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To contact Mirka Knaster, visit the website [www.LivingThisLifeFully.com](http://www.LivingThisLifeFully.com), or [www.mirkaknaster.com](http://www.mirkaknaster.com). I would love for people to contact me, especially if they knew Munindra.

# Living This Life Fully

*Stories and Teachings of Munindra*

Mirka Knaster

In collaboration with Robert Pryor

Foreword by Joseph Goldstein

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## Foreword

*Joseph Goldstein*

I first met Munindra in 1967. I had been introduced to Buddhism as a Peace Corps volunteer in Thailand two years earlier, but when I returned home and tried to practice meditation on my own, it didn't take long to realize that I needed a teacher to help cut through the confusion in my mind. In those years, the Buddha's teachings were relatively unknown in the West, and I decided to return to Asia in search of someone who could guide me on the path.

Through what Tibetan meditation master Trungpa Rinpoche so aptly called "the pretense of accident," I ended up in Bodh Gaya, the extraordinary place of the Buddha's enlightenment. While sitting in one of the tea shops across from the great Mahabodhi Temple, I heard about a teacher who had just returned from nine years in Burma and who had begun teaching vipassanā meditation. I soon went to meet him, beginning what would become a lifelong relationship with Anāgārika Sri Munindra, a classical meditation master and scholar and a uniquely iconoclastic *kalyānamitta*, a spiritual friend.

One of the first things that Munindra said to me when we met was that if I wanted to understand the mind, I should sit down and observe it. The great simplicity and pragmatism of this advice struck a very resonant chord within me. There was no dogma to believe, no rituals to observe; rather, there was the understanding that liberating wisdom can grow from one's own systematic and sustained investigation.

This, indeed, was the outstanding quality of Munindra's life. He always wanted to test the truth of things for himself, to see things firsthand and not simply believe what others had said. And it was this very quality that he encouraged in all of his students. Given the great diversity of Buddhist lineages and traditions, methods and techniques, Munindra's openness of mind became a powerful influence in all of our own unfolding dharma journeys.

*Living This Life Fully: Stories and Teachings of Munindra* is both an insightful introduction to and a wonderful remembrance of this unusual teacher. Mirka Knaster has woven together recollections from many of Munindra's students, highlighting his great warmth and curiosity, his incisive wisdom and compassion. These stories are a dharma teaching in themselves, revealing how a great teacher takes every circumstance of life as a vehicle for deepening understanding. This book is a testament to a life fully lived.

*A Brief Biography*  
Robert Pryor

Anāgārika Munindra was a Bengali Buddhist master and scholar who became one of the most inspiring and influential vipassanā teachers of the twentieth century. For many who met Munindra, even if only briefly, the encounter could resonate years or decades later as a pivotal point in their spiritual life. The power of his presence resided in his single-minded focus on Dharma as a path to realization and awakening. He fully embodied the principles of Dharma and was, for his students, a powerful example of “living the life fully,” as Munindra himself would put it. Munindra invited his students to let their practice and life unfold in a natural way. He delivered this advice in an urgent, simple, and very personal way that was the hallmark of his teaching style.

Anāgārika Munindra was a key force in the transmission of Buddhism to the West. He, like Thomas Merton or Alan Watts, was active in the twentieth century as a teacher who linked the traditions of the East and the West, forming bridges between these two complex cultural areas. While Thomas Merton and Alan Watts were Western contemplatives who explored the religious traditions of Buddhism, Anāgārika Munindra was born a Buddhist in India and became a meditation master who was able to convey his teachings in a way that deeply transformed his students in Asia and the West.

Speaking in English, he was able to create a link between the vipassanā tradition of Burma, where he trained with Ven. Mahāsi Sayādaw, and the inquisitive European, North American, Australian, and other Western students whom he inspired and guided in meditation. While Merton and Watts were Westerners who wrote widely about their spiritual experiments, Munindra was an Easterner whose impact on the world has been felt primarily through the work of his many outstanding students.

Because Munindra taught in a traditional style, person-to-person, rather than through writing, we have been largely in ignorance of the profound effect that he has had and continues to have on the transmission of Dharma to the West. This book brings his message and skillful intuitive style to life for a wider public who did not have the opportunity to practice meditation with him in person during his years of teaching in India and the West.

The following brief biography will clarify how the circumstances of Munindra’s life led to his becoming the teacher of so many significant figures in the movement of Buddhism to the West during the twentieth century. There were three major influences that contributed to his success as a teacher of vipassanā meditation: his Buddhist family background, his work with the Mahabodhi Society, and his training in Burma. When combined with his natural intelligence, curiosity, enthusiasm, and goodwill, these experiences prepared him to be one of the most effective vipassanā teachers of the twentieth century and a vital link between the tradition of vipassanā as taught in Burma and the Buddhism that is now taking root in the West.

*The Early Years: 1915–36*

Munindra was born in a small village near Chittagong in Bengal (located today in Bangladesh) on an auspicious full moon day in June 1915. He was brought up in a Buddhist family that was a part of the Barua clan, a Bengali-speaking Buddhist community that traces its roots to the time of Shākyamuni Buddha. His family was aware from his birth that he was a special child who the astrologers said would be a gifted teacher and not a householder. His father was educated and imparted to him a love of learning and books, as well as a tolerant attitude toward their neighbors in nearby villages who were Muslim and Hindu. While Munindra was still living at home, his father became a monk, and this gave him a personal model for a life that was devoted to Dharma but still in touch with the everyday world.

The influence of his loving and supportive family environment was profound, as was his parents' willingness to let him pursue a life of learning. He attended local schools, where he studied English as well as Bengali and explored various religious traditions through reading. He had a strong love of books from an early age and demonstrated both a single-minded focus and great curiosity. Although he was the top student in his high school class, he chose not to compete in the final exam and receive a graduation certificate, feeling that the pursuit of formal education and certificates had become a distraction from his effort to deeply study Dharma. Nevertheless, he was invited to teach in the local school, and did so for a time, as his intellectual talent was already recognized.

In his Bengali background and early education, it is possible to see the character of Munindra emerge as a humble, intelligent, curious, and open-minded teacher who was respected and supported by his community.

*The Mahabodhi Society Years: 1936–57*

In 1936, Munindra moved from his village to Calcutta, which was the intellectual capital of India at the time. He was invited to stay at the Bengal Buddhist Association and teach English to the monks there. During this period, he also studied Pāli (the language used in the canonical texts of his Theravāda Buddhist lineage) and the Abhidhamma, an early compilation of Buddhist philosophy and psychology. His curiosity drew him to lectures at the Mahabodhi Society, an organization founded in 1891 to revitalize Buddhism in India and revive pilgrimage sites associated with the life of Shākyamuni Buddha. He gradually became more involved with this organization, adopting the lifestyle of an *anāgārika* (literally, homeless one), an intermediate role between a lay practitioner and monk popularized by Anāgārika Dhammapala, the organization's founder. Although invited to ordain as a Buddhist monk at this early stage of his life, Munindra chose instead the lifestyle of an *anāgārika* because he knew that it would be less restrictive and permit him more time to pursue his studies.

In 1938, he was invited to serve with the Mahabodhi Society in Sarnath, where he spent the next ten years. At that time, both Sarnath and nearby Varanasi were centers of activity for Buddhist, Theosophist, and Hindu teachers, including Krishnamurti, Lama Govinda, and Ānandamayi Ma. Munindra's open-minded nature allowed him to learn from all of these traditions and also to closely observe the various teachers. His personal style continued to be a humble one. Eschewing the formality of some of the gurus he met,

we can see the beginning of his own teaching approach as a simple spiritual friend, or *kalyānamitta*.

During his time in Sarnath, Munindra's responsibilities included supervising the bookshop at the new Mahabodhi Society temple and answering the many questions of visitors to the temple. On one occasion, Mahatma Gandhi visited, and Munindra sat with him on the cool stone floor, explaining the elegant wall paintings that depicted scenes from the life of the Buddha.

From 1948 to 1951, Munindra accompanied various Mahabodhi Society delegations that took Buddhist relics to Burma, Nepal, Sikkim, and Tibet. These experiences broadened his sense of the Buddhist world and introduced him to many important dignitaries. The relics were conveyed from place to place with great honor and ceremony, while large crowds came to pay their respects along the way. In early 1951, after a demanding trek from Gangtok in Sikkim, the delegation reached the Chumbi Valley in southern Tibet, where the Dalai Lama was in residence. During the delegation's stay there, Munindra met with the Dalai Lama several times. Through this as well as later meetings in Bodh Gaya, Munindra and the Dalai Lama developed a friendship that lasted for decades.

On the journey to Burma, the relics were conveyed on an Indian navy ship, and the delegation was met at the quay with great ceremony. During his long stay in Burma, Munindra had the opportunity to meet U Nu, the Burmese prime minister, as well as many outstanding Buddhist teachers and scholars.

From 1953 to 1957, Munindra was the superintendent of the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodh Gaya, where the Buddha reached enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree. As the first Buddhist superintendent since the twelfth century, he had the important and delicate job of converting the ritual practices at the temple from Hindu to Buddhist, while maintaining the goodwill of the local people.

During these years, he often hosted important visitors to the Mahabodhi Temple, including Prime Minister Nehru as well as many notable Buddhist leaders. In 1956, he was part of the Buddha Jayanti celebration on the 2,500th anniversary of the Buddha's passing away, or *parinibbāna*. At this time, many political leaders visited Bodh Gaya, and Munindra was invited by U Nu to travel to Burma for the purpose of learning vipassanā meditation. The practice of vipassanā had disappeared in India centuries earlier when Buddhism died out in most of the country; however, it had been preserved in Burma. Munindra understood that mastering vipassanā would allow him to directly experience Dharma, and so he welcomed this invitation with enthusiasm.

During the years from 1936 to 1957, the Mahabodhi Society had become the second major influence on Munindra's thinking and character. Working with the society enabled him to pursue his interests in studying Pāli, Abhidhamma, Theosophy, and Yoga, while learning Hindi and improving his English. He continued to evidence his early character traits—humility, intelligence, curiosity, and open-mindedness in these new situations.

Throughout this period, Munindra continued to value learning and books above worldly concerns, even though he was actively involved in helping the Mahabodhi Society. Finally, when offered the chance to learn vipassanā in Burma, he unhesitatingly accepted the opportunity to deepen his understanding of Dharma.

*Dharma Practice and Study in Burma: 1957–66*

During his years in Burma, vipassanā meditation became the third major influence on Munindra and the focus of his life from that time forward. After his arrival, he first spent several months at Sasana Yeiktha meditation center in Rangoon practicing under the guidance of Ven. Mahāsi Sayādaw, one of the greatest Burmese meditation masters of the time. Munindra reached high levels of spiritual accomplishment due to his previous preparation and single-minded dedication to the practice. Despite considerable pain in his body, he sat for long hours of continuous practice and achieved remarkable progress relatively quickly. It was here that he developed his devotion to the lineage of his teacher, who instructed him in personal interviews throughout his training. In later years, he would always carry a simple square of cloth given to him by Mahāsi Sayādaw as a cover for his meditation cushion. With great deference, he would gently place it on his seat before beginning his practice, thus honoring his teacher each time that he sat to practice or give a dharma talk.

After this initial period of practice, Munindra spent five years in intensive study of the Pāli Canon under the guidance of U Maung Maung, a highly respected Theravāda scholar, eventually becoming a master of the intellectual as well as the experiential aspects of vipassanā meditation. Every day during these years, he studied from dawn to dusk with enthusiasm, and he later remarked that understanding the Pāli texts was easy once one had direct experience of the Dharma through meditation.

When he had completed his studies, he returned to the meditation center of Mahāsi Sayādaw, where he trained as a meditation teacher and was valued as a spiritual guide by members of the Bengali Buddhist community living in Rangoon. He even trained some of his Bengali students in concentration, or *jhāna*, practice and the development of psychic powers in order to prove that this could still be done by following the classic texts. He verified that some of his students were able to see into the future, visit other realms of existence, or even appear suddenly at a distant place. The most skilled of these meditators was Dipa Ma (Nani Bala Barua), who later became an influential vipassanā teacher after returning to Calcutta and was highly respected in the United States as well.

After mastering both the theory and practice of vipassanā as taught at Sasana Yeiktha meditation center, he requested permission from Mahāsi Sayādaw to receive training in several other methods of vipassanā so that he could understand the full range of techniques then available in Burma. Munindra then spent several months visiting other meditation centers and acquainting himself with their methods of vipassanā training. Thus he came to realize the wide variety of methods that could be employed in the service of directly experiencing Dharma. During his last year in Burma, Munindra was ordained as a Buddhist monk. However, when he decided to return to India, he determined that it would be more effective to teach there as an *anāgārika*. So he gave up his monk's robes in favor of the simple white clothes that became familiar to his later students.

The vipassanā movement in Burma that shaped Munindra holds that the principal goal of meditation practice is liberation or awakening rather than simply the reduction of suffering or stress. This movement developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as part of a revitalization of Buddhism in the face of the challenges of European colonialism and the introduction of Christianity. Burmese teachers such as Ledi Sayādaw

and Mahāsi Sayādaw felt the need to emphasize the personal realization of Dharma in one's present life, and vipassanā meditation was the key to this transformation. This approach tended to put less stress on the importance of ritual practices. Therefore, the vipassanā that Munindra learned was not dependent on traditional Buddhist rituals or beliefs that were unassociated with the pursuit of realization through meditation practice.

The form of vipassanā practice that Munindra studied in Burma would later appeal to his Western students in Bodh Gaya. At Mahāsi Sayādaw's center in Rangoon, vipassanā meditation was taught in personal interviews rather than large lectures. Each practitioner would work at his or her own speed, according to the teacher's advice and supervision. Although there was great respect for the lineage of the teacher, there was not a sense of the infallibility of the guru, but rather the teacher was looked on as a spiritual friend. This would be the model of instruction that Munindra later followed and with which he was always most comfortable.

Realization or enlightenment is said to occur in four successive stages that are recognizable to the teacher. These stages are *sotāpanna*, *sakadāgāmī*, *anāgāmī*, and finally *arahant*. At each stage, some of one's impurities are eliminated, but removal of all negative character traits is not reached until the fourth and final stage of *arahant*. To be an effective vipassanā teacher, it is not considered necessary to have reached that final stage. There is an implicit recognition that teachers are human and fallible and that one's personality remains even after attaining realization. Munindra became a living example of the expression of enlightenment through a distinctive personality. Years later, his students would comment on how he embodied Dharma through his unique style and perspective.

When Munindra departed for India in 1966, after nearly nine years in Rangoon, he took with him twenty-six crates of Buddhist books as well as the blessings of the vipassanā community. He was, in fact, fulfilling a Burmese Buddhist prophecy that anticipated a resurgence of Buddhism and vipassanā meditation 2,500 years after the Buddha. This helps to explain not only why Munindra felt called to return to India and teach vipassanā where it had been unavailable for so many centuries but also the reason why hundreds of Burmese came to the wharf to bid him farewell when his ship set sail. His action was seen by all involved as the fulfillment of a historic prediction, the beginning of the movement of Buddhist practice back to the land of its origin and then onward to the rest of the world. Munindra was uniquely prepared to carry these hopes, as he was a fully qualified vipassanā teacher who had thoroughly mastered the Pāli Canon and was fluent in Bengali, Hindi, and English.

### *The Bodh Gaya Years: 1966–85*

On returning to India, the natural place for Munindra to settle was Bodh Gaya, where the Buddha had attained enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree. He never went back to being superintendent of the temple but simply lived in Bodh Gaya and was available for teaching. As he began to offer instruction in vipassanā, all the strands of his background finally came together. His knowledge, experience, language abilities, and humble style attracted more and more students. He was a model of integrating the practice in daily life, and his open-minded approach was particularly attractive to young Westerners. He did

not hesitate to send his students to other meditation teachers, and Hindu gurus, such as Neem Karoli Baba, often sent their students to him.

Munindra became a key resource and teacher to many Westerners who are now important teachers and writers in the movement of Buddhism to the West. His love of books, knowledge of Buddhist philosophy and psychology, familiarity with a wide variety of traditions, and fluency in English enabled him to inspire a generation of Westerners who had eclectic interests and a deep curiosity about meditation. The teaching style he used was an informal interview that put people at ease and allowed them to ask as many questions as needed. As so many of his students report, he taught as much by his actions and advice in the bazaar as through his formal meditation instruction. His simple and committed lifestyle was an inspiration to his students, who saw him as an embodiment of Dharma.

From 1966 to 1977, he remained in Bodh Gaya, but beginning in 1977, he was invited by his students to travel and teach in North America, Europe, and Australia. From 1962 until the 1980s, Burma was closed to outside visitors who wished to practice meditation; therefore, Munindra became one of the few qualified teachers available who could teach vipassanā in English at that time. During those years, he lived very simply at Samanvaya, the Gandhi ashram, or the Burmese Vihar. Anyone with an interest could ask him for instruction, and he would give individual advice based on the person's questions and level of experience. Munindra was generous with his time and would often spend hours each day with whoever wanted to see him.

The years 1977 to 1985 found Munindra particularly busy with many teaching tours to Western countries, as well as time spent teaching in Bodh Gaya and Calcutta. This was a period of expansion and experimentation for the vipassanā movement, which was new in the West. In 1976, several of Munindra's students, including Joseph Goldstein and Sharon Salzberg, founded the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts, which has since become one of the most important centers for vipassanā training in North America. Munindra was invited to teach at this and other centers that his students had founded. Although he enjoyed traveling in the West, his heart always remained in India.

Munindra's Western students were impressed by his level of energy when traveling, as well as his insatiable curiosity for all that was new and strange to him. Between meditation retreats, he was always happy to explore the local sights with his students, and he often had more energy than they did even though he was much older. However, after 1984, Munindra largely remained in India, as his health was often not good enough to travel and he preferred to live in India.

### *The Later Years: 1985–2003*

In 1985, Munindra had surgery in Calcutta that was not successful and led to poor health for the next few years. After a second surgery in 1988, he spent several months recuperating in Hawai'i at the home of his student Kamala Masters, who later became a vipassanā teacher herself. Fully recovered, he returned to India and was invited by S. N. Goenka, the influential lay teacher of vipassanā, to stay at Goenka's meditation center at Igatpuri, near Bombay, where the climate would be better for his health. Goenka and Munindra had been friends since Munindra's time in Burma. When Goenka began to



teach vipassanā in India, Munindra encouraged him and sent many of his students to practice with him. From 1991 until his death, Munindra spent the majority of his time at Igatpuri, where he lived in retirement but was consulted on matters relating to the Pāli Canon. He occupied a simple meditation hut that was frequented by visitors when he was not in retreat.

Starting in 1979, Munindra began to teach vipassanā annually to a group of American university students in the Antioch Education Abroad Buddhist Studies Program. Throughout his retirement, Munindra faithfully kept this commitment and taught for three weeks in Bodh Gaya each September. He also spent some time each fall in Calcutta, where he visited family, friends, and students before returning to Igatpuri for the remainder of the year.

In this final period of his life, Munindra continued to inspire the students who practiced with him through his enthusiasm for Dharma and his example of what it means to lead a life in Dharma. As the years passed, his teeth began to fail, but he refused to get false teeth, as he insisted that he wanted to experience the natural changes of aging. He would often remark that his body was failing, but his mind was quite fine.

Munindra's love of books and learning persisted, as did his open-minded approach to Dharma. Although he was a living example of the power of meditation to reduce stress, he continued to insist that the purpose of vipassanā practice is to attain liberation and that it is possible to do so in this life. His single-minded focus on enlightenment and the path to realization was conveyed with an urgent conviction to those he met. Even as he lay ill and dying at his family home in Calcutta, Munindra was still able to inspire his visitors with the clarity of his vision of Dharma and the power of his loving-kindness.

## Introduction

*Mirka Knaster*

Diminutive yet striking in his signature white robes and white hat, Munindra was an enthusiastic, energetic, and immensely inquisitive Bengali meditation master who had a profound impact on people everywhere he went, even on many who never met him. Those whose lives he touched remember him not only for his erudition and expert guidance but, most importantly, for his embodiment of Dharma—he lived what he taught. Through his presence and actions, Munindra made otherwise abstract ideals come alive.

Like his fellow countryman Mahatma Gandhi, Munindra was one of those rare individuals who demonstrate seamless integration, rather than conflicted separation, between daily life and spiritual practice. Through his attitudes and behavior, he held out the potential of what is attainable: to be at home in this body, in this place, in this time, under these conditions; happy and at peace with oneself and in harmony with others.

Munindra was also an illustration of what neuroscientists are now able to confirm through sophisticated technology: By training the mind, one can change the brain so that positive emotions become enduring character traits, rather than just occasional states. Based on his personal knowledge, Munindra was convinced that even nowadays people are capable of tasting what the Buddha and his disciples experienced more than 2,500 years ago. What may seem out of the ordinary or even impossible is actually within reach of those who make the effort. Yet Munindra never pretended to be extraordinary, exceptional, or perfect. He was simply a flourishing human being, not a saint. With all his idiosyncrasies and fallibility, he walked the path and enabled others to walk it too.

For Munindra, spiritual life was not limited to meditating in silence, living in a monastery, or attending intensive retreats. Nor did a life steeped in Dharma have anything to do with arcane and esoteric doctrines or ritualistic and exclusionary practices. Munindra made Dharma highly accessible and himself widely available. His easygoing, outside-the-box, nonsectarian openness, as well as a no-frills, no-airs attitude, had great appeal. According to Munindra, Dharma was all about “living the life fully.”

### *A Surprising Start*

The idea for this book came unexpectedly and inexplicably. In May 2004, I was sitting and minding my own breath in the meditation hall at the Forest Refuge, in Barre, Massachusetts, when a thought arose out of nowhere. It was as though someone suddenly asked out loud, “Who is honoring Munindra-ji’s life and legacy in the *Dhamma*?” But, of course, there was complete silence in the hall.

Later, in my room, I jotted down the question and then let it go. Perplexed as to why it had arisen in my mind, once my month-long retreat was over, I decided to inquire among several individuals who had been close to Munindra (who had passed away the previous October). Kamala Masters suggested that I contact Robert Pryor, who had

known Munindra since 1972. When I reached Robert, I learned that in 2000 he had conducted twenty-one hours of interviews with Munindra and also had received permission to use photographs from Munindra's extensive collection in any future book about his life. After some discussion, Robert and I decided that since our intentions were similar—to pay tribute to an important dharma teacher and pass on his wisdom—we would collaborate on the project and, in the spirit of *dāna*, any proceeds would be donated to a scholarship fund at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies in memory of Munindra.

So I set aside two other writing projects and began to search for people around the world who had known Munindra. One person led to another and, in turn, to another. After listening to hundreds of down-to-earth, poignant, humorous, and instructive stories, I became determined to find a way to share those personal experiences as well as Munindra's direct teachings. I sensed that, when woven together, they would provide a panorama of his life and service and, simultaneously, inspire and encourage readers on their own voyages of transformation.

### *Yet Another Surprise*

The question that arose during my retreat was not the only mystery that presented itself. There was also a curious incident that occurred in Asia.

In addition to interviewing most people by phone and some via e-mail, I went to India to meet Munindra's family in Calcutta, to visit some of his old haunts both there and in Bodh Gaya, and to interview local people who had known him. Then I did the same in Burma, which was Munindra's spiritual home in many ways. It was in Rangoon that something completely unanticipated happened. When I was introduced to Daw Than Myint, she handed me a simple school notebook that Munindra had entrusted to her a few days before returning to India in 1966. In it, he had written a short autobiography. Unbeknownst to anyone, this record of Munindra's life had been sitting in a bookcase in Daw Than Myint's family home for four decades. Amazingly, it had escaped destruction by the moisture, heat, and insects common to a tropical climate. Other books in the bookcase had succumbed to silverfish, and hundreds of books stored in trunks had been eaten by termites. Yet, somehow, this inexpensive notebook had remained intact and unblemished. Daw Than Myint said to me, "I have been waiting forty years for someone to come and use this," and I felt the hairs on my arms stand up.

### *About the Book*

*Living This Life Fully* is divided into sixteen chapters. Each one is devoted to a different quality of awakened mind and heart and to how Munindra embodied and taught that particular quality. There are many qualities to cultivate on a spiritual path, but I focus specifically on these sixteen because they represent various schemata in the Buddha's teaching. I derived them as follows.

The *bodhipakkhiyā-dhammā* are the thirty-seven qualities conducive to awakening or enlightenment. They are divided into seven sets: the four foundations of mindfulness (*satipatthāna*); the four right efforts (*padhāna*); the four roads to power (*iddhi-pāda*); the seven factors of awakening (*bojjhanga*); the five spiritual faculties

(*indriya*); the five spiritual powers (*bala*); and the Eightfold Path (*atthangika-magga*). I made a chart of these thirty-seven qualities, then added the ten perfections (*□pāramī*) and the four divine abodes (*brahma-vihāra*), and observed quite a bit of overlap. From these lists, I distilled seventeen discrete qualities. However, in the process of writing, I eliminated a chapter on calm or tranquility (*passaddhi*) because the quality appears within so many stories throughout the book.

Each chapter focuses on a specific quality, but deciding where to situate a particular story often provoked a debate in my mind as I wondered which quality it best exemplifies. For example, one particular anecdote someone shared was not exclusively about loving-kindness (*mettā*), as it also clearly exemplified mindfulness (*sati*) and effort (*virīya*). Thus, placing it in the chapter on *mettā* was somewhat arbitrary.

No one quality functions in isolation. The Buddha's path is not a linear progression from A to Z. Bringing any characteristic to fulfillment is a matter of bringing them all to fruition, for everything on the path operates by way of mutual support, reciprocity, and interdependence.

*Living This Life Fully* begins with mindfulness and ends with equanimity (*upekkhā*). It could have as easily opened with generosity (*dāna*) and closed with wisdom (*paññā*). You can move from chapter 1 to chapter 16 or read whichever chapter appeals to you randomly. In the same way, when you choose a quality to cultivate, you may soon notice that, perforce, others come into play to complement and reinforce it.

If you are interested in a greater explanation of a quality, at the end of each chapter I have given a detailed definition set off from the body of the chapter. At the opening of each chapter, you will find a brief one- or two-word definition of the quality. However, translating a Pāli term into only one English word is a challenge because there are shades of meaning that are lost. Take *saddhā*, which is usually rendered as “faith,” a word that conveys something quite different in Christianity than it does in the Buddha's teaching and, thus, could be misinterpreted. The definitions at the end of each chapter provide some understanding of the origin and nuances of the terms. These definitions are not from Munindra, but are based on my own research and have been checked by dharma teachers and scholars. In combining personal anecdotes with this information, my intention is to honor Munindra's own way of being in the world and teaching—everyday experience partnered with scholarship.

### *Direct Quotations*

Each chapter opens with one of Munindra's pithy utterances, while a quote from the Pāli Canon, generally from the Buddha, concludes it. Within the text itself, indented paragraphs are direct statements from Munindra, taken from talks recorded by David Johnson in the late 1970s and from a series of interviews that Robert Pryor conducted with Munindra in 2000. Other quotes attributed to Munindra (those not set off as extracts) vary in tone or idiom because they are paraphrased or based on what people remember hearing him say. Variations also may be due to the fact that English is not the first language for some of the people I interviewed.

### *Foreign Terms and Conventions*

I have included Pāli terms throughout the book to reflect how Munindra communicated: He incorporated the ancient scriptural language into his dharma talks and conversations. I hope they will arouse your interest, stimulate further exploration, and help expand your practice of Dharma.

Munindra most often referred to the Pāli rather than Sanskrit version of a name or term: Gotama rather than Gautama Buddha, Dhamma rather than Dharma, Abhidhamma rather than Abhidharma, *kamma* rather than karma, *nibbāna* rather than nirvāna. I did not alter direct quotes to make them uniform, but left them as I heard them, to reflect how Munindra or another person spoke. When Pāli and other foreign terms (Hindi, Sanskrit, and Burmese) occur in the text for the first time, they bear a brief definition that is usually not repeated but can be located in the glossary at the back.

Sanskrit terms that are familiar and appear in English dictionaries are not in italics; for example, karma, nirvāna, sūtra, and Dharma. All Pāli terms are in italics, except for Dhamma and vipassanā. Since these words are so frequently used, they are italicized only the first time they occur. I have included diacritics because, otherwise, certain names and terms might have not only a different pronunciation but also another meaning. However, I have chosen not to use diacritical marks in the names of geographical places and institutions because these names are easily recognizable without them. Although some place names in Asia have changed, I have kept those that Munindra was accustomed to: Calcutta instead of Kolkata, Rangoon and Burma instead of Yangon and Myanmar, Varanasi instead of Benares.

### *Contributors*

*Living This Life Fully* is a project built entirely on generosity (*dāna*). More than two hundred people helped to make this book possible by contributing leads, interviews, recordings, scholarly expertise, photographs, letters and other memorabilia, hospitality, and much more. While everyone is recognized in the acknowledgments, only those individuals who are directly quoted in the text are briefly described in a list of contributors at the back of the book. This was done simply to avoid the awkwardness of repeatedly identifying a person. These succinct descriptions are based on information provided by the people themselves.

### *Abbreviations*

Quotations from the following texts that compose the Pāli Canon were taken from a variety of translations in published works (see bibliography) as well as from the website [accesstoinight.org](http://accesstoinight.org). In a few instances, Munindra translated Pāli passages directly while speaking, in a dharma talk or an interview.

Texts from the Pāli Canon:

- AN Anguttara Nikāya (Numerical Discourses)
- BV Buddhavamsa
- DN Dīgha Nikāya (Long Discourses)
- Dhp Dhammapada
- It Itivuttaka
- Khp Khuddakapāṭha
- MN Majjhima Nikāya (Middle-Length Discourses)
- SN Samyutta Nikāya (Connected Discourses)
- Sn Sutta Nipāta
- Ud Udāna

Other Abbreviations

- BCBS Barre Center for Buddhist Studies
- IMS Insight Meditation Society
- SRMC Spirit Rock Meditation Center

*Final Note*

Researching and writing *Living This Life Fully* afforded me an illuminating experience of great satisfaction that I could never have anticipated that day in May at the Forest Refuge. It has been a privilege and an honor to be moved to tears and amused into laughter by the many people who were willing to reflect on Munindra's influence and impact. I am deeply gratified by how much I have learned and how much that has affected my own practice. May Munindra's life and the stories of those who knew him also provide a source of deep inspiration and encouragement as you journey toward peace, happiness, and freedom.

## 1

## Be Simple and Easy, Just Rest in Awareness

*Sati* (Mindfulness)

*When mindfulness is there, all the beautiful qualities are nearby.*  
—Munindra

The practice of mindfulness, of nonjudgmental awareness, lies at the heart of the Buddhist path. For Munindra, mindfulness was not a mystical state but a mundane act that anyone could and should do in any moment. He emphasized this to his students:

Everything is meditation in this practice, even while eating, drinking, dressing, seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking. Whatever you are doing, everything should be done mindfully, dynamically, with totality, completeness, thoroughness. Then it becomes meditation, meaningful, purposeful. It is not thinking, but experiencing from moment to moment, living from moment to moment, without clinging, without condemning, without judging, without evaluating, without comparing, without selecting, without criticizing—choiceless awareness.

Meditation is not only sitting; it is a way of living. It should be integrated with our whole life. It is actually an education in how to see, how to hear, how to smell, how to eat, how to drink, how to walk with full awareness. To develop mindfulness is the most important factor in the process of awakening.

For many students, Munindra's best teachings took place outside the meditation hall. "One of the nice things about him was he was just very ordinary in how he taught you," says Daniel Goleman. "You would walk into the bazaar with him and go to the post office. He was the epitome of mindfulness all the time."

This afforded Akasa Levi a model of what it means to be an elder in the Dharma, to be a full human being. "He was always pointing out details," says Akasa. "At the bazaar he would say, 'Notice how the lemons are stacked. See how the vendor does that, where he puts the bad ones and keeps the ripe ones.' We'd be walking along, and my mind would be running, and he would say, 'Oh, look! See the little flower!' He would bend to look at it and say, 'See, it grows like this.' He would lightly touch it, taking me out of my head and back to the earth, back to what was right there. You could say he distracted me back to the present moment. He was very good and very soft with that. Munindra would say, 'Pay attention. Be mindful of all the details.' He would stick the word *mindfully* into just about every other sentence he uttered."

When Ginny Morgan wants to bring to mind a paradigm of how to move through the world, she too recalls her time with Munindra: "To wander around in a flea market and

have someone buying something on one hand and then turning it into a dharma talk, going back and forth, and have it all be of one fabric, was really powerful for me.”

Michael Liebenson Grady, who was Munindra’s attendant at Insight Meditation Society (IMS) for a time, adds, “Munindra had the ability to see the Dharma everywhere, in everything, including all the ordinary experiences of daily life. This attitude is helpful to lay practitioners. Some of my most vivid memories are mealtimes with him. I used to watch him eat. He had a healthy appetite and was so mindful and present when eating.”

### *Mind and Mindfulness*

“Mind and mindfulness are two different things,” Munindra used to explain.

Mind by nature has no color. When it is colored with greed, we call it “greedy mind.” When anger arises, at that moment, it is called “angry man” or “angry mind.” If there is no mindfulness, mind is influenced by this anger. Anger has the nature to pollute the mind; it creates poison. But mind is not anger; anger is not mind. Mind is not greed; greed is not mind. Please remember this. Mind has no nature of liking or disliking. “Mind” means “knowing faculty,” “cognizing faculty.”

Munindra would then describe *sati*:

Mindfulness is a different thing: alertness, awareness, remembering, heedfulness. It means not to forget, just to be aware, to be mindful of what is going on. When you are asked to walk on a [narrow] one-bamboo bridge over the river, you have to be so careful on every step. Once you forget, there is every possibility of falling down. If you lose your mindfulness, you will hurt yourself or kill yourself. So, in reality, mindfulness means not to forget what is going on at the present moment—in thought, in word, in deed.

Munindra noted that though the mind is “always there, always working,” we are not always mindful. He said, “Many times you will see that mind is not with you, you are not with the mind. Mind is somewhere else, thinking something else, while [the] eating process is going on mechanically, unmindfully.” According to Munindra, there is only one way to conduct all activities—with moment-to-moment awareness.

### *The Practice Is Simple*

Munindra highlighted simplicity and ease. Joseph Goldstein says he must have repeated thousands of times, “Be simple and easy. Take things as they come.” Still, that is a challenge, especially early in one’s practice. As Munindra once mildly chided Michael Stein, “The practice is simple, and you make it complicated.”

Sometimes students misunderstood Munindra’s use of “simple.” When they saw him bargaining intensely, even for a bag of peanuts, they questioned his action and reminded him, “You said to be simple and easy. What are you doing?” He would pause, then respond, “I said to be simple, not a simpleton.” As Roy Bonney understands this,



“Essentially, what I took from it is that it’s really important to have a practice and recognize the truth of the world, but don’t be a fool in the world.”

Munindra taught that true meditation can have a refreshing or relaxing effect:

When mind comes to a silent state, then we recoup our energy again. Meditation is not forcing, not straining oneself. It is harmonious work with the whole being, not fighting. If we understand the process of meditation, it is so simple. As long as we do not understand, it is an extraordinarily difficult task because our mind is not trained not to cling, not to condemn, not to judge, just to be with what is at the moment. But once you understand the Law [Dharma], then it is the most simple thing—it is a way of life. As one develops mindfulness, after some time it takes care of itself; it becomes effortless, automatic.

His words were a balm for Larry Rosenberg: “His instructions were so simple and natural and ordinary: Just be aware of what’s happening. But I was in tears. It was his emphasis on awareness, which for me is the whole thing. He knew that the bottom line was finally, ‘Are you awake or aren’t you?’ I had been with Zen teachers and Tibetan teachers and there was a huge amount of culture, and he didn’t bring much cultural baggage at all. Awareness was awareness, and it was open to anyone.”

This “amazing awareness” is what Matthias Barth found so special about Munindra, for it was evident in the most commonplace circumstances. “In his presence, even the arrival of a train at a London tube station became an event. The sound of the train, at first hardly noticeable, growing ever more with its approach, the wind being pushed before it, the movement of the waiting crowd—all this came alive in the field of his infectious mindfulness. Being with Munindra was a living practice of moment-to-moment awareness, awake and open in the here and now.”

### *No One Way to Be Mindful*

Among the many methods of *vipassanā* (insight meditation), Munindra never designated “the right one.” Jack Engler says, “Whether it was mindfulness of sensation or mindfulness of another class of objects at any one of the sense doors made little difference to him, as long as it was mindfulness.”

“I didn’t feel any sectarianism from him at all, or ‘you gotta sign up for something’ or ‘you shouldn’t sign up for something,’” Eric Kupers says with a laugh. “It was just very much about the living truth of the teachings in the moment in a very down-to-earth way.”

Munindra’s acceptance of various ways to practice was due to his receptive nature and to his experiences in Burma. After intensive training with Mahāsi Sayādaw, and with his permission, Munindra studied with local teachers who taught different forms of insight meditation. He stated,

I found all these trainings complementary, not contradictory. All these methods are for the development of *Dhamma*. They are a means, not the end. If one trains one’s mind in one way and thoroughly understands, then other methods are not difficult.

Whatever sect or school one may belong to, it is always helpful if you keep the mind open, because there is nothing to cling to.

Munindra kept his mind open, urging mindfulness even in those activities he did not subscribe to. Mirko Fryba (now Ven. Āyukusala Thera) learned this when he first arrived in Bodh Gaya in 1967. After visiting the Mahabodhi Temple, he sat down in a small tearoom next to the stairs leading to the temple entrance and caught sight of a bald monk clad in bright yellow and smoking a cigarette. “What does your guru say to your smoking?” Mirko twitted him. The monk replied, “My guru says, ‘Bring the cigarette to your lips mindfully, then mindfully notice the touch sensation, then mindfully inhale, then mindfully notice the feeling. . . .’” Mirko asked him for an introduction, and the monk took him to see Munindra.

### *The Bigger Picture*

Munindra never encouraged frivolity in practice, but his open-mindedness impressed and inspired his students. Appreciating Munindra’s free-form approach, Sharon Salzberg says, “His view of meditation was very big—live mindfully—it’s OK if you go to the bazaar for a cup of *chai* [tea]. He kept broadening my sense of what the Dharma is and what the path is. He left me with a very big sense of, as he put it, ‘living the life,’ of not being so prescribed and formalistic or stylized about practice, but really understanding its roots in transforming one’s mind.”

Lama Surya Das agrees, “What always comes up for me is how sitting meditation is not the end-all and be-all. Walking meditation, mindfulness in daily life, and so forth, were also extremely important. He really exemplified that and took away the total emphasis on just silent, closed-eyed meditation. He helped me understand more about what living Dharma and mindfulness practice and real awareness are. He was a great teacher of integrating Dharma in daily life, how to be mindful in daily life.” Or, as Saibal Talukbar expresses it, “Life and Dhamma are always to be connected.”

The major impact Munindra had on Grahame White was helping him see that practice becomes a holistic way of living. “What he was able to do was show me that the ten-day retreat syndrome wasn’t really where it was at, that it really had to be an ongoing part of your life,” he says. As Munindra used to repeat, “You can practice any time.” Grahame adds, “That was the thing that eased all my tensions, and I was able to relax much more with my understanding. It took me a while to get it, but once I learned it and became independent in my mind, that was the greatest thing—to not think that meditation practice had to take a particular form, to be restricted to retreats. As long as you learn to be mindful in whatever situation you’re in, you’re OK.”

Jack Kornfield puts it succinctly: “He didn’t divide life from meditation.” And that is why he was such a vital model for people East and West.

### *Mindfulness for Householders*

Kamala Masters greatly benefited from Munindra’s approach to mindfulness in everyday life. As a young mother struggling to raise three children, she was unable to dedicate time to formal sitting practice and retreats. Munindra did not let her family circumstances be

an obstacle. When he found out that she spent a lot of time washing dishes, he immediately seized the opportunity to teach her *sati* at the kitchen sink. He instructed her to have a general awareness of washing the dishes: the movement of her hands, the warmth or coolness of the water, picking a dish up, soaping it, rinsing it, putting it down. “Nothing else is happening now—just washing the dishes,” he said. Then he told her to experience her posture. He did not insist on her moving slowly or observing every detail of every moment. Instead, she was to exercise general mindfulness of whatever was occurring as she cleaned the dishes.

Standing next to her, Munindra would occasionally inquire, “What’s happening now?” When she replied, “I’m worried about paying the mortgage,” he would suggest, “Just notice ‘worried,’ and bring your attention back to washing the dishes.” When she told him, “I’m planning what to cook for dinner,” he repeated, “Just notice ‘planning,’ because that’s what is in the present moment, and then return to just washing the dishes.”

Munindra guided Kamala with as much seriousness as though on a formal retreat. By practicing diligently, she soon realized its advantages. “Doing this ordinary task with intentional mindfulness has helped me to notice and experience many things more clearly,” says Kamala. “The changing physical sensations, the flow of thoughts and emotions, and my surrounding environment are all much more alive. This practice helped collect my mind so that it was not so scattered. It has required me to develop more perseverance, patience, humility, clear intention, and honesty with myself. These are no small things. Just from washing the dishes! The resulting enjoyment of being more fully present with life is a rare treasure in this world.”

Instructing Kamala in how to wash dishes mindfully was only one part of the training. Munindra also noticed that she passed through the hallway from her bedroom to the living room many times each day, so he suggested it as an ideal place for walking meditation. From the threshold of her bedroom door, he directed, “Every time you step into this hallway, see if you can use the time as an opportunity to be present with the simple fact of walking. Just walking. Not thinking about your mother or about the children . . . just experiencing the body walking. It might help you to make a silent mental notation of every step. With each step, very quietly in your mind you can note, ‘stepping, stepping, stepping.’ This will help you keep your attention connected to your intention of ‘just walking.’ If the mind wanders to something else, as soon as you notice that it has wandered, make the silent mental note, ‘wandering mind.’ Do this without judging, condemning, or criticizing. In a simple and easy way, bring your attention back to just the walking. Your practice in this hallway will be a wonderful training for you. It will also benefit those around you because you will feel more refreshed.”

Kamala recalls that it did not seem like much of a spiritual practice, but every day as she walked back and forth through that hallway on her way to do something, she had a few moments of clear presence of mind—unhurried, unworried, at ease with life for those precious ten steps. And she extended mindfulness practice to all the household chores—washing clothes, ironing, wiping counters. This was her main practice for several years.<sup>1</sup>

### *Slowly and Quickly*

Just as Munindra’s perspective on mindfulness had nothing to do with being in a special place, it also did not require a slow pace. That he moved quickly, but always mindfully,

expanded a student's comprehension of practice. "He seemed to be more of an explorer in motion than in stillness," says Erik Knud-Hansen. "I think he did his sitting practice privately in the early mornings—he did the stillness part on his own time. During the day, he was out and about. Watching him, I learned that the speed of your body doesn't have to detract from an emphasis on the mind seeing the truth. In the last twenty years or so of teaching Dharma, I've appreciated the need for the seeing of the truth to not be related to some particular bodily attitude or even mental attitude—truth is truth every moment. I think that he understood that some people wanted to get stuck in slowness."

Erik continues, "He was reflecting an area of practice that some people would respond to by saying, 'That's not practice; that's just being alive.' Somebody who is living Dharma is not making that distinction, whether sitting down, standing up, talking, walking through Disney World, or walking in a meditation hall. Munindra's example and teaching was seeing the truth not so much based on a specific practice, but seeing the truth of mind itself. He taught the freedom to be alive and to see things that are right in front of your face."

### *The Benefits of Seeing the Truth of Each Moment*

Munindra's message, says Robert Sharf, is "Basically, it doesn't matter what style of practice you're doing. Either you're doing it mindfully or you're not. And if you're doing it mindfully, there will be benefits; if you're not doing it mindfully, there won't." Munindra said,

People can do things better when they are mindful. It is not only beneficial on a spiritual level, it is also beneficial on a physical level. It is a process of purification too. When mind is purified, many psychophysical diseases are cured automatically. People understand their own anger, hatred, jealousy—all these unwholesome factors which arise in the mind and which we do not understand generally. So many psychophysical diseases, which we accumulate unconsciously or by reflex action emotionally, [can] come under restraint, but not by suppressing. By coming close to and seeing them, people become free from many physical ailments, many mental ailments. They become more sweet, more loving.

For Maggie Ward McGervey, the benefits of mindfulness are obvious. From Munindra's teachings and her experience of vipassanā has come a greater appreciation for the body and the mind. "He spent a lot of time focusing on the senses, whether it was noticing a tickling sensation on your hand, or the feeling in your throat. It grounded me in my body in a way that was really important," she recalls. "I can still remember how he would coach us to simply notice and label the thoughts and sensations that came up for us during meditation. He would repeat the labels twice: 'thinking, thinking' or 'itching, itching.' He would say, 'Just watch the sensation.' That's fused into me now. If I feel panicky because I'm late for something or feel annoyed, then I can simply go back and realize that it's just a thought. It affects my life a lot less. If I stub my toe and feel the pain, I immediately go to realizing that it's just nerves and sensation. I can cut out all the ripple effect of the anger and frustration and see the emptiness of it."

Munindra explained how this works:

Unpleasant feelings are most prominent to us because, when we experience pleasant feelings, we don't mind. But when we experience the unpleasant feeling, we don't like it and we condemn. We have to observe it. We have to penetrate it. We have to pierce through it. We have to understand it. When you keep the mind there, then you will see that it is not static; it is a process, and afterward, it disappears. But don't expect it to come or to go. If you expect, then you have to be aware of the expecting mind. Not clinging, not condemning, not hoping. Whatever comes up, see the thing as it is, at this moment, without liking or disliking. If you like it, you feed it with greed; if you dislike it, you feed it with hatred. Both ways, the mind is unbalanced, unhealthy, unsound. [The] object itself is neither good nor bad. It is our mind which attributes the color—it is good or it is bad. We are influenced by that and then reaction comes. Be gentle with everything that comes up. Keep the mind in a balanced state. We are following the middle path. Be fully alert.

Heather Stoddard says that learning to be fully alert “was so simple and direct—with no ritual, no frills at all. You just went in there and did this awareness practice twenty-four hours a day.” She adds, “It’s like learning to ride a bicycle or to swim. Unless you actually experience it yourself, you don’t know anything about it. And once you’ve experienced it—the perception of the functioning of the mind—there’s no way that you can forget it or that it doesn’t influence your life at every moment. Following the daily vipassanā practice of strict and continuous observance of body, mind, and breathing, I felt that I had not learned so much in all my eighteen years, at home or at school, as I had during those three weeks with Munindra-ji in Bodh Gaya.”

Munindra repeatedly conveyed that mindfulness was about the truth of any given moment. He told Oren Sofer, “What is happening is the truth. If your mind is distracted, in this moment, that is the truth. Accept it.” Such advice enabled Giselle Wiederhielm to deal with deep back pain on a retreat. In a dharma talk one night, Munindra stated that one can even use pain as a focus and live with it. “I really learned by facing it,” says Giselle. “Sometimes we don’t face up to what’s going on, but by facing it, it’s not just pain anymore and it’s a way to resolve it. It took me three days, but it went away. That was incredible because I spent the next week free of pain.”

Another gain derived from mindfulness is having more energy available because attention is not divided. According to Gregg Galbraith, when Munindra was involved in something, he was fully into it: “When Munindra was eating, his attention would be totally with that. When he was talking, he would talk. But you didn’t really see him spreading his attention to a lot of different things. He had this quality of just being there in the moment. If you were going to buy him a ticket to travel to Europe, he would get very engaged in it: ‘What’s it cost? Where do you stop? How long will it be?’ He wanted to know every little detail. And when it was done, he would put it out of his mind.”

Gregg once asked Munindra, “How can you always be in the moment when there are things to take care of in the world? You have to think of the future. If you’re going to go to a school, you’ve got to enroll and do this and that.” Munindra told him that you simply do whatever it is—plan a trip, eat dinner—but once you are finished, you do not spend time thinking about it. You go on to the next thing.

### *The Freshness of Each Moment*

Mindfulness is an opportunity to experience everything anew. Michael Liebenson Grady remembers a particular phase during a three-month retreat when “things seemed so flat and uninteresting. My motivation was beginning to lag, and my mind began to wander more. Munindra suggested that I pay attention to the breath as though it were my first breath and my last. For some, this might not be good advice but, for me, it was perfect. From this suggestion, I saw how important it was to bring a quality of freshness to the present moment, a quality that I saw in Munindra all the time.”

Sharon Salzberg found this instruction helpful as well, especially early in her practice in India, and not just with each breath. “I was to be with each step, each sound, each taste just this way,” she writes in *A Heart as Wide as the World*. “Practicing in this spirit allowed me to bring a fullness and an immediacy of attention to each moment of my meditation. The fragmented aspects of my self came together. I was no longer so tempted to compare the present to what had happened in the past, because where was the past, if this was my first breath? And if this were my last breath, I certainly could not postpone giving it my full attention, lost in the hope that something better might happen later on. I was not so inclined to experience the present with judgment, because how could I judge what I was going through without bringing in the past or the future? It is a beautiful and powerful way to practice—as well as a beautiful way to live and die.”<sup>2</sup>

### *Thought of Your Mother Is Not Your Mother*

Munindra frequently reminded his students that thinking and meditation are not the same. He would inquire, “Do you want to think or do you want to meditate?” He made the distinction by speaking of two worlds: one of concept, the other of reality. “Mostly you’re living in the world of thoughts,” he said. “Dhamma and meditation practice is living in the world of experience.” For Oren Sofer, this admonition meant that “life is so short—what we can actually experience from moment to moment is so brief and fleeting—that to spend time being lost in thoughts and ideas about what is happening is insane, leading us away from the Truth.”

Munindra asked his students,

If you observe your mind, what will you find? We find that our mind is constantly thinking of something of the past or planning for [the] future. The past is not real; it has gone. [The] future also is not real; it has not come. Real reality is the present state. We are living in the present moment only. The present moment is true. So we have to live the life fully, being alive, seeing things as they are at this moment.

This thinking mind cannot meditate. As long as mind does not stop thinking, one cannot meditate. Meditation is not thinking; it’s not imagining. Meditation is the process of silencing the mind. Unless mind is silent, there is no experience, there is no meditation.

To help students better understand what he meant, he gave this example:

A thought of your mother appears in the mind. You never invited the thought. It just came, and you become aware of it. But [the] thought is not [your] mother; it is just

[a] thought or [an] image of mother. It is like a dream. In the dream, you feel hungry and food is offered to you and you take it. When you wake up, you see that it was a dream, not real. You ate food in the dream, tasted it. It appeared to you as real at the time of dreaming, but when you wake up, you see it was not real.

### *Mindfulness at the Core*

Munindra was unambiguous that *sati* is absolutely crucial to dharma practice—the linchpin. “For forty-five years, Buddha taught Dhamma in different parts of India, under different circumstances, to different people, at different levels,” he affirmed. “He gave about 84,000 discourses. All the teachings can be summarized in one word—*appamāda*: mindfulness, heedfulness, nonforgetfulness.” *Appamāda* is a synonym for *sati*.

This message would emerge “like clockwork,” says Danny Taylor, who at times wondered why Munindra was “rambling all over the place” in his talks: “He would always come back to the same thing. Right on the dot of the hour, he’d say something like, ‘If you have trouble with any of this, it doesn’t really matter. There’s only one thing you’ve got to remember, there’s only one duty, and that is to be mindful.’ He’d always finish with this.”

Danny says that what he learned from Munindra was that “if we analyze too much, we’ll just get ourselves caught in knots. At the end of the day, the thing that will reconcile everything is to keep being mindful. You don’t need to worry about all this intellectual stuff. Just be mindful.”

### *Mindfulness Is Always Useful*

In stressing the magnitude of mindfulness, Munindra would quote the Buddha: “*Sati sabbatthikā*” (SN 46.53). [Mindfulness is beneficial in all cases.] For example, Munindra said,

There should be balance between heart and brain, between emotion and intellect, between faith and wisdom. So how to do it? This *sati*, mindfulness, brings balance between the two. Both are necessary. Also, too much effort makes a person restless; too much *samādhi* [concentration] makes a person sleepy. How to know how much effort is necessary, how much *samādhi* is necessary? It is the function of mindfulness. When mindfulness is there, then it has the nature to bring balance between effort and concentration.

*Sati* not only performs a fundamental role in harmonizing opposites, it also provides the brilliance of a lamp in shadowy places. “Where there is light, there cannot be any darkness,” Munindra used to say. “*Sati* is always wholesome, always an illuminating factor.” He described how:

All the dirt accumulated in our unconscious, subconscious, we are just following life after life. So when you observe silence, all kinds of thoughts come up on the surface. It is not somebody sending it to us; it is part of our life. You get caught up with the thought because, say, somebody scolded you in the past but you suppressed it. But

when the mind is silent, not talking, not busy, anything can come up. At that time, you see things because of awareness. You are asked to develop mindfulness because *sati* illuminates [the] whole mental field. As soon as things come, you see them as they are. When they come in darkness, they get fed; when there is light, they get dissolved, they remain unfed, unnourished. Our duty is just to observe. Passive observer: You have nothing to do. When you are running after this sight or this sound or this thought, you are wasting your energy, no? Mind becomes exhausted. But when you are a passive observer, if anything comes up, you see it in the light of mindfulness and it dissolves.

Mindfulness, thus, also has the function to protect, “guarding the mind from impurities, defilements, negativities,” Munindra said.

By watching all six sense doors, you will not get involved. But when you condemn, you recondition; when you cling, you recondition. When you experience and [do] not identify, when there is no clinging, no condemning, it is called cleansing, deconditioning. [A] process of purification is going on, [a] process of unfolding. Mindfulness is the main factor that eliminates the three root evils—greed, hatred, delusion.

Kamala Masters once asked Munindra whether he got angry. He told her,

Yes, anger comes, but there is a sign, a signal. There is a feeling; it’s uncomfortable. So when there is that sign, do not let it [anger] come out of your mouth, do not let it go into your actions. You just let it pass. Be mindful—watch it, [noting to yourself,] “anger, anger, anger.”

Munindra also made clear that anger is not an unchanging block of emotion. Caitriona Reed paraphrases his advice to someone who talked about repeatedly getting angry: “Notice the anger, and notice it’s not the same anger. You say you keep getting angry, but just notice carefully and you’ll see that every time it’s a different anger.” Because mindfulness has the nature to penetrate through all psychic layers into the depth of mind, it affords the opportunity to deal with the past, present, and future in a new way. Munindra said,

By constant practice, our whole inner being comes into the conscious level—nothing remains hidden. It is the process of self-discovery. As you go deeper and deeper, then those impressions that accumulate in our daily lives by action and reaction will come up on the surface level, and they are washed away. In every moment—sometimes happiness, sometimes unhappiness, sometimes good, sometimes bad, sometimes disturbed, sometimes concentrated—one’s duty is just to be mindful, not to be stuck to any phenomena, and not to react. The Buddha always said to be mindful and equanimous. Awareness and equanimity, these two factors go together.



*Just Remember This*

Munindra’s simple instructions still have the power to support his students. Erica Falkenstein remarks, “In times of stress, I always hear Munindra-ji saying, ‘Moment to moment,’ and it helps me focus.” A similar thing happens for Max Schorr: “He was such an amazing teacher that whenever you’d be in contact with him, he would bring you to more mindfulness. Just seeing him walk, the way he was so deliberate and caring and overtly compassionate and mindful himself, had a powerful effect on me. Now, whenever I even think of him, it brings a little bit more mindfulness.” What prompts Oren Sofer is recalling Munindra’s exhortation before leaving the room after a talk: “Just remember this—everything should be done mindfully.”

For Munindra, mindfulness illuminated a clear direction to *nibbāna*:

If we know how to live at this present moment, mindfully and clean [i.e., with *sīla* (virtue)], then the next moment comes all right and we build our future. Working in this way, walking on the middle path, leads you toward liberation, total freedom from the cycle of birth and death.

*This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting  
of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and grief,  
for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of nibbāna—  
namely, the foundations of mindfulness.*

— the Buddha, MN 10.2

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*sati*: from *smr* or *sar* (to remember, to have in mind). Most frequently, *sati* is translated as “mindfulness,” but also as “recollection,” “wakefulness of mind,” “attentiveness,” “the state of not forgetting,” and “nonconfusion.” When considered synonymous with *appamāda*, *sati* is “watchfulness” or “vigilance,” a presence of mind that guards it from what is unskillful or unwholesome. Combined with *sampajañña*, it is “clear comprehension” or “clarity of consciousness” or “alertness.”

Because its chief characteristic is “not floating away” (*apilāpanatā*), *sati* stays with an object. It is direct and objective knowing of all mental and physical activities, uncolored by misrepresentation or judgment. For that reason, the *satipatthāna* (four foundations, or establishings, of mindfulness: body, feelings, mind, and mind-objects) are a primary practice for developing both insight and concentration, as well as for living daily life. They do not foster memory in the Western sense of the past. Rather, they promote “proper” remembering (i.e., “keeping in mind”) with wisdom (*paññā*), which sees things as they truly are: impersonal processes or phenomena that are impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not-self. Such insight leads eventually to the uprooting of all defilements, to liberation.

*Sati* appears several times in the thirty-seven requisites of awakening: as the seventh link (*sammā-sati*) of the Eightfold Path, as one of five spiritual faculties (*indriya*) or powers (*bala*), and as one of seven factors of awakening (*bojjhanga*). It plays a central role in balancing the other factors.

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## 2

## If You're Not Happy In Body, You're Not Happy Out of Body

*Samādhi* (One-Pointedness of Mind)

*These miraculous powers are not important; liberation is important.*  
—Munindra

### *Be an Ordinary Person*

In the late 1970s, when Munindra first began to tour and teach in the West, an invitation from Gregg Galbraith brought him to Columbia, Missouri, where he stayed with Ginny Morgan. Ever eager to share Dharma, Munindra suggested that she gather some Buddhists to ask him questions. At that time there were no practice groups or *sanghas* in the area. However, at Ginny's request, a community radio station announced that a spiritual teacher would be at her house and people could come for an hour to talk with him.

"Sure enough, some people showed up," Ginny recalls. "One of them was a sixteen-year-old boy who had a Carlos Castaneda book under his arm. He was just the sweetest, most open human being. The others were kind of intimidated by Munindra, but this boy could not get enough of him. He sat as close as he could get. When Munindra asked, 'Does anyone have questions?' this boy said, 'Yes. I want to know how to leave my body.'"

Munindra looked at the boy and said, "You want to leave your body?" And the kid said, "Yes. You see, I'm not happy. My whole life is miserable, and I just can't stand it another minute. I want to leave." (Ginny comments that this was amazing because the boy's demeanor was not miserable; he seemed interested, joyful, and energetic.) Munindra looked at him, patted him on the knee, and said, "If you're not happy in body, you're not happy out of body."

The boy gasped and said, "Oh, well, Carlos Castaneda says . . ." Munindra patted him on the knee again and said, "I know of this man. He's not happy either. Please, if you can listen to me, I will save you many steps. Yes, these kinds of mystical things are possible, but you will get caught in this power and you'll go around and around many lifetimes. Please, listen to me now, and I will save you many steps. Be an ordinary person: Get married, have children, cook breakfast. Be present in your life."

### *Learning to Fly*

Fascination with so-called magical powers that can arise from intense *samādhi* prompted people to inquire about them. In the early 1980s, when Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (the founder of Transcendental Meditation) was teaching students to fly, Marvel Logan (then known as Mahesh but now Bhante Vimalaraṅsi) asked Munindra what he thought about this. Munindra wanted to know how much the course cost. When Marvel told him it was about two thousand dollars, Munindra quipped, “I can fly around the world for two thousand dollars.” “OK,” said Marvel, “I guess I know what you think about that then.”

Munindra was not only being practical about money, he was also saying that ultimately such abilities are inconsequential. Asked whether he could teach his students to fly, Munindra said, “Oh, yes, I could teach you that. But it would be easier to buy a plane ticket.”

It is not that Munindra thought that *samādhi*, the basis of these sorts of magical powers, was useless or unnecessary. He taught that *samādhi* is a means, not an end. Denise Till comments, “He never wanted to talk about past lives or future lives. He wasn’t into all this psychic business or clairvoyance. He said, ‘That’s just part of the path on the way. You drop all that. You let go of the *samādhis* you go into. The essence of the path is attaining liberation.’”

### *Understanding Samaḍhi*

In studying the Pāli Canon, Munindra found that the Buddha spoke of and taught two kinds of meditation: concentration development and insight development. He explained,

To start with, concentration is necessary. We are beings of the sensual plane (*kāmaloka*). Our mind is generally diffused, scattered. Constantly we are coming in contact with six kinds of objects—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and thought. Our mind is wandering from one object to another moment to moment. *Samatha-bhāvanā* (concentration development) is a means for calming the mind. Buddha has mentioned there are many methods for it, such as visualization and chanting. From the wandering state of mind, we are trying to fix bare attention on a particular object, ignoring all other objects. Attention means to be with the object. This also goes with one-pointedness, but they are two different things. Supposing one gives attention toward fighting, killing, robbing. It is called improper attention; it is wrong *samādhi*. As soon as mindfulness joins with the mind, then all the factors become purified because mindfulness is always wholesome, always an illuminating factor.

As human beings, we have the potentiality to attain all kinds of happiness, all kinds of higher experiences. But as long as we are in the world of senses and concepts, certain forces pull us down. Those forces are called *nīvarana* (hindrances)—sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and doubt. As soon as we try to practice meditation, to collect our mind, these hindrances come on the way. When concentration is highly cultivated, one comes to the *jhānic* plane, experiencing absorptions, a state of stillness, a blissful state. Then the five mental hindrances are suppressed, go down to the bottom.

Munindra described the five *jhānic* factors that have the power to block *nīvarana*: Mindfulness stops the wandering mind; rapture stops irritation; happiness stops worry and anxiety; sustained thought stops doubt; and applied thought stops laziness (sloth and torpor).

What are these *jhānas*? They can go higher and higher but they are all conditioned, mundane, not supramundane, not beyond. But these absorptions are helpful to collect and compose the mind, to suppress all these negative forces that come on the way.

To help students better understand, Munindra made the following comparison:

If we want to throw something upward, it comes down because of the gravitational pull of the universe. But the tremendous force of a rocket surpasses [that] and becomes weightless—gravity cannot bring it down. If you go higher, then forces of a higher planet pull you toward that. In the same way, as long as we are in this ordinary level, we don't feel the gravity of the hindrances. But as soon as we try to concentrate our mind, then these negative forces come. Constant effort, constant mindfulness [remembering to bring the mind back to the object], makes the mind very powerful and sharp. Then these hindrances are suppressed. The *jhāna* factors of absorption cause the mind to surpass this state. They come to a higher level and become prominent, and they make the mind strong. Interest is there. Enthusiasm is there. Mind becomes easier.

Nevertheless, Munindra cautioned his students about such altered states of consciousness:

This *jhāna* itself is not enlightenment. It is liberation only in the sense that one has transcended negative forces, the hindrances. A human being is now in a position to experience incredible bliss, but it is not sensual happiness—it is not dependent on pleasant sensual objects—it is mental happiness. Even higher *jhāna*, where one can experience infinite consciousness, is also not enlightenment.

When he gave dharma talks, Munindra distinguished between *sati* (mindfulness) and *samādhi* (concentration) as two different but complementary methods, supporting each other for the purpose of gaining insight (*vipassanā*) and wisdom (*paññā*) toward attaining liberation. *Samādhi* or *samatha* can ease the way. Munindra identified three ways to awaken: First do *samatha* practice and apply the calm and collected mind for *vipassanā*; or else practice *samatha* and *vipassanā* together; or practice only *vipassanā*. He said,

Supposing you want to cross a big river. You can cross by swimming, but you can use [a] boat also. A boat is much easier, more pleasant. If you have *samatha-vipassanā*—when you know both—you have the boat and can quickly cross this river. But if you do not know *samatha*, you have to use [your] hands and feet. Without *samatha* practice, it is called *sukkha-vipassanā* (dry *vipassanā*). It is good to know both.

### *Deep Concentration and Supernormal States*

During his long teaching career, Munindra, like the Buddha, did not encourage cultivation of the “magical powers” that can result from deep states of concentration. The Buddha banned his disciples from exhibiting in front of laypeople the various *iddhis* or *siddhis*—ranging from clairvoyance, clairaudience, invisibility, and teleportation to accessing memories from past lives. He also prohibited using such powers unless one was fully awakened. The Buddha himself possessed all the supernormal abilities, but he employed them as an aid in reaching people and bringing them to Dharma, rather than for show. Only those who experience a level of realization can be trusted with *siddhis*, because, as Munindra noted, “*Samatha* can be misused. By thought force, you can kill, you can rob—you can do many wrongs. *Samatha* purifies the mind temporarily. It is very useful for developing vipassanā, for developing anything good.”

While Munindra was in training in Burma, Mahāsi Sayādaw, recognizing his attainment and sincerity, suggested that he learn these supernormal perceptual states before returning to India, the land of *siddhis*. However, because Sayādaw had already assigned him to teach meditation to Bengalis, Nepalis, and other Asians living in Rangoon who came to the center, Munindra did not have the time and seclusion necessary for *samatha-bhāvanā*. He did, however, decide to experiment with his most advanced students.

Munindra wanted to challenge the conventional thinking of his time that said, “We cannot learn those things; they have disappeared now; we have to wait for the next Buddha to come.” Such doubt aroused his interest in finding out what was true, just as it had during his childhood, when people said no one had attained or could attain awakening since the Buddha’s era.

When I studied Dhamma thoroughly, when I experienced it for myself, I found that this idea was not correct. Buddha said anybody who practices Dhamma in this way can experience Dhamma anytime. Because people do not study Dhamma thoroughly, and also most of the time they do not practice thoroughly, they say something else. They talk mostly about *dāna* and *sīla*, not very much about the practice.

Such views regarding obstacles to awakening in contemporary times were quite common until the latter half of the twentieth century. Munindra had a hand in changing them, starting with an experiment. He chose certain students for their purity of heart. He said that people must fully know Dhamma first, because if they were not deeply rooted in it, they might go astray and become overly fascinated with what he called “miraculous powers.” He felt no concern that these particular students would get addicted to such states and inflate their ego.

Despite the potential for abuse, Munindra said,

Understanding *samatha*—what it is, how it is—is not a bad thing. Buddha [had] all these [powers]. You can play with your mind. From first *jhāna*, you can go to second *jhāna*; from second *jhāna*, you can go to eighth *jhāna*; from eighth *jhāna*, you can come to first *jhāna*. You can play with your mind! It is a blessing. But *samatha* is done only to understand vipassanā thoroughly. *Jhāna* cannot eliminate defilements,

negativities—all kinds of greed and hate and delusion. Whatever we did in the past, it remains. That cannot be cleaned by *samādhi* or by *sīla*; only by vipassanā it can be cleaned. When mind is silent, they [the defilements] come up on the surface. As soon as they come up, you see them as they are—the factors of darkness. But if your mind is illuminated, as soon as they come, they don't get fed and they die out. So, in this way, all the past is cleaned.

Munindra described some of the results of training a few students in *samatha-bhāvanā*. He basically followed part two of the *Visuddhimagga* (The Path to Purity), a fifth-century Theravāda commentary by Buddhaghosa. Depending on the *jhāna* entered, the meditators were able to visit other realms or other times, because “the mind can travel anywhere and see anything” or do any number of things. “When mind is absorbed in a deep *jhānic* state, then you are gone beyond physical consciousness,” Munindra clarified. “If anybody pierces you, you do not feel pain. You do not hear any sound.”

Dipa Ma was one of the students Munindra guided in accessing eight classical *jhānic* states and the *siddhis*. According to an interview Jack Engler conducted with her, she once resolved to enter and remain in the eighth *jhāna* for three days, eight hours, three minutes, and twenty seconds. Precisely at the end of that period, she came out of it. She was able to perform the five supernatural yet mundane powers. For example, from his room at the Mahāsi Sayādaw center, Sasana Yeiktha in Rangoon, Munindra noticed her in the air near the tops of the trees, playing in a room she had built in the sky by transforming the air element into the earth element. On other occasions, she and her sister Hema Prabha Barua spontaneously appeared in his room for interviews. Dipa Ma could also leave by going through the closed door or the nearest wall. She learned to cook by making the fire element emerge from her hands, and she duplicated her body in order to have someone accompany her if she had to walk alone at night.

To verify these human capacities and dispel the doubts of a highly skeptical professor of Ancient Indian history at Magadh University in Bodh Gaya, Munindra set up a simple trial. The professor stationed a graduate student in Munindra's room at Samanvaya, the Gandhi ashram, to watch Dipa Ma in meditation. Though she never got up and left, she showed up at the professor's office miles away and conversed with him.

Munindra also tested her power to move back and forth through time. For example, when he knew that U Thant, the Burmese diplomat, was scheduled to give a speech at the United Nations accepting his appointment as secretary-general, he asked Dipa Ma to go into the future and remember his words. Munindra wrote down what she said and later, after U Thant spoke, he compared it with the speech. They were identical.

Dipa Ma was able to do all this and much more. Yet, she told Jack Engler that none of it is important because it does not purify or liberate; it does not generate understanding or end suffering. And that is what Munindra emphasized to Sharda Rogell decades later when she wanted to know more about concentration practice and to understand how Dipa Ma had psychic powers. He told her,

This really isn't so important. It's not the best way for you to spend your time. When I came back to India, many students who had done *jhānas* and had some miraculous power said, “This power has gone. I cannot do it.” Dipa Ma only had psychic powers

when she was in retreat, in deep states of concentration, but she couldn't sustain those powers outside. I said, "You learned that those things can be done, that people can be trained in *abhiññā* [the six higher powers or psychic abilities], but don't bother for all those things."

Munindra elucidated the limitations of the *jhāna* experience:

Our hindrances are suppressed, but they are not eliminated from the inner mind, from the unconscious level. As long as you remain in *jhāna*, you are free from these negative forces, but you are not totally free. As a human being, you cannot stay there long because your body belongs to the physical plane, so you have to come back. When [we] come back and come in contact with the sense objects, then we get attached to sense pleasures; we cling, we condemn. Irritation comes, anger comes, hatred comes, or greed comes. There is every possibility of falling from the *jhāna* again if there is no understanding, no wisdom. Then we feel sad.

Munindra pointed out that, unlike *jhāna*, insight meditation (*vipassanā*) does have the power to eliminate, step-by-step, all the inherent, dormant forces such as fetters, defilements, and hindrances, and to entirely uproot them from the unconscious level.

### *Helping Others to Concentrate*

Munindra himself never went through a course of training in intensive *samādhi* practice. His main practice focused on insight throughout his life. Nonetheless, he experienced great concentration in meditation, being able to sit for many hours, and he applied it in daily life. "By living with him, you could really learn to appreciate the power and benefits of just plain meditative concentration," says Uffe Damborg. Munindra explained, "You can develop *samādhi* in day-to-day life by cultivating mindfulness."

Tapas Kumar Barua comments that, as an academic student, he felt overwhelmed by everyday worries, and they interfered with his daily activities. His uncle, Munindra, provided him with a simple solution: "It's quite possible that you are trying to do a lot in just a single frame of mind, so half the mind is there and half is here. Try to concentrate your mind on one thing because you will find the benefit instantly. Start doing it."

The memory of Munindra's guidance has also helped others with concentration. On retreat in 1980 at Sasana Yeiktha, in Rangoon, Ven. Khippapañño found that when he was not fully aware of the rising and falling of the abdomen, he did not achieve complete concentration. Recalling Munindra's instruction to focus on the abdomen transformed his meditation. "Then I go deep into *samādhi* and there is no wandering, no thinking," he says. "So when I am sitting in meditation and my meditation is not good, I think of Munindra's words from the first time I met him [in Bodh Gaya, 1967]. Then meditation comes quickly, automatically, similar to the engine of the car. I turn the key and my concentration comes."



### *Seemingly Psychic*

Though Munindra did not exhibit the same powers as Dipa Ma, his own level of concentration was such that he appeared to sense acutely what was going on with his students. Ginny Morgan recounts an uncanny experience she had in a car with Munindra. She was in the backseat, and the driver was saying things that she found insensitive. “I was sitting back there thinking, ‘Ugh, this man is just rude.’ Munindra turned around and looked at me and said, ‘Ginny, what are you thinking?’ I looked at him and smiled. Then he held his hand out and said, ‘No, don’t answer. Just know that there is suffering in your mind; it is not happening in anyone else’s mind, only in yours.’ I thought, ‘Dang! Caught in the act.’ I just laughed, and so did he.”

Although Munindra never claimed to communicate telepathically, there are people whose experiences made them wonder. Daw Than Myint and her mother Hema Prabha Barua made a habit of visiting him every evening at Sasana Yeiktha, not far from their house. She remembers, “On some days, when I was feeling tired or it seemed there was nothing new to report, I would tell my mother, ‘Today we won’t go. I’ll go early in the morning.’ But then sometimes my mother and I could not stay at home. She wouldn’t say anything, but I’d ask her, ‘How about going today?’ ‘I’m ready to go,’ she’d say. Then we’d leave and find him walking at the top of the hill, waiting for us. Maybe in his mind he was calling us. After a few times, my mother and I suspected this, so we asked him, ‘Munindra-ji, did you call us? We decided not to come today and suddenly we had to come.’ He wouldn’t deny it or confirm it. He would say, ‘Oh, it’s just your faith, your *saddhā*.’”

Daw Than Myint notes that this happened to other people as well. On one occasion, when Munindra found some difficulty in translation, he was very eager to consult with an Indian man who could translate from Bengali to Burmese. But the man lived nine miles from the center. Since Munindra was in retreat, he could not leave to look for him, and there was no phone contact. Yet early the next day, the man came knocking at his door and said, “I just wanted to come.”

### *Ordinary and Extraordinary*

Munindra eschewed talking about past lives or future lives, perhaps because it was a hot topic and bandied about without discretion, but some of his Asian students could see such lives and were convinced they had shared an earlier lifetime with him. Munindra was open to other worlds and different dimensions of reality. Recalling the early years in Bodh Gaya, John Travis says, “I listened to him go into great detail, sometimes for two hours. There was this incredible excitement about the Buddhist cosmology. You felt like you were surrounded by *devas* and all kinds of unseen things, in some way. He had that twinkle in his eye about the unseen. It was not just a belief system for him.”

Yet, in his inclination and recommendation toward ordinariness—his goal was insight not magic—and his ability to concentrate deeply, he was still extraordinary. As Roy Bonney puts it, “Munindra’s gift was his ordinariness as an expression of his extraordinary experience.”

Some of his old students comment that when certain teachers walked into a room, they sent a palpable wave of powerful energy, but when Munindra passed by, nothing special happened. Yet, therein was the appeal. “That’s what I liked about Munindra, that

he was normal,” says Grahame White. “It’s one of the reasons why he didn’t attract a lot of people—he had a very simple sort of persona. Like the Dalai Lama says, ‘I’m just a simple monk.’ That’s what Munindra was like.”

*This holy life does not have gain, honor, and renown for its benefit . . .  
or the attainment of concentration for its benefit. . . . But it is this  
unshakable deliverance of mind that is the goal of this  
holy life, its heartwood, and its end.*

—the Buddha, MN 30.23

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*samādhi*: from *sam* (together) + *ā* (toward) + *dhā* (to get, to hold), a coming together rather than a scattering apart; or from *samā* (even) + *dhi* (intellect), a state of complete equilibrium of a detached intellect. *Samādhi* is generally understood as the fixing of the mind on a single object—unification or one-pointedness of mind (*ekaggatā*). The mind remains steady, unmoved, unperturbed, and undistracted by sense objects.

*Samādhi* ranges in intensity from “preparatory concentration” at the beginning of the mental exercise, to “neighborhood concentration” nearing the first *jhāna*, and to “attainment concentration” during absorption. When *samādhi* is present at the four noble path- and fruition-moments (*magga phala*), with *nibbāna* as the object, it is associated with the supramundane. All other kinds of concentration, no matter how blissful, are mundane. An important role of the teacher is clarification of this distinction.

Since *samādhi* helps settle the mind and inhibit the five hindrances (*nīvarana*), it affords the space in which to see clearly and penetrate to insight. Concentration is also the basis for the six *abhiññā* (supernormal knowledges), including magical powers (*iddhis* or *siddhis*). Because some powers can be misused, traditionally they are considered a distraction from the ultimate goal of complete freedom from suffering.

The second of the Eightfold Path’s three divisions is *samādhi* (*sīla* is the first and *paññā* is the third), which consists of right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. As *sammā-samādhi* (right concentration), it is the path’s last link, defined as the four meditative absorptions (*jhāna*), and associated with karmically wholesome consciousness. It is one of seven factors of awakening (*bojjhanga*) and one of five spiritual faculties (*indriya*) or powers (*bala*).

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