



Samatha at Home
(and elsewhere)

A weekly newsletter for the Southern Sangha: 3
Thursday April 16th 2020

Samatha at Home - Issue 3

Dear friends,

We come into week four of lockdown in the UK – and in other countries, where there are people also reading this newsletter, variations around this. We have, sort of, settled into a routine. But it is odd, as there are still many people in constant contact with the desperately ill, the suffering, or trying to provide services, or ill; others who sometimes feel mildly guilty to be fine at home. In a Zoom meeting last week one *samatha* meditator made an interesting comment: that just as those at home cannot but be aware of and feel the suffering in the hospitals, and the strain on those working in them, so, we can hope, there is a sense that our minds in meditation can help others too; those on the front line, or very ill, can feel our presence and good will.

The Chinese philosophical system, known as Huayan, rests upon a beautiful image. It is of Indra's net of jewels, that covers the whole universe. Every event in each jewel is reflected in all the other jewels; every jewel affects all the others. This system is based on the idea that the vast is in the tiny, and the tiny in the vast; all is interrelated, and one change in one jewel is felt throughout. It suggests that those staying at home – itself a public service at the moment – help others around by simply finding peace in the meditation, and feeling contentment and fulfilment in daily life. We cannot block our minds to the suffering we know is out there; we hope that those who are suffering can feel our *mettā* and compassion too. From a purely pragmatic point of view, the person who finds balance and grounded-ness is far more likely to be helpful to others if a crisis does emerge. But being able to let go, and find equanimity about the different kammic heritage of so many beings, is itself a place of strength. So we hope that any stillness and mindfulness found in the practice can help other beings, and bring happiness and path to them, too.

It has been very nice to hear from others that the newsletter is offering a helpful resource. So please feel you can contribute. Anything really – poems, letters, comments, articles, and in particular pictures – perhaps of your shrine, or flowers, streets, cityscapes or birds seen on walks, would be most welcome. We would like to hear from you.

This week our loose theme is the second factor of awakening: investigation of *dhammas*. This also is one of the factors said to be present and active in the healthy and awake mind, based on mindfulness. What is the best approach to investigating, in life and practice? So in this issue we explore *dhammavicaya* from a number of different angles. Next week, we move on to vigour, or strength (*virīya*). If you would like to send contributions on that – or anything that pops into mind anyway, on any aspect of your lives now – please do!

And this week, many thanks to Chris Gilchrist, Sarah Schieffer Riehl and Fran Warren for contributions.

Warm wishes,
Guy and Sarah

guy.healey@outlook.com sarah99shaw@gmail.com

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The bedtime Jātaka story this week is about a time when the Bodhisatta was a gardener – and had difficulty giving it up (J 70). This is third in the list of the ten perfections.

<https://player.vimeo.com/video/407333523>

If you would prefer to download this video, you can use this link:

<https://vimeo.com/silverbrookfilms/download/407333523/9e21addf3a>

And here is a video from a samatha meditator in the front garden, in Texas.

<https://photos.app.goo.gl/khCBNtrv7RRRkeJo6>

The second factor of awakening: Investigation (*dhammavicaya*)

The second factor of awakening is, investigation of dhamma: investigation of the teaching, or just ‘events’ or ‘phenomena’. We are all having to investigate at the moment: how to work the online systems, see why the sound isn’t working on some device, strategies to plan our shopping, how to make a routine the day. But one can feel that it is a burden, rather than something which is actually part of the healthy mind! For it is said to be a factor in the awake and skilful mind, when it is working well, and is something simple that also takes the mind to awakening itself. So, what is investigation as a factor in waking us up, or keeping the mind healthy and balanced?

The key seems to me to remember what it is like to be a small child exploring in the garden or in a new setting feeling carefree. He or she picks things up, feels them, plays with them, and has fun seeing what it can do. This willingness to try things out three-dimensionally, and with all the senses, just out of a healthy curiosity, to see what things can do and how one can work with them seems to me to be at the heart of *dhammavicaya* – the investigation that, according to the theory, leads in the end to awakening. It is an experimental feel: ‘why don’t I?’ In the suttas, after practising self-mortifications for several years, the Buddha said a memory had come back to him of a time when he had been completely happy. It was when he had been left alone for the first time under a rose-apple tree while his father conducted a ploughing festival. A very earthy and happy occasion. So, just experimenting – and the commentaries say he discovered *samatha* breathing mindfulness doing this – the young Gotama found the first *jhāna*. Years later, after all the deprivations of the years trying self-punishment as the route to wisdom, he remembered how happy he had been then. He had come to a complete dead end with various meditations and self-punishments. So, remembering the unification and peace of that state, he said to himself, ‘Why am I so frightened of happiness, when it is not to do with the senses? Why don’t I try that again? Could this be the route to wisdom?’ In his reflections, he uses something called grammatically an ‘optative’. This grammatical form is used when you feel like trying something out, and make a choice to do that. This seems like the attitude of the happy child: ‘why don’t I?’ In the Buddha’s case, this willingness to try something new led him to take food properly after years of fasting, and find the middle way: it led to him becoming fully awakened too. So I suspect a happy playfulness, or at least a willingness to try out the new in an unfamiliar setting is needed, at most stages of the path. And we are all on unfamiliar ground now...

Once that had become clear, it puts *dhammavicaya*, and its place in the whole list of factors of awakening, in perspective for me: it is just that quality of mind, which we sometimes slightly mistrust, that is willing to try something new, and give it a go. It is key to finding out more about any new ground we are in or getting to know it better.

So, investigation involves a little bit of discrimination, and noticing what is good for the mind and what is not good. We may be in new ground now, but I have noticed that the hindrances, our ‘troublesome’ friends, have just changed form a bit. Restlessness, wanting to be somewhere else, wanting to hug friends, panic, getting bored or frustrated... these are ‘quite normal’ as Boonman says, and in a way are just healthy and natural responses to

the situation we are all in. But they become hindrances when they prevent anyone settling in the practice. And they are persistent sometimes. The hindrances are the kind of friends that do not seem to respect social distancing, and can rock up, sometimes in teams, at any time! Investigation of dhammas is said to be able to distinguish between states that go nowhere, and are unhappy, and those that will help, and lead to feeling fulfilled and well.

And what, bhikkhus, is the nutriment for the arising of the unarisen enlightenment factor of investigation of dhammas and for the fulfilment by development of the arisen enlightenment factor of investigation of dhammas? There are, bhikkhus, wholesome and unwholesome states, blameable and blameless states, inferior and superior states, dark and bright states with their counterparts: frequently giving careful attention to them is the nutriment for the arising of the unarisen enlightenment factor of investigation of dhammas and for the fulfilment by development of the arisen enlightenment factor of investigation of dhammas. (S 5.66)

So in the practice, and in daily life too, I have found it useful to look at the traditional antidotes to each one of them, explained by Buddhaghosa.

The first hindrance, longing for the senses, is when you really wish you were doing something else. The antidote to that is unification (*ekaggatā*) or, in Abhidhamma terms, concentration (*samādhi*) – stillness. Someone was telling me this week they were on one daily bike ride, had to go back, and then wished she had gone further and was somewhere else. She got off her bike, just had a few moments of peace and stillness – and after that felt great just doing what she was doing, and where she was. This seemed a really good example of how stillness can clear the head and change the state of mind. In the practice, I find just remembering something that made me peaceful in the day helps to find that stillness if there is a wish to be doing something else. If I have heard some beautiful music, or felt some peace on a walk, remembering that feeling may be what is needed in practice too. Hatred, the second hindrance, has joy (*pīti*) as its antidote. If one is feeling annoyed with Zoom not working or angry that one cannot do something, just finding joy somewhere else – on a walk outside to blow cobwebs away, or some singalong music, or something very funny – takes the mind off the ill-will. So too do contacts with friends now. We need each other so much to keep our spirits up, and feel some joy. When it works it's as if the hatred shrinks; one has just forgotten to be angry. Sluggishness, or sloth and torpor, has the antidote of thinking of something, or applying the mind, perhaps to a new object (*vitakka*). So, if one is sluggish, it is really interesting how getting interested in something enlivens the mind and body too. The fourth hindrance, of restlessness and worry, is probably the real problem for many of us now. The antidote to this is happiness, or contentment (*sukha*). If one is happy in what one is doing, worries do seem to go into a new perspective, and one feels better able to respond to them from a place of balance and quiet afterwards. So it does seem important to find things one enjoys and feels happy about – gardening, perhaps, or painting, winning a computer game. And the last hindrance, of doubt, has the antidote of exploration, or sustained attention (*vicāra*). If you are trying to draw a tree, or mend a plug, or rearrange the furniture a bit so it looks more welcoming, the mind becomes engaged, and, curiously enough, doubt does lessen; there is no room for it. It is something I find you have to try to see how this works, but it really does.

These five factors are of course what we need in meditation too, as they are the five ‘limbs’ of *jhāna*: they support the mind in meditation. It is interesting to find how to investigate the breath at any time. As *samatha* meditators, the investigation needed is best with a touch of loving kindness or friendly interest. Examining the breath for jagged or rough bits, seeing where it seems to catch for a moment, and places where it gets stuck, seems to need a gentle, open sense of exploration, like feeling silk for knobbly bits, and just going over them, again and again. It can be like rubbing together flour and butter in a bowl, so they make fine breadcrumbs. You need to be open and exploratory, and patient, just enjoying the process itself. This kind of investigation arouses all the five *jhāna* factors we have discussed. One text says this of *dhammavicaya*:

So, living mindfully in this way he/she investigates and explores that teaching with wisdom. *Samyuttanikāya* 5.67

We have a teaching, in the basic instructions for our practice. Coming to feel at home with it, is as if one is just getting to know the breath, and examining it without trying to change it or make it different – that happens naturally, if it is watched with the right attention. From here, it can be surprising how much joy and happiness arises, if you treat the breath as if it were doing your favourite hobby: something absorbing, which has great feeling too. This does not get less in deep meditative states, but rather becomes much finer and more subtle.

In Abhidhamma, *dhammavicaya* means the same thing as wisdom. I think many Buddhists feel that wisdom has to be clearly labelled, or that it needs to be an obvious manifestation of insight into the three signs of impermanence, dis-ease and non-self. But in practice, it may not be the most obvious thing about experiencing wisdom in meditation, or about being wise. If I think about people I know who I feel are wise, it is because they are willing to listen, see what the situation really is, and give advice based on compassion or friendliness. They do not impose a preconceived view. They are just open, and try to help with good heart, and, if wisdom is there, probity. Because they do not have agendas, they often find what is a sensible and creative solution to a tricky problem, whatever it is. In *Jātaka* stories, the Bodhisatta is often reborn in conditions where he has to help others, or perform a craft well as part of his path to the perfection of wisdom. So, he is sometimes an adviser to the king; but sometimes a tailor, an architect, or a potter. In each case he does the job with an extra care, that makes other people marvel: but in fact he just does the job really well. Wisdom just seems to leave its stamp on what is done. When I look at paintings by Rembrandt and Vermeer, my favourites, I realise it is because I see wisdom in them. The painter has captured a moment and rather than not try and change it, has infused some compassionate understanding and insight into the scene and the person, often themselves it seems, a wise person too. The figures look completely part of their environment, and have presence, where they are. In the picture below, I love the graceful ease with which the girl holds her balance, she irradiates a mindful light somehow.



Johannes Vermeer, 1662–3, *Woman holding a Balance*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

I feel this quality is somehow there too in a really well-made and lovingly rounded pot: it just feels whole, and you feel it is a good pot to use too. Or it can be there in a photograph that just communicates a way of seeing people, the world or objects around differently. This is the kind of wisdom one can find in the breath, in meditation. It is like a light that simply by its suffusion changes things that seem unsatisfactory or not working well so they look different, and one can accept and even accept and love them. This sort of attention, like a patient and wise friend, transforms. But it does not have to be just for meditation: it can be there in anything we do that is right for the time, and shows care and a feeling for what is needed.

Wisdom is somehow the key to the how people who do their job or what they do regularly, with real warmth, engagement, and experience. From the Abhidhamma point of view, wisdom is only true wisdom when it is based on loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, or equanimity. In several cases in the *Ummagga/Mahosadha Jātaka* (J 546), the

Bodhisatta is brought in to determine the culprit in a crime. Although his instinct tells him so immediately, the real craft for him is to devise a way that other people will know too, and how the situation will turn out well; he does this. The wise person may be able to see a situation, but the wisdom really lies in knowing how to deal with everyone involved, accept their faults, and see a way something can work for them; it does not impose.



Photograph of an old man, twenty-first century, Vietnam

So for me, the essence of *dhammavicaya* is flexibility and friendliness, and trying to find out what is actually needed, rather than what we might think we 'should' do. This applies in the practice, when we want it to be other than it is, and in our daily life. At the moment our old patterns and habits are being shaken. Some people need us more; some less so. Some things feel good to do now, some less so. Investigation with good heart seems to lie in the ability not to have fixed preconceptions, and to do what the situation needs, rather than follow our usual habits and procedures. *Dhammavicaya* is when this sort of thinking becomes what it can be: wise, motivated by genuine compassion or equanimity, and, essentially, practical. For me, I have to drop ideas about Buddhism even, or intellectual systems at all, unless they actually work at the time and I would like to look more. The Buddha found his path to freedom through a bit of playful investigation, in his own way. In fact this is what the Buddha of course suggests for us: the teaching (*dhamma*) is a crown on one's own head, not on someone else's.

In this fathom-long body...a reflection

Where lies happiness?

Where lies me?

So hard to answer.

What comes to mind is the Buddha's saying:

In this fathomless body, with its perceptions and thoughts,

there is the world, the origin of the world,

the cessation of the world, and the path leading to the cessation of the world.

(*Aṅguttara Nikāya* 4:45).

I take great comfort in this.

It makes so much sense.

I know this body is fathom long.

I know the worlds that arise and cease.

I know also the joy and suffering of having the chance to experience this as a human being.

Oh, how wonderful, and how lucky are we as humans!

A blind turtle to find a golden yoke floating in the great ocean, once in a hundred years.

Great fortune to come up at that moment.

Great fortune to be 'me'.

What I do with this 'me' is, in the beginning, the middle, and the end, up to me.

I can only feel great gratitude, metta and compassion for us all.

Joy that I have good friends along the way

And the hope that the equanimity I aspire to will be present when I need it the most.

What an amazing gift and blessing to be human.

Where else could we act from with knowledge, love, delight for others, compassion and (hoped for) equanimity?



The Ten Bases for Making Merit

The development of the Enlightenment Factor of Investigation is something we can do in all circumstances. One way to consider it is that it is an invitation to inspect and understand different aspects of the Buddha’s teaching. In the current conditions, the importance of mental well-being is very much in mind, especially because of the confinement due to the Covid-19 epidemic. The underlying principle of meditation practice is that it produces skilful states of mind, states which overcome the mental hindrances and lead to calm and insight. Our practice of mindfulness of breathing develops mindfulness not just during the meditation practice but sets up conditions for mindfulness to arise in skilful states of mind throughout the day. Skilful states are both pleasant to experience and beneficial. But meditation practice is not the only way in which skilful states of mind can arise.

According to the *Abhidhamma*, (a part of the Buddhist canon) there are eight types skilful states of mind in the sense sphere (*kāmāvacara*), that is, the world comprising of the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind sense doors (six senses in all). These eight skilful states range from the consciousness which is spontaneous, associated with pleasant feeling and joined with knowledge to the consciousness which is instigated, associated with neutral feeling and separated from knowledge. These states are not only beneficial in themselves, but they produce wished for results in the future.

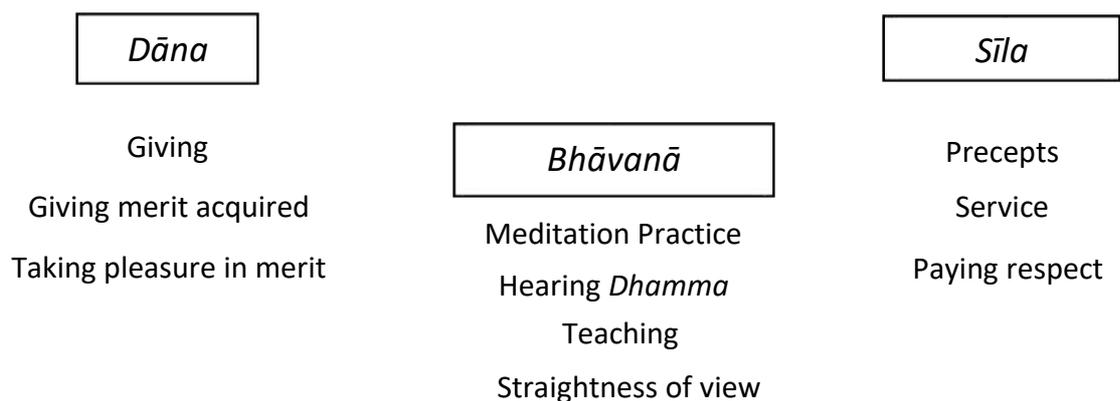
So how do these states arise? According to “Entrance to Abhidhamma” (*Abhidhammāvatāra*, a classic commentary and introduction to *Abhidhamma*) the eightfold skilful states arise due to the ten bases for making merit.

Given that these ten bases, if practised, can be of tremendous benefit for our mental well-being and the well-being of others, they are worth exploring. The order in which the ten bases are given is as follows:

“Giving, precepts, meditation practice, giving of merit acquired, service, teaching, taking pleasure in merit acquired, straightness of view, right listening, and paying respect” (*Abhidhammāvatāra*, para 21, translated by L.S. Cousins).

The commentary then orders the ten bases into three groups: giving (*dāna*), precepts (*sīla*) and meditation practice (*bhāvanā*).

The bases of giving merit acquired and taking pleasure in merit acquired are derived from Giving, service and paying respect are derived from Precepts and hearing *dhamma* (right listening), teaching and straightening view are derived from meditation practice.



Let's look at each of these three groups more closely.

Dāna

1. **Giving.** The first base of merit is giving, generosity. It is the opposite of selfish attachment and requires letting go, an extremely important element in spiritual development. The thing that is given must be of benefit to the recipient, that is to say, it will not result in intentional harm to any being.
2. **Giving of merit acquired.** The transference of merit is a common practice in Buddhist countries. It is the wish that any merit acquired, either through a specific act (such as a period of meditation practice, an act of generosity, or other skilful actions) or more generally through all acquired merit, is shared with other beings. This can be directed to parents, family, friends or spread to all living beings. It has been described as akin to one candle having the ability to light many others. The method of transference can be through the pouring of water accompanied by a particular chant, or simply by touching the ground and making the wish that the merit is transferred to the beings concerned.
3. **Taking pleasure in merit acquired.** Taking pleasure in merit acquired is what happens when a person sees another perform an act of merit and has a positive response to it, to see it as a meritorious act and of benefit to that person. So, seeing someone spontaneously give to another and to respond with a consciousness that is unprompted, associated with pleasant feeling joined with the knowledge that this is a skilful act, is an example of taking pleasure in merit acquired.

Sīla

1. **Precepts.** The precepts refer to virtuous conduct, the restraint of bodily and verbal actions. The precepts are the guidelines for protecting the mind and therefore ourselves and others. Not doing any harm underpins each of the precepts. One of the chief benefits of keeping the precepts is freedom from remorse. For lay people there are five precepts which are as follows:
 - i. Refraining from killing
 - ii. Refraining from stealing
 - iii. Refraining from sexual misconduct
 - iv. Refraining from lying
 - v. Refraining from taking drink or drugs that intoxicate the mind

There are other precepts which are kept by lay and ordained people which come under this category. Morality/virtue is part of the threefold training of the Buddhist path: morality (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*). The five precepts are fundamental to the development of the Buddhist path and observing them is considered the measure of what it means to be a human being.

2. **Service.** Service is doing work that provides something of benefit to others. It covers a wide range of activities, including our work, whether we are leaders or part of a team, but also everyday life, from a parent looking after children to helping our neighbours and voluntary work. All such activities are a basis for developing skilful states of mind. The Buddha can be seen as an exemplar of service, working for others from his enlightenment to his attainment of *parinibbāna* (the end of re-birth) at the end of his life, 45 years later.
3. **Paying respect.** The examples given for paying respect are usually with regard to paying respect to monks and nuns, particularly those who have achieved distinction in their spiritual development. The practise is to pay respect to all. Paying respect also refers to paying respect at a shrine, which can arouse much faith when recollecting the qualities of the Buddha. Furthermore, if we reflect on our experience, it is clear that treating everyone respectfully is a basis for the arising of skilfulness; this is part of the *sīla* section.

Bhāvanā

1. **Meditation Practice.** Meditation practice covers all types of calm (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*) practices, including chanting and recollection of meditation practice. *Bhāvanā* literally means “bringing into being”. So, when we practice meditation, one of the eight skilful consciousnesses of the sense realm can arise. It should be noted that if and when *jhāna* meditation is achieved, the skilful consciousness that arises is not of the sense realm, but of the realm of form, formless realm or supramundane meditation (the coming together of calm and insight at one of the four stages of enlightenment). These types of consciousness are important but not the subject of this article.
2. **Hearing dhamma (right listening).** Hearing *dhamma* (also translated right listening) refers to paying attention to a *dhamma* talk (some aspect of the practice, or theory regarding the development of the path) as a basis for the arising of skilful consciousness. It also refers to listening to chanting, as opposed to taking part in chanting. Anyone who has listened to a number of chants in sequence will know that the mind can be transformed into a very positive state.
3. **Teaching.** Teaching refers to teaching *dhamma*, which includes the threefold training of Morality (*sīla*), Concentration (*samādhi*) and Wisdom (*paññā*). It has also been said to refer to the teaching of any subject that benefits another person.
4. **Straightness of view.** Straightness of view refers to the practice of developing wisdom by seeing things as they really are. Our world view dictates our subsequent behaviour. Understanding actions in accordance with the law cause and effect, for instance, that mental, verbal and physical actions produce results in common with skilful or unskilful volition, will have major benefits for us and all those around us. The “Entrance to Abhidhamma” says “Making merit by recollecting these ten, delighting in them and taking the three refuges are undoubtedly included in making the view straight” (ibid, para 24 translated by L.S. Cousins). So, recollecting these ten bases of merit is in itself one of the ten bases of merit, making the view straight.

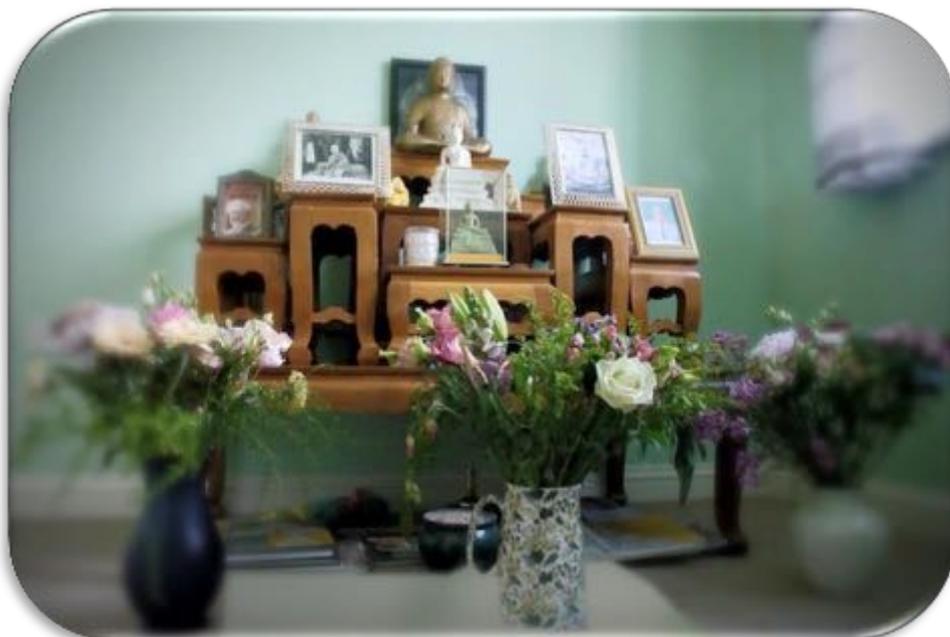
The eight types of skilful consciousness in the sense realm are the basis for good and fruitful action, and the source of good results, not harmful results, and the ten bases for meritorious action are the cause for these skilful states arise in the sense sphere. “The Entrance of *Abhidhamma*” ends this section with the following:

“It must be made known that these *cittas* (consciousnesses) are many under the influence of the ten meritorious activities and so on.

In detailed exposition there are 17,280 *kāmāvacara* (senses sphere) meritorious deeds.” (ibid, paras 26-27 translated by L.S. Cousins).

The detailed exposition is that 10 bases are multiplied by 6 senses, 3 levels of efficacy (inferior, medium and superior) 4 bases of success, 3 periods of time (past, present, future) and the 8 skilful consciousnesses ($10 \times 6 \times 3 \times 4 \times 3 \times 8 = 17,280$).

So, given this analysis, we can reflect on this sense of expansiveness in the scope for performing the ten bases for meritorious action, through various senses, levels, periods of time and so on. In practice it means that there is a huge potential to develop skilful states of mind in our daily lives, be it a little repeated often, or more intense practice. Mindfully done, simple things can change our lives in a positive way.



A walk

This wilderness transforms.
An assemblage of rough grass, faded heather,
sloping hills with rocky streams,
iridescent emerald moss tufts,
waving white blobs of cotton grass,
lit by bursts of sun through marching clouds -
is suddenly one,
a wholeness without a centre.
Absent myself, joy floods to peacefulness,
flowers to accepting tranquillity.
No I sees no thing.
Sense perceptions recreate an embodied person,
briefly flickering between me and selflessness,
moving like a shadow of a greater being
that is truly home.

