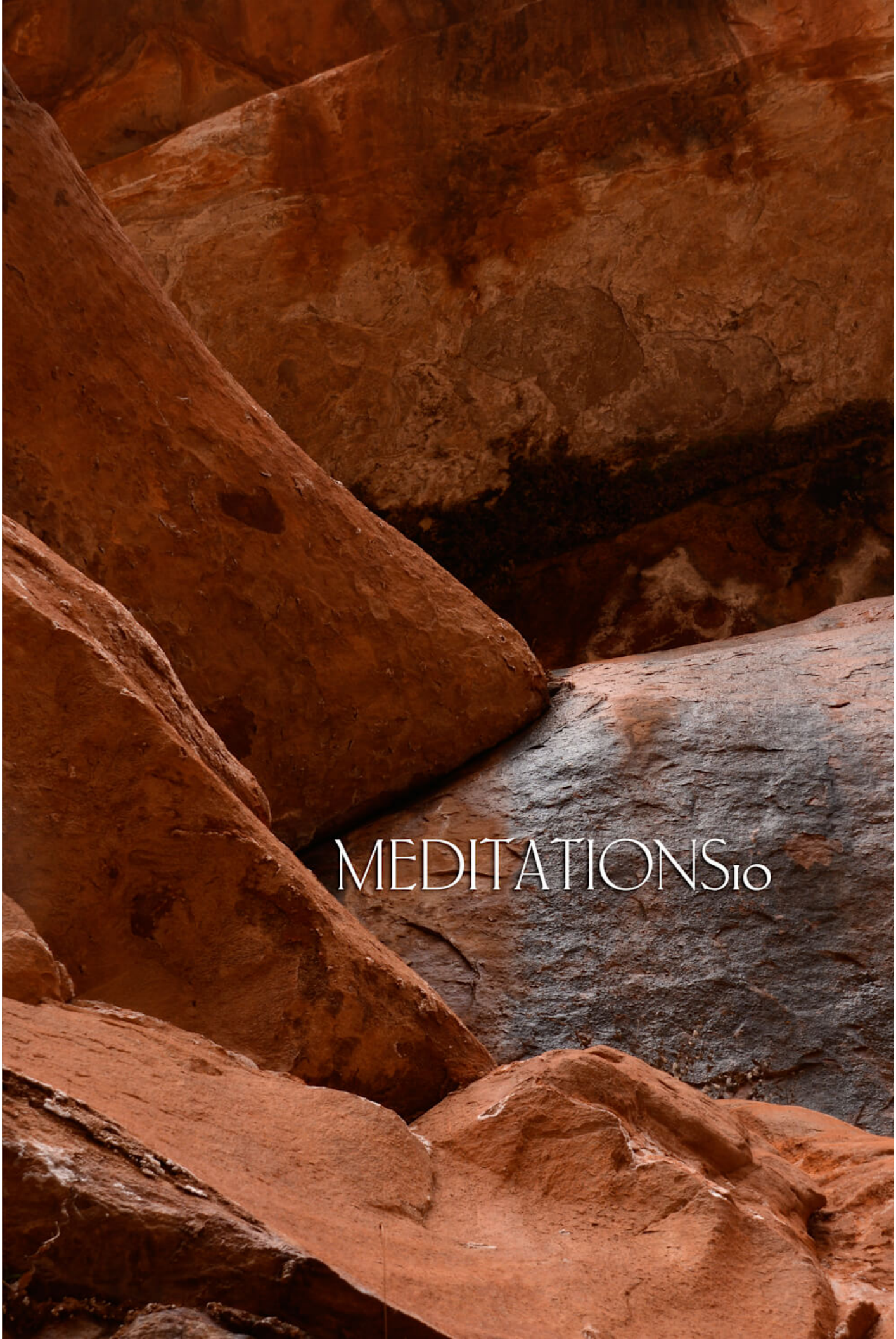
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Meditations 10

Dhamma Talks

by

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Introduction

The daily schedule at Metta Forest Monastery includes a group interview in the late afternoon and, later in the evening, a chanting session followed by a group meditation period. The Dhamma talks included in this volume were given during the evening meditation sessions, and in many cases covered issues raised at the interviews—either in the questions asked or lurking behind the questions. Often these issues touched on a variety of topics on a variety of different levels in the practice. This explains the range of topics covered in individual talks.

I have edited the talks with an eye to making them readable while at the same time trying to preserve some of the flavor of the spoken word. In a few instances I have added passages or rearranged the talks to make the treatment of specific topics more coherent and complete, but for the most part I have kept the editing to a minimum. Don't expect polished essays.

The people listening to these talks were familiar with the meditation instructions included in "Method 2" in *Keeping the Breath in Mind* by Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo; and my own book, *With Each & Every Breath.* If you are not familiar with these instructions, you might want to read through them before reading the talks in this book. Additional Dhamma talks are available at www.dhammatalks.org.

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As with the previous volumes in this series, I would like to thank Bok Lim Kim for making the recording of these talks possible. She, more than anyone else, is responsible for overcoming my initial reluctance to have the talks recorded. I would also like to thank the following people for transcribing the talks and/or helping to edit the transcriptions: James Babbitt, Deane Cameron, Jeff Colonel, Amala Ghosh, Melissa Graben, Katie Hoody, Andrea Kessler, Linda Knudsen, Virginia Lawrence, Carol McDonald, Addie Onsanit, Elaine Thompson, Isabella Trauttmansdorff,

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Thanissaro Bhikkhu

Metta Forest Monastery
September, 2020

More than Ordinary Heedfulness

October 22, 2019

The Buddha said that all skillful qualities have their root in heedfulness. This emphasis on heedfulness is one of the remnants of Buddhism's wilderness source: The Buddha gained his awakening in the wilderness, passed away in the wilderness, and recommended that his monks go out into the wilderness. One of the qualities you need in order to survive in the wilderness is heedfulness because there are dangers on all sides.

There was a famous writer who spent a lot of time with the Inuit. When he was asked, "What was the quality that distinguished them from people in modern civilization?" he listed a few words from their language that described a quality he said he couldn't quite find the right English equivalent for: a combination of wariness, apprehension, a sense of danger present all around. That's heedfulness: the realization that there are dangers and that, to avoid them, you have to be very careful about what you do.

Where Buddhism's emphasis on heedfulness is special is that it identifies the dangers as lying primarily in the mind. But it also has a special sense of possibilities. If you don't have the confidence that your actions could lead to safety, heedfulness would be meaningless. If there were nothing but dangers all around, you couldn't do anything about them. You'd just have to give in to the dangers and get fatalistic about them. Or just stay confused.

This is why the Buddha said there's another quality that takes heedfulness and makes it a quality for awakening, and that's appropriate attention: seeing things in terms of the four noble truths and then applying the duties appropriate to the truths to what you're actually doing. The four noble truths raise our sights as to what is possible for human beings to do.

We can put an end to suffering. We don't have to keep coming back to suffer again and again and again. It lies within our power to find an escape. So here, heedfulness is combined with confidence that there is a way out.

But at the same time, this confidence makes heedfulness very demanding. There are a lot of dangers in life that people simply accept and say, "Well, that's the way life is." I was talking the other night to someone who was telling me about how she was trying to analyze her unskillful mind states as to why she would go for them. One of the conclusions she came to was that it's a normal human reaction. Other people do things that are displeasing, and the normal reaction is to get angry. You see something nice, and the normal reaction is greed. Well, it may be the normal reaction, but it's not the best. It's not the best that we're capable of.

The Buddha's actually pointing out that the mind doesn't have to stay on the "normal" human level. We meditate so that we can transform it. But how many people come to the meditation to be transformed? Most people simply want a nice place for the mind to hang out and don't ask for much change beyond that. But the Buddha's saying that if, after you've gained rest from concentration, you simply allow the mind to go back to its old habits, you're being heedless. Areas where other people didn't see dangers, he saw dangers. Areas where other people didn't see a way out, he saw a way out.

Take, for instance, our attachment to the body. It's a normal thing. As long as we have a body, we have to take care of it, and it seems natural to be attached to it. What happens, of course, is that your attachment to the body gives you a reason to be afraid of death. Simply the fact that you *have* a body leaves you open to all kinds of attacks: attacks from outside, attacks from within the body itself.

As Ajaan Funn used to like to say, every part of the body has its diseases. In fact, every part of the body, he says, *is* a disease. There are passages in the Canon that list the various diseases that can come in the different parts of the body, and he had a very creative way of translating the terms. For instance, where the Canon lists *cakkhu-rogo,* eye diseases, he

translated the passages as saying basically, "The eye *is* a disease." The simple fact that you have eyes, ears, a heart, and lungs means you're open to all the kinds of diseases that are ready to appear in the eyes, ears, heart, and lungs at any time. We just take that for granted.

But the Buddha says you don't have to. It is possible for the mind to experience formless states. Now, that may be something you don't know is possible for sure, but he recommends that you take it as a working hypothesis because it opens up possibilities for safety that you wouldn't have access to otherwise. After all, having a body requires also that you feed it. As you're looking for food, you get into conflict with other people, other beings, who are looking for their food in the same places. But if the mind can attain a formless state, it doesn't have to get into those conflicts. It's not exposed to those dangers.

As the Buddha says, whenever there's a choice between an assumption that places limits on what you can do and an assumption that opens possibilities for what you can do, it's always better to adopt the assumption that allows more possibilities for your actions. Otherwise, the simple act of assuming that there are no possibilities cuts off what might be a potential avenue that you could follow for safety and happiness.

So, we apply appropriate attention to our heedfulness, reminding ourselves that there are possibilities beyond the ordinary human level. There's a possibility of a safety beyond the ordinary human level. The mind can be perfectly fine without a body. In the higher levels of the heavens, beings are not only perfectly fine, they're much better off. As for nibbana, it has no body and it's the ultimate happiness. So turn around and look at your attachment to the body and ask yourself, "Is this something I really want to hold on to?" When you realize that you could actually be freed from the limitations of the body, then you're more likely to follow the path that would free you.

We have that contemplation of the different parts of the body. A lot of people don't like it, because they don't see it as an avenue to freedom. They just see it as bad-mouthing something that they would prefer to be

attached to. But the Buddha's telling us to question that preference. Question that attachment. Be heedful and expand your imagination through appropriate attention. Ask what possibilities of safety heedfulness might be able to bring.

So it's not simply that we're aware of dangers. That's part of heedfulness. They're all around us, especially now in the fire season. We have to be very careful. But there are greater dangers than that. There are dangers inside. At the same time, heedfulness, at least from the Buddha's point of view, encompasses confidence that there is a way out from these dangers, a total freedom from these dangers.

And even though it may be a more-than-ordinary-human level of safety, you start with ordinary human capabilities, and as you develop them they can take you there. Always keep that assumption in mind, because it's an assumption that doesn't leave you trapped in the dangers that we see all around us and in us. It opens the way out.

Worry vs. Heedfulness

November 16, 2019

Bring your attention to the breath. Try to breathe in a way that feels good. And try to stay with the breath all the way in, all the way out, each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out.

What often happens, though, is that you stay with the breath a couple of times, and then another thought comes in and it seems more interesting, more important, and you go with that. It's called a hindrance. It's the normal way of the mind, and in everyday life it doesn't seem like much is being hindered. But when you're trying to lift the mind to a higher level, thoughts like this can really get in the way. Some of them are problems in daily life as well: Ill will is a problem. Restlessness, worry, uncertainty, sleepiness: These are problems. Part of the issue is that there's an aspect to them that's sometimes skillful. With uncertainty, sometimes it's wise to be uncertain about things—in other words, not to commit yourself too quickly. With worry, there are some things that you should think about, prepare for.

There's a sutta where the Buddha talks about future dangers. A monk should contemplate the fact that death can come very easily, aging can come, illness can come very easily. Famines can happen. Societies can break down. The Sangha can split. When any of these things happen, it's going to be hard to practice. And there will be other difficulties as well.

The Buddha's response is not to pretend that these dangers are not there, but to prepare for them wisely. This is the difference between worry and heedfulness. Worry just sits there stewing and spinning its wheels, whereas heedfulness says, "Okay, there is a danger, but there's something that can be done about it." It requires a level of confidence that there is a way out, and it also requires that you put the effort in to develop the skills you'll need to protect you.

In the case of the monk reflecting in the forest about the dangers that can come in the future, the resolve is: "I should focus on trying to attain the as-yet-unattained, to reach the as-yet-unreached, to know and to see what things I haven't known and seen before"—in other words, to find something in the mind that will not be touched by the dangers. Now, that may seem far away, because the Buddha's talking about nibbana. A little bit closer are the skills you can develop as you meditate—and in particular, wisdom in terms of where you look for your happiness and for your security.

When you realize that the most important things in life are not so much your work, your family, your relationships, but rather the qualities you build into your mind, that realization puts you on the right course. When you have concentration, for instance, even though it may not be perfect, if you've got it as an internal resource, as a source of nourishment inside, then when things go bad outside, at least you've got something to turn to. When you have your virtue, when you have your endurance, when you develop the quality of determination, all these perfections are things you can hold on to.

That may be one of the reasons why the Pali name for these qualities is *parami*: When you hold on to them, they take you over to *param,* the other side of the flood that, if you're not developing the perfections, can carry you away.

So, when you find the mind worried about issues in daily life, then whether you're meditating or not, remind yourself: Where is true security going to be found? It *can* be found: That's the confidence. The next question is: What do you do to find it? That's when you direct your worry to a skill—and it's an inner skill. If you let yourself be concerned totally about things outside, you'll never find any security.

I remember talking to someone who was describing the behavior of the people on Wall Street back before the big crash. They knew that a big crash was going to come from all their risky behavior, so everybody had his or her "nut" as they called it—like a squirrel—stashed away someplace

where they felt it would be safe. He described to me what some of those safe places were, but they didn't strike me as very safe at all.

You think about the survivalists and all the food that they stash away. I know someone who's got a whole three months' worth of food stashed in his basement. But if things break down and your neighbors find out that you have food, do you think you'll be able to keep it for three months? All these provisions we make are like putting up a cardboard wall to keep the sea away when the sea is rising. You're not going to find security there.

Which means that, as you look at your body, you say, "Okay, I can't rely on this body to provide security in and of itself, but I can *use* the body to develop virtue, concentration, discernment, and *those* are the things that will provide security." Use the body to be generous, use the body to practice the precepts, use it as your topic of concentration and as your object of discernment.

Because as you focus on the body, you begin to realize you can see the mind's defilements right here in the present moment very clearly. They all come gathering around right here. If there's pain in the body—or if there's concern about the body's getting sick, the body's getting old—your fear and worry and frustration will gather right here. To counteract them, you can engage in the reflection we chanted just now on the thirty-two parts of the body. You realize there's not much there in and of itself. And if you hold on to the body for its own sake, then you'll become like those people who die and then become worms in their own corpses.

But if you use the body as a tool, you find it has a lot to offer. So think of it as a tool. It's not your haven but it can be your set of tools for finding a haven inside, in the qualities you develop in the mind. And have a lot of confidence in those qualities. There's so much about the future that you can't know, but you *do* know that if anything unexpected comes up, you're going to need mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment—all the good qualities of the mind. Those will be your refuge. So, when you find the mind is consumed by worries, stop and think for a minute: What can be done? What can I do *right now*? That's what you should ask yourself.

Of course, right now as you're meditating, the thing to do is to develop these qualities. But even as you're out in daily life, remind yourself that there's a difference between worry and heedfulness. Worry is a hindrance. Heedfulness is the source of all things that are skillful. And what heedfulness implies is that there is a way out. If there were no way out, then being heedful wouldn't accomplish anything. The assumption is that there is a way out, there is a way to safety, and if you're really heedful, you're going to devote this moment right now to developing the qualities that'll open that way and make you safe.

So the difference lies, one, in the confidence that there is a way out; and two, in actually working on the skills that you're going to need. That's how you turn worry into something that's actually skillful—something that, instead of eating away at the mind, actually provides it with a place that's secure.

For Goodness' Sake

December 27, 2019

A few weeks ago I was in Thailand. While I was there I went to pay my respects to Ajaan Uthai, a student of Ajaan Funn. When I arrived, there was already a group of laypeople visiting with him. He asked me a couple of questions about life here at Wat Metta. And one of them was, "When Westerners come to the monastery, what do they come for?" He'd been talking about virtue and generosity to the laypeople, so I mentioned that a lot of people don't come thinking about generosity and virtue at the very beginning. Their first motivation for coming is to find peace of mind. One of the people in the other group said, "Ah, Westerners, they go straight to the top, right from the very beginning." And Ajaan Uthai's response was, "What do you mean *straight to the top?* Even common animals want peace of mind. If you want to be a human being, you have to develop virtue, good qualities of the mind, good qualities of the character. That's what differentiates us from common animals."

So what are those good qualities? There's a list called the ten perfections. They include discernment, which is primarily a quality of the mind, but the other nine are all qualities of the heart: generosity, virtue, renunciation, persistence, endurance, truth, determination, goodwill, and equanimity.

Goodwill stands out as good-heartedness. A lot of the others, though, are types of strength, which we may not associate with a good heart, but for the heart to be truly good requires strength. If you start out with good intentions but you can't carry them through, they don't really mean much. Goodness requires strength to do good things that are hard: the ability to make yourself want to do things that you might not want to do but you know are going to be good for you in the long term, and the ability to say

No to things that you like to do but you know are going to be bad for you in the long term.

In other words, when your discernment points out the fact that the consequences are going to be good or bad for certain actions, you've got to look at your emotions. Are they on the side of what your discernment is telling you, or not? Sometimes they are; sometimes not. When they're on the side of your discernment, then there's no real problem. It's when they're at cross-purposes: That's when it's a real test of your character. That's how we should measure our self-worth. As the Buddha said, the sign of your discernment as a mature person is your ability to make yourself want to do things that you don't like doing but will give good results in the long term, and to make yourself want to say No to things you like doing but are going to give bad results in the long term.

So notice, you're not just going against your likes. You're trying to change your likes, trying to make yourself *want* to do these things. This means you have to be able to point out to yourself the good consequences of difficult actions, and how happy you'll be when the good consequences come.

This is one of the reasons why we begin the practice with generosity. It's practice in delayed gratification and also in the realization that some pleasures are better than others. The pleasure that comes from seeing someone else enjoy something you gave to them is a better pleasure than simply enjoying it yourself; the knowledge that you've done something good is a better pleasure than the pleasure that comes from just gobbling up what you've got.

Notice that there is pleasure here. All too often we're told that to be a good person you have to deny your own happiness for the sake of other people's. But then after a while, you start wondering: Why is their happiness more important than yours? From the Buddha's point of view, though, the person who works for his or her own well-being and the well-being of others at the same time is the best sort of person, better than one who works only for the well-being of others. So you've got to learn how to

find your happiness in being good at the same time. You do things for goodness' sake and also for happiness' sake, together.

We have that phrase in English, "for goodness' sake." It's been repeated so many times that it's become just a matter of emphasis. It's lost its real meaning. The real meaning is that you do something because it would lead to good results, for the sake of the goodness it would yield. That's your motivation. So ideally, you want to learn how to get your likes in line with what's good.

This is one of the reasons why we meditate: not just to give the mind a peaceful place to stay, but also to give it strength. The goodness of meditation requires endurance, determination, and persistence. If you don't have a source for internal strength like this, it's going to be hard to carry through with your good intentions. This is why concentration is not just one aspect of the path. The Buddha placed it at the *center* of the path to give you strength to carry through with the rest of the path. You try to get your heart well rested, get your mind well rested, with a sense of well-being, ease, and rapture so that the heart and mind will be strong enough to do the work that the rest of the path demands.

And these are things you can do. You can make the mind settle down. Recently, I was at a place in Malaysia where the people had been taught that you can't *do* concentration. It just happens on its own—kind of comes up and whacks you across the head. All you can do is sit there very patiently, waiting for it to come. But actually, the first jhana contains directed thought and evaluation: These are things you do. You direct your thoughts to the breath and then you evaluate it. How does it feel? Does it feel good enough to stay with for a while? If it doesn't, how could it be *made* to feel that good? You experiment. You try things out. You ask questions. You look for answers. These are all things you do.

Then, when you find something that seems good, you can stick with it for a while to see if it really is good, or how long it's going to be good. And when you find a way of breathing that really feels good, you allow that sense of pleasure to spread through the body: down the spine, out the legs,

down the nerves of the arms, starting from the area around the heart down through the different organs and down to the intestines.

Try to sensitize yourself. The more sensitive you are to this area of your awareness, the more satisfying it becomes. As you make yourself sensitive and then breathe in a way that satisfies that sensitivity, you develop a pleasure that's more and more refined. It's a pleasure that's good, in and of itself, but it's also good in the sense that it's not harming anybody, and it gives you the strength to look at the questions you're asking yourself as you go through daily life about what to do and what should be done.

This is a basic distinction in the Buddha's teachings. We hear so much about the Buddha's teachings on non-duality or his avoidance of dualities. But one of his duties as a teacher, he said, was to give you a basis for deciding what should and shouldn't be done, and underlying that duty is the basic principle that your actions really do matter. They make a difference. You have the choice to act in one way or another, and those actions have consequences.

If you were to deny your power of choice, or the fact that your actions had consequences, then there wouldn't be any idea of "should" or "should not." You'd just act on your impulses, with no choice in the matter. But you do have choices, and actions do have consequences. So, if you want true happiness, those are the conditions for the Buddha's shoulds.

Then you want to be very careful about what you actually do. Ask yourself: Do I want to do what I should be doing?

This is where you have to learn how to talk to yourself. Make yourself see the goodness that comes, the happiness that comes, from doing the right thing. Part of that happiness is a solid sense of self-worth. People who indulge in all their impulses find that, after a while, they have very little sense of self-worth at all—or they have to blow up an inflated sense of self-worth that doesn't really have anything to do with reality.

But if you can look at your actions and see, "I did this and nobody was harmed. I found happiness this way and nobody was harmed. I found happiness in this way and other people benefited, too": That kind of

realization gives you a sense of your worth as a person. A lot of well-being comes around that sense of worth. You want to learn how to appreciate it.

This means changing the balance of power inside. There are some voices in the mental committee that are rebellious, but when you follow them where do they lead? A lot of them are like the friends who try to get you to do something against the law and then, when the police come, go running away. In other words, something inside you wants to do something unskillful, and you give in, but that particular defilement is not the one that's going to suffer. *You're* the one that's going to suffer.

So you have to see the value of acting in such a way that you can look back on your actions and realize that nobody was harmed, and that in some cases people were helped. There lies your value as a human being. That's your value as a *mature* human being. This is one of the reasons why we come *for goodness' sake:* to figure out what would be the good thing to do, so that we can regard ourselves as good people.

So look carefully at that list in the perfections: endurance, determination, renunciation.

Renunciation, here, doesn't just mean giving things up. Every case where the Buddha talks about renouncing something, he adds that there's always something gained in return. The primary case of renunciation is just sitting here giving up your sensual thoughts, learning how to focus on the breath, to focus on the sense of the body as you feel it from within, and learning how to find pleasure there. Because that search for pleasure really is strengthening and is totally harmless.

The search for pleasures outside, or the fascination of thinking about what a wonderful meal you had, and how the next meal is going to be really good: That really weakens you. It makes your happiness depend on things being a certain way. You become a hothouse plant. You can live only under certain conditions. Your happiness can survive only under certain conditions.

Whereas if you learn how to find happiness with the breath, you can be anywhere: sitting on a bus, in a doctor's office. They could throw you in

prison, and you could still learn how to breathe well, and you'd have your own personal sense of well-being, a source of well-being that nobody can take away from you. That gives you strength, because it enables you to put up with all kinds of conditions that you wouldn't be able to otherwise. And your goodness can survive all kinds of conditions because of that.

So, we're here for peace of mind, but it's a peace of mind that's also goodness: happiness and goodness together. That's what makes it really special. Anybody can find peace of mind in just about any way, but when you add those extra conditions onto it, it makes it something of real value because you've learned how to find your happiness in a responsible way. You can look at your actions and see nothing that you would criticize yourself for. That means your peace of mind doesn't require putting up huge walls of denial. It's also peace of mind that can withstand all kinds of external changes, because you've made certain qualities in your mind unchanging.

So, think of the all-around aspect of the goodness we're looking for—goodness and happiness together—and the deep peace of mind that comes from that. After all, release is the ultimate peace. That's the kind of peace that common animals can't find, but human beings can, because the release the Buddha taught depends on all the factors of the path. They include virtue and, as he said, they're founded on generosity. Stingy people, he said, can't attain jhana, can't attain nibbana. In other words, it's the kind of peace that's available only to generous people, virtuous people.

So, yes, we are looking for peace of mind, but we've got some extra conditions. We're doing it for the sake of happiness, and we're also doing it for goodness' sake. Always keep these many dimensions in mind, because they make the practice whole: an entire practice, a practice that really is worth giving your life to.

Seeing Danger in Birth

October 30, 2019

I remember the first time when being a human being scared me. I was about six years old when I met a man who had had a stroke and was half paralyzed. I was told that he hadn't always been that way. He had been normal, and then all of a sudden half his body became useless. I remember the sense of horror, not so much at the man himself, but that it could happen to me.

Ajaan Lee and Upasika Kee talk about this same sort of thing. In Upasika Kee's case, it was when one of her younger siblings was born. She saw all of the pain her mother went through during childbirth, and she had to leave home for three days. The same with Ajaan Lee: As a child, he saw all the pain that the women in his village went through as they were giving birth, and he had to run away.

It's good to reflect on these things.

Here we are in a human birth, and it's not a very secure place to be. We have to find a way out if we want to find any real security or happiness. This is why we meditate, because we believe in the power of the mind to find a happiness that's more than ordinary. Try to use these thoughts, not to get you discouraged, but to encourage you to practice. That's the use of heedfulness. That's the use of recollection of death: This can happen to us all.

If we can recollect death in a way that makes us heedful, that's an auspicious thing. In Thailand, there's a textbook they use for the Dhamma exams for lay people. It divides ceremonies into two sorts: those that are auspicious and those that are inauspicious. The inauspicious ones all have to do with death. But the idea that anything associated with death is inauspicious is not a Buddhist idea. It's more Brahmanical. The Buddhist

attitude is that if you can reflect on death in a way that makes you heedful, then it becomes auspicious.

When you see a dead person, the Buddha encourages you to be heedful by telling yourself, "This body too: Such is its nature, such its unavoidable fate." But you don't have to see a dead body to reflect in this way. You can just think about the fact that there's death and reflect on your own death, too. We read about death every day in the news. The numbers vary, but a day doesn't go by without somebody dying. In fact, quite a few people die. They say that on average it's 200,000 people a day. So it's all around us, which means that we should be very heedful: heedful in our virtue, heedful in our concentration, heedful in our discernment.

Heedful in virtue means realizing that whatever we might gain by even the slightest infraction of the precepts isn't worth it. Those little gains get washed away, and then you're left with the kamma.

Heedful in your concentration means trying to be as careful as possible in your efforts to get the mind to settle down: being alert, mindful, ardent; not just getting the mind to be still, but also watching the mind as it settles down. This way you can begin to understand when the mind does leave the topic of concentration, even if just for a moment, how does it do that? And why?

Here you are: You've made the intention to stay with the breath, you work with the breath, get familiar with the breath, try to make the breath comfortable so that it's a good place to stay, and yet the mind will still wander off. Why is that? How does it do that? What are the stages? There are psychologists who say they've studied brain patterns and they can tell that when a person's made a decision, often the decision has been made a little bit before the person's aware of it. Their conclusion is that we have no free will, that somehow the brain makes the decision and then we lie to ourselves that we've made the decision ourselves.

But another kind of lying is going on. You were there when the decision was made but then the mind likes to cover things up from itself. Part of it knows the decision was made to go, and it's just waiting for the

opportunity to slip away. Can you catch it? Can you catch that little moment in the mind where it makes the decision and then pretends that it didn't?

It's like a dog we used to have at Wat Dhammasathit. It was a very clever dog. It would come up in the evening when the monks were having their evening allowables and would scratch your leg. If you looked down at it, it would look away and pretend that it hadn't done anything. Then if you ignored it, it would scratch your leg again. There are layers like that to the mind. And the purpose of concentration is to begin to see through those layers. That's what it means to be heedful in your concentration.

Heedful in your discernment means that when an insight comes, you can't just accept it at face value. You've seen so many cases of people who've come to false conclusions that they're awakened, so you have to learn from other peoples' mistakes. You've got to watch yourself. When an insight arises, how does the mind respond? What's its immediate reaction?

Ajaan Lee gives two pieces of advice. One is that when you gain an insight, you ask yourself: To what extent is the opposite true? As the Buddha pointed out, there are many things that are true but not necessarily beneficial. And this may not be the right time and place for them. So check whether—or when and where—the insight might be beneficial, whether it's the right time or place to apply it. Then ask yourself further: To what extent is the opposite of that insight true?

The second piece of advice, he says, is that wherever there's "true" there's going to be falseness as its shadow. Once you place a stamp on something as 100% true, something false has already slipped in. So you have to be careful about your insights. After all, if you're not careful, they're not going to be safe. They're going to lead you to do and say and think things that might be dangerous. You want to be careful all around.

This is a quality that many of Ajaan Mun's students said they noticed in him. They'd set their minds on doing something and thought they were 100% right, and he would still find something wrong, an angle from which they hadn't looked, an angle they hadn't considered.

Or you think about the Buddha. They called him the All-around Eye. He saw things from every angle. That's how he was able to make himself 100% safe.

So you want to see the dangers in birth, the dangers in becoming. Be alive to those dangers but don't be overwhelmed by them. The whole point of heedfulness is not that you give up in the face of dangers. In fact, it's the opposite of giving up in the face of dangers. The other part of heedfulness is seeing that there is an escape and it can be accomplished through your actions.

We take on right view, but remember that it is a view. It's not yet right knowledge. There are a lot of aspects of right view that the Buddha can't prove to you ahead of time. But he does offer two ways of conducting a pragmatic proof. For example, when you adopt as a working hypothesis the view that you do have the power of choice, that the results of your actions are going to depend on the intention behind the action, and that these results can last not only through this lifetime but also to future lifetimes: The first test is that, if you adopt this view, you're more likely to behave in a skillful way than if you adopted its opposite. If you believed that you had no choice or that your choices didn't matter, you would just go with whatever came into the mind.

The second proof is, if you believe in the possibility that there is a path that leads to awakening, to the end of becoming, you open more possibilities for what you might achieve in terms of a real happiness than if you assumed that there was no such thing as awakening or the end of becoming. At the very least, if you open yourself to the possibility, you might be able to make it happen. If you close your mind to the possibility, there's no way it's going to happen.

In a way, adopting right view is a gamble. But you look around: There are really no other good alternatives, no inspiring alternatives, no noble alternatives. So you might as well give it a serious try.

That's how you're heedful in your discernment. And it's through heedfulness that you provide yourself with safety. As the Buddha said, all

skillful qualities are rooted in heedfulness. We're not skillful because we're innately good. At the same time, we're not innately bad. But our actions depend on a calculation: Is it going to be worth the effort? The more you believe in your power of action, and the more you notice the dangers that come from acting unskillfully, then the more your calculations will lead you to stay on the path.

Becoming Capable of Happiness

May 19, 2018

"Days and nights fly past, fly past. What am I becoming right now?" That's a question the Buddha has you ask yourself every day. The reason he has you ask it is because you can do something about it: What you're becoming comes from your actions. The person you are right now is the product of actions of the past plus actions in the present moment. If you couldn't change what you're doing right now, then the Buddha wouldn't have you ask the question.

When we change the way we act, we change who we are. This is good to keep in mind when, as you look at the practice, you get discouraged. You're thinking that it's beyond you. You won't be able to do it. Well, the "you" right now is not the person who's going to be able to do it all the way. As you practice, you change. You become a different person. Remember the image of the relay chariots. The first chariot doesn't make it all the way to Savatthi. The last chariot is the one that does. But if you hadn't ridden the first chariot in the right direction, you wouldn't have been able to get into the last one.

Keep this in mind when you look at your behavior and aren't inspired by it, when you look at your weaknesses and say to yourself, "How can a person with these weaknesses ever reach there?" You don't reach there with those weaknesses. You look for your strengths. And you build on those.

As you develop skills—the skills of generosity, virtue, and meditation—they can overcome those weaknesses and change you into a different person. And they *are* skills. Generosity is a skill. At the very least, it's an exercise in free will. So many of the Buddha's lists of teachings start with generosity because an act of real generosity—when you give something, not because you have to, not because someone tells you that you should,

but simply because you want to—gives you a sense that you have some freedom of choice. You could take the chocolate yourself, or you could give it to somebody else. If you give it to somebody else, you become a different person. You have the freedom to take it, but you're also not a slave to your desires. This is why, when the Buddha is asked, "Where should a gift be given?" he says, "Give where you feel inspired, or you feel it would be well used." In other words, he doesn't place any shoulds on the act of giving.

However, if you want to turn generosity into a skill, then you have to start thinking about what you're going to give; why you're going to give it; who you're going to give it to; what kind of motivation and attitude you're going to bring to the act of giving. And here again, you can choose. The Buddha points out that some motivations are higher than others. The lowest one is giving with the idea, "I'll get this back through the force of kamma." But after a while, you get tired of thinking in those terms because you begin to realize, "Well, I'll gain this some other time. But once I gain it that next time, I'll have to give it away again if I want to maintain the virtue of generosity." So you start thinking about other reasons, deeper reasons. For one, it feels good in the mind to give. That's when the happiness that comes from generosity begins to get internalized. From there, the motivations go higher and higher until finally giving is just a natural ornament for the mind.

The precepts are a skill as well: They provide training in mindfulness, alertness, ardency, and all the other qualities you're going to need to get the mind into concentration. You have to remember the precepts. You have to watch your actions to make sure you're following them. And you have to want to do this well, realizing that you need to develop the discernment that sees how to hold to them without their forcing you into doing things that will be detrimental. After all, there are times, say, when you're asked a question about some information and you suspect that the person who's asking the question might misuse the information. How do you withhold

the information while at the same time not lying? That exercises your discernment.

Over time, you begin to reflect. As you stick with the precepts, you can look at your life and begin to see that you're leading a life that's less and less harmful for yourself, for other people. You've become a person of principles, and not just another mouth in the food chain. A sense of well-being comes from that.

And, of course, meditation is a skill. It's probably the most difficult skill there is. When we're first getting started, it can seem pretty daunting. But, bit by bit by bit, as you work at it, the skill develops. As it comes, a sense of well-being comes along with it. In this case, the quest for happiness turns from, "How can I consume happiness?" to "How can I produce it?" There's a sense of satisfaction that comes from being a producer of good actions. This is why the Buddha said that acts of merit, which these three activities are—generosity, virtue, and meditation—are another word for happiness. The act itself is the happiness when you see that you're able to do it.

On top of that, there's the happiness it produces. This is going to take patience, because this kind of happiness is something that grows over time. This kind of gradual growth comes with gradually improving skill. It's the most solid way to improve the level of happiness in your life. They've done studies showing that most people have a happiness quotient: a certain level of happiness that may be disturbed by really good events or really bad events, but then the mind, after those events, tends to return to the original level of its sense of well-being, higher or lower. The happiness that comes from things outside happening to you doesn't bring long-term changes to that habitual level of happiness.

But the happiness that comes from your own actions and changing your own actions: That's something else entirely. That's how your happiness quotient can be raised, because your actions will change it. Events happening outside may mark you in some ways, but the mind has a certain way of recovering its original equilibrium, wherever that equilibrium was, because its internal actions are still the same as they were

before. It tends to digest sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas as it did before. But if you can learn how to change the way you digest your experiences, change the way you act in shaping your experiences, that's how you change the basic level of your happiness.

So, given that we're working on skills, be prepared to be patient. Here again, patience is something you may not have much of to start out with. This is why you have to motivate yourself with thoughts of heedfulness, realizing that if you don't change your actions, no improvements are going to come. So you have to keep at it, keep at it.

This is why we have those reflections about aging, illness, and death, the world being swept away, the reflection the Buddha has you make every day that this could be your last day. In fact, this breath right now could be your last breath. If you have one more breath, make use of it. The next breath: Make use of that, too. You passed over the potential for death at that moment. But the potential for death at this moment keeps going and going and going on. You've made it this far. Well, make good use of it. Make good use of the time you've got right now. If you learn how to focus on your actions right now, instead of on the big results you're hoping for at the end of the path, you'll find that, over time, almost insensibly, you begin to change and your level of happiness begins to rise.

Dogen, the Zen master, gave a comparison. He said it was like walking through mist. Even though you're not conscious of the fact that you're getting rained on, your clothes do get wet. It's a gradual soaking up. He mentioned this in the context of being around a good person—and this helps an awful lot, being around good people and getting out of your ordinary environment for a while. But those two external aids on the road aren't enough. You've got to make up your mind that you're going to change the way you act and speak and think. And here, the image of gradually getting wet in the mist also applies. Almost insensibly, you become a different person. A better, more capable person.

This way, when the Buddha asks, "What are you doing right now, what are you becoming right now?" You can say, "Well, at least I'm working in

the right direction."

And learn how to develop a craftsman's attitude toward the practice. In other words, you work at it bit by bit by bit, and you see gradually your mastery beginning to grow. You learn to look for the little signs that things are getting better, and not to get discouraged when the signs are not all that clear.

One of the Buddha's images is of the handle of a hammer. We know that if you hold the hammer and use it long enough, eventually the handle gets worn down. You can't measure how much it's gotten worn in one day, yet still, over time, it happens.

He also gives the example of a ship. The ship gets docked on the beach and, over time, the ropes begin to wear away in the wind and the sun. But if you were to measure them day by day as to how much they're getting worn away, you couldn't measure it. Still, over time, it happens. You've got to keep these images in mind, because the way the mind talks to itself is very important in how it's going to act.

As you learn these new habits, you find that you can develop more difficult skills, better skills, over time. You become a different person. So of course, the person who's facing the path and saying, "I can't do this": That person can't do all the steps of the path at that moment. But that person can take the first step, and then the next step, and the next step. Then the person that he or she becomes at that point can take the following steps. This is how you become someone who's capable of the practice, capable of being happy, even though where you are right now doesn't seem promising. But as the new person develops, you'll be right there. You'll be a different person at a different place.

It all starts with what you decide to do. And keep doing. Results will have to come over time.

On Idle Chatter

May 28, 2019

Of all the forms of wrong speech, idle chatter is the hardest to get past. It also seems the most innocent to most people, which is one of the reasons why it's hard to get past. After all, a little social grease isn't bad, right? But as with grease in an engine, if you get too much, it mucks up the engine to the point where the engine can't run. And the very nature of idle chatter is that you open your mouth and only then do you discover what's going to come out. You don't think very carefully about your intention, about why you're saying this, what it's going to accomplish. That's a bad habit to develop if you're trying to become a meditator, both in terms of trying to get the mind into concentration and just learning how to watch your own mind.

If you're used to just talking all day, then when the time comes to sit and meditate, the mind says, "Hey, I've been churning out thoughts all day. Why stop now?" It's in the habit of thinking mindlessly. If you don't look carefully at your intentions, you miss one of the main aspects of social life as a Dhamma practitioner: being very careful about what you're going to say and what you're going to do. Think things through and *then* open your mouth or go into action.

After all, this is part of the Buddha's instructions to Rahula. Before you say anything, ask yourself: What's going to happen as a result of this? Am I going to be harmed? Is someone else going to be harmed? Are we both going to be harmed? Only when it passes that test—that you don't expect any harm for anyone—can you open your mouth and say what you wanted to say.

What makes the test a little more specific is in another sutta, when the Buddha's talking to a prince. The prince had been set up to ask the Buddha a trick question: Would the Buddha ever say anything unpleasant? The

idea was that if the Buddha said, Yes, he would say something unpleasant, then the prince could say, "Well, what's the difference between you and ordinary people out there in the world?" And if the Buddha said he wouldn't say anything unpleasant, he was on record for having said things critical of Devadatta that Devadatta didn't like.

So the prince asked the question, and the Buddha said, "That's not the sort of question that deserves a categorical answer. It deserves an analytical answer." The prince realized that the Buddha had slipped out of the trap. And the analytical answer was this: If something was true and beneficial and timely—in terms of the right time to say something pleasant, the right time to say something harsh—then the Buddha would say it. If it's true but not beneficial, or true but not timely, or true and beneficial but not timely, he wouldn't say it. That gives you three checkpoints you have to go past if you want your speech to be in line with the Dhamma.

It's not the case that simply talking about Dhamma is dhammic. Conversation or discussion of the Dhamma, as we chanted just now, is a blessing, but there are a lot of ignorant things being said about the Dhamma. And do you want to mess up people's minds with your ignorance?

One time, when I was first staying with Ajaan Fuang, he overheard me saying something to another monk where I was trying to explain a point of Dhamma. I said, "I think it's like this." And Ajaan Fuang said, "If you don't really know, then don't say anything." In Ajaan Lee's analysis, if you're talking about a level of Dhamma that's over the heads of your listeners, that, too, counts as idle chatter.

So you've got to be very careful before you open your mouth. Especially here, we have a lot of people here right now—a lot of mouths. We want to make sure that we don't get in one another's way of finding a sense of seclusion, a sense of peace inside. So it's a good lesson in being a good friend as a meditator, being very careful about when you open your mouth. There's that old expression that "Silence is golden." So if you're going to open your mouth, you want to have something to say that's more

valuable than gold. That way, we can live here with a lot of people and everybody still has a good chance to find the right atmosphere to practice. We ourselves benefit by being careful about our speech.

Remember that one of the elements of concentration practice is verbal fabrication—the things we talk to ourselves about. That's one of the elements of the first jhana. If you can get some good control over the way you talk to yourself as you go through the day, then it's a lot easier to talk to yourself about the right things as the mind settles down. In fact, this is the whole reason why we have precepts and why we live together as we practice. You notice in the way the monks' life is set up: Monks can't go off to be hermits, growing their own food, fixing their own meals. If they're going to eat, they need to have contact at least once a day with somebody. And both sides are supposed to benefit.

The Canon has a passage where the Buddha has been staying with a group of monks who've been getting into arguments. He decides to leave and find some peace and quiet. First he visits a group of three monks. They talk about their life together. They're living in the forest together and every five days they have a Dhamma discussion. Aside from that, they try to keep their speech to an absolute minimum.

Now, the Buddha did say that observing a vow of no speaking at all is living like dumb sheep and dumb cattle. Because, of course, what happens when you're not talking to anybody is that you're in your own little world where you can start saying some pretty crazy things to yourself. So it's good to have a certain amount of talking with others to maintain your bearings. But you have to keep it within bounds. If you're going to say something, either it has to be something that's necessary in the work of the day, or something that's actually helpful to say to somebody else. But again, even here, you have to be careful. Hold on to the principle that the less said, the better.

Think of the ajaans in Thailand. They tended to be people of few words, but not because they didn't have much to say. There were times when I was with Ajaan Fuang and a question would come up and he could

talk for a whole hour about it. But that was rare. Most of the time, if a question came up, he'd have a quick answer because he had to learn how to be quick with his own mind. When the defilements come up, they don't sit and listen to long lectures. You have to get right to the heart of the matter for them to hear you.

So, learning how to be a person of few words is a good habit to develop as a Dhamma practitioner. It's good for you; it's good for the people around you. It's a good exercise for developing appropriate attention. You ask yourself, "When I'm going to do this, when I'm going to say this, is it really worthwhile, is it really going to be helpful or harmful?" Make sure that in what you say, you're acting as an admirable friend to other people. Those two qualities—appropriate attention and admirable friendship—the Buddha said, are the most important internal and external qualities for getting your first taste of awakening.

So we try to make our life here the kind of life that is helpful for one another's awakening. We don't want to have the kamma of being an obstacle. This means: Practice right speech both inside and out. The more you practice it outside—in other words, being very careful about what you say, thinking about the consequences, thinking about where your speech is coming from—the easier it'll be to practice it inside. As you develop this habit of seeing, when something comes up in the mind, where it's coming from and where it's going, that's when you begin to see things in line with the Dhamma.

Understanding Goodwill & Equanimity

February 2, 2018

The sublime abidings start with goodwill and end with equanimity. In a sense, there's a hierarchy there. Equanimity is more peaceful than goodwill. But without the goodwill, equanimity turns into indifference and coldness, which I don't think is what the Buddha had in mind when he was teaching equanimity.

You have to start with goodwill, a desire for happiness, a happiness that's lasting, a happiness that's harmless. Part of being harmless is that you realize if your happiness does harm somebody else, they're not going to stand for it, so it's not going to last. So "harmless" and "lasting" go together.

You have to think about what that means in terms of goodwill. It's not that by spreading thoughts of goodwill to others we say, "May you be happy simply as you are, whatever you're doing." If people are doing unskillful things, we hope that they can change their ways. If we're able to help in that endeavor, we're happy to help.

This counteracts the ill will we sometimes feel when we see someone harming people we love or people we're concerned about. There's part of the mind that says, "I'd like to see them suffer a little bit, to get a taste of what they've been handing out to other people." But think about it: Often when people are suffering from their unskillful actions, they don't stop. They can often become even more and more unskillful. So, ideally you're hoping that they develop an understanding, along with the willingness and the ability to act on the understanding. At the very least, the understanding is the important part.

Think about what that means. We're wishing for happiness and what it comes down to is that we're wishing that people develop understanding.

All too often, the sublime abidings are treated as something separate from the four noble truths. There was a book years back, *What the Buddha Taught,* that treated the four sublime abidings as an addendum tacked on to the end, because they didn't seem to fit in with the rest of the discussion, which was on the four noble truths. But that's not the case. Goodwill is intimately connected with right view. As the Buddha said at one point, if you have ill will for anyone, you've got wrong view. Wherever there's any sense of resentment, any desire for revenge, that's wrong view.

One of the phrases we chant is, *Sabbe sattā averā hontu:* May all beings be free from animosity. The word animosity here, *vera* in Pali: It's hard to get a precise equivalent in English. It's basically the animosity that comes when two people have been mistreating each other and they just keep going back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. "You did it to me, now I'm going to do it to you": that kind of attitude. It's very closely related to the desire to get revenge. And this can go on for lifetime after lifetime.

This is why an important part of goodwill is also forgiveness. There was an article recently saying that forgiveness has no role in the teaching of kamma. It's true that your forgiving someone else for having abused you is not going to erase their kamma. You're not the owner of their kamma. But forgiveness does help avoid future unfortunate actions. You realize that this back-and-forth has gone on long enough, you're not going to try to continue it, you're not going to try to get back at the other person. So you forgive them for the last instance, and make up your mind that you're going to pose them no danger. The word *abhaya,* at least in Thai, is used to mean forgiveness. It literally means danger-free.

So forgiveness, goodwill, understanding: All these qualities go together. As they get applied to specific cases, they turn into compassion and empathetic joy. In other words, if you see people who are doing something really unskillful or are suffering the results of unskillful actions, you feel compassion for them. If you see people who are doing things that are skillful and will lead to happiness, or are already experiencing

happiness, you're happy for them. There's no resentment, no jealousy. These attitudes all go together.

Equanimity stands a little bit apart. It's the realization that if you want for there to be happiness but it's not happening, there's going to be pain. The Buddha describes that as renunciate pain, especially when it's related to your own practice, but also when you're feeling goodwill for others and you see that they're simply not going to be happy. We say, "May all beings be happy, be happy, be happy," but when you look at people, you see that they're doing a lot of things that are not going to lead to happiness—and they're not going to change. If you don't develop equanimity, there's going to be a lot of suffering. This is for your own protection and for the protection of the other person.

Sometimes your efforts at helping can get pretty desperate and do more harm than good. Or in your desire to get along, your desire to do what people want, you can do harm. There are times when what they want is not the right thing, so you have to pull out and develop some equanimity for the fact that they may resent your pulling out or not helping them in the way they want to be helped.

But again, equanimity, like goodwill, has to be based on understanding: the realization that you're not giving up on the search for happiness, simply that you're focusing it on areas where it'll have an effect. The primary effect, of course, is going to be in your own actions. If you find that you're doing something unskillful, that's not an area where you can have equanimity, to be content with it, or to say, "Well, this is the way I have to be." You've got to do what you can not to give in to those unskillful habits.

I've met a lot of people who say, "Give me some time. It's going to take me a while to start getting more skillful in my actions." But it's not a question of our giving those people time. The question is: Do they have that time? That figure of death that we see in cartoons doesn't wait around and say, "This person has had enough time to get their act together, so now I'll come and visit." Death can come at any time, unannounced, unbidden.

In terms of your own actions, if you see that you're doing something unskillful, you need lots of goodwill for your desire for true happiness. Tell yourself, "I'm not going to keep on giving in, giving in, giving in to my unskillful desires. I've got to do something about this." Where the equanimity comes in in terms of your own experience is when you're dealing with the results of past bad actions that you can't change. You have to accept that this is the way things are. There are certain things you can't work your way around. But even there, you've got to figure out, "How do I not suffer from this?"

You need to have some acceptance for what you can't change. Then there's the next step, which is that "Even though there's pain, and I've learned to accept that there's going to be pain, how do I not suffer from the pain?" That's something different. It requires more wisdom, more understanding. Learning how to separate the pain, if it's a physical pain, from your awareness and to separate the pain from your sense of the body: That's when you can free the mind, again, through understanding.

So you use less willpower in terms of generating equanimity there, and more understanding to cut through the connections that would cause suffering.

As for your dealings with other people, you focus on the people you *can* help, saving equanimity for cases where you can't.

So all the brahmaviharas, all the sublime abidings, require understanding so that they really lead to the happiness we want.

And the happiness we want is one that spreads itself around. It's not like the happiness of the world—based on gaining status, gaining fame, gaining wealth—where, when one person gains, somebody else has to lose. With the happiness that comes from the practice, we gain, the people around us gain. As we gain in wisdom, in compassion, in purity of our actions, we cause less suffering to others and can actually bring them a measure of happiness.

I've talked to some people who've said that simply knowing that there's a monastery here in Southern California where people are practicing

warms their hearts, even though they can't come. So you never know to what extent your practice is going to have a good effect on somebody else. Just be confident that the goodness does spread around. Some people are more receptive, some people are less, but it does spread around.

The Brahmaviharas Are Not a Complete Practice

March 16, 2019

There's a sutta where the Buddha talks about one of his previous lifetimes, when he was a king. He ruled until he saw his first grey hair. Then he handed the kingdom over to his son, went off, and lived in the forest.

He spent the whole rest of his life devoted to practicing the brahmaviharas, developing thoughts of unlimited goodwill for himself and all beings, unlimited compassion, unlimited empathetic joy, and unlimited equanimity. But, as he commented at the end of the story, that practice didn't lead to awakening. It didn't lead to dispassion. It simply led to a really nice rebirth as a Brahma.

There's another passage in the Canon where Ven. Sariputta's going to teach one of his old students who's on his deathbed. The old student is a brahman. Sariputta figures that brahmans want to go to the Brahma world, so he teaches him the brahmaviharas. The man dies and is reborn in a Brahma world. Sariputta goes back and tells the Buddha what happened. The Buddha chides him: "You know, you could have taken him further. Rebirth in a Brahma world is an inferior place." Of course, it's superior to being a human being, but it's still inferior to the goal, which is total awakening.

The point of both of these passages is that the brahmaviharas are not a complete path. They can't take you to awakening on their own. Now, they do have a function in the practice. When the Buddha taught breath meditation to his son, he first taught him a series of preliminary practices to get the mind ready, and one of them was the brahmaviharas. After all, as you're here meditating, you should be doing it based on goodwill: goodwill for yourself and goodwill for other beings.

Goodwill is not love. There's another word for love in Pali. That's *pema*. Goodwill is *metta. Metta* is a wish for happiness. The reason we're

practicing is because we want a genuine happiness, a happiness that also doesn't harm anybody. We want the happiness to spread around.

So you want to get that attitude firmly in place—that you really do want to be happy—because you're going to be dealing with lots of different committee members in your mind, and some of them are self-destructive. Some of them will try to sabotage what you're trying to do. You have to keep reminding yourself: You do really want to be happy. You don't want to be miserable just to show other people that they mistreated you. You want to take your life in your hands and say, "I can make something good out of this." You do that by training the mind.

So, goodwill is a preliminary practice for getting the mind into concentration focused on the breath. But there are also passages where the Buddha talks about it as a topic of concentration in and of itself. He doesn't say how you do it. You simply develop the thought, "May all these beings look after themselves with ease," an interesting way of expressing goodwill. He's not having you say, "I'm going to be there to help you." He says, "May you be there to look after yourself" or "May you be able to help yourself." After all, when you think about it, that's what beings all want, deep down inside: to have the ability within themselves to look after themselves, to be happy and independent.

Here again, you can use this as a motivation for your practice. But you can't just tell yourself that you have no ill will for anybody in the world. Actively look to see where you *do* have ill will for somebody, where you want to see them suffer, and then stop and think about it: What would you gain from their suffering? What would you gain from your own suffering? Very little. There's a peculiar pleasure sometimes that comes from suffering or seeing somebody else suffer. But it's not good for you in the long term. It's like foods with a taste you may like for a little while, but then they get sickening.

So think about what goodwill means. In light of the principle of kamma, it means that you're going to act in ways that lead to true happiness and that you'd like to see other people acting in ways that lead to

true happiness, too. If you could get the whole world to do that, the world would be a much better place. But a lot of people don't know the ways to true happiness. Or sometimes they may know, but they don't care. So what you're saying is, "May you know, and may you care, and may you be willing and able to act on those causes for true happiness." Wish this for yourself. Wish this for others. What's difficult about that?

A lot of times, we don't like the idea of goodwill because we think it means, "May you be happy just as you are." But that's not what it's saying. Goodwill often requires that you change your actions or that other people change their actions in a good direction.

Some people find that they can get the mind into concentration when they think thoughts of goodwill in this way. As for other people—as in the instructions to Rahula, the Buddha's son—once you spread thoughts of goodwill in all directions, then you focus on the breath.

We're here both to gain the sense of well-being that comes from concentration and to use that concentration to give rise to more mindfulness, more alertness, and more discernment. That's the part that's missing in the brahmaviharas: the discernment. Breath meditation helps in that direction by teaching you about the mind's fabrications. When the Buddha gives instructions, he starts out by having you notice your long breathing, notice your short breathing, and then try to breathe in a way that you're sensitive to the whole body.

Now, you may have to work up to whole-body awareness section by section. Start with one area of the body. Get to know how the breath feels there. Then make it comfortable—that's the next step, what the Buddha calls "calming bodily fabrication," as you breathe in and as you breathe out. What this means is that you calm the breath. But before the breath can grow calm, first you have to nourish yourself well with breath energy. Breathe in such a way that the energy fills the whole body, and then allow it to calm down. Then you begin to notice.

Why does the Buddha use the word "fabrication" there? Because focusing on fabrication is the key to getting insight: to see how you put

your experience together. It's as if your past kamma gives you the raw material and then, from that raw material, you shape things with your breath and with the way you talk to yourself. The breath is called bodily fabrication. The way you talk to yourself—technically it's directed thought and evaluation: That's called verbal fabrication. And then there's mental fabrication: feelings and perceptions.

These are the activities by which we put things together in the present moment. The Buddha teaches breath meditation in a way to get you sensitive to the fact that you're putting these things together. First, you develop good bodily fabrications and mental fabrications, and then you calm them down. And the instructions for breath meditation themselves are a kind of verbal fabrication, in which you tell yourself what to do.

This way, you're developing tranquility and insight in tandem. In being sensitive to the calming, you're getting the mind to settle down and be tranquil. Being sensitive to the fabrication gives you a basis for insight. What kind of job are you doing as you put your experience together? You want to do a good job. Talk to yourself about the breath. Ask yourself: What kind of breathing would be comfortable? What kind of breathing would not be comfortable? How can you breathe in ways that feel satisfying? And what would be satisfying right now? What does the body *need* right now? When the breath feels satisfying, how do you keep it satisfying? How do you spread it around?

As the Buddha says in his instructions for getting the mind into deeper concentration, you want to take any sense of ease or fullness or refreshment and let it fill the whole body. Let the whole body get saturated with it. How do you do that? Ajaan Lee gives some pointers. He says to think of the breath energy flowing through the blood vessels, flowing through the nerves, out to the pores of the skin, so that as you breathe in, you're suffused by breath. It's a good perception to hold in mind. That would be a mental fabrication. Then you've got that feeling of well-being saturating the body. That, too, is mental fabrication.

All the different kinds of fabrication are right here, and as we meditate, we're learning how to do them well. Then we realize we're fabricating our experience not only as we meditate, but also as we go through the day. We're talking to ourselves. We're holding certain perceptions in mind. We're breathing in certain ways to give rise to certain feelings. Sometimes we put these things together well and sometimes not.

You want to take this sensitivity to fabrications and start using it in all areas of life to get past your unskillful mental states and unskillful emotions. It's a useful analysis for dealing with addiction. You could hold in mind the perception that your mind is not just one mind. It's like a committee. Sometimes the committee's like the Chicago City Council. It's got lots of politics; lots of deals are being made in the back rooms. But the fact that an idea has appeared to the committee doesn't mean that you have to go along with it.

If the committee's putting things together in a bad way, you can ask yourself, "Well, how am I breathing? What's the conversation inside? What are the perceptions they're holding?" If that particular mental state or physical state is not heading in a good direction, take it apart. Put together something better, using those kinds of fabrication.

It's important that you get the breath on your side, because one way that an unskillful mind state takes over is that it seizes your breath. Anger comes in or fear comes in, and you're going to start breathing in uncomfortable ways. Then you feel you've got to get it out of your system. All too often, we do very unskillful things to get these things out of our systems. Then we're stuck with the kamma. What you've got to do is to seize the breath back. Tell yourself that "No matter what's going on in the mind, I can still breathe calmly. I can still breathe in a way that feels like it's filling the body with a good energy." That puts you more in a position of strength, where you can look more calmly at the way the mind is putting things together and see what strange perceptions have taken over.

This kind of analysis can help get you past a lot of unskillful things. You learn it by doing the breath meditation with an eye to seeing how you put

things together with your breath, your internal conversation, your perceptions, and feelings. That's something you can't learn from the brahmaviharas. You can apply that analysis to the brahmaviharas, but the brahmaviharas on their own—just sitting there, wishing thoughts of goodwill or whatever—are not going to accomplish that task. That's why they're not a complete practice.

The brahmaviharas are useful in some ways, but a lot more is needed to really get the mind under control and to find a happiness that's more than just a fabricated happiness. You want to find something that's unfabricated inside, and you're going to achieve that first by understanding these processes of fabrication. If you don't understand them, you can't get past them.

So we practice because of goodwill—for ourselves and for other beings—but goodwill is just a start. It can take us only so far. We also have to learn how to understand what's going on in the mind, and that can take us a lot farther.

Happy for People You Don't Like

September 3, 2019

When we spread goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity to all beings, we're said to be developing a sublime abiding. The Pali term is *brahmavihara*—literally "the dwelling places of Brahmas." We try to take our human mind, which can be very partial about wishing well to others, and lift it to the level of the Brahmas, where they wish well to everybody. But if you just do the brahmaviharas, that's as far as it takes you: to a very high level of being. It's not release. As the Buddha said, the brahmaviharas on their own don't lead to dispassion. They don't lead to unbinding. But if you combine them with the factors for awakening, they can lead to unbinding. What this means is that you should develop them with strong concentration and also use your discernment to analyze what you're doing, to analyze what you're wishing in a way that leads to dispassion.

A good example is the development of empathetic joy. Of the brahmaviharas, it's the one that gets discussed the least—and actually it's one of the harder ones to do. It lifts your mind to a higher level than simple goodwill or even compassion. And it's good to think about why. Thinking about why gives you a sense of how you have to go beyond just being happy for other people when they're happy. You have to think about: "Are there people out there whose happiness is difficult to appreciate?"

Two types of people might come to mind. First are those with whom you're competing. They have something you want but you don't have it. They beat you to it. It's going to be very difficult not to feel resentment in cases like that. So you have to analyze why. You come back to the underlying sense of self that you built around the kind of happiness you want, the image you have of yourself in comparison to other people. And

it's very small-minded not to be happy for other people even in situations like that.

This forces you to look at yourself: how you define yourself with regard to other people, what your attitudes toward happiness are, and what your attitudes toward good fortune are. The Buddha has you reflect, when you see somebody who has some good fortune that you don't have, that you've been there before. You created the kamma to enjoy those things. Now that kamma has shown its results and gone away. If you want those results again, you've got to create the kamma to bring them back. But in the meantime, why be envious of those who have what you used to have and would like to have again? It's a part of human life that there are ups and downs. Sometimes your "down" coincides with their "up." Sometimes it's the other way around. So why be envious? Why be resentful? Is that the kind of self you want to nurture? One that's envious? This kind of reflection helps you to look back on how you can create a sense of self in unskillful ways. It's one kind of reflection that helps give rise to dispassion.

Another group of people for whom it's difficult to feel empathetic joy are those who have good fortune and happiness, but either they did something unskillful to gain it or they're abusing their positions of power and influence now that they've got it. But here, too, you have to think they created the causes someplace back in the past to gain that kind of happiness. Now look at what they've got. Not only is the happiness they've gained impermanent, and the things they've done to gain it are unskillful —at least, right in the present moment—but the happiness doesn't prevent them from acting in unskillful ways.

This shows you that happiness is not all that safe. We may aspire to happiness of one kind or another, but it's important that we think about the implications: What if we gain that happiness and we abuse it? We're putting ourselves in a dangerous position. That blessing the monks chant —*Āyu vaṇṇo sukhaṁ, balaṁ*—long life, beauty, happiness, and strength: Those things can be dangerous. Long life can be pretty miserable toward the end. Beauty: There are a lot of people who abuse their beauty and get

abused because of their beauty. Happiness, if it's worldly happiness, is no protection. And strength: Some people abuse their strength by bullying others.

So this reflection helps you reflect on what kind of happiness would be safe. It forces you to develop some equanimity toward the way kamma works itself out. Sometimes you work for happiness and, by the time it comes, you've changed. You're a different kind of person. You thought you would use your happiness for good purposes but something's happened in the meantime. As for people who are happy now, who have good fortune now, you have to be equanimous about that fact. But then from equanimity, you move into a sense of dismay and dispassion. You realize that if you want happiness that's really true, really solid, it has to be more than just worldly happiness. This sense of dismay is what gets you on the path.

So if you're practicing the brahmaviharas, it's good to think about them. Empathetic joy, as I said, is a good test case. After all, you say, "I want everybody to be happy, everybody to be happy," but when you come across somebody who's actually happy, well, this is what it looks like. Exactly what kind of happiness are you wishing for, for yourself and for other beings? This forces you to reflect. The only kind of happiness that's safe is what the Buddha calls noble happiness. The only search for happiness that's safe is the noble search.

So if you combine the practice of the brahmaviharas with the factor for awakening called the "analysis of qualities"—it's the discernment faculty in the factors for awakening—you go beyond simply trying to create a happy state of mind. You start reflecting on the nature of happiness. That's when the practice begins to lead beyond something ordinary. It inclines the mind to look for happiness that's extraordinary: noble, true, harmless, safe. This way, when you're enjoying the happiness of others, reflect on it so that you're doing it for the sake of the happiness that's most worthy of enjoyment and most worthy of pursuit.

Equanimity as a Skill

May 24, 2019

You'll notice in the chant we had just now on the four sublime attitudes: "May all beings be happy. May all beings be freed from their suffering. May all beings not be deprived of the good fortune they have attained." It's "may, may, may." But then the fourth one is not like that. It's a statement of fact: "All living beings are the owners of their actions." When I was in France this last month, I came across the French translation of the sublime attitudes in the chanting book that the group there had put together, and they'd missed that point. Their translation of equanimity was, "May all beings be the owners of their actions, heirs to their actions." It sounds like a curse. We're not wishing that on anybody. We're simply accepting that that's the way things are.

We live by our actions. Our actions shape our lives. But it's interesting to note that the reflection on kamma is used not only for equanimity, but also for gaining a sense of confidence that there is a way out and we can do it through our actions. This connects with the fact that equanimity is not something to develop on its own. The Buddha never recommended developing equanimity as a single practice. It's always in conjunction with other good qualities of mind. And the purpose in each list of those qualities is not just to stop at equanimity.

This is one of the misunderstandings that comes from looking at the list of the four sublime attitudes, the seven factors for awakening, even the ten perfections. They all end with equanimity, which makes it sound like this is where we're going. But that's not the case. It's meant to take you beyond itself, and to do so, you have to develop equanimity in conjunction with the other factors in the lists, keeping in mind the principle of kamma: that there are certain things that, based on past actions, you can't change.

But you have to remember that, in the teaching on kamma, not everything in the present moment is determined by the past. You're making choices in the present as well, and there are important areas where they can make a difference. Remember that discussion the Buddha had with some Niganthas, a sect that existed in his time. They believed that everything in the present moment was shaped by the past and they endured self-torture to burn off their past kamma. The Buddha asked them, "Have you ever noticed that this pain you feel during your tortures ends when you stop doing the torture?"

In other words, the pain is not coming only from the past. It can also come from things you're doing right now. What you're doing right now is something you can't be equanimous about. You have to be equanimous about the fact that there is a pattern for cause and effect. You do certain things and certain results will come: That's something you've got to accept. But then you have the choice as to what kind of things you want to do, based on the results you're looking for from those actions.

Like right now, you're making a choice: You're going to focus on your breath. How you focus on the breath will make a difference for the whole hour. If there are some pains in the body that come from past actions, past injuries, you work around them. You find areas in the body that are not in pain. You focus there. Think of good breath energies nourishing those parts of the body, strengthening those parts of the body, and then spreading from there to go through the pains—at the very least, to relax some of the tension around the pains. But you have the choice of where you're going to focus your attention right now and what you're going to do with what you're finding in the here and now.

So when we think of equanimity in terms of kamma, it doesn't just leave you there where you are. It focuses your attention on what you can do.

When I was in Paris, one evening toward the end of my stay, I was standing on the sidewalk in front of the hotel, waiting for a ride. I suddenly realized: This was my first time in the country without a translator around.

What would I do if someone came up and asked me a question and exposed my awful French? Well, sure enough, there was a telephone lineman working across the street. He saw me and came across the street, saying, "Marvelous! Marvelous! You're just the person I want to see. I've got a miserable job. I'm surrounded by dishonest people," he said. "How can I find happiness in life? How can I find peace in life?" So I talked to him about generosity, virtue, meditation. "How do you meditate?" I gave him the address for the website. He seemed pleased, shook my hand, and went back to work.

The irony was that night I was going to give a talk at a vipassana center on the topic of how the present moment is not the goal, how we're not here simply to accept what's happening in the present moment and to try to be happy with that. So I told them the story of the lineman. I mentioned that if I had told him, "Well, to be happy, just learn how to accept, be equanimous about your miserable job and your dishonest friends," he would have had the good sense to walk away.

The Buddha never told us just to sit there and accept things. You accept the way things function in terms of your actions and then you train the mind to use that principle of cause and effect to create a path. Equanimity is part of that path, but it's not the whole path—and it's not the goal. Recently I heard of a monk trained in the forest tradition saying that equanimity was the goal and that we're here to arrive at right view, accepting the fact that everything is inconstant, arises and passes away, and to stop at being okay with that—which is appalling. The Buddha never taught that, nor did the great ajaans.

His images, their images, for people on the path are never images of people who just sit back and accept. They're people who are searching, people engaged in a battle, people trying to develop skills. Now, equanimity has a role in developing a skill. It has a role in battles. It has a role in searches. If you're searching for something, you look and look and look and when you don't find it where you think it should be, you accept that fact and then you go and look for it someplace else. If you're in a battle

and there are setbacks, you accept the fact that there are setbacks, but you don't let them defeat you. You work your way around them. When you're developing a skill, you use equanimity to look at the results of what you're doing, to watch your actions, to look at the results, and if the results aren't satisfactory, you accept that fact and then go back and change your actions to be better.

Equanimity is selective. For instance, right now: Things outside, you put aside. Issues in your home, people for whom you're responsible, you just put them aside for the time being. Focus on your own mind. But remind yourself that you're doing this in a way that doesn't benefit only you.

You're getting your mind under control, and you can develop qualities of discernment, mindfulness, and alertness to learn how to put aside your greed, aversion, and delusion. When you can do that, you benefit and the people around you will benefit, too. This is a part of your motivation for being here: that it's going to be better for the people around you. Your equanimity for those people at the moment is what allows you to develop the skill you need right now. So that's one function of equanimity: to put anything that's not related to what you're doing right now out of your mind. It's not your business right now.

Then, of course, the second function is to look at what you're doing. Are you getting the results you want? If you're not, you can ask yourself, "What could I change? The spot I focus on? The way I breathe? The way I conceive of the breath? Should I learn how to think of the breath as energy?" Learn to see your sense of the body as you feel it from within as all energy. It's all breath. As you breathe in, there are no hard spots or solid spots that you have to push the breath through. You're simply allowing more energy to come suffusing into your energy field. Good energy comes in; bad energy goes out.

There are lots of ways you can change the way you relate to the breath in the present moment, the way you understand the breath in the present moment, what you do with the breath in the present moment. Equanimity

is there to judge the results, to look fairly and objectively at what's going on so that you can be more effective in making changes.

So with equanimity, we accept the principle of kamma that actions have results in line with the quality of the intention. That means you have to learn the pattern of which intentions work well and which ones don't. But then it leaves open the possibility that you can master that pattern and use it for the sake of what you want, true happiness, because that's what the goal of the practice is.

We're not here to arrive at equanimity. We're here to arrive at the ultimate happiness. Equanimity, as part of the path, helps get you there. But it's not the whole path, and it's not the essence of where we want to go. Always keep these points in mind so that you can develop the skillful kind of equanimity that helps you. Stay away from the unskillful kinds: the kinds that are lazy or defeatist or—in Ajaan Fuang's terminology—the small-hearted equanimity that just gets depressed and gives up. Those are not the equanimities that the Buddha was teaching. He was teaching large-hearted equanimity, in Ajaan Fuang's phrase, that has space for the effort that needs to be put into the practice. And happiness is going to result, both along the way and when you arrive at the goal.

The Gatekeeper Doesn't Just Note

September 4, 2019

The duty of mindfulness is to remember. What does it remember? It remembers what's skillful and what's unskillful, how to recognize different skillful qualities as they come up, how to recognize unskillful qualities as they come up. It also remembers what to do with them. It doesn't stop with the recognition.

The Buddha compared mindfulness to a gatekeeper in a fortress at a frontier where there's the danger of enemies coming in. As you can imagine, the duty of the gatekeeper is not simply to recognize who's coming in, who's going out. If he reported to his boss, "Well, today fifty enemy spies came in," and he didn't stop them, the boss would find a new gatekeeper. This is why, when the Buddha teaches mindfulness, he teaches it together with other qualities. For example, there's the passage where he combines it with right view and right effort in developing all the factors of the path. Right view basically is knowing what's skillful and what's not, and the various techniques for dealing with skillful and unskillful qualities. Right mindfulness remembers those lessons and applies them to what you're doing. Right effort is what actually does the work of abandoning unskillful qualities and developing skillful ones in their place.

There's another passage where the Buddha combines mindfulness with alertness and ardency. Ardency is basically right effort all over again. You're not simply ardent in naming things. If something unskillful comes into the mind, mindfulness helps you recognize it, and ardency tries to get rid of it. Suppose sensual desire comes in while you're trying to meditate. You recognize it and you remember all the different techniques the Buddha gave for contemplating the drawbacks of sensuality and the advantages of getting the mind beyond it. If the gatekeeper simply called out the names of people as they came in—if he saw a spy and said, "Hey, a spy!"—some

spies would run away. This is why the naming technique gives some results in clearing up the mind. But there are a lot of enemy spies who would pretend not to notice, not to hear, and just walk right in. If mindfulness didn't have something else to back it up, if all it were doing was naming things, then the fortress would be overrun.

Now, in that image of the fortress, the Buddha said that you also have soldiers, which are your right efforts. They're armed with learning, once you've learned about right view. But both the gatekeeper and the soldiers have to be supported by concentration, in other words, the food stores that you keep in the fortress. This is why it's important to focus your mindfulness on one thing and try to keep it there as much as you can, because the Buddha's instructions for mindfulness are not just for noting. They're basically—and this is where the analogy breaks down—they're basically the Buddha's instructions for how to get the mind into concentration.

For example, you stay with the breath, in and of itself. You're ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. That's what we're doing as we're concentrating: staying focused on one thing in and of itself. Put aside all other topics that you might be thinking about. You do both these activities with mindfulness, you do them with alertness, and you're ardent. When you stick with them, you can get a sense of comfort.

This is where your ardency turns into evaluation. As Ajaan Lee teaches it, you evaluate the breath to see what kind of breath feels good. See what way of conceiving the breath helps the breath feel even better. Spread that good breath energy around, so that you have a sense of well-being throughout the body, along with a strong sense of nourishment. When the mind feels nourished like this, then it's a lot easier to deal with defiant defilements, the ones that would walk right in no matter what the gatekeeper said, regardless of how well the gatekeeper knew their names. You have the strength to deal with them. Your soldiers can fight them off. You're not so taken in by them.

This is where you bring in the work of discernment, because seeing things arising and passing away is only part of the Buddha's strategy for dealing with the things that create trouble in the mind.

You see something arise, but you don't just watch it arise. You try to see what arises with it, what causes it. When it passes away, what else has passed away? Remember, when the Buddha described his awakening in the shortest possible way, it was a principle of causality: "When this is, that is. When this isn't, that isn't. From the arising of this comes the arising of that. From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that." You've got to see these connections. If you don't, what you see doesn't count as discernment, because when there's a problem in the mind, you should be able to figure out what the cause is so that you can attack the problem at the cause. If you attack it at the result, the cause just keeps producing more and more problems. It's like a pipe bursting in your house. If you spend all your time bailing the water out of the house without fixing the pipe, you can bail till your dying day and still not get the house dry. So when you see something arising and passing away, you've got to see what else arises and passes away along with it. Those are the first two steps in the Buddha's five-step strategy.

The next step is that when you see something arise, look for the allure. Why do you go for it? This step will take a lot of discernment, because the mind likes to lie to itself. As Ajaan Chah commented: "When you watch the mind, what you learn is how the mind lies to itself." There are things it likes and it won't admit to itself why it likes them. So you've got to be very patient. Again, this is why we practice concentration, because we're going to have to be watching these things again and again and again. And to watch things that steadily and that consistently and that persistently, you need a sense of steady well-being. You need a place where you can take your stance with a steady gaze, because you're going to be trying to compare the allure with the drawbacks.

This is where the contemplation of the three perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self come in. You see that whatever it is that

pulls you away, it's got to have one of these problems. It's inconstant, stressful, not-self—in other words, you can't control it. And those are just the main categories of the different perceptions you can apply to things to see why they're really not worth it.

But if you compare the drawbacks with a false allure—in other words, with what you thought is the reason you went for things, but it really wasn't the reason—you don't get to the root of the problem. You might get discouraged: With all this analysis and everything, nothing seems to be clearing up the mind. Well, that's because the mind still hasn't opened up to itself. When we talk about being quickly alert to whatever comes up in the mind, it's that question of the allure. You have to look really carefully for that, because it whispers in the mind. It's like the subliminal messages they put on TV. They're there and they're gone, but they leave a trace of their influence. So when the mind is telling itself, "Yeah, let's go with this. Who cares about what the Dhamma says? Who cares about the fact that we're trying to meditate?" it'll dangle a little something in front of you and then disguise it. The message will have been received, but large parts of the mind are ignorant of what's going on. It's like spies inside and outside of the fortress sending messages back and forth to each other that the gatekeeper of mindfulness is oblivious to.

So those are things you've got to be really careful about. You're looking for the details of what's happening in the mind. That's the place where you want to focus: Why do you go for things that you know are not in your own best interest? It's when you really see what the issues are, really see what the allure is, then you can compare it with the drawbacks. When your sense of the drawbacks gets strong enough, that's when you find the escape through dispassion.

So remember, mindfulness has to work together with other factors of the path, and its work is more than just naming whoever comes in and out of the fortress gate. Recognizing those people is part of its job, but it works with a team—or with several teams, actually. And only when it works together with its teams can it really do the job that needs to be done, which

is to figure out why it is that the mind creates suffering for itself even though it doesn't want to suffer, and how it can learn to stop.

When you understand the function of mindfulness, it's a lot easier to get the best results out of it. Try not to settle for just partial results. Try to go all the way.

Anupassana

April 18, 2018

Tell yourself that the breath is your friend, and you're going to stay with your friend. You're going to be loyal. You're going to be consistent. You're going to be a true friend to the breath, and that way, the breath gets friendlier. But the important thing is that you stay together.

There's a Pali term *anupassana,* which literally means to follow and to watch. You can translate it as "keeping track." It's how you stay together. It's a term used both for concentration and for insight practice.

When you're doing mindfulness practice—trying to get the mind to settle down with the breath and stay with the breath so as to get into concentration—that's called *anupassana.* You're keeping track of the breath. It's like keeping track of a thread going through a carpet. There are lots of other threads in the carpet, but you're not going to get interested in them, or if you're going to be interested in them, it's simply in terms of how they relate to the thread you're following.

So think of the breath as a thread that you follow through time. To be on good terms with it, Ajaan Lee gives advice for how to work with the breath energy in the body. The Buddha simply says to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out, and to calm bodily fabrication. He also talks about developing a sense of pleasure, a sense of rapture even, as the mind settles down, and then letting that pleasure and rapture spread to fill the whole body. He doesn't say how, but working with the breath is a good way of, one, being aware of the whole body, and two, calming the breath, and then three, letting that sense of ease spread throughout the whole body, all at the same time. You're trying to get to a state where the breath fills the body, your awareness fills the body, a sense of ease fills the body. All these things come together.

The "breath" here, of course, means breath energy. It's one of the four elements: earth, water, wind, fire. We can sometimes take a while to get on good terms with it because we can easily mistake it for the water element. The breath flows through the body, but so does the blood. We can confuse the two. We can push the blood around. In fact, we do that an awful lot as we go through our lives. If you've had a lot of repressed emotions, you've been pushing the blood around quite a bit. Or if the body's not well, sometimes the blood is flowing in the wrong spots or the wrong directions and stagnating in other spots, so when you feel that something's not quite right, you try to push it around. As for the breath, it flows but it's not something you can push. Its nature is already to flow, to flow through everything, no matter how solid, but if you push it, you're pushing the blood, which can't flow through solids, and sometimes that can give you headaches. It can get you all discombobulated.

It's important that you understand exactly what you're following. You're following the sense of energy. And to let it flow, the word "let" is important. It's like opening valves on water pipes. When you open the valve, you don't have to push the water through. Just open the valve, and the water will do the flowing on its own. In the same way, wherever there's a sense of tension anywhere in the body, you want to relax that tension. It's like opening a valve to allow the breath to flow through. So just think of releasing, and that's pretty much all you have to do.

In fact, as the mind begins to settle down, you'll begin to realize that the perception you hold in mind is what's going to make all the difference, what's going to allow you to relax to begin with, to keep you relaxed, and to allow the breath to flow smoothly throughout the body. If the flow seems to be working at cross purposes—in other words, it's flowing in one direction in one part and an opposite direction in another part, and they're clashing—just hold in mind the question: How could they work together? And sometimes the breath will just sort itself out. All you have to do is allow. Then, as the sense of well-being spreads, you can let your awareness spread into the body, too.

For concentration to work, for mindfulness to work, this process of anupassana— keeping track—works best if everything is on good terms. You're trying to get the mind anchored in the body with the breath, and you follow the breath regardless of whatever else comes up. Sometimes visions come. Sometimes sounds come. And all too often we think, "Ah, here's a sign that something important is happening." But you should try to stay with the breath—because the breath is meaningless. Don't go jumping for meanings.

We had a visitor here recently who was trying to gauge what level of concentration he was on and where he had advanced in terms of his insight, but these things don't come with signs. Whatever signs there are could easily be coming from ignorance. Your main task is to anupassana, to follow and watch this one thing and be on good terms with it. You're doing this with something meaningless because it allows you to question the meanings you give to things. When a sign comes up or a vision comes up and the mind says, "This must mean this," or "this must mean that," put a question mark next to that comment. One of the easiest ways for meditation to pull you astray is if you start giving meanings to things and believing the meanings. Either when a vision comes or when an insight comes, you say "Oh, this must be a sign of x or a sign that I've reached this level or that level." That's how people go astray.

Upasika Kee has a good piece of advice. She says that whenever an insight comes, look at what immediately follows the insight in the mind. Sometimes you see a little bit of greed, a little bit of aversion, and you realize, okay, the insight has been tainted. You've latched on to it. Ajaan Lee's method for dealing with insights as they come like this is to ask yourself: To what extent is it true and to what extent is it false? To what extent is the opposite true?

So you put a question mark next to these things. The important thing is that you begin to see these processes of the mind as it gives meanings to things and then rides with them. You see that it can cause you an awful lot of trouble that way.

This is where the anupassana turns from concentration into insight. The difference between concentration and insight is basically the questions you're asking. With concentration, the right question is: "How do I get the mind to settle down? How do I get to enjoy the object? How do I get to be continually with the object, become one with the object?" And then you follow it. With insight, the questions are: "How is this a fabrication? And what's the best way to deal with these fabrications?"

The Buddha's instructions on breath are divided into four tetrads: four sets of four steps. In each tetrad, the processes are the same. One tetrad deals with the breath, one tetrad with feelings, another with mind, another with dhammas—in other words, the four frames of reference in the establishing of mindfulness. In each case, you get sensitive to the fact that that particular thing is being fabricated, and then you play with it to heighten that sense, "Oh yes, this really is something that I'm putting together right now."

You want to see this because your experiences are composed of two things: One is the results of kamma coming in from the past, and the other is both what you're doing right now and the results of what you're doing right now. In fact, what you're doing right now is what enables you to experience the raw material coming in from the past to begin with. When the Buddha explains dependent co-arising, this fabrication in the present moment actually comes prior to your awareness of the results of past actions, and the Buddha wants you to see that. You don't have much control over the results of past actions, but you *do* have control over what you're doing right now, and you want to see, "What am I doing right now that's causing suffering? Can I fabricate things in a way that causes less suffering?"

With the breath, you can see that it is a kind of fabrication. The way you breathe sometimes goes totally on automatic pilot, but there is an intentional element, and all too often that automatic pilot disguises some underlying intentions you don't notice. So you try to bring them up into consciousness. Ask yourself: "I'm deciding when to breathe in, when to

breathe out, so how can I do that well? How can I find a sense of ease and well-being through the breath? And then how can I calm the effect of the breath on the mind?"

The same pattern applies to feelings. Feelings are a part of what they call mental fabrication. They go together with perceptions. Perceptions are the images you hold in mind, and here we're interested in the perceptions you use to keep the mind with the breath, but also the perceptions that you use to deal with any obstructions that come up, any hindrances that come up. With hindrances, the number one thing is to perceive, say, sensual desire and ill will as hindrances, and not as your friends. Perceive anything that pulls you away from the breath right now as a hindrance, and then learn to perceive it as something that you really want to get past.

Those are two different perceptions. Sometimes you can perceive something as a hindrance, but another part of the mind says, "I don't care. I like it." You need to have other perceptions to help you see that that's not anywhere you really want to go. You can think about the drawbacks of the hindrance. If you thought about it for twenty-four hours, where would it take you? Well, not anywhere good. So why give it any time at all?

But more important are the perceptions that allow you to stay with the breath. You'll find that different perceptions will have a different effect on the breath and a different effect on the mind, so use the perceptions first that give rise to a sense of well-being, pleasure, rapture in the breath. Then use the perceptions that calm the sense of rapture down, that give rise more to a state of equanimity, so you can see to what extent you really are fabricating things right now. Those are the fabrications you want to gain insight into. Which are the ones you want to hold on to? Which ones are the ones you don't want to hold on to? I.e., which are the ones you want to keep doing? Which ones are habits you want to stop?

This is where we bring in some more perceptions—the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, not-self—and doing that, too, is a kind of anupassana, insight anupassana. As you apply a perception, say, to the breath or to the mind as being something inconstant or fabricated, again you're keeping

track of something. You're keeping track of its inconstancy or its stress or the fact that you have no control over it. You may have *some* control over it —if you didn't have any control over these things, you wouldn't be able to meditate, you wouldn't be able to practice—but there's an extent to which when you try to control things, you run up against a wall. You want to see that and ask yourself, "To what extent can I find true happiness with this? To what extent can I hold on to this and depend on it?" When you see that it's not dependable or worth holding on to, that's when you let it go. As long as it is worth holding on to as you're working on your path, you don't let it go quite yet. But when the path is fully developed, that's when you let go of everything. You see that everything is not worth holding on to.

It's a value judgment, and there's no technique that can convince you of the value of letting go until you see for yourself that you go for a particular way of fabricating things in your mind, fabricating your experience, because there's an allure. You have to ask yourself, "What is it that I'm trying to get out of this?" Especially when it's something like greed, aversion, or delusion: Why do you like it even though part of you knows it's wrong? Then you compare the allure with the drawbacks, but as long as you don't quite see what the real allure is, why you're really going for it, then no matter how much you tell yourself to let go, it's like trying to shake tar off of your hand. It's going to stick.

So you have to be very still. This is why concentration and discernment have to go together. Be very still to watch when the mind goes for something: Why does it go? What does it think it's getting out of it? The reasons are going to differ from person to person. This is why the Buddha didn't teach a technique for vipassana. Instead, he recommended asking questions, like, "To what extent is this fabrication? To what extent can I trust it? To what extent do I realize that it's an activity I don't want to engage in anymore?"

Those are some of the questions you ask as you anupassana, as you follow the thread of inconstancy, as you follow the thread of stress or the thread of not-self, until the mind learns how to be perfectly fine with

letting go. If you try to let go of things when you don't have the concentration, the mind feels lost. It thrashes around. Which is one of the reasons why the Buddha said to keep track of the breath as you're keeping track of these other things at the same time. You don't leave the breath. It's just that the questions you ask get more sophisticated, more subtle.

Ajaan Lee's image is of cutting down a forest. That's concentration. Insight is burning all the logs. It's the same forest, just that what you do with it gets more subtle and gets more effective, gets more thorough in clearing away stress from the mind. Even just concentration can get rid of a lot of stress, but insight gets rid of more. And both are centered on this process of anupassana, keeping track, following the thread of the breath, following the thread of the mind's fabrications, seeing when they're worth holding on to and when they're not. That's why it's all one practice. The questions develop, and the results will develop, too.

So stick with your friend. The breath is the friend that enables all of this to happen. Try to get on good terms with it. As for the things that come up aside from that, remember that you're sticking with this one thread, and you don't want the other threads to distract you or pull you away.

All Three Functions of Mindfulness

March 3, 2018

Mindfulness means keeping something in mind, like we're doing right now. We're keeping the breath in mind. But why are we keeping the breath in mind?

There are basically three functions for mindfulness on the path. One is to remember to stay alert to what you're doing in the present moment and not let your attention shift off to the past or the future. The second is to remember to recognize what's coming up in the present moment, and specifically what you're doing, to see what's skillful, what's unskillful. If, say, a thought arises in the mind, you can label it simply as a thought. Or if it's a specific hindrance, you can remember, "This is sensual desire," "This is ill will," or whatever. Noting just that much allows you to step out of the hindrance for a bit. That's when you apply the third function, which is to remember what's effective in getting rid of unskillful thoughts and developing skillful ones in their place. This passes the job on to ardency, or right effort, to actually do the work.

So you remember to be alert. You remember to recognize what's going on so that you can then deal with it in terms of right effort. That last function—the function of right effort—often gets forgotten in discussions of mindfulness.

Many years back there was a monk who went into the hills of Burma and asked a senior monk there, "Where in the Canon does the Buddha teach vipassana?" And the other monk replied, "Well, isn't everything in the Satipatthana Sutta?" And that response—that that one sutta contains everything you need to know about vipassana or even about mindfulness—has led to what's now the modern mindfulness movement, where the focus is totally on the first two functions of mindfulness: to be in the present moment and to recognize what's happening.

But the sutta's not complete. It's not even a complete account of mindfulness. It gives the formula for mindfulness: that you keep track of the body in and of itself, ardent, alert and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. The same formula is repeated for feelings, for mind, and for mental qualities. But then the sutta addresses only one part of the formula: What does it mean to keep track of these things in and of themselves? It treats that part in a lot of detail—so much detail, and the sutta is so long, that people naturally assume it's complete.

But the question of what ardency does—the third function of mindfulness—isn't explicitly addressed at all. Which gives the impression that you just stay in the present to note what's coming and going, and that that should be enough. But it's not. Now, sometimes simply watching things come and go in the mind *is* enough to develop a sense of dispassion toward them, but it doesn't always work. And simply watching things coming and going is not enough to get the mind into concentration, which is what the purpose of mindfulness is.

Even the Satipatthana Sutta itself mentions this. When you're focusing on the breath, you start out by just discerning when it's long, when it's short. Then you consciously try to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, breathe out. From there, you calm bodily fabrication which, the Canon tells us in another place, means getting the mind into the fourth jhana. That doesn't happen on its own.

Similarly with feelings: The sutta talks about feelings of the flesh, which are the feelings that arise willy-nilly at the senses. But then it also mentions feelings not-of-the-flesh, which are things you have to consciously give rise to. Pain not-of-the-flesh is the realization that there's work to be done and you haven't reached the goal yet. It's a painful thought, but the Buddha actually recommends developing it. Better than sitting around being upset at things in the world. He says to try to develop a desire to attain a goal and a willingness to put up with the pain of that desire—the pain that comes when you realize that you aren't there yet—because that's your motivation to practice.

Then there's pleasure not-of-the-flesh, which is the sense of ease and well-being that comes when you get the mind into right concentration.

So, even though the sutta doesn't explicitly mention getting the mind into jhana, it implicitly ends up there, at levels of jhana, which need to be done and are not just going to happen on their own. After all, that's one of the functions of what the Buddha calls "mindfulness as a governing principle": remembering to give rise to anything skillful that's not there in the mind and then, once it's there, to maintain it so that it doesn't fall away.

It's good to think about this third function of mindfulness, both because it's the one that tends to get forgotten and because it's the most important. There are times when you have to consciously try to get past, say, sensual desires or feelings of ill will, and the act of simply noticing that they're there won't be enough to get rid of them.

This is where the Buddha's analysis of how you deal with things that are taking over the mind comes in. There are five steps.

The first is to look for the origination. What causes that state to come? What sparks it? Be aware as soon as something has been sparked in the mind. Don't wait until it becomes full-blown.

The second step is to notice when it passes away. A lot of these thoughts come and go, come and go, come and go. When they come, they stir up some hormones. Then the thoughts are gone, but the hormones are still stirred up. You're still having the physical symptoms, say, of lust or of anger or fear or guilt. And because the physical symptoms are there, you figure, well, the emotion must still be there, the thought must still be there, and so you can dig up the thought again. So it's good to notice when the thought goes. Realize that it comes and goes in short periods, then it'll stop for a while and then it will start up again. Look for the times when you're starting it up again. That way, it begins to seem less monolithic and you also begin to realize why you go for it, what sparks it.

Because that relates to the third step, which is to look for the allure: what you find attractive in the emotion, even if it's negative. Say—when sensual desire arises, a desire for a particular kind of food—you ask

yourself, "Why am I going for it? What's the pull?" In some cases, it's because the body actually needs that kind of food. In other cases, it has to do with the associations we have around food. They talk about comfort food—I've never found meatloaf to be particularly comforting—but there are associations you have with things like that. Your mother made it back when you were young, and so there are associations that go with that. There are other kinds of food where the associations have more to do with status or something exotic.

This is why we have that reflection on why we eat: just for the maintenance of the body, to make sure that we don't get ill and that we have the strength to practice. That's all we need. Food doesn't have to be fancier than that. So look for the allure. Sometimes it actually makes sense and in that case, it's not really a defilement. But other times, it's something pretty strange and we tend to hide it from ourselves. We don't see it or we're embarrassed about it. Part of the mind is embarrassed so it hides it from the rest of the mind. All too often we don't know exactly why we go for something.

This can apply not only to sensual desire but also to ill will or to worries about things. Sometimes you worry about things because it feels righteous: You feel responsible because you're worrying. But the worrying doesn't really accomplish much, and actually depletes your energy to deal with the unexpected. This becomes particularly clear at death. One of the things the Buddha recommends, if someone is dying, is to make sure they're not worried about the people they're leaving behind. After all, at that point there's really nothing they can do for those other people. The worrying just drags them down. But sometimes there's a sense of obligation. People you're responsible for: You feel, "How can I leave these people?" Well, we've been leaving one another for who knows how long.

This is where the master narrative of Buddhism is useful: the narrative of many, many lifetimes. Put the narrative of your life in the context of that larger master narrative and see how it looks from that perspective. People have had lives intertwined who knows how many times, and then they've

separated again and again. They come back again, get separated again. And the roles get switched. If you identify too strongly with a particular role, you're going to suffer when you no longer can play that role. So look for the allure, and then look at it in terms of that master narrative. Is going for this particular defilement really worth it in terms of its consequences? Does it make sense in terms of that larger narrative?

This is when you get to the fourth step, which is to see the drawbacks. Holding on to that particular kind of thought: Where does it lead you? Where does it go? And what does it make you do to other people?

So much of our desire for happiness requires laying claim to things. And, of course, other people are going to have to lay claim to some of the same things. When everything is laid claim to, where are you going to find an innocent happiness? You've got to push other people out of the way, as in that vision the Buddha had of the fish in the stream pushing one another out of the way to get that last gulp of water before they all die. Even the ones who get the gulp of water die anyhow, and because they harm one another, there's kamma that goes with that. That's the way it is in the world. And it's not just fish. This is the way human beings live.

So, when a thought comes up to the mind and pulls you away from the practice, pulls you away from concentration, you can tell yourself, "Do I want to be like a fish, laying claim to something that I can't even hold on to for very long, or can I come back inside and find some well-being there, in my sense of the body as I feel it from within, my sense of my mind as I sense it from within?" Because that's something that nobody else can lay claim to. Nobody else can even know it. That's your territory entirely.

When you can think in these ways, you get to the fifth step: a sense of dispassion that frees you because you realize there's something better that comes when you let go. That's an important principle in the Buddhist teachings: You don't let go simply by saying that "Everything is really bad so I might as well not try." There *is* something good in life. There's a whole area inside your body, inside your awareness that you can straighten out,

and in straightening it out you can find a genuine happiness. That's why we let go.

We let go out of dispassion, and the dispassion comes from growing up. This is a lot of what our growth in the practice is. We're growing up. We're maturing. We admit the consequences of our actions and then we try to find a way to make our actions less harmful to others and less harmful to ourselves. We realize that we can take responsibility for ourselves.

It's in these ways that mindfulness performs that third function, which is helping us remember how to let go of things that are harmful, how to develop things that are skillful. You remember this from things you've heard and also, even more vividly, from things you've done that have given good results.

So in your practice of mindfulness, make sure that it's complete. Remember to stay in the present moment anchored in one of the four frames of reference. Remember to recognize things that are coming up in the mind and learn how to label them as "This is skillful," or "This is unskillful." That's usually not the first thought that comes to us, of course. Lust comes into the mind, anger comes into the mind, and we just tend to go for it. We don't stop to label it as skillful or unskillful at all. The labels tend to be more, "I like it. Let's go."

But if you can stop for a bit and say, "Hey, this is a hindrance," that enables you to move on to the third function, which is to remind yourself, "This is what you do with a hindrance. You learn how to let it go." If there's something that leads to concentration or mindfulness—a sense of fullness and ease inside—you remember to develop that, and you remember how.

In that way, the Buddha's teachings on mindfulness achieve their purpose, which is to give the mind a good place to dwell inside: a place where you settle down with a sense of well-being that doesn't have to depend on anybody else and puts the mind in a good position where it can see even more clearly where its attachments are and how it can let them go.

So, it's good that people are trying to be alert to the present moment and trying to recognize what's going on, but it's even better when they move onto the third step and learn how to use that knowledge, use that awareness to find something really skillful inside. That's how the Buddha characterized his own quest: the quest for what was skillful. This is what he found—that from the concentration he could develop in the mind in a way that leads to a happiness that goes even deeper, that goes beyond the concentration.

So, check inside yourself. Develop the qualities that the Buddha talked about. See if they lead to the same result.

Death Without Drama

March 2, 2018

There was a nice cartoon in *The New Yorker* recently: three hooded death figures with scythes, and one of them is lying dead on the ground. One of the other ones is saying to the third one, "You never think it's going to happen to you."

Most of us go through life like that. And yet death happens to everybody. Most people don't like to think about it because they think there's nothing you can do about it. They're, you might say, fatalistic about fatality: You die, you just die, and that's it. But the Buddha realized that there's a skill to dying, because death is not the end. You can die well or die poorly, and how you manage your death is going to play a large role in what happens after death.

This is one of the reasons why we practice, one of the reasons why we contemplate the five reflections so often: We're subject to aging, illness, death, and separation. These things are all inevitable. But then we have our kamma. That's what makes a difference.

Now, for most us our kamma is that we want more, as in that other chant we did just now: The world is swept away, does not endure, offers no shelter, has nothing of its own, there's no one in charge—and yet, we're all slaves to craving. We want to keep coming back for more and more and more of being swept away. That's the problem. But we can learn how to gain some control over that craving at least—and at best, of course, put an end to it.

Before we can put an end to it, though, we need to get some control over it. This is why we meditate, because there's a skill in gaining control over the mind. The Buddha talks about the things you have to watch out for as death comes. There are two big ones. One is worry: your own worry

about yourself, what you're facing, along with your worries about the people you're leaving behind.

The other thing you have to watch out for is sensuality: your attachment to planning for sensual pleasures, which leads to fear that you'll be deprived of the pleasures you've enjoyed.

When we practice meditation, we're learning how not to fall for these attachments. Regard them simply as hindrances coming up in the mind. No matter how insistent they may seem—that you really want a particular pleasure, that this is something you really have to worry about—you have to tell yourself you don't need those things.

As for the best preparation for the future, it lies in gaining more discernment, more concentration, more mindfulness. You don't know the details of what's going to happen in the future, but you *do* know that when unexpected things come, the more mindful, alert, and discerning you are, then the more likely you'll be able to handle these things well. And the more you'll have the ability not to get knocked over by these events.

One of our biggest problems is the narratives we tell ourselves. And the narrative of death is a very upsetting one. But we don't have to tell ourselves that narrative, or any other narrative. That's another thing the practice does as we're developing concentration. We start out by trying to be with just the body, feelings, and mind, in and of themselves, at the level before we turn them into issues, before we turn them into narratives.

The "in and of itself" is there before we turn these things into the ordinary becomings of daily life: what you want to do with this body; what kind of feelings you want; how you're going to go about getting them; the attitudes that come up in the mind; the stories they tell. We try to get at our experience of the body, feelings, and mind before they've turned into becomings. When they're still just a potential for a becoming with narratives, we turn them into a becoming with concentration, which doesn't have narratives.

If you were to be asked, "What was the narrative of your concentration today?" the answer would be, "Well, I watched this breath, then I watched

that breath, and then I watched that breath." A pretty dull narrative. But the point is not in the narrative. You don't have to remember all the breaths you've watched. You just have to remember to be with each one as it comes, and try to breathe in a way that's skillful each time you breathe. Try to find whatever pleasure or potential for pleasure there can be in that breath. Give the mind something good to stay with so that it's not hungering after any narratives.

It's just the breath in and of itself, the body in and of itself—not the body in the world, where you might wonder about whether it's good-looking or not, whether people will like it or not, whether it's strong enough to do this or that job. Stay with just the fact that you've got a body right here. That's it. It's just a body. Feelings are just feelings. Mind states are just mind states, without all the fearful narratives. And that's your refuge.

The Buddha talks about taking the Dhamma as a refuge and he explains it as establishing mindfulness in this way. It's your refuge because it helps pull you out of the narratives that would make things overwhelming.

There's a lot of drama that can happen around death, but death can also be without drama. You have that choice—and that's the skill we're trying to develop.

That's the other part of meditating. There's not much drama about sitting and watching your breath. Like that older *New Yorker* cartoon: A woman is talking to a friend. In the background, you see her husband in the next room, sitting and meditating. And she's complaining to her friend: "Henry used to be such an interesting neurotic before he took up meditation."

The meditation is much better for you than neurosis, but there's no drama. There are people who live for the drama, but then the drama can overwhelm them. I know an author who wrote a book about infidelity on a large scale, a man who was very unfaithful to a lot of women. But then she found that her husband was cheating on her and she couldn't take it, so she

committed suicide. It's one thing to like the drama just for the taste, as they say in Indian aesthetic theory, which describes how you're not actually experiencing what the characters are experiencing, you're just tasting their emotions at a distance, which makes them interesting and enjoyable. But then when things like that actually happen to you, the suffering can be immense and overwhelming.

That's not what we want. We want to learn to keep the mind from being overwhelmed. The Buddha talks about feelings invading the mind and remaining. What he means is that the feelings overwhelm you. He trained himself so that he was not invaded by the feelings and he was not overwhelmed. They didn't remain. A feeling would come and it would just slip away, like water off a duck's back.

How do you do that? By developing this refuge of mindfulness.

The Buddha has an image of the practice being like a fortress. You've got mindfulness as the gatekeeper, who tries to remember to recognize unskillful thoughts and to keep them from coming into the fortress. Mindfulness has three functions altogether:

- One is remembering to stay alert in the present moment.
- Two is recognizing what's coming up, learning to label things as skillful and unskillful. Rather than "my narrative," it's, "This is an unskillful thought of this particular variety."
- And then three, once you recognize what variety it is, then you know what to do with it. You remember how to deal with unskillful thoughts in an effective way, and how to effectively give rise to skillful qualities. That's what mindfulness does. It protects the fortress at the gate.

But if it happens to let somebody in, then you've got the soldiers inside, which stand for right effort, armed with knowledge of the Dhamma. In other words, if something unskillful does come into the mind, you remember what the Dhamma has taught about things like that, and you do your best to get rid of it.

Then you've got concentration, which is the food that keeps the soldiers and the gatekeeper strong. At the same time, the soldiers and the gatekeeper are protecting the stores of food. They don't want the food to get stolen.

So these are the qualities that, working together, see you through. These are your protection.

The fortress itself has a foundation post, which is conviction. The conviction is that your actions really will matter, which is why we're not fatalistic about fatality. When death comes, we know there is a skill to approaching it. The actions you've been developing, the skills you've been developing through your meditation, through your practice, will see you in good stead. As long as you have that conviction, you'll work at getting more skillful in your actions, even up to your last breath.

Finally, discernment is the fortress wall. It's covered with plaster so that the enemy can't gain a foothold. The soldiers throw the enemy out and your discernment keeps them out. That's your refuge.

But the key to all this is to get to things before they turn into the narratives of becoming that make events overwhelming. See that the body is just the body. This is what the body does. It's going to die inevitably. We have to prepare for that, so that when the time comes, we're not knocked out of line: "The time has come? Okay, this is what you do when the time has come. You've been preparing for this. It's just body. It's just feelings. It's just mind states." That way, the mind can go on to whatever opportunities it has created for itself through its kamma.

If you do it well, then you go to a place where you have more opportunities to practice, which could be the human realm, or it could be the realm of the devas. Sometimes you hear that it's only in the human realm that people can practice the Dhamma, but that's not true. Devas can practice, too, when they're heedful. So, if any of those realms open up with an opportunity to practice and you're not able yet to completely let go, go there, and it still counts as a skillful death.

So we're working on these skills: seeing the hindrances as hindrances rather than as more interesting stories to follow; learning to develop our fortress inside with its gatekeeper, its soldiers, and its food. That way, even though we don't look for death, when it happens to come, we're ready for it. We can approach it with skill, realizing that our level of skill will make a huge difference.

A Concentration Diet

October 9, 2019

There's a series of questions and answers that the Buddha used to teach the Dhamma to young novices. It starts with: "What is one?" "What is two?" "What is three?" and it goes all the way up to, "What is ten?" For example, "What is four?" The four noble truths. "What is five?" The five aggregates. "Eight?" The noble eightfold path. The most interesting answer, though, is the answer to, "What is one?" And that is, "All beings subsist on food." And here when the Buddha says "food," he means both food for the body and food for the mind.

Food for the mind includes things like contact at the senses, consciousness at the senses, and intentions. Our mind feeds off of these things. This is why when people go into sensory deprivation tanks, the mind starts getting really weird. It's starved for food. And just as food outside can be either healthy or unhealthy, there's also healthy and unhealthy food for the mind. Especially with intentions: Our mind has a tendency to feed off of unskillful intentions, and even though they might be delicious, they're like some kinds of tasty but unhealthy food in that they lead to trouble down the line.

So we have to learn how to eat properly by finding the right kinds of intentions to feed on. But even then, as long as the mind is in the position where it has to eat, it's going to suffer. As the Buddha said, suffering is the five clinging-aggregates, and the word for clinging—*upadana*—can also mean to take sustenance, to feed. When you're in a position where you have to feed on things, no matter how good they are, you're in an unstable position, always concerned about how much longer your source of food is going to last, dependent on things that are often outside of your control.

The Buddha's solution was eventually to find a state of mind—*nibbana* — that doesn't have to feed on anything at all. There's no hunger, no lack.

And when you don't have to feed, you don't have to hold on to anything. You no longer count as a being. This is why when the Buddha was asked, "When arahants die, do they exist? Do they not exist? Both? Neither?" he wouldn't answer, because we people are defined by our attachments, defined by our desires. When there are no attachments and no desires, there's no definition. We can't be measured by anything. When there's no definition, nothing to measure, there's no proper way to give a description. This is why the image the texts use to explain the Buddha's silence here is of the ocean. It can't be measured as to how many buckets full of water it contains. In the same way, an arahant can't be measured.

But, to get to that state requires that we feed in the meantime. This is why, when the Buddha talked about the practice as being like having a fortress in a frontier and he compared various aspects of the practice to different things in a fortress—like mindfulness being the gatekeeper, persistence being the soldiers, discernment being the wall—he compared concentration to the stores of food kept in the fortress. When you get the mind to settle down and stay with one object with a sense of pleasure, a sense of rapture, that's food for the mind. Your gatekeeper of mindfulness can feed off of that. The soldiers, your persistence, can feed off of that. This is how they get their strength to keep going.

Ajaan Fuang's analogy is that the practice is like an engine, and the engine needs lubricant in order not to seize up and burn itself out. The lubricant here would be the sense of pleasure and rapture that comes from concentration.

So, the pleasure of concentration is a good thing. Sometimes you're warned that you're going to get stuck on it, that it'll make you go slowly on the path. And while the Buddha did recognize that it is possible to get so pleased with your concentration that you get lazy, he also said that the dangers of concentration are nothing compared to the dangers of not having concentration.

When you don't have concentration, then no matter how much you may understand the drawbacks of sensuality, you're still going to go back

to sensual pleasures. And it's because people are attached to sensual pleasures that they can kill, they can steal, they can have illicit sex. They lie. They take intoxicants. People don't do any of those things under the power of concentration. Concentration gives you an alternative source of well-being with none of those drawbacks, and it can keep you from hungering for your old ways of eating.

So, learn how to focus on your breath in a way that gives rise to a sense of pleasure, gives rise to a sense of fullness. You can try long breathing, short breathing, fast, slow, heavy, light, deep, shallow: any combination of those. When you've found something that feels good, stick with it. If it doesn't feel so good anymore, you can change. Keep on top of the needs of the body. When you're able to maintain a sense of well-being, then you can let it spread through the body. Think of the in-and-out breath connecting with the breath energies throughout the body so that your entire sense of the body gets fed with a feeling of well-being, as you breathe in, as you breathe out.

And as for people who say you're stuck on concentration, well, it's a good place to be stuck. Let them say what they want. After all, the Buddha was in concentration when he gained awakening, so you're in good company. Simply be careful to feed off of your pleasure carefully. If you gobble it down—in other words, you get so attracted to the pleasure that you forget about the breath—that puts an end to your source of food. This happens all too often: You're focused on the breath, there's a sense of pleasure, and you just go for the pleasure, wallow in the pleasure. But the cause of the pleasure to begin with was the fact that you were focused attentively on the breath. That's your foundation. When you abandon your foundation, the pleasure may last for a while but then it stops. And if you keep that up, your concentration practice doesn't really develop.

You're like a person who gets a job and then, as soon as you get your first paycheck, you leave work, go off, have a good time, spending all your money, and then you come back to ask for the job back. Now, assuming that the boss is a kind person, he'll let you back. But if you keep that up,

just quitting the job every time you get a paycheck, he's not going to give you a raise. You'll never advance in the company. In the same way, when you get a sense of well-being from just being with the breath and then you wallow in it, forgetting the breath, you get into delusion concentration, which is a dead end. In other words, you're here, but not really present. You're very still, but if you were to ask yourself what you're focused on, you're not really sure. Sometimes when you come out, you can even ask yourself, "Was I awake? Was I asleep?" You're not really sure. That's delusion concentration.

It comes from not knowing how to eat, or having no manners in how you eat. A person with manners doesn't gobble food right down. If you know that you get your food because of a service you're providing, you keep providing that service, and your food keeps coming.

Here your service is staying focused on the breath, being conscious of the breath filling the body. Try to maintain that sense of full-body awareness. It takes work, but the work you do in the sense of well-being is what keeps you clearly here with the breath. If, as the breath gets more and more refined, your range of awareness is small, then you disappear. It's like falling into an air pocket. You drift off and lose your concentration. The mind may be still, but there's no mindfulness.

So, do the work that needs to be done. That way, you'll have a source of food you can draw on all the time. As you get used to this food, you then start thinking about other things the mind could be feeding on and you begin to lose interest. This is much nicer, much less harmful than all those sensual pleasures out there in the world. At the same time, as you develop more refined tastes like this, you get a more refined sense of what's going on in the mind.

This is why concentration is a basis for discernment. That's because you have to be very careful not to be overcome by the pleasure in order to hold on to the perception of the breath, which gets you more and more sensitive to the process of perception and thought-fabrication in the mind. You can also begin to see how these things can contribute a little bit of

stress to the mind. Even a sense of well-being like this can contribute a little bit of stress. And there *is* stress in the concentration. You sense it most as you're getting used to it, but then as you get more and more proficient at doing it, sometimes you tend to forget. But there *is* stress there.

After all, the word *jhana* is related to the word *jhāyati,* a verb that means "to burn." Pali has several different words for burning, and this is the one for burning with a steady flame, like the flame of an oil lamp. It's still, it's steady, you could read by it much better than you could read, say, by a bonfire. In a bonfire, the flames are leaping around, flickering here, flickering there. It's hard to read by them. But when the flame is steady, you can read by it. In the same way, when your mind is in jhana, you can read your mind. But nevertheless, it's burning. Ajaan Lee says it's a cool fire, but it's still a fire nonetheless. You're feeding off of fire.

Remember that the meaning of nibbana is that the fire goes out. So, there's more work to be done to figure out what in the mind is still causing suffering, is still causing disturbances. It's hard to say "suffering" at this point, but it's still causing disturbance, even in a state of stillness. It's in pursuing this question that you finally get free. But you pursue the question in the framework of the concentration. Some people say, "Well, I've done concentration, now I need to move on to something else." But if you're going to gain insight, it's going to be here. Either right while you're in concentration or when you've just come out.

So give your concentration a lot of time. After all, it is the heart of the path. After the Buddha had been practicing his austerities for six years and saw that they were a dead end, he asked himself, "Is there another way?" And he remembered a time when he was a child and had spontaneously entered the first jhana. Something inside him said, "That's the way." Even though right concentration comes at the end of the list the factors of the noble eightfold path, it was the first factor the Buddha discovered. Then it was simply a matter of his figuring out what other factors needed to be added to make it a complete path.

There's one sutta where he says that right concentration is the heart of the path, whereas the seven other factors are its requisites, its supports. And this is it, the mind centered right here. It was right here where the Buddha gained awakening. His mind was in concentration. We know he gained awakening under the Bodhi tree, but that's far away. The place where he gained awakening in his mind was right here in right concentration. So if we get into right concentration, we're in the same place the Buddha was. This way, we give ourselves a chance to see the things he saw, understand the things he understood.

So, don't be afraid of being attached to concentration. As the Buddha says, indulge in it. Settle into it. Make it your home. Just be careful to have manners in how you feed on it. Otherwise, it has no drawbacks at all.

The Current News

March 18, 2019

I had a student once who told me that his version of checking the morning news was to go out into his garden and check on what was growing, what was blooming, what was dying. I had to tell him that even that was too far afield.

The important news is what's going on in your mind right now: What are you doing? What are you saying? What are you thinking? Why? What's the motivation? This is the news that's really important for us, because it's what we're responsible for.

Yet all too often we don't exercise our full responsibility here. We pay attention to other things. We let the news of the world outside coming through the media invade our attention, to the point where we really don't know what we're doing or why.

So, it's good when you meditate to remind yourself that this is the news you should be current with: Each time the breath comes in, what are you doing? Each time the breath goes out, what are you doing? Are you with the breath or are you someplace else? If there's something coming up in the mind, do you see it clearly? Here's an area where you can exercise some power, some control.

There's so much in the outside news over which we have no control at all. And it's frustrating to have knowledge about things we can't do anything about.

On top of that, we let ourselves get worked up about the news of other people. Instead, we should be getting worked up about the fact that greed, aversion, and delusion are taking charge of our own mind, and yet we're not doing anything about it, or our efforts are half-hearted. You want to

give full attention to what's happening right here, because right here is where you're responsible, and this is where you can make a difference.

As you sit here focusing on the breath, you can ask yourself: What would be the best way to breathe right now? Unlike the news outside, this isn't anything you can discuss as a topic of conversation with your friends: "I had a really great breath last night." But it is important for your internal well-being right now.

That's because the mind needs a place in the present moment where it can settle down. If it's going to see itself clearly, it has to stay anchored in the present. The breath is good for that, both because it's always in the present moment—there's no future breath, no past breath that you can watch right now—and because you can make the breath comfortable. That helps the mind be willing to stay here.

If there's a sense of ease in the body, try to spread it around. Think of it filling the whole body. Think of the breath bathing the body and of good energy filling the body along with the breath. When we talk about the breath being full, it's not a matter of lots of air in your lungs. It's more a sense of fullness in your blood vessels, fullness in your nerves. That's a feeling you want to be able to maintain even as you're breathing out. It may give rise to a sense of floating. As long as that feels good, keep it up.

When you're with the breath, you don't stop there. You ask yourself: What's going on in the mind? Don't try to stir things up, just keep an eye out for it. This is what alertness is for, to be not only with the breath but also with the mind. That way, if anything's going to come in and invade, you see it. And you begin to see the stages by which you get involved in the thought and how the thought goes out into a desire to do something. It's something you want to see, because the mind plays a lot of tricks on itself as it goes from just a stirring to a decision to do something. All too often those stages are totally hidden from us because we've got our attention someplace else.

Someone once told me that her approach to watching the news was always to ask, "Someone wants me to believe this. Why?" In other words,

you have to bring a sense of skepticism, you have to wonder about the motives and agendas of other people. And you can never really know. Well, you've got to bring the same attitude toward your own motivations. "Something inside me says to do this. Why?" Here's something you actually *can* know. You can look into your motivation. What is the agenda? Is it an agenda you'd like to continue with? This way the news is current, and you're on top of something where you can make a change. That's the most useful news of all.

The Buddha once said that his test for anything he would say was threefold: Is it true? Is it beneficial? And is this the right time and place? You can apply those same questions to your thoughts. Something comes in: Is this true? If it's not true, why bother? And when you say it's true, based on what do you think it's true?

So much of the news is hearsay. It may be guaranteed from many different sources, but it's still something you just hear about, it's just a report. Yet we base so many of our opinions on reports like that. As the Buddha points out, there's so little you can really trust in reports. They may be right, they may be wrong. You don't really know.

But the truth that you see while you meditate is the truth of what's going on in your mind, whether it's giving rise to pleasure or pain. That's something you can trust a lot more. But even then if something's true, that's not enough. The next question is: Is it beneficial? In other words, can you do something useful with that knowledge? Something that really is for your benefit and for the benefit of others?

Finally, is this the right time and the right place? You could spend the hour thinking about lots of good things you could do tomorrow—which could be true and beneficial, but this is not the right time. Right now you've got the opportunity to get the mind really quiet, so that you can see clearly inside what's going on. Take the opportunity while it's there.

The Buddha's image for seeing things clearly is of standing by a clear pool of water where you can see the fish moving around, and you know which fish is doing what because the water is so clear. That's the clarity you

want to have in your mind. Yet for so many of us, our minds are not a clear pool of water. They're all pretty murky. Every now and then something seems to show its head out of the murk, but the question is: What lies further down in the murk? You've got to make the water clear.

You do this by looking at your actions. When you do something, look at the intention beforehand; look at the action while you're doing it, to see what results you're getting while you're doing it; and then look at the results over the long term.

To see the long term requires not only clarity but also mindfulness: the ability to remember what you did. This is one of the reasons why we practice not only being with the present moment but also developing mindfulness *and* alertness *and* ardency: keeping in mind the lessons we've learned from the past as to what's useful and what's not, being alert to what's actually going on, and trying to do this as best we can for the sake of good results now and into the future.

Is your mind staying with the breath or is it wandering off? If it's wandering off, bring it back. That's part of the ardency. While you're with the breath, ardency tries to be as sensitive as possible to how the breathing feels and how the mind's relating to the breath.

When you bring all these qualities to bear, that clears the water so you can see precisely what's going on.

We hear about the unconscious or the subconscious as if it were a separate room in the mind. Actually it's just actions happening in the mind, right below the surface, but we're not paying attention to them. When the water's clear, we can see them clearly.

As meditators we want to be investigative reporters, to look into what's really going on, to see how many layers there are in your intentions and which ones you can trust. These are things that you *can* learn, skills that you *can* master. It's an area of your experience where you *can* make a difference for sure. You're the one in charge. In fact, you're the only one who knows how you feel the mind from within, how you feel your breath from within.

So here's your chance to make your eyewitness report to the person who's responsible for making changes. And try to cultivate the desire that you really want to make the changes for the better. You want to be as skillful as possible in what you do, able to rely on yourself as much as you can.

Because all those reports that come from the world outside may be interesting right now, but as you get older, as death approaches, they won't be able to do much for you at all. The skills you've learned in watching your own mind: *Those* are the things that will come in handy, that will really help you, so that whatever thought or emotion flares up in the mind, you know how to handle it—because you've learned the skill *now*, because you've been on top of things *now*. You've paid careful attention to the news inside your mind *right now*.

That way, when death becomes something happening right now, or a very strong pain becomes something happening right now, you won't be in unfamiliar territory. You'll know the area because you've watched it, and you've dug down to see what's really going on right here. That means you'll be in a position of strength, the strength that comes from being current with what you're doing and what the results are. It's through those two things that everything else you know in the world gets filtered.

So be very clear about how you engage with your senses, how you make up your mind to do or say or think something, because everything else you know gets filtered through those decisions. When you're clear here, everything important becomes clear.

A Rite of Passage

December 10, 2018

One of the things our culture lacks is a serious rite of passage: a time when you can go off, be by yourself, delve down inside. You start sorting out the things you learned as a child on your way to adulthood, trying to see which things you're going to carry into adulthood and which you're going to leave behind.

It's almost as if our culture's afraid to have people do that, for fear of what they might see. Our minds are so connected now through the media, and there's a strong sense that if you're not participating in the general culture, there's something wrong with you. We have very little room for genuine dissent, very little room for real independence.

Meditation, though, is one activity that you can do that gives you some of that freedom, gives you some of that time to yourself.

In a lot of cultures, they want you to go out and have a vision quest and gain a vision—maybe of your totem animal or some symbol that the culture recognizes. The Buddha's rite of passage is a lot more radical than that. It calls everything into question. In particular, he found an answer to the question that deals very deeply with our relationship to the society around us: To what extent does your personal happiness have to make way for the needs of society? To what extent is it really detrimental to society for people to go off and find happiness in their own ways? And to what extent does your personal happiness have to be in conflict with others'?

The Buddha found that it is possible to find a genuine happiness that doesn't harm anybody. The fact that he gained awakening never harmed anybody, even though, when he came back to teach, a lot of his teachings were not pleasing to people who weren't willing to change their ideas. So, it's not the case that he came up with an answer that pleased everybody,

but he came up with an answer that didn't harm anyone. At the same time, it brought him to the ultimate happiness.

So, we look at his example and say, "If he can do it, why can't we?" This is what we're doing as we meditate: giving the mind a place where it can set itself apart, not only from people outside—that's called physical seclusion—but also from the people inside our minds. That's called mental seclusion. We have all these different voices in our mind that we've picked up from other people—our parents, our teachers, our friends, our enemies, the media—and it's a real jumble. It's good to have some time away physically so that you can get off by yourself and then give yourself a place to stay in the mind so that you can step out of the thoughts, step out of the voices.

This is one of the reasons why we work with the breath. It's the closest thing to the mind that's not a thought. Among the various elements or properties of the body, the breath is the most immediately present to your awareness. We tend to think of the body as being a solid lump that we're aware of and the breath as something we have to pull into the lump. Actually, though, breath is what lets you know that there's solidity there to begin with. It's right there next to the mind. It gives you a place where you can stand a little bit outside of the mind, outside of your thoughts, and yet be close enough that you can watch them. That's part of the Buddha's rite of passage: giving you this place.

So explore your breath. Learn to see which kinds of breathing feel good, which kinds of breathing don't feel good, which ways of picturing the breath to yourself are helpful and which ways are not, and how you can breathe in a way that really is blissful. One of the tricks is making sure that you don't squeeze the end of the breath in as you change to the breath out. Try to think of the in-breath flowing into the out-breath, the out-breath flowing back into the in-breath. In other words, let the breath do the breathing. You don't have to use the solid parts of the body to do the breathing, or even worse, you don't have to let the pains do the breathing. When you're aware of the pains in the body and not much else, then as you

breathe in, it feels like the painful areas are the ones actually doing the work.

Think of breath as being an energy cocoon that's in the body and a little bit outside the body as well. Its boundaries are not all that clearly defined. The quality of this cocoon is that it breathes in, breathes out, expands, contracts. But it's all one cocoon. Try to hold that perception in mind and see if it helps you settle down and, at the very least, helps you get into the kind of concentration the Buddha taught, which is to have a full-body awareness.

If you can see the breath as being simply air coming in and out through the nose, it's hard to relate that to the whole body. But if you realize that breath is an energy flow, that it's an aspect of the wind property, then you realize that it's everywhere in the body. So, let the breath do the breathing. You can nudge it to make it longer, shorter, deeper, more shallow—whatever feels good for the body right now, whatever the body needs. Try to do this in a way that allows you to feel like you're settling in, because one of the important aspects of getting the mind into right concentration is that you give it a place where you can stay for long periods of time and not feel that you have to move.

We're not here to jump through jhana hoops, where we have to say, "Spend seven minutes in the first jhana, now seven minutes in the second." Stay right here. Your relationship to the breath will develop as you stay right here, as will your relationship to the feelings that come with the breath: feelings of ease, feelings of fullness, rapture, or refreshment. As long as they feel refreshing, stay with them. When they begin to seem a little bit too much, then you think of a more subtle level of energy in the body, a more subtle level of breath. It's there.

Focus in on that and let the movements of the rapture or the refreshment or whatever take care of themselves. Now, thoughts will come up as you're doing this. In the beginning, all you have to do is tell yourself, "They're not part of this process right now." They're not relevant to what you're doing. Sometimes they'll be really insistent, and you'll have to think

a little bit about them to get rid of them. But try to think about them in ways that can untangle you from them as quickly as possible.

Remind yourself that you're trying to get in touch with a level of awareness that really doesn't have a history. It doesn't have stories. We have our stories about what happened to us when we were young, what may have happened to us before we were born. But there's an aspect of awareness that doesn't have those stories, doesn't have to carry them around. Try to get in touch with that aspect of your awareness. Anything that comes up that reminds you of who you are or what's happening in your life—you say, "This is not relevant right now."

Try to find something timeless. Let that be the thought that helps to extricate you. If that doesn't work, you can try other ways of thinking about what's happened to you in the past in terms of kamma. Think about the vast expanses of time during which kamma has gone back and forth, back and forth—you've been victim and victimizer who knows how many times: whatever helps give you a perspective on your thoughts and allows you to put them aside so that you can settle in here and have a real sense of feeling at home.

Then, when you can stay here, you get to the second step in the rite of passage which is to allow some of those thoughts back in. What's different is that now they're in your territory. You're not wandering out into theirs. That's a big difference. There's an image in the Canon of monkeys wandering out of their territory and getting into areas where hunters have laid traps. They get caught by the traps, skewered, and carried off. But if they stay in their own territory—the areas where the hunters can't go—they're safe. If you're thinking of yourself out in the world, or thinking of yourself in terms of the identity that the world has given you and that you've adopted while participating in the pleasures you get from the world, that's where the hunters can get you.

But if you have this sense of belonging right here in the present moment—with your awareness filling the body, your sense of the breath energy filling the body, a sense of ease filling the body—this is your

territory. And now when thoughts come in here, they're here on your terms.

Ajaan Chah has a nice image. He says it's as if you have a house where there's one chair. As long as you're sitting in the chair, whoever else comes into the house has to stand and is subject to your orders as to what they have to do. If you leave the chair or leave the house, they can get you. You're in their territory. But if the thoughts are coming into your territory, then you can ask yourself, "Okay, where does this thought lead? Does it lead to my true happiness, or does it lead away?" Remind yourself that true happiness is going to be harmless. It's not a selfish thing. It comes from developing your internal resources in a way where you become more generous, more virtuous, wiser. It's all to the good.

Then you can start questioning all the other voices that pull in other directions and say, "What do they know?" For me, that was one of the big turnarounds in my practice while I was in Thailand. I was practicing meditation and it was during the Vietnam War. You could hear the bombers going overhead. Three a.m. every morning they were on their way to drop bombs in Vietnam and Cambodia. I kept thinking, "Here I am, just focusing on my own breath, being very selfish." But I began to realize that the voices in my head that I'd come to identify with were voices I'd picked up from different people. This voice was the voice of my mother, that voice was the voice of my father, telling me I shouldn't be doing this. I had to realize, "What do they know of this? This is an area where they've never been."

And don't think that this applies just to people who are raised in countries that aren't Buddhist. Ajaan Fuang had plenty of students who were getting a lot of flack from their parents for practicing. Generally, in Thai society, it's okay to go to the monastery, to go to the temples and make merit. But if you're actually meditating, you're getting a little bit out of your parents' control. So, Ajaan Fuang had to teach his Thai students, "You've got to ask yourself, 'What do they know?' The fact that you're finding a happiness they don't understand bothers them. It doesn't fit into

their worldview. You have to ask yourself, 'Are you going to let yourself be a prisoner of their worldview, or are you going to get out?' If getting out meant that you were going to be ungrateful, ungenerous, that would be a bad thing. But this is not the case."

While I was sorting through the thoughts I had picked up from my parents, Ajaan Fuang kept reminding me, "You've got to have gratitude for what they have done, the good things they've done for you." So, it's not just a simple rebellion where you've been taught 'A' all your life and now you're just going to rebel by holding on to "not-A."

There are lots of different things you have to sort out. Getting the mind into concentration gives you a place where you can do this sorting with full alertness, full awareness. As you keep doing it, your discernment grows as well. Remind yourself that you're motivated by compassion, both for yourself and for others, and that you're happy to have found a path that allows you to find true happiness without having to harm anyone at all.

A lot of Western psychology is built on the idea that, on the one hand, you've got your desires for happiness, which are pretty wild and untamable. On the other hand, you've got the strictures of society that tell you what you've got to do, and they have very little to do with your true happiness. A lot of them serve what society thinks is in its own best interest. And you're caught between those two impulses. But the Buddha says No. He's got a different set of shoulds that really are for your true happiness.

Even though your desires for happiness may be uncontrollable in some areas, they've got one basic idea right: that happiness is a good thing. The next step is to ask yourself, "How do you find a true happiness, a happiness that's not going to change?" That's when you have to learn how to be a little bit wiser, more compassionate, more alert to your actions and the results of your actions so that what you actually do and say and think is in line with your ideals. That's the quality that the Buddha calls purity.

So. Wisdom, compassion, purity—these are the qualities of the Buddha. These are qualities that come from practicing this rite of passage

aimed at true happiness. It's not a rite of passage where all bets are off and anything can happen. There is a direction to this. It's not like we're just getting into the present moment and saying, "Well, wherever the present moment is going to lead me, that's fine." We're doing this because we have a very clear idea of what we want: a true happiness, a harmless happiness. That ideal will get even clearer as we finally discover that such a thing is possible, and that we're capable of doing it.

So, the choice is yours—if you want to take on this goal. But it's a really good one. I can't think of anything in the world that would be better.

Comfortable as an Outsider

December 28, 2019

We suffer largely because of the way we talk to ourselves. That's what the message of the four noble truths is all about. It's not that we suffer from sights, sounds, smells, tastes, or tactile sensations. We suffer because of the commentary we apply to these things. And a lot of meditation is learning to talk to yourself in new ways. In fact, the whole practice is about talking to yourself in new ways, asking new questions—and when you ask new questions, you get new answers. How do you create suffering for yourself? What are the steps? What are the steps in the path away from the suffering? What do you have to relearn? What old habits should you keep? What new habits do you have to develop?

These are questions best asked when you're alone, talking to yourself. The problem is that we don't always live alone. We very rarely have time alone now in the modern world. Our space is invaded; our minds are invaded. This has always been the case with every domestic culture where people try to domesticate you so that you live nicely within the culture. Even in societies where they have rites of passage where people go out alone into the wilderness, they have very set ideas of what you're supposed to find there. You're going to be looking for a totem animal or spirit guide. Whatever message you gain, they'll have their ways of incorporating it back into the regular beliefs of society.

One of the things that's radical about the Dhamma is that a large part of it is not domesticated. It's a wilderness Dhamma. The Buddha was able to straddle wilderness and civilization, but his time in the wilderness was what enabled him to get away from the questions of his civilization and see that they were the wrong questions. The hot topics of the time were: "What are you? Do you have a self? Do you not have a self? Or how about

the nature of the world: Is it eternal? Is it not eternal? Who made it? *Did* somebody make it?" That kind of thing.

It drove some of his contemporaries crazy that, when the Buddha was teaching, he wouldn't answer these questions. He asked another set of questions entirely. It was by holding to that alternative set of questions that he was not sucked back into his society after his awakening.

This is something you'll have to learn how to protect: this ability to be with yourself even when you're with other people, and not get sucked into their issues.

Part of it's realizing that a lot of people are asking the wrong questions and trying to get *you* involved in the wrong questions. To the extent that you have to live with other people, work with other people, you do have to take on some of their questions but you have to take them on with a sense of being disjoined from them. A Dhamma practitioner's always something of an outsider. Learning how to practice both on your own and with other people means becoming comfortable with both roles. It takes time and it takes determination. Because a lot of us don't like being outsiders. We want to fit in.

I found this to be true during my time in Thailand. We had a lot of work projects around the monastery. Ajaan Fuang was really good about not forcing me to get involved, but there were times when I had to. This meant we had to work together on a project, talk together about the project, and we could bond around the project. But he was always very careful to make sure that I didn't bond more than that. Of course, the fact that I came from a different culture meant that as I got to know some of the other people in areas outside of the project, whatever the project was —usually construction of some kind—I began to realize that these were people I never would have connected with outside of that particular context. I looked at some of the values in their daily life and I told myself, "I'm glad I don't have to get further involved with them."

But in order to maintain that stance as a comfortable outsider, you have to get comfortable inside your own skin, comfortable with your

practice. Otherwise, you feel that you're the only person making yourself miserable this way, cutting yourself off from others. There's a great passage in the Canon where a monk is meditating in the forest, and his meditation isn't going well. He hears the villagers off in the distance having a nighttime festival and he's thinking about how miserable he is and how at least *they* know how to make themselves happy. Then a deva appears to him and says, "Do you realize how many people envy you right now? All those beings who are going to go to hell, they see you going in the opposite direction." The monk came to his senses and realized that what he was doing was really worthwhile.

Now, we don't have devas coming to talk to us that way, so we have to learn how to talk to ourselves in that way. This is one of the reasons why we have Dhamma talks online. And it's a reason why we recommend chanting before you meditate. It helps get you out of the issues of daily life so that when you sit down to practice, you come with a different perspective. We have the chants on the different parts of the body to gain a sense of distance from the concerns of the body, the concerns of consuming; reflections on aging, illness, and death, and the fact that our actions are our only possessions; reflections on goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity. We develop the right attitudes toward the people around us. We wish them well, but we realize that wishing them well often means we have to go our separate ways.

All these reflections are there so that you can create a mental space for your meditation, convinced of its importance—and being okay with the fact that it's somewhat cut off. Because when you look at the craziness of the world, you realize you really do want to be insulated from it. Some people will say you're running away, but that's the whole point. Samsara tries to suck you in, and all too often we're willing to be sucked in, to play along. Our lives get frittered away by things totally irrelevant.

So we have to take charge. This is one of the reasons why it's so good that out meditation method is proactive. It reminds you that you do have a large role in shaping your environment. And you want to take advantage of

the fact that you have the power, to at least some extent, to shape things. There are so many meditation methods that tell you, "Don't do anything. Just accept things as they are."

Last night I was reading a little piece on the attitudes you should bring to mindfulness practice, and one of them, according to the author, is that nothing needs to be changed, nothing needs to be fixed. You have to be convinced that you're beautiful as you are. That's what the author said. But after meditating that way for a long time you'll begin to feel helpless: that you shouldn't be trying to fix anything, that you shouldn't be trying to help anything. It's like those dogs in the learned helplessness experiment. First they were placed in a room where, no matter where they lay down on the floor, they were getting electric shocks. After being subjected to that for a while, they were moved into another room where half the floor would still give them electric shocks and half the floor would not. The researchers would drag the dogs from one half to the other so that they could see the difference, but by that point the dogs had given up. They were convinced there was nothing they could do to avoid the shocks, so they just lay wherever they happened to be.

A lot of meditation methods are like that, teaching you that there's nothing you can do, so you might as well accept that fact. But that wasn't the Buddha's approach. Look at his meditation instructions for breath meditation: They're all about intentionally breathing in certain ways to induce certain mental states and certain physical states. You can be aware of the whole body with a sense of well-being throughout the whole body, calming the effect of the breath on the mind, calming your perceptions. These are things you can do.

So when you find yourself getting discouraged or getting pulled into the questions of the world, remind yourself: What are the questions the Buddha would have you ask? Where is your suffering right now? How can you change what you're doing so as *not* to create that suffering? Because it *is* something you're doing. The cause is something you're doing; the suffering itself is something you do. Why keep on doing it? It's not

necessary. So find ways to remind yourself of the importance of this question and how you don't want your time frittered away.

As for the sense of feeling a little bit estranged, remind yourself that it's good to get away from crazy society. Every domestic society is crazy in its own way. You're doing something that the noble ones would approve of, so keep them in mind. You're not totally alone. Many other good people are following this path.

Back in the days of the Roman Empire, the Stoics, who lived scattered around the empire, considered themselves members of what they called the cosmopolis. *Polis* meant city; *cosmo,* of course, meant cosmic: the cosmic city. The idea was that this particular city was not determined by *where* you were, it was determined by what you respected. If you respected reason, you were a member of the Stoic cosmopolis wherever you were.

In the same way, when you respect the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, when you respect your ability to find true happiness, that makes you part of the cosmopolis of the Buddha's *parisa,* the following of the Buddha: those who are asking the questions the Buddha asked, looking for the answers inside themselves.

So as you repeat the chants at night, remember that people all around the world are repeating them. There are people actually practicing in line with the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, taking refuge not only in the external Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, but also in the Triple Gem on the inner level: the qualities of the practice, developing right mindfulness, taking refuge in things that are unchanging, things that are free from conditions. This means that you want to learn how not to let yourself be overwhelmed by the conditions of having people around you, and how to keep your internal conversation somewhat separate from the conversations outside.

This means that when you're working together with others, you talk about things that are necessary to talk about. But watch out for conversations that stray away from things that are of genuine worth. You may become a person of few words, but what's wrong with that? As long as

your few words are good words, they're a contribution to others. They may be few, but they're valuable.

Part of your own training in gaining some control over your mind is to ask the question: "Where does the suffering come from?" It's coming from within. "What can I do to put an end to it?" You're learning the skills. That's what matters. There's something undomesticated about those questions and those answers. And if they set you apart, they set you apart in a good way.

Filling in the Buddha's Outline

January 4, 2019

We're working on a set of skills here that are meant to solve a problem: *Why is it that everything we do is for the sake of happiness but we often end up causing pain and suffering?*

The Buddha gives two big frameworks for approaching this problem. In fact, they're his only teachings that he says are categorical—in other words, true across the board, all the time, in all situations. One is that unskillful behavior should be abandoned and skillful behavior should be developed. The other is the four noble truths, going into the unskillful behavior in the mind that's causing suffering and then seeing what kind of skillful behavior we can develop in its place so that we can bring suffering to an end. That's basically the big framework for the problem.

Now, the framework tells you a lot. The Buddha is saying that suffering comes from our actions, and particularly from unskillful actions of the mind. The unskillful craving and clinging can be brought to an end by developing actions that crave and cling in a different, more skillful way: Crave to have right view, right resolve, all the way down through right mindfulness and right concentration. That's a kind of craving, too, but it's a good one. There has to be the desire to develop the path. Otherwise, the path doesn't happen.

The rest of the Buddha's teachings basically give more detail on those issues. And, as he said, in some cases the detail is true across the board; in other cases, it really depends on the situation.

Across the board, the Buddha says no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no harsh speech, no divisive speech, no idle chatter; trying to avoid greed that goes out of bounds—of course, that raises the question, "What are the bounds?" The bounds start with any greed that would require that you do things that are against the precepts in order to get what

you want. The Buddha also says, across the board, to avoid ill will—in other words, wanting to see other people suffer—and to avoid wrong view: the wrong view that your actions don't make any difference, that generosity isn't worthwhile, that gratitude isn't worthwhile, that nobody knows what happens after death so who cares.

Those are things you have to avoid across the board.

As you get into the four noble truths, especially when you get into the noble eightfold path, there are specific instructions on how to get the mind into concentration by being mindful, but by and large those truths provide a pretty large outline with lots of spaces. In those spaces, the Buddha indicates where some problems might be or where things might evolve into problems—sometimes the mind is too sluggish, sometimes too restless—but to see precisely what the problems are, you have to read the situation for yourself.

The ajaans often talk about taking a survey of your mind when you sit down and before you focus on the breath. In what direction is the mind headed? Is it sleepy? Is it drowsy? There are ways of counteracting that. If you find that a particular topic puts you to sleep, change the topic. If you're focused on the breath, try changing the way that you breathe—or changing to another topic, something that engages the mind more, such as the contemplation of the body or goodwill. Get up, walk around, do something to stir your juices a little bit, to wake yourself up. If you already have some concentration, think of the awareness filling the body down to every little cell. Explore the parts of the body that you don't usually pay attention to—say, the areas between the toes or between the fingers. In other words, do something to make the breath interesting and to develop a full-body awareness. That can be energizing.

These are things you have to play around with, because each person's situation is different. This is why the Buddha gives such large outlines where there are spaces for you to fill in. Your situation today may differ from your situation tomorrow, and your situation right here, right now,

may differ from the situation of the person sitting right next to you. So, look and see what you need right now.

If the mind is restless, it needs to be steadied. First, remind yourself that the worries you're restless about are not going to accomplish anything. All too often, we're restless because we're worried about something in the future or about some situation in the present moment. Remind yourself that your worrying is not going to solve the problem. The problem gets solved by developing qualities of alertness, mindfulness, ardency, concentration, and discernment: the things that we're supposed to work on as we meditate. So, if you want to solve the problem, it's often good to work on these skills first, right here. The skills themselves may not solve the problem on their own as you meditate but they give you the skill set you're going to need when you actually have to start thinking about the problem. Meanwhile, you can breathe in a way that calms you down.

You have to read the situation to see what needs to be done. This involves getting a sense of the right time and the right place for things, which is a concept that the Buddha emphasizes many times.

Say, with the factors for awakening: Some factors for awakening are energizing. Rapture, effort, taking an analytical attitude toward what's going on in the mind: Those factors can wake you up. Taking an analytical attitude toward what's going on in the body: That'll wake you up, too.

Other factors are more calming: focusing on the parts of the body that seem more calm and getting the mind more concentrated, developing an attitude of equanimity.

So you've got to read the situation. What's needed right now? The Buddha makes a comparison with trying to get a fire going. If the fire is too strong, you've got to put ashes on it. If it's too weak, you've got to put more fuel in.

He makes a similar observation with the bases for success: Sometimes your desire's too strong; sometimes it's not enough. In other words, it's not focused on the right thing. You're supposed to be focused on the causes, and as for your desires for the results at the end, you can put them aside.

You know that they're there but you don't focus on them. You focus on what you've got to do.

The same with the other bases of success, like persistence: Your efforts may be too much, too little. The focus of your intent may be too narrow or too broad, and your analysis may be too much or too little.

So you've got to figure out what's right for here right now, and the results will be the means by which you judge what's right for here right now. In other words, what happens as a result will tell you whether your efforts are right or wrong for the situation.

This is why evaluation plays such an important role in the meditation. You do something and you look at the results. Are they good enough? If you're not sure, just keep doing what you're doing until the results becomes clear. If they're not right, then you can change. This is how your discernment develops.

Sometimes you hear that tranquility meditation is one thing and insight meditation is something else, but the Buddha never taught it that way. He said to do concentration, and that it's going to require a certain amount of tranquility and a certain amount of insight to get into jhana. Where does the insight come in? It comes in seeing the connections between what you're doing and the results you're getting, and judging them as to whether they're good enough. And your sense of what's "good enough" should develop over time.

You see if there's any disturbance in the mind, it's a potential problem. Ask yourself: "To what extent am I contributing to that?" That's actually applying the four noble truths to a very immediate problem. The four noble truths are not objects that you put up on a table and worship. They're tools for analyzing problems, and the problem here is this: something's weighing down the mind. The four noble truths teach you to ask yourself: "What are you doing that's contributing to that?" They keep focusing you back on your actions—and that's the kind of knowledge that, while we're doing the meditation, counts as real knowledge. Other kinds of knowledge can be very detailed but if they don't fall into that framework—

what are you doing, what could you be doing that can put an end to suffering?—they count as ignorance as far as the Buddha's concerned, particularly with regard to this problem that we're trying to solve.

A lot of the practice is like developing any skill. If you're a carpenter and you're planing a piece of wood, how much pressure do you put on it? How much is too much? How much is too little? You learn from doing. When you're cooking, how much salt is too much? How much is too little? You learn from doing, keeping in mind the basic principle that if there's a problem, you want to look back on your own actions.

Now, this doesn't mean that other people are not creating problems for you, but the big problem that you can solve is: Why do your actions create suffering? That's the problem that's really worth pursuing.

The same principle applies in daily life. You have to look at your actions. Here again you go back to the precepts, you go back to the Buddha's basic teachings on what he calls the ten guidelines: no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no harsh speech, no divisive speech, no idle chatter, no inordinate greed, no ill will, and avoiding wrong views. That's the basic outline, but there are lots of things not covered by the outline. The outline is a sketch with big blank areas, and those are the areas where you have to use your own judgment. Again, the judgment is based on, "What am I doing that's leading to unnecessary problems for the mind and how can I stop?" As you go out into daily life, do you spend all your time meditating? No. To what extent do you deal with other people? How much of that is too much? That's something you have to find out for yourself. But notice, the way to judge it is: What impact is it having on your mind?

Ajaan Fuang was once talking about how some people go out into the world and they try to do so much to help the world that ultimately their goodness breaks, as he put it, and they totally give up. They have no energy anymore. That's a sign that they haven't been watching themselves all along. You have to know how to watch yourself and notice, "In this case, I'm getting too involved. I've got to pull back. In this case, more needs to

be done right now." There are no hard and fast rules, but there is that basic principle: Look at what you're doing and what you can change in what you're doing. In some cases, there are things happening in the world that you cannot change, tasks that you have to take on regardless of what you may think you would like to take on. There is work that has to be done and you do it. You have to train yourself to be up to doing it.

Ajaan Fuang, every now and then, would spring work projects on us. At the end of the meal, he would come in and say, "Okay, today we're going to do *x,"* and sometimes *x* would require the entire day. One time it went from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 a.m., working on a cement-pouring. At times like that, you'd have to tell yourself: "Okay, I've got to forget totally about my plans for a meditation schedule today. I've just got to do what needs to be done." And so you do it. But while you're doing it, you try to develop what inner strength you can.

Think of your meditation. Think of your breath and what you've learned about making the breath energized inside. Give the mind a good place where it can stay. After all, even when you're doing work, how much of your attention really is on the work? Take the part that's ordinarily not on your work and devote it to the breath. Some jobs require 100% of your attention so you give them 100% of your attention. Others, though, require maybe 30% or 20%, so give the remaining 70% or 80% to the breath so that your mind can have a place where it can nourish itself and gain some sustenance.

Remember, though, that not all of the skills of the practice are related to meditation. Some of them have to do with the other perfections you can develop: qualities like endurance, patience, determination, goodwill. To develop these qualities is also part of the practice.

Remind yourself of the teaching about the acrobats. The Buddha tells the story of two acrobats, one standing on the top of a bamboo pole and the other standing on top of his shoulders. The one below tells the one above, "Okay, you look out after me and I'll look out after you, and that way we'll get down from the pole safely." But the other one says, "No, that's

not going to work. I'll look out after myself; you look out after yourself, and that way we'll get down from the pole safely." The Buddha said in that particular case the person on top was right. If you maintain your balance, it helps other people maintain theirs.

But he added that there are also cases where looking out after another person helps with your practice. When you're kind, when you show patience, when you develop equanimity and goodwill in your dealings with other people, that strengthens the goodness of your mind. This is an important principle. We have to remember that this skill we're practicing here is not just a technique. It involves a lot of the qualities that we would call qualities of a good heart.

We live in a culture where a good heart is not really prized. You hear of people called captains of industry, captains of government. Well, they didn't rise to those positions out of a good heart.

So in this way the practice has to be counter-cultural. You have to stand outside of the culture a bit. But then there *is* a part of every human culture that does value a good heart, so you're still in tune with that part of the culture. Buddhism emphasizes the good heart as much as possible—because basically that's what the desire to put an end to suffering comes down to. You want to find happiness in a way that doesn't harm anybody. That's a good-hearted desire. You want to find a happiness that's really worthwhile—in other words, that will last. That's a good-hearted desire, too.

What the Buddha is offering is a large framework for approaching the question of how to maintain that good heart and get good results. Once you've got the larger framework—seeing that even though other people may be contributing to the problem, the problem that's causing your suffering can be traced back to your actions—once you've got that framework in mind, you keep looking back to your actions. If you don't like the results you're getting right now, go back and change what you're doing. Look again. Make changes again. That's how you learn.

You gain a sense of when's the right time for engaging with other people, when's the right time for meditating, and—when you're meditating—what's the right time to work on developing more energy in the practice, what time is the right time to be more analytical in the practice, what time is the time to be more still. With practice, you gain a sense of these things.

The Buddha has offered you the framework for knowing what to look for, along with a range of skills to apply, to help you figure out what is the problem right now, and what you should do right now. He's not leaving you to keep re-inventing the Dhamma wheel all the time, but he does expect you to use your powers of discernment, your powers of observation. Otherwise, if everything were all laid out—insert tab A into slot B, where everything is precut and all you have to do is assemble it—it'd be a foolproof practice, but you'd still be a fool. There's no foolproof way to awakening. We may be foolish as we start, but part of the practice is to teach us how to be more sensitive, more wise, more alert to what's the right time, what's the right place. That's how discernment develops, and it's through discernment that we overcome our foolishness and the problem gets solved.

No One Size Fits All

October 17, 2018

Ajaan Fuang once told me he heard Ajaan Mun say that we human beings are all the same, but we're different, but when you come down to it, we're all the same. One of the meanings of that statement is that we all have the same basic problems, but they don't all respond to the same approach.

You see this in the forest tradition itself as a whole. There's no single forest tradition technique for meditation. When people came to see Ajaan Mun, he would assign different techniques to them. Ajaan Lee, who probably wrote out the most detailed of any of the techniques in the forest tradition, left at least two different ways of working with the breath, and he would talk about other topics as well: recollection of the Buddha, contemplation of the body, the brahmaviharas, contemplation of death. The point being that we all have to find the way that'll work for us, and in some cases, there's not just one way that'll work.

In Ajaan Lee's explanation, you should have one technique that's your home base, and he recommended the breath because it's the safest of all the techniques. But you also need other techniques that function as the places where you go foraging. In other words, you may have to look for a solution, say, to the problem of lust, the problem of anger, or the problem of sleepiness. Sometimes the breath is not the topic for that particular problem, so you need to have a wide range of other tools to choose from.

We see this in the Canon as well. When the Buddha taught breath meditation to his son Rahula, he didn't teach just breath meditation. He taught contemplation of not-self, contemplation of inconstancy. This was even before the breath. He taught contemplation of the elements, making the mind like the elements as a way of developing patience; contemplation of the body; the brahmaviharas. In other words, he wanted Rahula to have

a full set of tools for all the problems that might come up in the meditation. It's up to us to figure out which particular themes are going to work for us and which ones will work at different times. There's no one-size-fits-all in the Buddha's teachings.

More recently, especially in the nineteenth century when Asia was amazed by the West's superiority—in terms of firepower, at least—they attributed it to the fact that the West was able to pare manufacturing down to the essentials. So some Asians did the same thing to their own traditions. They did a reductionist take on the Buddhist teachings, for example, trying to boil everything down to one technique or two. But that ignores the fact that people all have that aspect where they are different. When a problem comes up, you have to find out which way is going to work for you. You have to learn how to read yourself—and that's a large part of discernment right there.

If all you had to do were to know just one technique and apply it relentlessly, it wouldn't take much discernment. Any fool can do that. What's required in the middle way is that you figure out what's just right for you right now, what's appropriate for you right now—just as in the middle way, sometimes intense effort is right and sometimes very gentle effort is right, depending on what's needed. In seeing that, in ferreting out that point of "just right," you develop your discernment. Sometimes you have to work really hard, sometimes you have to be very gentle, but in learning how to read yourself, that's how the discernment comes. You become more and more sensitive to what the mind is doing, what the results are, and what you need to do in response. That's the basis of insight. That's the basis of discernment.

As you're trying to get the mind into concentration, the big questions are: "How do you get the mind to settle down? How do you get it to enjoy where it is and get some refreshment out of it?" Then there are the questions of insight. Here again, the Buddha didn't teach one single technique. He just set up some questions: "How should fabrications be regarded? How should they be investigated? How should they be seen

with insight?" Those are the questions you ask, and it's in figuring out how to answer them that your discernment develops. That, as the Buddha said, is one of the signs of someone with real discernment: that he or she knows how to answer a question.

It's not that we're trying to clone awakening. All the tools the Buddha gave for discernment are tools for directing your questions. Even the teachings on inconstancy, stress, and not-self are questions to ask. If something comes up in the meditation and you find yourself gravitating toward it, getting stuck on it, ask yourself, "Is this constant or not?" If you can see any inconstancy in it, then that's a sign that it's not your goal. But then the next question is, "Is this a tool along the way?" And that requires even more discernment.

So take your basic techniques, make them your home base, and then learn how to read the mind to see where you are and what type you are. As the Buddha said, there are some who start out with insight and go into tranquility, and others who start out with tranquility and go into insight, and then there are those who have to develop the two together. In his case, it seems that he developed the two together.

The meditation technique that he taught most often was breath meditation. He taught it both as a concentration technique and as a discernment technique, because after all, with the breath you're trying to get things calm, but before you get things calm, the Buddha teaches you how to see things in terms of fabrication. The breath is bodily fabrication, in that it creates your sense of the body right now. Then there's mental fabrication: perceptions and feelings. In both cases, the Buddha says, once you see that process of fabrication, you learn how to calm it. In that way, you're doing both insight and tranquility at the same time.

Then there's verbal fabrication in the instructions themselves. You're telling yourself to breathe in and out sensitive to the whole body, breathe in and out sensitive to whatever potential there is for rapture or pleasure, trying to develop it as much as you can. Those are things you tell yourself to do. That's verbal fabrication.

Once there's a sense of ease and well-being, you try to spread it around. These instructions actually raise questions: How do you breathe in a way that gives rise to rapture? How do you breathe in a way that gives rise to pleasure? How do you spread it around? Ajaan Lee gives some helpful tips by having you work with the breath energies in the body. How do you breathe in a way that gives you a sense that the whole body is breathing and that it's all breathing together?

In learning how to do that, you begin to notice that there are times when you push things too much, and other times when you're not pushing them enough; times when you have to be allowing, and a few times when you have to force things. The question is: Which? When? That's something you've got to learn how to read: how to develop your sensitivity to what you're doing and the results that you're getting, and to figure out what's right for you right now.

In this way, we take advantage of the fact that we are different—and not only different from one another. Each mind goes through different stages. It'll have its different defilements that'll require different approaches, so it has to learn how to read what's going on and to foster some sensitivity. There can be no discernment without this sensitivity to what the mind needs. Think of the image of the cook who learns how to read his master. The foolish cook doesn't bother. He just keeps churning out food, which the master may like or may not like, but the master finally decides he's sick and tired of this cook because the cook isn't paying any attention. The cook who pays attention to what the master seems to like and who provides more of that: That's the cook who gets rewarded.

So try to be sensitive to what's needed right now, and have a range of tools that you can pick up to deal with whatever contingency comes along. That's how the mind both settles down and gains insight. The concentration itself becomes more sensitive. Your insights become more sensitive. And that sensitivity is what will take you where you want to go.

Appreciating Your Practice

January 5, 2019

When Ajaan Fuang taught meditation, he would hand out a copy of Ajaan Lee's "Method Two," and in "Method Two" there was a section that referred to jhana. After he'd have people read the whole of "Method Two," he'd have them put it aside and say, "Focus on your breath," but he wouldn't talk about jhana at all. He would talk about the mind in relationship to the breath: ways of working with the breath, ways of working with the mind, ways of putting them together. When teaching individual people, he would ask them to describe their experience. Then, from their experience, he would give recommendations using their vocabulary. Part of the reason for this was to make sure that people didn't start competing with one another over their jhanas. And part of it was to get them really sensitive to what was getting better inside as they meditated—because this is an important part of the practice.

If you're constantly measuring yourself against the texts, you're measuring yourself against ignorance, basically. You think maybe the texts mean *x* or *y,* but you don't really know. What you *can* know is that while you're practicing, the mind can settle down more than it could before, or there's a greater sense of ease than there was before. You begin to see that certain unskillful ways of relating to your body, relating to the mind, relating to the world outside all fall away. And you want to appreciate the skill that you're developing in and of itself, without any reference to how other people may be skillful or how they or some text might measure your progress. You want to be able to see for yourself that things are getting better and, as the Buddha would say, learn how to delight in that.

One of the customs of the noble ones is learning how to delight in abandoning and delight in developing. When you see, say, that some greed you used to have is just not there anymore, or your tendency to get angry

over things is getting weaker, then delight in the fact that you're able to abandon those unskillful things. As for a sense of well-being inside, a sense of being more settled, learn how to delight in that, too, because this delight is what keeps you on the path. You see for yourself that it really is worthwhile. You don't need books to tell you.

I know of one meditation method in Asia where if they think you've gained stream entry, they have you listen to a tape to tell you what fetters you've abandoned. But if you've really abandoned them, you don't need to be told. You know for yourself. If the method is constantly concerned about how someone reading the texts would judge what you've done, it makes the worth of your practice depend on somebody else. The real worth of the practice is what you can see for yourself in how you're developing your mind.

This is how the Buddha developed his practice. He didn't have any texts against which to measure his progress. But he noticed when he could get the mind to settle down with the breath and *how* he could get the mind to settle down with the breath. He noticed the ways that worked and the ways that didn't work. He judged his meditation based on the level of stress and suffering still in the mind, and the types of stress and suffering that had been abandoned.

So focus on what you're doing right now and try to be sensitive to what's changing, realizing that it will sometimes take a while to see progress. One of the images in the Canon is of a ship with sails all rigged up. It's been pulled up on shore and just left there. Gradually, the ropes and the sails rot away, the wood rots away. If you go today and look at it and go tomorrow and look at it, you won't see any difference. But over time, you begin to realize, "Oh, yeah, it is rotting away."

Another image is of using a hammer. The handle of the hammer will wear down over time. But if you look at it today and then look at it tomorrow, you won't see any difference.

In the same way, sometimes it takes a while to see progress in your practice. Some changes are gradual.

Others, though, are more noticeable. You can see a thought coming up that used to hook you and make you miserable, but now it comes up and yet doesn't make you miserable anymore. Appreciate that. You've made progress. Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about seeing little tiny flakes of bark get chipped off the trees of his defilements, and he took a lot of satisfaction in that.

So, when you see that there are areas where you used to get angry, or used to get lustful, or used to get greedy, used to be fearful, but it's not happening anymore—at least not as easily—you've made progress. Appreciate that, because the whole purpose of the practice is to see that you're making yourself happier in a totally innocent way.

Innocent happiness is really rare in the world. It comes down basically to three things: generosity, virtue, and meditation. When you find an innocent happiness that's good for you, it's good for other people, too. By finding a reliable happiness, it's also good for other people, too, because if your happiness isn't reliable, you're frustrated and you start taking it out on others. If you've got something of solid worth inside and you know for yourself that it's of solid worth, then you feel less threatened by other people, less exasperated by their behavior. So, the search for a solid happiness inside is not a selfish thing.

Think of the Buddha's instructions to Rahula. If you see that you've made a mistake, be willing to talk it over with someone you trust, out of the desire to learn. If you're going to be proud, be proud of your desire to learn. A certain amount of pride is necessary—the confidence that you have the ability to do this. If you realize that you've done something well, then, as the Buddha said, take joy in that fact and continue training. In other words, use that joy as part of the motivation to stick with it and get better.

Now, as you find joy in the practice like this, then the changes of the world—aging, illness, death, separation—don't hit the mind so hard. Appreciate that.

This appreciation comes under the general heading of empathetic joy, *mudita*. We often think about empathetic joy as meaning not resenting the good fortune of other people. But it also means appreciating their goodness and knowing that their goodness will lead to good results—and appreciating your own goodness as well. Remember, you're included in "all beings" when you say, "May all beings be happy. May all beings not be deprived of the good fortune they've attained." You're one of those "all beings."

So, appreciate your practice. Appreciate the progress you make in the practice. This kind of appreciation helps pull you out of your likes and dislikes. You begin to realize the happiness that comes from developing a skill. The way you treat your own mind can be turned into a skill. It's not the happiness of simply having nice sights, sounds, smells, tastes, or tactile sensations. You realize you've got something better that you can hold on to when the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations turn bad. So develop an appreciation for your practice. Find joy in the effort. Find joy in the times when you make the effort and it actually succeeds. As for the times when it doesn't, learn how to give yourself pep talks. Remind yourself that even the Buddha made mistakes.

But let the thought that there's a goal you haven't attained be like the tension on a bow when you're shooting an arrow. If there's no tension on the bow, the arrow doesn't go anywhere. The realization that "I've got progress I need to make. There are areas where I'm still lacking": Don't let that get you down. Make it a type of motivation: "Okay, there's work to be done, and I know a path for getting out of the situation my mind is in right now." That thought can act as motivation for the effort that'll actually get you to the point where you can master the practice.

All too often you hear, "Don't have any goals. Just be in the present moment." That's like a bow that hasn't even been strung. It just sits there. It can't shoot any arrows; it doesn't go anywhere. But the practice is meant to go someplace. It's meant to arrive at an attainment, as the Buddha said,

where you come to know what you haven't known before, to attain what you haven't attained before, to realize what you haven't realized before.

We are going someplace. The "someplace" will be right here at the mind, but it's the mind as it changes through the practice. And as it changes bit by bit by bit, you don't have to worry about the noble attainments or jhana or anything. Just ask yourself, "Is the mind more still than it was before?" If it's not, what can you do to make it more still, more solid, with a greater sense of belonging here?

In a lot of ways, the practice is basically learning how to feel comfortable in your own skin. That's a lot of what concentration practice is about. As for the insights, an insight is useful if it actually has an impact on helping you develop some dispassion for things that used to get you worked up. That's how you know if an insight is worthwhile. You can read in the books about the insights you're supposed to have and then try to impose them on what you're doing. Sometimes the lessons from the books are helpful, but sometimes they can be accompanied by pride or an over-estimation of what you've accomplished. That gets in the way.

So, simply notice when an insight comes: What does it do for the mind? How does it help the mind? If it helps the mind, fine. And if you find that tomorrow the same insight doesn't do anything, that doesn't mean the first insight was bad. It means simply you've got to develop more subtlety in your insight, to try things from a different angle. But appreciate the fact that yesterday it did help, so maybe today you can find something that will help as well.

Take heart from the example of those who have gone before you. This is why we have the contemplation of the noble Sangha: people who started out as ordinary people, just like us, and yet were able to develop their potentials into something really noble. It is possible. We have their examples. That's meant to give us encouragement. How did they do this? They did it for themselves. They judged their practice for themselves and found that it was making them better people, making them happier,

making them more reliable. They kept heading in that direction to see how far it would go.

That's what we've got to do: just keep heading in this direction. That'll give us a chance to taste some of the attainments they attained. And as you've appreciated your practice all along, it'll help you really appreciate the big things, when they come, because you've learned how to read your actions and appreciate what they accomplish.

Be Precise

March 9, 2019

We're here to observe our minds. But we start by observing the breath, because the breath is like an object we're working on, and you see the results of your actions in the object. That way you get more sensitive to what you're doing.

Say, for instance, you see a basket. Looks pretty easy; shouldn't be any problem making one. So you make one. Then you look at your basket and compare it with the original basket. You see that they're two very different things. Some people give up at that point. Other people say, "Well, there must be something I'm doing wrong." So they go back and make another basket, look at what they're doing, and then look at the resulting basket. What in that basket still needs to be improved?

The raw materials are not all that different. What you've *done* with them is what makes all the difference. And you see your actions in the final product. When you see they're not giving good results, you have to go back and change what you do, make a new basket in a better way, and then a better way. That's how you get more sensitive to what you're doing.

That's the whole purpose of the concentration: to get more sensitive to what the mind is doing. This, of course, relates to the heart of the teaching: the four noble truths. We're doing something in the mind that's giving rise to suffering, and we're suffering because of our ignorance of what we're doing. We also have the potential to do something that puts an end to suffering. To see the difference, you have to focus on what you're doing. You have to learn how to see your actions in the results, see the connection between cause and effect, and see the difference between different causes and different effects. That requires some very sharp and consistent powers of observation, which is another reason why we want to observe the mind

in concentration. The concentration allows us to see subtle things we couldn't see otherwise.

So, you focus on the breath. You begin to realize that the way you focus on the breath, the image you hold in mind of the breath, and the perception of the breath are all going to have an effect on how the breath feels—whether it's going to be a good place to stay or not a good place to stay. But those are things you can change. If they're not good, try something else. If that's not good, try something else again. When it *is* good, learn how to stay with it. Observe what you've got.

It's all too tempting when you read about the different levels of jhana to want to race right through them. But you don't see anything by racing through them. We're not here to cut little notches in our jhana belts. We're here to observe the mind. And one good way of observing the mind is to get it in a good state of concentration. The next step is to keep it there until you really get to know it. Try to see what problems you have in keeping it there.

One very common problem is that you slip off the breath and go into the sense of ease, and things get murky, blurry. It's like going into a dream world, what Ajaan Lee calls "delusion concentration," where things are very still, but you're not very clear about where you are. That kind of concentration won't give any insight into your actions.

You have to realize there's a distinction between the breath and the pleasure. They're going to both be there in almost the same place, but they are different things. The pleasure is the result. The shape of the breath, the way you're breathing, comes from your actions and intentions. So, maintain the intention to stay with the breath and learn to see that even though these things come together, they are different.

When you learn how to be precise in your observation, the mind gets into stronger concentration and allows you to see things even more precisely. You begin to see that your inner discussion about staying with the breath, adjusting the breath, becomes a disturbance. And when you really, clearly see that it is a disturbance, that's when you let it go. Don't let

it go beforehand. In other words, it's not simply because you're told that if you want to get farther along in the concentration, that's what you've got to do. You've got to really see for yourself that you're doing something disturbing and unnecessary at the same time.

This is one of the reasons why when Ajaan Fuang was teaching meditation, one, he wouldn't talk about jhana at all. And two, if anyone asked him about what was the next step or the next step after that, he'd say, "Don't worry about that yet. Worry about where you are right now. If it's something good, keep it up. And whether it's jhana or not jhana, as long as it feels good, stick with it." When you see something disturbing, drop that and see if you can still stay in the concentration. Now, sometimes, something seems like a disturbance but if you drop it you've lost your concentration, which is a sign you're not ready to drop it yet. Go back and pick it up again.

In other words, don't let your concentration be overly ruled by the texts or by what you've heard about concentration. Focus directly on what you're doing right now, to see what's a cause and what's a result. When they separate out clearly, you can move on. Drop anything that's getting in the way of allowing the mind to settle down more fully and really be at its ease. But hold on to whatever you need.

Ajaan Suwat gave a Dhamma talk on how you should regard anything that comes to disturb your concentration as stress, as suffering, even though it may not seem all that onerous or heavy. That's how the perfection of concentration leads to discernment, moving it into the four noble truths. But you don't have to think in terms of the four noble truths. Just think, "What is this disturbance right here? And how can I stop it?" Try to be very precise in how you observe these things.

We had a question this afternoon about what a big problem the ego is. Well, "ego" means a lot of things, and it involves a lot of different actions, some of which are actually skillful and some of which are not. It's too big a concept to function in the analysis that'll succeed in getting rid of a

problem. You have to see the problem in action and divide it up into useful units.

In other words, you have to see what you're doing in action because the problem lies in your actions. There may be ignorance there. There may be craving there. You need to be very precise in seeing the steps in how these things arise, how they pass away, because only when you see the steps can you begin to see, "Oh. This is the allure. This is why I go for them." And it may be—probably will be—something you hadn't expected at all. There may be something hiding behind what you thought was a perfectly fine idea, a perfectly justified idea. You have to dig down to find the real reason, and when you find it, you'll ask yourself, "Well, why go for that?" It'll obviously be not worth going for.

This is one of the reasons why, when we're getting the mind concentrated, everything that gets in the way—no matter how right or how good your ideas may seem—has to be regarded as a disturbance, a distraction. Develop a certain amount of skepticism toward your ideas, so that when the mind feels tempted to go for them, you can begin to ask, "Well, why?" You learn not to trust the voice that says, "Well, of course this is good. This is right," because maybe there's something else going on as well.

The more precise you are in seeing things, the more clearly you see where the allure is. Then you can compare it with the drawbacks. When you can see these things clearly, that's when it begins to hit home: Yes, this really is something you do want to get past, something you do want to escape from.

Even though there is a general tendency to reduce the Buddha's teachings to a few slogans or a few general concepts, still, as practitioners we have to resist that tendency. We're looking for the particulars. Why *this* disturbance? Why *this* distraction? Why do you go for it? How did it start? Where does it start? Does it really last, or does it come and go? When it goes, why does it go? What's the difference between the mind state when it picks it up and the mind state when it drops it? What happened to the

allure? Sometimes the allure comes when you pick it up, but then it fades very quickly. You drop it. But then you forget and you pick it up again. Why did it fade?

You want to slice things very finely this way. And your ability to slice things finely has to come from your practice of concentration when you can see things distinctly like: "This is the breath, and this is the ease that comes from the breath. They're two separate things even though they're right there together."

A lot of discernment has to be developed in the course of getting the mind into concentration and maintaining the concentration—particularly, insight into what you're doing. The breath becomes the object you shape with your actions. You look at the shape of the breath and you learn a lot about your actions. You can start discerning where your lack of skill is.

And you can do something about it, which is much better than dealing in abstractions or imposing ideas you picked up from books—even from the teachings of the ajaans. Their words may be right, but sometimes the way you understand them is not quite right. How do you make it right? By looking carefully at what you're doing.

Be precise in your observation of what you're doing. Be precise in the observation of the object you've made here with the breath, the concentration you've made by staying with the breath. That's how you begin to arrive at some insights that really do make a difference in the mind. They show you something that's been here all along, but you haven't seen it because you haven't been looking in the right place, or haven't been looking precisely enough, or haven't been asking the right questions. But it's here to be seen.

The more precise you are in chasing away distractions, the quicker you are to chase away distractions, the more precise you are in how you focus on things and the perceptions you use, then the more the practice of concentration really will be good for the mind. It'll show you areas where you've been foolish, areas where you've been blind—things we normally

don’t like to see, but things we have to learn how to see if we want to stop suffering.

The Prison Break

May 29, 2019

Ajaan Suwat once made an interesting observation. He noted that all beings are looking for happiness, all beings want happiness, and what that shows is that we don't have it. We're suffering. Otherwise, why would we search for happiness? Why would we need it? As he said, we're born into suffering. If you survive birth, you don't just lie there happily. You cry. You squirm around. And for the rest of your life there's a lot of squirming. There's a basic sense of discontent we all have. What the Buddha does with his teachings is to tame that discontent, to civilize it and put it to good use.

Think of the teachings called the customs of the noble ones. There are four altogether. The first three say you should be content with what you've got in terms of food, clothing, and shelter, and you focus your discontent someplace else. That's what the fourth custom is. You want to learn how to delight in developing and delight in abandoning: to delight in developing skillful qualities and delight in abandoning unskillful ones. You do this because you realize you can't stay content with what you've got in your mind. There are things you've got to develop and things you've got to abandon if you're going to be happy. If you want to do it well, you have to delight in doing it.

This principle comes down to heedfulness, realizing that just because you want to escape from something, you can't simply run away. If you're going to escape for good, you have to plan it well. It's like those movies where they have a very well-planned prison break. If you're trying to get out of the prison, then if you just rush at the guards, they'll shoot you, and that's the end of that. You have to figure out very carefully how to make a clean escape, and you have to take pleasure in working out all the details, in doing it right. That's how heedfulness trains your discontent. We want to

let go. We want to go all the way to awakening. We want that happiness. So, we have to follow the steps.

Think of the Buddha's image of the cow. It's in a nice pasture. It's got nice grass and nice water in the pasture, but it looks over to another hill, across the ravine, and there's another pasture. It wonders, "What's the grass like over there? What's the water like over there?" But because the cow is foolish and inexperienced, it doesn't know how to go down into the ravine and get back up in either direction. As a result, it gets stuck in the ravine and loses the grass and water it had to begin with.

The Buddha's example here is an image for people who are beginning to gain some concentration and they're discontent. They want to move on. But first you've got to learn how to tame your discontent. Realize that if you're going to do a good job, if you really want to get out of suffering, you have to follow the steps. The part of the mind that's really in a hurry, that's really impatient: That has to be tamed.

We usually think of the mind taming the heart. The mind understands things but can't get the heart to go along, yet the heart sometimes goes along too well. It's in too much of a hurry. It hears about all these wonderful things along the path and at the end of the path, and it says, "Gee, I'd really like that. I want to go right now." But when it can't get there right now, it gets disillusioned, upset, and loses interest. You've got to train the heart to develop some patience and persistence.

That's why we have the practice of generosity, why we have the practice of virtue. You're training the heart and mind in the basic habits you'll need as a meditator, and you want a good foundation. Now, it's not the case that you have to wait until your foundation is good before you start meditating. You meditate while you're developing your generosity and your virtue. These practices have to work together, but you have to realize that they all require work.

One of the reasons the Buddha sets out steps in the path is that he's taking a really big job and breaking it down into little pieces, so that you can content yourself for the time being with this piece, and then, when

you've mastered that, you remind yourself, okay, you can't rest here, there's another piece. That's what heedfulness tells you. You can't rest there. There are some good things along the path—if you get the mind into concentration, there's a sense of well-being, even a sense of rapture—but that's not good enough. Your heedfulness and discontent keep pushing at you, but your heedfulness also has to say, "I've got to do this well, so I'll have to focus on the next step, and only when I've got it solid will I think about the next step after that."

So while you're here, what is the next step? Well, basically you stay with the breath, then you adjust the breath to the point where it's good enough to settle down with. We're not here to create the perfect breath. We're here to get the breath good enough so that the mind will be willing to settle down in the body. If you don't adjust things with the breath, the body's not a very comfortable place to stay. It has its aches and pains here and there. But, as you breathe comfortably, breathe around the pains, breathe through them, allow the bands of tension to dissolve away, it gets to the point where it *is* good enough to stay.

Then you allow the mind to stay. Try to keep your gaze as steady as possible, and energy will come up. The Buddha's image is of a spring in a lake. It keeps flowing and flowing and flowing, and the rain keeps pouring down so that the spring doesn't run dry. That's satisfying for a while, but sometimes it gets to be too much. That's when you think of the energy flowing out the hands, flowing out the feet, flowing down the tailbone out down into the ground, flowing out your eyes. Or think of adjusting your focus, so that instead of focusing on the gross energies in the body, you focus on the subtler ones that are right there in the same place. Try to erase any perception you have of the skin of the body holding things in. Remember, the skin is full of pores. The atoms of the skin are largely space. Hold that perception in mind, and the excess energy can diffuse. It has nothing to push against.

Now there's an even subtler level of well-being. Stay with it long enough, keeping your range of awareness wide open, until everything in

the body seems so well-connected that the breath energy can feed itself. In other words, if there's a lack of energy in some part of the body, the energy in another part will flow right there. You get to the point where you don't even need to breathe in and out. This is what the Buddha means by the stilling of bodily fabrication. The mind gets really, really still and very content. The body is still. The breath is still. And you can stay there.

That's when you can see events in the mind clearly, because that's what we're here for: to see the movements of the mind. To make sure that the sense of the body is fully balanced at this stage, Ajaan Fuang would have you experiment first with thinking about the different elements in the body: earth, water, wind, fire.

You start first with the breath, which is part of the wind element. The breath is all smoothed out now, so you think about fire, the warmth. Notice where there's warmth in the body, which spots seem to be warmer than others, and then focus there and allow that sense of warmth to spread out and fill the body. If it gets excessive, then you think of coolness, the water. Where's the coolest spot in the body? Focus on that and then let that sense of coolness spread out. Then you think of the solidity. The whole body is solid. Then you try to think of mixing these elements together so that everything feels right—not too cold, not too hot, not too light with the breath, not too heavy with the solidity. Get it just right.

What you've done is to learn about the power of perception, how it can affect your experience of the body. You've learned how to control your perceptions steadily, so that when you go to the perception of space, thinking of the space filling the areas between all the atoms in the body and going out beyond the skin, your ability to hold on to that perception is a lot more solid. Then you can ask yourself: What is it that knows the space? There's an awareness, just your sense of awareness sitting right here. Focus your attention there.

In other words, you learn how to take things apart, bit by bit by bit. As the mind settles down like this, you're peeling away this layer, peeling away

that layer, and it's in the peeling away that you see the movements of the mind, how the mind puts things together.

That's when both the mind and the heart are ready to start letting some of these things go. You've been letting go of certain things just to get the mind in concentration, but now you can see things a lot more clearly, because you've established a good foundation, and you've sensitized yourself to what's going on as you've stilled everything down.

It's like trying to find a mouse in a wall. Say you've heard a scratching sound in the wall. If you've got the generator going and your TV going and your stereo going and your refrigerator going, you're not going to hear the scratchings in the wall clearly enough to locate them. You've got to turn off all these machines, make less and less and less noise yourself, and then you can start picking out the little sounds that you wouldn't have heard otherwise. That's how you can locate the mouse and catch it.

In the same way, as your sensitivity gets more refined, you begin to see how even little subtle things in the mind can have their harm. We started out with blatant suffering, we learned how to work our way through that so that we now see subtle things and realize, "Even this, too, is stressful." You're raising your standards for what counts as well-being.

This is how the mind gets ready to start peeling things away even more radically. But you can do it only because you've trained both the heart and the mind very patiently and gone through the proper steps.

Again, it's like the prison break. You do the steps very carefully. You have to be subtle so that you won't be detected. Or it's like one of those old *Mission Impossible* episodes on TV, where they're assigned something impossible—it seems impossible—but bit by bit by bit, very delicately, very carefully, they can do it, so that the mission impossible turns into a mission possible, a mission accomplished.

If they'd just rushed at the evil person, the evil person would have killed them, and that would have been that. They had to do everything very subtly and very skillfully.

Well, that's what we're doing as we get the mind to settle down. We're learning about the subtleties in the mind by developing our skills. This is what it means to delight in developing. You take delight in the subtleties; you take delight in doing things well—almost to the point where you forget why you're here. Still, there's that discontent that's eating away at the mind, and your heedfulness reminds you that even though things get really comfortable as you're settled in, you're not meant to stay there. The Buddha said there's something even better, something that's genuine heartwood.

His image is of going through the parts of a tree and not contenting yourself with the leaves or the bark or the softwood. You want the heartwood, something solid that really is worthy of your contentment. In other words, once you've got it, you don't need anything more. That's what it means to be really content. We can't clone contentment by saying, "Well, let's just be okay with whatever." That aborts the path right there and leaves you settling for things less than ideal. But at the same time we can't let our discontent run wild. We have to tame it. We have to civilize it.

As you follow the steps, then step by step by step you get out of the prison, by learning how to take delight in being really subtle in how you understand your mind, how you deal with your mind. As Ajaan Fuang once said, if we could take nibbana by storm, everyone would have gone there a long time ago. It's because it's delicate work that we haven't gotten there yet.

So learn how to take some delight in the delicate work. This is why the Buddha taught so much about the path in detail. He didn't teach much about nibbana. He said, in effect, "Do the path carefully, and the path will get you there." That's what counts.

See Your Thoughts as Strange

August 17, 2018

Try and settle into the body—the body as you feel it from within, what the texts call "form"—and try to find a sense of pleasure here. Explore the breath to see how it feels, and adjust it so that it feels just right: not too long, not too short, too deep, too shallow, too heavy, too light. When the breath feels good, try to notice where there's a sense of ease and think of it spreading around the body—like a liquid that can seep through all the little nooks and crannies of the body—and allow your awareness to follow it. Or if you want, you can spread the awareness out there first and then think of the breath following the awareness. The important thing is that you try to fill the body with a sense of well-being. Fill it with your awareness. Then, as for any thoughts that go out into the world, out into your visual field or your aural field, just let them go. Try to have a sense that you belong here. This is normalcy.

The Thai ajaans talk about the mind settled in, at ease, at equanimity, as the normal state of mind, or the mind at normalcy—in the same way as when you're observing the precepts, they say that your behavior is finally at normalcy. But for most of us, that's not our sense of normal. Distraction is our normalcy. The desires that flow along with that distraction out into the sensory realm: That's where we normally are.

One of the points of meditation is to change your sense of normal. This is one of the reasons why we leave the activity, say, of a city, the activity of even little towns or farms, and come to a quiet place like this. Because when you're staying out there, the way everybody else is behaving seems normal, but here you want to be able to pull out and say, "Is that really normal?"

It's good to get out and have a sense of society being strange. Right now it's especially strange, but even when society seems to be relatively

normal, going its ordinary way, from the point of view of the Dhamma it's still strange: people going along with their defilements. As Ajaan Mun used to say, whatever culture there is in the world, it's a culture of people with defilements. There's only one culture that's not, and that's the culture of the noble ones, and the noble ones don't think like other people do. We need to learn how to see their thinking as normal if we're going to learn how to benefit from their teachings, so that when thoughts of, say, sensual desire or anger come up, you want to see them as strange.

This is one of the reasons why we have the contemplation of the body. You can think of all the pleasures that revolve around the body, and yet look what you've got when you take the body apart. Look at a diagram of the inside of the body, and you can see that it's very bizarre. If you were to take all the different organs out and put them on the floor, you'd run away. They'd be so strange. Yet when they're all sewn up nicely inside, you can look at a human body and actually desire it. You can look at your own body in the mirror, and it seems normal. It seems okay.

There's an incongruity here, and the contemplation of the body, as with all the other contemplations that deal with our defilements, is meant to show how incongruous our desires are. We have to turn a blind eye to so many things in order to stoke our greed, stoke our lust, stoke our anger, and put the mind into what the Buddha would say is an abnormal state. Yet for us, that's the spice of life. So we have to learn how to change our views, to see that we have a weird taste in spices. This is one of the reasons why we try to develop this sense of well-being in the body as our refuge. As the Buddha points out, if we didn't have any other alternative to pain, we'd just go for nothing but sensuality, because that would be the only other option out there offering some pleasure.

So, it's important that you find a strong sense of pleasure simply sitting here in the body as it's felt from inside. That's a part of your awareness that our culture tends to block off. We don't have much of a vocabulary to describe the body as it feels from within. All the interesting things in the world seem to be happening out there, where our vocabulary is huge. Yet

actually we're in here, and it's unnatural for us to be pulled out there so much. So, get back in touch with how your body feels from within, and learn how to relate to it in a balanced way.

Some people, especially if they have a lot of suppressed emotions, will find weird energies moving in different directions in the body and getting stuck in different parts. You have to think of everything opening up, all the channels open, open, open. Any excess energy can flow out the palms of the hands, the soles of the feet. If something's stuck in your head, think of it going out the eyes, the ears, or down through the throat. In other words, learn how to have a sense that you can be with your inner awareness of the body without pushing it in unhealthy directions. Learn how to compensate for any bad habits you may have developed subconsciously in the past around the energy flow in the body, and keep compensating until things feel balanced. Then tell yourself: "This is normalcy." As for thoughts that pull you out, learn to look at them as strange.

As the Buddha said, discernment comes down to seeing things as other, as separate. Yet we live in our thought-worlds, we let them envelop us, and for us they're normal. Your desires, your angers are very much yours. If we could take everybody's thoughts and put them out in a lineup, you'd probably be able to pick out your thoughts very quickly. There's a certain you-ness to your thoughts that seems normal. It's one of the reasons why you go for them—and keep going for them, again and again and again.

But stop and think: In all the many lifetimes you've had, you've been many different kinds of people with lots of different ideas about what's beautiful, what's ugly, what's fair, what's not fair. And that's just counting your times as a human being. You've probably been other types of beings as well. Different genders, different races, different species: We've been through all of them. And each time, it was "me," "my" thoughts, "my" ideas, "my" taste of things, "my" desires. But just think about what you were like maybe two hundred years ago and how strange that would be. Well, in the same way, learn to look at yourself right now as strange, especially your

thoughts, so that you can have a much more solid sense of feeling at home here, belonging here with your breath, and seeing anything that would pull you away as alien.

It's like learning a different language or going to a different country. At first, you're struck by how strange that language is and how strange that country is, but if you stay there long enough, get fluent enough in the language and live with the customs, it becomes more normal. Then you come back home, and home seems strange. That's precisely the attitude you should learn around your thoughts. They really are strange. The fact that you would desire something, the fact that you would have lust for something, the things that get you angry: If you can see them as strange, it's easier to pull out of them.

Otherwise, you live *in* them. They become a becoming, a whole world in which you take on an identity, and these states of becoming are what cause us to suffer. They require feeding, and the feeding entails suffering. In fact, the Buddha's word for clinging, which he identifies with suffering, can also mean to feed. You take on this identity where you have to feed, which means you've got to suffer.

So any craving that would pull you in that direction, you've got to see as strange, as alien. Otherwise, you go for it again and again and again. Learn to see your thoughts as strange. See the mind centered here in the body with a sense of balance as normal. That puts everything else in the right perspective.

A Conglomeration of Germs

July 18, 2018

I don't know if you've ever contemplated our hummingbirds. They're living in a very unnatural situation here. Hundreds of them have a couple of feeders they share. That's not how they usually live in nature. Out in nature, each hummingbird has its own territory, which is quite large because it needs lots of flowers to survive. Yet here they're living in close quarters, and for the most part they get along. But then little squabbles break out here and there, and sometimes everything collapses. One hummingbird decides it's going to take over a particular feeder and chases everybody else away. Or they get angry at one another for some reason, and things begin to break down. This morning the nectar ran out in almost all the feeders, and they began to get unglued.

You can compare all this to the body. Think of the body as being composed of lots of little one-celled organisms that have learned to get along, but every now and then, things begin to fall apart. Fights break out. Some of them may turn on a particular part of the organism with an autoimmune disease. Sometimes a few of them decide to keep growing and growing and growing, and the others can't stop them. That's how the body develops cancer.

So it's pretty amazing that the body works, because each little cell in there is programmed to behave sometimes in a social way and sometimes in an antisocial way. It's good to think about the body like this so that we don't get heedless.

That's a lot of what the body contemplation is for: to counteract our heedlessness. To begin with, we have to remind ourselves that the body's not all that attractive when you really look inside. When we think about what we eat, we usually think about food as what goes into the mouth, but what the organism is actually feeding off is the stuff down in the stomach

and intestines, which is in a different condition entirely. Then there are all the things coming out of the body that we have to clean away, clean away, clean away. This is what we've got, and yet we're so protective of it, because we need it to find happiness in life—at least that's our attitude. In some ways that's right; in some ways it's wrong.

We need the body to practice, but for a lot of us the body has very little to do with practicing the Dhamma, and everything to do with practicing things that are not Dhamma. This is why we have to contemplate it to ask ourselves, "What in here is of any essence?" It's all going to die someday.

If you're attached to it, then when you die you're not going to go anywhere. You're just going to hang around. When Ajaan Fuang was teaching in Bangkok, he taught at a monastery that had a crematorium and sixteen of what he called "body shops": the pavilions where they'd set out coffins and hold funerals.

Occasionally, say, on a Saturday evening when not too many people came to see him—most of the people on Saturdays would come in the middle of the day—if it was a Saturday evening, he might just walk around the monastery to stretch his legs. One evening he came back from his walk and said, "You know, the number of people who die and don't leave their bodies is huge." They're so attached to them that even when they die, they still can't go anywhere because this is all they know.

That's one of the reasons why we practice developing some detachment toward the body: so that when the time comes to leave, we can leave neatly and move on to something better.

And of course, even as we're alive there are lots of dangers in getting attached to the body in the wrong way. If we think that the value of the body lies in whether it's attractive or not, that can create a lot of problems. If you are attractive in line with what society has decided is attractive, then you get really possessive of the body. There can be a lot of pride, but of a very unstable kind—because, after all, the body does age.

People who are proud of their appearance have to be constantly reassured that, yes, they're still good-looking. While they're still young,

they're constantly afraid of people who want to take advantage of their good appearance, and yet they also need other people to be attracted to them. I remember hearing of a French actor who once said that the easiest women to seduce are the ones who are pretty. The hardest ones are the ones who are not pretty. The ones who are not pretty say, "You're being ridiculous." The ones who are pretty are all too eager to go along—which is a weakness of character.

On the other hand, if you're not attractive in line with society's ideas, you can get really down on yourself. This is why we have that contemplation of the body to remind ourselves that the things that are unattractive in the body are unattractive in everybody. That's what you can call a healthy negative body image.

But the contemplation of the body doesn't end there. The body does have its good side, in that we can use it to practice. To sit here and meditate, you've got to have a body sitting. To give things, you need a body to do the giving. So, the body does have its uses, and you want to take care of it in the proper way.

Someone once came to see Ajaan Lee, complaining that some of his friends had found out that he was a meditator, and they said, "So, you say your body is not-self, then how come we can't hit it?" He didn't know how to answer. Ajaan Lee said to tell them, "It's borrowed goods. I have to take care of it. I have to return it to the owner in good condition." Well, "good condition" doesn't mean attractive. It means good enough so that you can practice. So, you do take care of the body to that extent, but you have to contemplate again and again and again, to make sure that you're not attached to the body any more than that.

Just realize that this is a pile of borrowed goods. All these little cells here are like a big conglomeration of germs that you've managed to latch on to. As the Buddha said, "See this as old kamma." When you were born with this, this was the result of your old kamma. Now it's the raw material with which you create new kamma, which is something you want to focus on because kamma is what really belongs to you. That's what goes with you

when you go, and that's what shapes your mind as you stay here. As the Buddha said, the things you do again and again and again bend the mind in a certain direction. So try to bend it in a good direction.

Learn how to have the right attitude toward the body, that it's a tool, something you've borrowed, a weird conglomerate of all these little germs: this flock of hummingbirds that sometimes gets along well and sometimes doesn't. While it's getting along well, try to make good use of it.

Even arahants take good care of their bodies. As long as they see that continuing to live in the human realm serves a purpose, they look after the body for that purpose. In this way, they give us a good example. They don't need the body to gain awakening, because they've already gained awakening. But for those of us who have yet to gain any awakening, this is what we've got to use, so use it for that purpose.

And watch out for any tendencies of the mind to want to see the value of the body in some other way. Contemplate it so that you can have the right attitude toward it.

This contemplation is also good for seeing the power of perception.

In Thailand, sometimes the monks will go into hospitals. Over there they can actually make arrangements for monks to go in and see autopsies. One monk I knew noticed once, as he was going to see an autopsy, that in the office of the guys who were cutting up the corpses, there was a girly calendar. As if to reaffirm that, yes, there are some bodies that are good-looking—even though they were cutting up dead bodies day after day. That just goes to show the huge walls the mind can create for itself. If it wants to see something as attractive, it'll do everything it can, regardless of the evidence all around it. And you can see this in yourself. You can do body contemplation and see all the aspects of the body that are strange or weird or incongruous, and then very quickly the mind can shift around and find the body attractive again.

So watch for the shift. This is the point where contemplation of the body gives rise to real insight into the power of perception—and the power of intention behind the perception. Again, what is that intention?

It's kamma. Where does that kamma come from? You want to look into it, because that, too, is your possession. If you're not careful, that particular kind of kamma will lead you to come back again, looking for another weird conglomerate like this to keep the process going.

The body is not the problem. The problem is in the mind: in the intentions that drive the perceptions. We use the body as a tool to understand the mind, to train the mind. So, you look after it as you would look after any tool. But at the same time, you have to realize that, as with any tool, you can use it well or you can use it destructively. If you use it in a way that gives rise to more greed, aversion, and delusion, that's destructive. If you use it in a way that gives rise to kamma that harms others, that's destructive, too. If you use it to meditate—to give rise to concentration, to give rise to discernment—or as a means for generosity and virtue, that's a sign that you really know how to use your body.

Take advantage of this conglomerate of old kamma that you've got, and while you can hold it together, learn how to use it well.

A Snare of Death Laid Out

December 6, 2018

Craving has a location. In fact, it defines locations. It becomes the seed around which the process of becoming gathers, like little bits of dust in the atmosphere that become seeds for clouds, seeds for rain. And it's good to know where the location is, because all too often we think we want something but once we get it, we realize that it wasn't what we really wanted. We have to go back and look at where that original desire was located.

This is how we come into life. As we were about to die from our previous lifetimes, a vision of the human realm came in. There was something in the human realm that you found attractive and you didn't look at the fine print. You just went for that image, whatever it was.

This is scary: this ability of the mind to slip off that way, to slip into whole worlds without really knowing where it's going, simply because it's attracted by some little bit of pleasure, some image, some idea.

Usually, it's sensual pleasures. This is why there's so much in the Canon about the drawbacks of sensuality. After all, one of the ways we suffer is through sensual clinging. And one of the causes for suffering is sensual craving.

"Sensuality" here doesn't mean the pleasures in and of themselves. It means the mind's fascination with planning them, all the embroidery we create *around* them, all the perceptions and feelings and thought constructs—verbal and mental fabrications. Often that's where our craving is focused. Often, when you desire a person, it's not the person you desire. You desire your perceptions and thoughts of the person.

So you want to get the mind really still so that you can see, when craving of any kind comes up: Exactly what are you focused on? What is

the allure? Because that's going to be where the location is found.

Once you've seen the allure, then you look around: What else is tied up with that allure? Those are the things we don't look at. Something looks appealing, but we don't think about what the other implications are. We think, "Well, this appealing thing is sure to have a wonderful world around it." But then look at beauty, youth, power, and wealth: What kind of world is run by those things?

Twiggy, a famous model back in the '60s, was involved in Hollywood for a while and then she left it. Several years later, I read an interview in which she was talking about how Hollywood was all about beauty, youth, power, wealth, and, as she put it, "all those other horrible things." It's a good perspective, because a world where those things reign is a pretty miserable one.

People who don't have beauty, who don't have power and wealth, are thrown away—have no worth at all. If our happiness depends on those things, we have to very quickly learn to find a happiness that depends on something else. Otherwise, we're headed for a big fall. All too often when you lose those things you miss them, and if you have a chance to get them again you jump for them. This is what happens at rebirth. "Here's another chance: You want to go for another round?" You have to think about the implications.

As the Buddha said, we tend to go for what he calls householder pleasure and householder pain. In other words, sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations that we like: If we get them, that's householder pleasure; if we don't, householder pain.

So, you've got to replace those with renunciate pleasure and renunciate pain. Renunciate pain is the realization that "There is a much higher form of happiness that I haven't reached yet." It's a painful thought, but it's a thought that motivates you to practice. Renunciate pleasure is when you're able to let go of sensuality and find pleasure at the very least by getting the mind into concentration.

The realization that there is such a pleasure is a really important discovery, and we should try to make the most of it. It's not the goal, but it certainly helps pull us out of a lot of misery, so that we're not starving for pleasure. Otherwise, we're just going back and forth between householder pleasure, householder pain, householder pleasure, householder pain.

Part of the way out is seeing the value and the real sense of satisfaction that can come from finding pleasure simply in getting the mind to settle in. But also, you have to see the drawbacks of sensuality. And not just the drawbacks: The Buddha also uses the word *degradation*. If you think about people's relationships, a lot of degradation goes on in the sensual ones. Both people become enslaved to each other.

In the Theragatha and Therigatha, some of the more dramatic encounters are when people come and try to seduce monks and nuns. In the Therigatha there's the famous story about the nun going through the forest when a man comes up and tries to get her to disrobe. And it's interesting, there's no mention of how good-looking he was. All we see are his words, and he's a real master at spinning words. He hopes to spin a net in which to catch her, based on his appreciation of her beauty and all the beautiful things he's going to provide her with. Fortunately, she's not attracted to her own body. She says, "What do you see in this body that's of any worth?" And the fact that she's not attracted to herself—and doesn't mind not being attracted to herself: That's what frees her.

In other words, she's found something much better. Because for a lot of people, that's where the attraction to sex is located, in the perception that someone else is attracted to them. After all, as the Buddha said, our desire for sensuality—our desire for other people—starts out with our sense of our own attractiveness. Then we look for other people whom we find attractive and who are also attracted to us. That's where the magnet pulls. So you've got to cut those force fields, first by looking at the unattractiveness of your body—and not just your body when it's obviously not appealing, but also when it's at its most appealing. Even then, if you

turned it inside out, what would you have? Nothing much you'd want to go for. You realize: This is the way it is with all bodies.

Yet this is what you'd get when you have that vision of the sensual pleasures you could enjoy if you were reborn as a beautiful, attractive person. You'd get all the things that go along with having a body, all the various parts of the body—and every part of the body has illnesses associated with it. It's going to grow old; it's going to grow unattractive. Do you want to keep going back for that?

In the Theragatha there's a verse where a monk is approached by a woman, and here we get a description of how beautiful she is. She says, "You're wasting your youth. Let's enjoy each other and then when we're both old we can go forth, after there's no attractiveness left in the body." He tells us that he looked at her and saw a snare of death laid out.

That's what you've got to see. The people you're attracted to are *snares of death*. The pleasures you're attracted to that would pull you to be reborn in a sensory world: Those are snares of death, because when you're reborn there's going to be death—and there's no escaping it.

It's like that animated film *Ice Age,* I think it was *Ice Age II*. I was on a plane one time, flying over the Pacific, and a kid sitting in the row in front of me was watching the series. There was one incident where a group of them, male and female animals, are in a boat drifting through the fog. All of a sudden a lot of mermaids appear in the fog, and a merman appears for the woman, the old lady turtle. The animals are all very attracted to them and start looking dreamy-eyed, but then they begin to see static in the images, and as you look into the static you see the fangs of vicious fish.

It's good to have that image in mind when you see something attractive, especially as the mind is approaching death: Beauty is hiding fangs. After all, at death there's an inclination to want to go for whatever pleasure there may be, because you're surrounded by pain at that moment. The physical pains in the body, the mental pains of having to leave this life, being uncertain, and then suddenly latching on to something that looks good: You've got to watch out for what you go for out of desperation. Just

because things look good doesn't mean they *are* good. Look for the static, look for the fangs—and don't wait until you're on your deathbed before you start thinking in these terms.

This is why contemplation of the body is such a basic part of the meditation. It's why we have the chant of the body parts that we repeat so often. This is what you have in your body. This is what other people have in their bodies. This is all the fine print that comes along with the idea of sensual pleasure. If you can think in these terms, then you can admit that maybe renunciate pleasure actually is a better thing.

So, we first provide the mind with an alternative pleasure. This is one of the reasons why we practice concentration. We try to learn how to sit through pain and maintain our concentration because we're going to need the concentration when the body and mind are in pain, so that we're not pained along with them, so that we're not driven by desperation to jump for whatever appears.

But at the same time, in addition to the concentration, you need to have the wisdom that looks for the long term, looks for the whole picture. Instead of looking just at a particular pleasure—a pleasant sight, sound, smell, taste, or tactile sensation that can be very alluring—look for the world around it. What's tied up with that pleasure? Look for the static inside the image, look for the fangs. They're there if you're willing to look for them. These things are all around us.

People are dying. Why? Because they got born. People getting old, all the things that we see in the human realm: They happen because people wanted to be reborn as people. We call it the fine print, but it's really writ large when you get into the reality.

So be very careful about where you locate your cravings. Look for the allure, and then look for the drawbacks and the degradation, all the other bad things about whatever the pleasure might be. And that, the Buddha says, is when you're ready to think that maybe the idea of renunciation really is good.

When he gave his graduated discourse, he started out with generosity, virtue, and the rewards of generosity and virtue, which would be to experience sensual pleasures here in the human realm and then up in the higher realms. Then, before he taught the four noble truths, he had to take you through that step of seeing the drawbacks and degradation of sensuality, to the point where you could say, "Maybe renunciation really is good."

The pleasure of a concentrated mind is not just a second best—it's actually much better. When you see that, that's when you're ready for the four noble truths. So, make sure you have this step well mastered, because it's an important step on the way out.

Don't Just Fatten Your Mind

October 9, 2018

We practice concentration as our food on the path. We try to settle the mind with one object, like the breath, and bring the mind to the object in a way that it feels at ease and has a sense of fullness, refreshment. So we work with the breath to see what kind of breathing would feel good, and then we learn to live with that sense of well-being. This is why we practice: to be able to keep coming back to it again and again, to keep ourselves nourished so that we're not so hungry for other pleasures. When you're not so hungry, you can look at pleasures not so much in terms of whether you like them or not. You'll look to see what effect they have on the mind—what they lead you to do.

Ordinarily, we go for the pleasures of the senses: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations that we like. We keep going for them again and again because, as the Buddha said, most of us don't see any other alternative to pain. Even though they may have their drawbacks, we're willing to put up with them. But if you have this alternative pleasure—the pleasure that comes from settling the mind in—you can look at those drawbacks and begin to see which pleasures are having a bad effect on the mind and which ones are having a good effect. Not all sensual pleasures are bad. As the Buddha said, he doesn't deny that some sensual pleasures can be in accord with the Dhamma. But it's an issue for each one of us to figure out which are okay for us and which are not.

There are some general principles. The pleasures that come from going out into nature are relatively harmless, as are the pleasures of solitude and the pleasures of being in the company of virtuous people when there's a sense of harmony in the group. But then there are other pleasures that are more of an individual matter.

Think about alcohol as an analogy. Alcohol is never good, but some people taste it and they don't feel any attraction to it at all, whereas other people can't get enough. So you have to ask yourself: Which pleasures do you thirst for that you can't get enough of? What do they do to the mind? You've got to look at the effect in your actions. We can't just be consumers, consumers, consumers all the time.

True happiness comes from having skills—being able to maneuver through the difficulties of life without suffering from them—and you don't learn those skills simply by indulging in pleasures. In fact, the more you indulge in most pleasures, the weaker you become. When you get hooked on certain pleasures, you get really irritated when you can't have them. Those are the pleasures that are really bad for you.

Think about that experiment where they found the little pleasure center in the brains of mice. They put an electrode right into it, and then a little plate on the mouse's head. The mouse could touch the plate against another plate and would get a tiny charge, just enough to stimulate the pleasure center. They found that when they put mice in cages where they could do this, they would just sit there with the little plate against the bar and they'd die. The pleasure was enough for them, so they didn't care about eating or anything at all. They just wanted the pleasure.

This is what happens to our goodness if we just keep going for pleasures without any concern for what they're doing for the mind: It dies. We have to remind ourselves that we're not just consumers of pleasures, here to get as much as we can. We're agents. We're acting in the world, acting inside the mind as well, and so the question is: What kinds of actions are our pleasures and pains inducing in us? We have to learn how to respond well to both—how to respond to pain in a way that's good for the mind, and how to respond to pleasure in a way that's good for the mind.

Think about the qualities the Buddha himself developed on his path. One was, as he called it, lack of contentment with skillful qualities. In other words, he kept wanting to perfect his skills even more. If there was

still the slightest bit of disturbance or disease in his mind, he wouldn't rest content. He'd just keep working. And what did he develop? What qualities did he employ as he kept working at the path? He listed three: heedfulness, ardency, and resolution.

Heedfulness is the proper attitude to have when you realize that your actions do make a difference, and they're going to determine whether you suffer or not, so you've got to be very careful about what you do. This, of course, goes back to those issues of pleasure and pain. Which pleasures are heedful pleasures? In other words, you indulge in them, you enjoy them and they're actually good for the mind. Concentration is a good pleasure in that way.

Then there's ardency. You put your heart into trying to develop more and more skill.

Resolution is being strong in the face of difficulties.

The pleasure of concentration is one way of developing these qualities, but on its own it's not enough. After all, some people get into nice concentration and just stay there. They get content. They say, "This is good enough for me." Now, that's their choice, of course. The Buddha's not up there giving orders to anybody, but he is saying that if you stay with that pleasure, there are going to be dangers.

So, you have to contemplate the dangers of even a nice state of concentration. You could simply sit here and get lazy, but then you carry that habit of laziness back into the world. This is why concentration has to be developed together with an inquisitive, curious mind—one that wants to know: What's better than this? What's more solid, more reliable than this? The voice of heedfulness is asking those questions. If you see that there is a certain laziness in your concentration, that's when you bring in the ardency.

It's good to rest here and get rested, but you've got to use your strength for something of more value. It's like eating, eating, eating without using the strength that comes from eating. You get fat. You've got to ask yourself:

What more is there? What's better? As you keep at this in the face of difficulties, that's resolution.

So you have to ask yourself as you go through life: The pleasures that you're enjoying—are they helping make you more heedful, ardent, and resolute, or are they getting in the way? Are they making you apathetic, listless, and weak?

As living beings, we're not just sitting here in the present moment. The present moment is going in a certain direction. You have to look at the qualities you're developing in the present moment and ask yourself, "In what direction are my actions in this present moment taking me?" The present moment is not a place where you sit. It's a place where you work. It's your path.

The Buddha saw that we're all on different paths. It's not the case that we suddenly decide we'd like to have a path in life only when we come to the practice. We're already on a path of one kind or another, leading someplace. All too often, though, we have no idea where that path is leading, but the Buddha can describe the different paths and where they go. You can ask yourself, "Given the way I'm living my life, which path am I on? Am I on the path to a good destination or to a bad one?" If it's a bad one, you can turn around and go in a better direction. If you're on a good one, you have to stick with it—and bring along that inquisitive mind.

There was an ajaan who came to visit us here, and some people took him to a few of the national parks. And they said, every path he got onto he would say, "Let's see how far the path goes. What's around the next bend? What's around the next bend? Where does it end?" That's the kind of mind you need to have as you're meditating: What's around the next bend? You don't want to just rest satisfied where you are, because that's the path that slides down.

There's a hill in Lassen National Park that's covered with very fine bits of lava. If you climb up the hill, as long as you're climbing you can go up the hill. But if you stop to rest, you begin to realize that you're sliding

down. Just to stay in place you have to keep walking. If you don't, you end up sliding all the way back down to the bottom of the hill.

That's the way it is with the practice. If you stand still too long, you start sliding down. Now, this doesn't mean you shouldn't be enjoying the concentration. You should. And you should have a sense of when it's right to simply rest in the concentration. But you should also make sure to put it to good use, instead of just feeding, feeding, feeding, and getting a fat mind. You're trying to feed the mind so that it's strong enough to do the work that needs to be done. Wherever there's still ignorance, there's going to be suffering, however subtle it may be.

So look at your pleasures, look at your pains, and ask yourself, "In indulging in these things, where am I going? Where are they taking me? Are they really my friends? Am I really a friend to myself?"

Some pains are actually your friends. Ajaan Suwat was talking once about how when he had malaria he learned an awful lot about the mind. As he said, if malaria were a person whom he could thank, he would need to thank malaria for the lessons he learned.

So, look both at your pleasures and at your pains—and at your relationship to them. Then focus on the pleasures and pains that are skillful, i.e., that lead you to act in skillful ways. That's how you stay on the path and keep yourself from sliding back.

You Can't Relax Your Way to Awakening

December 13, 2018

There's a Pali phrase that the Thai ajaans repeat a lot, *viriyena dukkhamecceti:* It's through effort that we put an end to suffering. And as Ajaan Lee said, we hear it but we don't believe it. We're looking for the Pali phrase that would say, "It's through relaxing that we put an end to suffering." We go through the Canon trying to find the passages indicating that there's no need for an act of will, that as soon as you're developing admirable friendship everything will follow right in line. We also focus on other passages that portray the path as one nice step after another nice step, without much difficulty.

That's ignoring huge parts of the Canon. Even the passages saying that if you start with admirable friendship, everything follows naturally, will admit that admirable friendship is not easy. Finding a good person, someone you trust, and then emulating that person's qualities: That's where it gets difficult. And there are many passages in the Canon where the Buddha says that there's an aspect of developing skillful qualities that's going to be difficult, it's going to be hard. In fact, he says one of the advantages of getting the mind into concentration with a sense of well-being is that it helps get you past some of the pain and hardships involved in developing skillful qualities. Unskillful qualities aren't the only ones that involve pain. Sometimes skillful qualities do—or the act of trying to develop them is going to be painful. Your unskillful qualities rarely abandon the field without a fight.

There's even a passage where the Buddha says that if you've come to a point in your practice where sticking with the practice makes tears come down your face, you'd still be wise to stick with it. Even though there may be pain in the short term, there's going to be well-being in the long term. There's also the passage where he says that if you could make a deal that

someone would stab you with spears every day for a hundred years—a hundred spears in the morning, a hundred spears at noon, a hundred spears in the evening—but with a guarantee that you'd gain awakening at the end of those hundred years, it'd be a good deal. And when you finally gained awakening, you wouldn't feel that it was attained with pain. The pleasure—and this is not a pleasant feeling, but the pleasure of freedom that comes with awakening—is so overwhelming that it would blot out all of the difficulties.

So, if you're sitting here looking for the path of relaxation, you're in the wrong place. There will be some difficulties and you have to make an effort. The persistence of right effort is not always a matter of just watching things. There *are* some unskillful states of mind that cause suffering which, when you watch them, just go away on their own. They wither away in front of your sustained awareness. The fact that they've been causing suffering in the mind is simply because you haven't been paying them any attention. When you pay them attention, you see, "I don't really want to go there. Why am I doing this?" You stop. But there are other unskillful states that are not like that. They require what the Buddha calls exerting a fabrication, or fabricating exertion, where you have to put forth an effort. There will be pains as you sit. There'll be thoughts coming up in your mind that you would really like to think but you've got to say, "No, I can't go there." There will be discomfort of all kinds.

We had that question this afternoon about dealing with mosquitoes: What way of thinking about the mosquitoes would make them go away? It's good to think about some of the stories of the forest ajaans. There's the story about Ajaan Lee. He'd gone out to sit in an orchard one afternoon, put down a mat, and then discovered that, in putting down the mat, he'd disturbed a red ant nest. As the ants came swarming around, he said, "Okay, if I've ever done anything wrong to you, go ahead and bite me. But if I haven't done anything to wrong you in the past, please stay away. Let me practice and I'll dedicate the merit of my practice to you." In that case, the ants went away.

But notice: He didn't start out by saying, "Go away," or "I'm spreading goodwill in your direction so you'll go away." He said, "If I've wronged you in the past, okay, I'm willing to suffer the consequences." We have to have *that* attitude. After all, the simple fact that we're doing something nice here doesn't mean that everybody's going to treat us nicely.

One of the ajaans at Wat Asokaram was telling me that when he was a young monk, the sala there didn't have any fans, so at night as they were sitting meditating, the mosquitoes were all over everybody. He'd somehow gotten the idea that if you breathed with your entire body so that the breath came in and out every pore, it would blow the mosquitoes away. But it wasn't happening for him. So he opened his eyes one night when Ajaan Lee was up on the Dhamma seat giving the Dhamma talk, to see if Ajaan Lee was blowing all the mosquitoes away with his breath. But he saw that Ajaan Lee, the breath expert, was covered with mosquitoes.

So it's not always the case that, when you're sitting and meditating with lots of goodwill or lots of breath energy filling the body, the mosquitoes will go away and leave you alone—to say nothing of the ants or the other animals or disturbing people. This is something even the ajaans going off into the forest found: There were lots of disturbing people they had to deal with. If there weren't disturbing people, there would be disturbing animals or disturbing spirits.

So when laypeople come here and say, "The monks here have it easy, they don't have to deal with a lot of people," it's not true. We have to deal with all kinds of people coming here. And when you go home it's not all that different. You may have less time to practice, but the fact that there are going to be disturbances, the fact that there are going to be difficulties, is nothing new. It's simply a matter of having the right attitude toward them.

Which is Ajaan Lee's attitude: "If these people have been wronged by me in the past, okay, I'm willing to put up with the difficulty. If I haven't wronged them, may we live in peace. Either way, I'll be willing to dedicate the merit of my practice to them." That attitude means that you're willing to take on whatever difficulties are involved.

One of the better Zen teachings is the statement that "The Great Way is not difficult for those with no preferences." Now, this doesn't mean that you don't prefer to put an end to suffering rather than suffer. You *do* prefer that. What it means is that whatever the path to the end of suffering entails, you're up for it. Whatever the difficulties, you're ready for them. You've seen that otherwise the mind is going to create a *lot* of suffering for itself. And the sufferings that come from people outside or situations outside are nothing compared to the suffering that the mind can create for itself—and that's what you've got to work on. That's the real difficulty and that's where the real effort is going to be.

Notice that when the Buddha defines right effort, he focuses on the effort to get rid of unskillful mental qualities and to develop skillful ones in their place. In other words, the effort has to do with the mind. It's not simply a matter of sitting long hours. It's a matter of being consistently on top of your mind to deal with the problems coming up there. That's where the focus should be. Allow the difficulties outside to fall into the background. Accept them as a good sport.

This is where the teaching on kamma is helpful. It reminds you that, okay, there are things you've done in the past, some of which you have no idea what they were because they were done in another lifetime. Even though you've been good this lifetime doesn't mean you've always been good. The fact that you're born as a human being means that you have some bad kamma. Because the human realm is a place where people with mixed kamma go, we're bound to meet up with difficulties.

So see them as training. The pain of having mosquitoes bite you is nothing compared to the pain that's going to happen as you approach death. If you can't put up with little pains now, what will you do with the major pains that come then? In the same way, the pain of having a relationship end is nothing compared to the pain that comes when you're going to have to give up *all* your relationships to *all* things in the human realm. So, on the one hand, look at difficulties as the price that comes from having been born as a human being. On the other hand, remember that

bad things happening to you in the world outside can sometimes actually lead to good results.

Both Ajaan Fuang and Ajaan Suwat told me that some of the really important insights they gained in meditation came when they were ill. In Ajaan Fuang's case it was a persistent migraine that went on and on and on for months. In Ajaan Suwat's case, it was a bout of malaria. As Ajaan Fuang explained, he began to realize that he'd gotten so obsessed with putting an end to the headache that he'd forgotten: What's the duty with regard to pain? It's not to make it go away. It's to locate where the real pain is and to comprehend it: that it's the pain in the clinging, not the pain in the head. It's the pain in the clinging, an activity you're doing. You're not just on the receiving end, you're actually *paining*. Think of it as an active verb, and that's how you begin to comprehend it.

So the pains and the difficulties of the practice are an important part of it. You learn some very important lessons. After all, the first noble truth is the truth of suffering. You're going to have to watch it and understand it before you get past it. That's going to require effort. The idea that you can simply relax, and the unconditioned will come through your relaxation, has *nothing* to do with the path. It's based on a wrong idea about the relationship between the fabricated and the unfabricated. The Canon and the ajaans never used analogies of relaxation to explain the path to awakening. Instead, they use analogies of warriors, of people developing skills: in other words, people who overcome difficulties through using their own powers of analysis together with their persistence.

There's an idea that made its way into Buddhist circles that, after all, because fabrications just create more fabrications, then you can't do anything that would lead to the goal, so you have to just go around doing nothing, not fabricating, and that's how the unfabricated will appear. That's based on a very simplistic notion of causality. The Buddha's notion of causality is a lot more complex. It's like the complexity of non-linear systems, in which simply relaxing into the system doesn't ever get you out of the system. It's by pushing the different elements in the system that you

can actually, by following the internal laws of the system, make it *break down*, and that's how you get out.

So where is the pushing right now? It's in dealing with suffering, dealing with pain. We develop rapture, calm, concentration, and equanimity so that the mind will have an alternative place of well-being to stay to give itself a good foundation, so that it can deal with pain and not feel threatened by it. But it doesn't mean the pain's going to go away.

If you could just go into jhana and wipe out all pain and never have to deal with it again, the Buddha wouldn't have taught discernment the way he did: Use right concentration to comprehend pain, comprehend suffering, realizing where the real pain is. It's not in the physical pain, it's not even in the anguish. It's in the clinging. When the mind is well-settled, it can develop a dispassion for that clinging and then dispassion for the cause.

This is how the path to awakening attacks the problem. Remember, the four noble truths are set out as cause and effect: unskillful causes, bad effect; skillful causes, good effect. But those skillful causes don't *create* the deathless. What they do is to develop dispassion. As you get the mind to settle down, you begin to see, "Oh, this is how I've been creating suffering. This is stupid!" and you let go of what you've been doing. Then, when you're done with all your other cravings, you realize that the only thing still weighing down the mind is the path, so you let that go, too. But you don't let it go until you've developed it. If you let it go before you develop it, it's like that image of the relay chariots that are supposed to go all the way to Savatthi: If you get off the first chariot, saying, "Okay, I'm just going to rest here," without getting onto the next chariots in the relay, you never get to Savatthi.

Or like the image of the cow: You want milk out of the cow, you've been squeezing the horn, and you find you're getting nothing from your efforts. You stop squeezing the horn and you say, "This is much nicer than squeezing the horn. It's nicer for me, nicer for the cow." But the problem is that you still don't get any milk. You've got to develop the path. In this

case, you find out which is the right part of the cow to squeeze, then you squeeze it, and you get the results.

So even though we'd like to relax our way to awakening, it's not going to happen. It's only through effort that suffering is overcome, that suffering is ended. Once we're willing to admit that, then we can get to work.

Wise about Pain

July 19, 2019

Take some good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. Get a sense of where you feel the breathing process in the body. Then, when it's clear, the next question is: Is it comfortable? If it is, you can keep it up. If not, you can change. Try shorter breathing, more shallow, heavier, lighter, faster, slower. Try to see what kind of breathing feels good for the body right now. Think of the breath as a whole-body process. It's not just at your nose; it's not just at your abdomen. The simple fact that the muscles in the body have to expand and contract to let the breath in, let it go out, creates different patterns of energy that flow throughout the whole body. The fact that you're trying to maintain your balance as these muscles expand and contract means that the balancing muscles, say in the back, are going to get involved, too. They, in turn, are connected to the muscles down in the legs. Everything's all connected inside.

So what kind of breathing feels good for the whole body? That's something you can explore. You can spend the whole hour doing just that one exploration. But if you find something that you can stay with and it feels good, stay with that breathing. Try to maintain it as long as it feels good. If it reaches a point where it doesn't feel good anymore, you're free to change again.

Now, you may find, as you're working on whole-body awareness, that you run into pains. In the very beginning, you don't focus on them. Try to focus on the parts of the body that you can make comfortable by the way you breathe.

But the question sometimes comes up: To what extent do you work with pains or try to get rid of them? This is where one of the basic principles of wisdom comes in. As the Buddha said, the sign of wisdom is that you know what duties fall to you, what you're responsible for, and

what you're not responsible for. There are some pains that are caused by past kamma; others are caused by present kamma—in other words, your intentions right now, how you're relating to the body, how you're holding the body, how you're breathing.

The ones that come from past kamma: There's not much you can do about them except to release the tension around them by the way you breathe. The ones that come from present kamma, you can do something with. Change what you're doing: Change the way you breathe; change the way you perceive the breath. When you find a comfortable spot in the body, think of the comfortable energy in that spot spreading through the area where the pain is. Make sure the energy doesn't stop at the pain. Let it go right through it. The pain is not a wall. If you treat it as a wall, you make it more solid than it has to be. Think of the energy going right through.

Sometimes you'll find that by releasing tension in one part of the body, a pain in another part of the body goes away. So make a survey of all the different parts of the body to see where you're holding on to any unnecessary tension—any tension that's not required to keep the body erect—and see what effect that has.

In other words, you learn about which pains you can work with and which ones you can't by experimenting. This was the Buddha's approach to everything he encountered in the course of his quest for awakening. He would try something out. If it didn't work, he would try something else out. He learned that he had to question lots of his assumptions.

You find in meditation circles that there are two extreme assumptions about pain. One is the New Age assumption that every pain is a result of your state of mind right now, so all you have to do is change your state of mind and the pain should go away. The other extreme is the fatalistic Vipassana approach, which is that you simply have to accept the fact that the pain is there and not react. It's a given, based on your past kamma. It's a past fabrication, and you have to patiently wait until it goes away on its own.

Neither of those approaches is in line with what the Buddha said about feelings, which is that they come from past actions and present actions together. There are some cases where, no matter what you do in the present moment, the pain isn't going to go away because it's not caused by what you're doing right now. In other cases, you find that you're living with pains that you don't have to. The way to find out which is which, of course, is by experimenting.

This approach applies to everything inside and out. When you're dealing with other people, one extreme is that you're responsible for their behavior, the other is that you're not responsible for their behavior at all. The middle way is to say, "How about if I change the way I behave to see if that changes the way other people behave around me?" It's going to be trial and error, and a lot of us don't like that, which is why we tend to go for the extremes. But going for extremes doesn't solve the problem. You have to try to be sensitive to what you're doing in order to distinguish, using your own powers of observation, what's skillful and what's not.

This is one of the reasons why we meditate. The three qualities the Buddha says should be brought to mindfulness and concentration practice are mindfulness, alertness, and ardency.

Mindfulness means keeping something in mind. In this case, you keep in mind the fact that you want to stay with the breath. As for alertness, you're alert to what you're doing: Are you staying with the breath? If not, what can you do to get it back? If you are, what can you do to get more sensitive to what's going on? At the same time, be alert to how your mind is having an effect on the breath, how the breath is having an effect on the mind, and how you can improve that effect in both directions. The desire to improve it: That's ardency. You really want to do this well.

Now, notice the focus of alertness here. You're alert to what you're *doing* in the present moment. You're not just aware of what's going on in the present willy-nilly—the sound of the crickets, the sound of the helicopters. You're not simply accepting what's here as a given, and at the same time you're not holding yourself responsible for everything that's

coming in right now. You're responsible for some things you're experiencing and not others. Alertness is there to focus on what you are responsible for. There's a boundary between what you are and are not responsible for, what you do and don't have to explore, which is why knowing what you're responsible for and what you're not responsible for is a sign of wisdom.

This is how we gain wisdom, by experimenting. We listen to what the Buddha has to say and we think about it, because he gives us some pointers on where to look and where not to look, so that we can save some time. But what we'll actually see, and how sensitive we'll be to what we are and are not responsible for: That's nothing the Buddha can do for us. That's something we have to do ourselves.

So, adopt this principle that you're going to learn through experimentation, not by holding to a particular extreme view and not by following a rote method. We have the idea somehow that wisdom lies in short, insightful statements that you can put in a book: the wise sayings of so-and-so. Well, the sayings may be wise, but your own wisdom comes from knowing when each saying is applicable and when it's not. Ajaan Lee used to say that this is a good test for any insight that comes up in the course of the meditation: The first question is, "Is it applicable now?" If it's not, you put it aside. If it is applicable, you put it to use to test it. And the second question is, "To what extent is this true? To what extent is its opposite true?"

You begin to learn that your insights have their boundaries, their limitations. When you know their limitations, you can use them wisely. You can use them when they're appropriate; you can put them aside when they're not. And you develop a sensitivity to enable you to tell *when* things are appropriate and when they're not. That sensitivity is the wisdom, the discernment, that we're aiming at. It's wisdom in action—that, and the sensitivity that allows you to deal with situations as they come up without having to refer back to books all the time. When you meditate, a lot of

things coming up are not in the books. You need to have the attitude that "I'll test them."

This is the attitude that the Buddha taught to the Kalamas. They had heard so many different teachings that they had no idea who was right and who was wrong. And the Buddha basically said, "Ask yourself: 'If I put this particular teaching into practice, what would it lead to? If I put its opposite into practice, what would it lead to? Which one gives the better results?'" That's the basic principle of wisdom.

Learn how to develop it in yourself and put aside the extremes that would either say that you can't change your pains or that you're totally responsible for them. Or on an external level, that you can't change other people's behavior or that you're totally responsible for it. Try to find the middle line, both inside and out. That's how you stay on the path—and how your sensitivity develops so that you can rely on it more and more.

Let Pleasure & Pain Fall Off the Plow

June 1, 2018

Ordinarily, the mind goes bouncing back and forth between pain and sensual pleasure. Even though we may realize that sensual pleasures have their drawbacks, we keep going back, going back anyhow because we don't see any other alternative to pain. When the Buddha taught what he called the middle way, it was to provide the alternative.

Part of the middle way is right concentration. It involves a strong sense of pleasure, but it's a different kind of pleasure. It's called the pleasure of form. Sensual pleasures come from sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations. The pleasure of form is more the pleasure that comes when the body, as felt from within, feels good regardless of what it's touching outside. The various elements and various functions in the body seem to be working in harmony. When we get the mind in right concentration, that's what we're trying to induce: a sense that all the energies in the body are working together; the breath is flowing smoothly. If it's not flowing smoothly yet, you work on it. That's what directed thought and evaluation are for.

Directed thought is when you focus your thoughts on staying with the breath. Evaluation is asking yourself, "Does this feel good? If it feels good, how do I keep it up? If it doesn't feel good, what do I change?" That's the kind of thinking that enables the mind to settle into this sense of the body felt from within without pushing the energies out of balance.

But even here you have to be careful, because it's very easy, once the breath gets comfortable, to forget about the breath and go for the pleasure. That turns into what Ajaan Lee would call delusion concentration, where you're quiet and still but not really sure where you are. Or, even worse, it just turns into drowsiness. You just start falling asleep because you've forgotten your work, which was the directed thought and evaluation: to

make sure that the breath stays right, which is something you can't really let go of until everything is well balanced in the body, your awareness fills the body, the breath energy fills the body, and the mind feels solidly there.

So, in getting the mind to settle down, we're dealing both with pleasure and pain as felt from within. And we have to learn how not to be overcome by either of them. The Buddha calls this being developed in body and developed in mind. Developed in body doesn't mean you go out and you exercise a lot. It means that your mind isn't easily overcome by the pleasure. Developed in mind means that the mind is not easily overcome by pain. This requires that when you encounter pains in the meditation, you have to learn how not to be knocked off course by them. Try to breathe through them.

But remember the Buddha's instructions with regard to pain. The duty is not to make it go away. The duty is to comprehend it: in particular, to comprehend the mind's relationship to the pain. So there'll be a back and forth as the mind begins to settle down and encounters some pain and works with it, either breathing through it or just not focusing on that part of the body. Tell it, if the pain wants to be in the knee, "You can have the knee." You're not going to move in with it. That enables the mind to settle down even more. Then you can see more clearly how the mind is reacting to the pain or getting involved in the pain.

As for the pleasure, you're going to have to remind yourself, "Stay with the breath. Stay with the body." The pleasure is not the topic of the concentration. The pleasure is one of the by-products. It'll do its work perfectly well without your wallowing in it. So you have to learn how to regard the pleasure as no big deal. It's there and it's going to be helpful. You can learn how to use it as a tool. You don't make it the purpose of the meditation. And you have to remind yourself that as long as the mind can be overcome by pleasure, it's going to be overcome by pain, because they both come from the same place.

If you hold on to those places—in other words, what the Buddha called the five aggregates: the form of your body as you feel it within;

feelings; perceptions; mental fabrications, where you put thoughts together; and consciousness, your awareness at the senses, including the sense of the mind: If you hold on to these places, you'll find that they can give pleasure and they can give pain. Seeing that they give pleasure, we hold on to them. They're activities we like to engage in. In particular, we like to fantasize around our perceptions of something being entertaining or beautiful. Attractive. Interesting. These perceptions form the nucleus around which we start fabricating our thoughts. Then there's a feeling of the pleasure that comes with those thoughts. But the thoughts can turn on you. They can lead to other thoughts that give pain. They're all part of the same process.

So, if you hold on to these processes because of the pleasure they can give you, when they change, you find yourself holding on to pain. Even though nobody wants it, we hold on to it because we're so used to holding on to these activities. If you don't want to be overcome by the pain that comes from these activities, you have to learn how not to be overcome by the pleasure that comes from them, too.

As we get the mind settled in concentration, we're engaging in these activities. We're trying to get a sense of inhabiting the form of our body from within in a way that gives rise to a non-sensual feeling of pleasure. And there's a perception that we're holding here: the perception of how the breath runs in the body. There's the fabrication of directed thought and evaluation as you're dealing with the task of getting the mind to settle into the body well, so that the mind feels snug with the body and the body feels snug with the mind. Then there's consciousness, the awareness of all these things.

We're engaging in these activities, but we have to be careful not to focus on the pleasure that comes from them. We use the pleasure, we use these activities as tools. We have to stay focused on what we're trying to do here, what the task at hand is, because we're aiming at a well-being that goes beyond these activities. To do that, the mind has to be, as I said, well developed, just as the body has to be developed in the sense of not being

overcome by pleasure. So we engage in these activities but we let the pleasure fall off us. We don't try to gather it up.

Ajaan Lee's image is plowing a field. As the dirt falls off the plow, you stick it in a bag. If you keep doing that, you're going to get weighed down. That's how we tend to deal with these activities. We stick our pleasure in the bag. We stick our pain in the bag. We think about how long the pain has been there. We think about how much longer it's going to be there, especially if we're going to sit for an hour. All of a sudden, the whole hour becomes an hour of pain. Even though it's only one moment that you're feeling the pain, you've already sketched out the rest of the hour as being a painful hour. And however long the pain's been there in the past, you carry that around in your bag as well. No wonder you get weighed down. It's because we have that bag in which we want to collect pleasure. Whatever comes off the plow, we stick it in the bag. Well, "whatever" sometimes turns out to be pain.

You have to learn how to let the soil fall off the plow by not gathering it up. The pleasures are there, but you don't gather them up. The pain may be there, but you don't gather it up. This way, the mind can stand apart from the pleasure and pain.

The pleasure of jhana is your alternative to going back and forth between indulgence in pleasure and indulgence in sensuality. Even here, though, you have to be careful about how you indulge in the pleasure that provides you with the alternative. You give rise to it. You nurture it. You take care of it. But you let it fall off the plow. You don't put it in a bag. Whatever pains come up, you let them fall off. In training the mind in this way, you'll ultimately find something that's even better. But it requires that you be very precise in how you relate to pleasure and pain so that neither of them can take charge of the mind.

The Dead Snake Around Your Neck

June 23, 2018

We've talked a lot in the past about how the three types of fabrication —bodily, verbal, and mental—play a role in shaping our experience. Recently, though, I read a weird piece by a scholar saying that these three kinds of fabrication apply only to meditation, as if they didn't apply to the rest of your life. But of course, the mind that's meditating is the same mind that goes out and deals with the world. And it's precisely because these same processes shape our experience in the ordinary, everyday world as they do in meditation that the meditation is really a good tool for getting to understand how your mind creates suffering. That's what the four noble truths are all about.

It's not that life is suffering. It's that we create suffering in our clinging. The source of the suffering is not outside. It's what we do as we approach experience, as we create our experience out of the raw materials that come from our past kamma and then cling to it. This applies to experience both in meditation and out, so, as you're getting to know the mind in meditation, you're also getting to know the mind in everyday life.

As you put concentration together, start with the breath. Try to breathe in a way that feels good and nourishing: restful if you're feeling tense, energizing if you're feeling tired.

Then talk to yourself. That's what verbal fabrication is. Talk to yourself about how the breath is doing, what you might do to make it better and, when it's pleasant, what you might do to let that sensation of pleasant breathing spread around. Talk to yourself also about what perceptions to hold in mind as you do this.

The perceptions and feelings are mental fabrications. Perceptions are the labels you apply to things or the images you hold in mind. What kind of image of the breath is helpful for concentration? Think of the breath as

energy flowing through the body. It can flow through the nerves and blood vessels. You might try visualizing an image of the nerves or of your blood vessels and the whole circulatory system, spreading out to the little pores of the skin, with the breath energy suffusing that whole intricate system.

Then there are feelings. You've got a feeling that's easeful. Well, what do you do with it? Do something with it that makes it nice to stay here. As the sense of breath flows through the body, think of the sense of ease flowing together with it. Think of your awareness extending out through the whole body, covering the whole range of the breath and the feeling. That's how you put concentration together.

Then, whatever comes up, you can talk to yourself about how to deal with your distractions. With some distractions, all you have to do is note them and you can go back to the breath. No big deal. Those are the distractions without much of a hook. They just seem to be churned up randomly. But there are others that have hooks and can be pretty tenacious. Those are the cases where you have to look at the drawbacks of that kind of thinking.

Here the Buddha gives you another mental fabrication, a perception, to hold in mind: that you've got the carcass of a dead snake or a dead dog around your neck and you want to get rid of it. Learn to look at your distracting thoughts like dead dogs or dead snakes hanging around your neck. Don't let yourself see them as interesting or enticing or worth thinking about. When you do that, the contemplation of the drawbacks will have a chance to work.

You also have to see the allure of the distractions. Why do you like to go for them to begin with? Sometimes you don't see the allure until you tell yourself, "I'm just not going to think that thought." The mind will then come up with a reason for wanting to think it. Sometimes it'll be a verbal fabrication; sometimes, a mental fabrication. This is how the mind creates distractions to begin with. This is how it operates as you go through the world. You're beginning to see that. And the Buddha's giving you new tools to use against that.

This is why there are so many analogies in the Canon: new ways of perceiving, or different ways of perceiving from what you ordinarily do. Most of us don't think of lustful thoughts as a dead snake or a dead dog, but that's a good image to hold in mind not only with thoughts of lust, but also with thoughts of anger or anxiety. Perceive them as something disgusting that you really do want to get rid of.

Once you can get your mind on the side of the Dhamma in this way, that's half the battle right there. Because there's a large part of the mind that says, "I don't want to give up my lust or my anger or whatever. These have been my defenses. These have been my ways of finding entertainment in the past." Again, more verbal fabrication, so you need verbal fabrication to fight it. Or thoughts just seem to be running random and unstoppable. In that case, you can tell yourself, "Okay, I'll just let them be there, but I'm not going to get involved."

Here the image is of a person closing his eyes. The distractions are there, but you don't have to look at them. You look away. You've got the breath. Thoughts don't destroy the breath. And they're not why you're here to begin with. Focus in on the breath and, for the time being, let the thoughts have whatever corner of the mind they're going to occupy.

What you're learning is how to use these processes of bodily, verbal, and mental fabrication to fight your old ways of using bodily, verbal, and mental fabrication. You may notice that when you're thinking about something, there's going to be tension in part of the body. Well, breathe through that. You can use your bodily fabrication there. There are lots of ways that you can think to yourself, talk to yourself, or bring to mind images to counteract the ones you've been hanging around with all along —because these forms of fabrication are all kamma.

That was another weird point in that scholar's article: He talked about how fabrication in the five aggregates—which he claimed was something different from the three types of fabrication—is not really karmic. It's just the result of old kamma, but doesn't create any new kamma. But if it's not karmic, what are you doing? The way you look at things, the way you think

about things, is going to incline your mind in their direction. If you have old ways of looking and don't change them, your mind gets stuck in big ruts. Of course it's going to have karmic consequences.

So, you've got this power here: the power of choice, the power of intentional action. As we're meditating, we're learning how to use this power well, learning how to divide things up so that we can get a handle on what the mind is doing. When you get the mind in a state of concentration like this, you can fight off the distractions. You begin to see that you're engaging in these kinds of fabrication all the time.

Emotions are a big example of that. Different emotions will employ different ways of breathing along with different ways of talking to yourself. You can breathe in a way that exacerbates anger, or you can breathe in a way that stills it. You can talk to yourself in a way that excites anger, but you can also talk to yourself in a way defuses it. The same holds true with your perceptions.

All too often, we're not just waiting for something outside to happen before we suddenly think thoughts of anger. Actually, we're often out there looking for something to get angry about—when, for example, we feel that anger is our protection, or that we can ward off danger by finding fault with things before they can do us harm. There are a lot of ways we talk ourselves into wanting to be angry or wanting to be lustful. We've got to learn how to look at these emotions in a different way, use different images in the mind, use different ways of talking to ourselves, to counteract our old images and inner conversations.

So as you're getting the mind into concentration, you're not just resting. You're getting hands-on experience in how you shape a state of mind. Then you can use that same knowledge to look at the other states of mind: emotions and other distractions, both while you meditate and as you go through the day.

In particular, look at the way the mind talks to itself. There's one kind of clinging the Buddha calls clinging to habits and practices. Many people interpret that simply as a matter of holding on to rules: petty rules and

petty rituals. But it's not just that. It's your idea that "I've got to think in this way or I've got to act in this way, and if I don't do that, something really bad is going to happen," even though those ideas about how you have to think and act are actually causing you trouble. There's a sense of "ought" in a lot of our clinging. It's not just pure lust or pure desire. Sometimes we tell ourselves, "This is the way it's got to be." Then we get ourselves into trouble and wonder why we're suffering. That's verbal fabrication.

So, learn how to question these things. And you do that first by mastering an alternative skill, using fabrications as you meditate in a skillful way. Once you know how to fabricate in a skillful way, why go back to your old ways? What keeps pulling you back? The fact that you've got this alternative skill gives you a perspective you wouldn't have acquired otherwise. It also gives you a good place to stand as you're taking apart your old habits. So, see the importance of fabricating a state of concentration and maintaining it.

Again, the issue of talking to yourself is going to be important. Sometimes you tell yourself, "My mind is in concentration and nothing is happening. What can I make happen?" An important part of the concentration is learning to be patient when things don't seem to be happening. It's not the case that you get the mind into concentration and immediately move on to the next stage. Sometimes you have to stay, stay, stay right here, because things in the mind don't necessarily show themselves right away. You have to learn how to content yourself. See the concentration as a skill that you're willing to take time to develop. And take some pride in your workmanship.

It's like sharpening a knife. When I was in Thailand, we didn't have electric knife sharpeners where you can go zip, zip, and the knife is sharp. They had a big stone and some water. That was it. You had to rub the knife, usually a machete, against the stone, and wet the stone every now and then to make sure it didn't dry out. And you had to talk to yourself while you were doing this, so that you maintained your alertness and didn't get

bored. After all, when you're doing something like that, you don't want to sharpen some parts of the blade too much, because that would spoil the blade. There has to be an evenness to your effort, a consistency. You have to learn how to give yourself pep talks all along the way. Otherwise, as your mind wanders off someplace else, you find you've ruined the blade. So, you stay on top of things and then you talk to yourself just enough to keep yourself content with staying on top of things right there. It'll take a while. But if you stick with it, you get a good, sharp blade.

The same with concentration: Sometimes you sit here and ask yourself, "Where's the entertainment? Where are the lights? Where are the cameras? Where's the action?" You have to tell yourself, "Nope, this is it." After all, where was the Buddha on the night of his awakening? His mind was in the fourth jhana: the mind right there at the breath, very quiet. Yet he was able to see what was going on in his mind, going on in his breath, in a way that led to awakening. So, once the mind settles down, you're at the right spot. The question is simply learning how to look at this spot with more care from the right angle.

In the beginning stages, it's a matter of learning how to be content just being here. This requires more verbal fabrication, mental fabrication, and bodily fabrication that not only get you into concentration but also keep you here. You learn how to keep yourself happy to be here, to fight off thoughts that say, "This is boring." Again, what is that thought? It's a verbal fabrication. Well, you can also use other verbal fabrications that say, "Who cares of it's boring? I'm here doing something I haven't done before, making the mind really consistent in its concentration. I haven't yet seen the full potential of these states, so I'm going to stick with it until I do." As long as you're going to fabricate your experience, you might as well do it well. When you really learn how to do it well, that's how you learn how not to fabricate anything at all. That's a stage that comes with practice.

But where's the practice going to happen? It's going to happen right here: as you're fabricating your state of concentration, as you're breathing, as you're talking to yourself, as you're using different perceptions and

making use of your feelings of pleasure here. It's in doing these things that you gain your insight.

Dogen has a nice passage where he says that the duty with regard to the third noble truth is to realize it, the duty with regard to the fourth noble truth is to develop it, and those two duties are basically the same thing. As you're developing the path, the goal appears. He's not saying that the path is the goal. He's saying that the process of paying full attention to developing the path is where you're going to realize the goal, the cessation of suffering. It's all right here. It's just a question of learning how to be content to stay right here and to be stable enough right here so that you can really see what's happening right here.

So. You're at the right spot. Just learn how to fabricate it well.

Worries & Regrets

June 22, 2018

By the time I went to stay with him, Ajaan Fuang very rarely accepted invitations to meals outside of the monastery. When he did, he asked that he not be asked to chant. He said he'd be happy to discuss the Dhamma, but he didn't want to give house-blessings. That was for us younger monks.

There was one time when one of his students invited him to her home, and I went along. The student's sister—who'd been meditating with another teacher—had some meditation questions. She started out by saying, "The whole purpose of meditation is to make your mind empty, right?" And Ajaan Fuang said, "No. If you leave your mind empty, it's like leaving the door to your home open. Anyone can come in."

We've all noticed this. You try to settle down with the breath and be quiet and all of a sudden thoughts of the past, thoughts of the future, things you regret about the past, things you're worried about in the future come barging in. Simply doing the concentration is often not enough to keep them at bay. Sometimes you *can* just tell yourself, "I'm not going to go there," and the mind obeys. One good trick is, as soon as a thought comes in and starts speaking to you, just refuse to understand the language. Try to cut the connections between the words and the mind so that they become gibberish. Scramble the signal.

But there are other times when that's not enough. That's when you have to develop the right attitude toward the topic that's distracting you. The Buddha didn't teach just a meditation technique. He also taught attitudes to go along with the technique for training the mind: reasons for training the mind, ways to think so that unskillful thoughts don't come in and take over. In this way, you're not leaving the mind empty. You're giving it work to do.

One important thing to think about is the principle of kamma, along with the immensity of rebirth. We sometimes think about things in this lifetime that we regret. The Buddha would have you cast your mind away from the present moment for the time being and just think about how far back into the past we've been trying to find happiness: struggling along, dying and being reborn again, struggling some more, dying and being reborn again. And the whole process is run by craving and clinging. "Clinging" in Pali, *upadana*, can also mean feeding. We're feeding off of one another in an endless process of feeding, feeding, and feeding, getting a little bit of satisfaction and then losing it and having to feed some more. Just think about how long this has been going on, and how many stupid things you've done in the course of all that time. There have been so many that they become meaningless. And that's the whole point: You want to make it meaningless, so that the individual instances don't have a big impact on the mind.

Then you come back to the present, "See, here I'm doing something good with my time right now." This is the area in which you can be responsible. You're not responsible for going back and changing things in the past. As the Buddha said, no matter how much you may regret what you've done in the past, you can't go back and change it. But you *can* make up your mind right now that if you recognize you've made a mistake, you can just tell yourself, "I don't want to make that mistake again." That's the most that can be asked of a human being.

We're not expected to be perfect when we come here. The Buddha doesn't say that your virtue has to be perfect before you can sit down and meditate. We're all coming from ignorance, we're all coming from a lot of wrong ideas and wrong actions in the past. Now we're trying to straighten the mind out, and that's the whole point: that we *can* straighten it out. As the Buddha said, if we couldn't abandon unskillful qualities and unskillful actions, he wouldn't have taught us to do so. If we couldn't develop skillful ones in their place, he wouldn't have taught us to do so, either. It's because

we can make these changes: That's why we're practicing. That's why he taught.

In addition to recognizing your mistakes, try to develop goodwill. Goodwill is your protection for the future, in the sense that the things you really regret most are when you did something out of ill will, out of a desire to harm, and then the harm actually came about. It suddenly hits you that you really shouldn't have done that, that you should have known better. That's the kind of regret that hurts and festers the most. The mistakes you make out of goodwill are a lot easier to deal with. You didn't know, you were ignorant, but there was nothing bad in your intention. That kind of mistake is a lot easier to live with.

That's why the Buddha encouraged his son, "Before you act, ask yourself, 'Is this action going to harm anybody?' If you see that it's going to harm somebody, you just don't do it. If you don't foresee any harm, go ahead and do it. While you're doing it, you check, 'Is there any unexpected harm coming up?' If there is, you stop." Because you have to remember the principle of kamma: Some actions take a while to show their results, and other actions show their results immediately—in fact, they actually shape the present moment. If you see any harm coming up, you have the ability to stop. If you don't see any harm, you continue with what you're doing.

When you're done, you look at the long-term results. If you see that harm *was* done, then you can talk it over with someone more advanced on the path to get that person's advice. Learn how not to be too ashamed to admit your mistakes. Because if you can't admit your mistakes to other people, after a while you start getting so that you can't admit them to yourself—and then you can't learn. What the Buddha is teaching here is that old principle of learning from your mistakes, but he shows how to do it so that the mistakes don't leave too big a scar. Because as I said, you start out with the intention not to harm. That protects you from having to deal with a lot of really bad regret on into the future.

Sometimes, of course, as the mind gets open and relaxed here in the present moment, thoughts of the future come in: things you're worried

about. You have to remind yourself that you don't really know what's going to happen in the future, but you *do* know that you're here meditating right now, and the best way you can prepare for unknowns is to develop as much mindfulness and alertness and discernment as you can—and that's what you're doing. The best way to prepare for the future, the best way to deal with thoughts that come up and say, "How is this going to be? How is that going to be? I don't know if I can handle this," is simply to remind yourself, "If I'm more mindful and alert, I'll be able to deal with situations as they arise." There are always going to be unexpected things arising, and this is how you prepare for the unexpected: by developing mindfulness and alertness around the breath right now.

In both cases, you're thinking about the past and thinking about the future, but if you think about them in the right way, that pulls you back to the present moment to develop the qualities you know you'll need so that you don't have to repeat your past mistakes and you'll be ready for unexpected things as they come.

So, as you meditate, it's not just a matter of emptying the mind in the present moment. You give it work to do. You've got to change your attitudes. You can't tell the mind, "Okay, just do this technique and you'll be okay." You need to have the right understanding behind it.

This is why the Buddha put right view at the beginning of the path. Of course, there are ways in which he describes the progress along the path in which discernment comes last. But a certain amount of discernment, a certain amount of understanding, has to be there at the beginning. You start with right view. It's not right knowledge—it's not going to be knowledge until the end of the path—but you can tell yourself, "These are the opinions I need to adopt as my working hypotheses." Then you have to keep teaching the mind those opinions, because it has a lot of old unskillful opinions still sloshing around inside. You can't hope that a technique of noting or a technique of… whatever, is going to take care of all those problems.

Right understanding has to go with this, to motivate you to practice and to keep your practice on course, and also to deal with the distractions that come up, no matter which direction they pull you, past or future. Sometimes you have to cut them a little slack. In other words, think about the past a little bit, but think about it in a way that's going to bring you back to the present moment. The same with the future: Think about the future a little bit and then remind yourself that the best preparation for the future is to meditate right now. That focuses you back on the present.

As for the thoughts that come up after that, learn how to chop them up. As you breathe in, think of the breath scattering the thoughts. Or you can think of the breath as a big broom sweeping through the body, sweeping through the mind, sweeping those thoughts away. That way, you can settle down and actually strengthen the mind here in the present moment, so that it's strong enough to maintain those right views, maintain the right perspective.

This is how discernment and your concentration go together and help each other along. All too often you hear the question, "How much concentration do I need before I can practice insight?" That's not a useful way to think. The two have to go together. The Buddha never taught them as totally separate practices. Ideally, they should go together, insight and concentration. Your insight develops your concentration; your concentration develops your insight. Remember that you need both, so that the concentration can strengthen the insight and the insight can help protect the concentration. It's when the path has all its factors functioning together that it can really do its work.

Unchanged by Loss

September 18, 2018

One of the passages we often chant together is, "I will grow different, separate from all that is dear and appealing to me." It's a reflection on separation, inconstancy, but not just inconstancy outside. It also covers inconstancy inside. Notice that it starts, "*I* will grow different." This is something we have to watch out for, the fact that the mind is so changeable. When things that we've been dependent on, things that we're attached to, suddenly stop, when conditions change, how much are *we* going to change? Do we have the stability inside that even when things start falling apart—outside or in—our virtue doesn't fall apart, our concentration, discernment—the things that are really important—stay solid?

In the beginning, we have to go on conviction that what the Buddha said is true: that if you lose your wealth, if you lose your health, even if you lose your relatives, it's not that serious a loss. The serious loss is when you lose your virtue or your right view. The things of the world, the people of the world, are all subject to aging, illness, and death. These losses will happen no matter what you do. But you can keep yourself from losing your virtue or right view.

There's that passage where King Pasenadi has come to see the Buddha and, as he's talking with the Buddha, one of his men comes up and whispers into his ear that Queen Mallika has died. Queen Mallika was his favorite queen. He breaks down and cries. The Buddha's first comment is, "When has it ever been the case that something that was born would not age, grow ill, and die?" The fact that these things are universal is actually comforting. It's not just your individual pain, your individual loss. You're not being singled out for unfair suffering. Everybody suffers this. Then the Buddha tells the king that we should express our grief to whatever extent

we find useful but then we have to realize that we've got to get on with life. There's work to be done both outside and especially inside. As long as grief is in charge, it can very easily cause you to do things that would go against the precepts, or you might even change your views.

But if you have something solid inside, then you're more resistant. And that solidity, as I said, starts with conviction that what the Buddha said is true: Our only real possessions are our actions, so we have to be very careful with them. Right view reminds us that our actions are important, and virtue gives us some guidance as to what's skillful and what's not.

The precepts are there as shortcut guides, quick notes in the mind—no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no intoxicants, ever—because they're most needed when the mind is overcome with emotion, and when the mind is overcome by emotion, it's very easy to forget. If the precepts were complicated, with lots of exceptions, the mind would certainly find a way to take advantage of the exceptions. When you're in shock, you need something that's quick and short to remind you that—no matter what—you're not going to do *x*.

But just having conviction is not enough. You've got to get to work. And it's interesting that those two qualities that the Buddha said are most important to protect—your virtue and your right view—are also the qualities he said form the basis for right mindfulness. Right mindfulness, of course, is a series of instructions on how to get the mind into right concentration. You need something inside that's solid so that you're not tempted to give up on your virtue, give up on your right view when things outside suddenly change, and conditions are a lot less comfortable than they were. So we work on the concentration, work on getting the mind to settle in.

We've got to be friends with our breath. This friendship is something that can outlast all the other friendships outside. If you have trouble being friends with your breath, you've got to ask why. What is it about the breath that's so hard to stay with? Sometimes a lot of associations we have inside the body—there's a pain from this event and a memory from that—seem

to be buried in the energy body that we're working with as we play with the breath.

This is where you have to use some analogies to help. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha gives so many analogies. They're perceptions you can use to start shaping your mind in a new way. He says to make your mind like earth. People throw nice things on the earth, people throw disgusting things on the earth, but the earth doesn't react. Hold that image in mind, and remind yourself that whatever comes your way, you can stand it.

Aging comes, you can stand it. Illness comes, you can stand it. Even when death comes, the Buddha says you can stand it. You're going to be losing all kinds of things but you can remind yourself there's an awareness in here that's going to keep going. It's not going to be destroyed. The more solid it is, the more confident it is, the more likely it is to go to a good place.

That perception helps you stick with that conviction. And strengthened conviction makes it easier and easier to get the mind into concentration. It helps you develop that earth-like quality of being solid in the mind, so that whatever comes up as you work through energy knots in the body, you're not going to be knocked around by it. So, this principle of trying to make sure that you don't change for the worse when outside conditions change for the worse also means that there has to be a part of the mind that doesn't change when inside conditions change or start revealing themselves.

You begin to realize that the changes outside are not nearly as worrisome as the changes inside. One change inside, when the mind suddenly changes direction and gives up on the practice: That's the biggest thing to fear. That's the kind of change you've got to watch out for.

Some people say that the Buddha teaches us to embrace change, but that's not the case. Some changes are good. When you change for the better, that's certainly fine. But you want to have something inside the mind that doesn't change for the worse when outside things change for the

worse, and this is what we're working on as we practice. So, look for that "something inside." It's going to be very close to the breath, which is one of the reasons why you work with the breath as much as you can. Or, if you have trouble working with the breath, try to develop qualities of mind through other meditation topics that will give you some of that solidity.

Think of all the topics the Buddha taught to Rahula, one of them being the reflection on keeping your mind like earth. Other topics include the brahmaviharas: spreading goodwill for all the people who've harmed you, spreading goodwill for all the people you've harmed, spreading goodwill for yourself; reflecting on impermanence, the inconstancy of things; reflecting on not-self—all of the things inside and out that are beyond your control.

Then, as the mind begins to accept these truths, it develops a greater solidity inside. At the same time, when other issues come up to distract you, you have these quick ways of dealing with them. The face of someone who's harmed you comes up in the meditation? Spread goodwill. Try to make it quick so that you can get back to the breath quickly. The thought of someone you've lost or some *thing* that you've lost? Reflect on impermanence and inconstancy: These things are all *made* to be lost.

Think of Ajaan Chah's analogy: to think of the cup as already broken. This doesn't mean that you treat it casually. You actually take very good care of it. But part of the mind has to be prepared that someday it's going to break. The Buddha compares people to pots. As he says, all pots get broken eventually. Whether it takes a long or a short time, they're all heading to be broken. In the same way, people are all headed to being broken. The world is broken. It's never going to be perfect. If you can accept that, then you can live with it, and do what you can to make it a little bit better.

But particularly, do what you can to make yourself better, make yourself more reliable, so that the changes of the world don't lead to changes inside, at least not to the deterioration of anything good inside. When you can maintain this kind of solidity, then change doesn't hold any

fear, loss doesn't hold any fear, because you've already gathered your good things inside where they're safe.

Angry

August 21, 2018

In the forest tradition, it's rare that someone would practice goodwill as a basic practice. As Ajaan Mun said, you have to focus on the body as your basic practice and deal with the mind's issues around the body if you're going to get really far in the practice. But he would also recommend that people develop goodwill as a framework practice. In other words, first thing in the morning, spread goodwill to all beings; last thing at night, goodwill to all beings. That frames the day to remind you why you're practicing.

The fact that you want happiness is something taken for granted. The fact that you want a happiness that doesn't harm anybody is an attitude that has to be cultivated. So, as you think about what you're going to do and say and think in the course of the day, have in the back of your mind that "I don't want anybody to be harmed." That gives a structure to your practice.

Then, within that context, you do the rest of the practice. You're generous. You observe the precepts. You try to train the mind to get rid of its greed, aversion, and delusion, because this practice is a way of showing goodwill to yourself and all other living beings. These are ways of finding happiness that harm no one.

The problem is that even within the framework, no matter how much you do goodwill practice, there are times when anger comes up. Now, anger is different from ill will. Ill will is wishing to see someone suffer. Anger is simply aversion. It can come in many levels of strength.

Even though you set your mind on goodwill, you find it slipping back. So you have to look at why. Part of it, of course, is that we're very good at anger. It comes very easily to us. It can go from zero to outrage in one sixtieth of a second. But you have to remember that it's something

fabricated. It's a habit you've developed. I remember watching my niece, Gigi, grow up. For a long time, she was very docile and reasonable. Then one day she visited another family. One of the kids in the family threw a tantrum. And two days later, Gigi threw her own tantrum. She'd gotten the idea from the example she saw.

The thing is, if you live with people who are easily angered, it's very easy to pick up their habits. It's very easy to think that if you don't show your anger, people are going to push you around. So your way of freeing yourself from what you don't like is to get angry. That's a perception you have to look into, because if you allow your anger to take over, there are a lot of things you don't see. You can do a lot of damage to yourself and other people.

Here it's good to remember the Buddha's way of analyzing emotions into those three kinds of fabrication: bodily fabrication, the way you breathe; verbal fabrication, directed thought and evaluation, which means the way you talk to yourself about things; and then mental fabrication, feelings and perceptions.

When you fabricate anger, one, you breathe in a certain way that gets the breath all constricted. Two, you talk to yourself about why it's good to get angry and why that particular person deserves your anger and why it's perfectly okay to think those thoughts and act on them. Then, three, there are perceptions. What images are you holding in mind? One might be that if you don't show your anger, you're going to be victimized. Another might be that in passing judgment on others, you're very far away from them, way above them, so you won't be affected by your judgment. As for feelings, the way you breathe, even though you may not consciously think of it, aggravates a sense of having something oppressive inside you that you've got to get out. Part of you will say, "Well, the only way of getting it out is either to express the anger or to bottle it up and get cancer." So you just let it out into the world.

The Buddha offers alternative ways of fabricating these things. But first you need to have the motivation to follow his alternative. This is what

goodwill does: It reminds you that, for the sake of your own true happiness and the happiness of others, you've got to get some control over your anger.

So look at the way you breathe. Can you breathe in a calm way even though other people are doing outrageous things? Remind yourself that, at the very least, if you can breathe more calmly, you can think more calmly. And calm thinking doesn't mean not caring. It means looking at the situation as it really is rather than through the red eyes of anger. Wherever you see that you've built up feelings of tension or tightness in the body through the way you've been breathing, breathe through them. That gives you the alternative to getting it out by expressing the anger or bottling it up.

Here's a third way of dealing with it. You dissolve it. You dissolve those feelings in the body. Then you look at the way you think about things. Goodwill is not the only antidote to anger. You can try *samvega,* thinking about how petty a lot of the issues are that we get angry about. Someday we're all going to be in our graves and today's issues won't matter, yet here we are creating kamma with one another and it just drags us down.

Think of the Buddha's image of human beings as fish in a dwindling pond. The water's drying up, and the fish are struggling over that last little patch of water. But it doesn't really matter who wins. They're all going to die. When you think about that, it gives you a sense of real compassion for those poor fish and then compassion for the people who are struggling and struggling and struggling, trying to snatch happiness away from others, and they're going to suffer as a result.

As the Buddha said, if you find someone with no good qualities that you can focus on to help alleviate your anger, then you've got to have compassion for that person. He's really digging himself into a hole. And remind yourself that by expressing your anger you're not necessarily getting out of a bad situation. All too often, you're making it worse.

I think I've told the story of my grandfather teaching my older brother how to box before he entered first grade. My grandfather didn't like the

names my mother gave to her sons. He was a farm boy and we were farm boys, but my mother gave us fancy names. My brother's name was Galen, and my grandfather could think of all kinds of ways that the other kids would make fun of that. He had been a boxer when he was younger, so he taught Galen a few moves, and they tried sparring a little bit. As he started getting more aggressive, Galen lost it. He started flailing. Grandpa put his hand on Galen's head to stop him and said, "Look, when you get angry like that, you've got to grow cold. Then you can punch the other guy. If you just give in to your anger, you flail around and open yourself up to all kinds of problems." So hold that image in mind.

The Buddha's not saying that when you kill your anger you should also kill your desire to improve things in the world. That's not the case. It's just that when you can get past your anger, then you can see things more clearly. So change the story line. And change the perceptions: in particular, the perception that anger is what frees you. Anger is actually what ties you down and skews your perceptions. All this falls under the principle that we tend to fabricate our experience of the world—including our emotions—out of ignorance. As a result, we suffer.

The problem with anger is that it blames that sense of suffering on somebody else. You're already making yourself suffer and then on top of that, someone does something you don't like. You feel the suffering inside, you attribute it to what they're doing, and that just compounds things. So you've got to turn around and look: How are you fabricating your present experience? Do it with knowledge and it becomes part of the path.

Look at the Buddha's teachings on breath meditation. In the first tetrad, you get sensitive to the breath and then you get sensitive to what he calls bodily fabrication, i.e., the impact that the breath has on the body and then, through the body, how it has an impact on the mind. You can calm that. You let the breath fill the body, you let your awareness fill the body, and then you calm the effect of the breath. In the second tetrad, you get sensitive to ways of breathing that give rise to pleasure and rapture, and then you notice how they have an impact on the mind. In other words,

you're sensitive to mental fabrication, seeing how those feelings and the perceptions affect the mind. Then you adjust the feelings and the perceptions so that they calm the mind down.

In the meantime, you're talking to yourself about this. That's verbal fabrication. So you're using the breath as a way of getting more sensitive to how you fabricate things. Look for the way you breathe. Look for the story lines you're telling yourself. Look for the perceptions, the images, you're holding in mind. And say, "Okay, to get past this particular habit, I need to develop new habits of fabrication." The Buddha gives you lots of images as examples of perceptions to hold in mind, he recommends lots of ways of thinking, and he gives you advice on how to breathe. He gives you, basically, instructions for how to fabricate well.

Part of your mind may object, saying, "This doesn't seem natural." But your "natural" habits are all fabrications to begin with, and the reason why they seem natural is simply because you've been doing them a lot, fabricating them again and again, for a long time. And you can't really blame the habits you picked up from your parents on them or on your family because, after all, as the chant says, we're related through our actions. If you didn't already have those kinds of tendencies, you wouldn't have been born into that kind of family. So it doesn't do any good to try to trace back where this habit began.

Trace it down right now: How are you doing it right now? Why are you choosing to do it now? And is it really in your best interest to keep on doing it that way? If you have trouble imagining other ways of doing it, well, look at what the Buddha has to teach. Look around you for good examples. Then start fabricating your experience with knowledge, keeping in mind the larger context that we're here to find happiness in a way that doesn't harm anybody.

Goodwill, as the Buddha said, is a form of mindfulness. It's a recollection. The desire for happiness is taken for granted, but the realization that if we really do want to find true happiness, we have to have goodwill for all, without exception: That's something we have to train

ourselves in. We have to determine for ourselves that this is what we're going to do. We want to keep this in mind as we speak, as we think, as we act, so that we can straighten out our ideas about where our suffering is coming from and find the harmless happiness that we really want deep down inside.

Dispassion Isn't Depression

December 3, 2018

Those five reflections that the Buddha recommends that we reflect on often are, in the beginning, pretty depressing. Aging, illness, death, separation: inescapable. But notice the Buddha doesn't leave you there. He goes on to the fifth reflection, on kamma. Kamma is the way out—if we master it.

It's important to keep that distinction in mind. Some people think that the Buddha's teachings end with aging, illness, death, inconstancy, stress, and not-self. The message seems to be: "Give up. There's nothing worth striving for, because everything all falls apart." Some people equate that attitude with dispassion. But it's not dispassion, it's depression. You've been hoping for happiness but you realize there's no happiness to be found anywhere, so you give up. That kind of attitude would put the mind into severe depression.

But the Buddha doesn't leave you there. There is a way out. And it's very much worth following because it leads to a true happiness—and it's through our *actions* that we can get those results. Particularly, actions of the mind. This is why we meditate—and why, when we meditate, we focus on the mind. In other religions, they meditate on God or some abstract principle, but here we're meditating on what the mind is doing, because what the mind is doing is going to make all the difference between suffering and not.

What you're doing right now is shaping your experience right now, and if you're not satisfied with what you're experiencing right now, then, as they say, "If you don't like the news, go out and make some of your own." If you don't like your experience now, you can change what you're doing to shape it. Try to detect what you're doing to shape your experience and change it for the better. This is why we meditate, because the source of all

our actions, the source of all our experience, is the mind. So you've got to look at your mind.

The best way to look at it is to get it into the present moment where it's fabricating things. We use the breath as our topic because it's right next to the mind and it's our anchor in the present. As long as you're with the breath, you're in the present moment. You can't watch a past or future breath. The only breath you can watch is in the present. As you stay focused here, you can watch the mind to see what it's doing to shape the present moment. Use it to settle down until you get the breath comfortable, and get the mind comfortable with the breath.

In the beginning, there has to be a fair amount of thought: Think of the image of the bathman or the bathman's apprentice mixing water with soap powder to make a soap dough, as they used to do in those days. You have to take care to make the mixture just right, so that none of the soap powder is left unmoistened, and there's not so much water that it starts dripping out. In the same way, you get the breath just right, and then you think of ways of spreading that just-right feeling throughout the body to give the mind a good place to stay.

And don't throw it away when you leave the meditation. You've got to take it with you. We tend to blame the world outside for our lapses: There are so many other people, there are so many other things we have to think about and say and do, that we forget our meditation. But remember, those are choices we make: the choice to drop the meditation, drop the breath, and give all our attention to things outside. We have to overcome some old habits if we want to choose to maintain a sense of well-being inside.

We have to give it importance, because that's what all the Buddha's reflections give importance to: our actions. So, what are your actions in terms of looking after your mind, maintaining at least some sense of comfort in the breath, and some sense of a good center inside as you go through the day? Don't allow that center to be invaded by other people's energy—and don't send your energy out to them. Learn to be more self-contained, self-possessed. Your body should be *your* body, and shouldn't

be invaded by other people's energies. And you have no business going around invading theirs.

So, an important part of the practice is not only what we're doing here as we have our eyes closed, but also what we're doing as we try to carry our alertness through the day, trying to maintain it and, if we've dropped it, trying to pick it up again. We do that both for a sense of well-being, so that our actions come from a sense of well-being, and also for gaining some insight into what the mind goes for.

What are its strange assumptions? Our problem is that we don't see them as strange. We see them as normal—that is, our habits have become normal for us. An important part of the practice is staying with the breath long enough—with a sense of its usefulness in maintaining a sense of well-being—that you begin to see thoughts that go against it as strange. Then it's easier to let go of them and to stay with the breath both for a sense of well-being and for insight—and for increasing your mindfulness and alertness to see clearly what you're doing.

That right there covers three of the uses of concentration: creating a *pleasant abiding* for the purpose of developing *mindfulness and alertness* and gaining the *insight* into your defilements that lets you gain some detachment from them. As you get to know the present moment really well, you begin to see how you're putting it together—and that it's always put together. This is why the present moment is never the goal. It's part of the path.

The fact that you put it together means you can put it together in a better way, and you can make a good path out of it. The Buddha's discovery was that you could make it into a path to the end of suffering. After all, we're all on a path of some kind or another already, willy-nilly. All too often, though, we don't know what path we're on. We don't see down to the end of the path. All we see are the things that we like along the way—either on the path itself or off to the side—that keep us entertained. But the Buddha's warning is that some paths, even though they seem nice, lead to bad places.

So look at your actions, weigh them against how he defines the various paths, and make up your mind to follow the path that leads to the best destination, to a happiness that doesn't have to be subject to aging, illness, and death.

And it is a *happiness*. It's not a *nothing*.

There are some strange views out there. I was talking with someone this evening who was recently at a retreat where a monk was saying that we're here to arrive at right view, and right view is basically realizing that everything is inconstant, stressful, not-self. Therefore, you just accept that and basically give up. The monk didn't use the phrase, "give up," but that's what he was saying. Nibbana wasn't happiness, he said. It was equanimity, acceptance. At the end of it all, there's nothing. Basically a sad end to a sad story—but that's not what the Buddha taught.

The Buddha was not defeatist. He called the noble eightfold path "unexcelled victory in battle." It's victory over our unskillful habits, a victory in the search for true happiness, a search that's well worth the effort. It's always important to keep that in mind. The reflection on aging, illness, and death is to remind us: There is something that doesn't age, doesn't grow ill, doesn't die. The contemplations of these things, as they motivate you to practice, are meant to get you to the point where you do see the deathless.

In other words, you realize that you're shaping the present moment out of the raw materials that come from your past actions. But your shaping of these materials actually comes prior to receiving the materials. You already have the skills or lack of skills that are going to determine, when you get the raw materials, what you're going to do with them and how much suffering or lack of suffering you'll experience.

So here, as part of the path, we're developing better skills. We're becoming more sensitive to how we fabricate things. We fabricate them into a state of concentration and then we try to keep maintaining that state of concentration. Of course, in doing that we can learn a lot.

It's like the Army Corps of Engineers trying to keep the Mississippi River in its channel: Over the course of the many years that they've been trying to do this, they've learned an awful lot about the Mississippi. In the same way with your mind, as you try to keep the mind in concentration while you're sitting here and as you go through the day, you learn an awful lot about what the mind is doing.

In particular, you see the extent to which you are shaping your experience and how you can do it in a better way. Ultimately, you get to the point where the mind doesn't fabricate anything: Its sensitivity gets greater and greater until you realize that any kind of fabrication, even skillful fabrication, involves stress. It's inconstant. So you ask yourself, "Why do I keep engaging in this?"

When your sensitivity is developed properly, then you can see that there is an escape. The fact that your fabrication comes prior to the input from the senses means that when that fabrication ends, you can find something that's outside of the senses, outside of time, outside of space. As the Buddha said, it's the ultimate happiness, the ultimate well-being, bliss —however you want to translate the word *sukha*. And it is a state of *knowing*—there is an awareness there. You're not blanking out. You're not going to nothingness. And it's a happiness that doesn't change, because it's not known through anything fabricated.

This is what that fifth reflection leads to. On the one hand we have all the other pleasures we might go for, and one of the reasons the Buddha has you look at the drawbacks of all of your regular pleasures is that if you satisfy yourself with them, you won't look for anything better. You have to see that they have their drawbacks. You have to want something better, and you'll find it through your own actions: meditating to become sensitive to your own actions as you learn to become more and more skillful in what you do, say, and think.

When you can create a good state of mind through your actions, be careful to maintain it. Ajaan Fuang had some students who were complaining one time that they'd been meditating with him and had

gotten into a really nice state of mind, but then they went back home, they started talking with some friends, and as they were gossiping about other people that great state of mind disappeared. So they went back to complain to Ajaan Fuang: Why didn't it stay? He replied, "Well, *you* were the ones who took gold and exchanged it for shit." Pretty blunt, but it gets the message across.

Your ability to maintain a good state of mind really is gold. Make that your gold standard. As you go through the day, you want to maintain the sense of well-being in the body, maintain the sense of well-being in the mind, so that you have a better and better foundation for acting in skillful ways, and a better foundation for seeing the subtle things the mind does to destroy its happiness. You don't blame it on situations outside. You say, "This was my choice, to be mindless and unalert. But mindfulness and alertness are qualities I can develop." Remind yourself of that again and again. There are so many things in the world where the effort you put into it isn't worth it, doesn't really give you solid results, but that's not the case with the Buddha's path. It's eminently worth it. All your efforts on the path are well repaid.

The Thinking Heart

December 28, 2018

In Western languages, we have separate words for heart and mind. But in most of the countries where Buddhism has spread, they don't have separate words. They use one word for both. Even in the ones where they do have two words, like Thai—they have *cit* for mind and *cai* for heart—the words are pretty interchangeable. This reflects the Buddha's insight that there's really not that clear a dividing line between your heart and your mind. Your emotions have thoughts; your thoughts have emotions.

The big problem for the heart, of course, is suffering. And it's hard to separate that from thinking. As the Buddha said, our first response to suffering is bewilderment, trying to figure it out: "Why is this happening?" Then the second response is a thought, too: "Is there anybody out there who knows a way to put an end to this suffering?" So the suffering already has us thinking. In fact, you might say that if we didn't suffer, we wouldn't be thinking. It's because of suffering that we're spurred on to figure things out.

Isaac Newton once said that if the orbit of the moon hadn't been so erratic and complex, mathematics wouldn't have developed as quickly as it had. To figure out the orbit of the moon, people had to come up with very sophisticated math. The question is, why were they trying to figure out the orbit of the moon? Because of astrology. They thought that the movements of the moon were going to have an impact on their lives: more thoughts based on the question of whether you were going to suffer or not.

So, all our thinking comes from suffering. It's an issue both of the heart and the mind together. And, from the Buddha's point of view, it's not a question of heart versus mind. It's simply that our thinking is confused when we come to the issue of suffering. There are so many things in the world that we've figured out, but when it comes to why the heart is

suffering, our thinking gets very vague, convoluted, and backwards. What he's trying to do in his teaching is to give us some insight into how you can really think about suffering in a way that thinks straight and does put an end to it.

That's what the four noble truths are all about. They speak to this problem of the heart, which is the problem of suffering. But they apply your mind to it. If we think in terms of mind and heart being separate, the four noble truths try to get them back together again, so that your mind can talk to your heart in a way that puts an end to the heart's big problem.

There are four noble truths. Why are they four? Why are they noble? Why are they true?

They're four because suffering is a problem with a cause. We much prefer to have it end. That's what the truths are for: to put an end to suffering. That, together with the Buddha's insight that it's going to have to come about through action. And action is based on desire. So to arrive at the result of putting an end to suffering, you need to start with skillful causes: skillful desires, skillful actions. If suffering is the result, the causes are unskillful desires, unskillful actions. So there are two things—actions and results—divided into two types: skillful and unskillful. That's why the truths are four.

Why are they noble? The word for "noble," *ariya,* has two meanings in Pali. One is something higher than the normal, something to aspire to. In this case, the Buddha says, our lives are a search: the search to put an end to suffering. It comes from the bewilderment. We end up searching either for something that is going to age, grow ill, and die, or for something that won't. If we're looking for things that age, grow ill, and die, we're going to just pile on more suffering. We're not getting to where we want to go. That kind of search, the Buddha said, is ignoble.

He tried a couple of ignoble searches in the course of his practice. He started out pursuing sensual pleasures and found that they didn't lead to where he wanted to go. He tried self-torment, thinking that if he could purify himself simply by enduring pain, that would put an end to suffering.

But it didn't. It was only when he found the middle way that he was able to reach the end of suffering: going to something that doesn't age, doesn't grow ill, doesn't die. And part of that way is right view. That's what the four noble truths are: the terms of right view.

So these are the truths that guide us in that noble search. It's one of the reasons why the truths are noble.

Another reason is that they're universal. That's the other meaning of the word *ariya* in Pali: universal. The Buddha compares these noble truths to what he calls individual truths or personal truths: things that may be true for you, but not true for other people. He's not interested in teaching those. He's teaching something that's true for everybody, no matter how old you are, what your background is, what your gender is, or any of the other things that we use to divide us into different groups. This is something we all have in common: why we suffer and how we can put an end to it. The details of how we suffer will be individual, but the cure is always the same.

Part of the cure is understanding that you're suffering not because of things outside, but because of your own craving. You have to look at the cause. The cause isn't out there. It's in your craving. And the suffering itself, as the Buddha said, is in a place you might not expect. It's in your clinging. What this means is you're actually *doing* the suffering. You're holding on, feeding on things. And the act of feeding is suffering.

That's counterintuitive. We tend to think of suffering as something that hits us. We're on the passive receiving end. But, as the Buddha pointed out, that's not the case.

Seeing things in this way, you realize that the path to the end of suffering has to attack the problem at the cause. As I was saying this afternoon, you go into a house, you see that it's full of smoke, but if you simply try putting out the smoke, it's never going to end. You've got to find the cause: the fire. You put that out, and that's the end of the problem with the smoke.

The approach we adopt on this path that we're practicing is to put an end to suffering by putting an end to craving. Part of that is through developing right concentration so that we can create a steady sense of well-being. You sit here with the breath coming in and going out. Try to breathe in a way that, at the very least, feels okay. If you learn how to protect that sense of being okay right here, you'll find that it'll grow into a sense of ease. That sense of ease not only gives you a good place to stay and encouragement on the path, but it also allows you to look at the problem of suffering without being overwhelmed by it, without feeling threatened by it, because you know you've got a good place you can retreat to. From this place, you can see your cravings not as your friends but as your enemies. That way you can let them go.

So, these are the truths that help us look into the problem of suffering so that we can solve the problem at the cause rather than solving it at the end.

Many years back, when I was in Thailand, I read an article about some high-ranking government officials from Bangkok going out to a far distant part of the country. There was a little school there, and the kids looked so poor as they lined up in front of the school to receive these important visitors from Bangkok. So the visitors arranged for them to have school uniforms so that they'd look nice the next time visitors came out. That's attacking the problem at the result. You have to look into why the families are so poor to begin with. Maybe you can do something about that. But they tried solving the problem at the result, which doesn't solve much at all. You want to solve it at the cause.

Another aspect of why the truths are noble is because they have you step back from your craving, step back from your clinging. These are the things that we invest ourselves in most. We actually identify with these things. As a result, we go around "obeying our thirst," as that old Sprite commercial used to say. But learning how to step back from our thirst, to step back from our clinging and feeding: That's a noble act. That's really

what makes us human beings as opposed to animals. It gives us some nobility.

At the same time, these truths do provide guidance to the path that truly leads to that goal: a goal where there's no aging, no illness, no death. That's why they're true.

But they're an interesting kind of truth. When the Buddha uses the word *truth,* he uses it in two senses. One is statements about the way things are. The other is the actual reality, or the actual experience that the statements describe. When we first encounter the noble truths, they're words. But they're pointing to something that's already happening in our experience: the suffering, the craving, and the potentials for the path. So, when the Buddha says that you abandon the truth of the cause of suffering, you don't abandon the statement about it. You abandon the actual experience of the cause.

When he says to comprehend the truth of suffering, again it's not simply a matter of comprehending the words. You're actually trying to comprehend, when there's suffering in the mind, what's actually going on. In developing the fourth noble truth, again, you don't develop the words. You develop the qualities in the mind that are called for by the path. But eventually, as you develop the path and perform all the other duties appropriate to the truths, you find that the four noble truths take you to something beyond them.

There's an interesting passage where Anathapindika has gone to see some wanderers from other sects. It's early in the morning. The monks are out on their alms round, it's too early to visit either them or the Buddha, so he says to himself, "Well, I'll see what these people have to say." He goes and listens to their doctrines. And he points out to them that all their doctrines are put together, fabricated. Because anything fabricated is stressful, in holding on to their doctrines, they're holding on to stress.

Then they ask him, "Well, what's *your* view?" He says, "Whatever is fabricated, put together, is stressful. Whatever is stressful is not me, not mine, not my self." So they try to turn the tables on him and say, "Well,

you're holding on to that doctrine. That, too, is holding on to stress." And he says, "No. By holding on to this and practicing in line with it, I get beyond it."

This is why the four noble truths are special. They take you to a truth that's beyond them because they force you to look at what your mind is doing, to see everything in the mind as processes. When you get involved with pleasure, where does it come from? Where does it go? When you're dealing with pain, where did the pain come from? And where does it go? In other words, what did you do to give rise to these things, and what do they lead you to do? You look at the causes for whatever's unskillful and you learn how to let go of them.

But then you realize that the guidance you've gotten from the four noble truths: That, too, is something fabricated. That, too, is something simply put together. It's still not the deathless. So you look at it as a process as well. This is the part where, as Ajaan Mun said, all the four noble truths become one, with one duty: Let go through dispassion. In the letting go, you finally get to that noble goal—not the true statement about the goal, but the true experience of the goal itself. That's where the noble truths take you. And that's the point where both the heart and mind are totally satisfied.

As Ajaan Suwat said, once you achieve that ultimate happiness, then that's what it is. Ultimate happiness. Totally satisfying. You have no questions about who's experiencing or why or what. The experience is sufficient in and of itself. That speaks to the heart's deepest desire, to put an end to suffering.

To end suffering, we have to learn how to think about it properly. This is why the Dhamma is called the language of the heart: not because it comes out of the heart, but because it's the part of the mind that can speak to the heart in a way that helps it understand what its problems are.

Another phrase you might use for this is the intelligent heart or the thinking heart. It's willing to listen to that language, to follow through with the instructions and to find that totally satisfactory goal where all thinking

can stop because it's served its purpose. This is the most noble thing we can aim for—noble because it makes us behave in an honorable way, and noble because it's universal: It's something we all can aim for. It's open to us all.

A while back I was reading some scholars saying that the four noble truths are true only for noble ones. Well, how do you get to be a noble one? You follow the four noble truths. So, they're already true statements for you. They're true for all of us. They offer to all of us the help we're looking for in our bewilderment, in our desire to find a way to put an end to the suffering. That's the Buddha's gift. We simply have to follow their guidance to find the experience of the truth to which they point.

The Safety of Dualities

July 21, 2019

The Buddha generally wasn't the sort of person who'd go out to look for people to argue with. But there were a couple of cases where he would seek out teachers and ask them about their teaching because he'd heard they taught things that were really detrimental. One group of teachers were those who said that your actions don't make any difference: Everything you experience right now is determined from the past, either from what a god has decreed or from past actions. Another group were those who said that there is no cause and effect in the world. Pleasure and pain happen randomly, and are in no way related to your actions. Your actions don't make any difference.

In both cases, he criticized those teachers because they were irresponsible. They were neglecting the two duties of a teacher, the first of which is to help the student learn how not to be bewildered. After all, we're all bewildered by suffering. If we want to find a way out of suffering, we have to get past that bewilderment.

Secondly, he said, those teachers leave the student unprotected. And he explained what that meant: that they didn't give any basis for saying that something should or shouldn't be done, or for even wanting to know what should or shouldn't be done. After all, if it were determined that some action had to happen, how could you say it shouldn't be done? It would happen willy-nilly anyway, and you'd be in no position to make a choice. Or if your actions had no effect on things, what difference would it make what actions you chose to do? They'd have no consequences. In both cases, those teachers were depriving people of any basis or motivation for choosing what should and shouldn't be done: That's what leaves them unprotected.

Nowadays, there's another teaching that also leaves people unprotected, and that's the teaching of non-duality: that good and evil are basically the same, that there's no basis for saying that one action is good or another action is evil. This teaching on non-duality has made its way into Buddhism. In fact, I was reading just the other day a passage where the author said that when the Buddha was teaching the four noble truths, he was coming from a position of non-duality, which doesn't make any sense at all. If any number is dual, it's four: a dual duality. And the truths are four precisely because the Buddha's trying to fulfill his duty as a teacher, his responsibility as a teacher, which is to give you a basis for deciding what should and shouldn't be done.

After all, we're all active creatures. Our minds are active. We're not simply sitting here passively observing the world and asking, as an idle pastime, "Well, what is the nature of the world? How does the world act?" We have to know how the world acts because we're acting in it. We're pulling the levers all the time, with every moment. We're engaged in the act of fabrication, and it's because we do it with a lack of skill that we're suffering. That's the problem the Buddha wants to solve. As long as you realize that suffering is one thing and not suffering is something else, and you decide that you really want to stop suffering, you've got to think in dualities. This is your protection. It's what discernment is all about.

You start developing discernment by noticing what in the mind is skillful, what in the mind is not skillful, and then pursuing greater and greater refinement in understanding what's skillful and what's not. You learn by comparing the two sides of a duality. In that way, you protect yourself. You have a basis for making that decision. If you believed that actions didn't have any effect, that everything was predetermined, or that there was no real distinction between good and evil, you'd be left unprotected in two ways. One, you'd have no basis at all for even thinking that there should be something you should or should not do. Two, you wouldn't have any basis for deciding what should and shouldn't be done. Yet the Buddha's trying to provide you with precisely those two things:

first, pointing out that certain actions lead away from suffering, are skillful, are blameless, whereas other actions lead in the opposite direction. And, second, he gives you the tools for figuring out which is which.

In some cases, he simply gives you the precepts. These are issues you don't have to test: no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no taking intoxicants. Period. Those issues, he said, have been tested. You can simply follow the precepts and you'll clear up a lot of issues in life. That allows you to look deeper into the mind, because there are a lot of issues that are not covered by the precepts: things you might do or not do, things you might say or not say, and particularly things you might think or not think. You've got to decide whether they're worth doing or not.

In fact, discernment is a value judgment in that way. It gives you a basis for deciding what's worth doing, what's not worth doing. Like right now, we've decided that meditation is worth doing. That implies that our actions make a difference, and because our actions come from our intentions, and our intentions come from our minds, it's worthwhile to train the mind. You want to get the mind really still so that you can see, when it moves, whether its movements are skillful or not. As you get deeper into the processes of the mind, you begin to see these acts of fabrication—bodily fabrication: breath; verbal fabrication: directed thought and evaluation, in other words, the way you talk to yourself; and then mental fabrication: feelings of pleasure or pain, neither pleasure nor pain, and then perceptions, the labels you apply to things. All of these things are actions and they can take you in different directions.

Take perception, for instance. The way you perceive a particular part of the body, the way you perceive an action in the mind, is going to determine what you do with it. For instance, if there's a pattern of tension in the body, if you see it simply as a solid part of the body, there's nothing much you can do with it. For years, I had a blockage in my back and I thought it was because there was a bone there. So, I simply accepted the fact that it was there. Then I went in for an osteopathic treatment, and the doctor released the tension. It turned out that what I perceived as a bone

was really a tensed muscle. I suddenly realized: I could now breathe with that part of my body. I could move that part of the body. When you see these things as breath, there are lots of things you can do with them. If you see them simply as a solid lump or a bone, there's not much you can do.

So, your perceptions can change your range of what you can do, which means that some perceptions are skillful and some are not. This is why we have to develop right view, to get a sense of which perceptions will be skillful, which ways of perceiving ourselves, which ways of perceiving the problem of suffering will actually be conducive to putting an end to suffering. Why is putting an end to suffering a skillful thing? Because as long as you're suffering, you're going to cause other people to suffer, too.

It's when you learn how not to cause yourself any suffering, that's when you don't have to cause anybody else any suffering—because as we're suffering, we're feeding, both physically and, more importantly, emotionally and mentally. If we don't get the food we want or need, we can get pretty desperate. There are lots of very unskillful things we can do because of this inner hunger. But if you can find the part of the mind that doesn't need to feed, then it places no burden on anyone at all. That's why there are shoulds and should nots.

When the Buddha taught the four noble truths, he immediately taught the shoulds that went along with them. Suffering should be comprehended, which means that you look for the clinging and look at what you're clinging to and realize that it's not worth it. That, in turn, means you have to look for the cause of suffering, which is the craving that says it's very much worth it. That's something you should abandon. You should develop the path so that you can abandon the craving and then realize the cessation. Those are the shoulds. Making this distinction between what should and should not be done is basic to any worthwhile act of teaching.

The Buddha himself, although there were lots of issues that he would not take a position on, would come down hard on people who would not take a position on the question of what is skillful and what's not. Some

people, he said, were afraid to take a position for fear they might be defeated. Others were afraid to take a position because it would involve clinging. Other people, he said, were just totally confused and thought it was clever to say there is no such thing as right or wrong, good or evil, or that the idea of floating around without taking a position on what was skillful was kind of a cool thing. He said that was utter stupidity.

So, although there were some dichotomies or dualities that the Buddha avoided—he called them extremes—he focused on teaching the dichotomy and duality of suffering and not suffering, what should be done, what should not be done, what is skillful to do, what is not skillful to do to put an end to suffering. Those are important dualities to keep always in mind. They're his gift to us, because they do allow us to be protected.

I've been reading about people being abused by their teachers in those traditions where they teach non-duality, and you see how the teaching on non-duality lends itself so easily to playing mind games on people. Their normal defenses are down—their defenses based on their ideas of what's right and what's not—and then the teachers abuse them. It was only when someone came in from the outside and said, "Look, this is abuse," that they finally came to their senses.

So, realizing that there are dualities is the beginning of your protection. Then when you see the distinction between what's skillful and what's not, what should be done and what should not be done, and you refine your discernment around those issues, that's when you end your bewilderment. That's when you're really protected.

One of the aspects of the Buddha's teachings that's underappreciated is the fact that it's a very safe teaching. And it gives safety all around. You follow his teachings and you will never, because of that act, have to suffer. You'll never go to a bad destination. It's only when we try to change the teachings into something we think is more clever: That's when we're left unprotected. The act of trying to be clear about what is Dhamma and what is not Dhamma, what is skillful and what is not, is basic to the whole practice. And it's basic to keeping you safe.

The Buddha's Questions

September 9, 2009

When you read the Buddha's accounts of his own quest for awakening, it's hard not to be struck by how many times he asked questions of himself, and how his quest was directed by his questions.

It started when he saw a problem: Here he was, subject to aging, illness, and death, and yet he was seeking happiness in things that were also subject to aging, illness, and death. He asked himself, "What if you were to seek happiness in things that didn't die?" The question suggested a possibility he hadn't thought of before. So, as he says, he went off in search of what was skillful. This shows that he already had some assumptions: that there was a way, a method of human action that would lead to the deathless, and he wanted to find the skillful means to get there.

First he went to study with a couple of teachers who claimed to know the path to true happiness, but he wasn't satisfied with their teachings. He asked himself, "What if I were to go off on my own, to practice austerities?" He had a vision of three types of wood: sappy wood near water, sappy wood away from the water, and then the dry wood away from the water, which is the only type of wood that you can actually use to give rise to fire.

So, he decided that he had to do without pleasure entirely. That's how he interpreted the meaning of that simile: the dry wood away from water meant abstaining from sensuality and not allowing the mind to dwell on sensuality. He tried the trance of suppressing his breathing. He felt horrible pains in his head, pains in his body. He asked himself, "What if I were to go without food entirely?" Devas came and said, "If you go without food entirely, we're going to infuse divine food in through your pores," but he dismissed them. He asked himself, "In that case, what if I were to take just a tiny bit of food, say, a handful of beans every few days?" So he tried that.

He did that for six years. He got so thin that he fell over every time he tried to urinate or defecate. When he touched his stomach, he could feel his spine.

Finally, after six years, he asked himself, "Could there be another way?" This way was obviously not working. Then he remembered when he was a child meditating under a tree, and had spontaneously entered the first jhana. "Could that be the way to awakening?" And the consciousness arose to him, yes, it could be. But even then, he tested it. As he says in one of his accounts, he first decided, "How about if I divide my thinking into two sorts: skillful and unskillful?" He tried that. When he noticed that his thinking was unskillful—that it was imbued with sensuality, ill will, or harmfulness—he would beat it down. Whenever his thoughts were not imbued with those qualities, he would allow them to range freely, until he saw that all of his thoughts were skillful. But then the mind grew tired of all that thinking. So he brought it to stillness and into the jhanas. Even here, he was motivated by that original desire, that original question: "What is skillful?"

When he attained the different levels of jhana, he looked at each level as an activity: "What here is still stressful, even in this jhana?" He could ferret out the different factors that were necessary in one level of jhana but would prevent his mind from going to a deeper level of jhana. They were a disturbance to the mind. So he would drop them and go into deeper levels of jhana. He got to the fourth jhana, and there he started directing his mind to different questions: "Is this the only life that there is, or have there been lives previous to this?" And he had memory of many, many previous lifetimes, eons and eons.

But he didn't stop there.

Some of the texts talk about other teachers who had attained a similar knowledge. Once they'd seen many previous lifetimes, they'd set themselves up as great philosophers, explaining that this is the way the world is: The world is eternal. Or sometimes, if they had memories going back to previous lifetimes, but then they hit a time when they were totally

insentient beings and they couldn't remember past that, they'd say, "Well, there was a point where I didn't exist, and then existence came to be, so the world must not be eternal."

But the Buddha's question again was: "What's the most skillful use of this knowledge?" He didn't stop just with knowledge of his previous lives. He moved on to knowledge of all beings dying and being reborn, because the question was: "Does rebirth happen only to me or does it affect other beings? And what's the basic pattern underlying rebirth?" He saw beings dying and being reborn all over the cosmos in line with their kamma, their intentional actions. Again, he didn't stop there and set himself up as an expert on kamma, teaching just that much about kamma. He said, "There must be some other use for this knowledge. What's the most skillful use?"

He applied it to his own intentions, the kamma of the mind in the present moment. He traced the suffering he was feeling—the aging, illness, and death he was trying to get past—back through his intentions, and from there all the way back to ignorance. In this case, it turned out to be ignorance of what he later taught as the four noble truths: suffering, its origination, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. What was he to do with those truths? He realized that there were duties that you had to fulfill with regard to them. Again: "What's the most skillful use of this knowledge?" That was the question that kept directing his practice. From there he fulfilled the duties with regard to the truths: He comprehended stress, abandoned its origination, and realized the cessation from having developed the path.

So, all along the way, he kept questioning himself: "What is this? What's the cause of this? What's the best use of this?" He kept questioning, questioning, questioning, until he finally got to awakening through questioning.

That's why, when he taught, he encouraged his students to question as well. He realized that some questions were useful, whereas other questions would lead you astray. After all, what is a question? It's the framework of a sentence, but it's got a big gap. When you ask a question, you're either

hoping to find knowledge yourself or you're trying to get other people to fill in the gap for themselves.

The important point is that the question is not totally amorphous. It has a frame with a specific shape. He saw that some frames would have room for skillful information, and others would have room for only unskillful information. For example, there's that frame about which type of life is better: the life of sensual indulgence or the life of self-torment? At first he had answered, "The life of self-torment," but later he realized that that was a poorly formed question. Or the question of what is the origin of the world: If that had been the question that had originally motivated him, then he would have stopped with the first or the second knowledge. So he realized he had to properly frame his questions in order to get something useful out of them.

This taught him several things. One is that questioning is what motivates you to find awakening. After all, as a prince, if he had simply accepted what everybody had told him—"Hey, you're a great prince. Have a good time. Go out and do some battles like princes do, and then come home to enjoy your sensuality": If he hadn't questioned that advice, we never would have had a Buddha.

So, that's one of the important functions of questioning: It shows that there's a gap, something's missing in life—true happiness, and knowledge about how to find true happiness. These are the missing parts. Without a sense of that gap, you can get very complacent.

But it's also important, when you ask these questions, that you learn how to frame the gap and give it the right shape. You can think of a question as a tool or instrument with a missing part. If you're using the wrong tool, then no matter how many wise people tell you about which part you're missing, it still doesn't solve the problem. You may get the missing piece to the tool, but it's the wrong tool for your purpose. You haven't really benefited.

This is why, when the Buddha taught, he encouraged people not only to ask questions, but also to frame their questions in the right way. The

questions he encouraged basically come down to this issue of what's skillful, and then how to understand the four noble truths, how to develop the skills appropriate to those four noble truths—in other words, how to put those truths to the most skillful use. Those are the questions he asks you to focus on.

Look at other questions he encourages: When you go to see a teacher, one, ask yourself about the teacher. Is this the sort of person who would tell a falsehood, pretending to know something he didn't know because of greed, aversion, or delusion? Would he try to get someone to do something that wasn't in that person's best interest? You've got to check out the teacher first, realizing you can't just trust anybody you come across, no matter how good they look on paper. You've got to look at that person's behavior. When you feel confident that this is the sort of person you can trust, then you listen to that person's Dhamma.

One of the first questions he has you ask of a teacher is: "What is skillful and what is unskillful?" Then, when you've learned that from the teacher, you go off and practice on your own, but you keep on asking questions. You don't just stop with the definition of what's skillful or a few rules about what's skillful. You actually look at your own behavior.

This is the essence of his teachings to Rahula: how to check your behavior, check your motivation, check the actual results you get from your actions. If you see anything harmful coming from them, you've got to go back and learn how to act in another way, how to speak in another way, how to think in another way, both through your own observations and through getting advice from other people on the path.

At the same time, you support that quest for skillfulness with questions that are meant to inspire heedfulness. After all, the Buddha didn't say that we become skillful because we're innately good or because it just comes naturally to us, so that once we somehow scrub away all social conditioning we'll find our wonderful true nature that we can trust. That's complacency, and complacency is one of the dangers he warned against. Skillfulness comes because you realize that your actions make a difference

between harm and no harm, and that you have a tendency to act in unskillful ways.

This principle lies behind the questions he has you ask at the beginning and the end of the day. At the beginning of the day, as the sun rises: "My death could happen today. Is there anything in my mind that would cause me to do something unskillful? Is there any unfinished business in the mind?" And if there is unfinished business, he says to try to straighten out the mind quickly, with the same sense of urgency you'd feel if your head were on fire. Then ask yourself the same question at sunset: "I might die tonight. Am I ready to go?" If not, quickly work on what you need to do. In particular, focus on your mind. As he says at one point, even though you can't read other people's minds, you should learn how to read your own mind. Look for the skillful and unskillful qualities you have there. If you sense anything that's unskillful, again, as if your head were on fire, try to straighten it out. If you sense skillful qualities, try to develop them even further.

When you learn how to read your mind in this way, developing both that sense of heedfulness and greater skill in how you manage your practice of virtue, concentration, and discernment, then you finally get to those questions that he asked the five brethren: "Is form constant?" They say, "It's inconstant." "If it's inconstant, is it pleasant or stressful?" "Well, if you're trying to find true happiness there, it's going to be stressful." "If it's inconstant and stressful, is it worthy of being called your self?" He asked the same questions of feeling, perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness.

The asking of the questions is meant to open up your attention to an area where there's been a gap, where there has been something missing in your knowledge. As you learn how to fill in that gap in your knowledge, then you can let go.

This is how awakening comes. It comes through questioning, having a sense of these gaps—gaps in your heedfulness, gaps in your skillfulness, gaps in your understanding. Without a sense of those gaps, you stay as

complacent as ever. Nothing ever develops. It's when you sense the gaps and the need to fill them in, that's when freedom can come about.

So just as the Buddha's quest was shaped by his questions, our practice should be shaped by questions as well, asking ourselves: "Are we heedful enough? Are we skillful enough? What skills still remain to be developed? What causes of suffering are we still holding on to? What factors of the path still need to be developed?"

This is why the Buddha never encouraged a dogmatic attitude, pretending to know things that you don't know. He wanted you to be very clear about where your knowledge lies and where the gaps in your knowledge lie. This gives focus to your practice. And it's meant to keep on expanding your imagination, expanding your concept of what true happiness might be.

One of the biggest pitfalls in the path is when people hit a particular level of practice—say, a state of concentration—and then tell themselves, "This must be it. I'm just going to hang out right here." Their imagination isn't large enough to conceive of something better.

This is why it's important to follow the Buddha's example: Keep your practice alive with questions—so that whatever comes up, any state of concentration, you ask yourself, "What is this? Where is there stress still here in this state? What's the skillful use of this state?" Any knowledge or insight that comes up: "What's the skillful use of this knowledge?" At the same time, keep your imagination open to the possibility that there might be total release from suffering and that you might be capable of it. Because when the Buddha tells his life story, this is what he's trying to encourage: desire, the craving that leads to the end of craving, the conceit that leads to the end of conceit. You want the same awakening that he had, and you ask yourself: "If he could do it, why can't I?" Those are the questions he wants you to ask so that you can find the same freedom he did.

Training Your Desires

March 7, 2019

All phenomena are rooted in desire—everything we experience, the Buddha said. And we desire happiness. So the question is, why don't we get the happiness we desire? Because our desires are ignorant. We're ignorant of the way things work.

We want to put in only a little effort, or no effort at all, and get a happiness that lasts. We've learned, of course, at least to some extent, that that doesn't always work. There's a large part of the mind that really doesn't like that. It's when we realize that we have to change our understanding of what works and doesn't work, and that we have to train our desires: That's when wisdom begins.

We realize that we can't get everything we want the way we want it. We have to learn to choose what we really want more than anything else and focus on that. As the Buddha says, if you see that a greater happiness comes from letting go of a lesser happiness—and if you're wise—you're willing to let go of the lesser happiness for the sake of the greater.

There was an English scholar who translated that verse one time, and in a footnote he said that this couldn't possibly be what the verse means. It was just too simple, too obvious. Well, it may be obvious, but it's really not the way people live. We want to win at chess and keep all our pieces. We want our major desires and we want our little desires; we don't want to have to give anything up that we want. It's when we realize we *do* have to give certain things up, and we have to prioritize, that we begin to bring some knowledge to our desires.

The Buddha said it's a several-step process. First, you realize that you need some training from other people who are more experienced than you are in terms of what brings true happiness. And you have to look for the right people. When you find someone who seems reliable, you have to

watch that person for a good while. Ask yourself if there's anything in this person that would make this person want to claim knowledge of things he or she didn't know. Would this person ever get anyone else to do something that was not in that other person's best interest?

It takes a while to observe a person to be able to judge this. But if you're truly serious about trying to find true happiness, you have to be responsible about who you choose to hang out with, who you choose to listen to, and who you choose as your friends. There have been so many cases of people finding out that their teachers are unreliable. But when you ask them what led up to the revelation, it turns out that there had been warning signs they chose to ignore.

So, there's a certain responsibility placed on the student to try to find a good teacher. Then you spend time with the teacher. When you have a sense that the teacher is trustworthy, you listen to what the teacher has to say. You think it over. When it makes sense, that's when the Buddha says you begin to have a desire to do the practice. The example of the teacher has shown you that it is possible to find true happiness, a higher happiness than what you already have. That gives you some impetus to want to make some changes in your behavior. Then you listen to the teachings, and if they make sense, that gives you even more impetus. A really good teaching opens up your perspective on what true happiness is so that you're willing to let go of lesser things. That's how the desire to practice begins.

And that's why the Buddha defined ignorance as ignorance of the four noble truths—not ignorance of the three characteristics, ignorance of the four noble truths—because they revolve around desire. There's the unskillful desire that causes suffering. Then there's the skillful desire in the noble eightfold path, under the factor of right effort, that leads to the end of suffering. The skillful desire wants to develop all skillful qualities in the mind and abandon all unskillful qualities. That's the kind of desire you want to encourage.

But the four noble truths also set out the possibility of finding an ultimate happiness that's unchanging and true—total freedom. That is a

human possibility, and the four noble truths set it out clearly. They don't say, for instance, that you simply have to accept the fact that there's going to be change in life, so just accept the change; or that things are impermanent and stressful, so accept the impermanence and stress; or that things are not-self, so accept that they're not-self and content yourself with that. That's not what they say.

The four noble truths say that ultimate happiness is possible and can be gained through human effort. And the proper way to respond to that is to see it as a challenge: Here's a possibility as to what you can do. Do you want to accept that challenge? If so, look at the other things you've been doing in life that would get in the way. Can you learn how to say No to them?

As the Buddha said, a measure of your wisdom is when there are things you like to do, but you know are going to lead to suffering or harm, and you can say No to them. Things you may not like to do, but you know are going to lead to long-term welfare and happiness: Teach yourself how to want to do those things. In this way, you're training your desires in the direction of a happiness that's really reliable. And it is possible. It can be done. There are people who've found it—good people, reliable people.

Now, you can't see their happiness. Ajaan Maha Boowa said that if you could take nibbana out and show it to everybody, that's the only thing anybody would ever want. Everything else in the world would pale by comparison. But you can't see someone else's experience of it. Still, you look at the people who seem to have found it, and they seem to be good people. That's the beginning of conviction. It's not knowledge, but it's conviction, the conviction that gives force to your desire to want to practice more.

Otherwise, it might seem that nobody in the world is really awakened, or the best anybody can do is just accept things as they are and not try to make any changes. But then what kind of effort would you want to put out? It would be very discouraging. There'd be no reason to make any

effort at all, no desire to make any effort at all, and you'd be stuck where you are in a situation that's really not acceptable.

When the Buddha talks about accepting things, it's not about accepting where you are and staying there. It's about accepting the fact that you're responsible for shaping your life and that things could be better if you trained yourself to shape your experience in a better way. That way, if you're going to look for the cause of suffering, you have to look inside.

That's another message from the four noble truths. Again, it's a message that we may not like to hear. We like to blame our suffering on other people. But think about it. If your suffering comes from other people, what are you going to do? Are you going to change them? And how many people in the world would you have to change? There'd be no end to it. But as the Buddha points out, suffering comes from our ignorant craving—and that's something we can do something about.

Ignorance may have been long-lasting—as the Buddha said, you can't trace back in time to find the point where ignorance began—but it doesn't have any right to lay claim to you. Ajaan Suwat's image is of taking a light into a place that's been dark for who knows how long. The darkness can't say, "We've been here ever since time began, so this light has no right to chase us away." As soon as there's light, the darkness has to go. As soon as there's knowledge, your ignorance goes.

Regardless of how ignorant you've been in the past, it's something you can change. The four noble truths set a high standard, but they also promise a lot. They provide a path we can follow, and it leads to true happiness—ultimate, unchanging, unlimited happiness. When you think about that, then whatever is required on the path doesn't seem so onerous. It doesn't seem so scary. It doesn't seem so large. The happiness we want is much larger than what we have; we have to keep that in mind at all times.

So, when you find yourself getting lazy, ask yourself if this is the best you can do. Is this how you show your desire for true happiness, by making excuses for your laziness? Try to encourage the diligent internal chatter that the Buddha talked about when he cited the reasons for laziness and

the reasons for being diligent. The outside situations are always the same. You may say, "I've been traveling a lot," or "I've been sick," or "I didn't get much to eat this morning," and make that an excuse for not practicing. But you can also say, "I was traveling a lot. I didn't have a chance while I was traveling to practice, but now I have the chance." "I've been sick. I didn't have the chance when I was sick, but now I have the chance to practice." "When I don't eat much, the body's light. It's not weighed down by all that food—it's a good time to practice."

How you talk to yourself is what's going to make all the difference. That's where you see wisdom in action. So try to get some wise voices in on your internal conversation. Inform them with the four noble truths, and teach them to train your desires so that they really do lead to the happiness you want—or, as the Buddha says, a better happiness than your desires can imagine.

At the very least, encourage the desires that try to imagine that kind of happiness. Then make sure those desires actually do take control of your actions so that, in accepting what really does lead to happiness, you can do what's needed to get there.

The Desire to Be Free from Desire

October 4, 2019

There's a passage in the Canon where a young monk is being asked by a king why he ordained. After all, the young monk came from a wealthy family, his health was good, his relatives were all alive. Why would he ordain? The monk replied that one of the reasons was that he saw all the world as a slave to craving, and he wanted to get out of that slavery.

He gave an example to the king. "Suppose someone were to come and say, 'There's a kingdom to the east with lots of wealth, lots of people, but a very weak army. Your army is strong enough to beat their army and seize that kingdom.' Would you take it?" And here the king is eighty years old, and yet he says, "Yes."

"Suppose another person would come from the south, the same message. Another person from the west, another from the north. Another person from across the ocean, saying there was a kingdom across the ocean that you could conquer. Lots of wealth, lots of people, would you go for it?" The king says, "Yes." The young monk says, "That's what I mean when I say the world is a slave to craving."

There's another passage where the Buddha said that even if it rained gold coins, we wouldn't have enough to satisfy one person's sensual desires. The monk wanted to get out of that slavery to insatiable desires.

Now, there are two ways of attempting that. One is just to deny desire, to tell yourself, "I don't want anything." But that wasn't the Buddha's way. His way was to find a happiness so total that it satisfied all possible desires: something outside of space and time, so that it couldn't be touched by changes in space and time. That would solve the problem of desire.

But to get there requires desire. All phenomena, the Buddha said, are rooted in desire. This means all things good, all things bad—everything

except nibbana is rooted in desire. Everything you experience is shaped by your desires.

The mind is not a passive thing. It's active. It goes out looking for things: looking for food, looking for clothing, shelter, looking for happiness. What we're doing as we practice is to take that tendency and direct it in a good direction. There's a passage where a brahman has come to see Ven. Ananda, who was one of the Buddha's disciples, and asks, "This path that you follow, what are its goals?" Ananda says, "One of the goals is to free the mind from desire." And then the brahman asks, "How do you do that?" Ananda says, "One of the ways of doing it is to develop concentration based on desire and the development of right effort." And the brahman says, "How can you use desire to get rid of desire? It would be an endless path."

So Ananda gives him an analogy. He says, "You came here to visit me in the park. Before you came here, did you have the desire to come here?" "Yes." "And when you came here, what motivated you, was it desire?" "Yes." "Now that you're here at the park, where is the desire?" "The desire's been satisfied, so it's gone." "That," Ananda, said, "is how you should understand this."

To explain the path, the Buddha gives an image of a raft to take you across a river. Tie together twigs, leaves, and branches, and then paddle your way across. The paddling is your effort, and you have to hold on to the raft. But notice: that raft is made out of twigs, and leaves, and branches found on this side of the river. The Buddha didn't give the image of a nibbana yacht coming over and ferrying you across the river. You take things that you already have in your mind, you put them together in the right way, and they can help you get across. Then, when you get to the other side, you don't need them anymore.

Now, among those twigs and leaves and branches is the desire that motivates right effort. You notice that some of your thoughts, some of the qualities of your mind, lead to happiness. You want to develop them. If they're not there, you want to give rise to them. If you've already got them,

then you want to develop them even further. As for unskillful qualities based on greed, aversion, and delusion, you see that if you follow them they take you in a direction you don't want to go. So if they're there, you want to abandon them. If they're not there, you want to prevent them from arising.

So desire is an important part of the path. And this faculty of right effort, which includes skillful desire, underlies right mindfulness—like we're practicing right now, trying to get the mind into concentration by being very mindful of the breath in and of itself. You have to want to focus on the breath and to put aside any thoughts that would pull you away.

The Buddha recommends three qualities to help with this. One is mindfulness, the ability to keep something in mind. Then there's alertness, the ability to know what you're doing while you're doing it. And then ardency: Ardency is basically right effort again. Part of right effort, of course, is desire. These three qualities work together, so that you remember when something comes up that would pull you away from the breath, you have to want to come back. You remember to come back, and you remember whatever techniques have worked.

Sometimes when you've wandered away, all you have to do is notice the fact that you've wandered away and you come back. Other times, you have to remind yourself of the drawbacks of the thinking that would pull you away. At the very least, this is not the time for that kind of thinking. Or with heavier cases involving greed, aversion, or delusion, you want to see that any amount of time spent involved in that kind of thinking is going to be a waste.

Or you may decide that you simply don't want to pay attention to that thinking. This is where perceiving the mind as a committee is useful. Some committee members may have their opinions, but you don't have to listen to everybody on the committee; you don't have to identify with everyone on the committee. If they're going to chatter about what they want, that's their business. You're going to stay focused on the breath. The thinking of

the mind doesn't destroy the breath. It's still here. All you have to do is remember to stay focused here.

You begin to notice, when you're really sensitive to the breath energy in the body, that when a thought comes into the mind, there will be a little pattern of tension associated with that thought someplace in the body. It might be in the arms, in the feet, in the forehead, around the eyes. It can be anywhere. If you sense that as soon as a thought comes in, there's a pattern of tension someplace in the body, you relax it. Breathe right through it. The thought will go away.

If it comes back, just make up your mind that you're not going to let that thought come into the mind. This is where having a meditation word is useful, such as *buddho,* which means awake. Just repeat that word again and again, rapid-fire. It's like jamming the signals. This, of all the methods for keeping the mind from wandering off, requires the most desire, the strongest determination, and the least discernment. But if you think of these different methods as tools in your toolbox, this is the sledgehammer. Sometimes you need a sledgehammer when the finer tools are no match for the job.

The important point is that you're ardent in doing this. You give it your whole heart. You realize that instead of being a slave to your desires, you want to take some control. You want your discernment, your wisdom, to be in charge of what you want, because what you want is going to shape everything you experience. If you direct your wants in the right direction, they can take you to a place where the wants are satisfied. When the Buddha talks about nibbana, he describes it as the highest happiness. Peace. Freedom. A consciousness without any limitations at all. Something that's true and unchanging. Something totally free from hunger, free from lack.

So, the Buddha's not trying to have you deny desire. He's basically saying that it is possible to put your desires in order, straighten them out, tie them together, and make them into a raft that takes you over the flood of desire to the far shore. Once you get there, then you can put the raft

aside. But while you're crossing over the river, don't let go. Try to identify which desires in your mind are the most trustworthy ones, the ones that open the most possibility for a genuine happiness. Don't let other desires push them aside. Make sure they're front and center, and this way you give the Buddha's teachings a chance.

As he said, he can't show nibbana to anybody. All he can do is describe it as a possibility, as a desirable possibility, and he points out the path leading to that possibility. Then he leaves it up to each of us to prove whether or not he's right. So cultivate the desire to find out if he's right. Through your meditation, through your practice of virtue, concentration, and discernment, try to make yourself worthy of judging to see if what the Buddha said is really true. That kind of desire can be used to put an end to desire, to free you from this slavery to craving that otherwise drives the world and keeps us under its thumb.

Choices Now & at Death

September 9, 2019

All phenomena are rooted in desire. It's one of the basic principles in the Buddha's teachings, and it applies to your meditation right now. Make sure you desire the right things. Different desires will come up, some of them wanting to stay with the breath, some of them wanting to wander off. So, hold on to the desires that want to stay, because who knows where you'll wander off to otherwise.

But if you stay with the breath, you can get the mind into a state of concentration. The concentration can give rise to discernment. Discernment will help you see through all the processes by which desire creates things, and you get to the point where you can go beyond. Whereas if you wander off, you'll end up just coming back to the same old desires that you've been mucking around in for who knows how long. Staying on the path gives you the prospect of something new.

And you do practice with desire. We often hear that craving is the cause of suffering. That's true. But the Buddha points out three cravings in particular: craving for sensuality, for becoming, and for non-becoming. That's in the second noble truth. Yet in the fourth noble truth, he points out that the desire to develop what's skillful and abandon what's unskillful is part of the path to the end of suffering. So not all desire is bad. You want to get to know your desires really well and be able to sort them out. This is a useful skill to develop not only while you're here meditating, but also as you go through life—and as you approach death, because the process of desiring is what will take you on to another life. You want to make sure you choose your desires well.

There was a wanderer who came to see the Buddha one time and asked him, "What is it that sustains a being from one life to the next?" And the Buddha said it's sustained by clinging to craving, in the same way that wind

sustains fire as it goes from one house to the next. The thing is, that's not the only time when you're sustained by your desires, sustained by your craving. As you go through your life, day by day by day, this is what defines you as a being.

Notice that when the wanderer asked that question of the Buddha, the Buddha gave him a straight answer: "Beings are sustained by craving." If the wanderer had asked some modern Buddhists, they might have said, "Well, there really is no being there anyhow. There's no continued identity, so there's nothing to go from one life to the next," which leaves people really adrift when they die and they find that they're not ending.

We sometimes think that the Buddha simply picked up his teachings on rebirth from his culture. But the way he taught rebirth was very different from what other people taught at the time. For one thing, not everybody in his culture believed in rebirth. Some said there was no rebirth, others said there was, and the way they would try to settle the issue would be by trying to define what you are: What is this thing, this being, and can this thing be reborn or not?

Now, the Buddha took it as one of the basic principles of mundane right view that there is the next world. In other words, there is life after death. But he didn't get involved in the common terms of the discussion. He didn't say what it is that goes on. He said simply, "This is *how* it happens." And how it happens is the same process that defines you as a being: your craving, your attachments. The only people who are not beings are arahants, because they have no attachments. That's why they don't get reborn.

We create our identity as beings, then we sustain it with our craving. And then, when we find we can't stay here in this body, we grab at whatever. If you're not prepared, you *will* grab at whatever. The mind is capable of all kinds of things. As the Buddha said, it's more variegated than the animal kingdom: All the different animals that you can think of in the earth, on land, at sea, and in the sky, come from the craving of the mind.

Look at the animal world and what you see is a small fraction of the many shapes and forms that the mind can take.

When you're counseling someone who's facing death, that's what you want to keep in mind: that the mind is capable of grabbing on, holding on to anything. So make sure that the person holds on to good things. The Buddha's first advice is to ask if they're worried about anything—usually it's with the family or with unfinished business. The Buddha's advice is to tell the person, "Just put that aside. You're dying now. There's nothing you can do for the family. There's nothing you can do about your unfinished business." The nature of the world is that all its business is unfinished.

Tell the person who's passing away not to expect closure, and focus instead on the state of his or her mind. The next question is, "Are you afraid of leaving your body? Are you afraid of leaving human sensuality?" If the person says, "Yes," the Buddha's first answer is really interesting. He says that there are levels of being where the sensuality is better. Aim your mind there. Now, this will depend on what that person's belief systems are. When people are dying, you don't want to impose something new on them, as long as they do believe that the mind will survive death.

What's important is that where the mind is holding on will create a state of mind that will either be lifted up or pulled down. So have the person think of things that will lift him or her up—in other words, the goodness they've done, not the good times they've had. If you get them thinking about the good times they've had, they might get depressed over the fact that those good times are over. Have them think instead of the times they've been generous, they've been virtuous, when they've shown their goodwill to others: Have them focus their mind there. In other words, give the mind something good to hold on to.

Then the Buddha goes on to say that if the person is capable, you might say, "Even the best thing you can hold on to would be a self-identity. And self-identities are going to change and end. It would be better if you could let go of the need for self-identity." In other words, stop defining yourself as a being. Let go, totally. But for a lot of people, that's not in the cards. So

instead, you have them focus on the good they've done. That way, when different possibilities open up to them as they find that they can't stay in the body, they'll have the confidence that they have some good to them. There's no reason why they have to go down.

The ajaans in Thailand talk about two kinds of visions that appear to a person passing away. The first kind consists of visions of their past actions. The other is visions of where they can go. If you've been focusing on some past bad actions, then if a vision of a bad place to go comes up, you're likely to fall for it, because that's one of the things we fear as we approach death: that maybe there will be some punishment lying in wait for the bad things we've done in life. This is one of the reasons why people who've done bad things often like to comfort themselves with the idea that, well, maybe if everything was pre-determined, they didn't have any choice, they're not responsible, and therefore they won't get punished. But that's not how things work.

The important thing to keep in mind is that there are only a very few things that would absolutely ensure that you would have to go down: killing your parents, killing an arahant. As long as you haven't done any of those things, then you've got the possibility of going up. As the Buddha said, that's part of the complexity of kamma. There are some times when you do something bad in this lifetime but you don't suffer in the next, and vice versa: You do good things in this lifetime and yet you suffer in the next, because the kamma you're dealing with is not just the kamma in this lifetime, but also your kamma from the past. Where you go also has to do with whether you change your mind, up or down, in the course of your life.

This is why so much emphasis is placed on the state of the mind as you're dying. That's asking for an awful lot, because as you're dying, you're dealing with the fact that the body is not cooperating anymore. It's no longer doing the things it used to do for you.

This is another reason why we meditate: to develop the strength of mind that doesn't have to depend on the strength of the functioning of the

body. So work on your mind here, because it does influence how you're living, who you are in this lifetime, and how you go as you go to the next. And it is possible to change the mind. Past kamma is not iron-clad. It creates tendencies. But we can develop skills in the present moment to handle even bad tendencies and not suffer from them.

This principle of having choice in the present moment is really central to the practice. You do have the choice to develop the mind or to do something else. The Buddha took this so seriously that even though he wasn't the sort of person who went around picking fights, he *would* go and search out teachers whom he had heard were teaching that you don't have choices, or if you do have choices, it doesn't matter because your actions don't have any results. Those kinds of teachings, the Buddha said, are really detrimental. The people who teach them do a lot of harm, which is why he felt it was important to seek those people out and see if he could change their minds, or at least let other people know that that kind of teaching was dangerous. As he said, it leaves you unprotected and bewildered. You don't want to be unprotected and bewildered as you're going through life, and especially as you're facing death.

Have confidence that you can change the mind. You have that choice. And the mind does have possibilities, many of which are more than you can imagine. So, train the mind in the direction where it will go for the best possibilities. Keep in mind the principle of choice and have the confidence that, yes, you can learn how to make better and better choices.

If that weren't possible, the Buddha wouldn't have taught. The fact that he did teach after gaining awakening is a sign that he wanted us to take this as a working hypothesis: that we do have choices. Because it's not until you gain your first taste of awakening that you really know for sure that, yes, you have choices and that they can become so skillful that they can lead you to the end of suffering. Only at stream-entry will you know for sure. Up to that point, it's a matter of faith—or if you don't like the word *faith,* use the word *conviction.* It's a working hypothesis. Act on it and, the

Buddha says, you'll benefit. Everybody who's reached awakening also says you'll benefit. They're the kind of people you want to believe.

Locate Your Craving

October 5, 2018

As we ordinarily go through life, when we come across sensory pleasures, we learn that they don't last, and so we try to milk as much as we can out of them before they go. But when you come to meditation, you have to adopt another attitude entirely. You're focused on your breath, not because you want the breath, but because you'd like the pleasure. You have to be frank with yourself about that, but at the same time, if you focus on the pleasure once it comes, you lose your foundation. Then you've lost them both—the breath and the pleasure.

So, you have to remind yourself the pleasure will be there, and as you keep doing the work of staying with the breath consistently, the pleasure will stay and do its work. As the mind begins to settle down even more with the breath, you can start thinking of the breath spreading through the body, and that'll take the pleasure along with it.

Think of the breath going down the spine, down the legs out to the toes; starting again at the back of the neck and going down the shoulders and the arms to the tips of the fingers; going through the torso; going through your head, eyes, ears, nose. As you gain a sense that the breath energy can flow in these places, the pleasure will go along with it. That'll be soothing to the body, but again, you stay with the breath. Let pleasure do its work on its own.

This teaches you several important lessons. One is that you've got to focus on the causes, and the results will come—as when you're focusing solely on the breath, you're thinking about the breath and you're evaluating it. It's called directed thought and evaluation. As you try to stay there, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-, those three activities—singleness of preoccupation, directed thought, and evaluation —are the causes. As for the sense of pleasure and even rapture that can

come, those are the results. You don't have to do those. You do the thinking, you do the evaluating, and then you make sure that you stay with this one object, which is the breath. That's all you have to do. The pleasure comes and it'll follow the breath.

Part of the evaluation is this activity of thinking of the breath going to the different parts of the body and of adjusting the breath as you need to, because as the mind settles down, the way you breathe is going to change or the breathing that feels best for the body will change, so you want to be on top of that. You have to be alert, you have to be mindful to do what needs to be done, and let the pleasure take care of itself.

Secondly, you're learning some important lessons about craving and about how to understand your mind. You'll notice this when the mind wanders off: An image will appear and you'll go into it. In fact, it happens so quickly, usually, that you don't even notice it. All of a sudden you find yourself someplace else. Well, a series of steps went into that. They start with a craving to do something that you particularly like, then a little world will appear around it, and then there will be a sense of yourself going into that world. As long as you're going along with it, you don't notice it. You don't really understand it.

As the Buddha said, if you want to really understand anything in the mind, you have to be able to step back from it, you have to see it as something separate. So, working with the breath, even though you want the pleasure, is a good way of seeing the pleasure as separate. The pleasure is where your craving is aimed but you're not going to focus there. You have to stick with the breath. Try to perfect this skill because it's going to come in really handy as you meditate further, as you try to get more and more insight into what your mind is doing.

Try to get so that when the mind moves, you don't have to move with it. It veers off in a new direction, but you don't veer along with it. You stay right where you are. You'll see that if you don't follow it, that impulse to move will go for a little ways. In the forest tradition, they called that the current of the mind. It'll go for a little ways but then—because you're not

following along with it, you're not pushing it along or riding it—it'll stop. It needs you to jump in for it to keep going, but if you don't go with it, it falls for a little ways, and then it's gone. This way, you begin to see the extent to which you are creating these things. In particular, you learn some interesting lessons about craving.

As I said, we're here meditating because we crave the pleasure it can provide, but we can't go directly to the object of the craving. This is a good lesson in seeing the craving itself as something separate, and it helps you get a clearer idea of where your craving is located.

There's an interesting passage in the Canon where the Buddha says: "Those things that you've never seen or sensed, is there any craving there?" And part of you might say, "Well yes, there are lots of things that I haven't seen that I would like to see." But that's not what the Buddha's asking. The craving isn't located there in the seeing. The craving is located in your thought about the seeing. You want to detect exactly where the craving is so that you can understand it, because that's where the allure for going into a particular mind state is going to be found.

You know those five stages the Buddha advises for dealing with anything coming up in the mind that you know will lead you in the wrong direction. The first is to see its origination. In other words, when it arises, what sparks it? Say you have a desire to go someplace: What brought that desire on? Maybe a feeling in the body or a little image appearing in the mind. A random thought goes through the brain and sparks a new desire. You want to see that, because all too often the things that cause us to do some very unskillful things are pretty minor to begin with—so minor that we hardly even notice them.

With a lot of addicts, there's just a strange feeling in the body and their immediate reaction is, "I need a hit" of whatever the addiction is. Just a little feeling of dis-ease in the body and they immediately run to whatever their addiction is. They can cause themselves a lot of trouble, without realizing that it was just a little word here, a little feeling there, that sparked it. You want to learn how to see that.

You also want to see it disappear. In other words, desires come but they don't last all that long. Our problem is that we dig them up again and keep them going. We push them again, and again, and again. We revive them because we want to get something out of them. But it's important to see that they're not as solid and monolithic as they sometimes seem to be.

Seeing this gives you a handle on these things, because all too often a desire comes up and part of the mind says, "If I don't give in to it, it's just going to get stronger and stronger and stronger until I just can't stand it." What's actually happening is that it comes back, and each time it comes back, you breathe in a certain way around it. That way of breathing becomes habitual, gets associated with the desire, and feels uncomfortable. That's actually what you've got to get out of your system: that uncomfortable breathing. Well, you can do that with the breath, the lessons you learn in calming the breath, adjusting the breath. You don't need to give in to the desire.

So, you want to see these things coming and going, coming and going, and then you want to look for the allure. Why is it that you go for them? Why do you want to go into them? The allure is going to be where your craving is located. It's an interesting idea: the location of craving. In the Buddha's analysis, craving is based on feeling, but where is that feeling based? It can be based in an object, or it can be based in the way you talk to yourself about the object, or the perceptions you hold in mind—what the Buddha calls verbal fabrication and mental fabrication.

Think about advertisements. Often they're not selling the object. They're selling a particular feeling around the object, or an appealing perception around the object. You probably saw that commercial for the BMW Chill a few years back. A guy comes up to the top of an auto-park and he sees his BMW parked among a lot of other jalopies, and a little chill goes through him. He's got the BMW. He's the owner of the BMW. Well, they're not selling the BMW. They're selling that perception, that feeling, the Chill, hoping that you'll associate it with the BMW—and spend all that money to buy a BMW for the sake of the Chill. So you want to be very

clear about exactly where the craving is, because that's where the allure's going to be found.

This is especially clear in relationships. All too often, one person is attracted to another person but doesn't actually like the other person. He or she is attracted to an idea about that person, a perception around the person, or a feeling around the person. Which is often why relationships don't go very well: You didn't want the other person, you wanted the perception. So, to avoid a lot of the problems in life, learn to see where your craving is located, so that you can see through the allure of your unskillful mind states.

This is something that we tend to hide from ourselves, because all too often a lot of the allure is based on things that we really don't want to admit to ourselves. We're attracted to certain things we find embarrassing, so we hide them, not only from others, but also from ourselves. You need to see the allure precisely where it is so that you can compare it to the drawbacks, and again, be very honest with yourself about what the drawbacks are. These, too, we can hide from ourselves. If there's something we really like, we can justify almost anything. If it's harming somebody else, we say, "Well, that person doesn't matter," or "It's not really harming them," or "Their suffering has nothing to do with my actions," and we get into huge denial.

This is why the pleasure of concentration is so important. It gives you an alternative pleasure so that you can look at these other pleasures and be frank about exactly where you like them, and at the same time be very frank about what their drawbacks are. Because it's when you see that the drawbacks really outweigh the allure, that's when you can get to dispassion, the escape from that particular unskillful habit.

So, this process of getting the mind to settle down with the breath as you're creating a sense of pleasure teaches you a lot of lessons about the different activities going on in the mind, the different functions. In particular, it teaches you exactly where your craving is located—and how you don't have to follow along with it. You can see it go, but you don't

follow it. That's how you can help get yourself free from these things. You begin to parse out the different activities of the mind, the directed thought, the evaluation—what the Buddha calls verbal fabrication—along with the perception that holds you with the breath. How do you perceive the breath going through the body? Notice that the way you change that perception will change the way you feel the breath in the body, but the perception and the breath are two different things.

The directed thought and evaluation use the perception but they're different things, too. As you parse these things out, you're in a better position to see where your secret cravings are, where the hidden allure is for the things you do that part of you doesn't like to do, but another part seems to really want to do. This helps you locate where that other part is.

This is why the Buddha said that when you do jhana, or right concentration, you're developing not only tranquility but also insight. The insight and the tranquility help get you into concentration, and the concentration helps sharpen both of these qualities of the mind. This is why we stay with the breath—not because we want to get the breath but because it teaches us so many lessons about the mind, and those are the lessons we really want, that are really worth wanting.

See Yourself as Active Verbs

November 15, 2018

There was a famous scientist who wrote an autobiography entitled, *I Seem to Be an Active Verb.* That sums up a lot of the ways in which the Buddha treats you: that you're active. The mind, he says, is not just sitting there receiving input from outside.

Even before we see things, hear them, smell, taste, touch, or think about them, there's already a lot of activity going out from the mind. The Thai ajaans call these the currents flowing out of the mind. Your intentions, your perceptions, your plans for things: All of these have an impact on how you're going to receive that outside contact. These activities prior to contact determine whether you're going to suffer from the contact or not.

Even the suffering itself, the Buddha says, is an activity. He equates suffering with clinging. Clinging is the act of feeding on things. We're not only on the receiving end of suffering. We tend to think of ourselves as receiving suffering from outside, that we feel the pain that comes from something that's come to hit us. But then we hear the Buddha saying something else entirely: that it's because of the way we act that we suffer. Now, he's not saying that you shouldn't act at all. After all, there's the path, and the path, too, is a path of action. It'll take us to a place beyond action, but it first requires that we act.

That's what we're trying to do right now. We're acting on the present moment. We're shaping it, and we're trying to learn how to shape it well to be part of that path. Bring the mind to the breath, keep thinking about the breath, evaluating the breath. How does it feel right now as you're breathing in? Question the breath: What's going on with it? And what are you doing? How are you relating to the breath?

You're trying to bring the breath and the mind together. Both of these are activities. The way you breathe is an activity, as are the functions of the

mind: the perceptions, the thoughts. How do you get these things to stay together so that breath and mind are acting in concert? That's the skill we're trying to develop right now, because when they act together we become more sensitive to them. It's as if the mind had lots of little minds, and they're all headed out in different directions. They don't know one another very well. But when we bring them all to the breath, we begin to see, "Oh, this is how minds work." They can watch one another.

As you focus on the breath, you notice that a perception helps you stay there—an image you hold in mind. What kind of image do you have? Is it a useful one? One that's really useful, as the mind begins to settle down, is not so much that the breath is coming in from the outside but that there's a breath energy that originates in the body at any of the resting spots that Ajaan Lee describes. Above the navel, the tip of the breast bone, the base of the throat, the palate of the mouth: Those are just a few. Notice when you breathe in: Where does the energy seem to emanate from?

When you hold that perception in mind, your sensation of breathing will change. You'll find it easier to live with the idea that, as the mind begins to settle down, the breath gets very, very subtle—sometimes so subtle that it seems to stop. If you feel that you have to suck the air in from outside, the mind is going to panic, and that'll destroy the concentration. But if you remind yourself that the breath energy is something that originates from inside, and when the mind is really still the brain uses very little oxygen, so the body will breathe only as much as it needs to, then it's easier to stay at ease without the in-and-out breath. The quieter the breath, the greater the sense of stillness inside. The breath is already there, filling the body, so you don't need to pull anything in from outside. That's a good perception to hold in mind.

All of these are things we do: the perceiving, the breathing, the thinking. We're trying to bring them together here in a way that gives rise to a sense of well-being that's solid and also allows us to watch the mind and see in which ways we're creating our suffering.

The Buddha equates suffering with clinging to the five aggregates. The aggregates are form, feeling, perception, mental fabrications, and consciousness—all of which the Buddha defines with verbs. Form, he says, deforms. In other words, in the form of your body there's nothing static. Feelings feel: pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain. Perceptions perceive. Thought fabrications fabricate, and consciousness cognizes. These are all verbs, and we cling to them. The act of clinging is also a verb. We've got verbs holding on to verbs. What that means is that they're activities we like to do repeatedly.

The problem is that all too often we get some measure of pleasure out of them, but we also create a lot of suffering and stress in the process, and we tend to turn a blind eye to the stress. The Buddha, here, is asking us to turn around and look at it directly. There's stress in the clinging, in this repeatedly having to hold on to particular activities, and he points out four ways in which we cling. One is clinging to sensuality. That's our fascination, not so much with sensual objects themselves, but with our sensual fantasies, plans, and resolves: "I'd like to have this pleasure, I'd like to have that pleasure—well, no, how about this one." We can design them as we like for hours, our pleasures, and in the realm of our imagination we have pretty much free rein to do so.

This is what the Buddha says we're attached to, much more than to the actual objects, which is one of the reasons we suffer so much. Say you get into a relationship with someone else. You have plans about how good it's going to be, but the actual person is very different from your plans. That's one of the ways in which we suffer.

Then there's suffering over what the Buddha calls clinging to habits and practices. We have certain habits that we're pretty committed to, regardless of whether they really work or not. We're not going to change, and sometimes we even believe that sticking with certain habits, certain rituals, or certain ways of behaving will guarantee happiness. But all too often, those habits have little to do with happiness at all. It's just that we're

familiar with them. They're like old shoes that are not very good for your foot but, because you've worn them for so long, that's what you're used to.

Then there's clinging to views, particularly views about how the world is this way or should be that way. This includes views about politics—you can get all fired up about those. People create a lot of suffering for themselves over these issues.

And then the fourth kind of clinging is to views about yourself, the way you define yourself. You're this kind of person, you're that kind of person. You exist, you don't exist. You're finite. You're infinite. As the Buddha said, when you define yourself—even as infinite—you limit yourself.

I've known people who say that human beings are simply conditioned biological organisms. Or yesterday I read about someone saying that we're all algorithms. What can an algorithm know about the deathless? What can a biological organism, which is caused and conditioned, know about the unconditioned? Once you define yourself like that, you place huge limitations on yourself.

So, these are some of the ways in which we cling and in which we suffer. The Buddha said that if you learn how not to do these things, though, you don't suffer. That's his basic solution.

But his solution is strategic. After all, he recommends views, habits and practices, and even ways of fostering a sense of yourself that are all provisionally skillful parts of the path. The path does involve some clinging. It, too, is an activity. The only thing the Buddha doesn't recommend clinging to at all is sensuality. This fascination you have with what kind of sensual pleasures you want, he says, you put aside. Go with the other three.

- You learn good habits and practices: following the precepts, and learning the habit of practicing meditation, practicing concentration.

- You adopt right views about action, that you do have some freedom of choice here in the present moment.

When describing the Buddha's awakening, the compilers of the Canon talk about how he saw the universe on the night of his awakening, beings dying and being reborn from all different levels of the heavens all the way down to the hells. But there are very few descriptions of the heavens and the hells in the Canon, and the descriptions that are there are not complete. The Buddha didn't go into describing those things. What he did do, when he summarized his awakening, was to boil it down to a principle of causality: the principle that lies behind our actions. And one of the main features of that principle is that even though your past actions play some role in shaping the present moment, they don't play a total role. You do have some choices here and now, which is why we're able to follow the path to begin with.

If everything were predetermined by past actions, you'd just have to roll along with their results, whatever they were, and you wouldn't be responsible for what was happening or what you're doing right now. The fact that you *do* have some role in shaping right now is what provides the opportunity for us to practice. So that's a view the Buddha has us develop.

And also the view that it is possible through our actions to arrive at something where there is no action, where there is no conditioning, where there is no fabrication at all: That's a view the Buddha has you take on as a working hypothesis.

• As for your sense of self, he doesn't define what you are. Sometimes you hear it said that the Buddha defines you as the five aggregates, but he says, no, the aggregates aren't you. They're what you're *doing*. You're defining yourself in terms of those five aggregates, whichever activities you hold on to. Sometimes you identify yourself with your feelings, sometimes with the images you have in your mind, sometimes with your thinking, sometimes with your body, sometimes with your awareness or a combination of any of these. But that's not how the Buddha defines you. In fact, he doesn't define you at all. He doesn't have to. You're already defining yourself.

Still, he does tell you to develop a sense of yourself as competent, that you can follow the path. He also recommends having a sense of love for yourself, in the sense that you don't want to act in any way that would cause you harm down the line. And if you really care about yourself, you're also not going to cause harm to any other people at all, because if you can harm them, then there's going to be trouble coming back. If your happiness depends on their misery, they're not going to stand for it. Even if they can't get you, your kamma will, at least to some extent.

Identify yourself with the thoughts in the mind that say, "I want to find a happiness that's harmless; I want to find a happiness that's reliable," and have a sense that you can do this, that you can depend on yourself. You can develop the qualities. You have these potentials within you and you can develop them so that you can find that happiness.

These are assumptions that the Buddha has you take on about yourself.

So the path does involve some clinging, but it's provisional. When you've completed the path, then you can put it aside. Even your sense of who you are, you can put that aside at that point, too. In fact, everything gets put aside; everything gets dropped.

In total awakening, there is no clinging at all. In fact, that's how awakening happens: It's from lack of clinging that people find release. But you have to cling to the path to get to that point. What this means is that you keep doing again and again the things that the Buddha recommends, the activities that he advises you to do. The habits and practices he teaches, the views about the world: Those are activities made out of thoughts and perceptions. Your sense of yourself is an activity too. You try to do these things in line with the Buddha's recommendations, and they'll take you to a spot where you can finally put them aside.

The image in the Canon is of a person taking a raft across a river. While on the river, you have to hold on to the raft so that the river doesn't wash you away, but once you get to the other side you don't have to pick up the raft and carry it on your head. You just leave the raft there at the side of the river and you can go your way. Once you've solved this problem of the way

you make suffering, you're free. There may be other issues you want to take up in life, but the big issue has been solved. And it is *the* big issue, because if you don't create suffering out of anything, there will be no suffering in your mind at all. Nothing from outside can come in and make you suffer.

So, when the Buddha says we suffer in the clinging, it does throw some responsibility on us, but also gives us the freedom not to suffer. After all, if the suffering were coming from outside, then—given that there are so many things outside that we can't control—the suffering would never end. But because it is an activity we do and it is an activity we don't have to do, that's why it is possible to have a path of practice that leads to suffering's end.

What Am I Becoming?

December 31, 2019

Here we are at the end of the year. As you meditate, you should remember that and forget it. You forget it in the sense that the practice itself is *akaliko,* timeless. The principles are the same whether it's the beginning of the year, the end of the year, or the middle of the year. You're trying to develop mindfulness, keeping the breath in mind; and alertness, watching the breath: What's it doing right now? And how is your mind relating to the breath? You're also developing ardency: You want to do this well because it's the only path out.

So is the breath comfortable? If it's not comfortable, you can change it. Is the mind staying with the breath? If it's not, is it a problem with the breath or with the mind? You've got time to check these things out. Experiment with different kinds of breathing; experiment with different places of focusing your mind. If the mind's hung up on some issue from the day, learn how to think about that issue in a way that helps you put it aside, so that the mind can settle in with the breath and have a sense of well-being, a sense of belonging here.

All of these principles are timeless. But at the same time, it's good to think of the passage of time. The Buddha has you reflect every day: "Days and nights fly past, fly past, what am I becoming right now?" You can think back to where you were this time last year. How are you different now? Hopefully, you've improved in the practice. But take stock. What are you becoming? Because what you're doing, what you're clinging to, determines what you become.

We know that clinging is the cause of suffering, but clinging also plays a part in the path, and learning how to figure out which kind of clinging is good for you, and which kind of clinging is not, is a useful exercise in developing discernment on the path.

There are four kinds of clinging in all. The first one is sensual clinging and that has no role in the path. That's clinging to your fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures—how this would taste good or how that would look good, this would smell good; you'd like to eat this, you'd like to see that. You can think about these things for long periods of time and you can cling to the pleasure that that kind of thinking can give, but it doesn't help you on the path.

Now, there will be sensual pleasures on the path. You can't totally do without them. But your fascination with planning for them and then reminiscing about how great that pleasure was, how great this pleasure was: That gets in the way of the path because you need to drop sensuality to develop right concentration here, which is something you can actually cling to in a beneficial way—clinging to habits and practices.

You have to make a distinction. Which habits and practices do you cling to that are getting in the way? Which ones do you cling to that are actually helpful? Clinging to the practice of meditation is not a bad thing. There will come a day when you let go of all clinging, but in the meantime —to get there—you have to hold on.

Think of the image of the raft. You put together a raft out of twigs and leaves. It may not look pretty. In other words, it's something you fabricate, something you put together. We're not sitting here waiting for the nibbana yacht to come over from the other shore to pick us up and take us back. We have to put together a raft out of what we've got here. We've got the breath; we've got directed thought and evaluation. These are things we're doing all the time: breathing in, breathing out; thinking about this, evaluating that. So we take these things we're doing all the time and we point them in the right direction. We've got perceptions and images in the mind; feelings that we develop through the way we breathe. These, too, are things we're doing all the time. But if we get them in line with the practice, they can become part of the path. You hold on to the raft as you make an effort with your hands and feet, as the Buddha said, to swim across. If you let go of the raft, you get swept away.

So you want to have a daily practice of training the mind to settle down. View it as something that's as important to you as anything else that you would do on a daily basis—actually, more important. After all, you brush your teeth every day, you eat every day, why can't you look after your mind every day? Try to hold on to this practice as something of essential worth. It's your good food. When the Buddha talks about clinging, the word he uses can also mean taking sustenance. This is your nourishment for skillful becomings. The more you engage in the practice of the precepts and the practice of meditation, the more you become a meditator, the more you become a practitioner—and that's a good thing to become.

The same with clinging to views: Views can cause you suffering or they can be part of the path, as when you hold on to the right views, understanding suffering correctly. What kind of suffering is causing your problems? What kind of pain is causing your problems? What kind of pain is not really the problem? As the Buddha pointed out, there are things in the world you have to accept. The body ages. It gets ill. It dies. These are things we can sometimes push off for a little while, but ultimately they're going to have to happen no matter who you are. As long as you're a being, the Buddha says, you have to experience aging, illness, and death. The question is, do you have to suffer from them? No. That's where you can make a difference. And you have to hold on to that view. Otherwise, you drift back to blaming your suffering on things outside, thinking of yourself as a victim of outside events—and that doesn't help on the path at all.

Regardless of whatever bad things there are out in the world—and we don't deny that there are bad things out there—the important issue is to realize that the extent to which you're suffering from them has to do with your own lack of skill in dealing with them. As long as you hold on to that view, it's not laying blame on you, it's actually offering you hope that you can stop suffering. After all, if you had to change the world to be just the way you want it, forcing everybody to fall in line with your ideas, you would never come to the end of things. But realizing that suffering is something you're doing—it's an active verb, it's coming from actions

you're doing but you don't have to do them: That's the view that helps you find a way out, so that's the view you want to cling to.

So again, are you clinging to right view? Are you becoming a person of right view? That's one thing you can become as days and nights fly past. You can ask yourself to what extent you move back and forth, sometimes blaming things outside, sometimes admitting that you're the agent that's causing the suffering. To what extent are you heading more and more in the direction of right view? That's something worth taking stock of every day, every day, every month, every year.

Then there's clinging to doctrines of the self. On the one hand, this can lead to all kinds of suffering as you identify with something and then feel you've got to protect it. When the Buddha talks about self, he's not referring only to the idea of a permanent self. There's also the idea of the self that could die at the end of the life of the body. It's not the case that you can cling only to the idea of a permanent self or you can suffer only from the idea of a permanent self. In fact, people who hold to the idea that what they are is something that'll be annihilated at death, get very attached. They'll do anything not to die. Even people who have a fluid idea about their gender, about their identity, hold on very tightly to that. There's a lot of suffering there, too.

"Self" is however you define yourself. If you cling to the wrong ways of defining yourself, you're just going to cause more and more suffering. But if you cling to skillful ideas of self—that you're capable, you're responsible, you're the kind of person who can learn, a person who's not stuck in his or her bad habits, who can recognize bad habits for what they are and be willing to make the change: That idea of self is a good one to hold on to because it opens the path instead of closing it.

So as days and nights fly past, fly past, the question is: What are you holding on to? And how consistently are you holding on to practices, views, ideas of yourself that are helpful on the path? The more consistently you can hold on in these ways, the better, because otherwise you're going to hold on to the old ways that pull you down.

In other words, you've got the twigs and the leaves and the branches on this shore and you just hold on to them right here. You don't make them into a raft. You cling to the trees. Maybe you hug the trees. But as the Buddha said, staying on this shore is a dangerous place. There are vipers coming after you, and thieves waiting to plunder you. In other words, you've got the sufferings that come from the aggregates, you've got the sufferings that come from the six sense spheres, you've got the sufferings from your greed, aversion, and delusion. These things are going to harass and plunder you as much as they can as long as you're on this shore. The only safe course of action is to get to the other shore.

So what are you becoming? Are you becoming the person who stays here and builds huts out of the twigs and branches, saying, "Let's create an ideal world here on this shore"? Or are you going to build a raft and cling to it while you make the effort to get across? These are choices you make every day, every time you breathe in, every time you breathe out. You make them at the end of the year, you make them at the beginning of the year, you make them in the middle of the year. So try to become timeless in the way you hold on to the path, so that regardless of which day of the year the question is asked—"What am I becoming right now?"—the answer is, "I'm becoming a Dhamma practitioner. I'm becoming a person on the path who stays on the path."

Ajaan Lee has a nice passage about how most people straddle two different paths: the path to the end of suffering and the path that leads to more suffering. When you straddle two paths like that, it's a very awkward position to be in—and a very uncomfortable one. It's better than someone who's totally on the path to more and more suffering, but still you don't get full advantage of the path that could take you away from suffering.

So try to be the kind of person who's always on the right path. If you're going to cling, cling to the things that help you get on the path and stay there so that when the Buddha asks you—"Days and nights are flying past, flying past, what are you becoming right now?"—you can give him an answer you'd be proud to give.

Willing to Learn

January 24, 2019

The Buddha talks a lot about the process of becoming, which is a combination of two things: one, a particular world of experience; and two, your identity in that world, your sense of who you are, what your capabilities are. And the two are very dependent on each other.

You see this particularly when you go into a new place where the language is different, culture is different, and all of a sudden you become very sensitive to the fact that who you are is not as clear as it was back in your old world: which of your talents from the old world are still useful and which ones are going to have to be changed if you're going to live happily in this new world.

The same process happens when you come to the Dhamma. It's like a different world, a different culture. The Buddha actually calls it "the culture of the noble ones." And a lot of its assumptions are very different from the world of secular life out there. Here we have rebirth; we have kamma. The training of the mind is the big value. Money is not the big value. The way people interact is a little bit different.

And so in the beginning, it's very normal to feel awkward. There are things you're enthusiastic about but other things you're very unsure about. And you're going to be changing as a person as you come into this world: sorting through your old habits and talents, trying to figure out which ones are still useful and which ones are not.

But one part of your self that you want to hold on to—and you will be fashioning a sense of self as you practice—is your willingness to learn. If you're going to take pride and have a sense of confidence in yourself, that's where you want to place it. Some people come into a situation and they like to pretend that they know everything already, that they can bluff their way through anything. But that doesn't help. They don't learn anything. If,

however, you're afraid to do anything at all for fear of making a mistake, then you don't learn that way, either. It's to be expected that there are going to be mistakes.

It's like learning a new language. You trip over the grammar; you trip over the vocabulary. And oftentimes the most memorable lessons come from making a big mistake that burns itself into your memory for a long time. We've had examples here with the monks trying to learn Thai or French. But you can't let the mistakes get you down. You've got to decide: "This is something really valuable here. I want to master these skills." And you can have some confidence that as you master the skills and are paying careful attention, with that desire to learn you're going to become a different person, a person who feels at home in this new world.

What does it mean to be willing to learn? The Buddha lists three types of discernment that you're going to need: the discernment that comes from listening, the discernment that comes from thinking, and the discernment that comes from developing. They're usually ranked with the discernment coming from developing as the really important one, but all three of them help one another along. It's not the case that you listen and then you think and then you just work on developing the mind without ever thinking or listening anymore. You still have to listen, and you have to think even as you're developing qualities in the practice. It's through the combination of those three things that you learn.

Now, a lot of people have problems mixing those together. Some people are really good at just listening and doing as they're told. Other people refuse to do as they are told until they've thought it through and come up with their own ideas. But it's important that you learn how both to listen and to think.

Toward the end of his life, Ajaan Maha Boowa was recorded as saying that Ajaan Lee was Ajaan Mun's favorite student. When you look at Ajaan Lee's life, you can see why. He was the kind of person who would listen and think in addition to meditating. That's how he wrote all those books. And he was constantly interested in new things. Ajaan Fuang once told me

that he thought it was a shame that Ajaan Lee hadn't met me. Here I was, someone with a Western education, and Ajaan Lee would have really picked my brain. He was always interested in learning.

When he was abbot of the monastery in Chanthaburi, a new magazine, *Dhammacaksu,* had come out. The monks in Bangkok were in the process of translating the Pali Canon into Thai, and they published a magazine of articles along with some new sutta translations as they were being produced. Ajaan Lee was a subscriber. Once a month, the magazine would come, and for the next couple of nights Ajaan Lee would simply read the magazine out loud during the group meditation.

So it's not the case that you learn a few basic concepts and then forget about the books and just meditate, or that you just do as you're told. You have to think some things through. Then, as you meditate, you've got to think through the results of what you've done and try to make sense of where you are, what you've learned.

This may have been another characteristic that Ajaan Mun liked about Ajaan Lee. On the one hand, Ajaan Mun would give Ajaan Lee a really difficult assignment—like sitting up all night many nights in a row—and Ajaan Lee would simply do it. On the other hand, though, he noticed that Ajaan Lee also had a mind that liked to put things together to make sense out of them. As he told Ajaan Lee, he didn't see anybody else who could help put the different principles of the practice into order.

That's what we see in Ajaan Lee's books, what they call *lak wichaa* in Thai: the principles of knowledge or the principles of skill. They require that you have that kind of quality: First, you listen. Second, you try to put things together, to make sense out of them. And then third, you actually try to take what you've learned, put it into practice, and be very honest with yourself about the results that are actually developing. Then take those results and think about them again: Where are they still good? Where are they lacking?

This is how we put all those three aspects of discernment together: listening, thinking, and developing. Ajaan Lee explains how we do this

with analogies of developing skills. He says you learn from the teacher, say, how to weave a basket or how to sew a pair of pants, how to make clay tiles. Then you think about it, and then you do it, and then you think about it again. You look at the example from the teacher and you look at your product: Where is yours still lacking? What does it look like you did wrong? Then you work at it again, and keep observing. Eventually, as you keep this up, you can go beyond what you simply learned from the teacher and you start thinking of new ways of using that skill.

When you meditate, you learn the instructions on how to breathe, how to work with the breath. Then you try them out and look at what you've got. If the results aren't good, go back and look at what you're doing again. Think about it. What's still missing? Try to be observant. Look around. Ask questions if you can't figure things out—and don't be afraid to ask questions.

One of the things the Buddha prided himself on was that the teaching he gave was a teaching where you could cross-question the teacher, and he encouraged that. He said, "This is a community where people are encouraged to cross-question," in other words, to ask people about what they've said, and be willing to engage in a dialogue.

The purpose of that, of course, is to get you to ask questions of yourself. After all, that's how the Buddha gained awakening. He looked at what he was doing. He said, "The results are not what I want. So what am I doing wrong?" He went back and looked at his actions. He had to think his way through: "What might be wrong here? What could I change?" Then he tried that out. And it was through trial-and-error that he finally reached trial-and-success. You look at the many setbacks he had: Most people would have given up. But the pride he took in his willingness to learn was what saw him through.

So as you move into the world of the Dhamma, the culture of the noble ones, you're not expected to know everything. In fact, you're expected to learn how to listen. And "listen" doesn't mean simply listening to the words. You notice actions. You actually try to memorize some things that

seem important. After all, when you meditate you can't have a book put out in front of you. When you listen to Dhamma talks while you meditate, there are a lot of things in a particular Dhamma talk that won't be relevant to your meditation right now, but it's good to have them someplace in the back of your mind, in case they'll be relevant later on. So when something seems important, memorize it. That's how you listen.

Then you think about what you've learned and how it fits in with what you've learned before, to see where it seems to fit and where it doesn't seem to fit. That's when you ask questions, either asking someone else or telling yourself, "Well, I'm going to put it into practice and see if there's a real conflict here, or if things actually fit together."

It's in this way that you grow. As you master more and more skills, you become a different person. The skills allow you to function in this new world, the world of the Dhamma. But simply having the skills doesn't necessarily mean that you're going to be successful. There are some people who find it very easy to get the mind to settle down, with no big deal. Other people can read books and immediately explain what they've read. That doesn't make that much of an impact, either. It's when you really stop to listen and think and develop and then think again with as much honesty as you can bring, with all your powers of observation—that's when you grow. That's when the skill makes you a new person. You find that you develop a new identity that really is helpful in the world of the Dhamma. There will come a day when you don't need that identity anymore. But in the meantime, use it and develop it as best you can.

Insight Is a Judgment Call

February 21, 2017

As you focus on your breath, try to figure out the best way to focus on the breath. This is a quality called evaluation. It's pretty simple. You're with the breath, but there are lots of ways of breathing and lots of ways of being with the breath: where you're going to focus in the body; how long the breathing's going to be, how short, heavy, light, shallow, deep; what image of the breath you're going to hold in mind. There are lots of options. Which means there's lots of room to play. But the "play," here, has a serious purpose. We're trying to get the mind as firmly established as possible with a sense of well-being, a sense of balance.

So experiment. If you're not sure if one breathing method feels better than another, stick with it for a while and see what it does to the body, see what it does to the mind. Then change and try another way for a while. You could spend the whole hour doing this.

As you do this, you're getting more sensitive to what you're doing and to the results of what you're doing, right here, right now—and also more sensitive to what it feels like to have a sense of well-being in the body. In the beginning, it's going to be pretty ordinary, sitting here without any pains. Or if there are pains in the body, focus on the parts that are not, but they're going to seem pretty ordinary. Yet if you give them some space, give them some time, you begin to see that the breath energy going through the body can have an impact: either tensing things up or helping things to relax; giving energy or taking energy away. And that sensitivity is what you want to get more and more attuned to, because you're going to use it to make judgments in other areas of your life as well.

That's what the practice is all about: making judgments. We hear so much about how meditation is about learning how to be non-judging, but I can't find that idea anywhere in the Buddha's teachings. He meant

evaluation to be a kind of judgment, and you want to develop that quality of the mind so that you can use it skillfully—so that you can be judicious in your judgments, rather than judgmental, and also sensitive to what you're doing. Because it's what we're doing that ties us down.

The Buddha's image is of a fire. The fire clings to its fuel and, as long as it's burning, it's trapped by its fuel. When it goes out, that's when it's released from the fuel. It goes out, not because the fuel lets go of the fire, but because the fire lets go of the fuel. That's how they understood the process of fire in his time, and that's the analogy the Buddha applied to the mind. We're holding on to things that are making us suffer. How do we get released from them? We don't wait for them to let us go. We learn to let *them* go. And we do that by passing judgment on what we're doing as to whether it's worth doing or not.

The Buddha illustrates this with the analogy of a bronze cup filled with a beverage that looks very enticing. In one case, the beverage is healthy for you; in the other case, the beverage can kill you, or at least cause you a lot of pain. Thirsty people come along, and the vendors of the beverage say to each of the people, "Okay, here's this beverage which is good for you, and here's this beverage which is poisonous." Sometimes they don't give you the choice, it's just the poisonous beverage. And they say, "You're thirsty? Well, here's this poisonous beverage. It looks very enticing and it's in a nice bronze cup. It's going to taste very nice as you drink it, but it's going to make you sick, bringing about death or death-like pain." As the Buddha said, it's the wise person who will say, "No, there are other things I could drink. I'll put up with my thirst for the time being." The unwise person will take the beverage. He doesn't care about the consequences because he's so thirsty.

That's the problem with most of us: We're so thirsty for things that we grab on to anything without thinking of the long-term payback. We do all kinds of things because we think it's worth it. Or, if we think of the payback down the line, we say, "I'll deal with that later, but I want something that I like right now." The ability to say No to things like that is a measure of your

wisdom, a measure of your discernment, and it comes down to seeing what's worth doing, what's not.

Like the fact that you're meditating right here, right now: You probably didn't think about meditating as soon as you came out of your mother's womb. It's taken time and a lot of experience for you to realize that this is something you'd actually want to do: to sit here in one position for an hour with your eyes closed, focusing on your breath. I've encountered a lot of people who, even though they've been through a lot of suffering in life, would never want to do this.

A woman once came here at the invitation of a friend, and the two of them joined in a group sit for an hour out under the trees at the outdoor classroom. It was a lovely day. The temperature was just right, not too hot, not too cold, with a little bit of a breeze. But after she came out of the meditation, the woman said, "I've never suffered so much in my life." In another case, I was invited back to teach meditation at my old college. One of the students, after fifteen minutes, came out of meditation and complained that he had been going through severe sensory deprivation. He was totally disoriented. So, a lot of people don't see what we're doing right now as worth it. In fact, they see it as something they'd want to run away from.

But we've begun to see that the question of whether we're going to be happy in life or suffering in life is going to depend on the quality of our mind. How do you develop the quality of your mind? Through strengthening mindfulness and alertness. You strengthen those qualities by sitting here, trying to stay with the breath. You develop a lot of good qualities this way. This is how your discernment develops.

Things that you used to see as worth doing, the games you used to play as a child, the things you did when you were a teenager: As you grow up and get more mature, you realize they're not worth it. Whereas things that as a child, as a teenager, might never have appealed to you, suddenly make a lot of sense because you've been observant. Well, that's the principle that carries you all the way through the practice. You learn to be more and

more discerning about what you're doing, the results, and what's worth doing, what's not worth doing.

When the Buddha talks about insight, *vipassana,* he doesn't teach a technique. He calls vipassana a quality of the mind, a clear-seeing quality of the mind. And what does it see? It sees things as they arise, along with what's making them arise, and then sees them as they pass away. At the same time, while it watches things arise, it begins to see their allure: why you want to go with them. It sees their drawbacks and it weighs the drawbacks against the allure. Then, when it sees that the drawbacks outweigh the allure, it can find an escape through dispassion.

That's how insight works. It passes judgment. Judiciously. It's simply a question of how sensitive you are and what options you see. If something is the best possible thing, if you think the poison in the cup is the only thing you can find to drink, you might go for it. But when you realize that there are better options, you'll be less and less likely to go for the things with drawbacks. You want something whose allure doesn't contain any poison.

As you're sitting here meditating, working on your evaluation, working on figuring out what the mind wants to go for right now, the Buddha's image for what you're doing is of a cook who's sensitive to what his master likes. The foolish cook just keeps producing food and doesn't really notice what the master eats, what he likes, what he praises. The intelligent cook listens, notices. Sometimes he doesn't even have to listen, he just watches: What does the master reach for? What does he take again and again? Okay, make more of that. The same with your mind: You've got to learn how to observe your mind. What does the mind go for as you try to get it settled down with the breath? What kind of breathing does it like? What kind of breathing does it not like? Where does it like to be focused?

Observe these things. Then observe what could be better in terms of getting the mind more solidly settled down. What are the activities you're doing that don't need to be done? Sometimes we find that we're breathing mechanically simply because we feel the need, or that we're obliged to

breathe with a certain amount of strength and energy put into the breath. But what if calmer breathing were better?

And how do you calm the breathing down without suppressing it? Well, you connect all the breath energies in the body, and when everything's connected, you can be very still with that. The need to breathe grows weaker and weaker, and at the same time the body is filled with good breath energy. You've developed a sense of well-being that's more solid. It requires more care in getting it and maintaining it, but at the same time, a lot less energy has to go into it. The payback is a lot bigger. You keep doing that. Noticing, noticing, noticing. Observing. Experimenting. That's how your sensitivity develops as to what's worth doing and what's not.

This is one of the big problems in life: We have a very bad sense of judgment as to what's really worth doing. You drive up the road to Las Vegas and you see the big signs advertising "93% payback rate." People keep going there week after week, even though the signs are basically telling them, "You give us a dollar and we'll give you 93 cents back." Somehow the thrill is worth it, thinking that maybe someday they'll give us more than the dollar. A few people get more than the dollar, but most people don't. That's why it's a 93% payback rate.

There are so many things in life where we dress things up to seem a lot more attractive than they really are. We fool ourselves, and part of the mind likes to be fooled. But there should be another part of the mind that says, "I've had enough. I want something better." That's the part of the mind you want to listen to. That's the part of the mind that'll get you to release.

Because that's what release is: the mind letting go through its discernment of what's not worth doing anymore. You get there by taking that question and consistently pursuing it further and further in. You try to see: What's the best thing that the mind can fabricate? There are some very subtle states of concentration, very strong, and as you develop them, you find yourself getting attached to them. But that's okay, because that

attachment allows you to let go of attachments, say, to sensuality, to unskillful thoughts, or even to weaker and less subtle states of concentration. You finally get to the point where the level of concentration is the best thing that fabrication can offer. And you begin to see that this, too, has its drawbacks.

That's when the mind is really willing to give the unfabricated a try. It sees its potential value for happiness. Up to that point, there's something about lack of fabrication that scares the mind. But there comes a point where the mind is no longer scared, and that's when it can let go.

It starts with this ability to evaluate: What are you doing? What are the results? Are they worth it? What might be better? If you keep those questions in mind, they'll take you all the way.

The Meaning of Insight

September 1, 2019

As you sit here, you'll be making choices for the entire hour. The primary choice will be whether to stay with the breath. You made up your mind at the beginning of the session that that's what you're going to do. See what happens when you stick with that decision. Each time the question comes up and there's a little stirring of a thought in the mind, choose to come back to the breath. Let the thought go, unless it's a thought related to the breath and helpful for getting the mind to settle down.

The mind is always making choices, both when you're meditating and when you're not. In fact, that's its primary activity: choosing what to do. As the Buddha says, we fabricate the aggregates for the sake of using them. So that gives us two things right there: goals—what the Buddha calls *attha*—and means toward the goals. This is the way the mind functions. This is the way it gropes through the world, learning about things, learning what works, what doesn't work, which kinds of goals are possible, which ones are not.

It's because of this activity that life has meaning. If we weren't making any choices, if we were machines—spinning wheels with no alternative but to keep on spinning—there'd be no meaning to it at all. This is one of the reasons why the word for "goal" in Pali is also the word for "meaning": *attha.* We look for meanings, instructions, or advice on what are good goals and on what's worth doing, what's not worth doing, for the sake of those goals.

Think of the meaning of words. There are some cases where the meanings get translated into other words and that satisfies you, but in other cases, you start thinking: What is the meaning of the fact that we have language? It's one of our tools for finding what we want *beyond* the words. If something gets us to what we want, then it has meaning. That's

where the meaning of words goes beyond other words. Life itself, in that case, has meaning. You could say that we live by meanings.

I've been reading an account of Knud Rasmussen going by dog sled across northern North America. He was interviewing shamans, storytellers, and poets among the Inuit, and he was always interested in how they interpreted the meanings of their stories. There was one storyteller who told him a story about a fox and a wolf. The fox tells the wolf that he's learned how to use his tail to catch fish. The wolf wants to know how to do that. He'd like to have some extra fish in his diet. So the fox says, "Well, you dig a hole in the ice, then you stick your tail down into the hole, and if you feel anything nibbling at the end of the tail, you pull it out, and there you've got your fish."

So the wolf does as he's told, and the fox gets out of there as fast as he can, because he knows what's going to happen. The wolf's tail gets frozen into the ice. So what does he do? He has to bite off his tail. Of course, he's furious at the fox and he goes looking for him. The fox sees him coming, so he takes some leaves and he holds them in front of his eyes, so that the wolf can't recognize him. The wolf comes up to him and says, "Have you seen that other fox?" And the fox says, "I'm sorry, I haven't seen anything. I'm snow-blind right now, which is why I have to hold these leaves in front of my eyes." The wolf believes him and goes away. End of story.

Rasmussen asked the storyteller, "What is the meaning of *that* story?" And the storyteller said, "Why do you have to have a meaning? This is the problem with you white people: You have to have meanings for things." Well, in one way the storyteller was right, and in another way he was wrong. If the story were totally meaningless, if it weren't amusing, if it weren't entertaining, there would be no purpose in telling it. It does have a purpose, which is entertainment. But it doesn't have a moral, aside from teaching you to be really careful around foxes.

For the most part, though, our best stories do have meanings in the sense of telling us about how to conduct our lives. Those are the satisfying stories, the stories that give us some sense of direction, some advice on

what's a good attitude to take toward life. So it's only natural that we look for the meanings of things, which we can then translate into how we make choices in our lives. This is why the Dhamma has an *attha,* a meaning, a purpose. It's designed to satisfy that desire. It gives us a worthwhile goal. And it teaches us the means to the goal, what's worth doing that will take us to the goal.

That's what insight is all about: teaching us what's worth doing for the sake of a really high level goal—putting an end to suffering. Sometimes you hear insight defined as just seeing the nature of things. Well, what good is that, unless there's something about the nature of things that you can put into action to serve your purposes? That's why the Buddha's basic teachings for insight are the four noble truths. First, he teaches the problem, suffering. Then he teaches the cause of the problem, and then the means for solving the problem, in other words, the noble eightfold path. The result is that you arrive at the cessation of the problem, the cessation of suffering, the third noble truth. That's the goal.

When you see the goal, then you know that you really have gained insight and you've used your insight properly. This is why stream-entry is defined as attaining the noble eightfold path, and why the crucial factor of the noble eightfold path is right view, the four noble truths. A person who's attained the stream is said to be consummate in view. In other words, you've really seen all four truths.

There's another description of stream-entry as seeing that whatever is subject to origination is all subject to passing away. It sounds like you're simply seeing the nature of things to come and go. But you have to stop and think: What is the state of mind to which that insight would naturally occur? If it's just a generalization about how life has been so far—everything you've seen so far seems to come and go—it's a pretty sloppy observation. You can't prove that it applies to everything. The only time you can prove it is if you see something that's *not* subject to origination, and you see that that doesn't pass away. When Sariputta attained his first experience of the Dhamma eye, he then went to tell Moggallana. This was

before they had met the Buddha. Moggallana sees him coming from afar and says, "Your complexion is clear, your faculties are bright. Have you seen the deathless?" And Sariputta says, "Yes."

It's from seeing the deathless that you can look back on things that are not deathless, and you realize that the difference is that they are subject to origination and passing away, whereas the deathless is not.

It's in seeing this that insight becomes complete. And this is what insight is good for. This is what it means. Sometimes you hear that insight is seeing things in terms of the three characteristics. But then the three characteristics or, more properly, the three perceptions: What are they good for? If you simply say, "Well, everything is impermanent," what does that tell you about what to do? You could take that observation and do all kinds of things with it. You could decide that nothing is worth striving for at all, so you might as well give up. In other words, that insight on its own can be used for very defeatist purposes. Or you could use it for hedonistic purposes, to justify going for whatever pleasure is within your reach while it lasts.

Actually, you use these perceptions properly when you put them in the context of the four noble truths, or more specifically in the context of the analysis the Buddha recommends for gaining escape from the forms of suffering included in the first noble truth. You see their origination, you see their passing away, you see their allure, and then you see their drawbacks. It's in the context of trying to see their drawbacks that you apply those three perceptions: You look to see the extent to which the things you cling to are inconstant, stressful, and not-self so that you can develop dispassion for them. That dispassion is going to be your escape to the deathless.

Those observations have meaning only in the larger context of the meaning of the Dhamma, the goal of the Dhamma, its *attha*. This is why, when the Buddha described his awakening, he never mentioned the three characteristics, or even the three perceptions. They're there implicitly in terms of the duties of the four noble truths, under the insight into the

drawbacks of the things to which you cling, the insight that's for the sake of developing dispassion. But the Buddha never explicitly mentions them. He's explicit about the four noble truths, though. He says that when you see those truths and see them clearly—in the same way that a person standing on the bank of a pool of limpid water would look into the pool and see the fish moving around and resting in the water: When you see all four noble truths clearly in that way, that's when insight has shown what it's good for. That's what its *attha* is, its purpose is.

So we're here not to learn so much about the nature of things outside. We're here more to learn about the actions of the mind as it's making choices, and which choices are worth making to get to a goal that doesn't serve as a means to anything else.

That's when we find something that really satisfies the heart and mind, something with intrinsic meaning. This meaning doesn't point to something else or serve a purpose for the sake of something else. It's the one thing for whose sake we do everything else. We all want true happiness. That's what we're groping around in the world for, as we make our choices and then learn from them—or sometimes don't learn from them. The Buddha simply gives instructions on how to go about learning in the most effective way.

So use appropriate attention. Ask the right questions. Look at your actions. Train the mind so that it can see its actions and their results really clearly. That's why we're here right now. The breath is here to train the mind. We train the mind for the sake of true happiness. These are all means to a goal, although you don't get to the goal by focusing on the goal or trying to clone the goal. You get there by paying attention to the means and doing them really carefully. Still, it's good to have in the back of the mind the realization that the practice does serve a purpose, and to have a general idea of what that purpose is. Because that's what gives meaning to the practice and keeps us on course.

Anybody Home?

September 19, 2019

I have a student (we'll call him George) who broke up with his partner of many years (we'll call her Martha). He went to a Dhamma teacher for some advice on how to handle his grief. And the advice she gave was that you have to remember that George and Martha are only conventional truths. On the level of ultimate truth, there is no George, there is no Martha. Never was.

He realized it was bad advice. To say that there's nobody there means that there's nobody responsible and that the people who are affected by your actions don't really exist, so it doesn't matter what you do. That kind of thinking is the refuge of people who don't like responsibility, who don't like to think there are consequences to their actions. The question he had for me, though, was, why would the Buddha teach such a thing—that on an ultimate level there are no beings? And my response was the Buddha never taught anything like that.

To begin with, he never said that some of his teachings were ultimate truths and others were only conventional truths. The terms the commentaries use for ultimate and conventional truths—*paramattha sacca* or *sammuti-sacca*—don't exist in the suttas. And he never said that there are no beings. Again, the terms for no being—*nisatto* or *nijivo*—also don't exist in the suttas. When asked what a being was, he said very clearly and straightforwardly, "Beings are their attachments." He wouldn't define what you are, but he said that *you're* defining yourself by your attachments. You create an identity and you go into it. This is the process of becoming, which, as he said, happens an awful lot. It's why we suffer. You create an identity in a particular world of experience: That's becoming. Then you go into it: That's birth. The process can go on indefinitely because we get so fascinated with the becomings we create.

The Buddha's image is of little children building what he called mud houses. He's referring to the kids playing by a mud puddle, taking the mud and making little houses with it. As long as they're fascinated with the mud houses, he says, they keep playing with them, keep making them. In the same way, we're attached to the things we create. One Western example would be the story of Pygmalion, who created a sculpture of a beautiful woman and then fell in love with the sculpture, forgetting that he'd created it to begin with. But this process is very uncertain and very unstable because it's directed by our desires. And our desires can go in any direction.

As the Buddha said, the mind is so quick to change directions that there's no image, no simile adequate for how quickly it can change. And it's capable of all kinds of things. So there *are* beings, but beings are very unstable, very changeable. In fact, this is the way the Buddha has you deal with grief of separation, either the death of a loved one or the death of love: Realize how changeable you are, how changeable the other person is, and how universal this pattern is. This applies to everything, everybody. That thought enables your grief to be transformed into compassion.

When you think about everybody's suffering, why pile more suffering on other people who are already suffering? Why pile extra suffering on yourself, since relationships are marked by so much suffering? That's the first stage in dealing with grief.

Ultimately, the Buddha says, you want to go from what he calls householder grief—the grief of not getting what you want—to renunciate grief: the grief that there is such a thing as nibbana and you're not there yet. That he calls a pain not-of-the-flesh, and it's a pain we should actively cultivate as a way to motivate ourselves in the practice.

But we have to go through the step of compassion first, thinking of all beings and how much they're suffering. How many people are suffering separation right now? That thought gives rise to a sense of samvega, realizing that as long as you stay fascinated with your mud houses, then no matter where you build them there's going to be suffering. They're going to

be washed away. That's what makes you want to get out. And this is where the Buddha's teachings on not-self come in.

He says you have to learn how to overcome your fascination with those mud houses. You see that they're made of nothing but the mud of the aggregates: form, feelings, perceptions, mental fabrications, acts of consciousness coming and going, coming and going. They've been coming and going in all kinds of zigzags. You want to learn how to see that they're really not worth getting involved with.

He represents this by the little children suddenly getting sick and tired of their mud houses, realizing they're nothing but mud, and then destroying them.

So we're trying to take apart the identity we've created as beings to see that there's nothing worthwhile there.

Another image used in the Canon is of a chariot. You take the chariot apart and then, when everything's been taken apart, there's no more chariot. Now, this image is sometimes interpreted to mean that there never was a chariot to begin with. But that's obviously not true. There were chariots. And as long as you're fascinated with chariots, you keep putting them together and fixing them when they fall apart. But when you begin to realize that they're going to keep falling apart, falling apart, and that even though they have their uses, they're not worth the effort that goes into maintaining them, that's when you dismantle them and say, "There's nothing left anymore." But you're not destroying the being you've created. You're just letting it run out on its own while you don't create anything new in its place. What you destroy is your fascination with the process of creating new states of becoming to replace the old ones deteriorating all the time.

Think of the image of sand castles at the edge of the ocean. We keep building sand castles, and the waves come in to wash them away. We build another one and they wash it away. And yet we keep at it. We seem to never get enough. The Buddha, on the night of his awakening, looked around and saw beings suffering from just this problem. He realized he

himself had been suffering for long periods of time, building these houses. That's why, after his awakening, he said he'd been searching for the house builder, and now that the house builder was seen, he wouldn't build a house again. That was because the mind had been engaged in dismantling —that's the meaning of the word *visankhara;* it's the opposite of sankhara; with sankhara you put things together, with visankhara you take them apart—he realized it was not worth doing anymore. This is why we say that insight is a value judgment as to what's worth doing, what's not.

These identities that we take on are ultimately not worth the effort, even when we've trained the identity well. Now, along the path we do use a sense of self: the sense of self that can meditate, the sense of self that can practice generosity, practice virtue. That kind of self we need as long as the path hasn't yet been fully developed. We need a sense of confidence that we can do it and a sense of competence that we can do it, along with the sense of responsibility that if we don't do it, it's not going to get done. We've got to roll up our sleeves and do it ourselves, with the conviction that we're going to benefit from this.

Now, you notice that the Buddha never says what's left after the job is done. If he had said that there were no beings to begin with, you'd wonder, "Then why does he keep saying that the arahant, after death, cannot be described as existing or not existing or both or neither?" If the being hadn't existed to begin with, then nibbana wouldn't make any difference. There'd be no existence. The arahant after death wouldn't exist. But the Buddha was very careful to say, "No. You can't describe the arahant in those terms. The arahant is beyond description because beings are defined by their desires, but here there's no desire. So you're undefined."

This relates to the Buddha's statement that when you take on an identity, you take on an obsession or an attachment to the aggregates, and you're limiting yourself. The images for the people who are not doing that are images of no limitations at all: as vast and unfathomable as the ocean, or like a fire that's gone out. In those days, when a fire went out, it was assumed to be vast. It was an element.

So, what you are—the "you" who's creating these identities—the Buddha never says. That's one of those questions he has you put aside. But he does have you know that the state that comes when you stop being fascinated with this house building—building these sand castles, building these mud houses—is a state of ultimate happiness. In fact, when the Buddha does use the word *paramattha,* ultimate goal, it's to describe nibbana. It's not used to describe a vocabulary or a language of a certain level of truths that are more ultimate than other truths on a conventional level. After all, he says the arahant knows the limitations of languages, *all* of which are conventions. Even the Buddha's language of the aggregates is a series of conventions. You use these conventions to attain a direct experience of what's ultimate.

So, we're not being asked to content ourselves with arriving at or consenting to an ultimate description of things. We're trying to find—and the Buddha promises, that if we follow the path, there's going to be—an ultimate happiness that's not dependent on any conditions at all. And that's his ultimate cure for grief. After all, renunciate grief is not meant to just sit there. It's meant to motivate you. You realize that you're suffering and there's more to be done, so you focus on doing it. It's in the doing that renunciate grief turns into renunciate joy, renunciate equanimity, something that can't be contained in any little house.

The Buddha said that, while he was alive, he dwelled with unrestricted awareness, an awareness that wasn't associated with the six sense spheres at all. So when the six sense spheres passed away, that awareness remained unaffected—if we were to talk in terms of space and time. But it's beyond even space and time, which is why it can't be described as "remaining" or not. It's untouched by the presence or absence of the six senses. Yet it can be found. And as the Buddha said, it's well worth experiencing.

Unfabricated Happiness

June 10, 2019

When the Buddha taught breath meditation, he started out with four very simple steps. You discern long breathing, you discern short breathing, you try to breathe in and out aware of the entire body. Then, in the fourth step, he introduced a technical term: fabrication, or *sankhara.* You try to breathe in and out calming bodily fabrication. That's another word for the in-and-out breath.

The question is, why did he use the technical term? You see it again in the next four steps. First you try to breathe in and out sensitive to rapture, any sense of refreshment that you feel while you're sitting here. Try to focus on that, let it spread throughout the body. Then breathe in and out sensitive to pleasure, a sense of ease. Then he says to breathe in and out sensitive to mental fabrications, which are feelings and perceptions. Now, you're already dealing with feelings, and in particular, that feeling of ease. Then there's the step of breathing in and out calming mental fabrication.

So again, why did he use the technical term? The answer is that the Buddha's trying to get you to think in terms of fabrication. In general, fabrication means things that are put together, processes that put things together. But specifically, the term refers to what you're doing to fabricate your own experience. Input comes into the senses and you don't receive it with everything already marked and identified as to what's what, what's important, and what's not. You have to do the identification: That's perception. You have to do the evaluating: That's more fabrication. In these ways, you shape your experience. We play a much bigger role in that shaping than we tend to think, and the Buddha wants you to get sensitive to that role. For instance, simply the way you intend to breathe—consciously or unconsciously—has an impact on how you experience the

body. The feelings you focus on, the perceptions you use, have an impact on the mind.

Then there's a third kind of fabrication, called verbal fabrication, where you talk to yourself. That plays a role in the instructions to the meditation themselves: things you tell yourself, such as, "I'm going to breathe this way, I'm going to breathe that way, I'm going to focus on this, focus on that as I breathe in and out." The Buddha wants you to calm that fabrication, too. This helps you gain a sense of how the way you normally fabricate things causes a lot of unnecessary stress and suffering. The more stirred-up your fabrications, the more you're going to suffer: one, simply out of the effort to put these things together, and two, you can come up with all kinds of ideas, perceptions, thoughts, feelings, that can wreak a lot of havoc in the mind. When the mind is punishing itself this way, it's going to suffer, and the punishment doesn't stop there. It spreads out to other people.

So follow the Buddha's instructions. Try to get sensitive to how the way you breathe has an impact on the body, and use the breath in a way that feels soothing, gives rise to feelings of pleasure, gives rise to feelings of refreshment. When the body's been energized, then you can allow it to grow calm.

At the same time, look at the perceptions you're holding in mind right now. What kind of perception do you have of the breath? If you think of it simply as air coming in and out through the nostrils, it's going to be hard to use the breath to help spread those feelings of ease and well-being around the body. But if you think of the breath as a flow of energy, it'll be easier. After all, the muscles have to move, the body has to move so that the air can come in and out of the lungs—well, what is that movement? It's breath energy. Where does it come from? Where does it originate in the body? And as you feel that movement spreading through the body, does it feel good or does it feel constricted? Try to become sensitive to these things so that you can use the breath energy skillfully.

We're perfectly free to breathe any way we want. Why let yourself breathe in a way that's creating unnecessary stress? The usual reason is

because you're not paying attention. You think other things are more important. But here again, the Buddha's pointing your attention to how the way you breathe is going to have an impact on your mood. Your mood, of course, is going to have an impact on the things you do and say and think. So it's wise to get sensitive to this aspect of your experience, to get more and more sensitive to how you really are shaping things, to see the potentials you have here, and how you can make the best use of them.

We focus on fabrication because ultimately we're looking for an unfabricated pleasure, something you don't have to put together. But you won't really know the unfabricated until you've gotten very sensitive to how you fabricate your experience of the present moment. It's not that everything is served to you ready-made, already finished. You have to put things together. You have to put the finishing touches on them so that they become a coherent experience. The mind is active in its creation of the present moment. Now, we don't create it totally out of whole cloth. Some things do come in from our past actions, but when the Buddha explains the list of causes for suffering, the input from the senses—which is what comes from your past actions—comes after this process of fabrication.

The way you fabricate your experience, if you do it in ignorance, already primes you to suffer from that experience, regardless of the input from the senses. If you fabricate with knowledge, that fabrication and everything following from it will become a path to the end of suffering. The more sensitive you become as you fabricate a good path here—in other words, a good state of concentration, mindful, alert, ardent—the more you can develop a sense of ease that you can spread through the body. You get a sense of refreshment you can spread through the body. You spread your awareness through the body. Your sensitivity develops and grows. Things that used to strike you as okay suddenly feel a bit too stressful. You begin to notice, more and more, how you're shaping things and how there's stress in the shaping. And you look at why.

Why are you creating the stress? Well, there's desire, and as the Buddha said, not all desires are bad. Some desires, when you engage in them with

knowledge, can be part of the path. But often our desires are ignorant and they fuel our fabrication in lots of ways that are conflicting, afflicting. As you get more sensitive here, you begin to wonder why you get engaged. Why create these things? After all, you're not simply on the receiving end. You're creating these things, and then you're suffering from them.

When you see that the suffering coming from these things is far greater than the allure that makes you want to create them to begin with, then you feel dispassion. Dispassion then allows these processes of fabrication to fall away because passion was what was driving them. When these processes fall away, then something unfabricated can appear. It's always there, but we're too busy to see it, busy creating our fabrications as to what we want here, what we want there, what we think this is, what we think that is, and if it's not what we want it to be, what can we do to make it what we want it to be? That kind of stuff. That's always getting in the way. But when you stop that process, then something outside of processes, outside of time, appears in the mind. That's the ultimate happiness. That's the unfabricated.

I've known people who ask, "How can we as conditioned beings find something unfabricated?" But they're assuming that we're conditioned by something totally outside of our control: either a creator god or just material laws, physical laws. But the Buddha's analysis is that, no, we're creating the present moment on our own initiative using the raw materials, as I said, that come from past kamma, pointing the present moment in different directions. Because we're creating it, we can take it apart. When we take it apart, that's when we can find something that's not fabricated.

This afternoon we talked about the image of happiness as being like a roller-coaster, going up and down, up and down, and then thinking of nibbana as getting to the up and then not going down again. But it's not like that. It's actually beyond the up. Wherever there's up, there's going to be down. The roller-coaster is in space and time. The happiness of nibbana, the well-being of nibbana, the bliss—all that's covered by one word in Pali, happiness, bliss, well-being, pleasure—the word is *sukha:* That's not dependent on anything in time; it's not dependent on anything fabricated;

it's not dependent on anything at all, which is why it doesn't change. It's in a different dimension, but it can be contacted here at the mind, when the mind stops its fabrication.

So listen to the Buddha's instructions. He's showing you that even the way you breathe is fabricating your experience of the body, and your experience of the body is going to have an impact on feelings. Those feelings are going to have an impact on the mind. The way you talk to yourself, the perceptions you hold in mind as you identify this as this and that as that, what you want out of this and want out of that: Try to get sensitive to all these things, to see where they're placing unnecessary stress on the mind. The more you can get sensitive to different levels of stress, the more you'll be able to unravel the process of fabrication to that point of awakening where the unfabricated appears.

As the Buddha said, it's true happiness, harmless happiness, blameless happiness—one of those rare forms of happiness that really is more than worth the effort that goes into finding it, both for your own well-being and the well-being of people around you.

Keep Your Options Open

November 27, 2019

As we practice, we're exploring possibilities—trying to expand our range of possibilities. When you look at the Buddha's quest for awakening, you see that he tried out many paths, but there were some paths he didn't try because he saw that those would actually close down possibilities.

One was the path of saying that everything you did was preordained, you had no choices, so you simply had to accept what came. That's not a path you can experiment with, and it's not a path you can explore. It closes off lots of possibilities, so that's a path he didn't take.

Another assumption that he didn't try was that we can't observe ourselves, we have to depend on somebody else to do all the observing for us. The whole principle of how he practiced was to look at his own actions and—if they weren't getting the results he wanted—to see what might be changed. Which assumes, of course, that we can observe our own actions.

This is why he said later on that the mind is luminous. That statement is sometimes interpreted to mean that the mind is innately pure, innately awakened. But in context, it doesn't mean that. He says, "It's because the mind is luminous that it can be developed." In other words, it can watch itself. A thought comes through the mind and you can watch the thought. It gives results. You can watch the results. You can see the connections.

Those are some of the assumptions we make as we explore possibilities with the purpose of expanding them. This is what the four noble truths are all about: They expand our sense of what's possible.

As for the third noble truth, that the total end of suffering is possible: Some of the other teachers in the Buddha's time would say, "Suffering will end, but there's nothing you can do about it, you can't speed up the process"—a very fatalistic teaching. Others were saying, "You do have

choices, but your choices can't get you to any place that's totally unconditioned, because after all, actions are conditions."

So in the third and fourth noble truths, the Buddha was saying something radical: There is an unconditioned happiness, and there's something you can do to get there. That required a new view of causality, which is one of the reasons why the Buddha took principles of causality so seriously.

His was a principle of causality that allowed for developing skills. In other words, there are some things that come in from the past: results of past actions that come into the present moment. Then there are choices you make in the present moment that don't have to be shaped by those past actions, and those give results now and into the future. So, there is a pattern that you can learn, but at the same time you do have freedom of choice within that pattern.

When the Buddha expressed his awakening in the shortest terms, it was that principle of causality. And the few times when he went out to, you might say, pick fights with other teachers, to criticize them, to search them out to criticize them, it was all over issues of causality. Because a principle that allows for skillfulness is an important principle to hold to. You can develop skills, and you will develop as a person. The more skills you have, if they really are skillful, then the more options you open for yourself. A view of causality that doesn't allow for the development of skills closes all the doors. That's why the Buddha took causality so seriously.

So, right now we're working on concentration, we're working on expanding our options, expanding our possibilities, keeping in mind the connection between the practice of concentration and the rest of the path, and the relationship between the path and the end of suffering.

Part of the purpose of being on the path is to create concentration as an alternative to other forms of pleasure. A lot of insight lies in seeing that certain things are worth doing, and certain things are not worth doing. Your idea of what's worth doing will depend on your range of skills.

Think about little children before they can speak: They just make nonsense syllables, and for them, that's worth doing. When they finally get the hang of language, there's not much use for nonsense syllables anymore. Think of the games you played as a child that were a good exercise for the body. As the body grew and developed more abilities, those childish games were no longer worth doing. Your range had expanded. You had a better idea of what's worth doing and what's not.

In the same way, the pleasure that comes from concentration is one of those things that allow us to see that it is possible to find a happiness that doesn't depend on sensuality—there is this option. When you take this option seriously and actually develop it, you can look back on your old sensual pleasures and gain a much better perspective on them. A lot of the things that you used to pursue don't seem worth pursuing anymore. The friends who used to pursue those things with you: You begin to wonder—what was that friendship all about?

And for quite a while, the practice of concentration will seem very satisfactory. I remember when I was first teaching here in California, we had a weekend devoted to the four noble truths. We got to the third noble truth first, and then the fourth noble truth. People were saying that the third noble truth—dispassion, cessation—didn't seem all that attractive, but the fourth noble truth, especially right concentration, with the rapture and bliss: That was very attractive.

So, you develop what's attractive until you begin to see its limitations. This is why knowledge of the third noble truth is so useful, so important: to remind you that no matter how good the concentration gets, there is something better. When you're ready to see the drawbacks of concentration, ready to admit the limitations, you don't have to be stuck. There is an opening to something better there.

So, work on your concentration, expand your range. This will expand your sense of what is possible—and also expand your range of yourself. Because with every skill that you develop, you create a new self to go along with the skill.

I've read a couple of pieces, some even written by monks, saying, "If you actually work on concentration, it's going to require a sense of self. After all, you have to make an effort, and you have to think about how you're going to benefit from this in the future, and you have to have a sense of you as a person capable of doing this—all of which creates a lot of yous, lots of selves. But we all know that the teaching is about getting rid of our sense of self, so don't try to create any concentration. Just learn how to be satisfied with what you've got, and there won't be any self around that." That's what one monk said.

But that's just keeping your range of options very narrow. If, within that very narrow range, you're going to be deciding what's worth doing, what's not worth doing, the choices will be pretty limited. Your old lazy selves will take over—after all, a lot of lazy selves can develop around telling yourself to be satisfied with what you've got.

So, yes, we are creating new selves as we practice concentration, but they're good selves to add to your inner committee, and they change the balance of power, tipping it in the right direction. Then, as the skill gets more and more mastered, those senses of self can fade into the background as you get focused on the skill in and of itself.

As you get more sensitive to what the mind is doing to create this state of concentration, you begin to see that it really is fabricated, it really is put together. Then there will come a point where you're ready to see the drawbacks of the fact that it is fabricated. And the mind will develop naturally at that point.

It develops because you push it. In other words, you're not just letting it grow every old which-way. It's like a tree: You take a tree and you make a bonsai out of it, and it looks pretty unnatural, but it's the tree's natural reaction to a certain kind of training. In the same way, getting the mind into concentration is the mind's natural reaction to the training.

And when you begin to see the limitations to the concentration itself, and realize you don't want to go back to your old pre-concentration days,

you start looking around: What other options are there? When you see the option of something unfabricated, you'll naturally want to go there.

Now, that option wouldn't have opened up without a lot of training. But the desire to go for it is the mind's natural reaction to the training. That's why there's such an intimate relationship between the third and the fourth noble truths. That third truth is there to remind you of this possibility.

Some people say, "Why did the Buddha put the third noble truth, the end of suffering, prior to the path to the end?" It's like a doctor's diagnosis: The doctor describes the symptoms, tells you where the symptoms come from, and then tells you whether it is possible or not to cure the disease—by treating the cause. Once the doctor has established that possibility, then there's the path—the treatment.

Now, as we're meditating, we're not focusing on nibbana. If you're practicing jhana, you're not even focusing on jhana, you're focusing on your breath, but you're focusing on the breath not for its own sake—it's for the sake of the concentration, and you're developing the concentration for the sake of something unfabricated.

Always keep that perspective in the back of your mind, that range of possibilities. Don't close off possibilities for yourself. Always do your best to keep your best options open.

Glossary

Ajaan (Thai): Teacher; mentor.

Arahant: A person who has abandoned all ten of the fetters that bind the mind to the cycle of rebirth, whose heart is free of mental defilement, and is thus not destined for future rebirth. An epithet for the Buddha and the highest level of his noble disciples. Sanskrit form: *arhat.*

Brahmavihara: Sublime attitude of unlimited goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, or equanimity.

Buddho: A meditation word meaning "awake."

Deva: Literally, "shining one." An inhabitant of the terrestrial or heavenly realms higher than the human.

Dhamma: (1) Event; action. (2) A phenomenon in and of itself. (3) Mental quality. (4) Doctrine, teaching. (5) Nibbana (although there are passages in the Pali Canon describing nibbana as the abandoning of all dhammas). Sanskrit form: *dharma.*

Jhana: Mental absorption. A state of strong concentration focused on a single sensation or mental notion. Sanskrit form: *dhyana.*

Kamma: Intentional act. Sanskrit form: *karma.*

Metta: Goodwill; benevolence. See *brahma-vihara.*

Nibbana: Literally, the "unbinding" of the mind from passion, aversion, and delusion, and from the entire round of death and rebirth. As this term also denotes the extinguishing of a fire, it carries connotations of stilling, cooling, and peace. Sanskrit form: *nirvana.*

Pali: The name of the earliest extant canon of the Buddha's teachings and, by extension, of the language in which it was composed.

Sala: Hall.

Samvega: A sense of dismay, terror, or urgency.

Sangha: On the conventional level, this term denotes the communities of Buddhist monks and nuns. On the ideal level, it denotes those followers of the Buddha, lay or ordained, who have attained at least their first taste of the deathless.

Sankhara: Fabrication.

Satipatthana: Establishing of mindfulness. The act of being ardent, alert, and mindful to stay with any of four things in and of themselves—body, feelings, mind states, or mental qualities—while putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.

Sutta: Discourse. Sanskrit form: *sutra.*

Upasika: A female lay-follower of the Buddha.

Vipassana: Insight.

Wat (Thai): Monastery.

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