriately into the context of Buddhist philosophy, and the second is to focus on practices that break the cycle of negative mood and cognition. These categories replicate the elements of ‘right view’ and ‘right intention’ (the latter also known as ‘right emotion’),<sup>47</sup> the first two stages of the ‘eightfold path’ that is at the heart of the Buddha’s early teachings. The third consideration is to tailor the choice of meditative practice to the personality type and individual capabilities of the practitioner to ensure their maximum benefit.

An appropriate framework for understanding any Buddhist doctrine is the core teaching of the Four Noble Truths; as the Buddha’s great disciple Sāriputta taught: ‘Friends, just as the footprint of any living being that walks can be placed within an elephant’s footprint, ...so too, all wholesome states can be included in the Four Noble Truths’<sup>48</sup>. The Four Noble Truths observed and taught by the Buddha discuss the nature of suffering, the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the way leading to the cessation of suffering, a pattern that imitates a medical pattern of diagnosis–aetiology–prognosis–treatment.<sup>49</sup> Since the Buddha also taught the cause, cessation, and cure for suffering, to focus only on the first truth of the existence of suffering is to take a one-sided view of Buddhism; and to insist that suffering is an

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<sup>43</sup> Jonas Bjärehed, Ali Sarkohi, and Gerhard Andersson, ‘Less Positive or More Negative? Future-Directed Thinking in Mild to Moderate Depression’, *Cognitive Behaviour Therapy* 39:1 (2010), pp. 37–45: p. 37. This finding is the case even though here the participants had no suicidal tendencies.

<sup>44</sup> The habit of looking forward to simple future pleasures (such as having a bath or reading a good book) is disparaged at the opening of Maitreyi’s recorded talk (talk 5, ‘The Defects and Dangers of Samsara’, track 1, 00:29-01:02).

<sup>45</sup> The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, published by the American Psychiatric Association and widely used for the classification of mental health problems. The manual was first produced in 1952, and the current fourth edition (‘DSM-IV’) appeared in 1994 with an update (‘DSM-IV-TR’) in 2000.

<sup>46</sup> Barbara J. Jago, ‘Chronicling an Academic Depression’, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 31:6 (2002), pp. 729–757: p. 740–1.

<sup>47</sup> The Buddha evokes this quality (*samma saṅkappa*) with reference to renunciation, non-ill will, and harmlessness (*Samyutta Nikaya* 45.8, ‘Analysis’, in *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000), pp. 1528–29: p. 1528), but Sangharakshita expands it around various positive scriptural states and gives possible translations as Right Resolve, Perfect Will, or Integral Emotion, adding that ‘until the heart is involved and we begin to *feel* what we have understood – until our *emotions* are engaged – there is no spiritual life, properly speaking’ (*Vision and Transformation*, pp.30–31).

<sup>48</sup> *Majjhima Nikaya* 28.2, Mahāthathipadopama Sutta, in *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, trans. Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, p. 278.

<sup>49</sup> Paul Williams with Anthony Tribe, *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 42.

unavoidable experience is to nail up the exit route that Buddha has helpfully provided. In particular it is to ignore the third noble truth, of which the Buddha states, ‘This noble truth of the cessation of suffering is to be realized’.<sup>50</sup> That the cessation of suffering is possible is confirmed by the teaching in the suttas that when a practitioner has abandoned underlying tendencies to lust, aversion, and ignorance, he is said to have ‘made an end to suffering’.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, in the teaching of the Twelve Links of Existence (shown in Table 2), the sufferings of life come along with aging and death as the final link in the chain, and have birth as a requisite condition, which in turn relies on the preceding string of causes, back through clinging, craving, unskillful volitional actions, and originating with ignorance – so it is clear that any work we can do to lessen these bad causes should reduce the build-up of suffering and ultimately remove it.<sup>52</sup> It is these teachings of cessation of suffering that assert that there is hope for the trajectory of life, that there is a point to spiritual practice, and that Buddhism is not a nihilistic, stoical or passively pessimistic philosophy.

The First Noble Truth is sometimes casually referred to as ‘everything is suffering’ or just ‘suffering’ for short; but this is an over-generalization, as Thich Nhat Hanh has pointed out.<sup>53</sup> The Buddha is more specific in his description in the suttas – for instance in this set of definitions most of whose specifics are straightforward to agree with: ‘Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering; union with what is displeasing is suffering; separation from what is pleasing is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering; in brief, the five aggregates [of existence] subject to clinging are suffering’.<sup>54</sup> As two of the ‘three marks of conditioned existence’, suffering and impermanence apply only to formations – that is, things subject to conditions, including our unenlightened mental and bodily aggregates – whereas the third quality of non-self applies to all things, including nirvana, equivalent to the cessation of suffering.<sup>55</sup> Thus suffering is experienced by those who are unenlightened, but not by those who have achieved the final goal of enlightenment.<sup>56</sup> That getting this right is an important part of Buddhist belief is shown by Sāriputta who, when asked about all the ways in which a disciple

<sup>50</sup> *Samyutta Nikaya* 56.11, Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (‘Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma’), in *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, pp. 1843–47: p. 1845.

<sup>51</sup> E.g. *Samyutta Nikaya* 36.3, Pahana Sutta (‘Abandonment’), in *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, p. 1261–2: p. 1261.

<sup>52</sup> The Buddha is explicit that ‘With the remainderless fading away and cessation of ignorance comes cessation of volitional formations; ... [and so on until] with the cessation of birth, aging-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair cease. Such is the cessation of this whole mass of suffering’ (*Samyutta Nikaya* 12.1, Paticca-samuppada (‘Dependent Origination’), *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, pp. 533–4: p. 534). The process is helpfully discussed by Bhikkhu Bodhi on pp. 516–26 of the same volume, where the Pali terms are given.

<sup>53</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching* (London: Rider, 1998), pp. 19–23.

<sup>54</sup> *Samyutta Nikaya* 56.11, Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (‘Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma’), *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, p. 1844. The five aggregates of existence are form, feeling, perception, volition, and consciousness, and they characterise unenlightened life (see Ñānamoli and Bodhi, *The Middle-Length Discourses of the Buddha*, pp. 26–27).

<sup>55</sup> This is clear from for instance *Āṅguttara Nikaya* III 134 (‘The Three Characteristics of Existence’), where it is stated ‘that all formations are impermanent, that all formations are subject to suffering, that all things are non-self’ (or in Pali, *sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā, sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā, sabbe dhammā anattā*). (In *Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, trans. and ed. by Nyanaponika Thera and Bhikkhu Bodhi (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 1999), pp. 77, 289.)

<sup>56</sup> This is confirmed in *Samyutta Nikaya* 56.11 in the Buddha’s discussion of the fourth noble truth: ‘The Tathāgata has awakened to the middle way, ...which leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna’ (‘Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma’, in *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, p. 1844).

might be of ‘right view’, answers ‘When, friends, a noble disciple understands suffering, the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the way leading to the cessation of suffering, in that way he is one of right view... and has arrived at this true Dhamma’.<sup>57</sup> One might be inclined to conclude, then, that not to understand these factors correctly is to be not of right view as a Buddhist and to have arrived at a wrong Dhamma.<sup>58</sup> In order to develop right view, close attention to the primary sources found in the Pali suttas would seem to be essential.

If depressive people are indeed to contemplate suffering and death, a correct philosophical context is crucial, but so is an appropriate emotional and psychological nuance. For this reason I also recommend the books of Stephen Levine, who worked for over twenty years counseling terminally ill patients, concentration camp survivors, and Vietnam war veterans.<sup>59</sup> His ‘years of Buddhist practice and teaching’ (plus the influence of other teachers in the Advaita tradition)<sup>60</sup> have evidently developed in him a great compassion for the dying and for all of us who will face this challenge. Though often emotionally challenging, his writings on developing an acceptance of death are warmer in tone than the typical Tibetan-derived and Western-styled accounts sampled above. In a meditation to work with fear, he exhorts us gently to

Let go of the hardness. Let it float  
in something softer and kinder...  
Let the healing in.  
Let the pain go...  
Letting go into the softness,  
fear floats in the gentle vastness we call the heart.<sup>61</sup>

His moving book *A Year to Live* thus focusses on the practical emotional tasks that one can undertake in preparation for death, including softening our fear, reviewing our life, developing gratitude and forgiveness, and working out how to prepare ourselves. Contemplating these constructive reflections can then productively draw individuals away from the sense of powerlessness and futility that has been associated with depression and empower them to engage with death – and life – with dignity and serenity.

Whilst contemplating death and suffering can (thus) be done in a way that is safe for those of a more pessimistic nature, other practices may be more productive and empowering for them. It has long been recognized in the Buddhist tradition that not all meditation practices are suitable for all people or states of mind (even though

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<sup>57</sup> *Majjhima Nikaya* 9.14, Sāmmāditṭhi Sutta (‘Right View’), in *The Middle-Length Discourses of the Buddha*, trans. Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, pp.132–44: p. 134. The Buddha himself confirms this definition elsewhere, for instance at *Samyutta Nikaya* 45.8: ‘Knowledge of suffering, knowledge of the origin of suffering, knowledge of the cessation of suffering, knowledge of the way leading to the cessation of suffering: this is called right view’ (‘Analysis’, in *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, p. 1528).

<sup>58</sup> ‘That a bhikkhu with a wrongly directed view, with a wrongly directed development of the path, could pierce ignorance, arouse true knowledge, and realize Nibbāna: this is impossible. For what reason? Because his view is wrongly directed’ (*Samyutta Nikaya* 45.9, ‘The Spike’, in *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, p. 1530).

<sup>59</sup> Stephen Levine, *Unattended Sorrow: Recovering from Loss and Reviving the Heart* (New York: Rodale, 2005), p. 1.

<sup>60</sup> Stephen and Ondrea Levine, *Who Dies? An Investigation of Conscious Living and Conscious Dying* (New York: Doubleday, 1982), p. xi.

<sup>61</sup> Stephen Levine, *A Year to Live: How to Live This Year as if it Were Your Last* (London: Thorsons, 1997), p. 33.

this is often ignored in favour of a ‘one size fits all’ approach). Buddhaghosa’s fifth-century commentary *Visuddhimagga* (or The Path of Purification) sets out forty standard meditational subjects, along with the types of people for whom they are suitable.<sup>62</sup> It is notable that meditations on death and corpses are not particularly recommended for those of a ‘hating’ temperament, the one that might be assumed to be closest to a negative depressive outlook (the other types being greedy, deluded, faithful, intelligent, and speculative).<sup>63</sup> Instead this type of person is recommended to take as their meditative object either a color *kasina*, an attractive disc of blue, yellow, red, or white,<sup>64</sup> or the four pleasant emotional states called the divine abidings. While I have not known the *kasina* meditation to be taught in any Buddhist groups in the UK, the neutral quality of the suggested stimulus recalls the ‘distraction induction’ (such as the rotating fan) used by Nolen-Hoeksema and may thus work to temporarily improve the mood of dysphorics.

The divine abidings (or ‘Brahma-viharas’) appear more often in Buddhist circles, usually beginning with the development of loving-kindness (with the addition later of the qualities of compassion, rejoicing, and equanimity). In the FWBO this ‘metta bhavana’ practice is one of two principal meditations (along with the mindfulness of breathing), and takes the form of five stages: ‘While sitting quietly, you cultivate [a] well-wishing attitude first towards yourself, then towards a good friend, then a “neutral” person..., then towards someone you find difficult, and then to as many living beings as possible’.<sup>65</sup> While this initial focus on oneself can be healing and reassuring, most of the depressives I have known have found it all but impossible to wish themselves well convincingly; as Vajragupta points out in an FWBO book:

We first need a sense of our own self-worth and an appreciation of life and its potential. In our culture this seems difficult for some people. An unforgiving self-criticism, and subtle, underlying sense of worthlessness, is surprisingly common.<sup>66</sup>

In order to avoid returning to rumination on one’s own mental state through this practice, the more impersonal formulation of the practice in the Buddha’s original Metta Sutta may be more helpful.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Bhadantācārya Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga: The Path of Purification*, trans. Bhikkhu Ñānamoli (Onalaska, WA: BPS Pariyatti Editions, 1999), pp. 110, 113–14.

<sup>63</sup> Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga*, pp. 104–7 explains entertainingly how one can work out which temperament a person is from observation of their habits, but the key passage is on p. 106: ‘In one of hating temperament there is frequent occurrence of such states as anger, enmity disparaging, domineering, envy and avarice.’ Some depressives may identify more with other states such as the ‘deluded’, who have ‘frequent occurrence of such states as stiffness, torpor, agitation, worry, uncertainty, and holding on tenaciously’. The deluded are recommended to work with the mindfulness of breathing (as described in the text below) or else any of the kasinas so long as its dimensions are ‘measureless’ rather than limited (p. 114).

<sup>64</sup> The *kasina* meditation is mentioned by the Buddha in *Āṅguttara Nikaya X 29 (Numerical Discourses of the Buddha)*, trans. Nyanaponika & Bodhi, pp. 245, 311). The total set of ten *kasinas* are the same except that where the Buddha has space and consciousness for the final two, Buddhaghosa has light and space (*Visuddhimagga*, p. 110).

<sup>65</sup> Vajragupta, *Tools for Living Your Life*, p. 32.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>67</sup> *Sutta Nipata*, 1.8. This is the particular translation by Buddhārakkhita, one of several presented on the Access to Insight web resource (<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/buddharakkhita/wheel365.html>). A less poetic published version can be found in *The Sutta-Nipāta*, trans. H. Saddhatissa (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 1994), pp. 15–16.

May all be well and secure,  
May all beings be happy! ... [*Sabbe satta bhavantu sukhitatta*]  
Cultivate an all-embracing mind of love  
For all throughout the universe,  
In all its height, depth and breadth –  
Love that is untroubled  
And beyond hatred or enmity. ...  
Pursue this awareness with your might:  
It is deemed the Divine State here.

What is translated here as ‘happiness’ is in Pali the quality of *sukha*, mentioned in various places in the Pali canon, but perhaps most memorably as a quality to experience and develop in the sixth stage of the *Anapanasati* or mindfulness with breathing. This vital 16-stage practice explores the cultivation of the four bases of awareness, the body, feelings, mind, and mental objects, providing a balanced attention across the human psycho-physical system. Its focus on positive states in stages 5 & 6 in particular may be helpful to those prone to depression, by helping to generate positive affect, and hence more constructive cognitions and further improvement in mood:

[5.] He trains thus: ‘I shall breathe in [and out] experiencing rapture [*piti*]’...  
[6.] He trains thus: ‘I shall breathe in [and out] experiencing pleasure [*sukha*]’ ...<sup>68</sup>

In the FWBO the related practice of the ‘mindfulness of breathing’ restricts the practitioner to awareness of only the breathing and the body, restricting the opportunity for one to attend to one’s mind and feelings.<sup>69</sup> (Likewise, the currently-fashionable decontextualized ‘bare mindfulness’ as a western way of treating various psychological or chronic conditions only appears to skim the surface of the traditional practice. The best-known books and courses on this subject prefer to focus on preventing relapse into depression, excluding those currently depressed.<sup>70</sup>)

Other translations of the Metta Sutta gloss *sukha* as ‘bliss’, an experience which is cultivated in a much more focused manner in some Tantric Buddhism

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<sup>68</sup> *Majjhima Nikaya* 118 (‘Mindfulness of Breathing’), in *The Middle-Length Discourses of the Buddha*, trans. Ñanamoli and Bodhi, pp. 941–48: p. 944.

<sup>69</sup> An account of the Mindfulness of Breathing short practice can be found in Kamilashila, *Meditation: The Buddhist Way of Tranquillity and Insight* (Birmingham: Windhorse Publications, 1996), pp. 16–19.

<sup>70</sup> This is made clear for example in the subtitle of the popular *Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for depression: a new approach to preventing relapse*, by Zindel V. Segal, J. Mark G. Williams, and John D. Teasdale (New York and London: The Guilford Press, 2002). That the authors were ‘encountering and then testing a very different paradigm from that in which they were trained professionally and in which they were recognized as experts’ (p. vii) is an admission that, despite the use of the buzzword ‘mindfulness’, this project belongs to the cognitive tradition of Western psychotherapy or clinical psychology. Their later more meditatively-founded collaboration with Jon Kabat-Zinn, *The Mindful Way through Depression: Freeing Yourself from Chronic Unhappiness* (New York and London: The Guilford Press, 2007), explicitly cautions those experiencing clinical depression against embarking on the programme (pp. 8, 228). Such reluctance to engage with these vulnerable people is disappointing and throws the effectiveness of the approach into question.

traditions, where it is used as a powerful mind with which to meditate on wisdom.<sup>71</sup> Committed practitioners are enjoined to generate bliss six times a day;<sup>72</sup> although the full range of tantric commitments may be too much for some depressed people to undertake, regularly remembering and generating a small burst of positive feeling (which is always available irrespective of one's life circumstances) may prove beneficial, both in breaking the cycle of low mood,<sup>73</sup> and in giving a person something positive to anticipate.

Of course I would not wish to propose a new orthodoxy of meditation regime that should be enforced on vulnerable people; my point is exactly that individuals should choose for themselves which practices they intuitively find beneficial and conducive. Some depressive people (such as my collaborator Josie) may for instance identify more with the devotional faith type, and derive inspiration from recollection of positive objects such as the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha, virtue, generosity, or deities.<sup>74</sup> Josie and I have both gained great solace from the Vajrasattva practice, where one confesses one's perceived negativities to a radiant white deity and visualizes receiving healing and purifying white nectar that washes them away.<sup>75</sup> The versatility of this practice lies in its ability to turn negative self-conceptions to good spiritual use, and to switch the practitioner's focus from those to the powerful purity that is one's potential.<sup>76</sup>

## Conclusions:

In conclusion, without a constructive state of mind (and emotions) one cannot practise (and will have no motivation or strength to do so), so tipping practitioners into depression – leaving aside whether or not it is compassionate – is likely to be counterproductive in motivating them to engage with Dharma. These forceful meditations on death and suffering are not right for everybody, and caution should be exercised in presenting such material and asking group participants to dwell upon it. Those who are not prone to depression or dysphoria do not experience lowered mood and agency following rumination,<sup>77</sup> so they will not necessarily appreciate the dangers for others whom they may lead in meditation. Considering these issues led me to wonder what proportion of people have depressive tendencies – that is, whether this issue concerns a tiny minority of those likely to be affected or a more substantial risk

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<sup>71</sup> For example in Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, *Clear Light of Bliss* (Ulverston: Tharpa Publications, 1992), p. 7: 'Realising emptiness with the mind of spontaneous great bliss is the quickest method for attaining full enlightenment.'

<sup>72</sup> This practice is esoteric and hence taught orally, but there is reference to it in, for instance, Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, *Tantric Grounds and Paths* (Ulverston: Tharpa Publications, 1994), pp. 57–58.

<sup>73</sup> See Sonia Lyubomirsky, Lorie Sousa, and Rene Dickerhoof, 'The Costs and Benefits of Writing, Talking, and Thinking about Life's Triumphs and Defeats', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90:4 (2006), pp. 692–708: 'Positive emotions may also serve as a resource in the prevention and treatment of psychological problems stemming from negative emotions, such as anxiety, depression, and stress-related health problems' (pp. 693–94).

<sup>74</sup> Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga*, pp. 114, 110. Meditating on deities focusses on our positive potential and offsets the obsession with lower states found in the Tibetan tradition. Recollection of the Buddha can be performed by giving offerings, either real or imagined, a particularly recommended practice for generating future merit and hence improvement in one's life circumstances (Gyatso, *Joyful Path*, pp. 47-50).

<sup>75</sup> Lama Yeshe, *Becoming Vajrasattva: The Tantric Path of Purification* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2004), pp. 57–61.

<sup>76</sup> Vessantara, *Meeting the Buddhas: A Guide to Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and Tantric Deities* (Birmingham: Windhorse, 2003), pp. 229–240.

<sup>77</sup> 'It is also important to note that the rumination and distraction inductions did not significantly alter the moods of non-dysphoric students' (Lyubomirsky et al, 'Why Ruminators are Poor Problem Solvers', p. 1052, n. 3).



group. One large-scale formal psychiatric survey estimated that around 11% of the general population of England had been suffering from a depressive disorder in a given week,<sup>78</sup> so it is likely that any study course of more than a few participants will have at least one actively or recently depressed person in the room. This figure may be higher amongst those attracted to Buddhism than in the general population, as many of us in the West approach it initially motivated by the sense of dissatisfaction or disappointment that ‘there must be more to life’. Furthermore, if Ken Jones is right in identifying the typical FWBO personality as ‘the Angry (or, rather, vehement) Young Man (of all ages)’, whilst typically ‘women are relegated to a lowly place’<sup>79</sup> (both anger and subjugation being potentially correlated with depressive experiences), then FWBO groups will certainly have their share of those prone to depression – which is the impression I have gained from involvement in them.

Furthermore, asking people to dwell on what is effectively a *wrong view* is surely going to have negative consequences – rather like hammering a nail into the wrong part of a structure, where it will only split the wood rather than fix the components together. ‘Westernized’ Buddhism can distort the fabric of the teachings and hence produce unintended meanings, if it diverges from well-established primary sources, or views important aspects of doctrine as dispensable. Extracting techniques or reflections out of context can be questionable and reductive, in a similar way to that in which western medicine isolates chemical essences out of herbal plants, making them more pharmacologically powerful but also introducing harmful side effects. Dwelling willfully on wrong views about reality, derived from incomplete or inauthentic sources, would seem to be the very opposite of skillful Dharma practice.

Better sources of the word of the Buddha, both published and online, are available now to us in the West, removing the justification for relying on outdated, questionable, or eccentric renderings of Dharma. The production of translated volumes of the Pali Canon by Wisdom Publications has been a real blessing, thanks to the immaculate care taken by the translators, the insightful prefatory essays, and the wealth of topic indices. This series known as ‘Teachings of the Buddha’ began with the *Dīgha Nikāya* in 1987,<sup>80</sup> and has gone on to complete volumes of the *Majjhima* and *Samyutta Nikāya* collections, with a version of the *Āṅguttara* on the way.<sup>81</sup> 1995 saw the appearance of the *Access to Insight* website, whose provision of suttas in various English translations has grown along with people’s internet usage since that time. It is an indexed and searchable resource, making the suttas and other supporting material available for free to anyone with a computer.<sup>82</sup> There are also resources available for Mahāyāna sutras, particularly online, but due to their considerable length and number (as well as the varying languages of the surviving texts) there is as yet no canonical published set in English that I am aware of. Reputable secondary literature too is flourishing: Snow Lion is a notable publisher that has produced over 300 books

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<sup>78</sup> 9.0% had a mixed anxiety and depressive condition, and a further 2.3% suffered from a depressive episode (‘Adult psychiatric morbidity in England, 2007: Results of a household survey’, ed. Sally McManus et al (Leeds: The NHS Information Centre for Health and Social Care, 2007), pp. 28, 30–31).

<sup>79</sup> Ken Jones, ‘Many Bodies, One Mind: Movements in British Buddhism’, a well-circulated essay originally published on the website of the British Peace Fellowship (1997), available at <http://vajratool.wordpress.com/2010/06/19/>.

<sup>80</sup> *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, trans. Maurice Walshe (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1987).

<sup>81</sup> See ‘Teachings of the Buddha Series’ at [http://www.wisdompubs.org/Pages/c\\_teachings.lasso](http://www.wisdompubs.org/Pages/c_teachings.lasso).

<sup>82</sup> ‘Access to Insight: Readings in Theravāda Buddhism’, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/>.

on Tibetan Buddhism and culture since 1980, some of them selling over 70,000 copies, and other publishers both academic and commercial have contributed to this flourishing area.<sup>83</sup> That these are just samples suggests that a purge of less adequate sources, such as recorded talks, used as primary materials might be undertaken by some Buddhist traditions (such as the FWBO), whilst the strict reliance on the writings of a single teacher (as in the NKT) might well be opened up.

On an uplifting note, it is said in certain Mahayana traditions that the Bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha goes even to the hell realms to teach unfortunate beings,<sup>84</sup> and likewise Vajrasattva is described as ‘the one who saves from hell’,<sup>85</sup> so we can hope that depressive and dysphoric individuals will not be excluded from receiving Buddhist teachings however negative their state of mind. Indeed they stand to greatly benefit if it can be done appropriately and with consideration for their particular needs. But it is crucial that the Dharma be presented in a context of right view – and right emotion – in order to cause good and not harm. Only then can Buddhism in the West avoid the pitfalls and embrace the possibilities of teaching Buddhism to all whatever their psychological starting point.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> ‘About Snow Lion publications’, <http://www.snowlionpub.com/pages/about.html> .

<sup>84</sup> Vessantara, *Meeting the Buddhas*, pp. 198–201.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

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Table 1: The sequence of reflections in various sources

<i>Jewel Ornament of Liberation (Gampopa)</i>	<i>The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment (Tsongkhapa)</i>	<i>The Meditation Handbook (Gyatso / NKT)</i>	<i>The Four Reflections (FWBO)</i>
<i>The motive</i>	<i>On the teacher On meditation</i>	<i>Relying upon a spiritual guide</i>	
The working basis	A human life of leisure and opportunity	Our precious human life	The preciousness and rarity of human life
<i>Meeting spiritual friends</i>	<i>The three types of persons</i>		
The instruction in the transitoriness of the composite	Mindfulness of death	Death and impermanence	The transitoriness of life and the certainty of death
The vicious state of Samsāra	Reflecting on your future life	The danger of lower rebirth	Karma and the consequences of our actions
	<i>Going for refuge</i>	<i>Refuge practice</i>	
Karma and its result	The characteristics and varieties of karma	Actions and their effects	The defects and dangers of samsara
	Types of, origins of, and meditations on suffering		
<i>Compassion Refuge Bodhichitta The six perfections Paths and levels Buddhahood</i>	<i>Liberation Compassion Bodhichitta The six perfections Meditative serenity Insight</i>	<i>Developing renunciation Equanimity/compassion/love Giving Bodhichitta Tranquil abiding Superior seeing</i>	

Table 2: The Twelve Links of Existence

(i)	ignorance	( <i>avijjā</i> )
	↓	
(ii)	volitional formations	( <i>saṅkhārā</i> )
	↓	
(iii)	consciousness	( <i>viññāṇa</i> )
	↓	
(iv)	name-and-form	( <i>nāma-rūpa</i> )
	↓	
(v)	six sense bases	( <i>saḷāyatana</i> )
	↓	
(vi)	contact	( <i>phassa</i> )
	↓	
(vii)	feeling	( <i>vedanā</i> )
	↓	
(viii)	craving	( <i>taṇhā</i> )
	↓	
(ix)	clinging	( <i>upādāna</i> )
	↓	
(x)	existence	( <i>bhava</i> )
	↓	
(xi)	birth	( <i>jāti</i> )
	↓	
(xii)	aging-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure and despair	( <i>jarāmaraṇa</i> )