

The background is a complex, abstract collage of colors and geometric shapes. It features a mix of warm tones like red, orange, and yellow, and cooler tones like blue, green, and purple. There are various patterns, including zig-zags, spirals, and solid blocks of color. In the lower right corner, there is a stylized, purple-toned face with large, expressive eyes, looking towards the viewer. The overall style is reminiscent of mid-20th-century abstract art or folk art.

# A Buddhist Perspective on Pain, Stress and Illness

**Bhikkhu Sumedha**



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on  
Pain, Stress and Illness**

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**A BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE ON PAIN, STRESS & ILLNESS**  
**BHIKKHU SUMEDHA**

Published for free distribution



• Touching Peace In Our Lives •

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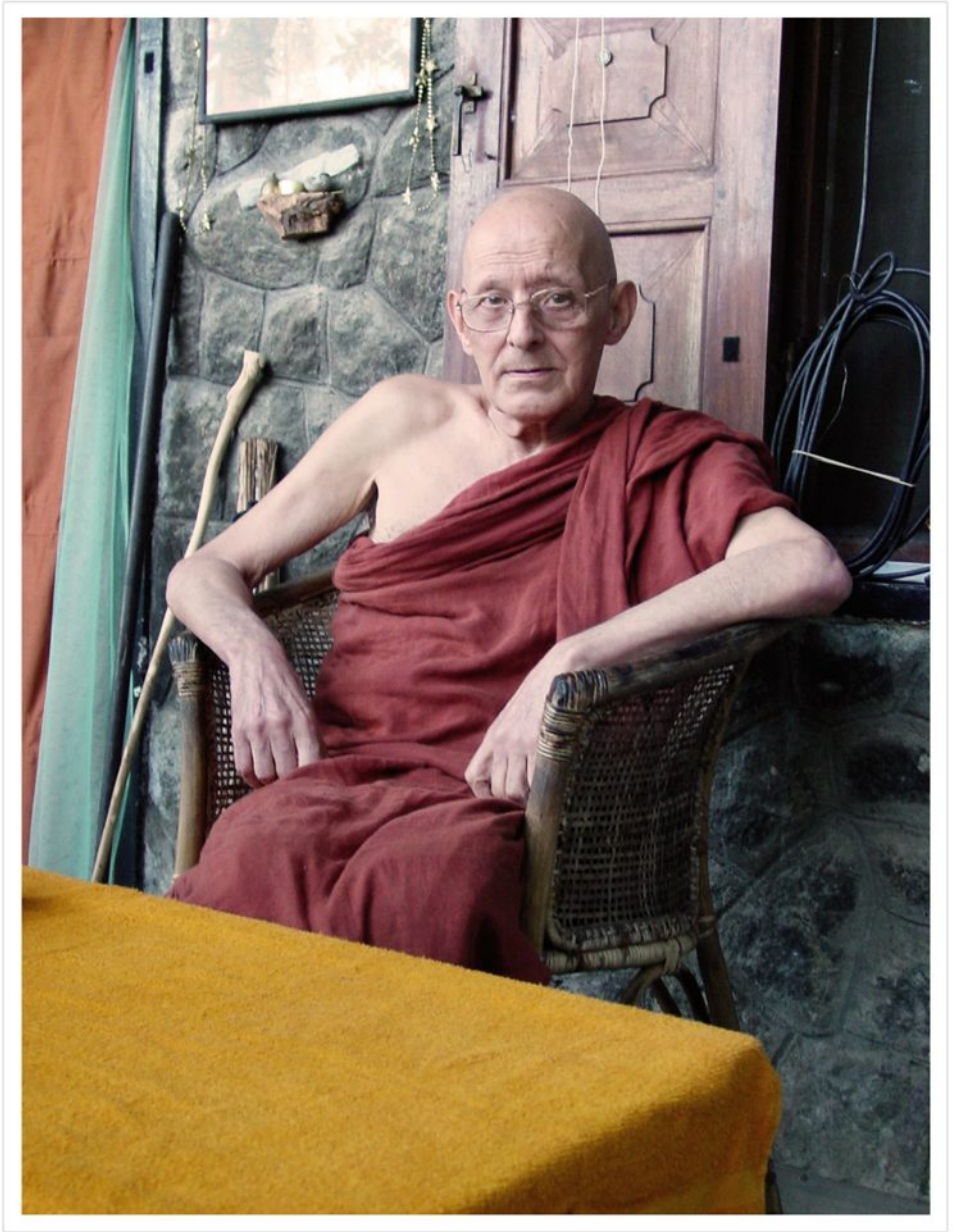
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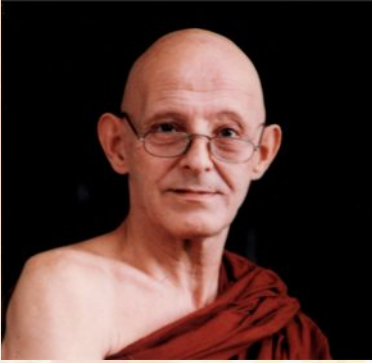
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*Bhikkhu Sumedha outside Manapadassana Cave  
in February 2006, photograph by Peter Zimmermann*





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## Preface

**Ven. Sumedha**, whose lay name was Aja Iskander Schmidlin, was born in Switzerland in 1932. Being an artist of repute, he was inspired by the natural beauty, the unique culture, and the multi-religious background of Sri Lanka on his first visit to the island in 1970.

In 1981, in the historical Buddhist city of Anuradhapura, he received full ordination as a bhikkhu or Buddhist monk. From that time on, he devoted himself to Buddhism and extended his services to the local community of Sri Lanka. His social services were not confined to religious activities. He set up a first-aid clinic with himself as a barefoot doctor. He trained several locals in first-aid and, in 1987, organized a free first-aid clinic at Dulwala which is still in operation.

Ven. Sumedha was neither a writer nor a scholar, and he understood and explained the Dhamma in a unique way. He often used visual imagery to explain Buddhist concepts. His paintings, some of which were displayed in his cave-hermitage at Dulwala, attest to his artistic ability.

During the latter part of his life, Ven. Sumedha became closely acquainted with the staff at the Peradeniya Teaching Hospital where he himself was repeatedly

admitted for various chronic ailments. During his stay in the ICU, he developed a warm friendship with me, which led to his beginning to offer the Dhamma for the mental well-being of the critically ill. He became a regular visitor at the hospital, conducting *paritta* or protection chanting, offering advice on meditation, and even assisting patients financially to buy expensive drugs. Despite his own chronic illnesses, he was devoted to the needs of others.

On 21 December 2006, at approximately 10:30pm Ven. Sumedha passed away at Peradeniya Teaching Hospital. According to his request, made long before his death, his eyes were donated to the eye bank, and his body was donated to the Faculty of Medicine, University of Peradeniya.

This work, which deals with the inherent nature of mind during pain and chronic illnesses and the Buddhist method of managing it, is based on my personal experiences with Ven. Sumedha. It is dedicated to his memory, as the spiritual patron of Peradeniya Teaching Hospital, and for his invaluable services for over 30 years in Sri Lanka as a Buddhist monk.

*Prof. C.D.A Goonasekera  
Head, Dept. of Anaesthesiology  
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## Introduction

On December 21st, 2006 at approximately 10.30pm Sri Lankan time, my beloved friend, Ven. Bhikkhu Sumedha, the Swiss-born monk residing at the Manapadassana Lena in Dulwala, near Kandy, passed away. Ven. Sumedha would have been 75 years of age the following February. Earlier in 2006 he had been diagnosed with bladder cancer and in March had undergone surgery. In November he had contracted pneumonia and was admitted to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) at the Peradeniya Teaching Hospital. While still at the hospital, he felt sharp pains in his abdomen and noticed blood in his urine and feces, which convinced him that his cancer had returned. Surprisingly, however, he left the hospital shortly thereafter. Our mutual friend Joel Harary, who regularly visited him at the hospital, wrote to me on November 19th that the doctors “offered to keep him for a few more days to determine the cause of the pain but Bhikkhu Sumedha refused.... [He] is in good form and has lots of energy. The doctors said they didn’t think he had cancer.”

On returning to his cave, beginning perhaps on November 24th, he suddenly stopped eating and drinking, claiming that to ingest any food or even water caused him nausea and vomiting. He knew this would result in his death, but he wasn’t the least bit afraid;

rather, those who visited him said that he radiated unusual exuberance and luminosity. Many reported to me that they were astonished by his constant vitality, dynamism, and clarity of mind, which persisted even after several weeks of fasting. He spoke on the Dhamma for hours, yet he showed no signs of weariness. He seemed to be powered by an immense source of energy and his mind was always bright, sharp, and perceptive.

After several weeks, however, his physical strength waned. His steward, Jagath Wijesiri, who had attended on him like a son since the late 1980s, suggested to him that he again enter the hospital. Aware that doing so would relieve Jagath of the burden of looking after him, he agreed, on condition that his wishes would be respected. He especially emphasized that he did not want to be force-fed or be given substantial nutriment intravenously. He agreed to receive fluids by IV, but would not accept food apart from an occasional sip of liquid to alleviate the dryness of his mouth. Over his last few days he became weaker and began to have spells of diarrhea. The British monk Ven. Anandajoti, who was with him near his end, said that his mind was clear and alert right up to his death.

From the American couple, Ken and Visakha Kawasaki, who visited him almost daily during his last weeks in the hospital, I heard a touching tale. On the very day of his death they went to visit him and found him emaciated and extremely weak. In the adjourning

cubicle there was a young boy, very ill, who cried and wailed. The sound of his wailing reached Ven. Sumedha's ears, and despite his own weakness, he looked up with great compassion and inquired what could be done to ease the suffering of that child. Such was the character of this monk who always showed so much concern for the poor and destitute, especially for the simple villagers of Sri Lanka.

Long before his death, he had requested that after death his eyes should be removed and donated to the eye bank for cornea transplants, that any of his bodily organs that were still viable should be used for transplants, and that his body should be donated to the medical faculty of the University of Peradeniya for medical research. Immediately after death his eyes were removed, as he wished, and the morning after death, his body was officially donated to the faculty of medicine. Meanwhile, on Friday morning, monks from his monastic fraternity, the Ramañña Nikāya, including his close friend, Ven. Y. Dhammapāla, arrived and performed the "sharing of merits" rite on his behalf.

This was not Bhikkhu Sumedha's first encounter with death. In 2001, he had almost died due to asphyxiation. One morning in late March of that year, when Jagath came to the cave to prepare his morning tea, he found him lying in bed in a comatose condition. Immediately, he carried him down the hill and rushed him to the ICU of the Peradeniya Teaching Hospital. When we — his



friends in Kandy — visited him at the ICU, his condition looked so grim that we started to plan his funeral. He was completely unconscious and was hooked up to what looked like a half-dozen machines.

Unexpectedly, however, on perhaps the fourth day he emerged from his coma, regained consciousness, and then slowly regained his health. But a bigger surprise was to come. Not only did he recover his health, but he felt such gratitude to the staff of the ICU for saving his life that there arose in him an irresistible urge to find some way to express this gratitude. Convinced that his deep coma and near-death experience had given him a rare insight into the state of critically traumatized patients, he decided to become a spiritual guide to the patients of the ICU. He spoke to the doctor in charge of the unit, Dr. Chula Goonasekara, about his experience and ideas, and the doctor accepted his offer of help.

Over a decade earlier, in 1987, Ven. Sumedha had organized a free first-aid clinic at his village of Dulwala, which first operated at his cave, with himself as the “bare-foot doctor.” He had taught himself first-aid care from a few textbooks he acquired from abroad. After some months, he trained locals in the first-aid practices and moved the clinic to the village itself. The clinic has continued, maintained by a retired school principal with the support of a Swiss Buddhist. But now he launched into a new phase of his astonishing life with its many transformations.

For the next five years he would visit the ICU and other wards in the hospital three or four days per week. He spoke to patients, offered them advice and consolation, inquired about their special needs, and sought ways to fulfill them. He went to the most gravely injured of them all, without the least squeamishness: the woman whose in-laws had poured gasoline over her clothes and set them ablaze, so that her body was a mass of scars; the young man who had lost both legs in an auto accident; the child afflicted with a rare disease, lingering on the verge of death, surrounded by his distraught parents.

To the astonishment of the medical staff, he showed an uncanny ability to discover the precise way in which a patient in a particular critical condition could best be treated in order to regain hope and courage. He became fast friends with Dr. Goonasekara, and the two worked together as a team at conferences and on special projects. With the doctor's support, he organized trainings sessions for the other doctors and nurses in which he would actually teach *them* how to tend to the patients in their care.

Though his father (who vanished in his childhood) was a medical doctor, his instructions were not based on any background training, but on sheer intuition. It was the intuition of an artist, one with a gift for seeing deeply behind people's faces and beneath their words into the

hidden recesses of their hearts — an intuition that came naturally to him, for in lay life Ven. Sumedha had indeed been a highly trained painter gifted with vision and rigorously disciplined in artistic technique. It was also the intuition of a yogi, for in his early 40s he had renounced the world for the life of a contemplative Buddhist monk, meditating for years in solitary caves.

In May 2005 Ven. Sumedha applied for Sri Lankan citizenship. In preparing his application, he had written a letter to the President of the country (who alone could recommend citizenship) explaining the reasons he was making this request. He had sent the draft of the letter to me so I could polish his English. Fortunately, I still have the file on my hard disk and I found this closing paragraph, which is particularly poignant to read on the day of his death:

“I have made Sri Lanka my adopted homeland and it is my wish to pass away in this country. I no longer have any sense of identification with any other country. Since my ordination I have not left this island, and I have no intention to leave for the rest of my life. I hold a German passport, though I have never lived in Germany. I would like to become a Sri Lankan citizen, both to express my sense of belonging to this country more than to any other country in which I have lived, and also, in my old age (I am now well over 70), to spare myself the trouble of applying each

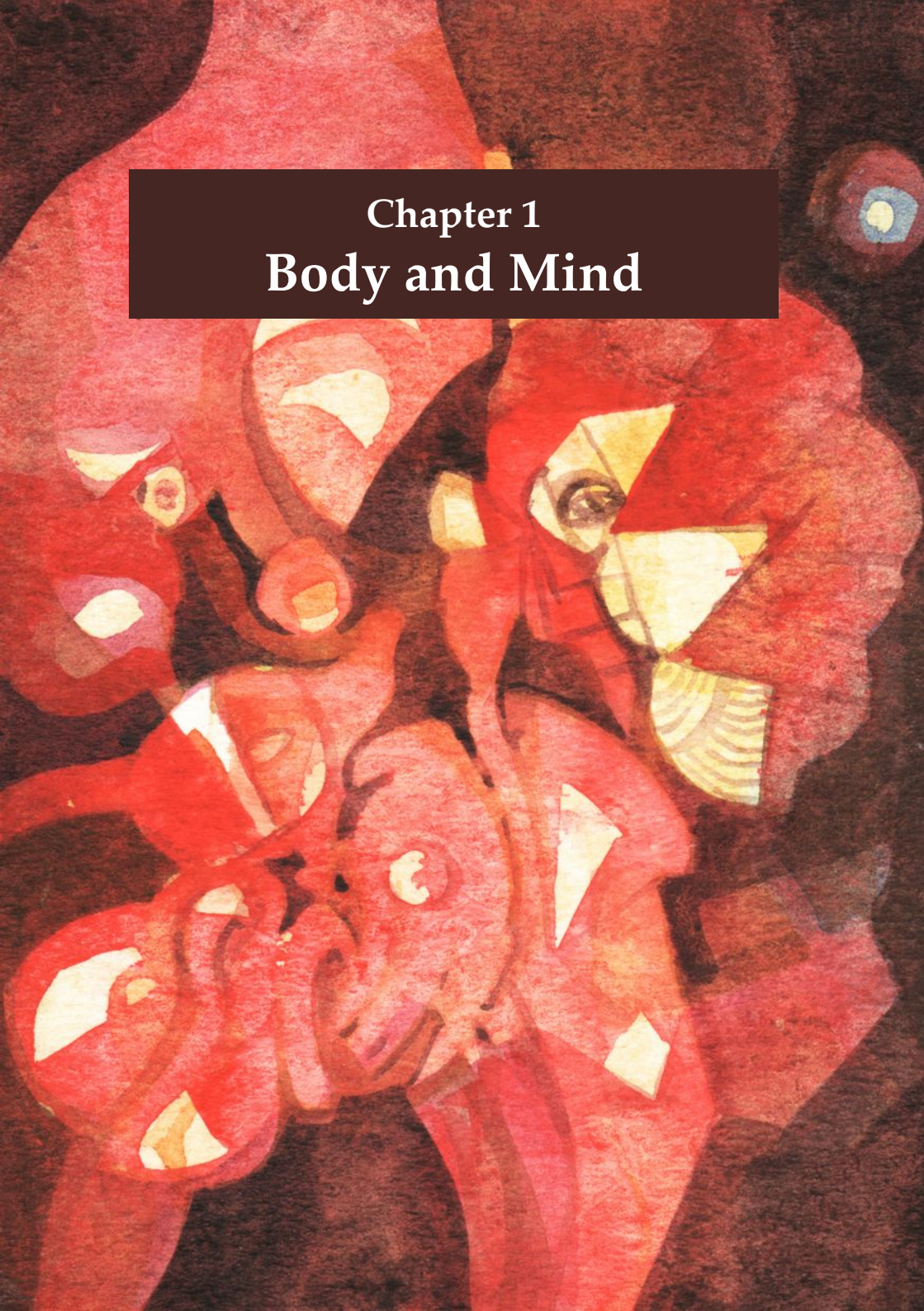
year for a residence visa valid for only one year. I have been a monk now for thirty years and I am fully intent on remaining one until the end of my days.”

Just a year and a half after writing the above, he reached “the end of [his] days” still clad in the brown robes of a Buddhist monk, a much loved and venerated member of the Sangha. He came to Sri Lanka as an artist seeking enjoyment and relaxation; the strange workings of karma, swelling up from an unfathomable past, turned him into a sage who found here wisdom, consolation, and a path to final peace. He lived and died as a true monk and rare visionary: Sumedha “the Unborn” (*aja*), the cave-dwelling meditator, the spiritual patron of the Peradeniya Teaching Hospital, the genius artist, and one who, even on the brink of his own death, still thought of a frightened child crying on a nearby hospital bed.

**Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi**  
*Bodhi Monastery*  
*Lafayette, New Jersey, U.S.A.*  
*December 21-22, 2006*







Chapter 1  
Body and Mind

The human body differs from the human mind at a superficial level. But the fundamental nature of the body and mind share similar characteristics. A description of those fundamentals should encompass the universal nature of mind and matter. An attempt is made here to describe some aspects of the nature of mind and compare it with the human body.

### CHANGING NATURE

The physical body requires a continuous supply of oxygen and nutrients for its maintenance. Oxygen and nutrients are continually consumed for the synthesis of bodily matter. Whatever matter is formed is unstable and, therefore disintegrates. But sooner or later, completely new matter is synthesized, replacing what is lost, thus the continuity is maintained. It is the continuity of a bundle of *unstable matter* that appears as a solid body. But in reality, it is nothing but a sequence of changes: synthesis and disintegration. This is the nature of impermanence, the inherent nature of the universe.

The same law of nature governs the mind. Our mind needs a continuous supply of 'nutrients' in the form of what we see, hear, taste, feel, smell and think, for its survival. The manifestation of the mind during a particular time period is determined partly by the nature of the 'nutrients' supplied during *that particular time period*. In other words, a change in the surrounding environment can bring about a change in mentality.



Just as doctors find the reason for the drop in oxygen saturation of a patient as some fault in the oxygen delivery mechanism, a drop in the mental status of the patient can be due to a change in the patient's 'outside' environment. When the nutrients of the mind are well understood, one knows how to correct them when in abnormal states of mind and restore normal mental health. For example, a tight oxygen mask irritating the skin may be a major reason for a patient's agitation. The simple loosening of the mask might solve the problem.

### CAUSE AND EFFECT

Any bodily phenomenon is a result of more than one cause. What is important here is that nothing in this body prevails alone, without being a result of causes. The reader may not agree at once that every element of our mind (consciousness) is a result of nothing but a combination of causes, but the important point is that no element of the mind stands alone without a cause. If we accept this then we see that humans are simply bundles of psychosomatic conditions. When this bundle of unstable psychosomatic conditions recognizes itself with ignorance, the notion of 'I' and 'mine' arises.

This 'I' has craving and aversion. When the cravings are satisfied, happiness results. When cravings are not satisfied, misery results. But when one realizes that this 'I' is nothing but a bundle of unstable psychosomatic conditions, the ignorance of 'I' passes away. Such a

mind doesn't see things as to be wanted or rejected. Instead it accepts whatever happens as it is and acts appropriately without any inner struggle. Then craving or aversion can no longer conquer the mind. As the mind is devoid of any impurities, it remains stable in its basic nature — calm and peaceful all the time.

For example: One whose idea of 'I' persists says, 'I am seeing a picture'. But one who sees cause and effect of mental elements perceives that 'an act of seeing a picture' has arisen at this moment, and it will also pass away as a result of certain conditions. No notion of 'I' is involved. Then the mental impurities attached to 'I', such as craving and aversion, will not arise.

This may be an absolute example. However, the less the notion of 'I' is, that much less the suffering is bound to be. A patient with corrected vision doesn't wish, 'I don't want pain' or 'I want pleasant feelings', but accepts that whatever happens is as it is, seeing the causes and effects, beyond the notion of 'I'. Then he is living in line with the true nature of mind and matter. The result is the passing away of stress and the establishment of peacefulness.

## **ACTIONS HAVE AN EFFECT**

When the body encounters an injurious agent like a virus, it develops a defense mechanism for its own protection, e.g. an inflammation. But at times such



bodily responses do more harm than the injurious agents themselves. Then doctors may medicate to reduce the bodily response by giving immuno-suppressive or anti-inflammatory drugs.

But for the mind this 'medication' is the truth. When an unpleasant sensation (= injurious agent) is encountered, out of ignorance one reacts with disliking, aversion or hating. The mental reaction (= inflammation) does more harm than the unpleasant sensation itself possibly could.

Just as the body switches on a vicious cycle of cytokine production in the presence of dengue fever which brings on a state of shock, this mental impurity, anger, proliferates, leading to confusion and agitation. Initially this aversion is only towards the unpleasant sensation. Soon it can spread to the thing or person held responsible for giving the pain. The angry person may start hating anything and everything associated with the suspected cause of his pain. Like a fire catching and destroying any inflammable material, this aversion burns anything that comes to the mind. Therefore it is necessary to give an 'immuno-suppressor' to the mind to stop this negative thought proliferation. It is nothing but the correct understanding of the mental impurity of aversion and its antidote, friendliness, gained by examination of one's own mind.



Physicians gain new knowledge about the human body in three main ways.

- knowledge gained by reading and listening
- knowledge gained by rational or logical thinking
- knowledge gained through their own experience

Out of the three, the last has a greater influence on the physician's decisions than the rest. The knowledge that relieves mental stress falls into the same three groups. And the direct experience of the mental and physical phenomena brings about the real change. For example, one may have listened to and read about all the unhealthy effects of anger (first type of knowledge); one may predict the harmful effects of anger, having seen people with anger (second type); but neither gives real relief from anger. It is the direct knowledge gained through pure observation of one's own anger and cultivation of its antidote, friendliness, that purifies the mind of anger.

### **NON-INTERVENTIONAL OBSERVATION**

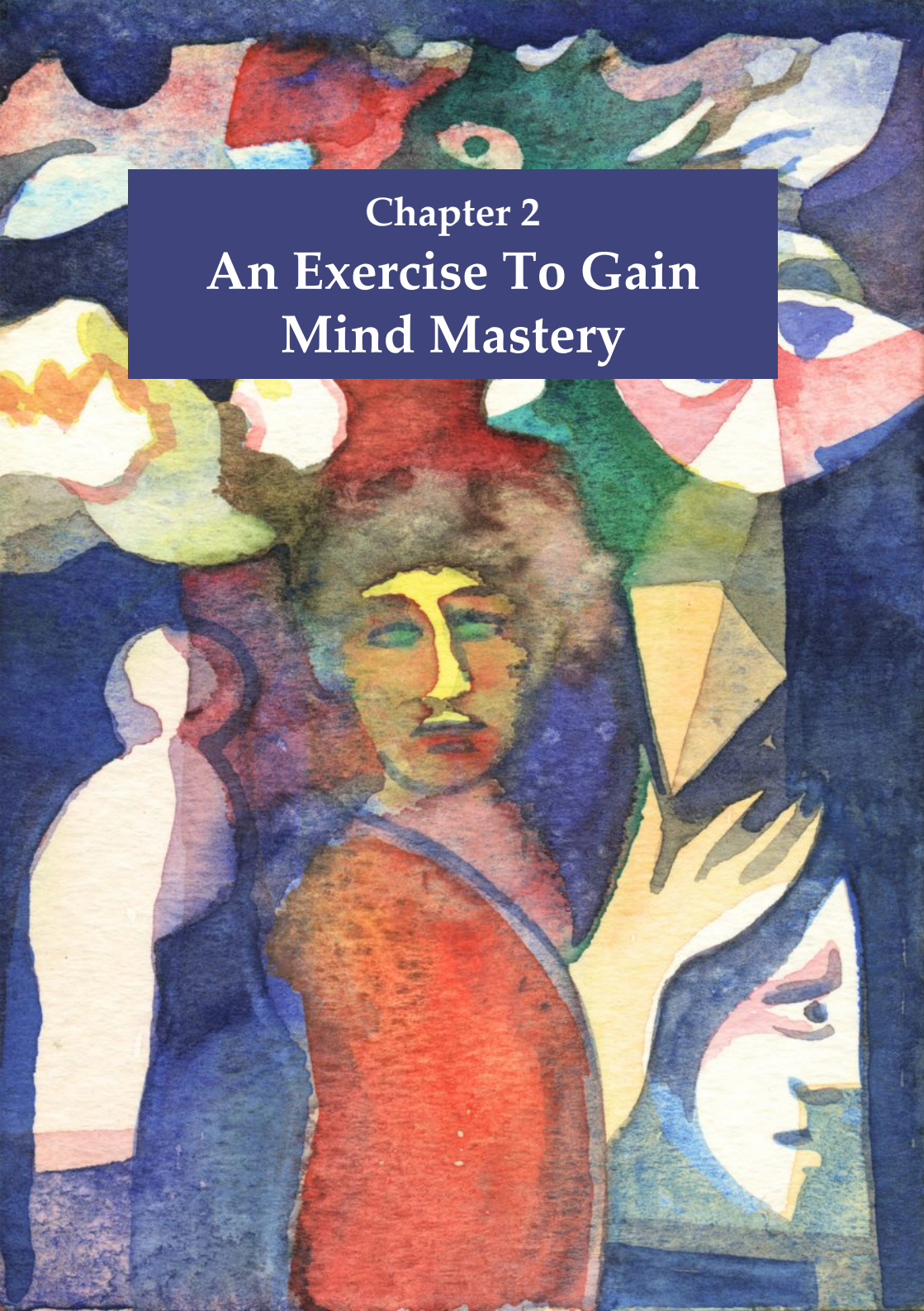
The principle of *do nothing, but watchful waiting* is applied in understanding the true nature of the pathological process going on in a patient. Do nothing because any intervention would mask the true nature of the process. Watchful waiting is to be vigilant in observing what happens.

The exact same principle holds true when dealing with the mind. What is needed to purify the mind is pure observation. Observation equals watchful waiting. Observation is pure in the sense that no intervention of liking or disliking is there. For example, if one wants to know the true nature of anger, he has to see the anger when it has arisen in his mind, without any dislike (or like) of the object of anger. When one starts examining thoughts without any liking or disliking, the true nature of thought begins to reveal itself. Then the law governing the mental elements becomes clearer. He comes to realize how stress and suffering are generated within his mind. Then he knows how to escape from suffering and enjoy peace within.







The background is a complex watercolor painting. It features a central figure with a yellow face, a red body, and a dark beard. To the right, there is a profile of a face with a white forehead and blue features. The overall composition is filled with various colors like blue, green, red, yellow, and purple, creating a rich, textured effect.

Chapter 2  
An Exercise To Gain  
Mind Mastery

First, please note that the application of this method may not be suitable for all patients. Therefore, candidates should be carefully selected for the practice. Most of the time it is not even easy to approach patients when they are feeling overwhelmed by great pain and stress. Therefore careful consideration of the individual patient is needed, and there must be sensitivity in adjusting the approach to suit that particular individual.

Once the patient's confidence has been built up with the therapist, further guidance has to be planned very carefully. Even though much importance is given to this method of stress relief, a few other simpler techniques, such as the development of loving-kindness, equanimity and environmental modification can also be included.

Listening to pirit-chanting and music therapy are some other beneficial techniques that can be employed. Having understood the peculiarity of each method, one may use a combination of techniques that best suits a given patient.

The practical aspect of stress relief is more important than any theory already discussed. Only when put into practice does it become practical, otherwise it just remains a matter for discussion.



Physical illness is part and parcel of life. When you are bedridden, you have a chance to meet yourself, you are confronted by your bodily and mental feelings. Often, out of ignorance you may feel helpless, frightened, and mentally depressed in such situations. Yet the period of illness is a great opportunity to observe oneself and to know the truth about oneself. Until that happens, you are always sleep-walking in a world of distractions, always interested in the outside world. When ill, you have a chance to peep into the world inside. What we present here is a practical mental training, which can give insight into ourselves. It can also help us to be mentally healthy even when we are physically ill.

There are three essential steps of the mental training.

- *physical morality* achieved by observing the five precepts: avoiding killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lies and intoxication
- *mind-mastery* developed through bare observation of the touch of the breath at the nostrils
- *wisdom* developed through attentive and equanimous observation of one's own feelings in a systematic order.

One becomes mentally ill due to the presence of mental impurities, such as craving, aversion, and ignorance. So this mental exercise aims to remove them. First, as a pre-



requisite, one has to put up defenses against mental impurities. One does that by maintaining purity of verbal and bodily action. Abstaining from telling lies, using harsh or slanderous words, and spreading gossip is vocal purity. Abstaining from killing, stealing and sexual misconduct is bodily purity. When one scrupulously observes these with correct understanding, one is actually blocking the gross forms of craving, aversion and ignorance. This is the foundation of the mental exercise of stress relief.

Based on purity of vocal and physical action, one proceeds to the second step — mastery over the mind. Here the concentrating power of the mind is developed while maintaining its purity. Having developed vocal and physical purity and mastery over the mind, one takes the final step — stress relief through wisdom. There are several techniques of developing the second step. One such technique is learning to observe the respiration objectively.

## HOW TO OBSERVE BREATHING

It is very simple and straightforward. We must *just be aware* of the natural pattern of breathing by focusing the mind on the area of the nostrils where the sensation of the contact of air can be felt. Make an effort to keep the awareness continuously for as long as possible.

*What not to do?*

- do not breathe consciously or artificially. The breath we observe is the natural, unforced breath.
- do not mentally verbalize e.g. 'in-coming breath, out-going breath'. Instead practice direct observation of the sensation arising from the contact with air. Otherwise, mental labeling will remain, and not the true sensation.
- do not imagine. Do not develop a visual image of a nose with air passing in and out.
- do not try to change or regulate any experience, instead, learn just to be aware and accept whatever happens as it is. This is learning to live in line with nature.
- do not let your mood be elated or depressed. Try to be neutral and normal at every experience.
- do not hang on to things, just let them go. Even if you gain knowledge that you never had before, just let it go.



*What barriers are there?*

While trying to practice in the way described above, it is natural to encounter difficulties. They are just barriers to be met and overcome. If you overcome the barriers, then you are at the goal and nothing else has to be done. Later with practice you understand that barriers are various manifestations of the three root mental impurities.

### **PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS - BASIC LEVEL**

*I do not feel the sensation of breath clearly*

The problem is that you *want* it to be clear, then it is not the truth at that moment. So just accept the truth. Do not try to change what you experience. This *wanting a change* is craving and is therefore a barrier. When you accept whatever you experience as it is, craving passes away, and your mind calms down. Let that calm mind observe the breath more clearly without your wanting it to be clear.

*Having observed one or two breaths the mind wanders here and there.*

There is no real problem at all. The true nature of the unpracticed mind is that it wanders. So when it wanders, just accept that the mind wanders. Then you are automatically with the breath again. This may happen thousands of times when one practices. So understand that it is nature. Do not interfere with it. Do not resist it. With each such experience your awareness develops. Finally it develops to the extent that, as soon as you miss your focus you get back to the focus in an instant.

You got angry because you wanted the mind to be concentrated. This wanting is breaking the law of nature — the wandering nature of mind. You suffered with anger as a punishment. It is good that you encounter this barrier, this anger. This is a good opportunity to realize how you generate stress by not knowing the truth. You have to learn this from your own experience.

*When I start observing, breathing becomes intentional*

Initially the mind *wants* the breath to occur in a pre-conceived, or a mentally-imagined way. So it tends to become self-conscious breathing. So give up the intention of breathing in a way that you like. Instead, allow nature to maintain its own pattern of breathing. Your task is just to be aware of it. As soon as you can do this, you start experiencing real peace — perhaps for the first time ever in your life. Then you realize the real cause of your stress. Learn to read your own body and



mind, not what is written in books. Because books are just guides to the truth, not the truth itself.

*I feel aches and pains. They disturb me.*

In reality, aches and pains cannot disturb you mentally. It's only you who disturb them by trying to remove them. Instead, just ignore them. If your attention still goes there, observe them as you observed the breath, without craving or aversion. This is really the next step of the mental exercise.

*I start nodding and then I fall asleep*

But try not to sleep during meditation. If you sleep once, then it becomes a habit. Practice ignoring sleepiness until you break the threshold point. Thereafter you become very alert. Understand that sleepiness is a form of craving.

#### **PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS - ADVANCED LEVEL**

*I experience very pleasant feelings when the mind gets concentrated, but soon they vanish.*

We want pleasant feelings not to vanish. This is craving — a mental impurity. Observe how we become agitated when craving is there. If the pleasant feelings vanish, just accept it. Then you are at peace. You will learn how to live without generating craving.

*Do I have to understand that this is the law of nature, that this is how to live in line with it, and this is impermanent and so on?*

All of the above are words about truth: a means of showing what reality is. They become obstacles if you hang on to them. All you have to do is to observe your mind and body in a *simple and direct way*, without building up theories and philosophies. You will discover the way of stress-relief right within you.

*When I do breath-examination, I feel relaxed, but at other times I am always stressed.*

It is important to realize that the examination of breath is just a technique to understand how to live stress-free. Once the purpose is served, you do not need to keep on examining. But you must learn to apply it in day-to-day life to get the real benefit. Here breath serves as a tool.

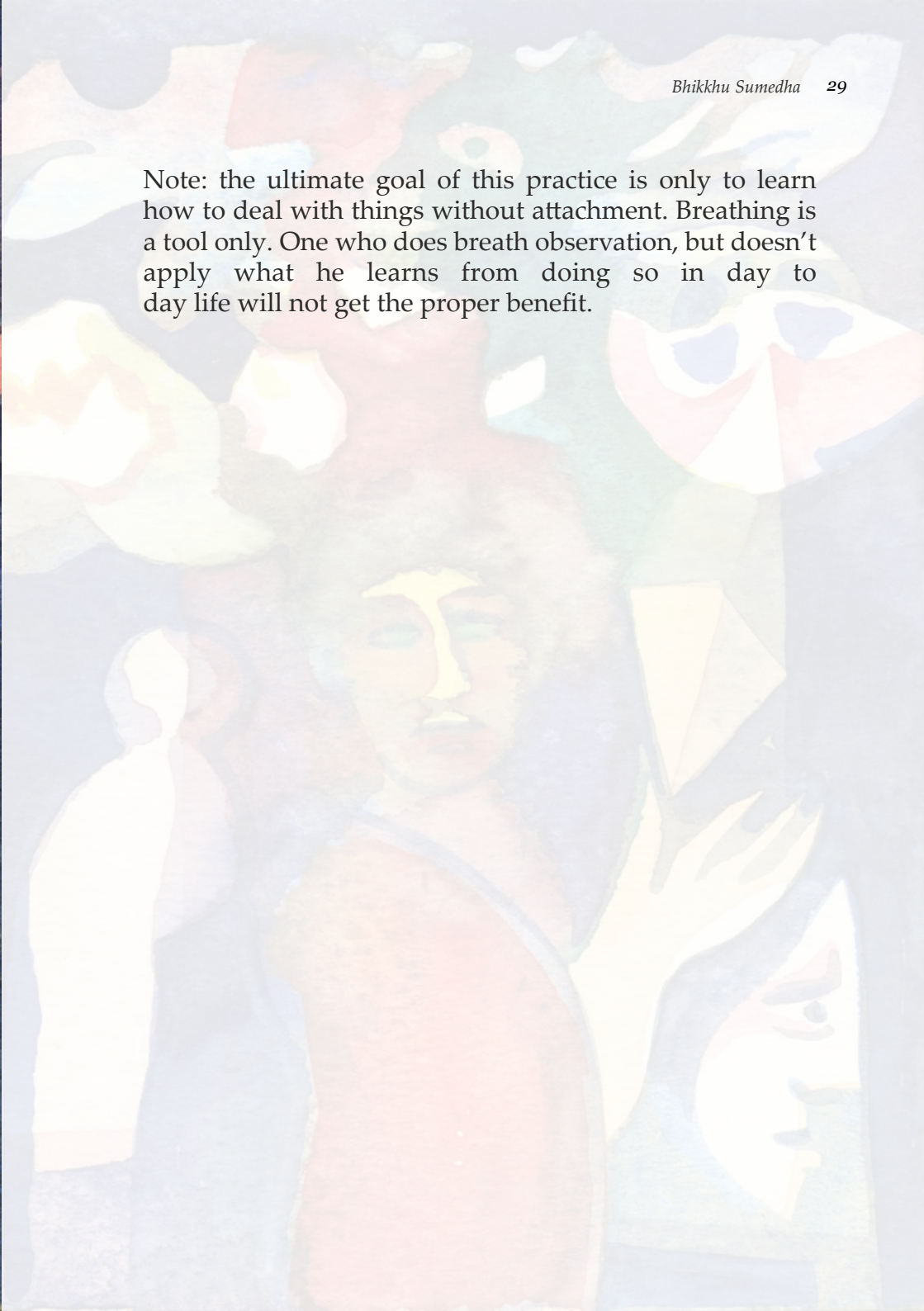
*Note: It is good to read what follows after having done the exercise, otherwise, one may be pre-occupied with it, instead of letting the knowledge develop on its own.*

While practicing, we realize the following through experience.



- our mind is a prisoner of the habitual pattern of wanting and aversion, which are the reason for all agitations.
- but wanting and aversion are against the laws of nature, so suffering is bound to follow.
- craving is generated from wanting, and anger is generated from aversion.
- when we accept reality without any wanting or aversion, the mind calms down.
- living in the present moment — as we can't be aware of the past breath: When we let go of whatever happens, we don't get entangled in the past. When we don't anticipate the future breath, automatically we are in the present.
- living in the present is just to be observant of what happens.
- if we try to analyze or make issues from events, we get lost in the past or the future, in worries or anxieties.
- events arise only to pass away; that is the nature of impermanence, therefore you should live in the present.
- if events are attached to, the calmness vanishes, and stress is generated, therefore be non-attached and enjoy true happiness.
- the two qualities of awareness and wisdom help to alleviate all stress.

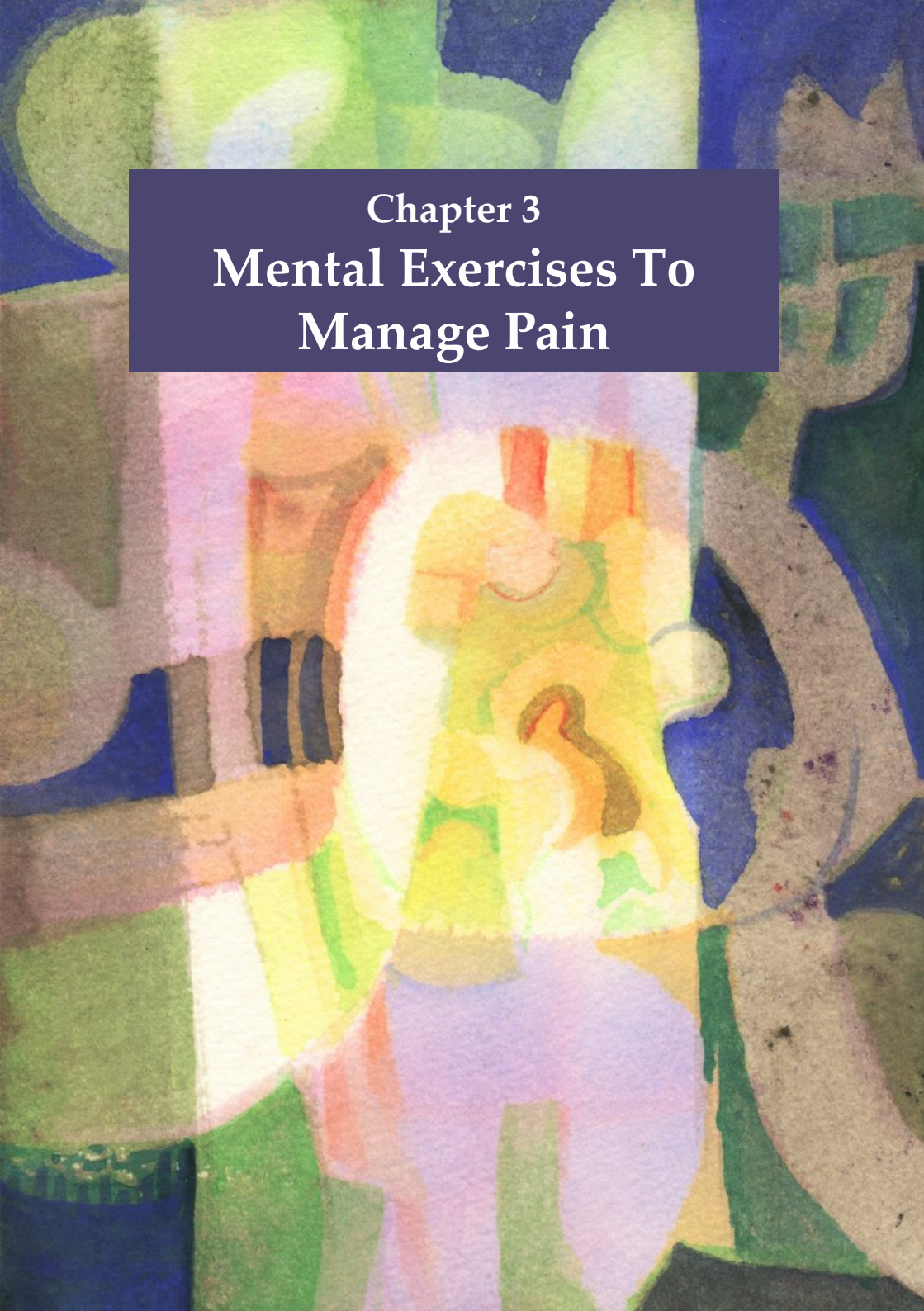
Note: the ultimate goal of this practice is only to learn how to deal with things without attachment. Breathing is a tool only. One who does breath observation, but doesn't apply what he learns from doing so in day to day life will not get the proper benefit.









The background is a vibrant, abstract watercolor painting. It features a central figure, possibly a person, rendered in soft, blended colors like yellow, orange, and white. The figure is surrounded by large, irregular shapes in shades of green, blue, and purple. The overall style is expressive and artistic, with visible brushstrokes and a rich, textured appearance.

**Chapter 3**  
**Mental Exercises To**  
**Manage Pain**

These are modifications of the four mindfulness meditations, to suit individuals who struggle with illness. The aim is to develop awareness of four areas of oneself, namely body, sensations, mind and mind objects. With proper awareness of oneself, one changes the habit of having an impulsive reaction into a habit of equanimous observation.

For example, a patient's thoughts when they are simply reacting can be depicted as 'Oh! It's painful! Why does this happen to me? I hate my pain, this bed, the doctors, that nurse! Oh! I can't bear this any longer. Please help me. I will die soon. I will no longer see my loved ones.' Whereas, a meditating patient's thoughts would be 'This is the beginning of pain, this is the end of pain, the character of pain is changing, etc.' Although this puts it into words only for the sake of understanding, a meditating patient should only observe true pain from moment-to-moment without any imagination or mental verbalization.

Patients need step-by-step training as they often have vulnerable minds. In step 1, the mental exercise is performed with the help of the therapist; in step 2, the same exercise is repeated with the help of a cassette



recorder; in step 3, the patient goes through the exercise himself.

### *An Example*

The following instructions show how a therapist might guide a critically ill patient through the final step of wisdom in the meditative training of mind.

*Step 1:* Where do you feel pain? (Figure 1) Can you locate the sites? Now locate an area where there is no pain. Do you feel anything there? Try to hold your attention on this feeling for ½ minute.

*Step 2:* Locate an area where there is pain, and find the center of the pain, or the area of maximum pain. (Figure 2). Feel the pain as it is for ½ minute. Do not try to remove the pain. Do not react to the pain. Let the pain manifest itself. Just feel the pain as long as possible.

*Step 3:* The moment you do not react to pain, negative emotions weaken, stress is reduced and the pain dissolves into minute *painlets* (Figure 3).

*Step 4:* Now scan all your feelings in the body, from head to foot in an orderly manner (Figure 4). Do not generate any liking or disliking towards any feeling. Do this exercise repeatedly and continuously to remain aware of all feelings without reacting.



After several repetitions check the patient's progress. Locate an area of the body. Ask the patient to focus attention there. Does the feeling of pain remain the same, or is it changing? As the concentration improves the changing nature of the pain will become clearer. Appreciate the changing nature of pain.

*Step 5:* Can you control the change of feelings by wishing? Appreciate the uncontrollable nature of any bodily feeling. Not trying to control something that cannot be controlled is the way out of stress. All your feelings are equal in their changing and uncontrollable nature.

There is now no 'I', but just an occurrence of change (Figure 5). Observe all the bodily feelings from top to bottom repeatedly. Try your best to remain with the changing nature of all feelings without reacting to them. As your concentration improves, you begin to experience more and more physical feelings. Then you do nothing but remain aware of them as you scan your body from head to foot.



*Fig. 1: the darkened area depicts how a patient feels pain at step 1: it is felt as gross and stable*



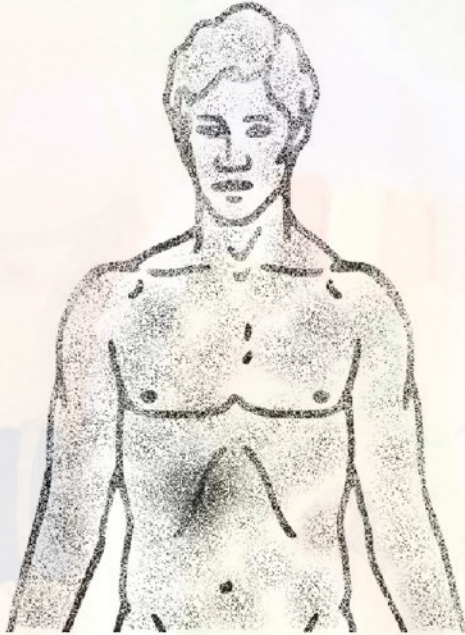
*Fig. 2: as concentration improves the patient feels pain at varying degrees*



*Fig. 3: the area of pain disintegrates into minute 'painlets' which are constantly arising and passing*



*Fig. 4: feeling various physical sensations all over the body characterized by changing*



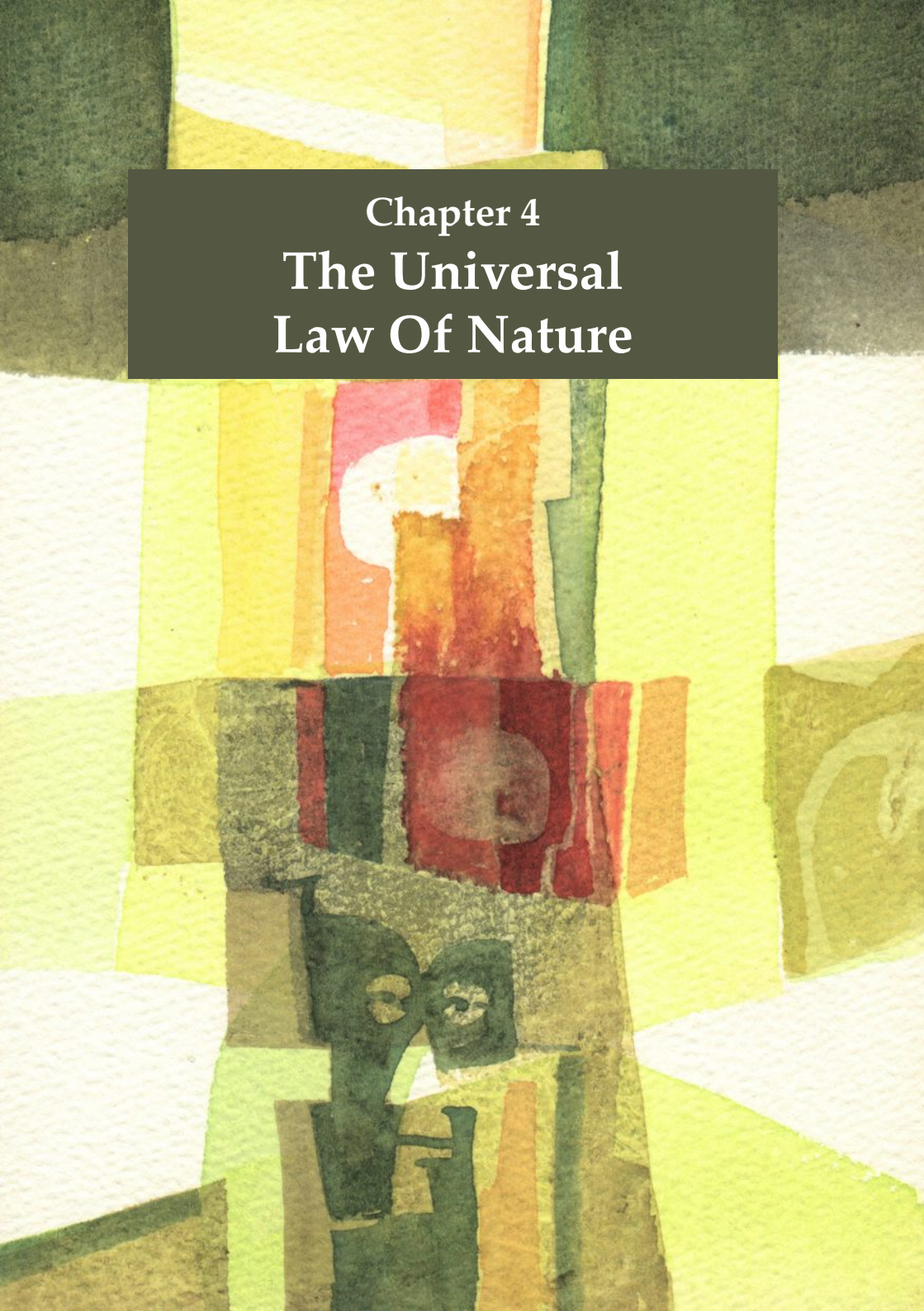
*Fig. 5 Witnessing non-self nature. The body is experienced as a flow of sensations, and the boundaries of the body disintegrate*



Remaining unstressed under stressful conditions is a skill to be developed through meditative training of the mind, for which illness is an ideal opportunity not to be missed.







Chapter 4  
The Universal  
Law Of Nature



Unless one recognizes the *Universal Law of Nature*, which is simply how things *happen* and *do not happen*, one might break the law. One who breaks the law is punished; one who keeps the law will be rewarded. Punishment is nothing but suffering, stress and misery. Reward is happiness, calm, and peace within.

*What is the Universal Law of Nature?*

The universal law governs mind, matter, and phenomena, including our bodies, mind, and all that we see, hear, smell, feel and taste. Let us understand this *universal nature* by considering the following example: What is the true nature pertaining to a candle flame?

The flame is a result of the combination of oil, twine, oxygen and heat. The existence of the flame is summed up in the following formula:

Flame = oil + twine + oxygen in ambient temperature

If the flame is seen for 3 seconds, then

Time scale:

In the first moment

Flame = oil<sup>1</sup> + twine<sup>1</sup> + oxygen<sup>1</sup>

In the second second

Flame = oil<sup>2</sup> + twine<sup>2</sup> + oxygen<sup>2</sup>

In the third second

Flame = oil<sup>3</sup> + twine<sup>3</sup> + oxygen<sup>3</sup>

Make a note that the amount of oil, oxygen or twine used for the first moment is not available at the second moment. For the existence of the flame a completely new amount of oil is always needed. Therefore, the flame is a result of a continuous process of consumption of causes. The flame cannot exist for even a single moment without consuming its causes, and at every moment the total life span of the flame reduces towards complete disappearance. This changing nature pertaining to flame is termed its *impermanence* or quality of being *aniccā*.

Although reality is impermanent, we are under the impression that the same stable flame existed for the three moments duration, which is a deceptive perception. If you attach to anything as permanent, when it is inreality impermanent, the result will be *stress* or *dukkha*. This is the second factor of universal nature.

A flame is dependently arisen through the combination of oil, twine, oxygen and the ambient temperature. Therefore, its behavior is not as a single, independent self-originated entity. Its apparent existence relies on its causes, hence cannot be controlled by one's wishing, liking, or wanting, it can only change if the causes are changed. This is the *non-self* or *anattā* nature of the flame.

The human body and mind and the whole perceivable universe operate in accordance with this law. Similar to the flame, the human body needs oxygen, nutrients, ambient temperature and so on in appropriate proportions for its existence.

To summarize the law then:

- things do change; they are impermanent, and they are unstable.
- things are stressful if they are attached to, and liking or disliking is attachment.
- things are non-self; i.e they cannot be controlled by wishing, wanting or liking.

In this the term *things* includes the mind, the body, and all that we see, hear, smell, taste, feel and think, i.e. the perceivable universe. Concisely put, anything in the universe dependent on causal factors is denoted by the term *thing*.



*How do we ignore the law?*

One who sees things as

- *permanent*, stable or not changing, and is, therefore, for instance, unable to accept death.
- *to be attached to* or clung to, including attaching to happy results, such as the more I earn the happier I will be.
- *endowed with self or ego*, thinking they can be controlled by wishing or liking, such as thinking: my son should become an engineer because I am an engineer.

These ignore the law of nature.

The three illusions above are the direct opposite of the real nature of things. They describe an ignorant person's vision of reality. Anyone, irrespective of race, religion, caste, class, level of education, or culture, who thinks, talks or acts based on these three illusions ignores the laws of reality and ends up being punished immediately with suffering.

*What is the mechanism of punishment?*

Again it is the nature of cause and effect itself. Let us consider the following examples to understand this mechanism more clearly.

First, a patient is diagnosed with cancer. The doctor informs the patient. Then the patient becomes very miserable.

**Exposition:** Cancer doesn't consider whether or not there is an 'I' or 'mine'. Cancer arises through causal processes, and is, therefore, the mere effect of causes. The human body as such has no control over getting or not getting cancer. Through this we can understand the *non-self nature* of our body. But the patient had the illusion regarding his body: 'I won't get cancer; my body can't get cancer.' This helps us to understand the illusion of the self.

In a similar way, when there is disease, one's health is *changed*. Health is unstable; not permanent. Therefore, *Once attached to it, there is bound to be suffering*. A patient is under the illusion that his health cannot or will not change, because he likes health. The patient has, therefore, ignored the universal law. Understand how, because he has broken the law, he has been punished then and there. The punishment comes in the form of his suffering and misery.

One month later, after the diagnosis, a letter comes from the doctor to the cancer patient saying, 'I apologize for misdiagnosing you as a cancer patient. A

wrong histology report has caused this grave mistake.' The patient becomes very happy.

**Exposition:** In reality, the patient was not a cancer patient. Still he suffered as a cancer patient for a month's duration, as he had the 'cancer of delusion' within him.

If you ask the patient what the cause of his suffering was before he received the letter, he would have replied that it was because of the cancer. But actually he had no cancer. Then one may say, 'It was the knowing of having a cancer that brought the suffering, because if he had no knowledge of having cancer, he wouldn't have suffered'. This answer is a little more correct, but it is still a wrong answer compared to the reality.

*Then what is the real cause of suffering?*

It is the *dislike* towards the cancer. Cancer is not a thing to be liked or disliked, as cancer itself has a non-self nature. If the causes are met, cancer develops. Whether there is cancer or not, if dislike is there, suffering is bound to be there.

Thus the real cause lies always within us, as its effect, suffering, is also within us, and through this we can understand that seeing the cancer, even as a contributory cause of suffering, is an illusion.



*Why is it called the real cause of suffering?*

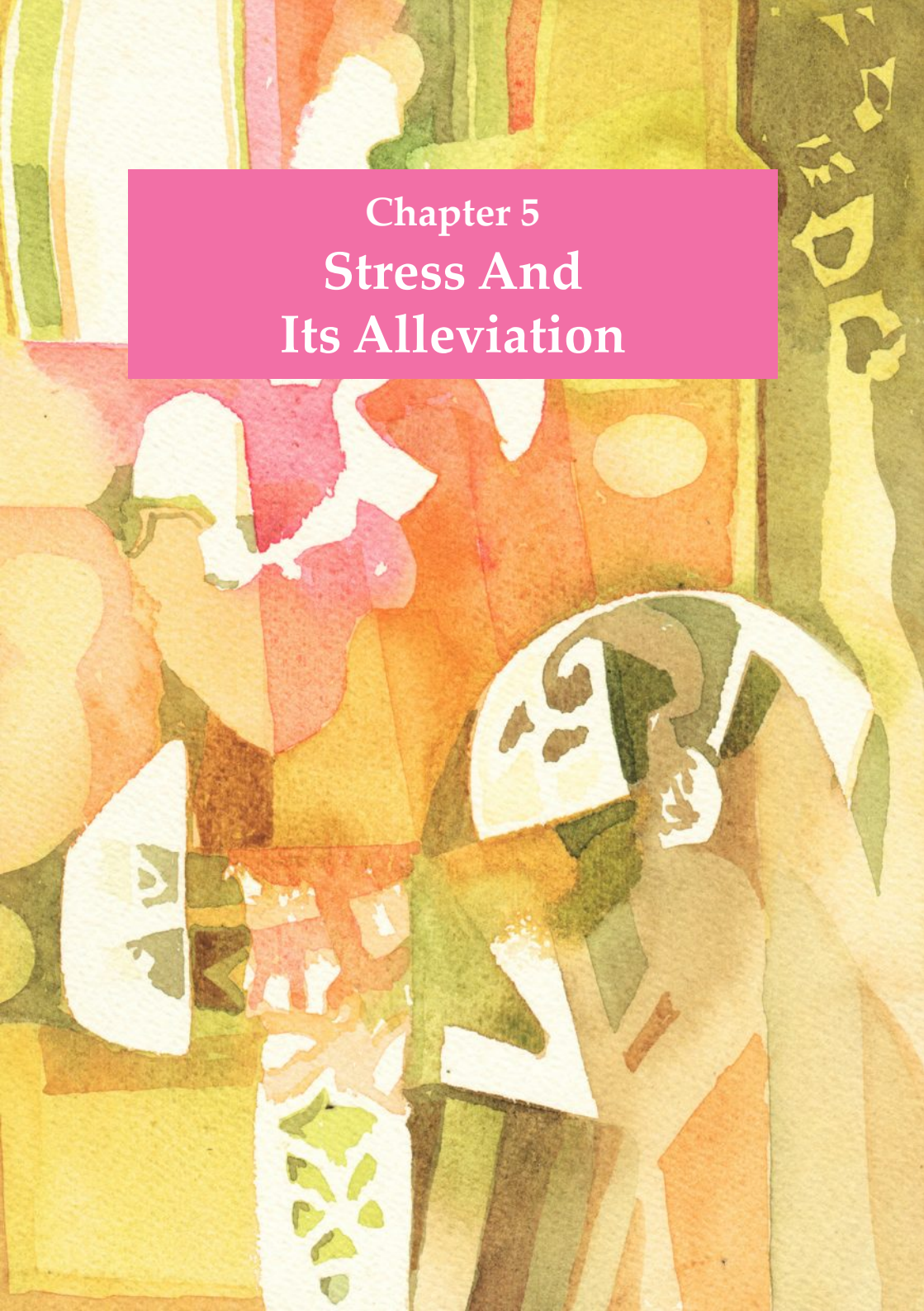
Because it is the universal cause of all suffering. If one is not deceived by the three illusions, whether he gets cancer or not, he has no mental suffering at all. That is because he has removed the real cause. Then the reward of peacefulness remains within him at all times.

*How to act in line with the law of nature?*

Living in line with the law is not breaking the law. Things are unstable: they arise to change, change to pass away, and pass away to arise again. Then how to live in line with this?

- if things pass away, let them pass away. Do not hang on to them — we only hang on because of liking or craving.
- when things pass away to arise again, then do not dislike the process — disliking is the beginning of anger and aversion.
- things do change, constantly. Be aware of this through observation — the illusion that things are stable is the basis of ignorance.

Thus one will be living in line with the universal laws of nature.

The background is a complex watercolor composition. It features a variety of organic, overlapping shapes in shades of yellow, orange, red, pink, and green. The colors are layered, creating a sense of depth and texture. There are some white, lace-like cutouts integrated into the design, particularly in the lower half. The overall effect is warm and artistic.

Chapter 5  
Stress And  
Its Alleviation



The mechanism of stress is obvious, and yet we often fail to see it. This chapter helps to reveal what it really is. We present the mechanism of stress in a question and answer format for the sake of clarity. One who discovers the truth about stress within himself gets rid of it, but not by mere intellectualizing about the unsatisfactory nature of existence. It is the systematic wise attention to the cause of stress by means of the mindful observing of the arising, changing, and passing away of feelings that triggers the transcendence to the non-stressed state. Now let's observe ourselves and ask some questions.

*What do we human beings actually do?*

Whatever we do falls into three categories:

- mental activities, such as impressions of sense contact, perceiving, feeling, volition, conceiving, and forming an opinion.
- vocal activities, such as talking, advising, laughing, crying, discussing.
- physical activities, such as reading, eating, bathing, and all activities involving muscular movement.



*Why do we do what we do?*

To bring about a change in what is already there. Whatever we do brings about a change. Isn't this universal to every human activity? For example, we eat to ameliorate hunger; we earn to improve our Economic status; doctors treat patients to overcome ill health — these are all types of change.

*Why do we need change?*

We constantly act to change the environment in order to gain stability because our internal and external environment is constantly changing and unstable. For example, we need to feed ourselves repeatedly because the 'non-hunger state' is unstable.

If we do not act to change, misery, mental suffering, or something we dislike, will result. Sometimes we need change for comfort, and we need comfort because, otherwise, there is misery. For example, if we do not eat to change hunger, what is left is the misery of hunger; if we do not earn to improve our economic status, we would experience the misery of poverty; if doctors do not treat patients to change their ill health, those patients will continue to suffer and may even die.

We are in a constant struggle to get rid of misery by trying to change an already ever-changing nature. But

the same struggle to get rid of misery puts us in further misery.

For example, to change hunger, you need to find food. So you struggle to earn money. Yet earning is not easy; you need a job. Then you are put in the struggle of finding a job. And once found, the misery of doing the job comes.

So what is the proper way of getting rid of misery? Is it by trying to change nature or by trying to change ourselves to be in harmony with nature? The answer is explained as follows.

*How does misery or mental suffering result?*

Only in two ways:

- something *happens* that we dislike.
- something *does not happen* that we like.

Let us analyze these two ways of suffering in order to understand the mechanism of all sufferings and stress.

*Happenings* and *non-happenings* are events existing in the world. They are always a result of a series of causal factors. For example, the growth of a coconut plant is a happening resulting from the combination of coconut seed, water, fertile soil, suitable temperature, etc. If these



particular causal factors are there, the particular *happening* or *non-happening* is bound to be there. Things do not occur just according to one's wishes. For example, you cannot hope to get a coconut tree after having planted a jack seed because happenings are in accordance with nothing but their respective causes.

Likes and dislikes are mental. People say, 'I *like* to live a healthy life', or 'I *dislike* cancer'. The illusion is that people think that they really don't get cancer, because they dislike it. They are under the impression of having 'constant health', because they like health. But cancer or health has no sense of liking or disliking. They are mere effects of respective causes.

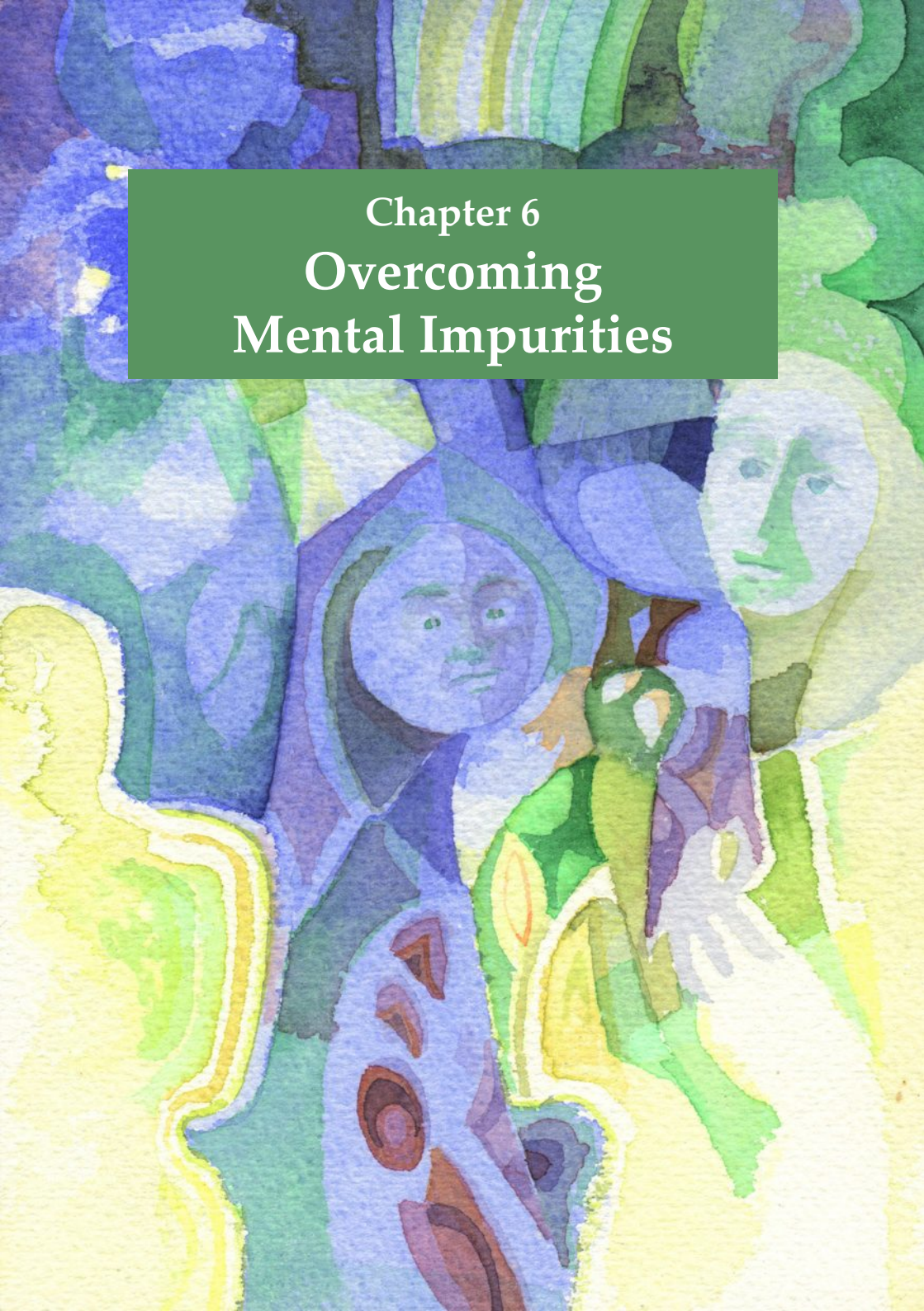
But we consider 'not getting cancer' as a reality without knowing whether we have the risk factors for it or not. Thus, when likes and dislikes come in, the delusion of not seeing the causes and effects come in. It is this discrepancy between the liking-disliking world, which is an delusion of the mind, and happening and non-happening in the world that gives rise to stress or suffering. Isn't this universal to all human problems? If your heart says no, then your mind is still in delusion.

*How to stop generating stress?*

A person whose vision is devoid of likes and dislikes and who sees *happenings* and *non-happenings* as resulting from appropriate causes will learn to live in accordance



with nature. Living in accordance with nature means being aware of the cause-and-effect nature of reality. When he needs something, he adjusts the causes to get the proper outcome. But he never anticipates the outcome with desire. Instead, he allows nature to give fruits, freeing himself from any struggle within. For example, you can plant a seed, water it, fertilize it and protect it. But you cannot grow the plant, because it is the plant that grows. That is how you allow nature to play its own role, and just help it along. But if you desire that the plant grows within two days, then you are trying to grow the plant, and it will not succeed.



Chapter 6  
Overcoming  
Mental Impurities



*What are mental impurities?*

They are the forces which make us break the law, and as a result we are thrown into misery. There are basically three of them.

- craving
- aversion
- ignorance

All the rest, including such things as envy, jealousy, agitation, laziness, regret and so on, are various manifestations of the three basic roots of impurity.

### **1. How Craving Generates Stress**

A middle-aged woman (V) is worried over a granddaughter's death. She meets a counselor (B). What follows is the dialogue between the two (based on Udāna 8.8).

B: Why are you looking so sad?

V: My son's daughter has passed away.



B: Would you like to have her back, alive? Would it alleviate your sorrow?

V: Of course sir, ... but, she has gone forever.

B: You seem to love her very much. Would you like to have all the daughters in your city as your own daughters?

V: Yes. I would have great love towards them.

B: If so, you will be crying every day.

V: Oh! Why is that?

B: Because every day a daughter passes away somewhere in your area.

V: (amazed) ... So why am I worried?

B: Would you be worried, if you had never seen her before?

V: No sir. If I had not seen her, I wouldn't have been attached to her.

B: Attachment, attachment is the cause of your sadness *not the death of your grand-daughter!*

Death is a *natural phenomenon*. If there is birth, it is inevitable there will be death. Let nature manifest itself without going against it by expecting to live forever. That will be the end of your suffering.

Mother, as long as you think that death is the cause of your suffering, you suffer because you are trying to change that which cannot be changed. Once you realize that attachment is the cause of your suffering, you can try to change what can be changed, and through that you get rid of your suffering.

## 2. How Anger Generates Stress

Let us consider the common example of driving a vehicle in a traffic jam. Mr. Angry, the driver of the vehicle, becomes very stressed in the morning trying to pass vehicles on the crowded road. Carefully follow the discussion below.

Q: Why are you so stressed while driving?

A: You know, people don't obey the rules. Pedestrians cross the road wherever they like. And three-wheeler drivers are the worst! Their driving is totally unpredictable. Today I shouted at two bus drivers for parking their vehicles in the middle of the road. How can I drive peacefully, if people do not obey the rules in this country?

Q: But still you managed to arrive without any delay?

A: Yes ... but I wouldn't be so stressed if the roads were clear.

Q: There is a way you can drive peacefully even if there is heavy traffic.

A: How is that, sir?

Q: Control what is within you, your anger, and cultivate friendliness instead. Then see the difference. You will find it very peaceful.

A: If everyone begins to think like that, traffic congestion will never clear! There should be someone to shout at! And a way to solve the problem.



Q: Of course! You can shout and scold if it is the proper solution. But be sure you are shouting with the base of compassion within, not with a base of anger. When you accept the congestion without any agitation within, you will see a better solution for the problem.

### 3. How Ignorance Generates Stress

Ignorance is a necessary supporting factor for craving and anger. In the above two examples ignorance of *the true nature of things* resulted in stress. Apart from generating craving and anger, ignorance itself can cause misery in several ways. One such instance is illustrated below.

A person who is concerned for his safety walks on a path. When he sees stones, thorns, and pot holes on the road, he avoids them. Vision helps him to identify any danger. When he sees grass and sandy areas, he takes that path enjoying the touch. Thus he escapes from any injury during the walk.

The following factors helped him to be safe:

1. understanding that by having a physical body, one is vulnerable to injury
2. good and unimpaired vision
3. using that vision to identify dangerous and safe areas



4. being skilful in avoiding dangerous areas and keeping to safe areas

The same principle applies in the relief of stress. The factors to be practiced to be stress-free:

1. understanding that having a mind, he is vulnerable to stress caused by mental impurities
2. awareness of thoughts
3. using that awareness to identify impurities and unwholesome thoughts
4. being skilful in avoiding mental impurities and cultivating wholesome thoughts

*When mental purities are eliminated*

- as one cannot kill without aversion, one stops killing
- as one cannot steal without craving, one stops stealing
- as one cannot commit sexual misconduct without lust, one gives up sexual misconduct

One's mental, vocal and physical actions become harmless to others. Then whatever actions he takes, they bring happiness and calm to others. Then he loves everyone without any attachment. Then his love becomes universal love. He lets go of whatever happens without liking or disliking. So no suffering is generated within him.

*What about physical pain?*

Whoever lives in line with the truth of nature leaves physical pain to the body. He will not make it into a mental pain. He still feels the pain, but he leaves feelings to feel pain, and no 'I' is suffering. Then pain is just another sensation which has arisen due to causes. Pain doesn't think that there is an 'I'. The body doesn't think that there is an 'I'. Even the mind is not 'I'. They are all the unstable effects of causes, and that is all. Only someone who is deluded sees an illusionary 'I'.

*If everything is left to nature, do I do nothing?*

Doing is a way of creating causes. When causes are there, results follow them. Then one can make his living in line with the nature of cause and effect; one can earn money without attachment to it; one can even live in a luxurious palace without any attachment, knowing the truth of impermanence, stress, and non-self. Then only does one begin to live life in full, without any stress at all, always peaceful.

*I agree with what is said here, but it is not practical.*

Our habitual patterns of liking and disliking are so strong that we tend to think that overcoming them is beyond our limits. But that wrong habit pattern is based



on falsehood. Therefore, when the truth is known, the problem is solved by itself.

Having developed understanding in the above way, one can observe the physical pains and aches that arise due to illness. Then he realizes that pains and aches are also impermanent, stressful and non-self as long as one is attached to them. Then he knows how to deal with bodily pains. He still *does* feel bodily pains, but he does not suffer mentally. The feeling part of mind feels pain, but there is no reaction in the form of liking or disliking. The story ends with the awareness of pain. As he practices like this, he soon sees the cause of stress as ignorance, which he was unaware of all the time. Thereafter he experiences and accepts pain or pleasure with a balanced mind.

### *Physical pain is unpleasant*

This represents the usual psychological response to pain. In the presence of pain we try to get rid of it — we see pain as our enemy. That is why when there is pain; patients shout, twist and become restless.

At a superficial level, it seems that we suffer because of pain, but in reality we suffer because of the habit of suffering within us. It is the aversion towards pain that misleads us into saying that pain is unpleasant.



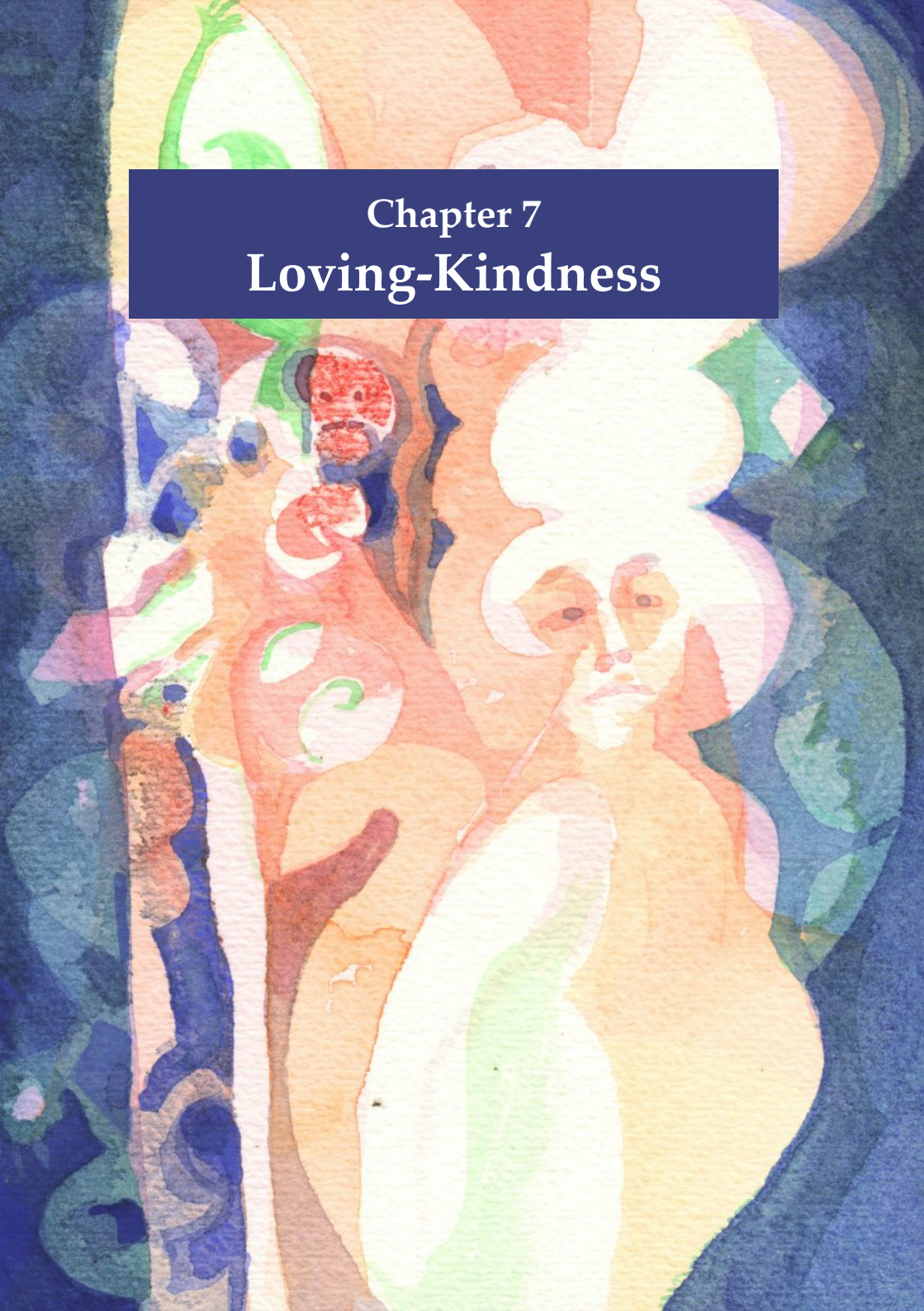
Pain is pain. Mind is mind. If there is pain on a physical level, let it be there. Do not allow the mind to be entangled in it. Once it gets entangled, pain proliferates in the emotions. Often people cannot accept this, because they have not observed themselves mindfully. After doing so, it becomes evident that feelings and mind exist in separate spheres, and there is no need of creating negative emotions in the mind.

Initially, when we feel pain, an impulsive reaction of aversion builds up. We need to become mindful at that moment and to try to keep the mind in balance, without any liking or disliking. Naturally, for a beginner, that is going to be a difficult task. We may feel more and more pain. Sometimes we become much more agitated than before. But if we do not give up, beyond a threshold point, the mind becomes quite calm in the presence of pain.

With such an experience we realize that pain is there as it was before, yet the mind has so calmed down that it has no intention of removing the pain. Only then does it become clear that suffering has been a mere habit pattern, and we have become prisoners of that mistaken habit. Pain is just a sensation, not to be liked or disliked, but to be let go of. Thus we become masters of ourselves, not slaves of our debilitating habits.





A watercolor illustration of a person with a beard and long hair, wearing a yellow robe, sitting in a tree. The tree has a thick brown trunk and branches, with green leaves and red fruit. The background is a dark blue, textured wash. The person's face is rendered in soft, blended colors, and their hands are resting on their lap. The overall style is soft and artistic, with visible watercolor textures and colors.

## Chapter 7

# Loving-Kindness



Previous chapters emphasized the importance of removing mental impurities. The next step in stress relief is to fill the vacuum with wholesome thoughts. Loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity are four wholesome thoughts which can nourish the human mind.

When we imagine a kind person, we think of a saint whose verbal and physical responses are mild and timid. But it is not necessarily so. A kind person can use strong words to change another's harmful behavior, but with a lot of love and compassion within. Think of a kind parent correcting a child's behaviour. Correction may be the only language that the child can understand. There it is for the good of the child. Not a trace of anger will be found in that action when loving-kindness is there.

There are a few essential steps in practicing loving-kindness:

- one should eliminate aversion without a trace
- one should enjoy the inner happiness resulting from purity of mind
- then one should wish that others may enjoy the happiness as he or she already enjoys it.

This means that a stressed person will not be able to truly practice kindness to others until he relieves his own stress first.

Compassion is the desire to relieve others' stress, and should be devoid of any attachment. Stress cannot be generated out of compassion, with compassion you help others, but you do not expect anything in return. Even if the one you have helped harms you, you cannot generate anger when true compassion is present. Compassion in its nature always keeps the mind calm and generates inner happiness.

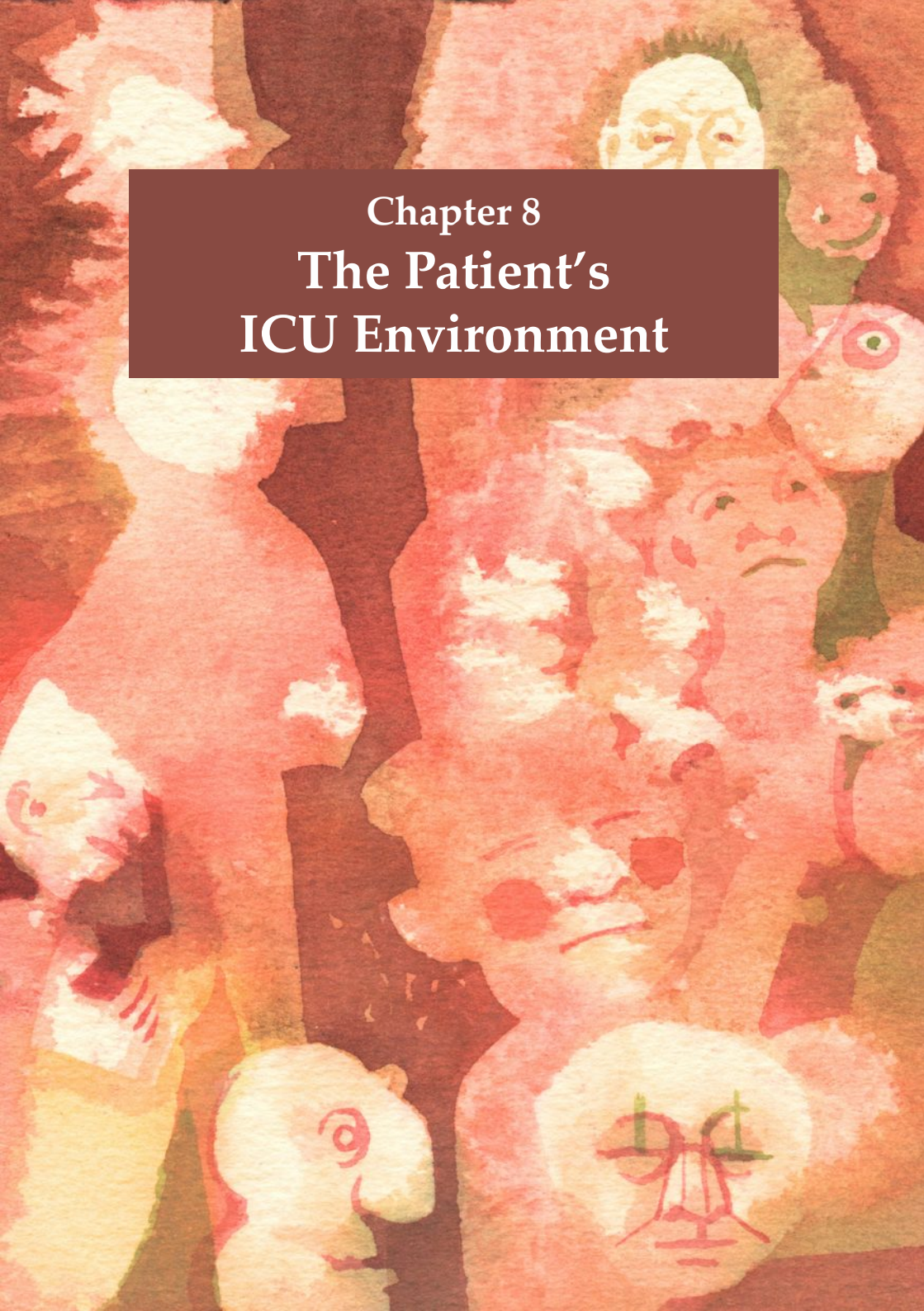
Sympathetic joy is the opposite of jealousy. It is the quality of being happy with others' success. This quality arises in the mind when the ignorance regarding self or ego wanes.

Equanimity is the quality of showing no change in mood between difficult and easy situations. It is a quality to be developed by training the mind to be steady in the changing circumstances of daily life.

In practice, one has to examine his thoughts from moment-to-moment and cultivate wholesome thoughts in place of the various antagonizing mental impurities. If the practice is done on a continuous basis for a longer period, the mental impurities can be overcome.

In a hospital setting, where patients find everything strange and stress-producing, a kind word from a nurse or doctor can do much good for the patient in relieving stress. In fact, such words are free medications that every patient needs and can be given easily. Hence the spiritual aspect in hospital care should be identified as an important area to be worked on.





Chapter 8  
The Patient's  
ICU Environment

The Intensive Care Unit (ICU) as perceived by the patient and the doctor is not the real ICU. The ICU itself is the real ICU. When a critically ill patient begins to experience the ICU as it really is, he will also begin to experience a cessation of his pain and stress.

In order to understand this, let us consider the following simile. Suppose that a person is wearing a pair of sunglasses and that he is unaware of it. When he looks at the outside world, everything appears dark. Wanting to see the colors of the world, he tries to rub away the darkness, but still sees only darkness. Thus he remains in the dark and is unhappy.

Of course, the darkness really exists not on the outside but owing to the sunglasses. Similarly, his wrong perception is due to his own ignorance. As long as this ignorance persists, all his efforts to erase the darkness and to see other colors is fruitless. He reaps nothing but misery.

With advice from a wise and kind person, the man can learn to see the sunglass lenses before seeing the outside world. When he realizes where the unwanted colour comes from, his ignorance passes away. Then he learns



to remove the darkened lenses and enjoy the real outside world.

Now, it is understandable that the dark colored world is not the real color of the world. The real color of the world is the color of the world itself. The ICU environment has to be understood in a similar way.

Patients admitted to the ICU are wearing not just a single pair of sunglasses but a number of them. So they always see the ICU as colored and distorted by those lenses. They wish they could change the ICU and its environment. But it could easily be changed if they see the lenses. These lenses are misperceptions, wrong beliefs and ignorance. As long as they wear these lenses they react with anger - and misery is generated out of anger.

What is meant by the patient's ICU environment is the world created within the patient's own mind. The real ICU environment itself, being neutral, selfless and ever-changing in nature, just supplies the stimulus for the creation of the patient's mind-made ICU environment. All patients live in their own mind-made worlds and all their behavior patterns are responses to what is found there.

All the real causes of pains and stress are found there, not in the outside ICU setting. Those real causes are nothing but a set of mental impurities. Identification



and understanding of the true nature of the impurities by pure observation, eliminates them. Observing one's own mind and body without any liking or disliking is pure observation. All that is needed is to learn the correct technique of observation.

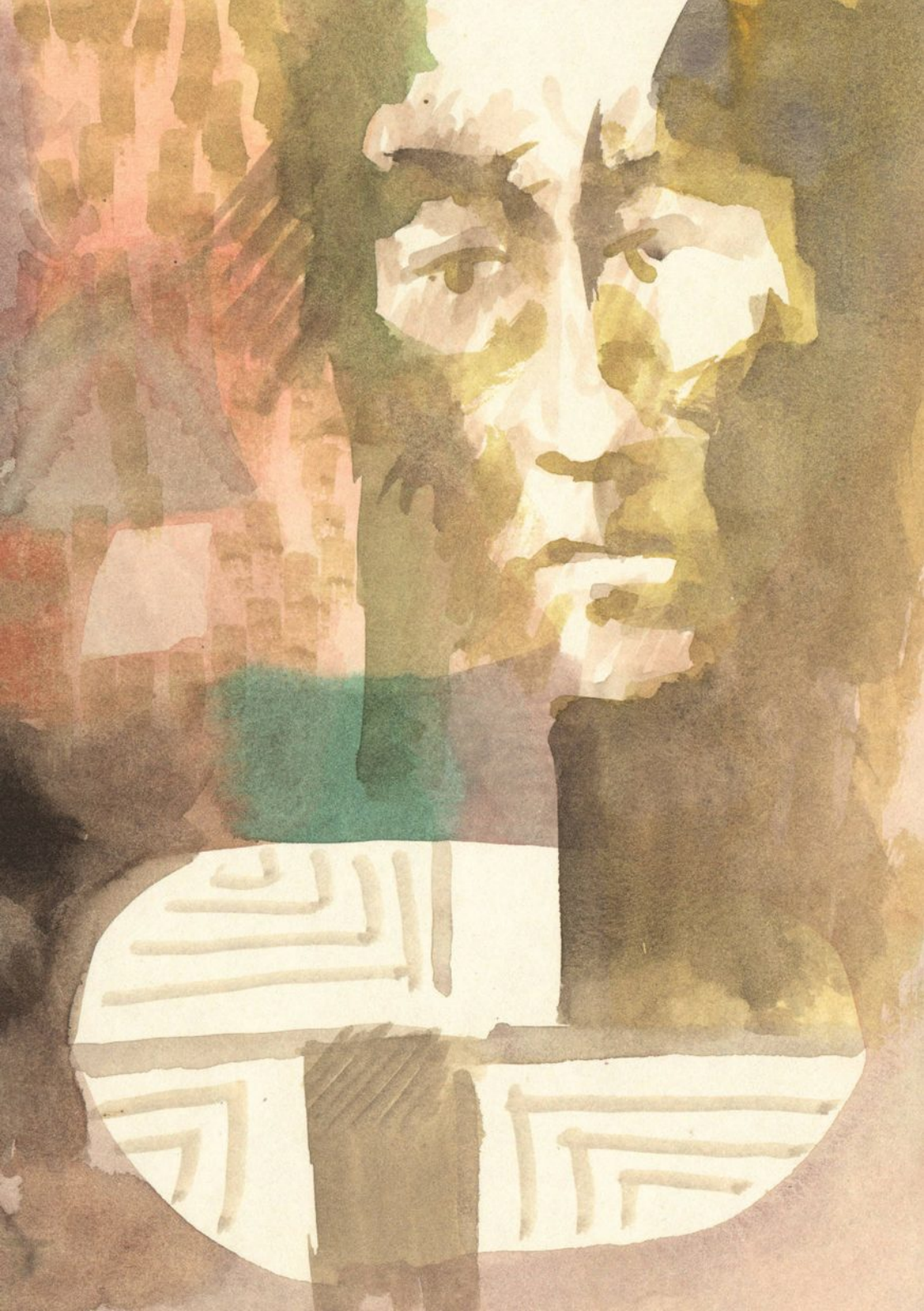
When a patient learns to see things with pure observation, his inner world becomes balanced. The patient's experience of the ICU environment gets closer and closer to reality. When the reality is seen, the conflict between the mind-made world and the real outside world ends. Such a patient's mind gains balance and whatever happens outside becomes acceptable to him without any reaction. Such a mind doesn't want what cannot be gained, doesn't reject what is there, but acts for what could be gained and withdraws what can be withdrawn without any struggle within. This state of mind is not pessimistic but realistic.

For example, when an unpleasant pain is encountered, the wise patient feels the pain as a sensation, and realizes that it is just an element of the mind that subsequently categorizes this sensation as unpleasant. Then there is no place for aversion. Pleasant sensations are also seen in the same manner without craving for them. Experiencing this truth makes the patient develop equanimity towards the sensation.

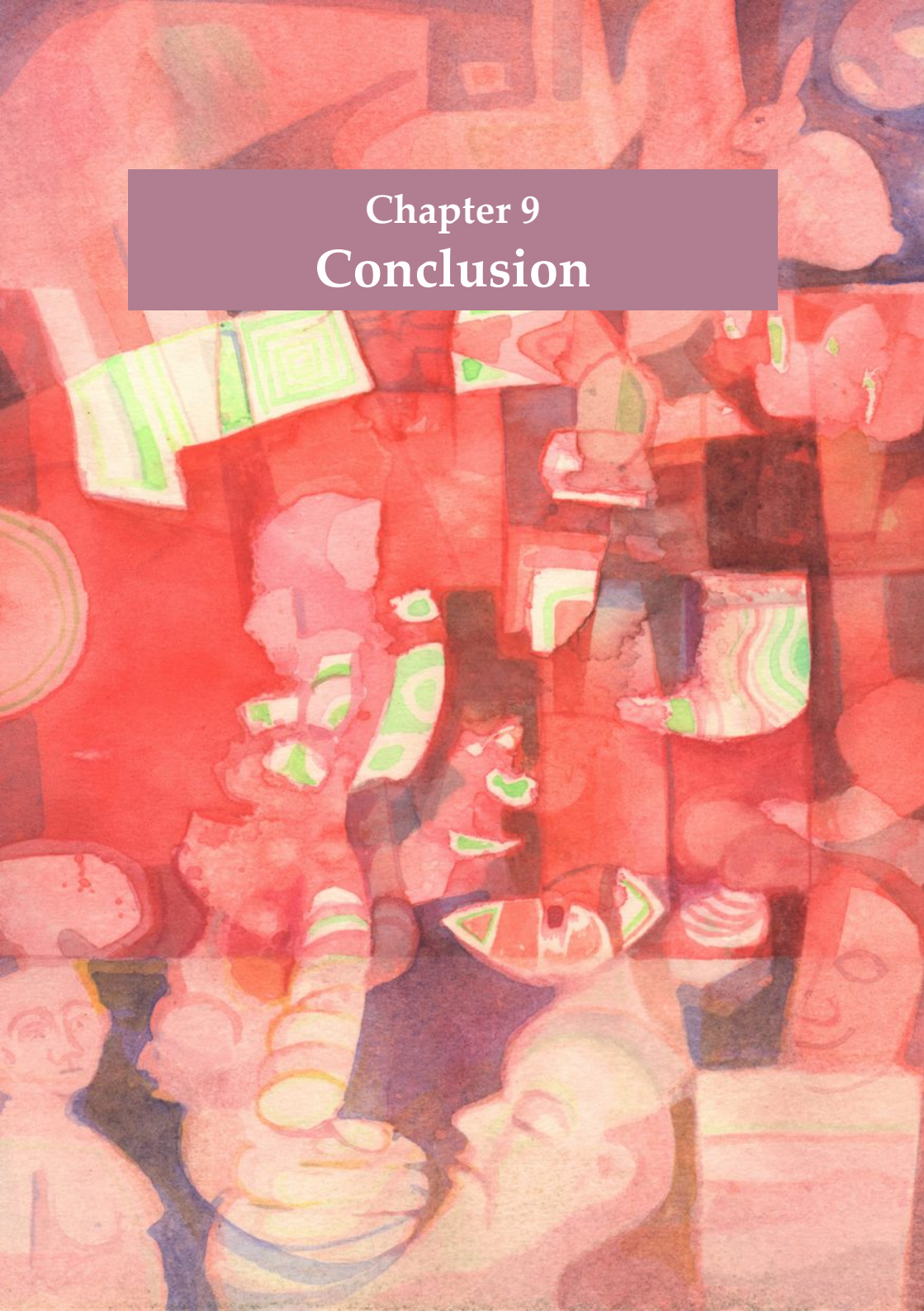
He also sees the beginning and end of the pain at subtler levels. So the mind becomes balanced and unstressed.

It experiences peace within all the time. It should be emphasized that mere intellectual understanding doesn't achieve this state. What is needed is the moment-to-moment awareness and experience of things as they are, through a well-guided practice.









Chapter 9  
Conclusion

Buddhist philosophy teaches a unique methodology to help those who are in pain, under stress, and ill. Unlike current methods such as surgery, analgesics, sedatives, anti-depressants, etc. or alternative methods like aqua-therapy, energy therapy, massage, etc., this method relieves pain without the help of an external chemical or energy source.

The pharmacological agents exert their effect by blocking signal transmission at various levels of the nervous system; alternative methods may bring temporary relief to the body. The Buddhist way differs from both. It teaches one to pay bare attention to every experience in order to explore its inherent nature. Clear understanding of the theory behind it, together with practical mental exercises leads one to gain its benefits.

#### *The Mechanism of Stress from a Buddhist Perspective*

A patient is in a constant struggle to get rid of his unpleasant experiences, such as the unpleasant mental and physical sensations resulting from the disease, the strange hospital environment, etc., and to obtain pleasant experiences. This effort is an *impulsive reaction*, and it is stress in itself. This reaction makes the patient wander in his past memories or future



imaginations, but not to stay in the present moment where reality is. The impulsive reaction is based on not knowing the true nature of one's own experience.

### *The Way out of Stress*

When the true nature of one's experience is realized, the impulsive reaction ceases, and this relieves the stress. The reason the average person doesn't see the reality of his experience is because his reactions distort the truth. For example, pain is seen as a sensation that should be removed as quickly as possible. It is labeled as unpleasant and intolerable.

However, if one stops reacting in this way and feels pain as it is, from moment-to-moment continuously, focusing his full attention on the pain and remaining equanimous at the same time, then he comes to know its true nature. Interestingly, at such a level of understanding one finds that all sensations are equal and that there is nothing to react to. He realizes that reaction is a senseless habit, and he becomes an observer of such sensations. His mind becomes still.

### *Incorrect Views are Responsible for Stress*

Patients often see stress as a result of external causes, which are often uncontrollable. But they don't have the habit of seeing the controllable internal causes of stress, such as aversion, craving and delusion.



This needs an exercise enabling them to examine their own thoughts. Patients are under the impression that they must suffer a state of prolonged unpleasant feelings. They need to observe the unpleasantness to see its impermanent nature. Patients perceive unpleasant experiences as things to be removed. But as they learn to see the causes of unpleasant experiences, they find themselves in a position to accept and live with the so-called unpleasant sensations without reacting to them.

Patients, who earlier saw an 'I' suffering with illness, realize that this 'I' is just an occurrence of sensations, as they practice in line with what was written above. No 'I' is involved anymore. Finally they will realize that the main cause for their stress was incorrect perceptions of themselves and that correct attitudes release the mind from stressful reactions.

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This work was based on the personal experiences of Ven. Bhikkhu Sumedha.

## Further Reading

### **MEDITATION DISCOURSES:**

The Ways of Attending to Mindfulness (MN 10)  
The Removal of (Unwholesome) Thoughts (MN 20)  
Mindfulness while Breathing (MN 118)  
Mindfulness related to the Body (MN 119)  
The Characteristic of Non-Self (Samyuttanikāya 22.59)

### **MATERIAL DEALING WITH PAIN AND ILLNESS:**

The Dart (SN 36.6 - the two pains, physical and mental)  
Nakula's Father (SN 22.1 - advice on dealing with sickness)  
The Sick Person (AN Bk.5.121 - five things to cultivate when sick)  
The 1st & 2nd Discourses about Sickness (SN 36.7,8 - enduring through wisdom)  
The Story of Pūtīgatta Bhikkhu (DhpA 41 - the Buddha tending to a sick monk)  
The Righteous Laymen (DhpA 16 - Chanting for a Sick Man)

### **DISCOURSES CHANTED WHEN ILL:**

The Sick Person (1-3) (SN 46.14-16)  
Girimānanda (AN 10.60)

## SECONDARY MATERIAL

Ven Visuddhacara: Loving and Dying

Lily de Silva: Ministering to the Sick and Terminally Ill  
(online)

Sangye Khadro: Preparing for Death and Helping the  
Dying

Elizabeth Kübler-Ross: On Death and Dying

Stephen Levine: Healing into Life and Death

Vidyamala Burch: Living Well with Pain and Illness:  
The Mindful Way to Free Yourself from Suffering

Darlene Cohen: Turning Suffering Inside Out

Jackie Gardner-Nix: The Mindfulness Solution to Pain:  
Step-by-Step Techniques for Chronic Pain Management

Bob Stahl and Elisha Goldstein: A Mindfulness-Based  
Stress Reduction Workbook

Jon Kabat-Zinn: Mindfulness Meditation for Pain Relief  
(Guided Audio Meditations)



## ONLINE RESOURCES

Ajahn Thanissaro: Beyond Coping (online source book for teachings on this subject)

There is a lot of other material available online, from chantings for the dying to mindful ways of dealing with sickness and death.

Try searching for “mindfulness dying” or “meditation sickness” or something similar and see what turns up.



Sabbadānam Dhammadānam Jināti  
**The Gift of Truth Excels All Gifts**

This dhamma publication was made possible by the following friends in memory of their departed loved ones and for all sentient beings.

**RM 500** Agnes Hon IMO Walter & Celia Hon,  
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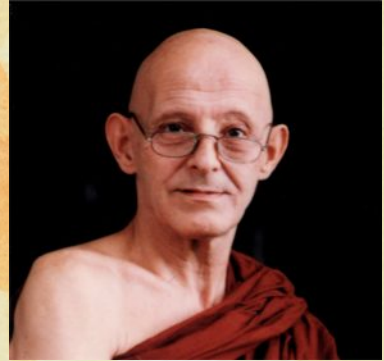
May all rejoice in the sharing of merits and  
may the spread of the true Dhamma enable us  
to attain Nibbana, the cessation of all sufferings.

*Sādhu! Sādhu! Sādhu!*





For nearly a decade towards the end of his life, the Swiss-born monk Ven. Sumedha worked with Doctors in caring for the critically and terminally ill at the Intensive Care Unit of Peradeniya Hospital, Sri Lanka where he was to end his own days in 2006.



During that time the Doctors who were with him took carefully note of the various instructions that he was giving both to them and to the patients. This book presents these instructions drawn from the Doctors' notes collated after his passing.

It represents a wisdom approach to the problem of pain, stress and illness and shows how an otherwise distressing situation can be transformed into a period of growth and understanding.

Although aimed at those under physical and mental stress this book is valuable for anyone studying the Buddha's teachings, which is about suffering and the ending of suffering.



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