



## Body Wise

By Kamalamani

# Meditating with Character

*"It must be really anchoring to practise a faith."*

*"Oh you meditate, that's why you're so calm."*

*"Retreat's must be so peaceful, I'd go- if only I had the time."*

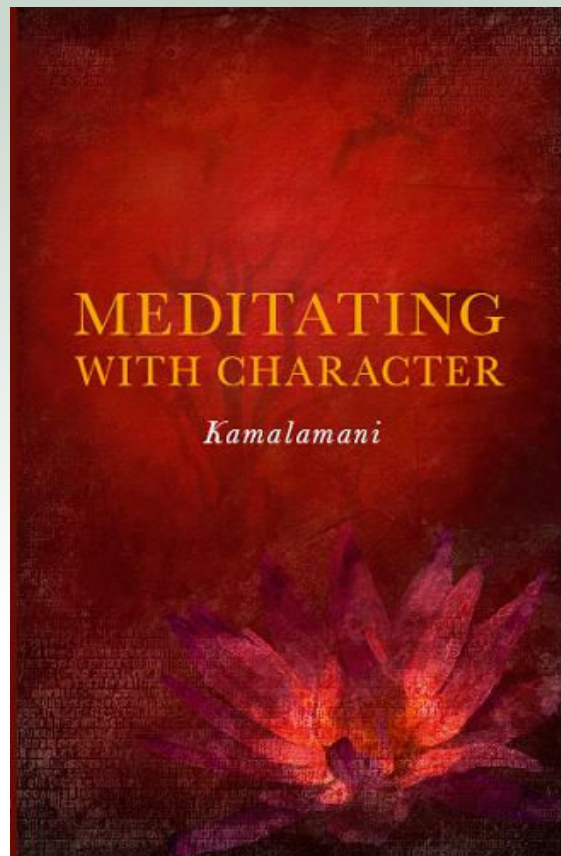
**I chuckle to myself when I hear these** well-meant comments from friends when they discover that I'm a Buddhist. In response, I find anchoring comes and goes; I'm calm in the way that a swan looks calm, paddling like mad beneath the unruffled surface of the water. And, yes, I suggest they make time to go on retreat, so long as they're prepared to cherish boredom and all the other mental states that will happen along. Rather than being anchoring, practising Buddhism and meditating have been more akin to having an invisible depth charge planted in my heart-mind.

**Right now, Buddhism and meditation are** on trend, and it is likely there are more folk

meditating and practising - particularly mindfulness - in the western world than ever before. Which, of course, is great news. Except that misconceptions abound about what meditation and practice are. The dangers of 'spiritual bypassing' (Welwood, 2000) are as present as ever, with spiritual practice having the potential to be yet another drug of choice; a realm in which we run the risk of seeking escapism and fantasy, near enemies indeed. Welwood coined the phrase 'spiritual bypassing' in noticing the tendency of western spiritual seekers to use spiritual ideas and practices to "avoid dealing with their emotional unfinished business" (Welwood, 2000, p. 5).

**After 20 years of sitting on the cushion,** or more honestly, struggling to get to the cushion (sitting's the easier part), I can still magically find myself on my feet with the kettle on in a split second. I am more appreciative of the messiness of meditation and the simple, beautiful, complexity of the Dharma—the teachings of the Buddha— than ever before. Being taught to meditate was the most valuable thing I've learnt, second only to watching myself try every tool in my extensive tool box in *avoiding* meditation and practice.

**To draw upon the language of Reich, we** meditate and practice *in character*. That's likely to mean that part of us longs to meditate and practise, the other part's running in the opposite direction. Bringing together character structure and meditation practice is profound in understanding the messier and out-of-bounds bits of our experience and embodiment. This fascination with the interface between meditation, the Dharma, and neo-Reichian character structure was what lead me to write my first book 'Meditating with Character' (The grand irony was that I spent three years doing far



more writing about meditation than actually meditating. There's always a catch . . .).

**My most familiar characterological** strategies are to ping between my top and tail, head and pelvis: either distracting myself in the world of analytical thinking and existential questioning, or bouncing around, entertaining myself and the world, being endlessly and tirelessly fascinating. I distract myself with fantastically complex questions about the nature of existence - a Buddhist speciality, especially with all those lists of teachings. Or entertaining myself whilst bringing to mind the Buddha upon whom I meditate, running a full colour Blu Ray quality film rather than engaging with the koans of form and emptiness, self and other, and self and no self.

**I've learned about the simple bliss of** making contact with my experience through meditation and character structure. My

I relish the texture of the breath, how its movement brushes my clothes against my body. It rolls on, no pushing or pulling, no beginning or end. Occupying this sense of being a body, even though there's nothing to occupy apart from sensations, feelings, thoughts, and even they keep changing.

'heady' part can now more easily dissolve into the ease of just sensing the softening of the scalp. In fleeting flashes, there is no me or mine in the way I conceive of me or mine in my every day mind. There's just this body, sitting and noticing sensations arise and fall, nothing to do, nowhere to go. A sigh on the out breath as my shoulders drop a few millimetres and I soften into the earth.



'Anchor' by H el ene Fletcher, Cornwall-based artist.  
<http://www.helenefletcher.net/>

**The entertaining side of my character** inwardly cries out at the relief of being quiet; no audience, performance, or rush. The only job is to be enchanted by the breath and its awesomeness. I relish the texture of the breath, how its movement brushes my clothes against my body. It rolls on, no pushing or pulling, no beginning or end. Occupying this sense of being a body, even though there's nothing to occupy apart from sensations, feelings, thoughts, and even they keep changing. Fear arising as I have no one to entertain but myself, breathing into that fear, surrounding that fear with loving-kindness, I settle and feel an unclenching deep within myself.

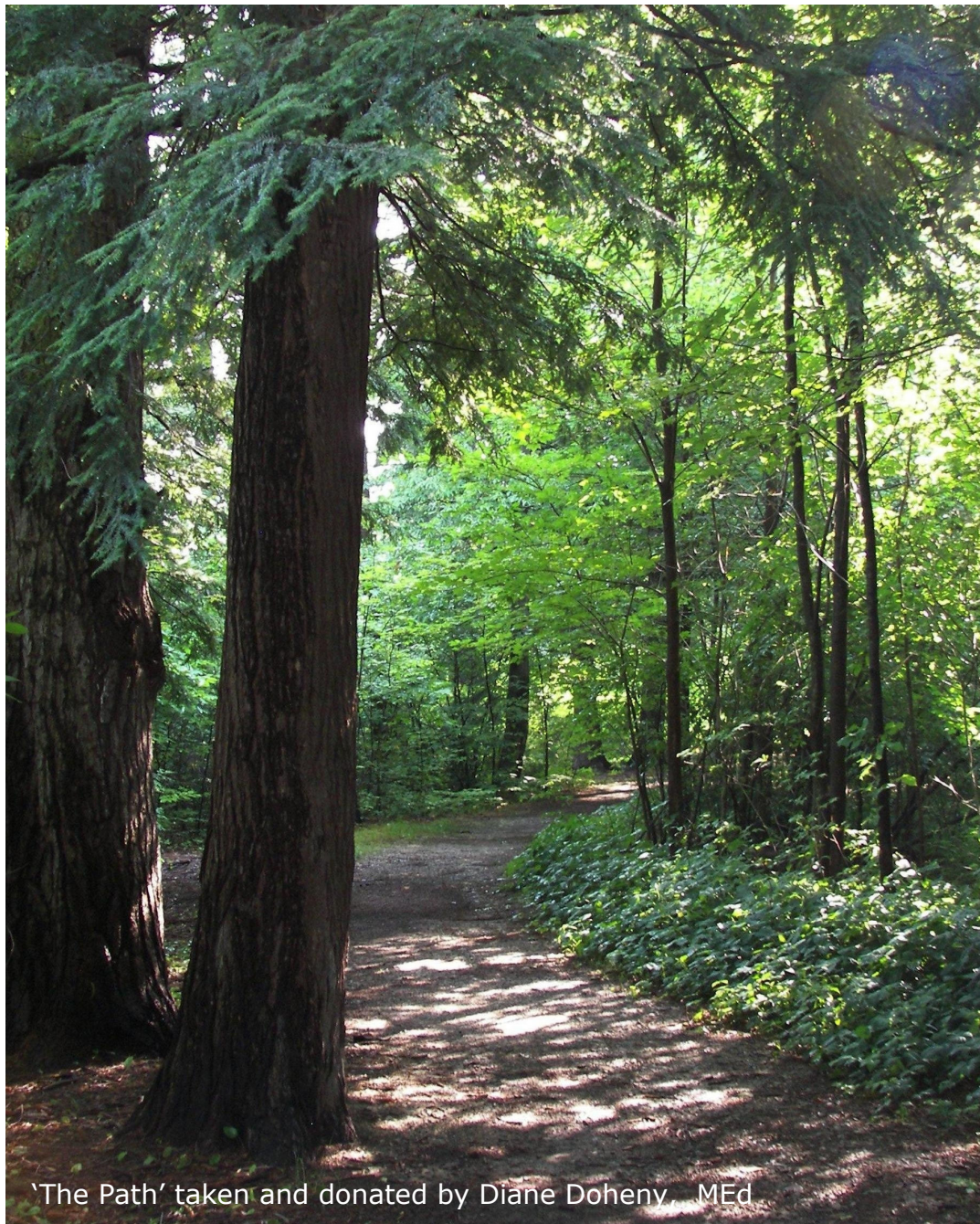
**After 20 years of meditation and practice,** I *do* feel more anchored and calm, but those have arisen as much from the struggles and messiness of staying with my experience as the moments of bliss and inspiration. My experience of meditating with character in mind has been that it's hard to spiritually bypass *anything*, because you are more likely to witness what you're doing, as you do it, becoming more aware of your armouring, little by little. Not comfortable, maybe, but growthful. Spirituality has to be embodied, else it probably isn't spirituality. Meditation and embodied practice offer us an amazing doorway into the heart of the furnace of seeing how our characters were formed from pre-conception to the present day (and how character can change in the furnace's heat). To enter so deeply into our habits and strategies, our views and beliefs, that we come out the other side and wonder what the fuss was all about.

Until, of course, we encounter the next layer of habits and strategies, views and beliefs . . .

**Being a Dharma practitioner** feels like being an archaeologist, as does practising body psychotherapy. In my practice of embodied spirituality, the theme of this edition, I sift layer upon layer of interesting sediment and different rock strata, each with their historical era and particular properties. We can easily think that the strata are fossilised - character armouring can feel so solid and immovable - but so often that's the story of the clutter in the mind and not the story of the integrating body-mind and the story it has to tell when we listen in

with care, patience, and a growing capacity to dialogue with the multitudes of parts of ourselves, and hopefully, interested others.

**The spiritual life is a warrior's path.** Not necessarily because it has to involve noble quests, long nights of the soul, or jaw-dropping self-sacrifice - although those seem to happen at various stages - but because it takes training, discipline, persistence, tenacity, a sense of humour, a leap of faith, and an appreciation of the absurd to keep on going. Of course, it's also an ordinary path.



'The Path' taken and donated by Diane Doheny, MEd

More than anything these days my practice also relies upon leaving from time to time the built, grey world of surfaces and straight lines to encounter greener pathways and hedges; where bird song is louder than human chatter. Where I'm more likely to hear the meow of the cat stalking me, and the rippit of a frog looking for a twilight mate rather than the shrieks of the police sirens. Where I touch soil and weeds rather than keyboard and phone. It's a relief to remember, in these precious moments, that humanity is but one species of life on earth.

I move through the landscape and the landscape moves me. I strike the balance between moving and sitting; not moving enough leads to tightness, constriction, and rusty joints, when meditation calls for looseness, expansion, and fluidity. Embodied spirituality doesn't make sense to me unless I remember my place in the other-than-human world. I can't explain that in words, but luckily Jung can, and did, way before me:

*"For it is the body, the feeling, the instincts, which connect us with the soil. If you give up the past you naturally detach from the past; you lose your roots in the soil, your connection with the totem ancestors that dwell in the soil. You turn outward and drift away, and try to conquer other lands because you are exiled from your own soil" (Jung in Sabini, 2002, p.73).*

**So, as we practise, may we love the** mess as much as we love the inspiration, remember our uniqueness as well as our similarity with all our living beings, and practise hard whilst we simultaneously lighten up and cackle at the absurdity of it all. In the first decade of practice I was seeking meaning in things. In the second decade I was practising so as to meet fully the world as I find it. Let's see what the third decade brings. In the words of a respected colleague, the Jungian Analyst and public intellectual, Andrew Samuels:

*"I seek to advance a vision of spirituality that is regular, ubiquitous and permeates every*

*aspect of existence. It is not intended to be a lofty, exhortative, sermonising approach. Quite the opposite. My take on spirituality discerns its worm-like nature, not its eagle-like nature. Spirituality as an underneath as well as an over the top thing. And because approaches to spirituality so easily go over the top, it is often better to stay underneath" (Samuels, 2002 ).*

**Kalamani is an Embodied-Relational** therapist, Wild therapist, supervisor, facilitator, and writer, living and working in Bristol, England. She's been a practicing Buddhist since her early 20s and loves seeing how age-old teachings and practices are relevant to contemporary life. She works at the interface of body psychotherapy, ecopsychology and ecodharma, drawing upon her experiences of being a development worker in sub-Saharan Africa, a lecturer in International Development at the University of Bristol, her current meditation practice and being a child lost and found in nature. She is currently finishing her second book 'Other than Mother: Choosing Childlessness with Life in mind'. [www.kalamani.co.uk](http://www.kalamani.co.uk)

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