

Meditations5

Dhamma Talks

by

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Introduction

The daily schedule at Metta Forest Monastery includes a group interview in the late afternoon and a chanting session followed by a group meditation period later in the evening. 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 essay, "A Guided Meditation." If you are not familiar with these instructions, you might want to read through them before reading the talks in this book. Also, further Dhamma talks are available at www.accesstoinight.org and www.dhammatalks.org.

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Thanissaro Bhikkhu

Wisdom for Dummies

April 9, 2009

If you read a lot of books about the Dhamma, it can get pretty confusing after a while, for there are so many different takes on exactly what the Dhamma is. On top of that, there are people who will tell you it's all very complex, very subtle; only a very erudite scholar or subtle logician could figure it all out. With so many teachings, it's hard to figure out which ones to hold on to. Of course, some people will tell you that you can't hold onto anything at all. That makes it even more confusing and obscure.

So it's good to remember that the Buddha himself taught the Dhamma in very simple terms. And all the teachings derived from a few very basic, very commonsensical principles. You might call it wisdom for dummies: the kind of wisdom that comes from looking at what's actually going on in your life, asking some very basic questions, and applying a few very basic principles to solve your big problems.

When you use wisdom for dummies, it doesn't mean you're dumb. It means you recognize that you've been foolish and you want to wise up. As the Buddha once said, when you recognize your foolishness, you are to that extent wise. This may sound obvious, but when you think about it, you see that it teaches you some important things about wisdom. In fact, the realization that you've been foolish contains within itself many of the basic principles of the Dhamma. To begin with, this kind of realization usually comes to you when you see you've made a mistake you could have avoided. In recognizing that much, you recognize that your actions do make a difference: Some actions are more skillful than others. In recognizing that the mistake came from your foolishness, you recognize the principle that your ideas and intentions played a role in your actions, and that you could have operated under other ideas and intentions. You could have been wiser—the mistake wasn't preordained—and you've got something to learn. That right there is the beginning of wisdom.

It's when you're willing to learn that the Buddha can teach you more about what it means to be wise. Start with one of his basic ways of distinguishing a wise person from a fool: If you're a wise person, you tend to your own duties and avoid the things you're not responsible for. If you're a fool, you tend to ignore the things you're responsible for, and to focus on things you're not responsible for. This is probably the number one principle, because it cuts out a lot of other issues, such as taking a stand on where the universe came from, or if the universe came from anything, whether it's finite or infinite; what your inner nature is. A lot of what we think of as metaphysical issues get put aside this way, because you're not really responsible for those issues. And what are you responsible for? Your actions, what you're choosing to do. No one else can make your choices for you, so you have to focus on doing them well.

This is why the Buddha says that wisdom starts growing when you ask someone who's knowledgeable, "What's skillful? What's unskillful? What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term harm and suffering?" Why are these questions wise?

Because they come from seeing that the issue of how to find a worthwhile happiness is something you really are responsible for. Happiness is preferable to suffering, it depends on your actions, and long-term happiness is better than short-term. This is what's meant by "skillful."

The distinction between skillful and unskillful is another basic principle. Once one of the Buddha's lay students was accosted by someone from another tradition who asked him, "Well now, does your teacher teach about the origin of universe, or whether it's finite or infinite?" He went down the list of the big issues of the time, and the lay student kept saying, "No, he doesn't talk about any of those things." And the other person responded, "Well, in that case he's a nihilist. He doesn't teach anything at all." So the lay student said, "No, that's not true. He does teach the difference between what's skillful and what's not." He later went to report this conversation to the Buddha, who approved of what he had said.

The distinction between skillful and unskillful forms the basis for the four noble truths. When you dig deep down into why people suffer, you find that it's because of craving. How can people stop suffering? By developing the path, which is primarily composed of good qualities of mind. So you realize the mind has to be trained. That's another basic principle of wisdom: that true happiness comes from training the mind, because the mind is what makes the choices. That's why we meditate. And that's why meditation requires that we focus our attention on the present moment, because these choices are being made right now.

This again brings up the distinction between short-term and long-term happiness. Not all your choices are between doing something harmful and something not harmful. Sometimes the choice is between two things that are relatively harmless, but one leads to short-term, and the other to long-term happiness. You have only a limited amount of time, a limited amount of energy, so you don't want to get distracted by the short-term things. Now, part of the mind likes doing things that lead to long-term suffering because they provide happiness in the short-term. Sometimes it'll deny the long-term suffering, or else it'll feel that the quick fix is worth the trade. Then there are other things, difficult in the short-term, that lead to long-term happiness down the line. So you need strategies and tactics for getting the mind to avoid the things that you like doing that are going to be harmful in the long-term and to get yourself to do the things that may be difficult now but will give you long-term happiness. This, too, the Buddha said, is a basic measure of your wisdom.

One of these strategies is developing the brahma-viharas. Remind yourself that you want to be kind to yourself. You want to be kind to other people. This is an attitude you want to develop because it helps you. When you're facing a short-term happiness that leads to long-term suffering either for yourself or other people, it really helps to have this attitude of kindness already developed in the mind. This is one of the reasons why we meditate: to develop these attitudes ahead of time. Having the breath as a way of training yourself to be kind to yourself is an important aspect of developing goodwill: It helps you realize that you really do have a role in shaping your present experience, starting with the breath and then moving into other areas of the present. There's nobody forcing you to breathe in an uncomfortable way, or in a way that puts yourself to sleep, or in a way that gets you anxious and on edge. And yet we allow these things to

happen because we're distracted, often about things that are really none of our business. But the breath is something that really is your responsibility. Nobody else can breathe for you. And nobody else can tell you what kind of breathing is going to be comfortable. You have to pay attention yourself.

So this is another area where you really are responsible. And it does have a huge impact. If the mind has a sense of inner wellbeing, you're operating from a position of strength. You don't have to be a slave to things outside. You don't have to let the mind be shaken by things outside. You have a different source for happiness that comes from within. You're coming from a position of strength, which means that you're in a better position to act in skillful ways.

At the same time, you get more and more sensitive to one of the big principles in the workings of cause and effect, the principle that informs all the basic principles of wisdom and discernment: the fact that some causes have an effect over time, some have an effect immediately, and some have both. When you're facing any experience in the present moment, part of it comes from past actions, and part from things you're doing right now. You aren't currently responsible for the things coming from past actions, but you *are* responsible for the things coming from your present actions. It takes sensitivity to figure out which is which, but if you can develop that sensitivity, it gives you a handle on things. You may be experiencing pain right now, but you don't have to suffer from it. The choices you're making right now are the ones deciding whether you'll suffer or not.

This is where the distinction between what you're responsible for and what you're not shows its more subtle side. If there's pain coming from past actions, it's *dukkha* in the context of the three characteristics. It's just part of the way things are. The suffering you're adding, though, is *dukkha* in the four noble truths, which doesn't have to be there. It comes from your craving, and that's something you can do something about. There may be pain in the body, there may be undesirable thoughts coming up in the mind, but as you focus more carefully in the present moment, you begin to realize that you choose where to focus and how you want to shape the situation. You could let yourself suffer, fall victim to these things, or you could make a change.

This point is often misunderstood. When you read the Buddha's teachings on mindfulness out of context, it's possible to interpret them as saying that when you're being mindful, say, of feelings, you just watch whatever feeling comes up and don't make any changes. Don't meddle with it. Just be non-reactive, allowing whatever's happening to happen. What this attitude does, though, is to drive underground some really important sources for insight: the ability to see to what extent you're shaping your feelings of pleasure and pain right now. This applies to physical pleasure and mental pleasure, to physical pain and mental pain. So when the Buddha talks about the things you do that lead to happiness, he's not just referring to your external actions. He's also referring to the way you think, the way you interpret, filter, make choices about how to shape the present moment: a purely internal matter.

Mindfulness is to remind you that you can make choices, and that you want to learn to make them skillfully. You can learn how to breathe in a comfortable way, to think in a comfortable way, to fashion your thoughts and your perceptions so as to shape a greater sense of wellbeing. You don't have to invest

any money. Just take time and use your powers of observation. That's what it all comes down to.

These are very simple things, very simple principles we're operating on. What the Buddha does is to take these very simple principles and follow them through, to see what their implications are. It's wise to realize that you're responsible for some things and not for others. This applies whenever you're experiencing stress: You have to ask yourself, "Is this something coming from the past, or from something I'm actually doing right now?" You focus on the issue of how you're creating suffering for yourself right now, and how you can develop new habits that create the causes for happiness.

As you follow through with this, you begin to get more and more sensitive to where you're creating unnecessary suffering. This is how that question on skillfulness begins to translate into the three perceptions, or what are sometimes called the three characteristics. As the question says, you're looking for "my long-term welfare and happiness." When you give rise to happiness in the present moment, you focus on whether it's long-term or short-term. You notice that if it's short-term, if it changes, if it's inconstant, you can't rely on it as your true happiness. It's stressful. So why would you want to lay claim to it as you or yours? In these ways, these three perceptions help to become your principles for judging what's working and what's not. If it's inconstant, it's not long-term; it's stressful. If it's stressful, it's not happiness. And if it's not happiness, you can't hold onto it as *your* long-term welfare and happiness.

But the follow-up question is, "Is this a stressful cause that will eventually lead to long-term happiness, or just a cause of more stress?" Remember to keep this point in mind as well. If it's solidly pleasant in terms of its result, you put up with the stress and pain of the action. But if it leads to long-term suffering, it's something you want to drop. You tell yourself, "This is not what I'm looking for." It's like going into a place where you can pan for gold. You want to have standards for what you're looking for as you pan for the gold there. You're looking for certain colors, certain characteristics, that indicate genuine nuggets of gold. Any gravel or flashy fool's gold that doesn't meet those standards, you just throw away, throw away, throw away.

But as for the pan in which you're swilling the gold around, even though it's not gold, you don't throw it away yet. In other words, even though the qualities you develop in terms of virtue, concentration, discernment are not ultimately what you're looking for, they do help you find what you're looking for. When you're looking at the results of your actions, you want to have some way of separating the gold from the gravel and dross, so you need the pan. It's not not-self just yet.

Ultimately, when you apply the perception of not-self to let go of everything, it's still a question of knowing what is your responsibility and what's not. You let go of everything you've been identifying with because you're looking for the highest happiness. The quest for happiness is your responsibility; everything else at that point—even your innermost sense of who you are and who's been following the path—is not. But once you've done that final act of letting go, you don't have to be responsible for anything. The ultimate happiness looks after itself, and you're finished with your duties on the path. As the Buddha says, the holy life is completed, the task done.

In this way, when you follow through with all the basic principles of wisdom, you find that they explain everything in the Buddha's teachings. You focus on what's your responsibility and you realize your responsibility is the fact that you're creating unnecessary suffering. But you can also be responsible for creating long-term happiness.

Then you use the Buddha's teachings as tools to help you realize that if there's something you want to do but you know it's going to cause harm, you need some help in learning how to talk yourself out of it. As for good things that are difficult—as when it's difficult to be generous, difficult to be virtuous, or difficult to meditate—you need ways of helping yourself get over the hump: tools, strategies, ways of thinking that make it easier, so that you can let go of the unskillful things that you like, and arrive at that true happiness, which ultimately lies beyond even wisdom.

This kind of happiness is the fourth of what the Buddha said, the four *ariya-dhammas*, the four noble Dhammas: virtue, concentration, discernment, and release. The first three factors in the list all aim at release, and then—when they've done their work—they get put aside. Even wisdom gets put aside. You put down your gold-pan for you've found all the gold you need. But until that point, you want to learn how to use it. The important point is to remember that the most useful wisdom is the basic kind: just following these basic principles to see how far they can take you as you get more and more sensitive to what the right questions are, and finding more and more skillful ways of answering those questions. So hold onto the pan, even though it may not be pretty or fancy, and simply learn how to use it with greater and greater skill.

That, basically, is wisdom for dummies: the wisdom for people who recognize that they've been foolish and that they don't want to keep on being foolish. That means that they aren't fools; they simply see that they've *been* fools—an important difference. They're the kind of fools who aren't really dumb.

The real dummies are those who think that they're already smart, and that the only wisdom good enough for them has to be counterintuitive: hidden essences, mysterious teachings that don't make sense. But the Buddha didn't teach that way. He simply taught basic principles for people who want to wise up: The first principle is to realize that your actions are important, that they make a difference, that they come from your ideas and intentions, and that they can be changed for the better. Second, focus on what really is your responsibility, and let go of things that are not. Third, train your mind to develop better and better answers to the question that focuses on what you're really responsible for: what you can do that will lead to your long-term welfare and happiness. Then take advantage of the tools the Buddha offers so that it's easier to give up the things that you like doing that are harmful, and to get yourself to do the things that are difficult but will lead to the long-term happiness you want.

Ajaan Lee has a nice image to illustrate this point: A person goes to a mountain and comes back with a big hunk of rock to get the gold ore out of it. Another person, who assumes he's smart, sees the first person doing that and says, "What kind of fool would want a big hunk of rock? I just want the gold." So he carries a pick to the mountain to dig out the gold—but he doesn't get any gold, because gold doesn't come out of the rock that way. You have to take the rock, put it into the smelter, and heat it. That's when the gold comes out. The silver comes out. All these other minerals come out on their own when they reach their

melting point. The heat here stands for the effort of your practice. You're willing to put in the effort to separate what's skillful from what's not. That's how you get the gold.

Another analogy is climbing a tree. You can't climb the tree from the top down, starting with subtle concepts and advanced treatises. You have to start from the bottom, admitting to yourself, "There's a lot I don't know, and I can't figure it out just by reading, but I can figure it out by watching what I'm doing and seeing what's working to give long-term happiness." If you're willing to be the sort of person who doesn't have things all figured out ahead of time, but you know that you've got some good tools and you're willing to learn how to use them well: That's how you'll get to where you want to go.

Adult Dhamma

September 28, 2006

The Buddha treated his students like adults. If he had wanted to, he could have told them about all the amazing and wonderful things that he had learned during his awakening, and that they should simply obey him without question. But instead, he taught them how to question, how to think for themselves, how to gain awakening themselves. Even when he was teaching children he taught them adult things, or basically how to become adults.

The Novice's Questions, for instance, start out with the big harsh fact of life: that all beings subsist on food. This fact is also the main proof against the idea of intelligent design. If there were intelligent design, we could all live off the dew every morning, the rain every evening. We wouldn't have to harm anyone else in keeping our bodies going. But this is a fact of life: We have a body that need to be fed; we have to eat. When we eat, there's suffering, even if we're very strict vegetarians. The farmers who have to clear the fields and plant the food, the animals who die when the fields are cleared, the people who have to transport the food once it's grown: A lot of work and misery goes into that. So when the Buddha introduced the topic of causality to children, he started with a harsh fact of life. This is your prime experience of causality: Feeding goes on all the time. Without it, life couldn't last.

When he taught his young son, Rahula, about truthfulness, the teaching was also pretty harsh. If you feel no shame in telling a lie, he said, your goodness is empty. It's thrown away. You can't be trusted. Then he taught Rahula to apply truthfulness in looking at his actions, to learn from his actions. That is basically what it means to become an adult. When you do something, you notice what actually happens as a result, and then you learn from it. If your action harmed yourself or others, you resolve not to repeat that mistake. Then you remember to apply that lesson to your next action, and then the next. That's what mindfulness is for: to remember these lessons. As the Buddha says, this is how you purify your thoughts, words, and deeds. Nobody else is going to come along and do the job for you. You've got to do it yourself. You have to learn how to be observant. You have to learn how to deal maturely with your mistakes. Don't hide them from yourself. Don't pretend they didn't happen. Be adult enough to willingly tell your mistakes to other people. That is what it means to be an adult: You take responsibility.

When he taught Rahula meditation, he started off with the images of making the mind like earth, making the mind like water, like fire, like wind. In other words, earth doesn't react to what it dislikes. If you throw something disgusting on the earth, the earth doesn't shrink away. The same with fire: It can burn disgusting things and doesn't recoil in disgust. The same with water, the same with wind: They wash things away, they blow things away, and it doesn't matter whether those things are disgusting or not. They don't react.

That was the Buddha's preliminary instruction to Rahula on the kind of mind you have to bring to meditation. You don't go by your likes or dislikes. You don't shrink away from pain. Yet this doesn't mean you become indifferent,

because the next step is to work with the breath, which requires that you train the mind in a certain direction. You train yourself to breathe constantly aware of the whole body, to breathe calming the breath—which means that you are sensitive to pleasure or pain, and you’re working to ever more subtle levels of pleasure. But in order to learn how to do this skillfully, you have to put your immediate reactions aside, and look to see what actually works.

All of these are instructions on how to become an adult, how to deal with complexities, because cause and effect is a very complex issue.

Look at dependent co-arising. It requires an adult mind to handle that kind of complexity. And yet the Buddha gives basic instructions to children on how to handle it—how to approach it, how to be an adult in your meditation, how to take responsibility for yourself—looking at things in terms of what you do and the pleasure and the pain that result. Once you’ve got those basic principles down, then it’s simply a matter of learning to be more and more observant as to what works in getting the mind to settle down, what works in giving rise to insight. He gives you help. Look at the Canon: forty-five volumes. And a very large portion of it appears to have come from the Buddha himself. That’s a lot of advice, but it all keeps pointing you back to yourself. As the Buddha keeps saying, Buddhas only point the way. It’s up to you to follow the path. This means you have to be responsible.

You have to be clear about your intentions, mature about admitting when you have some unskillful intentions in the mind, and honest about the results that come when you act on unskillful intentions. Only by observing that, again and again, can you finally get tired of those intentions. When you really see that there’s a connection between unskillful intentions and needless suffering, you become genuinely motivated to find the escape from that suffering. This is the only way you can do it. Basically, you have to learn to judge what’s worth observing and what’s not. And again the Buddha points you to what’s worth observing. The issue of needless stress that comes from unskillful states of mind: That’s where he points you – “Look here, look here, look here.” Then it’s up to you to see and—when you’ve seen—to take that knowledge and put it to use. This requires that you be responsible.

So it’s a pretty radical, a very demanding teaching. The question is, “Do you want to be an adult or not?” There are lots of people out there who’d rather not be adults, who’d rather be infantilized. And there are lots of other people who enjoy telling them what to do, what to think. Even in Buddhist circles, you find various kinds of meditation where as they say, “Everything has all been thought out, everything has all been worked out, just follow the instructions. Don’t think, don’t add anything of your own.” It’s interesting to note that a lot of these methods also refer to the teaching on not-self as egolessness. Any sense of pride, any sense of independence is a bad thing in those meditation traditions. As one tradition would say, just be totally passive and aware, very equanimous, and just let your old sankharas burn away. And above all, don’t think. Or if you are going to think, they say, learn how to think the way we think. And they have huge volumes of philosophy you have to learn, to squeeze your mind into their mold, after which they promise you awakening.

But that doesn’t work. Awakening comes from being very observant in seeing things you don’t expect to see, developing your own sensitivities, your own discernment. After all, as the Buddha said, the issue is the suffering you’re

creating. If you don't have the basic honesty and maturity to see that, you're never going to gain awakening no matter how much you know, no matter how much you study, no matter how equanimous you are. You've got to take responsibility. And you've got to be willing to learn from your mistakes. When the Buddha taught Rahula, he didn't say, "Don't ever make mistakes." He said, "Try not to make mistakes, but if you do make a mistake—and it's expected that you will—this is how you handle it, this is how you learn from it." That's teaching Rahula how to be an adult.

So it's up to each of us: Do we want to be adults? Or do we want to continue to be treated like children?—told what to do, told what to think, not being willing to take any risks. It may sound safe and reassuring, but if you don't take risks, you never get awakened. And the safety of being a child is all very delusional. It's the delusional safety of wanting to be told that everything you need to do has already been thought out. Or that there are lots of different ways to the goal, so it doesn't matter which one you choose; you can choose whichever one you like and you can be guaranteed that all the paths will lead to the same place. Again, that kind of thinking puts your likes and wishes ahead of everything else. That's precisely what an adult can't do. As an adult you have to realize that there are risks in this meditation path. There are some paths that do lead to the goal, they do lead to the end of suffering. Other paths lead to all kinds of other places. You have to be responsible for which path you choose, which one looks to be the most honest. This of course throws you back on your own honesty as well.

Sometimes you read about teachers who turn out to be major disappointments. They do really horrible things to their students, and the students complain that they've been victimized. But in nearly every case, when you read the whole story, you realize that the students should have seen this coming. There were blatant warning signals that they chose to ignore. You have to be responsible in choosing your teachers, choosing your path. Once you've chosen the path that looks likely, you have to be responsible in following it, in learning how to develop your own sensitivity in following it. Because after all, what is the path that the Buddha points out? There's virtue, there's concentration, and there's discernment. These are all qualities in your own mind. We all have them to some extent. Learning how to develop what's in your own mind is what's going to make all the difference. The Buddha's discernment isn't going to give you awakening; his virtue and concentration aren't going to give you awakening. You have to develop your own. Nobody else can develop these things for you. Other people can give you hints; they can help point you in the right direction. But the actual work and the actual seeing is something you have to do for yourself.

So the question is: Are you mature enough to want this path? Are you mature enough to follow it through? Nobody's forcing you. Just realize the dangers of *not* following this path and make your choice.

Precept Meditation

October 22, 2006

Years back, when Ajaan Suwat was teaching a meditation retreat at IMS, someone asked him a question in a Q&A session toward the end of the retreat: “How do we bring meditation into daily life?” His answer was to focus on the five and the eight precepts—but a lot of people misunderstood his answer. They interpreted it as his being dismissive of laypeople; that laypeople really couldn’t or shouldn’t focus on meditation in daily life; that they should just stick to the lowly practice of the precepts instead. But that wasn’t his point. His point was that following the precepts is an important part of meditation.

The act of taking on the five precepts teaches you very important lessons about skills integral to meditation. To begin with, it focuses your attention on your *intentions*, because you can break a precept only intentionally. This forces you to ask yourself, “What are your intentions? Why do you act? What’s the motive behind your actions and your choices?” When you’re forced to focus on these questions, you realize that one of the few intentions really worth sticking with all the time is the intention to be harmless. This is why you decide that you don’t want to kill, to steal, to have illicit sex, to lie, or to take intoxicants, because all of these actions are harmful by nature.

So you set up that intention and try to stick by it. This requires mindfulness and alertness, which are important factors in training the mind. You have to keep your precepts in mind and be alert in watching over your actions to make sure they don’t go against your original intent. At the same time, you have to develop strategies for fending off any intentions that would go against your intent to be harmless. This requires ingenuity and discernment.

Right here you can begin to see the connections with meditation. Once you’ve set up an intention to stay with the breath, you have to be mindful and alert to make sure you actually do stay with the breath and don’t go wandering off. You also have to use your discernment and ingenuity to fend off any contrary intentions that would lure you away from your original intent.

The precepts also teach you to be scrupulous. It’s easy to think of being harmless to all beings in a general way, but when you really try to act on that intention, you discover all sorts of ramifications you didn’t expect. You have to pay attention to animals you may have otherwise overlooked: ants and termites, for instance. You’ve got to take their survival into account. This forces you to be very scrupulous in your behavior, very careful in what you will and will not do. This habit, too, is very helpful in the course of meditation, helping you to pay attention to little details, little movements in the mind that are easy to overlook but can have important consequences.

In this way you can see how the precepts are a form of meditation in daily life. They take your actions as your objects of meditation and they force you to develop many of the mental skills and attitudes you need in formal meditation: mindfulness, alertness, ingenuity, strategic discernment, and a scrupulous attention to detail.

The precepts also teach you the power of your intentions. As you stick with a skillful intention, you'll find it really does change your life. It creates a better atmosphere for your meditating. If you stick with the intention not to be harmful, then when the time comes to sit down and meditate or to try to be mindful in other ways throughout the day, it's a lot easier. You're not burdened with remorse over any harmful things you might have done or said. You don't have to go into denial about what you might have done or said. This creates a much better atmosphere, a much better environment for the mind to keep things in mind and to settle down and be at ease with itself.

But the precepts also help induce a sense of *samvega*: dismay over the prospect of continued *samsara*. You'll begin to notice, as you try to maintain the intention not to be harmful, how really difficult it is to be totally harmless, because life maintains itself by feeding. This is one of the best arguments against intelligent design, or at least *compassionate* intelligent design: Why do we have to feed off one another all the time? Wouldn't it be better if we could feed off inanimate objects or energies? If we could eat rocks or soil, if we could live off light waves or sound vibrations, nothing would be harmed. Like the harmoniums in *The Sirens of Titan*: We could just feed on vibrations and take pleasure in one another's happiness. But that's not how the world works. Worldly happiness is limited by the fact that one person's happiness often requires feeding on someone else's suffering and pain.

So there are limitations to the range of the precepts. When you decide to adopt the precept against killing, for example, you decide basically that you yourself are not going to kill and you're not going to give the explicit order to anybody else—or even an indirect hint to anyone else—that they should kill. But even then, it's still difficult to go around without somebody's getting killed. When you walk along a sidewalk, you don't know how many living things you step on. Or eating: Even if you decide to be a strict vegetarian, a lot of insects get killed in the process of farming vegetables. Gophers and other animals get killed when farmers clear the fields. So as you reflect on your precepts and on your desire to be harmless, it creates a good strong sense of *samvega*—which is an important element of discernment to remind you that it would really be good to get out of this whole process of *samsara*-ing, to find a happiness that doesn't need to feed. Maybe there is something to this *nibbana* business after all. It really would be something good, something worth trying to attain. So the precepts not only help develop the skills you need for concentration but also provide a context and motivation for gaining discernment and insight.

As for the eight precepts, those move into another area of training for the mind. Again, Ajaan Suwat: "The eight precepts add the element of restraint of the senses." Each of the added precepts places restraints on the types of pleasures we might try to get through the sense doors. The precept against illicit sex turns into a precept against sex, period. That covers all of the sense doors right there. Then there's the precept against eating after noon or before dawn. That covers pleasures of taste. The precept against watching shows, listening to music, using perfumes and scents covers pleasures of sight, hearing, and smell. And then the precept against high and luxurious beds and seats covers the sense of touch. As you go down the list, you can see that each of the five senses is covered. This adds a higher level of restraint and places some barriers on our typical ways of indulging our desire for pleasure: evening munchies; the desire

for a nice, thick mattress to lie on; wanting to smell nice; liking to listen to music. By taking on these precepts, you learn to put some barriers around your self-indulgence.

These barriers serve several purposes. One, they focus you on the meditation: If you're going to find any pleasure in the course of the day, you have to look more intently at developing pleasure in the meditation to make up for the restrictions you've placed on your foraging for pleasure outside. In addition, you learn important lessons about indulgence. If you tend to be indulgent in your daily life, you're going to be very self-indulgent when you meditate. If you can't say No to your daily desires, it's going to be hard to say No to them while you're sitting here meditating. The mind-states that want to go off and think about pleasant sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations are very easy to indulge in if you don't have the habit of saying No to your impulse to look for pleasure in those things throughout the day. As you develop this habit of saying No to sensual indulgence in the course of the day, it's a lot easier to say No to sensual thoughts in the course of the meditation.

You've also developed the habit of learning when to say "enough," which will hold you in good stead as you begin to develop the sense of non-sensual pleasure and rapture that come with concentration. You'll be more likely to realize when you've indulged enough in those kinds of pleasure so that you can turn to the further work you need to do in terms of insight and discernment. You can't just stay wallowing in the pleasure of concentration. You've got to learn how to understand what's going on in the mind, why it creates mental worlds to begin with—the worlds that pull you away from the present moment and lead to suffering and stress.

So the precepts are a crucial part of meditation. They help you develop good habits and foster insight. In particular, they help you see into your habits of self-indulgence. A lot of the pleasures we indulge in really do get in the way of deeper pleasure, deeper happiness. We all want to have our cake and eat it too. When we play chess, we want to keep all our pieces and yet win at the same time. But an important lesson in life is that certain pleasures really do get in the way of higher happiness. You've got to learn how to say No to them. And to develop a sense of moderation: how much pleasure is enough for you to do the real work at hand. Ultimately, you see that even the most harmless pleasures in this world are not absolutely harmless. This realization leads to the sense of *samvega* that motivates you to look for an even higher pleasure: the absolutely blameless bliss of *nibbana*.

So learn to look at the precepts as an important part of the meditation. They're not Sunday school rules or "conventional truths" that someone who hits the more "ultimate truths" can eventually put aside and discard with impunity. They're an important part of training the mind in the skills and attitudes it'll need in concentration, in developing discernment, and ultimately leading to release.

So when Ajaan Suwat was asked about how to bring the meditation into daily life, his answer didn't dismiss lay life at all. It pointed to an important fact. This is how you meditate in daily life: by being very careful about your precepts, respecting them, and being alive to the lessons they teach.

Meditation Prep

January 30, 2008

Meditation isn't a lap belt. You can't just squeeze your mind into a single technique and expect the technique to do all of your work for you. You've got to develop the proper attitudes toward meditation, proper attitudes toward your mind. In addition, you've got to develop a range of techniques and learn how to determine which technique to use at which particular time for which particular problem, so that you can use the techniques wisely for their intended purpose. They're not meant to be straitjackets for the mind. They're more means for exploration. As the Buddha once said, he points out the road but it's up to you to follow the road, to see what you learn along the way and to discover where it takes you.

In many cases, the good techniques actually present you with questions more than they provide you with answers. You've got to develop the right frame of mind for taking up the questions and figuring out how to get the right answers, answers that help put an end to suffering. To get an idea of what these attitudes are that you need to bring to the meditation, it's good to look at what the Buddha taught his son, Rahula, prior to teaching him how to focus on the breath.

There are two main sets of instructions. In the first set, the Buddha started his meditation instructions not by telling Rahula to sit and close his eyes, but by telling him to develop the right attitude toward all of his actions: his thoughts, words, and deeds. In other words, Rahula was going to get practice in how to be a meditator by looking at his actions in all situations.

First, the Buddha established the principle of truthfulness. If you're the sort of person who feels no shame at telling a lie, he said, then you have no value as a meditator. You've thrown your value away. If you find it easy to lie to other people, it's going to be easy to lie to yourself. So truthfulness was the first principle, the first attitude the Buddha recommended.

Then, he said, you apply that truthfulness to your thoughts, words, and deeds before you act, and keep reminding yourself to act only on harmless intentions. This develops the qualities of good will and compassion. When an intention comes up and you're thinking about following it through, ask yourself: "Is this going to be harmful?" If you can perceive some potential harm, don't do it. If you don't foresee any harm, you can go ahead and do it. While you're acting, look for the immediate results coming from your action, because actions can bear their results not only in the long distant future but also right here, right now, where you can immediately see them. If you stick your finger in fire, it hurts right now. It's not going to wait to hurt you in some future lifetime. If you swallow hot soup, it'll scald you now, not after you die and are reborn.

So if you see any harm coming from your action, stop doing it. But if you don't see any harm either to yourself or to others, you can continue with it. When the action is done, look at its results over the long term. If you realize that it did cause harm over time, develop an attitude of shame about the action. Now, notice that the Buddha is not saying to be ashamed about yourself; he wants you to feel shame toward the action. In other words, view the action as something

beneath you. That's a healthy use of shame; it's the companion to a healthy sense of pride. Make up your mind that you're not going to repeat the action, and then go talk it over with someone you respect. This develops an attitude of integrity, that you accept responsibility for what you've done, and are open about what you've done. This way you can learn.

So the Buddha doesn't start out by telling Rahula not to make mistakes. He says to try to avoid making mistakes, but if you do make a mistake, this is how you handle it, with honesty, with an attitude of harmlessness or compassion, with a healthy sense of shame, and with integrity. If, on the other hand, you look at your actions and see that they haven't caused any harm, you can take joy in the fact and keep on practicing.

That's how you start meditating in your daily life. Those are the attitudes you want to bring to the meditation: a willingness to look at your intentions and to look at their results. This is going to be really important in the course of your meditation, because there's no other way you'll be able to read your own mind.

Then, at a later time, the Buddha taught Rahula breath meditation. But before he taught him breath meditation, he taught him ten other exercises to prepare him for the breath. The first four exercises deal with the physical elements, looking at the body in terms of its elements, its properties. Earth is solidity; water, liquidity; fire, heat; and wind, motion. He said to Rahula, "Try to make your mind like each of these elements, each of these properties." For example with earth: If you throw disgusting things on earth, earth doesn't react. Now the Buddha is not telling Rahula to be passive or oblivious. He's saying to be grounded, to learn powers of endurance, because as you'll see, the meditations he taught Rahula further on are active kinds of meditation that require a lot of sensitivity. You don't simply sit with whatever's there without making any changes. You are supposed to adjust and change things. But if you want to make the proper changes, you first have to understand where you actually are and what the problem actually is. Then make your changes and watch to see if they actually work.

Now to be able to watch to see things clearly, you have to have powers of endurance, the ability to sit with things and watch them steadily over time. Unpleasant things are bound to come up in the meditation for sure. To comprehend them, after all, is the duty with regard to suffering and stress: You've got to comprehend it. And to comprehend it, there are times when you'll have to really sit with it, to watch it over time, again and again and again. This requires endurance.

Then when you try changing something in the meditation—when you experiment with your breath and your mind in various ways—you've got to sit with things for long periods of time to see if what you did really works. You don't want to be the sort of person who makes a little change, sees a little something that looks promising, and immediately jumps to the conclusion that this is the solution. The result may be short lasting. You may ultimately find yourself back where you began. So you want to see if that's the case, which means you've got to be able to sit with things.

The same principle applies with the other properties. Fire can burn unpleasant things, but it doesn't shrink away from them. Water can be used to wash away unpleasant things, but doesn't get disgusted. Wind blows unpleasant things around, and doesn't show distaste.

So you learn to be grounded. Remind yourself that whatever comes up, you can bear it. I remember once when I was staying with Ajaan Fuang, he told me out of the blue one day to sit up and meditate all night. My immediate reaction was that it wasn't a good day for me to try that. I had been working hard that day, I said, I couldn't do it. He looked at me and said, "Well, is it going to kill you?" "Well, no." "Then you can do it." That's the attitude you've got to have—as with that saying, what doesn't kill you will make you stronger. But in the midst of doing difficult things, you don't just suffer through them. You've got to figure out, "How can I get through this without suffering?" That's where you start learning how to be ingenious. But the important thing is that you remind yourself, okay, you can stand this; whatever's coming up, you're not going to get blown around. That way you can begin to trust yourself as an observer.

Then, to show that the Buddha wasn't teaching Rahula to be passive, the next four meditations are about replacing unskillful attitudes with more skillful ones, essentially the attitudes of the brahma-viharas: goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity—although here the Buddha isn't asking him to develop these thoughts to the limitless extent of brahma-viharas. He's simply telling him to replace various levels of aversion in the mind—irritation, resentment, ill will, or the desire to harm—with more positive emotions. If you notice ill will coming up in the mind, try counteracting it with goodwill. Don't just allow the mind to stay stuck with its ill will. You do what you can to foster an attitude of goodwill to whomever the person may be. If the idea comes up that you'd like to be cruel or harmful to somebody, counteract it with an attitude of compassion, reminding yourself that you're not going to benefit from that person's suffering in any way at all. In fact, when other people are suffering, that's when they tend to do crazy, ill-considered, unskillful things. You've got to have some compassion for people who are engaged in unskillful activities, hoping that they'll learn the good sense to stop. Empathetic joy is the antidote for any feelings of resentment you may feel for somebody else's good fortune. You realize that resentment doesn't do you any good at all. People who are enjoying good fortune must've done something sometime that leads to happiness, so why resent it? Do you want people to resent good fortune when it comes your way? Of course not. As for feelings of equanimity, these are meant to counteract feelings of irritation. You want to be equanimous toward irritating things so that irritation doesn't build up to the point where it makes you do something stupid. In each of these cases, you want to be skilled at giving rise to skillful attitudes when you need them so that you don't just sit there stewing in aversion.

Then the Buddha taught two meditations for counteracting other sorts of unskillful qualities. For lust, he said to try to develop the perception of the foulness of the human body. Now this is not about having an unhealthy negative image of the body; it's actually training in having a healthy negative image of the body. You realize that everybody is in the same boat this way. We're all filled with blood, pus, contents of the stomach, contents of the intestines, all kinds of stuff you wouldn't like to have on the floor here in the morning when we're getting the meal ready. This is a useful antidote. When feelings of lust come up and you think about what lies under the skin, it's hard to maintain sexual desire.

So again, the Buddha is not teaching Rahula to be passive, or simply to accept whatever's coming up. He's telling him how to counteract unskillful attitudes and replace them with skillful ones.

In the final preparation, before teaching Rahula breath meditation, the Buddha taught him something that's usually considered to be a very advanced teaching. He said, "Try to develop the perception of inconstancy, to counteract the conceit, 'I am.'" Now notice: The Buddha is putting this right at the beginning. One of the reasons for this is that when skillful and unskillful things come up in the mind, if you immediately brand yourself as "I'm the sort of person who's always skillful," or "I'm the sort of person who's always unskillful," that's going to get in the way of actually seeing which actions in the mind are having a helpful impact and which ones are not. If, when something that looks unskillful comes up, and you immediately react to it, "My gosh, I'm a really bad meditator, I'm miserable, look at this, this horrible thought, I shouldn't be thinking this": You either feel self-hatred or you start going into denial, pretending that it didn't actually happen. Neither reaction helps develop any insight at all. If you engage in denial, you can't see what you're doing, can't see whether the intention was actually skillful or not, and can't see the results of the action. And you certainly can't counteract denial if you don't admit that it's there. Or if you build the other kind of "I am" around the unskillful thought, that "I'm miserable," that really shoots you down, saps your ability to counteract the thought.

This is the problem with "I am": It starts getting to issues of innate nature. If you have a bad innate nature, you can't change it. If you have a good innate good nature, then when something that looks skillful arises in the mind, you immediately read it as a sign of your innate goodness. You start getting complacent and careless, and you don't really see whether there's anything unskillful lurking under the surface. Where does this particular intention really lead? What needs to be done with it? Is it really as good as it seems at first glance? If you decide that it's part of your innate Buddha nature, you get complacent. So again, you miss out on things, don't really see things as they're happening, because the "I am" gets in the way.

It's interesting: The Pali word for "conceit"—*mana*—doesn't mean only a sense that you're better than other people. If you say, "I'm worse than other people," or "I'm equal to other people," that's conceit as well, because you're still building the "I am" around things. There are several ways to get around this. The first is the Buddha's advice to Rahula: Whatever comes up is inconstant. It doesn't last, so it's not enough to build an identity around. Another way around the "I am" is that, whatever comes up in the mind, you remind yourself that this happens to everybody. Remind yourself that you don't have any innate nature. The mind is neutral. It just knows. The thinking is skillful or unskillful, but those are habits, which aren't innate at all.

Or you can do what the Buddha did. This is something people tend to forget when they meditate. On the night of his awakening, his first knowledge was about himself, his narratives. You think you have narratives: He had narratives going way back, eons and eons. But he didn't jump straight from there to the present moment. He took a detour and thought about all the beings in the world: How about them? He saw that they all went through the same process—all different kinds of birth and rebirth—and on seeing them in a more universal way, he was able to see underlying patterns: what kind of actions were skillful, what kind of views underlay skillful actions that lead to fortunate rebirths, and how unskillful actions lead to unfortunate ones. It was by looking at the large picture

that he was able to see patterns. Only then did he look at the present moment from the perspective of those larger patterns. That helps cut through the “I am” and the individual narratives. You’re looking at events common to beings all over the world, and you’re looking at them in light of those larger patterns—not of natures but of actions. When you’re looking at greed, anger, and delusion in the mind in this way, it helps to loosen some of the sense of identity around them.

Another way to loosen that sense of identity is to think of the mind as a committee. The committee contains all kinds of members who propose all kinds of things. Just because somebody in the committee has proposed a bad idea doesn’t mean the committee is bad. The duty of the committee is to listen to the ideas brought to the floor figure out which is the best one to act on right now. If they make a mistake, they go back and undo the old decision, open the floor to suggestions, and arrive at a new decision. They don’t worry about the innate nature of the committee.

When you can see events in the mind in this way, then you’re really ready to meditate, because it allows you to deal with them just as events, as instances of intention and the results of intentions. When you put aside the “I am,” you’re in a much better position to see things for what they actually do, and then you can deal with them in the most appropriate way.

It was only after the Buddha taught Rahula all of these things that he said, “Okay, sit down. This is how you do breath meditation.”

So when *you* sit down to do breath meditation, it’s good to reflect on these attitudes. They’re your tools, your means for reading the events that are arising and passing away, and also for reading the results of applying different techniques. They help you figure out which technique is useful for which kind of issue, what’s getting results, what’s not getting results. That’s how you develop your discernment. You see cause and effect, skillful and unskillful, i.e., the four noble truths. You develop the path, so you can comprehend suffering and eventually let go of its cause. That’s how you realize the end of suffering: by experimenting, by exploring, by bringing the right attitudes and the right mental qualities to whichever meditation technique you choose. Those qualities are the factors that make all the difference. So do your best to bring the full set of mature qualities to meditation. That’s how you get results.

Establishing Priorities

September 11, 2008

When you start to meditate, it's important that you make a firm determination, establishing the firm intention that you're going to stay with the breath for the entire hour. And it's good to remind yourself of the reasons for why you want to do this, because that helps to firm up the intention.

We're here because we want a happiness that's blameless, a happiness that's dependable, a happiness that'll last. And this is the road that leads there: training the mind. The Buddha once said that the difference between a wise person and a foolish one is that the foolish person sees no need to train the mind. Happiness can be bought, happiness can be taken: That's the foolish person's attitude. But the wise person sees that the pursuit of that kind of happiness actually leads to a lot of unhappiness. Whatever little happiness it does produce isn't dependable. It requires that conditions be a certain way, conditions that lie totally outside your control. The fact that those conditions are unstable means that the happiness coming from them is going to be unstable as well.

So reflect on that. Sometimes you hear theories about how causality works in life. And in many philosophies and religions causality typically starts with an unmoved mover, something permanent, something good that gives rise to everything we experience. The question of course is, "Why does a permanent cause lead to changeable results? Why does a good cause lead to undesirable results?" Those ideas of causality offer no help at all. If something is undesirable, where do you go back and change the cause to make it more desirable? If the cause is unchanging, you're stymied. But as the Buddha saw, causes change too—and effects can have an effect on causes.

This is one of the reasons why things are so unstable and unreliable, but it's also part of the way out. The causes of suffering can be changed, which means that you actually can put an end to suffering. The Buddha's approach was not to simply accept suffering as a given in life, that it has to be that way and we simply learn how to accept it and that's the end of the problem. He saw that suffering can actually be brought to an end. And the causes of suffering are largely internal, which means that the way to put an end to suffering is largely an internal job as well. As someone once said, true happiness is an inside job. That's why we train the mind: to search for the causes within it that lead to suffering and see what we can do to change them.

Keep this point in mind as you practice because a common experience in meditation is that you sit here focused on the breath and then after a while suddenly realize that you haven't been with the breath at all. You've been someplace else. There was a lapse of mindfulness, a lapse of alertness. You're usually surprised that it's happened, but you shouldn't be. Expect that the mind will come up with alternative intentions in the course of the hour and be on the lookout for them.

So while you're focused on the breath, you also have to be heedful of the fact that you could lose the breath at any moment. This means that you want to do your best to strengthen your focus, strengthen your mindfulness, strengthen

your alertness. And one way to do that is, as soon as you catch yourself wandering off, immediately come back to the breath but without engaging in self-recrimination. Don't berate yourself for losing the breath. If you do, you'll tie yourself up in another long discourse that'll take you away from the breath again. Just drop the distraction in its unfinished state and come back to the breath as quickly as possible. Reestablish yourself.

And try to get interested in the breath. As the Buddha said, using your powers of analysis is actually one way of leading the mind into concentration. For people who can't calm the mind simply by sticking with the breath, it's good to look into the breath as a process to explore. How does the breathing affect the body? How does the effect of the breath on the body have an effect on the mind? How can you maximize the positive effects? What kind of breathing would feel really good? And when it feels good, what can you do with that good feeling? The Buddha suggests spreading it around, allowing it to permeate the body throughout.

So there's plenty to do here. It's not just in out, in out, in out. When the breath comes in, explore how it's coming in, how it affects different parts of the body. When it goes out, explore and experiment to see what's the most comfortable way of allowing it to go out. All too often our cartoon notion of the breath coming in and going out requires that we squeeze it out when it goes out. But you don't want to do that. The squeezing is actually depleting the breath energy in the body. Try telling yourself that you'll help the breath come in, but when it goes out, it can go out on its own. You don't have to push it. You don't have to squeeze it.

That way you can begin to maintain a sense of fullness that carries from the in-breath even through the out-breath. When you breathe with that sense of continual fullness, the breath feels a lot better. It becomes a lot more interesting. You begin to realize that this breath work we do in the body is a useful way of getting the mind interested in the breath, so that you don't have to force it to stay here. You're here through the power of your curiosity.

At the same time, you have to keep an eye on the mind to notice when it begins to show signs that it's about to wander off. Maybe it's a little impatient; maybe the results aren't coming as fast as you'd like. Nothing seems to be changing. The mind starts looking for someplace else to go, something else to think about.

If you're really alert, you can catch it before a distracting thought is fully formed. The more quickly you can see that process, the better. You can feel that stirring of a form or a thought beginning to occur, like a little tingling or a little stirring around, a little knot in the breath energy. At that point, it's hard to say whether it's physical or mental. It could be either. There will come a point, though, when the mind decides that the stirring is a potential for a thought. It looks into it and turns it into a thought world. The more quickly you can see that happening, the more you're able to zap it at the very beginning of the stirring. This too is something you'll learn in the course of exploring the breath.

So even though we say to keep one eye on the breath and the other eye on the potential for the mind to leave, when you really look carefully at the breath, you'll find that the potential for it to leave is right there as well, in the little knots or stirrings that can develop in the breath energy. So you don't have to split your focus. In this way you can help maintain your original intention to stay

continually with the breath because it's interesting, because there are lots of things here to learn.

A similar principle applies when you leave meditation because you really don't want to leave totally. You spent all this time getting the mind to settle down, and it would be a shame just to throw it away. So there is a skill to leaving meditation as well, a skill to opening your eyes. When you open your eyes, remind yourself that the breath-body is still here, the sense of energy in the body is still here. All too often when we open our eyes, all our attention goes flowing out into the visual world and our sense of the body gets shrunken down, pushed aside, blotted out.

You want to learn how not to do that. In other words, you *can* be aware of the visual world at the same time that you're aware of the breath-energy world. You might ask yourself, "Which contains which? Does your sense of the body contain your awareness of the visual world or does the visual world contain your sense of the body?" See which way of conceiving this relationship helps you to maintain that sense of breath awareness even as you open your eyes, get up and move around, negotiate the outside world, so that your breath awareness becomes more continuous.

This allows you to learn things about the mind, to develop new skills, in the course of daily life. You learn how to maintain a sense of ease even in difficult situations, a sense of fullness at times when your mind would otherwise be daydreaming or drifting around. Instead of wasting your time drifting, you can stay right here and continue to explore the sense of the body, the breath-energy body inside.

You can also begin to sense which things knock you off balance, distract you, pull you out of the body. When you see that happening, you've found an issue to explore. This is how concentration leads to insight. It provides you with a still center from which you can watch the movements of the mind and see where they go. This way you can detect: This is what a defilement is like; it blocks the mind, obscures the mind. You check into it: Is it greed, anger, delusion, lust, fear, jealousy? What are the things that spark these emotions? You see the defilements in real-time.

If you're able to do this, then the next time you sit down it's going to be a lot easier to stay with the breath more continuously. But if you develop the habit of throwing away your concentration as soon as you get up, it's going to be easier to throw it away in the midst of your meditation. You've got to keep in mind the fact that the mind has to be trained if you want to gain true happiness, and you don't want to train the mind only when you sit here with your eyes closed. You want the training to be 24/7 because the mind's potential to create problems is 24/7 as well.

So it's a matter of establishing your priorities. What kind of happiness do you want? What are you willing to give up to attain that happiness? How much time and energy are you planning to invest, willing to invest to find true happiness?

This is another aspect of wisdom: keeping your priorities clear. If true happiness is the top priority, that helps to pull the mind out of its ignorance—in other words, its overriding concern for other issues—and to bring the issue of suffering and the causes of suffering up to the fore. That's what clear knowing is all about, making it your clear priority that the issue of suffering is paramount. This is the most important issue to deal with. When the Buddha talks about

ignorance, he's not talking about a general lack of knowledge about things. You can know many things and still be ignorant of the big issue. And part of that ignorance comes from the fact that you don't really regard the big issue as the big issue. You've got other priorities, other agendas.

But the Buddha wants you to see that the question of suffering is *the* big issue in life. Your ability to train yourself to put an end to it should be your top priority. When I was up in Bellingham this last weekend, I was out walking after the meal. A guy looked at me and asked, "Buddhist?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Why are there so many religions in the world?" I answered, "Because the different religions ask different questions." "So what's the Buddha's question?" "His question is: 'Why are we suffering and what can we do to put an end to it?'" "Don't you just hate that question?" he said. I said, "No, I think it's a pretty good question." The fact that there's suffering is something you might not like, and it's natural not to like it, but it would be strange to hate the question of why it happens and how you can put an end to it. We should regard this as the most important question to try to answer because it's the most useful, most fruitful question we can explore. It's a privilege to be able to ask this question and answer it. That's why one of the duties with regard to the four noble truths is to develop the path, the way out of suffering. This is what we're doing here right now.

So wisdom is largely a matter of priorities. As you're sitting in meditation, as you go through life, your top priority should be to stay here with the breath so as to develop the powers of mindfulness, concentration, and discernment that will allow you to realize the end of suffering. A lot of the practice is learning how to stick to those priorities and not let other priorities sneak in.

How to Feed Mindfulness

August 3, 2008

We sit here with a lot of potentials: potential sensations in the body, potential qualities in the mind. The practice of meditation is learning how to put aside the unskillful potentials, how to develop the skillful ones, and how to take advantage of the skillful ones—learning how to feed them, to give them strength, so that they basically take charge and help put an end to suffering and stress.

You could, if you wanted to, sit here and spend the whole hour thinking about all kinds of random, frivolous things. Or you could sit here creating a lot of pain. Psychologists studying the nervous system have discovered that there are times when you have a sensation of pain but there's really nothing, no pain signal, coming in at the end of the nerve. The monitoring stations along the nerve interpret a particular signal as a pain signal, and so that's what they send on up the line. That means that you could sit here focusing on whatever potentials for pain there are, and you could turn almost anything into a pain—but you don't. You focus on the potentials for pleasure. Notice, when the breath comes in, where it's feeling good, which part of the breath cycle feels nicest. Is it the middle of the breath, the beginning of the breath, the end of the breath? Can you notice when the breath is getting too long? Can you catch yourself squeezing the breath as it goes out? When you squeeze it, you're weakening the potential for pleasure that the breath can give.

Someplace in the middle of the in-breath there's a point of balance. You might want to focus your attention there and maximize that particular sensation, which means that the breath will get shorter and shorter, more and more subtle as it hovers around that point of balance. If that's too subtle to notice, simply be aware of when the breath is too long, when it's too short, too shallow, too deep, which parts of the body would feel better if they were given a greater role in the breathing process. Try to figure out which ways of breathing will help to develop the potentials of comfort, ease, refreshment, fullness in the body.

As you do this, you're developing good potentials in the mind as well. The two major ones are mindfulness and alertness. I recently read someone saying that mindfulness is an unfabricated phenomenon—that only your thought processes that pull you away from the present moment count as fabricated, that when you're in the pure present there's no fabrication going on at all.

But that's a major misunderstanding. Mindfulness is something you *do*. It's a fabricated activity. Alertness is something you do. It's a fabricated activity as well. And there are potentials in the mind that can either foster the mindfulness or starve it. In other words, mindfulness is something you have to feed. It's not your simple awareness. It's the ability to keep something in mind. The reason we don't understand things, the reason we don't see the connection between cause and effect, is because we forget. It's because we forget that we can't stick with our resolves. Say you decide you're going to stay here for a whole hour with the breath—and five minutes later you find yourself planning tomorrow's meal, or thinking about events far away in Iceland. What happened? You forgot. And

why did you forget? Well, there was a blanking out for a moment or two because you weren't paying proper attention to the causes for mindfulness.

The Buddha identifies two qualities that feed mindfulness and help it grow. The first is well-purified virtue. Virtue here means the intention not to harm: not to do harm to yourself, not to do harm to other living beings. If you have harmful intentions in mind, part of the mind goes along with them and part of the mind doesn't. There's a conflict. And one of the mind's tricks for going along with the harmful intention is to allow itself to forget that the intention is actually harmful. If this becomes a habit, it's hard to develop mindfulness because you're running up against these walls of forgetfulness that the mind very insistently wants to keep up. Your mindfulness runs up against them and gets deflected.

This is why people in Thailand, before they meditate, sometimes make a vow: "I'm going to observe the five precepts. I'm going to stick with them. And I'm sincere in that resolution." This is even easier when you already have been following the five precepts. You reflect on your actions, and there is nothing you regret. You don't have to go into denial. That way it's easier for mindfulness to be continuous. But the simple act of resolving to be harmless in all your activities—harmless in what you do, harmless in what you say, harmless in what you think—can begin to create the right conditions for mindfulness immediately. Make that a principle you want to hold to.

The other quality that helps feed mindfulness is views made straight—straight in the sense that they're in line with the truth: understanding that your actions will have consequences, that skillful intentions will tend to lead to pleasant results, unskillful intentions to unpleasant results. This is a principle that wasn't just made up by somebody. It's been observed by people who've developed their minds to the point where they really can see what's going on. And on the basis of that, you realize, for example, that generosity is a good thing, gratitude is a good thing, because people do have the choice to act skillfully or unskillfully. You have to be grateful for the times when they've chosen to be skillful, and grateful to yourself for the times you've chosen to be skillful, because thinking in this way helps to break down the barriers in the mind that say, "I don't want to think about the Dhamma right now. I want to think about sex, or I want to think about drugs, or I want to think about who-knows-what." If there's part of the mind that says, "Hey, you can't do that without consequences," you've got your first line of defense against those wandering, unskillful thoughts.

Then there will be part of the mind that says, "I don't want to think about that because it means I've been acting unskillfully in the past, and it just hurts too much to think about that." That's where the Buddha recommends developing the right attitude toward your past mistakes. It's not inevitable that you're going to have to suffer a lot from your past mistakes. As the Buddha said, if you can develop an attitude of limitless goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity, that'll mitigate the results of your past bad actions. If you can train yourself so that the mind isn't overcome by pleasure, isn't overcome by pain—in other words, you don't let these feelings get in the way of your seeing what's actually going on—then again, the mind is immune, or at least the results of your past mistakes will be mitigated.

So the proper attitude to have toward your past bad actions is, one, realize that remorse is not going to undo them. Simply make the resolve that you're not

going to repeat those actions again. And then, two, try to develop attitudes of limitless goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity.

When the meditation gets dry, bring out these attitudes and work on spreading them around, realizing that other people's unhappiness isn't going to help you in any way, nor is your unhappiness going to help you in any way. So why would you wish for anybody's unhappiness? Even with people who have been cruel and unprincipled, you realize that if they suffer more, they'll probably get even more cruel, more unprincipled. So try to picture them learning to see to the error of their ways and changing their ways. In other words, you wish for them to start creating the causes for happiness. You don't feel that you have to settle old scores first before you let them be happy or wise. When you learn how to think in these ways, it helps to cut through a lot of the barriers you create in the mind, a lot of the unskillful attitudes that can get in the way of continual mindfulness.

So when you've lowered the walls, you can see back into the past and ahead into the future. You can start seeing the connections between actions and their results. When you focus the mind in a certain way, what are the results over time? If you're mindful of your actions, you can really see this for yourself. If you change the way you focus, if you change the way you breathe, what effect does that have over time? Sometimes the effects are immediate; sometimes they take a while to seep in. Only if you're really mindful can you see the long-term effects. Only if you're alert can you see the short-term effects. This is why mindfulness and alertness have to go together.

I was reading a Dhamma talk by Upasika Kee last night in which she was saying that real insight, as soon as it sees, lets go in that very moment. It's not that you see in one moment and let go in the next. You see and you let go in the seeing, right there and then. That kind of insight requires very quick alertness. But the ability to develop that kind of alertness requires solid mindfulness, long-term mindfulness, so that you can understand how you get the mind in the right place to see things clearly to begin with. All too often when people sit and meditate, the meditation either goes poorly and they have no idea why it's going poorly, or it goes well and they have no idea why it's going well. That's because they haven't been watching mindfully. They watch for a little bit and then they forget. Then they come back, and then they forget, so that they don't really see the connections.

Mindfulness is what keeps the practice in mind and allows you to remember what you did so you can understand the connection between what you did and the results you're getting. Alertness is what allows you to see what you're doing right now. When you develop the resolve to act only on skillful intentions, and the proper understanding of how your actions shape your life, those are the conditions that feed mindfulness, that allow mindfulness and alertness to grow strong.

So it's not the case that people can just walk in off the street, sit down, and develop mindfulness. It takes the ability to look at your life and make some decisions about how you're going to live, and how you understand the best way of living. That's when mindfulness has a chance.

Permission to Play

March 16, 2009

Focus on your breath. Know when it's coming in; know when it's going out. Notice where you feel it, the sensations that tell you when it's coming in and going out, and then keep your attention focused on those sensations. You have to be careful, though, in how you focus. If you put too much pressure on the breath, it starts getting constricted. If your attention to the breath is too light, it slips off and floats away. So find just the right amount of pressure to maintain on the breath—here meaning the pressure of your attention—but allow the breath to flow as freely as possible in the body.

We often make the mistake of tensing up around something in order to highlight it in our attention or to stay focused on it, but that'll get in the way of the breath's being a pleasurable place to stay. Which is what you need as you meditate—a good place to stay—because if the mind doesn't find any sense of ease in the present moment, it's going to go wandering off looking for ease and pleasure someplace else.

So experiment with the breathing. You can do it in one of two ways. The first is simply to pose the question in your mind with each breath: "What kind of breathing would feel really good right now?" See how the body responds. Or you can go about it more systematically. To expand your sense of what the breath is capable of, ask yourself: "What would longer breathing feel like?" And think of the breath going longer for a while. Then how about still longer: What would that feel like? And then go shorter, deeper or more shallow, heavier or lighter. Try to push the envelope until you gain a sense of what kind of breathing really does feel good right now.

It's important that you learn how to play with the breath in this way. This may seem counterintuitive. After all, we're trying to get to something unconditioned and unfabricated and yet here we go about it by fabricating. But that's what the whole path is: a kind of fabrication. Every factor of the noble eightfold path, from right view through right concentration, is something put together. It's a fabrication. It's something you *will* through bodily fabrication, verbal fabrication, and mental fabrication: i.e., through the breath, through directed thought and evaluation, and through feeling and perception. But to will skillfully, you have to bring these fabrications together in a way that makes the path pleasant to follow. Otherwise you can't stick with it. This is why right concentration is such an important part of the path. It gives you a good place to stay—a sense of ease, wellbeing, refreshment, or rapture that nourishes and sustains your ability to stick with the path.

So play around with the breath. Think of fabrication as playing, and you have permission to play. Don't think that playing around in this way is going to get in the way of insight. It actually helps create the conditions for insight to arise. For one, it gives stamina to the practice. If you're simply sitting with whatever comes up, meditation becomes an exercise in brute endurance. If no pleasure's coming up in the meditation, no sense of rapture or gratification, it becomes dull and unattractive. You find it harder and harder to actually sit down and keep up with

the practice day after day. But if you allow the meditation to be a process of exploring, of finding what's really comfortable right now, you can stick with it. It becomes something interesting, something you want to do.

As you're sticking with this process of experimenting with the breath, getting it more pleasurable and allowing that sense of pleasure to seep throughout the body, it gives you a steadier base in the present moment. The interest you develop in exploring the breath energy in the body helps you stay steadily in the present as well. If the meditation is simply a matter of watching whatever comes up, it gets boring very quickly. The mind's going to find reasons to do other things, to slip away and find other things that seem more interesting or important. But if you allow yourself to explore, your curiosity makes you want to stay here, to stay sensitive and steadily focused.

At the same time, allowing the breath to be comfortable gives you a safe foundation in the present moment—a foundation you're going to need because pains will come up. We need the right attitude toward pain: not to feel threatened, not to run away. Our duty with regard to pain is to comprehend it, but you're not going to comprehend it if you feel threatened by it. So it's good to know that you have a safe, comfortable place to return to whenever you need it.

Say there's a pain in your leg and you're not really ready to deal with it yet: You can focus on whatever sense of ease and fullness you can develop elsewhere in the body—say, in the chest, in the stomach, in your hands, in your feet—through the way you breathe. If things get bad with the pain, you can go back to the breath. Once the mind feels nourished and protected by the breath, it'll be more willing to actually look into the pain, probe into the pain, trying to understand: What is this pain I have in my body? Why do I fear it so much? Is it really as fearsome as it seems?

As you get interested in exploring the pain, you start taking it apart: Which part of the pain is actually a physical sensation and which part is the mental perception that makes things worse in the mind? And even with that physical sensation: Which part of it actually is a pain? Because you also have sensations of the different elements in your body, which are more like properties of how the body feels from within. There's solidity, liquidity, warmth, and energy. How does the pain relate to those? It's a different kind of sensation. Liquid is just liquid. Solid is just solid. It doesn't have to be painful. In fact, these sensations are a different order of sensation entirely from the pain. But there's a pain flitting around in there. If you glom it together with the physical properties, especially the property of earth or solidity, you make the pain seem a lot more solid and threatening than it actually is.

If you're coming from a position of wellbeing, a position of inner security, it's easier to explore and see these things happening because your agenda isn't necessarily to make the pain go away. You're curious. You want to learn about it.

And as you develop a greater sensitivity to the breathing, a greater sensitivity to how you fashion the breath and how intention plays a role in your experience of the breath, you start seeing more and more subtle levels of stress that you wouldn't have seen otherwise. You see more subtle levels of fabrication that you wouldn't have seen otherwise as well. Because one of the big lessons in the meditation is that the present moment is not a given. You're actually shaping the present moment with your intentions. And the best way to sensitize yourself to

those intentions and their role in fashioning the present is to try to fashion it skillfully.

This way you get a sense of when you should try to change things, and when you shouldn't; which problems in the body or in the mind respond to active intervention, and which ones respond better when you simply watch them with equanimity. As you put the mind in a better mood through giving it a good comfortable place to stay, or giving it something to explore with the breath, it becomes more open to seeing its own mistakes. It can even admit its mistakes with a greater sense of cheerfulness, because it sees that they don't have to be repeated.

If the mind is in a bad mood, it's like a person in a foul mood. If you want to talk to him about where he's been unskillful, where he's been outrageous or whatever in his behavior, he won't want to hear anything you say. He's going to resist. But if he's rested and well fed and in a good mood, it's a lot easier to broach the topic of his shortcomings. And the same with the mind: A lot of what we're going to learn in the process of understanding the mind is in seeing its subterfuges, where it lies to itself, where it's been dishonest with itself, all of which are things we don't like to see. Yet if we don't admit these things to ourselves, insight will never have a chance. You can't just put the mind through a meditation grinder and hope that the process is going to take care of it. The mind has to develop the sensitivity to see where it's been lying to itself, where it's been dishonest with itself, for genuine insight to arise.

So this game we play with the breath helps put you in the right mood to learn those lessons. Try to explore how to get the breath more comfortable, more refined, seeing how still you can get both the breath and the mind without forcing them unnaturally. After all, you're working with a sense of ease, so you can't force it to the point where the ease dies away. This means that you need to develop your powers of sensitivity. You need to have a sense of how much fiddling around becomes too much fiddling around. When the breath gets comfortable enough that you can stay with the body, when it feels good to be with the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out, then you just allow it to do its thing. And as the mind calms down, the breath calms down as well.

This is a common pattern throughout the Buddha's meditation instructions. You try to get a sense of what fabrication is going on, and then once you're sensitive to the process of fabrication, you allow it to grow still. This gives you some insight into the fact that you're shaping the present moment. You develop the desire to do it with more skill, with more finesse, with a greater sense of sensitivity and subtlety. And you can get there only by consciously trying to fabricate things: fabricating your sense of the body through the breathing, and fabricating your mind through the perceptions you hold.

The sensitivity that develops over time is what allows you to see the subtleties of these processes. If you try to lay down the rule in the beginning that "I'm not going to do anything, I'm just going to watch what's already there," a lot of what's really happening in the present moment goes underground where you can't see it. But as you consciously try to fabricate a sense of wellbeing in the body, a sense of ease in the mind through the way you breathe, through the way you relate to the breath, then you bring these processes up to the surface. You see them more clearly. This brings more honesty into the mind.

So it's important, as you meditate, that you realize you have permission to play, are encouraged to play, with the breath. This is how maturity develops in any field. Children who don't get a chance to play never really mature. The same principle applies to meditators. If you don't learn how to play with the present moment, you never develop a mature understanding of what's going on in the present moment. When you don't really understand the role of intention in forming the present moment, you never get to the point where you can drop every element of intention that's creating the present. And only when you drop the last shred of intention can there be an opening to something outside of the present, beyond space and time, to that happiness we're all looking for, which is totally independent of conditions, totally reliable. And only when we have a reliable happiness can we rely on ourselves.

You see this everywhere now. The economy's collapsing. There are more murders out there, more suicides, more robberies as people's sense of wellbeing gets more and more threatened. This is when you really get to see how strong people's sense of their inner wealth is. The more wealth you have inside, the less you're worried about wealth outside. The less you worry about wealth outside, the more you can trust yourself to do the skillful thing, to say the skillful thing, to think the skillful thing in any situation. If you can train the mind to the point where it's found something that can't be touched by anything in space and time but can be touched through inner awareness—as the Buddha says, you touch it with the body, or you see it with the body; in other words, it's a total experience; it's not just a vision, it's not just an idea, it's visceral: Once you've had your first taste of that, you know you have a happiness you can depend on. This means you can depend on your mind as well. The other pleasures of the world become less important and are less likely to tempt you to do unskillful things to attain them and protect them because you realize you have something that doesn't need protection.

That's where the meditation gets really good. But the only way you can develop the maturity needed to find that mature happiness is the same way any person develops maturity: You start out by playing around, learning about cause and effect by nudging things to see what they do in response. You nudge this cause—i.e., the breath—to see what that does to the mind, what it does to the sense of ease in the body, and then nudge another cause: say, your perception of the breath. If you see the breath only as air coming in and out of the lungs, you're really limiting yourself. Think of other ways you might perceive this energy in the body—flowing through the blood vessels, flowing through the nerves, flowing around the nerves, flowing out to every pore in the skin, flowing around the body just beyond the skin, having everything in and around the body all connecting up. Ajaan Lee's image is of cutting roads through a jungle till you have a whole system of interconnecting roads. Communication gets easier. Information flows more smoothly.

It's by playing around in this way that you start outgrowing your childish attitudes. It's through play that children become adults. So each time you sit down and meditate, remember you have permission to play. It's what the meditation is all about.

Levels of the Breath

August 20, 2006

We all bring our stories to the meditation. Sometimes they're helpful stories, sometimes they're not. Even the Buddha brought his stories to the meditation. That first knowledge on the night of his awakening was basically his story stretching back over many lifetimes. The big issues in each lifetime were his name, his appearance, his food, his experience of pleasure and pain, and how he passed away. That's pretty much it. The life of living beings: name, appearance, food, pleasure, pain, death. Not much of a story. And yet we can elaborate these things into all kinds of issues and spend whole lives going over the details, certain incidents in the stories, especially the painful ones. Or we can look back on the pleasures we once had but that we're missing now, which can turn those past pleasures into present pain.

The Buddha found two ways to get out of his stories. One was to generalize, to think about all living beings as a whole: That was his second knowledge. The question arose: If he had previous lifetimes, how about other beings? Maybe looking at other beings, he would begin to see some general patterns. And that's precisely what happened. He saw how all beings died and then were reborn, and in taking the larger view he saw an important pattern: The quality of their rebirth was based on their actions, on the quality of their intentions, shaped by their views. From there he went to the third knowledge, which took the pattern he saw in the second knowledge and applied it to the present moment: looking at his views and his intentions in the present moment, taking them apart. That was how he got out of his stories altogether.

So as we meditate, we want to think about the pattern the Buddha found. We've got to get out of our narratives, our stories. Otherwise they drive us crazy. You go through the same old movies over and over again—movies that, if they were put up on the screen, you wouldn't pay to watch. Yet because of the "I" and the "me"—*my* pain, *my* pleasure, *my* appearance, *my* food—you get hooked into watching them over and over again. If you want your meditation to go anywhere, you've got to get yourself off the hook.

The first step is to start generalizing. Think of all the beings in the world who had appearances they didn't like, or food they didn't like, or missed the food that they once had that they *did* like, or suffered both pleasure and pain. You're not the only one. Think about that often. These are situations we all undergo. And the particulars of our appearance and food and pain and pleasure may enthrall us, but you've got to look at the general pattern. When you do, you find that the comings and goings of good and bad, likes and dislikes, start seeming inconsequential. As the general pattern takes the sting or the allure out of your own personal narrative, you can come to the present moment and see more clearly what you're doing in the present moment that's creating pain that doesn't have to be there.

What do you have in the present moment? You've got intentions, or in other words, fabrications. What kind of fabrications do you have here? You've got the breath; that's the bodily fabrication. You've got directed thought and evaluation;

those are verbal fabrications. And you've got feelings and perceptions and the intentional element fashioning them; that's mental fabrication. These are the things you want to understand.

You understand them by learning how to master them, bringing them all together—as we're doing right now when we focus on the breath—and approaching their fabrication as a skill. What's the most skillful way to breathe? What's the most skillful way to think about and evaluate your breath? What are the most skillful perceptions to apply to the breath? What kinds of feelings are useful to develop out of the breath?

As you get more and more absorbed in these questions, they really help you get out of your narratives. During my first year as a monk back in Thailand I had a lot of time by myself, a lot more than you do here. And sure enough, a lot of my old narratives from grade school, high school, college, and my family, kept coming back, coming back, coming back. The one thing that kept me from going crazy was the fact that I had something interesting to explore in the present moment: the breath. As I got more of a handle on the breath, got more absorbed in the breath, the fascination with the old narratives began to wane. The understanding began to arise that if I really wanted to comprehend why I was suffering from those old past narratives, I should try to see how I was causing suffering for myself right now in the present moment. The breath was a good way to explore that. Getting absorbed in the breath is a very important way of getting out of those narratives and into the really big issue: Why are you causing stress and suffering for yourself right now? You're not a passive observer. You're not here watching a TV show that somebody else has pre-packaged. You're actively creating the show. It's an interactive game.

So it's important to look at how you think about the breath, how you perceive the breath, and to see the impact those thoughts and perceptions have. This is where Ajaan Lee's instructions on the different levels of breath energy are really helpful. There's the in-and-out breathing. Then there's the breath energy that courses through the nerves and the blood vessels throughout the body. Then there's the still breath. It's important to realize that all three levels of breath are happening all the time. What you're going to notice depends on which one you focus on; and which one you focus on is going to determine how strong and steady and precise your concentration can be.

First you work with the in-and-out breath, which is the easiest to observe and can get the mind to a certain level of concentration, but the in-and-out breath can take you only so far. You're still changing from in to out, in to out, and you may have a sense that the in-breath is something very different from the out-breath. So you're watching two things. But then if you start getting more and more in touch with the process of spreading of the breath energy through the blood vessels and the nerves, that gives you something you can watch continuously with no switching from in to out, for this level of energy is always there. Your perception can become steadier.

At first it's not all that steady because you're exploring: This is directed thought and evaluation. You're exploring how the breath energy affects different parts of the body: which parts you tense up as you breathe in, which parts you squeeze as you breathe out. Then you work through those parts, section by section, clearing out the tension and trying to keep it cleared out throughout the breath cycle. Sometimes, as you get one section cleared up, a section that you just

cleared up a few minutes ago starts tensing up again. It's like the old Thai proverb about throwing live crabs into a basket. You throw one or two into the basket. Then you look for your third, but by the time you throw the third one in, the first crab's crawled out.

So again, this stage of the meditation is fairly active. There's a lot of directed thought, a lot of evaluation, and they have to go back and forth over the same territory many, many times. But the important point is that you're consistently *with* issues of the breath. That's what enables you to be in a state of concentration. Even though there's some activity, even though there's some moving around, it's within a prescribed area. You've withdrawn from unskillful qualities, withdrawn from sensual passions, and you're right here with all the complexities of the breath energy in the body. As you work through the complexities, things begin to hook up, and after a while they stay hooked up: connected into a single field of energy.

That's when the perception of breath can get more unified. As it grows more unified, the issues are less complex. You're concerned less and less with the in-and-out breathing, and more and more with the state of the breath energy flowing through the body. You may notice that the breath channels in the body seem to expand as you breathe in. They may seem to contract as you breathe out. This is where you've got to make up your mind to keep them open all the time, both with the in-breath and with the out—so that it's just open, open, open: open breath channels open all the time. That can be your one perception. You don't have to think about "in" and "out." Just "everything open, everything open." By this time you should have noticed where the different nodes of breath energy are, the ones that are like road intersections that can get closed off. You can close off the whole road just by closing off the one intersection. But at the same time, once you've got the intersection opened you've got the whole road open. So focus your attention on the intersections and try to keep them open all the time.

That's what Ajaan Lee is pointing to when he talks about the resting spots of the breath. Say you're focused in the middle of the chest. Keep that sense of the middle of the chest wide open all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out, and then think of that sense of openness spreading throughout the body, wherever it's going to go. Get in touch with the awareness that already fills the body as well, so you're thinking, "all the way open, all the way in, all the way out," and the in and out become less and less and less important while the openness that's continuous takes center stage.

With that perception you can get the mind to a much more solid level of concentration. Just maintain that one perception. There will still be some in-and-out breathing, but it grows more and more subtle, and impinges less and less on your awareness. This is how you can get more in touch with that sense of the really still breath that's not affected by any in or out at all. No sense of motion at all. Just there, filling the body.

So this element of perception, this mental fabrication, has a really important role in how you relate to the present moment. As you learn to fabricate in more subtle ways, more solid ways, more unchanging and unified ways, the mind can settle down more and more solidly, securely. Some people, when they get to this stage, think that the mind isn't doing anything at all: no self, no actor, nothing. But actually it's doing just one consistent thing. When there's that one consistent thing, you don't notice the motions. The sense of the actor gets less and less

prominent in the mind because there's no changing of roles, nothing to thwart your role. There's just a sense of being, just being here. But being here is still an activity; it's still a fabrication. Nevertheless, it's a skillful fabrication. It's part of your path.

This is how you begin to understand fabrications: by mastering the fabrications that give you a sense of ease and wellbeing in the present moment, that allow the mind to settle down. Once it's settled down, it can see the subtleties a lot more clearly. So work on getting the mind in the right position, right here, right now. At this point, your stories and narratives are far away because you've got something really fascinating in the present moment. You see it. You approach the present moment with the right skills, and they really do make a huge difference in the amount of pleasure you get out of it. And that's an important insight right there.

The Four Jhanas

January 30, 2009

As you sit here with your eyes closed, where do you feel the breathing? You may feel it in lots of places in the body, because the breath isn't just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It's an energy flow. It's part of the breath element that fills the entire body. Your sense of the body sitting here, the whole body from the head down to the feet, has a breath aspect. Part of that breath is the in-and-out breath, and another part is simply the energy flowing in the nerves, in the blood vessels, out to the pores of the skin. It's all breath.

So as you breathe in and out, you have the right to sense it anywhere at all. You can focus either on the spot where the breath seems most prominent, or on the spot where it simply seems most natural to focus. Some people find it easiest to focus on the head, others find it easier to focus on the chest, the neck, or the shoulders. So focus anywhere you'd like.

And allow the spot where you're focusing to have a certain amount of freedom. In other words, don't clamp down on it. Sometimes you may try to define things sharply: "This is where the in-breath begins, this is where the out-breath begins; this is where the in-breath ends, this is where the out-breath ends." But doing that places unnecessary restrictions on your breathing. Given that the whole body is a body of breath energy, breath energy doesn't come with clear lines or sharp demarcations. When you breathe in, the incoming energy simply melds with the old energy. It doesn't fight it, doesn't have to be pushed against anything. It just suffuses and energizes what's already there. There's no clear line of demarcation. When the in-breath reaches a point where you feel you've had enough incoming energy, the breath goes out.

So try not to impose too many strict, preconceived notions on the breath. Just watch how the process feels and hold that perception in mind: that the whole body is a field of breath energy and the in-breath is simply charging up the breath energy already there. Then when things feel too charged, you allow the breath to go out. When it's going to start coming in again, that's its business. You're just there to watch it. To use the Thai word Ajaan Fuang would use, "*prakhawng*"—hover around it, look after it, make sure it feels good. You can pose some questions in the mind: "What kind of breathing would feel better right now? What kind of breathing would feel best? Which part of the body needs more breath energy?" And see how the body responds. Just hover around the breath like this.

The hovering around: That's directed thought and evaluation. As long as your hovering can stay with the breath and doesn't hover off to other places, you've got the third factor for first jhana, which is singleness of preoccupation: the singleness here meaning both that it's the one topic you're interested in and that, as you work with it, it becomes more and more the one thing filling the whole body, your whole range of awareness. You're working on a very broad-based state of concentration here. As the Buddha says, when a feeling of ease and rapture arises, you try to spread it throughout the whole body.

The image he gives is of a bathman or a bathman's apprentice kneading water into a pile of bath powder. In those days they didn't have soap. The bathman would start with some scented bath powder and then mix it with water, kneading the water into the powder until it formed a paste with which they'd bathe. It's similar to mixing water with flour to make bread dough: You want to mix it just right and knead it through thoroughly so that all the flour gets moistened in the same way. You don't add so much water that the water begins to dribble out, or so little that not all the flour gets moistened. That's what directed thought and evaluation are for. They're not extraneous to the first jhana. They're part of the process of arranging a good place for the mind to settle down. They help attain, someplace in the body, a balanced feeling of ease and refreshment, and then allow that ease and refreshment to fill the body, to knead it through the body if necessary, so that the whole body feels saturated and filled: with ease and refreshment, with breath, with awareness.

You'll notice that awareness has two aspects. There's focused awareness and then there's a kind of background awareness already in your body. You want to get them in touch with each other. The background awareness is already there, just like the background breath energy in the body. The question in both cases, though, is: Is it full? When dealing with the breath, you're not trying to pump breath into areas where it's never been before. You're simply allowing everything to connect. And the same with your awareness: You want your focused awareness to connect with your background awareness so that they form a solid whole.

Now as you work with this, you may find after a while that everything is as saturated as it can get. No matter how much you try to make it more comfortable, it just doesn't seem to change. At that point you can just settle in with the breathing as it is, keeping your awareness centered and full. You gain a sense more and more that the breath and the awareness become one—because, after all, they're filling the same place. The awareness fills the body; the breath fills the body; each fills the other, and they become one.

The stronger the sense of oneness, the further and further away the hindrances go. They may nibble at the edges of your awareness here and there, but you really don't have to pay them any attention. You don't have to chase them away. If you chase them away, you drop the breath and they've got you. So you don't want them to trick you in that way. Whatever thought comes passing by, just let it go passing by. But the greater the sense of unity or unification here, the less the hindrances are going to be a problem. That right there is enough to get you solidly based.

From there the concentration can develop further. You may decide that the sense of rapture and refreshment is too coarse, that it actually becomes an irritant. You'd like something more refined and still. So tune-in to the area where there already is stillness in the awareness, where there already is stillness in the breath, and let the rapture do its thing. You don't have to play along with it anymore. You go under the radar, below the rapture, into a level of more subtle ease: relaxed and equanimous.

In the Canon the distinction between these two levels is described in terms of two different images. One is of a lake fed by a cool spring: That's the second jhana. There's a sense of upwelling, a movement of the waters. The cool water from the spring spreads to fill the whole lake effortlessly. There's no conscious

effort, unlike the image of the bathman, who is deliberately working the water through the bath powder dough. Here the cool water just naturally spreads throughout the lake. But still there's a spreading, a sense of upwelling movement and refreshment.

In the image for the third jhana, though, the waters of the lake are totally still. Lotus flowers are growing totally submerged in the water, from the tips of the roots up to the tips of the flowers. No movement at all. Just the coolness of the water saturating them. As things get more and more connected, even the subtle movement of the breath in and out grows still. The awareness is still. The breath is still. Both fill the body with their stillness. This is the fourth jhana. In the image of this jhana, the water disappears altogether. There's just a light, white cloth covering the body. The equanimity here weighs less than the pleasure you've been soaking in, and your awareness throughout the body is very clear.

This is when your concentration is really strong. It's not the kind of concentration that blots out other things. It's just there. You've got the perception that gently but steadily holds it there. The world outside is still around you, but you don't send your awareness out to it. You stay with the sense of stillness in the breath, stillness in the body, stillness in the awareness.

There's a great sense of freedom, although there's still the subtle work of staying here. You don't want to drop it. But it's not nearly as complex as the earlier stages of concentration. Getting the mind to settle down like this is like a mother hen trying to gather her chicks together. In the beginning the chicks are running all over the place. The hen has to run here and there to round them up, but gradually she brings them into a smaller and smaller range until finally they all settle down together under her wings. That's the way it is with concentration. You're not trying to blot out anything; you just maintain your focus and gather everything in. The closer these things come together, the less effort involved in keeping tabs on them. Another image they use in Thailand is of a red ant. The red ant, when it bites, just grabs on with its jaws. It doesn't let go. You can pull at its body, but the jaws stay in place even when its head has torn off.

So all you have to do is gather all your attention on the perception and sensation of the breath throughout the body, and then just hang on. If you do it skillfully, with this enlarged awareness, you settle down and develop a sense of concentration that's easy to maintain. If everything is focused just on one point, that concentration will easily be destroyed with the slightest movement. You may be able to maintain it when you're sitting very still, but as soon as you have to move the body, it's gone. But with the whole-body awareness like this, where there's a sense of being settled and established with the entire body your frame, your center of gravity is low. The mind is broadly based, and isn't easily tipped over.

Even as you get up from the meditation, you can maintain that sense of full body as you walk around, as you deal with other things. It may not actually qualify as jhana, but it's a steady foundation. It's your foundation of mindfulness. It's an establishing of mindfulness, which after all is the theme or *nimitta* of the meditation. When the Buddha used the word *nimitta*, he didn't mean a vision or a light. He meant the topic of your meditation. And the topic of your meditation is what? It's the four *satipatthana*: the body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, mind in and of itself, or mental qualities in and of themselves—all of which are right here.

It doesn't take much to move from body to feelings, or feelings to mind states, or mind states to mental qualities. They're very close together right here. But you choose one as your primary foundation or frame of reference. For instance, try to relate everything to the breath. As feelings come and go, see how they relate to the breath. How does the breath cause them? Which way of breathing helps to induce feelings of ease and rapture? When the ease and rapture seem to be coarse, which ways of breathing or conceiving of the breath allow everything to settle down into a more subtle state of equanimity? Which ways of breathing allow you to gain what the Buddha called an enlarged awareness, *mahaggatam cittam*.

In the foundations of mindfulness or the frames of reference, he talks about different ways of categorizing the mind. As you read through the list, you see that the categories get more and more refined as your concentration gets more and more refined. So which ways of breathing help the mind get more refined? In terms of mental qualities, which ways of breathing are associated with the hindrances, which ways of breathing are associated with the factors for awakening? For example, the first three factors—mindfulness, the analysis of qualities, and persistence—are related to your directed thought and evaluation, trying to see what's skillful and what's not, trying to induce what's skillful and let go of what's not. How do you use the breath to develop these factors in such a way that gathers the remaining qualities—rapture and refreshment, calm, concentration and equanimity—here in the stages of concentration?

You want to hold onto the breath as your main frame of reference so that you don't get scattered. If you find yourself getting scattered, just drop those connections and stay simply with the sensation of the breath. Learn how to read your mind, to see when the mind is ready to start investigating these connections and when it really needs to just sit down and be still. Stay with the one perception that acts as a thread, keeps the mind right here, sews your awareness together with the body. You're creating a place where insight can arise. It requires a good solid foundation, a low center of gravity so that it's not easily knocked off. If you flit around from one frame of reference to another, you miss a lot of things, because in the flitting around there are going to be gaps. A lot of interesting things happen in the gaps, which you tend to miss. So think of your mindfulness of the breath as a long piece of thread that sews everything together over time. Anything that comes up in the body or in the mind, try to relate it to the breath.

This is the kind of concentration that can provide a good foundation for insight, for discernment. Its range of view is all around, with few blind spots. The stronger this concentration, the more refined the discernment you can develop. So don't worry about when to stop doing concentration and to start doing discernment work. As the Buddha said, it requires a certain amount of tranquility and insight in order to get the mind to settle down into strong concentration; then once it's in strong concentration, your tranquility and insight get more refined.

These things go together. You may find yourself leaning in one direction or another at any one time, but don't lean so hard that things tip over or get scattered. Try to keep everything together like this. The mind can then begin to cut through a lot of defilements, a lot of problems in a way that it couldn't when it was scattered. Ajaan Lee gives the image of gathering everything into a single

drill bit that drills down into the earth in one place. Your concentration is here. Your mindfulness is here. Your insight is here. When they're all working together, the drill bit can go deep and cut through anything—even rock—because all these qualities are working together.

Knowing the Body from Within

December 23, 2008

As you're meditating and listening to the Dhamma talk, give most of your attention to the breath, to your actual meditation object. The talk is here in the background, pointing things out that may or may not be appearing right now in your breath, in your mind. The actual Dhamma is right there in the body, in the mind. It's not in the words of the talk. One of the Pali terms for a Dhamma talk, *dhamma-desana*, literally means pointing to the Dhamma. In other words, the words aren't the Dhamma. The words point to the Dhamma that can be found in the breath, in the mind, in this area of awareness where you experience the body from within.

There's an old Peanuts comic strip where Linus comes up to Lucy and says, "Feel how cold my hands are." So he touches her and she says, "Brrr, yes, they *are* cold." Then she asks, "But how do you know how they feel when you're inside them?" And this is a big problem for most of us. We're not really that conscious of how we feel the body from within. Yet this is the area where the Buddha says you're going to find the Dhamma. The texts talk about touching the Dhamma with the body, even *seeing* the Dhamma with the body. Where you're experiencing the body right now: That's where the important things are going to be discovered. The experience of concentration is going to be sensed right here. Even when you go into the formless realms, it's going to be right here where your sense of the surface of the body begins to disappear. Right where the body was felt, that's where you're going to start noticing space and consciousness. When your awareness of the deathless comes, it's going to fill the area where your body is now. That's where the Dhamma is seen and touched.

So right here is where you want to look. And get used to looking again and again and again, so that you can see things more precisely and accurately. Now, words are useful to help you to discern and distinguish some of the things you might be experiencing here. It's like people who are trained to be professional tasters. Part of their training lies in learning how to notice very carefully what their taste buds are telling them, but an equally large part is learning a vocabulary that helps them make precise distinctions. This is the purpose of these words pointing to the Dhamma: to help you notice subtle things happening right here that you might have overlooked or glommed together. You might have missed some subtle distinctions.

When most of us look at this sense of the inside of the body, we can notice whether we're feeling well or not well, but that's about it. Some people can't even experience that much, can't even experience the body. Either because of abuse when they were small or some other trauma, they have trouble feeling their bodies, being sensitive to what's going on inside. One way to get around that is not to imagine that you're looking at the body from the area of the head or the eyes. Instead, back up into the body: Notice how the back feels, notice how the different parts of the body feel as you back into them. And use the breath as your guide. Think of the different aspects you notice in the body as an aspect of the breath energy.

Altogether, there are four elements or properties that make up our sense of the body from within: breath, fire, water, and earth. The sense of energy—which can be either moving or else still but buzzing—is breath. Don't think of the breath only as the air coming in and out of the lungs. It's the energy buzz throughout the body. When you start thinking of the body as an energy flow or energy buzz, you begin to notice parts of the body where the flow or the buzz is not quite right. You might have accepted them in the past as feeling solid, thinking, "Well, that's where the bones are. That's where the muscles are tight." But if you tell yourself, "This is breath," you realize that some parts of the breath seem to be stuck; others are stagnant. They don't move. They don't flow. What can you do to get them to move? What can you do to get them to flow? Changing your perception will also change your questions, change your ideas of what's possible.

Then there's the warmth, the fire property. Sometimes it seems too warm, sometimes not warm enough. Which parts of the body are warmest right now? Do they feel comfortable or overly warm? If they feel comfortable, think of spreading that warmth throughout the body, to the places that are cooler. If you're feeling too hot, you want to do the opposite: Look for the cool areas and think of the coolness spreading throughout the body. That's the water, coming in to dampen the fire.

Earth is a sense of solidity or heaviness. Does the body feel too heavy, or do you feel too lightheaded? Can you bring things into balance? If you're feeling too heavy, think more of lightness, the breath energy lifting you up. If you're feeling too lightheaded, think more of earth: There are bones, there's all this solid stuff in your body that can keep you grounded.

Once you've been able to detect these different properties within the body, the next step is to try to bring them all into balance so that things are not too warm, not too cold, not too heavy, not too light. They feel just right. When the body is brought into balance, your sense of the breath is going to change. The energy flow in the body becomes less and less a matter of having to pull energy in from without. It's more that the pores of your skin are wide open, and they connect with breath channels throughout the body. Different parts of the body are nourished with breath energy, and all you have to do is think of them sharing the breath energy with one another, with other parts of the body that seem more starved. The more the breath channels connect within the body, the less you're going to need the in-and-out breath.

This is important, because the more things come to balance and stillness like this, the more clearly you'll be able to see what the mind is doing right here—and particularly the very peculiar activity that the mind has of taking a sensation in the body and using it as a kernel for a thought. It becomes a little symbol in the mind and then the symbol turns into a thought world. The more quiet and balanced things are in the body, the more clearly you will be able to see this happen—and how arbitrary the whole process is.

Of course, this process does have its uses. It enables you to think and function in the world. But you also want to be able to pull yourself out at any time, in case a thought world turns vicious, so it's good to gain practice in just staying with the body. Think of "body, body, body," keeping the body in and of itself as your frame of reference. If a thought does arise, and you can sense where in the body it's lodged, think of breathing through that spot. Or just think of the energy in

that spot untangling itself and getting connected with the energy of the different parts right around it, dissolving the tangle. When you can stay with the sense of the body and not get sucked into a thought world, it's called keeping the body in and of itself as your frame of reference. This is why the Buddha starts here when he teaches mindfulness.

And in teaching mindfulness, he teaches you the themes of concentration. You want to maintain a sense of being centered right here where you're aware of the body from within, so that as the movements of the mind go flashing out, you can see them and yet not ride along with them. That's how you begin to understand things like greed, anger, delusion, craving, and all those other mental states that cause suffering—learning how to watch how they form and how not to get hoodwinked into running along with them. But this requires becoming more and more sensitive to how things are happening here in the body, how the mind and the different properties of the body interact. When you find yourself in a bad mood, don't immediately focus on how bad things are outside. Don't focus on the object of the mood; focus instead on the mood itself, realizing that it comes from something wrong with how the mind and the body are interacting. Learn to look inside, and not take the mind's comments on the world outside so seriously.

Again and again, this is the message of the meditation. You want to put yourself in a position where you can watch these processes as processes, rather than as reliable information about the world out there. The realization becomes clearer and clearer that everything you know about the world out there is being filtered through this area of your experience, the area we're all not very clear about, not very articulate about, not very observant about. Which means, of course, that we're going to get deluded by the information the mind puts together.

The way to get past that delusion is to get more and more clear about this clearinghouse, the area where you're aware of the body from within. This is where everything important is going to appear. If you don't yet see anything happening here, then you're not looking carefully enough. Everything that's going to shape your life has to go through this filter. You want to get to know the filtering process very well, so you can recognize when it's filtering things in an accurate and useful way, and when it's filtering them in a harmful way that gives rise to suffering.

So we focus on the breath not simply as a means for getting the mind to settle down and be still, but also as a means for looking at the mind itself and gaining insight. And the insight we're gaining here is not so much an insight that you can put into words. The words help you to articulate some of what you're experiencing here, but the actual Dhamma is going to appear right here in your inner sense of the body and immediately make sense in a non-verbal way.

This is why it's so important that you get sensitive to this area—and that you're continually sensitive to this area, without rushing in, rushing out, rushing in, rushing out. You're going to stay right here. If there's any rushing in and out, you can watch it, but you're not going to rush along with it. That's how you learn how to see things, to see *through* things, so they lose their power over you.

As you get more and more sensitive here, ultimately you'll arrive at the point where you do touch the Dhamma with the body. You see the Dhamma with the body—i.e., you see it where the body is right now. It's a very intimate kind of

seeing. Actually a lot of the Dhamma is already here right now. A lot of the processes of the body, the processes of the mind, can be sensed from within. But if you're not looking here, if you're not looking continually, or you're not looking sensitively from this perspective, you're going to miss them.

So try to be continuous in your sensitivity. Make this your frame of reference, stick with this frame of reference, and you'll come to see a lot of things you never saw before. They were happening here all along, but you were distracted. You were carried along by the flow. This is why the Buddha calls the things that defile the mind *asavas*, effluents, things that go flowing out. For all too long we've allowed ourselves to be carried along with the flow, and then end up deposited wherever the flow ends, in the mud and mess of the Mississippi delta. But now you want to take a stance right here. The Buddha said, "Make the body in and of itself your island" in the middle of the river, so as the flow goes out, you don't go flowing along with it. You get to see, "Oh, these are the things that get carried along with the flow. This is where the flow goes." As long as you're standing on the island, you aren't getting sucked into the flow. You aren't getting deluded. You can see what's happening and let it go.

This is why it's so important that you take your stance here, and that you maintain this stance in all your other activities.

Right Concentration

December 27, 2007

I don't know if you've noticed when we chant the sutta, "The Analysis of the Path," as we did last night, that the longest section is the one describing right concentration. It's the only section that talks about stages in the practice. And it gives a fairly detailed map of the different elements in each stage. The question is, how do we relate to the map? It's tempting to say, well, there's this ingredient, there's that ingredient, and so you pull the different ingredients together and hope that what you've got is a state of jhana.

But it doesn't really work that way. It's like being told that durian tastes a little bit like garlic, a little bit like onions, a little bit like custard. It has a little bit of cyanide, a little bit of vitamin E. So you throw all those things together, thinking that you're going to get durian, but what you get is an inedible mess. If you want to get durian, you have to plant the seed. Here the seed is the topic of the meditation. The topic, as the Buddha said, is the four establishings of mindfulness. For example, staying focused on the body in and of itself, ardent, alert and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world: That's what you focus on, the process you focus on. Once you've planted the seed and keep watering the seed, the tree will grow. When it's mature, the tree will start giving fruit. If you've planted the right seed, you're going to get the right fruit. So you don't have to go designing the fruit. You just have to be very careful to plant the right seed and care for it well.

So focus on the breath in and of itself. As you're focusing on the breath, put aside any sensual passions. There's the phrase in the description of jhana, "secluded from sensuality." Some people interpret that as meaning totally cut off from any input from the physical senses. Some interpret it as meaning secluded from sensual pleasures, so that you have to meditate in a place that's unpleasant or a place that's very boring. But neither of those interpretations is what the Buddha means. Sensuality, in his sense of the word, is your passion for your sensual thoughts and plans; the extent to which you love to obsess about those things. So in being secluded from sensuality you're not trying to close off any contact with outside senses and you're not trying to put yourself in a dull, boring place. You're trying to develop a more internal seclusion: If you see any sensual passion coming up, you sidestep it. You put it aside.

Right here is where the analysis of the body into different parts comes in handy. If there's anything in the body that's got you lusting for it, you can think about all the other things right next to it in the body that are disgusting. If you're feeling some greed for food, think about the whole process of getting and eating food: exactly how much work goes into preparing the food, how short at time it actually tastes good in the mouth, and then what it's like as it goes through the digestive system and comes out the other end. In other words, you're using some thinking here to protect yourself, to pull you away from unskillful thoughts, and in particular from sensual passion.

Another way of gaining seclusion from sensuality is to fully inhabit your sense of the body. This is what *rupa*, or form, means when you're in

concentration: the sense of the body as felt from within. You feel the inside of your hands, the inside of your feet, the inside of everything. The mind isn't living out in the world with its thoughts about sights or sounds or smells or tastes or things that come and touch the body. You want to be on the level of form: the body in and of itself as it's present to you right here from the inside right now. And as you're alert and mindful, you're ardent: You want to use your alertness and mindfulness in a skillful way.

In other words, notice how the breath feels and ask yourself: Is this the kind of breath sensation you could settle down and spend lots of time with? If it's not, what can you do to change it? This is where evaluation comes in. The image for the first jhana is of a bathman working water through his lump of bath powder and turning it into a kind of dough. Of the different images used for the jhanas, this is the only one with a conscious agent deliberately doing something and evaluating the results. You're finding a sense of pleasure and fullness with the breath, and then you deliberately work it through the body as a whole, evaluating the results as you go along.

In doing so, you learn an awful lot about this sense of the form of the body and how the energy moves through it and around it: how the energy can move in a comfortable way and how, if you force it in the wrong way, it gets very uncomfortable. You have to observe and learn what works and what doesn't. In this way you're not only developing a nice place to be in the present moment, but also learning about how the different aggregates—such as the aggregate of feeling and the aggregate of form—interact; how your perception has an effect on these things. You'll see how you come to the meditation with specific perceptions in mind, a particular idea in mind of how the mind focuses itself, of how the breath works, of how the energy in one part of the body relates to the energy in another part of the body. As you meditate, you get a chance to test those perceptions. If they're not working, try out other perceptions.

All of this is evaluation. When you've got the right focal point, you're evaluating it properly, and you're keeping a specific topic in mind as continually as you can, you've got all the causal factors that can get you into right concentration. Then you don't have to think about anything else. You don't have to ask yourself, "Do I need to add a little bit more rapture, a little bit more pleasure?" If you've got the causes right, the results will come on their own. The rapture and pleasure are results. If you aren't getting the right results, focus back on the causes, which are directed thought, evaluation, and singleness of preoccupation. When these are right, the pleasure will come as a sense of ease, whereas the rapture can come in many different forms. In some cases it's simply a sense of refreshment, of lightness or fullness in the body. Other times it's more intense: a sense of thrill running through the body, or your hair standing on end. Again, your main concern is to stick with the causes. You don't want to go out redesigning the fruit, painting the fruit, squeezing the fruit, or pulling on it. Focus on the causes, and the fruit will mature on its own.

Then there's always the question: How do you know you've hit the first jhana? You can't really know at first. It doesn't come with a sign that says, "Now entering jhana." When you find the mind in a state that feels really good, really comfortable, with a sense of coming home, then when you leave it, put a post-it note on it: This might be something important. In other words, you apply a label

to it, but at the same time you realize you're not yet really familiar with the territory, so you don't want to be too quick to incise the label in marble.

The only one of the jhanas that has a really definite signpost is the fourth, which is where the in-and-out breathing stops. There's a sense of awareness filling the body and it's all very still. The mind is still, the body is still, and everything's perfectly balanced. There's no in-and-out breathing at all. At that point you know you've hit the fourth jhana and you can put a more confident note there. Then you can look back at the various stages you've been through, and you might have to rearrange the notes a little bit. Or you find that you've taken more than four steps coming in. There are passages in the Canon that talk about five stages in jhana practice, others that talk about three. So it's possible that your path into the fourth jhana might not have the same number of steps as somebody else's.

I noticed that when Ajaan Fuang was teaching his students, different people would have all sorts of different experiences in the meditation until they got to that one point where everything was very still in the body. The in-and-out breathing finally stopped. Breath energy was filling the body, awareness was filling the body, everything felt very connected, balanced, and very bright: not necessarily with a light, but with a sense of real clarity. Then from that point on everybody seemed to go through the same stages.

But the process of getting into that point is going to be a very individual thing. The important factor is that you find a meditation topic you really like. There's got to be an element of delight here because you're trying to develop a state of becoming, a healthy state of becoming, an alternative to the unhealthy and unskillful states of becoming you've been engaged in before. And an important component in becoming is delight. With right concentration you have to develop a strong sense of ease and wellbeing. That's the only way you're going to be able to pull yourself away from the temptation to keep falling back to the sensual delight that feeds your old sensual indulgences.

The Buddha once said that even though you may have a right understanding about the drawbacks of sensuality, if you haven't had any access to the kind of pleasure and rapture that jhana can provide, you're always going to be tempted to go back. So mere insight on its own is not enough to pull you away from those temptations. You need something else, something stronger and more visceral, to provide the mind with a sense of wellbeing. This is what right concentration provides.

There's a nice sutta in which the Buddha talks about a bull elephant who wants to go down to the river and bathe alone. When he lives with an elephant herd and goes down to the river, the she elephants and baby elephants bump into him. He wants to drink clear water and of course they've muddied up the river. So he decides to go off on his own. Then, as he's living alone, when he goes down to the river, the water is clear. Nobody is bumping into him as he bathes. He comes out, breaks a twig off the tree, and scratches himself with the twig. He finds satisfaction. He allays his itch.

The Buddha said that this is the same as when you practice right concentration. You gain a sense of seclusion, and then the pleasure, the rapture, and the sense of equanimity are like scratching yourself with the twig. It feels good. It allays your itch. And that's an important part of the practice. Without that sense of ease and wellbeing, everything gets very dry. At the same time,

once the mind is satisfied in this way, you get to see the activities of the mind really clearly, you get to see the body really clearly, because you are here. Very consistently here, alert, mindful.

Then you begin to see the body and your mind in terms of the aggregates in action. You see form, i.e., the form you're inhabiting. You see feelings, the feelings that come from the different ways the breath energy moves through the body. You see your perceptions in action, your fabrications in action. For instance, when you move from the first to the second jhana, you let go of verbal fabrication, and your relationship to the breath changes. Singleness of preoccupation is a factor of all the levels of jhana, but when you get into the second jhana, the Buddha uses a new term: unification. In unification, it feels as if your awareness and the breath become one. It's not as if you're sitting outside of the breath kneading it through the body; you're immersed in a lake with the cool water of a spring welling up inside. You're actually one with the breath. You don't have to adjust it anymore; you don't have to evaluate it anymore. Things begin to meld together, merge together, and actually stay that way all the way up through the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness. This is what happens when you let go of the verbal fabrication of directed thought and evaluation. When you get to the fourth jhana, you let go of bodily fabrication. The in-and-out breath actually stops.

There are two ways you can observe the mind in the course of practicing jhana. One is as it's in a particular state of jhana. In fact, all the way up through the dimension of nothingness, you can observe each state while you're in it. It's like having your hand in a glove. It can be fully in the glove, partly in the glove, or totally removed. When you're fully in the higher jhanas you can't observe them, but when you're partly in them, you can. You pull the mind slightly above its full absorption—but not totally out—so that you can observe what's going on in that particular state. Another way to observe it is, as you move from one level to the next, you begin to see different fabrications, different perceptions, just peeling away. So you're beginning to see exactly what the Buddha is talking about when he talks about the five aggregates. You see them in action—for they *are* actions. You see the distinctions among them.

You also see how they interact, which means that you're not only in a really nice shady place with a branch that you can use to scratch yourself anywhere you itch. You're also in an ideal place to watch what's going on right here in the present moment in terms of the aggregates. This allows you to start looking at things in and of themselves as they come into being right here, right now.

This is why right concentration is the heart of the path. It's the first element of the path that the Buddha discovered. You probably know the story. He'd gone to the extreme end of self-affliction through the various austerities he had inflicted on himself, and after six years he realized that this wasn't working. In spite of all his investment in that particular path, he had the good sense and the humility to realize that there must be another way. So at that point he hearkened back to the time when he was a child sitting under a tree and had entered the first jhana. The question arose in his mind: "Could this be the path?" And he said, "Yes, this is the path." So right concentration is the factor that he first realized was part of the path. Then from that point on, as he worked with it, he began to realize that other factors had to support it as well. But right concentration is the central one, the one you can't do without. And the time spent on developing right

concentration is very well spent: both because it's a good place to stay and because it's an ideal place to start seeing things in terms of the five aggregates.

So you keep it in the back of your mind that this is what you want in the practice, this is where you're headed as an interim goal on the path. But as with every aspect of the path, you have to combine your desire for a particular goal with an understanding of the steps that will take you there. As the Canon says, desire for awakening is a good thing. But it's a good thing only when it gets you to focus on the actual steps that will take you there. And the same principle applies to jhana. You know in the back of your mind that this is where you're headed but you can't be obsessed with what's written on the map. You have to be more obsessed with the causes that will get you there. You seclude the mind from sensuality. And where do you do that? By focusing on the four frames of reference, the four establishments of mindfulness.

The Buddha says that this is your territory as a meditator. If you wander off your territory, it's like the quail who wandered away from the plowed field where he could hide from the hawk. He suddenly finds himself out in an open meadow where a hawk swoops down and catches him. As the hawk carries him off, he laments his bad fate, "Ah, I shouldn't have left my safe field. If I hadn't, this hawk would have been no match for me!" The hawk says, "Okay, I'll let you go there, but even there you won't escape me." He lets the quail go. The quail goes and stands on top of a stone turned up by the plow and shouts to the hawk, "Okay, come and get me, you hawk. Come and get me, you hawk." And the hawk, without bragging, just folds his wings and dives down. The quail sees that the hawk is coming at him full speed and so jumps behind the stone. The hawk crashes into the stone and dies.

This is the analogy for when you wander off into sensual passions: You're out where the hawk can get you. But when you're here in the body, ardent, alert, and mindful, you're in your safe territory. Just keep inhabiting the body as you go through the day. Whether you're in jhana or not doesn't matter. As long as you have this sense of fully inhabiting the body, being in touch with the breath energy in the body, you're in the right location, you're in the proper territory. As for the map of the different stages, keep that in the back of your mind. If you look at the map while you're driving, you'll drive off the road. Use the map after you've come out of meditation to reflect on what you experienced, what happened in the course of the meditation. Over time you'll arrive at your own more complete map of the different stages the mind goes through, the different ways it settles down, the different types of concentration you can get into. But all this comes from having a proper sense of cause and effect.

This is why the Buddha put right view at the very beginning of the path: seeing the practice of meditation as a type of kamma, something you *do* to get the results that you want, with the realization that the results have to come from causes. If you focus on the causes, with the sense of where you want to go kept in the back of the mind, the causes will take you there. In this case, it's not done by focusing on your memory of what was stated in the texts about jhana. It's done by focusing on the breath, getting to know the breath by evaluating it, adjusting it, settling in. That's where you'll see right concentration.

Jhana: Responsible Happiness

July 13, 2009

We start each session with thoughts of goodwill, reminding ourselves of why we're here, and of the fact that the happiness we're looking for here is harmless. That's what goodwill is all about: May all beings find happiness in a harmless way. Of course that means *we* need to find our happiness in a way that doesn't take anything away from anyone else. In other words, each of us has to find happiness within. That's why we're here meditating.

So the fact that you're not paying attention to anyone else right now is actually a very responsible thing, because you're pursuing a happiness that will make you less of a burden. Any happiness you try to gain otherwise is going to take something away from other people, other beings. Or if you go to the other wrong extreme of self-torture, trying to find some satisfaction out of that, you're not going to find true happiness at all, so that's not responsible, either. As we've seen many times, people go back and forth between these extremes. They can be very self-denying until finally they snap; then they head off in the other direction, getting very self-indulgent. When they see the harm of indulgence, they go back to being self-denying again, back and forth. Nothing gets accomplished this way. Both ways of looking for happiness are irresponsible. The responsible way is to come in and see what inner resources you have that can be developed into a genuine happiness within.

As the Buddha once said, your most important resource, the most important factor of the right path, is right view. In another passage he said that the most important factor is right concentration. So you need to emphasize both. Everything else draws on right view and serves right concentration. The right view here starts with what I just said: If you're going to find true happiness, it has to come from within because the sources of suffering also come from within. We suffer mentally not because of unpleasant things happening to us, but from how we shape our experience of those unpleasant things—or of pleasant things, as the case may be. Which means that we need some internal skills. That's what right concentration is for.

As you focus on the breath, try to bring your focus to a nice steady spot. Ajaan Lee's image is of a post planted at the edge of the sea. The sea rises, but the post doesn't rise with the sea. The sea ebbs, but the post doesn't go out with the sea. It stays right there. The trick here, though, is to make sure that that steady spot is comfortable. If you clamp down too hard, you're going to put too much pressure on your nerves, too much pressure on the blood vessels in that part of the body, and your concentration will have some bad side effects. It will create weird sensations in the different parts of the body as the blockage right here interrupts the blood flow and leads to problems somewhere else.

So, keeping Ajaan Lee's image in mind, allow the water to flow around the post, but keep your awareness steady with an element of interest. There's going to be something to watch here; something interesting is going to appear here, so have that element of interest to catch what's actually going on. If you find any tension or blockage building up here, think of it relaxing, dispersing, dissolving

away. And then think of the relaxation spreading out from that spot, through all the energy channels in the body, through all the nerves in the body. If it needs an escape route out of the body, think of it going out the soles of your feet and the palms of your hands.

Another image from Ajaan Lee is that meditation is like medicine. Mindfulness and alertness are the actual medicines; the quality of your attention right now is what's healing both for the body and for the mind. The breath acts as a solvent, helping the medicine to spread throughout the body. When you apply well-balanced alertness and mindfulness to any sense of blockage in the body, it helps to untangle it. The reason these blockages build up is because we're not paying attention to them. Our attention is off someplace else. And so we miss a lot of what's going on right here, right now, in the body and in all the connections between the body and the mind.

So wherever you focus on the breath in the body, keep in mind that you want the breath to be comfortable, you want the energy in that spot to be comfortable, the sense of flow to be unobstructed. And the results in the body help you to gauge how skillfully you're focusing the mind. In the beginning it's hard to tell the two apart. When there's a sense of focus, there are going to be physical symptoms around the focus. But with time you begin to see that the focus and the symptoms are separate, so that if you're focusing, say, on the nose or in the middle of the head, the sense of pressure that might build up around that focus isn't necessary.

Try to think of whatever escape routes there may be to allow that pressure to disperse a little bit so it's not so heavy, not too oppressive: out the top of the head, down the spine, out the hands, out the feet, down the front of the throat, wherever. You find where your escape routes are. Use some imagination, because we've all been developing different ways of maintaining focus in the body, using different physical symptoms as a sign that the focus is staying there, or as a reminder to stay at that spot. If some of those symptoms are unpleasant, you have to learn how to let them go and yet maintain your focus. The flow of the energy there is a good way of gauging whether you're doing this skillfully.

Once you develop that skill in being both focused and at ease at the same time—alert, attentive, interested—you see how that quality of still awareness can allow patterns of tension to dissolve away and blockages to be opened up. That's when you can bring that same quality of attention to patterns of tension in other parts of the body—around the navel, the middle of the chest, the back of the neck, wherever. Here again the steadiness and quality of your awareness is the medicine. The breath is a solvent that allows the effects of the medicine to spread through different parts of the body.

This is an important skill—learning how to stay focused in a way that's healing—because that's what the Buddha's teachings are all about: healing. That's what the four noble truths are all about. They're like a doctor's prescription. What's the illness? Where does it come from? Cure the illness by getting rid of the cause. Everything the Buddha taught was meant to be healing, a means to happiness that's blameless. So if you start feeling guilty about practicing concentration, remind yourself this is a blameless pleasure. The dangers of jhana are very minor and mild. If you get really addicted to this pleasure, you might start getting lazy in your other activities, so that's something to watch out for. And you might start getting lazy about the idea of using the

jhana to develop deeper insight. You might say, “Hey, this is good enough for me,” and just want to stay right there.

The problem, of course, is that it won’t last. If the jhana isn’t supported by right view, it begins to fall apart. If you’re not careful, it can actually strengthen wrong views. Some people hit a state of concentration and then decide, “Ah, from now on I don’t need to watch out after my actions because I’ve found the Truth, the Ground of Being,” or whatever. But the problem there is not with the concentration; the problem is with the views you bring into it, thinking that it’s going to do all the work for you, or that it’s all you need to do.

So the danger is not in having concentration; the danger is in the wrong views that you might bring to the concentration, or that might prevent you from getting into concentration. For the biggest danger is *not* having concentration. We hear so much about the dangers of concentration, but the dangers of not having it are a lot worse. If you don’t have this pleasure to tap into, you’re going to go looking for pleasure in other ways, which can often be quite harmful.

As the Buddha once said, even though you may see the drawbacks of sensual pleasures, if you don’t have the pleasure of concentration to tap into, you’re going to keep going back to your old sensual pleasures. If you go back to them with denial, that just complicates the issue. People steal, kill, have illicit sex, lie, speak divisively, speak coarsely, use intoxicants, not because of their ability to access the pleasure of concentration, but because they don’t have that ability. They go looking around for sensual pleasures. People engage in self-torment, and then they get very censorious and very strict with other people for not torturing themselves or tormenting themselves. Or as we see with a lot of Buddhist scholars, they don’t have any real concentration, so they say that concentration is self-indulgent; it’s not necessary; insight has to be strict and self-denying—and with that attitude, even the insight becomes harmful. It turns into a lot of wrong view.

So the dangers of not having concentration are much greater than the dangers of getting stuck on concentration. And again, the stuckness is not so much in the concentration itself as in your views around it. As long as you’re very clear that concentration is a path, and that it has to be combined with other factors of the path—right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, and right mindfulness—then it’s perfectly safe. This is especially true when you develop the ability to read the quality of your concentration, to read how it affects the breath energy in the body, and to make sure the energy feels balanced, at ease, healthy. In this way your concentration is self-correcting because it’s got right view built into it.

That’s because it’s the kind of concentration that listens, notices; it’s based on interest—*citta*—which is one of the bases for success. This factor has to be present in all states of right concentration. Whether or not it’s the factor you’re consciously emphasizing, it’s got to be there, paying close attention to what you’re doing, noticing where you’re adding unnecessary stress, and then learning how to stop doing the things that are causing that unnecessary stress. Even though this inquiry is just on the level of the breath, it’s an application of the four noble truths.

So this interest is a way of listening to what the body needs as you focus on its various parts. It’s as if you ask: “What do you need, stomach? What kind of breath energy would feel good right here?” Give it what it wants. Then you

move to the chest. “What do you need, chest? What breath energy would feel good right here?” Just pose those questions and try to maintain that steady awareness to watch, to respond. As you learn how to balance the force of your concentration with a sense of wellbeing in the energy in the body, you find that a lot of the elements of the path come into a balanced relationship. They’re healing. That’s when you know when you’re doing it right.

In this way you give all the different parts of the body a chance to tell you what they need. And because a lot of the energy flow in the body is related to different issues in the mind, you’ll find that parts of the mind that tended to not have a voice now start having a voice as well. You allow them to get healed, too. All of this, just as you focus on the breath, is your medicine: steady awareness combined with interest, monitoring the breath. A source of happiness that harms no one, that’s healing to the mind. When the mind has been healed in this way or even while it’s in the process of healing, you find that your relationships with other people are a lot less strained. You’re putting a lot less pressure on them, because you’re putting a lot less pressure on yourself.

So again, this is a responsible way of looking for happiness. Don’t believe those voices in the mind that say you’re being irresponsible as you stay here with the breath, or as you focus attention on your own mind. You’re focusing your attention on a source of happiness that doesn’t harm anybody. And that’s a noble pursuit right there.

The Uses of Concentration

December 29, 2008

Ajaan Lee begins his breath meditation instructions by telling you to breathe in deeply, three times or seven times. Use the wind element in the body to clean things out a little bit. Then allow the breath to find a rhythm that feels just right. See where your sense of ease is right now: which parts of the body feel okay, not tense, not tight. This may involve a slight trick of perception. We tend to focus on the pains, the tight areas, the problems, and we miss the areas that are actually okay. It's like that book, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, which teaches how to draw a face by focusing not on the eyes or the nose or the mouth, but on the space between the eyes and the mouth, or between the eyes and the nose. In other words, look at the shapes you ordinarily don't look at, and you find that the drawing comes out looking a lot more realistic.

It's the same with the breath. If you have a tendency to focus on the pains and the tensions, look instead at the space around them. And give that space some space. In other words, allow it to feel at ease all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out. If you find yourself tensing up, say, at the end of the in-breath or the end of the out-breath, then don't breathe so long. Another common mistake in breath meditation is to try to clearly demarcate the distinction between the in-breath and the out-breath by adding a little bit of squeeze or tension to emphasize the line between the two. That line doesn't really help the breath at all.

So think of the in-breath and out-breath as blending into one another. The in-breath is the same element as the out-breath. Allow the sense of wellbeing to stay constant and continuous. Don't drop it or step on it. Don't squeeze it out as the breath goes out. Give it some space. And you'll find that as you're giving it some space, vagrant thoughts may come into the mind. If you were to focus on those thoughts, you'd have to squeeze off that sense of wellbeing. This means you've got to develop a new habit. Realize that the thoughts are not all that important, especially not now as you're meditating. You don't have to get involved with them. Let them go passing through.

As you do this, you're using the concentration for one of its four main purposes, which is to develop a sense of ease and wellbeing in the present moment. Of the four purposes, this is probably the lowest on the ladder, but it's nothing to sneeze at. We all need that sense of wellbeing, for otherwise we go through life hungry: hungry for sensual pleasures, hungry for approval, hungry to shore up a particular idea of ourselves. And as long as you're hungry, you can't really see things for what they are. Everything just becomes food or non-food, and you gobble the food right down; sometimes you gobble the non-food down as well. Whereas if you can allow the mind to enjoy a sense of wellbeing simply in the way you breathe, simply in the way you inhabit the body, you can look more objectively at what used to serve as food. You find that you don't need to feed on all the things you used to feed on. That gives you a measure of freedom right there. It allows you to start looking at the process of feeding more clearly.

At the same time, when you develop this sense of wellbeing, it's a lot easier to look at yourself, at your own motivations, your own intentions. We spend so much of our life suffering from the intentions of other people—or focusing on how much we suffer from the intentions of other people—that we neglect to look at our own intentions to see how much suffering they cause. A part of the mind resists this, a very strong part of the mind. We like to think that our intentions are good, that there's nothing wrong with our intentions. Yet a huge part of the practice requires seeing where our intentions are *not* skillful. The only way you're going to look at your own intentions with any degree of fairness or equanimity is by getting the mind to settle down and be still, to maintain a sense of wellbeing, just being right here.

When I first went to stay with Ajaan Fuang, I was struck early on by the sense that he didn't fully trust me. I thought I was a very trustworthy person, and felt a little offended. But in my dealings with him, it soon became obvious that I did have some intentions and ideas that were very strongly unskillful and I hadn't been willing to look at them. When there were problems, it always seemed that the problem was out there someplace: in him, in the situation, in the other people in the monastery. Only when I was able to gain some sense of wellbeing in the concentration could I turn around to look at myself and realize that the problem is here, in this need the mind feels to feed on certain ideas. It's like an animal. If it's not disturbed, it'll feed away with no problem. It'll seem perfectly tame, perfectly harmless. But if you start pulling its food away, it'll snap at you and snarl. Those are hard parts of the mind to look at. The best way to do that is to gain a sense of wellbeing that allows us to look at ourselves more objectively.

This is why practicing concentration for a sense of ease and wellbeing in the present moment is very important. A lot of people want to go straight to equanimity practice, just watching things arising and passing away. Yet you can watch things arise and pass away for the whole rest of your life, but if there's no sense of wellbeing in the practice, you're going to miss a lot of the arisings and the passings away. You're going to miss the really important ones because you guard them, you hold onto them without realizing what you're doing.

So this sense of ease and wellbeing is the first goalpost in our practice. It involves having a good mature attitude towards goals. We work toward the sense of wellbeing but at the same time we realize that the seeds for the wellbeing are already here. It's not that we have to sweat and strain and push them into being, or that our pushing and straining will cause them to burst out of nowhere. In fact, the pushing and straining will prevent them from developing. They're already here in a gentle, potential form. But we do have to be careful. We do have to watch, to be sensitive, and to show a great deal of restraint in respecting the little pockets in the mind, the pockets in the body, where there's already a sense of wellbeing that we tend to overlook.

To sense the potential for wellbeing that's already there, you have to look very carefully, with a lot of sensitivity. That's where the effort is directed: not in exerting pressure on anything, but in being as sensitive as you can to these pockets of wellbeing and allow them to grow.

Once you've got that sense of wellbeing, then the Buddha says you can use your concentration for three other purposes. One is to gain what he calls knowledge and vision. That's where you develop a sense of light in the body. And that light can become the basis for the different psychic powers, or what

they call the higher knowledges. These develop for some people and not for others. If they happen to you, you have to learn how to handle them in a mature way. If they don't happen, it doesn't matter, for they're not necessary for purifying the mind.

The next purpose of concentration is to develop mindfulness, which the Buddha defines as the ability to keep things in mind; and alertness, which he defines as being able to see thoughts as they arise, as they stay, as they pass away; perceptions as they arise, stay, pass away; feelings as they arise, stay and pass away. In other words, you use the state of concentration as a basis for watching events in the mind without getting involved in the story lines or thought worlds you could create out of them. You keep in mind your desire to see them as processes.

Now, notice: The Buddha doesn't say that this is insight. It's mindfulness and alertness, just simply tuning in to what's actually happening and keeping in mind how to handle it skillfully. The insight that gives rise to the end of the defilements is something else. It's the last use of concentration, as a foundation for the ending of the *asavas*, the mind's fermentations or effluents. That goes deeper. You don't simply watch things arise and pass away. You see *how* they arise and pass away in dependence on shaky conditions. You gain a larger and larger sense of how little value there is in their arising and their passing away. You come to realize how in the past you've created all sorts of dramas, all sorts of identities, all sorts of worlds out of these things. And they're nothing but very fleeting events. As the Buddha says, you learn how to see them as empty, ephemeral, not-self; you learn to see them as stress.

There's a passage where the Buddha talks about seeing whatever arises, as stress arising. Whatever passes away, as stress passing away. That's not just being alert to things as they happen, but it's also gaining a sense of their value. They're just stress, that's all. The analogy in the Canon is of a blind person who has been given an oily stained rag. He's been told that it's a nice white piece of cloth. So he treasures it, folds it up neatly, carries it with him wherever he goes. Then after some time his relatives finally find a doctor who can cure him of his blindness. The first thing he looks at is the cloth, and he realizes he was misled. What he thought was a nice white piece of cloth is actually a soiled rag. All the issues and affairs worlds and identities, dreams and dramas we build in our lives are made out of oily rags. It's an insight that we don't like to see. But again, it's a lot easier to see this once the mind has had a sense of wellbeing through the practice of concentration so that it's not addicted to chewing on rags.

Or like that Far Side cartoon with cows feeding in a pasture: One of the cows suddenly jerks her head back, spits out her mouthful of grass, and says, in shock and surprise, "Wait a minute! This is grass! We've been eating grass!" That's what we've been eating all our lives: grass. This is an insight that goes deeper than just watching things arise and pass away. It's seeing the worthlessness of making them arise. For remember, we're not just passive observers of their arising. We're participants in fixing our food. As long as we see the food as desirable, we'll have the energy, the passion, to keep on producing. Only when we see that the food isn't worth it, when we lose our taste for it, will we lose our passion to produce it.

For as the Buddha says, once we see things arising and passing away, we have to look for their allure—why are we attracted to them?—and also for their

drawbacks: What cost do they entail? The purpose here is to see that their drawbacks are much greater than the allure. We like the dramas. We like the worlds. We have reasons for liking them. But they all fall apart. There's no real substance to them, nothing of any real value, and yet they cause a lot of stress. That insight goes deeper. You see all the suffering that comes from holding onto these things. That's when you truly understand, as the Buddha says, that such is the origination—say of form or feeling, any of the aggregates—and such is their passing away. This is what the aggregates are all about: nothing but grass.

This may sound depressing, but it's actually liberating. It's like the passage we chanted just now: "The world is swept away. It does not endure." And there are a lot of teachings in the Dhamma that are unpleasant-sounding but are actually important medicine, just as some of the most effective medicines are bitter. The Buddha teaches these things not to put a wet blanket on people's lives, on their pleasure, on their happiness, but to put the mind in a position where it really can look at these things square on, so it will find freedom on the other side. The Buddha's teachings never end with a negative. They go *through* the negative to something positive that lies beyond: for example, as mindfulness of death leads ultimately to the deathless.

So the truths we're learning are hard to learn. They're not just about things outside, but also about what's going on in our minds. There's something not quite right about the way we feed, the way we feel we need to feed. The problem isn't with things out there. It's with our intentions, our reasons for feeding. We have to learn how to become skeptical of our own intentions. And the only way to manage that without feeling disoriented, depressed, or discouraged, is to have the sense of wellbeing that comes from concentration, so that you let go not out of discouragement or of sour grapes. You let go because you've found a better alternative.

Each time you learn how to let go in the right way, things get better and better inside, because the whole point of all these teachings is to find ultimate freedom inside. And although the path leading there involves some harsh lessons in looking at our own ignorance, our own craving and clinging, our own unskillful intentions, it also involves developing skillful intentions: realizing that we do have the potential for skillfulness as well, and learning to use that potential wisely, developing a sense of ease and wellbeing that enables us to do this work in a more balanced and productive way.

Working at Home

August 13, 2008

A traditional Pali term for concentration is *vihara-dhamma*, a home for the mind. It's a place where the mind can stay. But it's also more than that. As with any home, there's more to the home than just the bedroom. And there's more to the home than just living in it.

First you've got to build it. And for many of us, that's the hardest part right there: getting it built. You put up a few posts and they fall down. You put them up again, they fall down again. But you can't let yourself get discouraged, because you need shelter. You need a place to keep your valuables. You need a place to rest. And you need a good sheltered place to work. Otherwise, you work out under the hot sun or the cold of winter.

So you've got to get the shelter built. You put up the posts again. If you stick with it long enough, you can put up at least something that'll stay. Lean a few pieces of plywood against each other, wrap some plastic around them, and you've got at least *some* shelter. Then as you get better and better at building, you can build yourself a better and better house until you've got one that's able to give you shelter from most of the vagaries of the weather. You've got a comfortable place to stay.

But then you've got to maintain it. This is the next difficulty in the practice. For many of us, once we get the mind into concentration, the immediate question is: "What next?" The mind just sits there and doesn't do anything, and we get antsy. Well, at first you've got to learn how to let it sit there and not do anything for long periods of time, not to give in to the antsiness. That requires skill: making sure you don't get bored, making sure you don't lose your focus, noticing when it begins to unravel, when it begins to fray, and learning how not to get complacent about repairing the little frayed ends.

So as soon as the slightest leak develops in the roof, you've got to fix it. Otherwise mold sets in and the whole house begins to rot and fall apart. In other words, there's a skill in maintaining the concentration. You learn a lot about the mind in the course of the maintaining. If you take the meditation into your daily life—in other words, trying to keep centered in your center as you go through your various activities—you begin to see very clearly where your attachments are, where the *asavas* are, the ways your mind flows out to things, barging right through the walls of your concentration.

This means you've got a double duty. One is to try to train the mind not to go barging through the walls; and two, to fix up whichever walls have been knocked down. In this way you're learning both about the mind's defilements and the skills you need to be a good repair person. As you replace the wall, you learn more about walls. You may be able to take what used to be a plywood wall and put up a stone wall in its place.

So the maintaining is an important part of the concentration *and* an important step in developing discernment. But to gain that discernment you can't simply use the meditation as a place to hide out at the beginning or end of the day. You have to carry your concentration with you throughout the day so that you can

use it as a way of gauging the movements of the mind and learning whatever skills you need to rein the mind in when it goes barging out.

So those are two of the steps in having a home. One is learning how to build it, and the second one is learning how to maintain it.

The third step is learning how to put it to use. For this step, it's good to think of the home as having several rooms and not just one. For most of us the concentration is just the bedroom. It's the place you go to rest and that's it. But even there you can learn how to use the concentration for more than just simply resting. As in the story of the princess and the pea: When you lie down on your mattress, are there any peas under the mattress? Can you sense them? In other words, is your bedroom really as comfortable as it could be? You can learn a lot just by investigating the bedroom and finding out where the irritants still are. If there's noise outside, how can you insulate the windows so that the noise doesn't come in? Like those hotels in airports where they've learned how to insulate the windows so you don't even know that the planes are taking off or landing: How can you insulate the mind? Is it better to shut the windows, or to leave them so wide open that the noise goes through and doesn't get lodged anywhere? And what can you do to make the bed more comfortable? There's a lot to be learned right there, for it heightens your sensitivity to even the least little bit of stress that the mind is creating for itself in the very process of staying concentrated.

But there's more to the house than just the bedroom. There's also an exercise room, a kitchen, a woodshop, a scientific laboratory. In other words, it's a working home, a craftsman's home. What this means is that you learn how to use the concentration not just as a place to rest, but also as a place to do your work. To start out, the work can be something very simple. If you've got a big problem in daily life, for instance, a good way of dealing with it is to pose it as a question in your mind before you meditate. Tell yourself: "At the end of the meditation session, I want to think about this issue."

And then put it out of your mind. Don't let your mind go there while you're meditating, while you're trying to get it into concentration. Only at the end of the hour, or however long the session may be, do you bring up the issue again. And now you're looking at it from the point of view of a mind that's strong and well rested, and the issue should be clear—or at least clearer than it was. Just pose the question in your mind and see what comes up. You may find that the new perspective of having the mind still and open makes the solution a lot easier to see.

Many people think that once the mind is in concentration you can't let it rest there; you've got to do vipassana right away. Well, yes, you do need to develop insight, but before you get to the really subtle work of insight, you've got other issues in your life that you have to sort out first. There's a tendency called spiritual bypassing, where people don't want to face the big issues in their lives, so they use the meditation as an escape, an avoidance strategy, claiming that if they can solve the subtle issues of insight, that'll solve their issues when they're off the cushion. But you can't really deal honestly with the subtle issues of inconstancy, stress, and not-self when you haven't sorted through the blatant problems you cause in daily life.

This is one of the reasons why traditionally they didn't have such things as meditation retreats. You went to monasteries. And in monasteries, there was time to meditate, but there were also other duties in the course of the day. There

was work to be done. You had to interact with the other people in the monastery to at least some extent. And in the course of that work and those interactions, you learned a lot about the Dhamma: the Dhamma of generosity, the Dhamma of virtue, the Dhamma of patience, equanimity, goodwill—all these other virtues that are an essential part of training the mind.

The idea of creating meditation retreats came basically in the late 19th or early 20th century, the same time when the assembly line was invented, breaking jobs down into little tiny parts that you do repetitively. This approach to physical work was efficient and effective, so it became the model for a lot of meditation retreats and for the methods taught on those retreats. You take one method and you just apply it again and again and again. But a lot gets left out in that approach. It's like exercising only one muscle in your body, so that the muscle gets strengthened all out of proportion to the rest of your body. And that can't be healthy.

It's better to think of meditation as a training for the whole mind, as exercise for the whole mind. You have to train the whole mind in all the virtues of maturity and heedfulness. In other words, you need to develop the ability to anticipate dangers, particularly dangers in your own behavior, and to figure out what you can do to prevent them.

You also need to master skillful suppression, the ability to say No to a state of mind that you know is going to lead you down the wrong path. Traditionally this virtue is associated with the attitudes of shame and compunction. In other words, you realize that unskillful behavior is really beneath you. "Shame" here doesn't mean low self-esteem; it actually means very high self-esteem, realizing that your worth as a person shouldn't be squandered on shoddy behavior. Compunction is realizing that if you follow a certain action, the results are going to be bad, and so you want to avoid that kind of behavior.

You also want to develop what psychologists call sublimation, the ability to counteract the desire for an unskillful pleasure by finding a more skillful pleasure to take its place. This is one of the reasons why we have the practice of concentration. The mind wants pleasure, so you give it a pleasure that's harmless, blameless, that it can tap into whenever it wants, so that the impulse to go after less skillful pleasure won't be so strong.

Then there's altruism or compassion. You have to learn compassion for the people around you, compassion for yourself. And you need a good sense of humor. I don't know the Pali term for a sense of humor, but you see it throughout the texts, especially in the Vinaya: the ability to laugh at the foibles of human nature that led monks and nuns to do unskillful things. Many of the origin stories for the rules really are humorous. They teach you to laugh at that kind of behavior, but it's a good-natured laugh. It's not nasty or mean. It's the recognition that we all have had those impulses, and we can see the foolishness in giving in to them. The virtue of humor is that it allows you to step back and separate yourself from what you're laughing at. As the Greeks used to say, the gods laugh. In other words, the gods are up there on Mount Olympus looking down on human beings below, and because they have that sense of distance, they can laugh at human behavior. So when you can laugh at yourself, you're putting yourself in a godlike position, a small-g god, separate from your foibles and above them.

These are some of the virtues developed as you learn how to live wisely with other meditators, live wisely in a group. Psychologists call these virtues healthy ego-functioning, and even though the Buddha never talked in terms of ego-functioning, he definitely did teach these virtues as part of the path.

So you try to use your concentration as a tool in developing these virtues in the course of the day. Take some quiet time and then look at your behavior. This is like having a bedroom with a workshop right next to it. You get rested and then you can go to work. And even though you may not be directly applying the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self to the five clinging-aggregates, you're learning to take a problem-solving approach to issues in your life, which is precisely the Buddha's approach. The four noble truths are a problem-solving approach, focused on the problem of stress and suffering as a whole, and offering a solution to the problem. As you first start applying this approach to the obvious issues in your life, you learn to develop maturity around the application of this teaching. The work then gets more and more subtle, to the point where your workshop turns into a scientific laboratory and you're discovering new things about quarks and muons. You can take your precise scientific equipment and learn more and more precise things about what's going on in the mind, working from the large issues or the blatant issues to the more subtle ones.

This is how skill gets developed. You can even extend the image of the house to the point where you start studying the house itself. Take your microscope to look at the beams and the carpet, to analyze the molecules in the air. There's lots of stuff in the house to study. And it's all right here.

So if you get the mind still and find yourself wondering what to do next, the first answer is that you've got to take care of the stillness. Remember: It's a house. It's not a movie show. You're not looking for entertainment. The house doesn't have to be entertaining. The prime requisite for a house is that it's restful, that it offers good shelter. But then the Buddha saw that you can do more with a house than just find shelter and rest. You can make it a working home.

In other words, you learn not only how to build and maintain your home, but also how to use it as your workshop. You not only develop and maintain concentration, but you also put it to use. This was the big difference between the Buddha's approach to concentration and that of his two teachers. His two teachers saw concentration simply as a place to rest, and that was it, whereas the Buddha said, No, you can actually work in here as well. There's more to be done than just resting. You work and analyze, you discover new things about the mind. And if you're still looking for entertainment, that's the best kind of entertainment there is: the joy of developing a skill, the joy of discovery.

So it's good to have a large sense of what this image of *vihara-dhamma* or home for the mind means. You learn how to build it, you learn how to maintain it, and then you use it as your workshop, working from crude problems up to the more subtle ones. So whatever stage you're in—the building stage, the maintaining stage, or the working stage—remember to keep this image in mind so that you get the most use out of the home.

The Practice of Right View

April 22, 2009

When there's a talk during meditation, don't focus your attention on the talk. Focus on your breath. The purpose of the talk is to act like a fence, to catch you when you wander away from the breath, to keep pointing you back to the breath. Because it's right at this spot—where the mind and the body meet at the breath here in the present moment—that your practice takes place. That's where you're going to see all the things you need to see, and do all the things you need to do in the practice. The talk is to help keep you focused here and to give you some perspective on what you're supposed to be looking for, what you're supposed to be doing.

Last year I received a phone call from someone who was doing a thesis on using Buddhist teachings and practices in the workplace. He wanted to ask me some questions as part of his thesis. One of the things that bothered me about his questions was that he would ask first about Buddhist teachings and then about Buddhist practices, as if they were two different things. But they're not. Everything is part of the practice. Even the more abstract and theoretical teachings are meant to be used for pragmatic purposes when appropriate. After all, right view is part of the path. It's something to do, to develop, to be applied. When it's done its work, you let it go.

Right view comes down to the four noble truths, and the four noble truths are based on one of the Buddha's really categorical, across-the-board teachings: that you want to abandon unskillful behavior and engage only in skillful behavior. In other words, we're working on a skill here. The things we intentionally do with our body, with our words, and with our thoughts all count as kamma and they all have results. There's no such thing as idle thinking. It may be idle in its intent, but it actually has an impact on the mind. It's something you're doing, and it leaves kammic traces. Just as the Buddha discouraged idle, aimless speech, he also discouraged idle, aimless thinking.

So learn how to look at your thoughts in terms of what they do, the impact they have on the mind. The Buddha himself said that he got on the right path when he started dividing his thinking into these two types: thinking that was harmful and thinking that was harmless. In other words, he classed his thinking by the skillful or unskillful impact it had on the mind. From that distinction, the rest of the path grew.

In his time, most Indian philosophers got worked up about issues concerning the nature of the world and the nature of the self. But the Buddha didn't get involved in those issues, didn't answer any questions that would drag him into those issues, because he saw that they weren't helpful in putting an end to suffering. Many people got frustrated with him because they couldn't get a clear answer out of him on what they thought were the really important questions.

They mentioned this once to one of his lay followers and said, "This Buddha of yours: He's a nihilist. He doesn't teach anything at all." The man said, "No, that's not true. He teaches what's skillful and what's not skillful." Afterwards,

the man reported this conversation to the Buddha, and the Buddha praised him. He said, "That's the right answer, the right way to deal with those people."

When the Buddha was critical of other teachers, it was most frequently over their inability, one, to explain what is skillful or unskillful, or two, to provide an understanding of why it's important to act in a skillful way and to avoid unskillful behavior. So this is what we're here for, to use his explanation of these issues as an aid in developing a sense of skill with the mind. And even with skillful thinking, he said there are times when it's even more skillful to let the mind rest in right concentration. It's another factor of the path. In fact it's one of the central ones.

There's a passage where the Buddha refers to the other seven factors of the path as aids, as requisites to right concentration. Right concentration is the important one, the first factor of the path that the Buddha himself discovered. So that's what we work on. And in the process, we bring in the other factors as they are needed.

So learn how to make the mind content to be staying with the breath, staying right here. The mind has a tendency to think and evaluate, so use it to think and evaluate the breath. How does the breathing feel? Where do you feel it? How many layers of breath energy are there in the body? When you breathe in, what's happening in the different parts of the body? When you breathe out, what's happening? Do you know the places where you tend to hold on or to force the breath or to squeeze the breath in an uncomfortable way? Can you learn to breathe in a way that doesn't involve that holding or forcing or squeezing? That's taking the question of skillfulness and applying it right here, right now. How can you skillfully relate to the breath so that it's easier to stay with, so that staying with the breath induces a sense of ease, of fullness?

As you begin to feel that ease and fullness, learn to protect it. In the beginning it may feel simply like a neutral sensation, nothing painful yet nothing outstandingly pleasant. But just protect that neutral feeling for a while, and you'll begin to see that it does grow more and more pleasurable. Then think of that pleasure seeping easily throughout the different parts of the body. If there's a sense of blockage in any spot, think of allowing it to open up. If you sense a blank space in some part of the body you can't account for—say, where your hips should be—try to approach from the back down to the hips, and from the legs up into the hips, to see where the connection is.

There are lots of things you can do to make the breath interesting. And it is an interesting phenomenon, this breath energy in the body. It enables us to live. It enables us to move around. Without the breath, we'd be dead. It's what animates the whole body. It's the connection between the mind and the body. So it's good to explore.

As you explore the breath in this way, you're getting some basic hands-on practice with the four noble truths. Where is there stress? What's causing the stress? The stress can be caused either by ignorance or by craving. So as you get to know more and more about the breath, you're doing away with ignorance around the breathing process, what's called in technical terms the process of bodily fabrication. You bring more awareness to the process. As you do this, you'll notice that you may have some subtle craving around the breath. You may prefer the in-breath to the out-breath, so you make it longer than is really good

for you. Or you have gotten to like some subconscious ways of forcing the breath sensations, but ultimately they create problems. They create stress.

So you're beginning to see some of the causes of stress right here in the present moment simply in the way you breathe. As you let the mind settle down, you're developing the path. It's important to use these four noble truths as a framework because they help give you an idea of what you need to do. That's why the Buddha set them out as right view, because each of them involves a task. Stress is to be comprehended. In other words, look at it so that you really understand it, so that you stop identifying with it or seeing it as happening *to you*, and see it instead simply as an event connected with movements in the mind. When you see the movements of the mind that cause the stress, and you see that they're unnecessary, then you abandon them.

It's important to be clear about that. You don't abandon the stress. You abandon the cause. It's like coming into the kitchen and finding it filled with smoke. The first thing you do is to run to the stove or oven and turn off the flame, or run to the electric box and turn off the power to the oven or stove. In other words, you don't try to put out the smoke, you put out the flame. Here the flame is the craving and the ignorance. Those are the things you want to abandon. Once the flame is out, then the smoke will dissipate. And your knowing what to do and doing it: That's the path. You want to develop that as completely as you can, because your knowledge of the path will get more and more precise, more and more subtle as you work with it, until ultimately you can begin to realize for yourself what the ending of stress is like.

So these categories are here not just to talk about or to think about. You talk about them and think about them for the purpose of using them: figuring out how you're suffering right now and how you might apply the categories to what you're doing right now. There's a story about Chao Khun Naw, who was a famous meditation monk in Bangkok. One night as he was doing walking meditation outside his hut, a young monk came running up to him and said, "I've been thinking all day and I can't stop thinking." Chao Khun Naw looked at him and said, "You're doing the wrong task." That's all he said, and then he went into his hut. But the young monk had enough knowledge about the four noble truths to realize, "Oh, I've been developing the cause of suffering. What I should be developing is the path." That was enough to bring him to his senses.

Ajaan Fuang tells of how he was once sick with a chronic headache that would last for days on end. It got so bad that other monks would stay in his room at night in case he woke up in pain. One night after midnight he woke up in pain and, as he got up, he looked around. All the monks who were supposed to be looking after him were sound asleep. He said to himself, "Who's looking after whom here?" But then he said, "Well as long as I'm awake, I might as well meditate." So he sat in meditation. As he was looking at the pain, he suddenly realized he'd been doing the wrong thing. He'd been trying to get rid of the pain when actually the pain was something to be comprehended. So that's what he did, and that shift in understanding proved to be a real turning point in his practice.

The categories of the four truths are here to help you to realize what you should do and to catch yourself if you're applying the wrong task, if you're trying to let go of good things or develop unskillful things. If you can catch yourself doing that, then you can switch around. Ultimately your appreciation of

these categories gets so subtle, so refined, that as Ajaan Mun says, they all become one. In other words, they finally get to the point where there's just one task: letting go, totally. Because after you've dealt with the blatant forms of stress and let go of the causes, you begin to realize that the only thing left is the path doing its work. The only stress still in the mind is the stress of the path, because there's a subtle level of stress that keeps concentration going, that keeps discernment active. In other words, even the path is stress, the cause of stress, and so at that point you let go of it.

As for the cessation of stress, there are passages in the Canon describing how people touch the deathless and yet develop a passion for it. The passion for the deathless then becomes their one remaining obstacle. They've got to learn how to let go of that, too.

That's why the Buddha said that all phenomena are not-self, because you hit a place in the practice where you're latching onto your experience of the deathless. You have to learn how to not identify with that. That, too, becomes something you let go. When you do that, you reach the ultimate end of the practice.

So these four noble truths are tools for getting you to the point where they all collapse into one, so there's one duty left: the duty of letting go all around. But until you reach that point, it's wise to keep these four categories in the back of your mind, along with their underlying principle: the idea of skillfulness—that we're here to develop a skill, to act skillfully, speak skillfully, and to think skillfully. You realize that there really is a difference between skillful and unskillful behavior, just as there's a real difference between the pleasure and pain they cause.

Keep that distinction in mind. Remind yourself that everything the Buddha taught was meant to be used as a tool on the path at one point or another. Sometimes some teachings may not be the right tool for you right now. As the Buddha said, words have to be evaluated as to whether they're true or false, but even if they're true, you want to say only things that are beneficial. And even if they're true and beneficial, you have to look for the right time and right place to say them. So apply that same principle to your thinking: Are these thoughts true? Are they beneficial? And is this the right time and place for that thinking, that teaching? If it's not, let it go for the time being.

Like right now, this is the right time and place to stay focused on the breath, bringing all your attention to how you can get the mind to settle down here. And as long as that skill hasn't been mastered, that should be your top priority. Other issues can wait.

Abusing Pleasure & Pain

January 1, 2009

Meditation is largely training in how to handle pleasure and pain. We need this training because we tend to abuse these things. When pain comes along we try to push it away. When pleasure comes we like to wallow in it. And pushing away and wallowing are not really all that productive of any genuine happiness, any genuine wellbeing. When you push the pain away, you don't get to know it. You don't get to understand it. As a result, you never really get away from it. No matter how hard you push, it keeps coming back, coming back. It's like having a delinquent child. You don't like him in the house and so you push him out of the house. And of course that brings on more trouble to you, because of what your child has done when he's out of the house.

Our abuse of pleasure is a different kind of problem. We want to have it all the time and yet we don't look after it. We just wallow in it and then it turns into something else. Ajaan Suwat had an image for this. He said, it's like being a water buffalo. Water buffaloes like to drink nice clean water. But when they get a nice puddle of clean water, what do they do? They lie in it. They piss in it. They wallow around in it and get it all muddy. As a result, they don't have the clean, clear water they wanted. In other words, the pleasure we gain when we meditate can be used for developing an even higher pleasure, a genuine nourishment for the mind to keep us going, to keep our meditation work well nourished. Yet as soon as we gain a little bit of pleasure, we don't want to use it as a basis for any kind of work. We just want to wallow in it. The mind begins to drift away and then we've destroyed our meditation because we've abused the pleasure.

So it's important that you understand the proper way to approach both pleasure and pain in the meditation. That way you can get genuine benefits from them because they are both noble truths. When pain arises, think of it: "This is the first noble truth." When the pleasure arises from being settled in the breath, that's part of the fourth noble truth: right concentration, a factor of the path. But we don't use it as a path. We just lie in it. And you know what happens when you lie down in paths. If it's a forest path, you're bound to get run over by an elephant or whatever large animal uses the path. If it's a paved road, you get run over by trucks and cars.

The path is to be followed, to be developed. That's what you do with this kind of pleasure: You learn how to develop it. As for the pain, you learn to comprehend it. That means in the beginning—say, as a pain arises in the knee or in your back—you've got to strengthen the mind, give it a sense of ease and wellbeing, so that it doesn't feel threatened by the pain. This is where the pleasure from the meditation can show one of its uses. You try to develop a sense of ease with the breath. Once you've got that sense of ease going, you don't wallow in it. As the Buddha says, once there's a sense of pleasure and rapture coming from getting the mind secluded from its unskillful thinking, you allow that sense of pleasure and rapture to permeate the entire body, to suffuse the entire body. Now that requires a little work, and a fair amount of alertness. How

do you allow that pleasure to spread without squeezing it out of existence? You have to learn how to develop just the right touch.

This is one way of discovering whether your meditation is too clamped down. If you clamp down on the object of the meditation, it's not going to produce the sense of ease you want. Or if you try to force the ease through the body, it's just going to destroy the ease and make things worse. So how do you allow it to spread? Just pose that question in the mind and see what answers you can come up with. And you want it to fill the whole body. As the Buddha said, it's like having a pile of flour—or, in his image, a pile of bath powder. In those days, you'd take bath powder and knead water into it to make a lump like dough that you would then rub over your body. To mix the water with the bath powder, you had to knead the water through the powder in such a way that every part of the ball of bath powder was saturated with water, but it didn't drip.

So how do you saturate the whole body with pleasure? That requires a lot of alertness, alert to the whole body. This is why the Buddha says, in the beginning of his breath meditation instruction, that you watch when the breath is long and when it's short. Then you try to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out, so that when the pleasure arises, you can allow it to spread through the whole body. If there's any sense of blockage, you try to knead the pleasure through that blockage. This is very different from wallowing in the pleasure. When you wallow in the pleasure, as they say in Thai, you close your ears and close your eyes and just dive right in. You're not taking care of the pleasure. You're not doing any work at all. And because you're not doing any work, the effort that was required to keep that pleasure going disappears. In the meantime you've probably lost focus and drifted into a delusive state.

So you need to establish a very large frame of reference, the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out. This is where you become more sensitive to the breath energies in the body: the flow of energy down the back, or sometimes up the back; down the legs, or sometimes up the legs. These things really vary from person to person. You find that conceiving of the breath energy in different ways helps to modulate the breathing so that it feels good: just right for what you need right now. When it feels good in one spot, you think of it spreading out in whichever way is the most comfortable to fill the whole body, so that you're surrounded with breath energy—behind you, in front of you, above you, below you. The whole body is saturated with a sense of ease and wellbeing, with the fullness of rapture.

Now you want to do this early on in the meditation period, because allowing the breath energy to flow in this way helps to eliminate a lot of the potentials for pain in the body: the pain that comes from focusing down too hard, from sitting in an unbalanced posture, or from closing off certain energies in the body to focus more strongly on the spot you want to highlight. You can avoid those problems by thinking "whole body" all from the very beginning, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out. That in and of itself can help prevent a lot of pains.

When I was first meditating at Wat Asokaram, we'd have hour-and-a-half sittings. I'd usually find that after the first half an hour or so, there'd be pains in my leg. But then I realized that up to that point I hadn't been doing much work in spreading the breath, spreading the pleasure from the breathing. So as a way of

heading those pains off beforehand, the first thing I'd do right from the very beginning of the session would be to think of the whole body, of the breath flowing through the whole body. That helped to eliminate a lot of the pains.

So while you're sitting here, don't think of how long you're going to be sitting here. Think of the work you've got to do right now. When there's a sense of ease in the breathing—and the breathing does become a lot easier when you're thinking of the whole body, because you've begun to get sensitive to areas where you've tensed up to breathe in or to push the breath out—you can allow the various parts of the body to relax.

Then you do your best to maintain that sense of full-body awareness and relaxation. It does have a tendency to shrink, so you have to fight that. Think, "whole body," all the way with the in-breath, "whole body" all the way with the out.

That's the work you do in the pleasure. When the pleasure arises, you have something to do with it. This also helps when the breath gets more and more refined. It will come to a point where it's going to stop—not because you've forced it to stop, but simply because all the breath energies in the body are so full and so well connected that they nourish one another. You're thinking less, so less oxygen is being turned into carbon dioxide in your body. At the same time, the carbon dioxide going out the pores is enough to keep the blood in balance, so the brain's instinctive reading of the level of carbon dioxide in the blood allows the breath to grow more and more still. When it's still, you're really going to need this full-body awareness not to lose track of things.

That's how you make proper use of the pleasure. Whatever sense of ease comes from the breath, you allow it to suffuse the body. Again, you don't force it. Just think of everything opening up to allow the pleasure to flow in. This puts you in a really good position if any pains come up, because the duty with regard to pain is not to push it away, not to make it go away. The duty with regard to pain, remember, is to comprehend it. And the first thing you've got to realize is that whenever there's any pain or stress, there are two kinds. There's the simple pain and stress that comes from the three characteristics. In other words, anything that's fabricated like the body or the mind—any of the *khandhas* or aggregates—is going to involve some stress simply by virtue of the fact that it's fabricated. That's part of the natural order of things.

But there's also a deeper stress, a deeper pain that comes from craving. That's stress and pain in the four noble truths. And that's not necessary. In Ajaan Lee's phrase, the pains in the body are natural pains. The pains caused by craving are unnatural. We create them—and yet we don't have to. That's what you need to learn how to see. Why do you create these kinds of pains? Because you like to feed on your pleasures. But when you're feeding on your pleasures, you're going to run into pains as well. And because you're in feeding mode, you start feeding on the pain, too, and that's unpleasant. So you want to watch: Why is the mind feeding on these things? You want to develop a sense of what the Buddha calls *nibbida*, which can be translated as disenchantment, but also as disgust or distaste for these things. In other words, you want to stop feeding, to lose your appetite for feeding. That's different from pushing them away. When you push them away, you don't really understand the difference between the natural pain in the body and the unnecessary suffering or stress in the mind. You want to keep on

feeding, but you've got something bad in your mouth so you indiscriminately try to spit it right out. And often you can't, for it's a big glob stuck in your throat.

You have to learn how to watch these things to make the necessary distinctions. This is why that sense of ease and wellbeing from the concentration is an important tool, an important helpmate in the path, because it allows you not to feel threatened by the pain. The pain may be there, but you've got something else you can focus on. And one of the things you can do, once you've got this full-body awareness going together with a sense of the breath energy flowing throughout the whole body, is to allow the breath to spread through the pain, so the pain isn't a wall, say, in your leg, or in your back or in your hip. It's porous. And the breath comes first, so the pain can't stop it.

There's often a subconscious reaction that perceives the pain as a wall that can block the breath. When there's a pain, you tend to close off that part of the body when you breathe. And because it's squeezed off, it doesn't participate in the breath. Of course that makes things worse. You allow the pain to restrict your breath energy. So you want to reconceive the breath energy as permeating that part of the body *prior* to the pain. It's there first, so the pain can't block it. Hold that possibility in mind. Keep that foremost so that you're not just reacting to the pain, but are actually more proactive in helping to direct the breath energy through the area occupied by the pain.

This can help loosen up the pain and allow you to feel less threatened by it. Sometimes the pain will actually go away. If it doesn't go away, you can still watch: What does the pain do as you breathe through it? How does it move? How does it change? What are the momentary pain sensations? Are they all pain sensations? Or were you labeling them "pain" in ignorance? What happens when you label them simply as "sensations"? Where is the worst spot of the pain? How bad is it? Is it so bad you can't stand it?

Usually when you get interested and more proactive with the pain like this, instead of simply being on the receiving end, you find that the pain is a lot more tolerable. That's because you're not just sitting there drinking in the pain or eating up the pain. You've gone from feeding mode to investigating mode. You're probing, chasing the pain down from a position of strength based on the breath. You can start seeing distinctions. What's the difference between the physical pain and the mental pain? What's the distinction between the physical pain and the body? What's the distinction between the mental pain and your awareness of the mental pain?

We tend to glom these things together, but that's because we don't understand them. We've been pushing them away, so we push them into one big glob. But as you allow them to open up, you begin to see that these things are different. The sensations of the body are earth, wind, water, and fire. Pain is something other than those four things. So when pain seems to have taken over your knee, try to ferret out which are the pain sensations and which are the knee sensations. Focus on distinguishing among the earth sensations, the fire sensations, water sensations, and the breath sensations in the knee. When you can sort them out, you see exactly what's left to be the actual pain. You see that these are all different things. They don't have to be glommed together.

This is where thinking of the breath as primary—as prior to the pain rather than something that can be squeezed out by the pain—is very helpful. Earth, water, wind, and fire were there first. The pain came later. Keep that in mind. It

helps you separate the pain out from the leg. As you're engaging in this analysis, you're feeling less and less on the receiving end, or on the eating end, and more in a position of simply probing to understand.

Then you apply the same principle to the mind and the mental pain. There's the awareness and there's the awareness of the pain. Then there's the pain itself. Try to sort these things out. Again, which came first? The awareness was first. The pain is visiting. Don't let the pain take priority. Keep your awareness, your perception of your awareness, in a position of priority.

When you do this, you're learning how to use both pleasure and pain in the right way. You're not abusing the pleasure. You're not abusing the pain. You're gaining experience in developing the duties of the four noble truths. You're developing the path, and you're comprehending the pain to the point where you develop dispassion for it. It may seem strange to say that we're ordinarily passionate for our pains, but we do allow the mind to get colored by them, as pain in the body becomes anguish in the mind. If something has the mind upset, causing it anguish, that's a kind of passion, a kind of coloring of the mind. And it's not necessary.

So we've got to learn new habits in the way we approach pleasure and pain, so that the pleasure isn't simply an end in and of itself, and the pain isn't pushed away as an enemy. You put the pleasure to use so that you can comprehend the pain. Only when you actively try to comprehend the pain can you go beyond it. Only when you put the pleasure to use can you go beyond it. As Ajaan Lee said, that becomes the point where you stop bothering them, because you've got something better than conditioned pleasures, something better than pain. And that's when everyone has their freedom. The pain has its freedom. The pleasure has its freedom. And you have *your* freedom.

So try to keep these points in mind.

The Fourth Frame of Reference

March 29, 2009

Ajaan Lee often made the point that when you're focused on the breath, you don't have just the first frame of reference or the first foundation of mindfulness. You have all four right there. The breath is the body in and of itself. That's the first frame of reference. The feelings of pleasure or pain that you're encountering as you deal with the breath count as feelings in and of themselves. That's the second. As for the mind state you're trying to develop, you find that it's either defiled or not. Or as you get further into this third frame of reference, you start noticing when the mind is concentrated or when it's not; when it's expanded or enlarged, or when it's not; whether it's released or not; whether it's ever been excelled or not.

And then there's the fourth frame of reference, the dhammas. Often we don't have a real handle on how to make use of that fourth frame of reference, because it looks like little more than a list of Dhamma teachings. But it's much more than that. It's a list of different ways you can look at problems that come up in the course of your practice. You can look at things in terms of the five hindrances, the five clinging-aggregates, the six sense media, the seven factors for awakening, or the four noble truths. Each of these lists provides a useful framework for looking at what's actually going on in different aspects of the practice. And not just looking: They also give you guidance in what to do. These are not exercises in bare awareness, because each of the different members of the list carries a specific duty. Once you've figured out what's happening in terms of that particular framework, you know what to do in response. You know what to do proactively.

For instance, as we're going through daily life, one of the main issues in practice is restraint of the senses. This is an area where it's good to use the framework of the six sense media. As the Buddha said in this context, when you're looking, try to notice: Where is the fetter in the looking? If you're listening, where is the fetter in the listening? And the "fetter" here is defined as a sense of passion and delight for what you're looking at, or for why you're looking. It's not always the case that a sense of delight comes up after you've noticed something. Sometimes you have a very clear idea of what you want to look for: You want to get riled up about something, you want to get attracted by something, so you go looking for it.

This is especially true with thoughts. Notice, when a thought comes up, "What's the appeal of this thought? Why do I go for this particular kind of thinking?" Once you've looked at the appeal, then look at the drawbacks. What are the drawbacks of going along with that kind of thinking? If you gave that particular kind of thinking free rein in your mind, where would it lead you? If you notice a fetter—in other words, you really are delighting in something to the point where it pulls you away from your center—don't just sit there and say, "Oh, I'm fettered," and leave it at that. You've got to do something to cut the fetter—because those fetters are the cause of suffering, which means that your duty with regard to them is to abandon them as soon as you notice them. Of

course the big problem here is that we often enjoy our fetters. We actually create them for the purpose of enjoying them. So we have to do something we usually don't like to do: to look at our enjoyment and see where it's causing problems. It may seem pleasant and entertaining right now, but where is it going to take you down the line?

So that's a framework you can use as you go through the day. And you can use it during your meditation as well. You're sitting here focusing on the breath, and all of a sudden your mind is off on something you saw last week, something you read yesterday, or something you're anticipating tomorrow. Look for the fetter. Where is the sense of passion? Where is the sense of delight in that particular thinking? What can you do to see through it to pry yourself away from that enjoyment? As the Buddha noted, the best thing is to pull yourself away from these unskillful ways of thinking and to encourage harmless ways of thinking instead. From there you direct the mind into concentration.

This is where the two frameworks of the hindrances and the factors for awakening become useful. When you sit down and try to get the mind concentrated, it's useful to figure out exactly, "What's going on here? Which hindrance is bedeviling me right now?" Once you're able to classify a disturbance as sensual desire, ill will, torpor and lethargy, restlessness and anxiety, or uncertainty, then you know what to do with it. And sometimes just recognizing it as the problem gets you over the hump.

This is because one of the characteristics of the hindrances is that they deceive you. When desire arises, your mind is usually already on the side of the desire. You don't see it as a problem. The thing you desire *really is* something desirable. When you have ill will for somebody, that person really is awful. When the mind is torpid, well, it's time to get some rest. It's time to sleep. The mind is getting too tired. And so on down the line. You have to learn to see these things as genuine hindrances, as real obstacles on your path, and not be fooled into siding with them. Ask yourself, "What is this hindering me from?" Well, for one thing, it's hindering you from learning about the potentials of concentration. You sit here rehashing your old ways of thinking and will never get out of your old ruts.

We read about the ajaans, about the people in the Canon who gained strong states of concentration. We read about the descriptions of concentration. But what's the reality of concentration? Exactly what do those words correspond to? If you spend all your time playing around with the hindrances, you never get to know. The only way to gain direct knowledge of these things is to bring some appropriate attention to the hindrance, seeing that it's a cause of suffering. Try to look for where the stress is, look where the limitation is, to see how that hindrance is squandering your energy. And then look for ways to abandon it.

When you do this, you're developing the first three factors for awakening: mindfulness, analysis of qualities, and persistence. Mindfulness is what helps you remember to look for what's skillful and unskillful; analysis of qualities—which is nurtured by appropriate attention—is what enables you to recognize skillful and unskillful qualities as they arise; and persistence is what carries through with the desire to develop the skillful and abandon the unskillful ones. Analysis of qualities actually helps you in many ways. It not only recognizes what's skillful and not, but also helps you figure out how to undercut an unskillful state of mind, like a hindrance, and how to develop the remaining factors for awakening in its place. As a set, these seven factors for awakening are

a good framework for understanding how to get the mind to settle down. In particular, you look to see that these factors are balanced. If they're not, how do you bring them into balance?

There's a sutta that compares this balancing act to getting a fire to burn at just the right level of intensity. In other words, you're trying to develop the fire of concentration, the fire of jhana, a steady flame of centered awareness. Sometimes it looks like it's about to go out because the level of energy is too low. In cases like that, you don't want to emphasize qualities like serenity or concentration or equanimity. You want to emphasize more active qualities. Get the mind moving again. Analyze things as to what's skillful and unskillful, and then put in whatever effort is needed to get rid of the unskillful qualities and develop the skillful ones. In taking this more active role, you can develop a strong sense of rapture, refreshment, as the skillful qualities get strengthened. This further energizes the mind. If, on the other hand, your mind is too active, that's when you try to calm it down. Go for serenity. Get the mind to focus on easing the breath, calming the breath down, working through tension in the body, until the mind gets more solid and can come to a state of equanimity and equipoise.

So, again, these frameworks of the five hindrances and the seven factors for awakening are not just guidelines for bare awareness. They're frameworks telling you what to do if you find yourself facing a particular type of mind state as you're trying to bring the mind to strong concentration. They help you get a sense of what your duty is, where you can find the path out of that particular unbalanced or unskillful state. Or if you find that you're balanced and the mind is doing fine, then your duty is to maintain it. You don't just say, "Oh, that's what concentration is like," and just let it drop. You try to keep it going, you try to understand what causes it so that you can maintain it. This is where you try to bring in an element of will power.

A couple of years back, I was talking to a group of people in training to become vipassana teachers. I was mentioning just this element of trying to keep the mind steady, and one of them said, "Well, it sounds like you're talking about using willpower, but I know that that's not what you mean." And I said, "That's precisely what I mean." The element of intention is willpower, and it's something you've got to use in the practice. But you can't use just strength of will to get things done. You also have to use your understanding of cause and effect so that your use of willpower is a skillful use of your will. This is what the categories of the fourth frame of reference are for. They're there to help give you guidance, once a particular state comes up in the mind, as to what you've got to do if you really want to find true happiness. In other words, they're not just instructions in how to respond to situations. They're also instructions in how to take a proactive role in giving rise to the path.

This is even clearer in the categories of the four noble truths. You analyze things first in terms of the first noble truth—the five clinging-aggregates—to understand where's the stress here, where's the suffering here, where and how you're clinging to these things. In particular, you want to learn how to identify each of the clinging-aggregates—form, feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness—as events, activities, to see what spurs them into action and how they stop. Then you try to notice how you're clinging to them: how you keep compulsively repeating them. Then you take your clinging apart. If something's disturbing your concentration, take it apart in terms of these five clinging-

aggregates: Where's the clinging? What kind of clinging is it? Is it sensual clinging? Is it clinging in terms of habits and practices? Views? Ideas of what you are or what belongs to you? Try to comprehend it—which, after all, is the duty with regard to the first noble truth.

Once you've comprehended the suffering, you should be able to see where its cause is. What's causing you to cling? Where's the craving? Try to catch it happening. When you can catch it happening, the duty there is to abandon it. As for whatever aspects of the path that can help you see these things, you develop them, all eight factors of the path, and particularly right concentration. This is where you get proactive.

When you've mastered concentration, the framework of the five clinging-aggregates comes in again. When all the factors of the path are in a good state of balance, you start analyzing the concentration in terms of the five aggregates to see where it, too, is stressful. Even the equanimity of the fourth jhana has its element of stress. You've got to look for that so you can develop dispassion all around.

This is why, when you've mastered concentration, it's useful to take these states of concentration apart in these ways. Where is feeling playing a role there? Where's the perception? Where are the thought fabrications? Where's the consciousness of this? Which aspect are you clinging to? Can you see the drawbacks of that clinging? It's helpful here to look in terms of the three perceptions—or of any of the perceptions that help to develop a sense of dispassion. You look for the inconstancy. Once you've perceived the inconstancy, you look to see that that's stressful. When you see the stress, you realize that it can't possibly be a happiness you'd like to claim as your own. Or you learn to perceive the aggregates that make up your concentration as empty, a disease, a wound. There must be something better.

This line of perceiving, this approach, is what finally gets you past all your attachments and brings you to something really solid, something unfabricated. At that point, you can put even these strategic perceptions down, for they've done their work. You've been carrying out these skillful duties to arrive at something that doesn't carry a duty. As Ajaan Mun once said, nibbana carries no duty for the mind at all. Each of the four noble truths entails a duty, but nibbana is something beyond the four noble truths, something outside of the framework of the four frames of reference and their attendant duties. It's not an activity in any way.

So it's helpful to look at this fourth frame of reference as a series of guidelines. When a problem comes up, figure out which framework is useful for analyzing where you are in the practice and for pointing the practice in the direction you want to go. Learn to see what's going on in your mind in terms of these frameworks, so you can figure out what to do, what's the duty here. This helps you to step back from just being in your thought worlds in a way that allows you to take them apart in terms of their elements: the events and activities that put them together. This in turn gives you a much better idea of what to do with them, instead of what you have been doing, which has been to cling to them and suffer.

This is how you take apart this big mass of suffering in the mind. If you learn how to take it apart, you really see it's not a solid mountain of rock. It's just a pile of gravel. And each little piece of gravel is not all that heavy. You can deal with it

much more easily as a piece of gravel than as part of a solid mass of rock. So try to familiarize yourself with these different frameworks and you'll get a much better handle on how to deal with the problems of the mind.

Taking the Buddha at his Word

October 2, 2008

Ajaan Fuang once stated that there are two kinds of people in the world: those who think too much and those who don't think enough. He was referring specifically to concentration practice, but his statement applies to other areas of the practice as well. When some people come to the practice, they want to be told what to do and they don't want to have to think about it. They want a series of instructions that they can follow—1,2,3,4—and then at the end of the list, they'll be guaranteed results.

That of course places all the responsibility on the teacher. If the results don't come, then the teacher was wrong. It was the teacher's fault, not the student's. At the same time, the attitude of not wanting to think turns many areas of the practice into ritual, things where you simply go through the motions. You do it because you're told to do it, and that's all you know.

For Westerners studying with other Westerners in Thailand, this is especially dangerous. They do something because their teacher says, "Well, the Thais say to do it, but it's just the Thai way of doing things." When they hear that, they naturally hold back a part of their mind, saying to themselves, "When I get home, I'm not going to do it their way. I'm going to do it *my* way." It's like that image of the elephant in the suttas. He charges into the battle but he holds back his trunk. He's going through the motions of fighting but he's not really giving himself over to the battle. That's one extreme.

The other extreme is not so much thinking too much; it's thinking in the wrong way, trying to figure things out beforehand so you don't have to go through the practice. In other words, you assume either that the Buddha didn't know what he was talking about, or that he was playing a trick on us, and that the whole point of the practice is to figure out the trick. "He talks about the unconditioned, but then he describes a conditioned path—this obviously can't be true; there must be a trick," or "He talks about putting an end to desire, but how can you do that without desiring to end desire? There must be a trick." Or so the thinking goes. In other words, you try to figure out the path without doing it, as an excuse for not doing it, and you think that you're clever.

A similar comment can be made about scholars who want to have the final word on the right interpretation of the texts without really doing the practice themselves. They know all the definitions. They know all the words in the books. They get established as authorities, but without any direct knowledge of what the words are talking about. That's thinking too much, thinking in the wrong way.

The proper attitude is one that Ajaan Lee shows in his autobiography. He mentions that when he first heard about eating only one meal a day or going into the forest to practice, it didn't make any sense to him. Why would you want to go into the forest? It's uncomfortable, dangerous. Wouldn't the practice be easier in the village, in more civilized surroundings? But, he said, everywhere you looked in the texts, the Buddha kept recommending going into the forest, going into the wilderness. So Ajaan Lee gave it a try. He took the Buddha at his word.

This meant that when he went out into the forest, he didn't simply sit there and say, "Okay, now. Show me the results." He started looking around and thinking about what might be good about staying in the forest. Why would this be good for the practice? And in the course of living there, he came up with lots of his own answers. On the one hand, it's quiet and you have a lot more time for yourself. But it's also dangerous, and in the midst of the dangers you realize you've got to depend on the Dhamma to get you through your particular fears, your particular anxieties, the dangers, the boredom, the restlessness. You have no alternative things to fall back on, so you find yourself committing yourself more and more to the Dhamma as your refuge.

There's a great passage in the *Theragatha* where a monk out in the forest is sick. He says to himself, "So here I am—sick. What am I going to do? Am I going to go back and find a doctor?" And his answer is, "No, I'm going to depend on the seven factors for awakening and the five strengths to fortify my mind." That's how he gets well. In the case of the ajaans in Thailand, there are many stories of their encountering tigers in the forest and realizing that their only defense was metta. So they developed very strong metta for the tigers, expanding their mastery of metta by really taking refuge in it. This is how they developed their skill in the practice.

Going into the forest, going into the wilderness, really forces you to hold onto the Dhamma in ways that you wouldn't have to when you live in comfortable surroundings. Ajaan Lee learned this, one, through experience, and two, through thinking about it. This is how you understand the Buddha's teachings: both putting them into practice and thinking about them as you put them into practice. You take the Buddha at his word but then you also try to figure out, "Why did he recommend this? What's good about this practice? What are the reasons behind it?"

During my time with Ajaan Fuang, there were times when he would explain things, especially when it was obvious that this *farang* was pretty clueless on those particular matters. But he also commented once that "If I have to explain everything to you, I'll die." Which meant of course that it was up to me to try to figure things out—going on the assumption that, yes, there must be reasons for this even though, no, I don't yet know what they are. Once you have that conviction, then you start looking for why this is a good practice, how it's a useful practice. You start figuring things out. You understand.

This is how understanding comes from conviction, as in the list of the five strengths: The list starts with conviction, and then goes through persistence, mindfulness, and concentration to discernment. If you're convinced that there are reasons for these practices, you've taken the first step. Then you stick with them. And it's through sticking with them that, in the activity itself, you begin to see the good results. You start connecting cause and effect. That's how conviction gives rise to discernment.

An ajaan I know in Thailand once commented on this. He said, "Notice that the list of strengths doesn't start with perceptions or ideas or concepts. It starts with conviction." It's like being in a forest. If, when you're lost in the forest, you're convinced that there's a way out, you have the chance to find it. If you're convinced there's no way out, you're doomed. You're going to give up, and that closes the door.

So conviction leads to ingenuity. And ingenuity allows you to test different hypotheses as you practice. Which means that as you're working with the breath here, remember that it's not just in, out, in, out. There's more to the breath. And the ways of working with the breath energy are not limited to the ones listed in the books. You can get some tips from the books. They can offer ideas of approaches you might not have thought of otherwise. But it's also good to try to figure out your own approaches so that you can come to your own understanding. The things you understand through having figured them out stick with you for a long time, much longer than things you've simply heard.

So we take the Buddha at his word. There is a path, a conditioned path, and it leads to the unconditioned. How does it do that? You give it a try and see what gets stirred up in your mind as you try to develop concentration, mindfulness, and all the other factors of the path. Sometimes the practice seems to stir up a lot more dust—well, that's a good thing. If it didn't stir up the dust, you wouldn't have known the dust was there. But the next question is, how do you deal with the dust? How do you use the teachings to deal with that dust?

As the Buddha once said, everything you really need to know for the practice is there in the wings to awakening. So try to figure out which of the various lists is applicable to what you're going through right now. Or if you're dealing specifically with problems with concentration, as Ajaan Fuang once noted, all the issues in breath meditation are contained in the seven steps at the beginning of Ajaan Lee's Method Two. If you're convinced that that's the case, and yet the problem isn't obviously mentioned in those seven steps, what variations can you play on those steps? What are some of the implications of those steps that could apply to your particular problem?

As you explore these implications, you'll find that there's a lot more to them than appears on the surface. And that's an important part of understanding the Dhamma: trying to figure out the implications through experimenting, learning how to take a few basic principles and work out their ramifications so they speak directly to the problem you're facing right now. In this way you discover that they mean a lot more than you might have thought. It's a process of trial and error. Sometimes you'll come up with ideas that just simply don't work out. Well, that's important to know. It's something you can learn only from the practice.

This is how the thinking and the acting go together. It's the kind of thinking that's good thinking. If the thinking and the acting stick close together, then even when you think an awful lot, it doesn't become too much.

As Ajaan Fuang once noted, Ajaan Lee was a very curious person, very inquisitive. He once commented that if Ajaan Lee had met me, he probably would have spent a lot of time picking my brain, asking questions, learning what's taught in a modern university education. That's the kind of person who discovered this breath meditation method we're following: curious, inquisitive. Having that same attitude allows us to take the method and run with it, to see how far it can go.

So try to develop this attitude to all aspects of the practice, from the way we clean things in the monastery on up: There's a reason why we do it that way. And the best way to figure out the reason behind it is to do it. You take the Buddha at his word in this way, but you're also very frank about your doubts

and you honestly try to resolve any conflict between the two. That's how things become clear.

Questioning & Conviction

October 3, 2008

They've conducted experiments where they put people under hypnosis and tell them that when they get out of hypnosis, they'll do something at a certain signal. And sure enough they come out of hypnosis and, at the signal, they do it—they climb a ladder, wave a hand, or whatever. When they're asked, "Why did you do that?" they'll give explanations. "I wanted to do X, I wanted to do Y." The people running the experiments have claimed that this is proof that people have no free will, that our idea of free will is an illusion because the decision was made much earlier and under much different circumstances from what the people claimed.

Well, it doesn't necessarily prove that. It also just might be the case that most of us—and especially people who are easy to hypnotize—are very ignorant of our own intentions. When you allowed yourself to be put under hypnosis, that was an intention; part of your mind under hypnosis agreed to follow the orders. If you were harder to hypnotize, it might not have agreed. It might have maintained its conscious power of choice.

From the standpoint of the Buddha's teachings, that's the interpretation worth pursuing: that we do have free will and yet we're very ignorant of our intentions. A large part of the purpose of the practice is to learn how to understand what it means to have an intention, to make a choice. It's in those little moments where we exercise freedom of choice that the path to the freedom from suffering lies.

The best way to learn about intentions is to try to set up a constant intention and see what happens to it. Like right now: Make up your mind to stay with the breath and see how long you can do it. You may find that you can stick with it pretty well, or that you're suddenly off someplace else and you don't know why. Well, you go back to the breath again. You do this over and over, and after a while you begin to realize that you've got to expect that there will be a disturbance, there will be a distraction. You've got to prepare for that. The mind will change its mind. A new intention will come in and take over. You've got to learn how to observe that process, to begin detecting the little signals that the mind has changed its mind and yet still pretends to be staying with the breath. Nevertheless, it's ready to go. The briefest lapse of mindfulness, and then it's gone. And you wonder: How could that happen in such a brief moment?

Well, it wasn't just that one brief moment. The decision had already been made, but it was buried. So now you're warned. You want to start detecting that decision, uncovering all the layers of ignorance and delusion that covered it up. As you do this, you'll run into other intentions that like to *keep* it covered up. So there'll be a battle inside. One mind, but there are a lots of minds to it, lots of opinions, lots of intentions. The only way you're going to uncover these things is to try to stick with one intention as long as possible. This begins with the intention to put an end to suffering. And that's based on the conviction that it's possible to do it.

Conviction starts with conviction in the Buddha's awakening, that he did find the end of suffering and he did it through developing powers of his mind. And they weren't powers peculiar to him; they were powers anybody could develop. This is an important form of conviction because it gives you the impetus to get on the path. You say, "He could do it; so can I." You need to maintain that belief.

So the knowledge of the Dhamma that you start out with is not really knowledge. It's a conviction, a belief—an untested hypothesis that you're going to test. But you decide it's worth testing. It's like being a scientist. There are lots of different hypotheses or theories a scientist could test, but the scientist has to focus on testing the ones that seem most promising. Which ones are going to be worthwhile, which ones will teach you something useful if you prove them true or false? If you decide that the idea that suffering can be put to an end is worth testing, it gives you the impetus to start testing the Buddha's teachings in practice.

It also gives you a rudimentary experience of what's called *yoniso manasikara*, or appropriate attention, focusing on the issue of suffering as having paramount importance. We could focus on lots of other issues in life: the economy, the weather, the environment, this person's ideas, that person's preferences—lots of different things we could choose to focus on as being important. But appropriate attention starts with the conviction that suffering is the important problem, and there must be a solution to it. This form of attention is not really knowledge yet, it's a conviction, but it's focusing you on a particular problem. You've chosen this one as the one most worth exploring, most worth trying to solve.

That's why we meditate, because part of the solution to suffering lies in developing certain qualities of mind, such as mindfulness, alertness, concentration. To develop these qualities, you need conviction. When mindfulness lapses, you don't have to debate with yourself as to whether it's worth wandering off after that distraction. Your conviction tells you No, it's best to get back, back to the breath. And that decision is based on the conviction that you should develop right effort. You start generating the desire to want to do this.

People often think that the Buddha gave desire bad press, but he actually gave it a central role in the path. It's right there in right effort: Generate desire to give rise to skillful qualities, generate desire to abandon unskillful ones. In other words, the best way to do this is to get yourself to *want* to do it, so that it's not just a mechanical process of following somebody's orders. You have to find ways of encouraging yourself and inspiring yourself on the path.

That's how you develop your wisdom, how you develop your discernment, motivating yourself to realize that this really is a worthwhile project to pursue. Even though lots of people might say, "What could you possibly learn by just focusing on the breath?" you realize that staying focused here exercises your mindfulness, your concentration, your discernment, all the qualities you're going to need to solve this problem of suffering. These are the qualities that allow you to test the Buddha's claim that by solving the problem of suffering, you solve the biggest problem in life. You actually arrive at the deathless, a happiness that doesn't change, that lies outside of space and time. It's quite a claim, but you can think about what life would be like if there were no happiness lying outside of space and time. Whatever you gained, you'd have to lose it; you'd gain it again,

you'd lose it again. What real satisfaction is there in that? But here's the Buddha, someone who seems reasonable, claiming that it is possible to find a happiness that doesn't have to depend on conditions. And it's up to you to decide: Do you want to make the effort to explore that possibility?

So you sit down and focus on your breath to develop the qualities of mind needed to test that claim. That's the beginning of appropriate attention. It's based on a choice you make—and a choice you have to keep on making, because it's so easy to fall off the path. It can be a long path. It requires a lot of discipline. It requires persistence, patience—qualities that we in the modern world tend to have in only minimal amounts. So it's very easy to give up. You need to keep on generating that desire, keep on reminding yourself why you're here. You're here to learn about the potentials in the mind: How far toward true happiness can these potentials go?

Our belief that this is an important hypothesis to test calls for an interesting combination of skepticism and conviction. But it's only through that kind of questioning, choosing a question you think is important and examining it again and again, that knowledge is attained.

And particularly as you develop these qualities, you begin to understand more and more what it is to make a choice. Where exactly do you make those choices? You begin to realize that there are many, many layers of choice going on in the mind. A lot of our explanations as to why we did something are pretty wide of the mark. They're simplified narratives we create after the fact without really observing these things as they actually happen.

This is why the Buddha places so much emphasis on alertness, the quality of noticing what's going on *as* it's going on. He talks about observing craving, the cause of suffering. You have to see it right there where it's happening to perceive exactly what the choice is, where it was made, and why it was made. You can do that only if you stay very close to the present moment. This is why the breath is such an ideal topic for meditation. It's always right here in the present moment. It's right here where the mind and the body meet. When you're here, you're much more likely to see your intentions as they're being made, the choices as they're being made. But this requires a lot of sensitivity, which is why it requires time. You have to keep coming back, coming back, coming back, looking deeper and deeper, developing stronger and stronger powers of concentration, mindfulness, alertness, getting the mind really still, so that it can detect even the slightest movements within it.

The going may seem slow, but don't let that be a deterrent. The process is gradual for everyone. Even though it seems to be taking a long time and a lot of effort, remind yourself that the Buddha himself had to pursue it for a long time, had to put in a lot of effort. But when he arrived at the goal, he said that it was more than worth the effort. And so you think about that possibility: that through understanding your intentions, you can find something that lies beyond intention; that through exploring your freedom of choice from moment to moment, you can find a freedom beyond moments, beyond time altogether.

So keep looking at the choices you make: Exactly when do you make them, how do you make them, where do you make them? Try to see as precisely as possible. It's right around the area of intention that there lies the opening to freedom. After all, what is a choice? There is a little moment of freedom right there where you can choose X or Y, but we usually don't take full advantage of it.

Our choices tend to be very, very conditioned by past ideas, past beliefs, past habits. Because we're not paying full attention, we just go along with our old ways of doing things. So we don't really appreciate the freedom that lies exactly where that choice is and the way it's made.

An important part of mindfulness is to decondition yourself. The Buddha said, just look at the breath, look at the body in and of itself, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world—in other words, putting aside your old habits of thinking about the world out there. Put aside your old ways of using your eyes and ears and nose, tongue, body, and mind to focus on issues outside there in the world, to get your knowledge about the world, to figure out how to gain what you want out of the world—and of course getting complacent and careless when you get what you want, and upset when you don't, and trying to find new ways of getting it. Now we want to use our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind for other purposes, just to see the processes of the senses as they happen, in and of themselves. Look at them in a way that highlights the movements of the mind, how the mind makes a choice, and how it enforces that choice, how it justifies that choice to itself.

All these processes are going on all the time, but we usually don't look at them because our attention is focused somewhere else far away. So stay right here at the breath, because this is a great place to observe all these other things. The Buddha makes a comparison to six kinds of animals. If you tie them all to leashes and tie the leashes together, the animals will all pull in their various directions to feed. The crocodile will want to go down to feed in the river, the monkey will want to go climb up to feed in the tree, the hyena will want to go to feed in a charnel ground, and so on. Depending on which animal is the strongest, the others get dragged along.

But if you tie them all to an immovable post, then no matter how hard they pull, they all end up staying right there at the post. The post here is mindfulness immersed in the body. The prime way of immersing mindfulness in the body is to be mindful of the breath. When you stay with the breath, you can detect the pull that goes out the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, or mind to past and future, to your likes and dislikes. But you don't have to give in to that pull because you've got a place where you can stay grounded and secure. That way you can observe the processes that happen at the eye, the ear, and all the other senses: how a perception arises, how the perception turns into a thought, and how the thought begins to develop fangs to bite you and make you suffer.

These things are all here to be observed. They're all happening all the time. But to see them we have to change our focus. To change our focus requires a change of heart, telling ourselves that this really is important, much more important than things outside. That's what conviction is all about. Appropriate attention is the change of focus; conviction, the change of heart. You make up your mind—and your heart—that this is an important issue that's got to be resolved, and this is the way to do it: training the mind, developing these qualities so you can see what's going on in the present more and more clearly, and you can uncover all those layers of delusion that cover up your intentions, those little spots where there's a potential for freedom that we don't detect.

So that's what we're looking for. Try to keep that as your utmost priority, because only through maintaining that sense of priorities can you actually test what the Buddha taught, and see if the way out really exists.

What's Not on the Map

May 14, 2007

In Thai they have a term—*arahan dib*, a “raw arahant” or an “uncooked arahant”—meaning someone who has read up on the texts, has everything all figured out beforehand, and then forces his meditation into the mold he learned from the texts. When he's reached the end of his preconceived notions about where the practice leads, okay, there he is: success in the practice. As you can imagine, “raw arahant” is not a term of praise or admiration. It's a term of derision for the inexperienced person who thinks he can have everything figured out all beforehand.

There's another Thai phrase about someone who “knows before he's born, who's expert before he's even tried his hand.” It's basically the same idea.

What we're working on here is not a body of facts you can simply memorized. We're working on a skill, and where we're coming from is ignorance. This means that although you can get a general sense of this skill beforehand by reading and listening to people talk, the actual practice is something you've got to learn to feel your way through. Getting that right feel for the practice is the essence of mastery.

The basic principles may apply to everybody, but no one else has ever trained your particular mind with its particular problems before. You're the one who's going to have to train it by mastering both the principles and the particulars. You're coming from ignorance but you're going to have to learn how to be your own teacher. This means learning how to learn from your particular mistakes: Make plans as to what you're going to do, do it, and then see what happens. Try to work with your best intentions from the very beginning—what seems to make the most sense, what seems the right thing to do—but be prepared to make adjustments along the way.

This is at the essence of what the Buddha taught Rahula in the sutta I keep referring to. And I keep referring to it because it's so basic and essential. You can't always know beforehand how the results of your actions are going to turn out. Sometimes you *can* anticipate and so you work with your best anticipations, but you have to be alert to the fact that your anticipations can sometimes be wrong. And so the Buddha also teaches you how to deal with the discovery of mistaken anticipations, recognizing sometimes, while you're doing something, that it's wrong, so you learn to stop. Other times you can read the results of your actions only after they're done. This requires honesty and integrity, and part of the way to learn honesty and integrity is to be willing to confess mistakes when you recognize them, to talk them over with someone further along on the path. This is because your willingness to be open and aboveboard with other people about these things translates into being open and aboveboard about them in your own internal conversation. You develop good habits this way. Your external habits of speaking become part of your internal dialogue.

So the practice is a combination of learning what you've picked up from other people, taking it to heart, and then also realizing that you've got to test it. Things may not come out the way you anticipated them. This is part of discernment. It

starts with learning from what you've heard and then thinking it through. Real insight, though, comes from developing these qualities in the mind.

It's like going out in the wilderness. You read the maps, you make your plans, but when you get out in the forest you realize that the forest doesn't look like the map. The map has splotches of solid pale green with red lines and little symbols on it. But when you look around yourself in the forest, you don't see those splotches, symbols, or lines. Now, the lines are relevant: They symbolize the paths through the forest. They give you a sketchy idea of what's out there. But you have to realize that there's a lot more out there than just the pale greens and reds of the map. There are actual trees, actual animals, actual changes in the lay of the land. So you make plans based on the map, but be prepared to throw your plans overboard as you meet up with new and unexpected things. This is an important part of the training: how to deal with the unexpected.

I had a friend back in high school who went into military training and later told me about having to do long-distance running as part of his training. One of the things I had hated most about high school phys-ed was long-distance running. It'd practically kill me. My worst memories of phys-ed class were having to do a mile run and coming back and getting dizzy, throwing up, and having to lie there on a bench in the locker room, feeling like I was going to die. So what my friend told me sounded like a horror story: Part of his military training was running for a mile with a full pack on his back. Of course, everybody was anticipating the finish line at the end of the mile. But as they reached the finish line, the instructor said, "Okay, one more quarter-mile." As you can imagine, there were complaints. But the instructor said, "Look, when you're engaged in a battle, you can't have predetermined lines about this is how far the enemy's going to chase you, or that you'll have to fight only up to five p.m. You may have some expectations of how long the battle is going to last, but you can never know. You've got to be prepared for it to last a really long time. And you've got to learn how to find the inner resources you can draw on when you get pushed beyond what you think are your limits."

The same holds true in the battle with defilements. You can never tell when greed is going to come up or how long it's going to keep coming back, coming back. There are times when lust seems to be really quiet for weeks and months on end, but you never know when it's going to come back in full strength, and you have to be prepared for that possibility.

So learning to deal with uncertainties is an important skill in the practice, because you'll have to deal with so many uncertainties both inside and out. You need to develop the right attitude, the right confidence in your ability to read a situation. And that kind of confidence comes not through attending self-esteem classes. It comes from actual practice in dealing with situations and, over time, learning how far your powers of observation can be relied on, and where they have to be further sharpened. Ajaan Maha Boowa makes the point that when the defilements are named in the books they come in nice, neat lists, but when they come up in your mind they don't follow the lists. They don't come in the proper order. They come all pell-mell, so you have to be ready to deal with them pell-mell, whatever the order they come in. As in that question the king of Thailand once asked Luang Puu Dune: "Which defilement do you have to deal with first?" Luang Puu's answer was, "Whichever one arises first." Sometimes there are going to be subtle ones and sometimes blatant ones. They don't line up neatly.

So, again, it's good to have names for the defilements to get a sense of what you might be dealing with, but be prepared for the fact that a lot of what's going to happen in your mind won't quite be the way it's described in the books. Ajaan Lee once commented that the ways of the mind are so many that no book on earth could possibly cover them all. But fortunately there are certain basic patterns you learn from, and you try applying them. Then when you've run through your list of skills and patterns, and you find that things are still not working, you've got to use your ingenuity and try new approaches.

This is why one of the worst attitudes you can have as a meditator is to hope that some ajaan is going to come and tell you to do X, and that's all you have to do. You don't have to think about it, just do X, X, X, X, X, obey his instructions, and you're guaranteed to come out right at the end. That's placing all the responsibility on the ajaan, and none on yourself. You've got to be willing to be responsible: to experiment, to try different approaches, and to learn how to read the results. That's the skill in the meditation. And that's how you develop discernment.

This comes from being willing to put yourself in uncertain situations: to have an adventure and not just an itinerary. Think of the itineraries on those cruises that go through the islands of the Alaskan panhandle. People basically stay in a floating hotel, and what kind of experience do they have? They get off at the different ports where they're thronged with guides vying to give them prepackaged, predigested experiences of the shrink-wrapped Alaskan wild. Then they come back home with their experience packages, but without having learned anything new. They didn't develop any skills. They just paid to be given a show. That's what itineraries are like. An adventure, though, is when you're willing to put yourself in an uncertain situation and to learn from the uncertainties. That's the only way you're going to gain real insight.

That's why the Buddha taught that there are three levels of discernment: the levels of understanding that come from listening, from thinking, and from developing qualities in the mind. Only in the actual developing do you begin to get an intuitive sense, a real feel, say, of what mindfulness is like, of what alertness is like, of what they can do. You may already know something about these qualities in their potential form, but as they grow they can branch out in unexpected ways. They can open up and connect to other qualities in the mind as well. So there's always an element of uncertainty in the practice that requires your own active participation in taking what you've learned and adjusting it to training the particulars of your mind. Because, as I said, no one else has ever trained your particular mind before, with your particular mix of defilements. You're the one who has to train it.

So pick up what lessons you can, read the maps, make your plans, but know that the plans can get washed away pretty quickly. And realize that being thrown on your own resources is not a bad thing. It's where genuine insight comes. As Ajaan Maha Boowa says, discernment doesn't arise until you find yourself cornered, at the end of your rope. It may not be a pleasant place to be, but it's where new alternatives show themselves if you're willing to look for them. Otherwise your practice is like processed cheese—no matter what kind of cheese goes into the factory, it all gets mixed with oil and comes out tasting the same. Kraft Velveeta has not changed much since I was a child. They may package it differently, but it's all very predictable, and all very blah. But we don't

want processed cheese in the practice. We don't want blah insights. We want something better than that.

Any practice that requires less than your full participation and less than your full willingness to put things on the line is never going to offer you any real surprises. Actually, awakening is quite a surprise when it comes. So learn how to deal with the little surprises, and the big surprises will have an opportunity to show you that there really is something special in life. After all, the Buddha said there are four noble truths. It's not that all life is suffering. Part of life is also the end of suffering—if you open yourself up to what often might seem like impossibilities, improbabilities. There's a passage where the Buddha says that we practice to see what we've never seen before, to attain what we've never attained before, to know what we've never known before. Which means being willing to do things we've never done before, to encounter things we've never planned for before. So learn to enjoy that adventurous aspect of the path, because it's crucial.

Always Willing to Learn

May 21, 2008

One of the habits of a good craftsman is a willingness to deal with uncertainties. You take the range of skills you've developed and you're willing to apply them to new situations, new problems. You experiment. And you deal skillfully with failure. You try again until you can see how the basic principles of your skill can be extended in that particular set of circumstances, to that particular set of problems.

The same principle applies to meditation. You may find as you're dealing with the breath energy in the body that there are parts of the body you have trouble integrating into your range of healthy breath energy. So you have to learn how to think about those parts in new ways. If you try to push them out of you or ignore them, they don't go away. They come back with a vengeance. So learn to think about them in ways that can include them in the breath.

For example, if there's tension in your neck or your shoulders, think of the neck and shoulders actually doing the breathing, and they're breathing just for themselves. The fact that they're tense may mean that they've been breathing for other parts of the body, while they themselves are starved. So let them have their fill of breath energy. Often, if areas of the body have been starved of breath energy, you'll have to start out with lots of deep long in-breaths and shallow out-breaths to get them re-energized. Be careful not to squeeze those areas on the out-breath. Let them do the breathing, and for the time being it's fully for their benefit.

If your brain feels foggy, you can think of the breath energy coming in and out of the brain, that the brain is doing the breathing. Or the spinal cord is doing the breathing. See what that does to the breath energy—if it helps to open things up or to strengthen parts of the body that are weak. If it doesn't work, experiment to see what *does* work. As a meditator you always want to be expanding your range of skills, consolidating what you've learned and then seeing how it can grow.

In doing so, you find that you expand your sense of who you are, of what you can do, of what's possible. But that sense of who you are: Don't focus primarily on that. We have ways of typecasting ourselves: You fall here or there on the enneagram; you're a smart person, a dumb person, a sensitive person, a clod, or whatever. If you think in those terms, you tend to limit yourself. What those types are, are the areas you tend to fall back on, the range of skills you're already comfortable with. But you don't want to be limited to those skills. You have to be willing to deal with uncertainties, which means being willing to develop new skills.

There are certain roles that you're comfortable filling, but things can't progress if you stay limited to those roles. You can't let your desire for self-esteem limit you just to the things you already know how to do well. It's a common tendency: When you see that you can do something well, you can pat yourself on the back that you handled that situation well from that angle. But

maybe you handled it poorly from another angle. That's an area you don't like to look at because it doesn't feed your self-esteem. And that way, you stay blind.

Or you're used to certain patterns in your emotional life. Like patterns in the weather, they seem natural because they're the ones you're used to. When I was younger, I lived back East. Like everywhere east of the Rocky Mountains, the heat during the summer would build and build and build, and then there would be a huge thunderstorm. The heat and humidity would be dispersed, and things cooled down. You got used to thinking that that's the way it has to be—the heat and humidity build into a thunderstorm that clears everything. Now you live here in California, and the summers aren't like that at all. When the cool air comes in, it comes in stealthily, very quietly. You go through a heat wave and then one morning you wake up: Fog. It crept in overnight without warning, with no clear line to tell you, "Now the heat is going to break." It's a different pattern.

We need to realize in our lives that some of the patterns we're used to are unhealthy, or they may be useful in some circumstances but not in others. So it's good to learn other ways of dealing with these patterns. Instead of trying to think of what kind of person you are or where you fit on a particular scale, just look at your range of skills and ask if you can expand that range. Look at things from different perspectives. For instance, if you're used to thinking of yourself as smart, it's useful to live in a set of circumstances where other people don't think that you're smart. At first you may find it debilitating, because your self-esteem has been built up around the idea that you're smart. But the idea that you're smart can get in the way of learning new things. You have to get past that sense of being debilitated, and realize, well, maybe you *are* dumb in certain areas.

The way to do this is to identify yourself as someone always willing to learn. That provides you with a wider range of places where you can stay, a wider range of groups you can live with, and a wider range of ways you can look at yourself and the situations you're in. The wider your range of skills, the easier it is to survive. Your survival doesn't have to depend on other people recognizing the fact that you're smart, or even *your* thinking you're smart.

Or suppose you're used to being angry, going through a certain pattern like the summer storm pattern—the anger gradually builds, gradually builds, and then a storm clears the air—and you're used to that effect, the idea that really feeling the anger fully and expressing it fully is going to clear the air. What actually happens, of course, is that you end up doing and saying things that are harmful to yourself and to people around you, just as storms can cause a lot of damage. You've got to ask yourself: What other ways are there of dealing with the situation? Do you really need to clear the air with anger? Does it actually clear the air? Might it not be better to go back to the very beginning stages of the anger and watch them to see how you can nip the anger in the bud, so the anger can be defused in a subtle way like the fog stealing in?

These skills we learn as we meditate—watching thought patterns arise and learning how to nip them in the bud—are an important part of the meditation. We like to think that real meditation is when you settle down with the breath, with no distractions, and the mind doesn't wander off anywhere. But learning how to deal with distraction is one of the major learning opportunities in the meditation: seeing how the distraction begins, how there's a little stirring in the mind and then, depending on what you want, how you place a meaning on that stirring and get attracted to it, involved in it. It becomes a little movie you want

to follow and then you're off wherever it takes you. But if you want to stick with the meditation, you need to see those processes right as they begin forming and to figure out ways of nipping them in the bud: questioning the perception, dispersing that little stirring of energy with the breath, getting more alert to what's actually happening, and more mindful of what you really want to be doing with the process.

Which means that, in learning how to deal with distractions, you learn an awful lot about how the mind works, how states of becoming arise. Then you take this skill and use it in daily life. When you run up against patterns in yourself and your relationships to the people around you—as in that old book, *Games People Play*—you have to ask yourself what games *you* like to play: the games you feel comfortable playing, the ones you feel you can play well. Are they really good games to play? If not, how can you pull out of those games? That's an important range of skills to develop.

And again, as you're meditating, learn which areas of the Dhamma apply to which phase of the emotional waves you go through. In the beginning stages where the wave is still subtle, you can apply the four noble truths: look for the stress, look for the craving and the clinging, and do what you can to let go of that craving and clinging. You need to do this early, for if you let the wave develop to a crest, to the point where you're in the middle of a rage, this subtle type of analysis is not going to work. The only thing you can do then is to use defilement to undercut your defilement.

There's that great passage in the suttas where the Buddha advises, when you're really angry, to stop and think of how, when you're angry, you tend to do and say things that are self-destructive, that destroy your friendships, that destroy your wealth, that hurt your best interests. When you're angry, you don't look good. All of these are things that will please your enemy. Do you want to please that bastard? Thinking in this way uses your pride and hatred to undercut your anger. When things have developed to a full-blown level like that, the subtle teachings aren't going to help. You have to use crude wisdom—which means that even though it works, the results are going to be crude as well.

So it's best not to let your emotional waves develop that far. Ask yourself: What happened to all those skills you learned as a meditator? They're not just for sitting quietly on a meditation seat. They're for use in your daily life, to take you out of the unskillful games you've been playing, to give you a wider range of actual skills. So look at your life: What in your daily life tends to provoke anger? Watching TV? Listening to the radio? Well, maybe you should watch less TV. Turn off the radio. There is that principle called restraint of the senses, you know. When you look at things that provoke anger, it's often not the case that the things actually provoke your anger. You're out looking for anger because you want the storm. But what does the storm really accomplish, aside from a lot of damage?

Learn how to look at the people you dislike in a different way. Learn to think about the situations that would normally provoke anger in a different way. If you find that you can't look at the news without getting angry, it means you can't look at the news yet. You're not ready for it. If you want to get involved in social action, learn how to look at the news in a way that gives you ideas for what could be done, but without the anger. It's possible to recognize injustice and to work for change without getting stirred to anger. When you don't get stirred up in anger, you can work more effectively.

This applies in your personal life as well, in your relationships with people right around you. They may do things you dislike, but instead of letting yourself get upset, ask yourself: What would be the most effective way of stopping that kind of behavior? The most effective way is rarely the route of anger. There are more subtle ways, more indirect ways, that are much more effective, much more lasting. But they're not going to occur to you if you're boiling over with indignation.

You may come to realize that you actually use the injustice or the wrong situation to play a game of anger. So start questioning your motives. Is it really the injustice you care about, or is it the charge of the anger? This way you bring the range of skills you develop in meditation into your daily life. You'll probably see things about yourself that you don't like, but hopefully the meditation should have put you in a position where you're ready to face those things maturely and deal with them skillfully.

This is why, when the Buddha taught Rahula how to meditate on the breath, he first taught him to develop the perception of inconstancy. As he said, if you focus on inconstancy, it helps to deconstruct the conceit that "I am." Now, ordinarily we think of conceit as one of the last things you abandon in the practice. It's a fetter that only arahants can abandon totally. But you want to learn how to question it right from the very beginning because it often gets in the way of the skills you could be developing as a meditator or applying to new situations in life. When you can let go of that conceit—even though you can't totally conquer it, at least put it out of your mind for the time being—it allows you to look at situations less in terms of what you are, and more in terms of what you can do with the range of skills at hand.

And do what you can to expand that range of skills. Ajaan Lee talks about knowing when to play the role of being a smart person, knowing when to play the role being a dumb person. The same with strength and weakness: Most people don't like to appear weak, but there are times when it's useful to play the weak role. You learn a lot about other people that way. What this means is that you want to be able to play both the weak role and the strong role whenever necessary.

Last week I was talking to a woman who was dealing with a difficult situation at work. She had begun to realize that it just wasn't worth keeping up the fight, that she'd be better off quitting the job. But part of her didn't like the idea, for she was going to look like a loser. She liked to think of herself as a warrior. Well, that's a very incomplete understanding of what it means to be a warrior. A good warrior knows which battles are worth fighting and which ones aren't. It's when you're really confident in yourself as a warrior that you're willing to look weak or demure when you know it's to your advantage to do so. In other words, you're willing to play lots of different roles—and to learn how to expand your skills in all the different games you might be playing with other people so you're not stuck in the same old narrow range of games, narrow range of skills. You're able to take on different identities as they are appropriate for the occasion.

This is a principle that applies to the outside area of your daily life and also to the inside area of your meditation. Learn how to live with uncertainties, with the confidence that you can learn from them and expand your skills. It's an important step toward freedom, this ability to expand your range. If you need a

working hypothesis about who you are, what kind of person you are, make it the kind of person always willing to learn. That sort of identity doesn't set you up for a fall. In fact, it aids you all along the path. But once you realize that it's the identity you want to take on, make sure that your attitudes really carry it out.

Joy in Effort

September 6, 2007

Often you hear that there are two ways of approaching meditation. One is to put in lots of neurotic, miserable effort. You stress and strain with your heart firmly set on the time someday in the far distant future when you'll finally become awakened. The other approach is to realize that the Dhamma is all around you in the present moment. You just relax into the present moment and there you are.

Now, if those were the two only alternatives, the second would obviously be the only reasonable approach. But there are other alternatives as well. It's possible to relax into the present and still be filled with delusion. It's possible to enjoy putting effort into the practice, to thrive on challenges, to realize that there's a mature way to relate to the goal of awakening, and actually get there. You realize that, yes, the experience of awakening is not here yet, it's someplace in the future, but to get *there* you have to focus on *here*. And focusing on *here* is not just a matter of relaxing; there's work to be done.

Ajaan Lee has a good analogy. He says the practice is like trying to get fresh water out of salt water. The fresh water is already there in the salt water, but just allowing the salt water to sit and relax for a long while is not going to get the salt to separate out. You have to distill it. The fire of your distillery is analogous to the effort that goes into the practice. If you don't put in the effort, you're never going to get fresh water out of the salt water. But the trick is learning how to *sustain* effort, so that you don't give up when the going gets tough.

The best way to make it all the way *there* is to figure out how to enjoy the work *here*.

In other words, the effort in the meditation doesn't always have to be miserable or neurotic, doesn't always have to be a matter of stressing and straining. Sometimes it will require strong effort, sometimes very subtle effort. Right effort doesn't mean middling effort all the time, you know. What makes the effort right is that it's skillful, appropriate for right here, right now—and you're up for the challenge.

In the Buddha's description of right effort, you're told to generate desire. And one of the best ways of generating desire is to learn how to enjoy the effort—in other words, to take joy in abandoning unskillful qualities and to take joy in developing skillful ones. This joy is one of the traditions of the noble ones. And it actually gets results.

The best way to develop this sort of joy is to regard the practice as a skill that challenges your ingenuity. One of the qualities I've noticed is common among all the forest ajaans—in spite of all their different personalities—is that they all like to use their ingenuity to figure things out. They're not the type of people who simply do as they're told and hope that simply by doing as they're told, awakening is going to come out the other end of the process, like luncheon meat out of a factory. They each found aspects of the path that were like riddles that captured their imagination. These riddles didn't involve just an intellectual analysis, but more the type of analysis where you figure out a problem. When

they found a problem of this sort, they liked to find the most effective way of figuring it out.

So that's a quality you want to bring to the meditation. Notice what you're doing with the breath and what things seem to be problematic. The problem might be a physical pain or an emotional one. Try to figure out how the breath can help. Notice the mechanics of how you breathe. When you breathe in, where in the body does the in-breath energy—the swelling in the abdomen, the swelling of the chest—start? And when this in-breath impulse ripples through the body, does it spread smoothly or are there places where it's caught up, where it's blocked, where it's tensed? Can you unravel the blockages?

That's one thing you might want to work at if you find this an interesting problem. See what you can do. If this problem doesn't capture your imagination, if it doesn't seem to be a problem, notice what *is* a problem for you right here, right now. In other words, learn how to pose questions about the breath that relate to issues that really concern you. Learn how to go about figuring out the answers and judging when you've found an answer that really works.

Another common tendency in the forest tradition is not to explain everything beforehand. The ajaans tend to give each meditator the opportunity to figure things out. One reason for this is that the things you've learned by figuring them out stick with you much longer than the things you're simply told. The other reason is that many of our internal problems are extremely internal—the way mental events relate to physical events within you—and only you know how to express them to yourself. Your internal dialogue uses words, images, and language in an idiosyncratic way that only you can know. So you have to learn how to phrase idiosyncratic questions and then come up with answers appropriate for your case.

If you can learn to enjoy this process, you're more than halfway there. If you see the effort simply as a chore, something you've got to get through, you're going to miss an awful lot. You'll end up at the point where you tell yourself that this isn't working at all. You'll want to go back to what people in the 19th century called "the gospel of relaxation," the idea that relaxation, simply accepting things as they are, is going to cure all your ills. This has been with us for a long time in America: the idea that if only we could learn how to relax, everything would be okay. We've been at this for more than 100 years, and even though it still hasn't worked out, the idea hasn't lost its appeal.

And it's certainly not the Buddha's take on the problem. In his analogy, if you haven't gotten results from making an effort, you've simply been engaging in wrong effort. The difference between right effort and wrong effort is not so much the *amount* of effort as much as *where* you focus your effort and what you actually do. If you want to get milk out of a cow, for example, you learn how to pull at the udder. That's right effort. Wrong effort is trying to get milk out of a cow by twisting her horn. Now, if you've been putting a lot of effort into twisting her horn but not getting any milk, it might be a good idea to relax. But relaxing is not the whole solution; it's just the first step. After all, you still haven't gotten any milk. The next step in actually getting the milk is to ask, "What other parts of the cow can I squeeze?" And you look around. You try squeezing her leg; that doesn't work. You try pulling her tail; she kicks you. And finally you pull her udder. That's when you get milk.

In other words, relaxation is the first part of the solution if you've been putting effort into the wrong area, if you've been engaging in wrong effort. But if you're engaged in right effort in the right area, just keep at it. As your effort gets more consistent, you start getting results. The more you get results, the more you find joy in the effort. And the more you find joy, the more you're energized to try to figure things out at even subtler levels.

So to do well at the meditation it's a matter, one, of being willing to put in the effort, and, two, of learning how to enjoy the effort, learning how to enjoy puzzling things out.

The Buddha's path is not the sort where you simply do as you're told—noting, noting, noting, or scanning, scanning, scanning without thinking. Those approaches are simply mindfulness exercises, but people tend to do them mindlessly—i.e., without asking any questions. Actual insight comes not by pummeling the mind with a technique but from posing the right questions in the mind. "What are these assumptions I'm carrying around here? How could I do this more efficiently? What am I doing that I'm not noticing? How can I learn how to notice it? How can I catch the mind as it's about to let go of its mindfulness?" This last point may sound impossible, but it's not. When you learn how to pose questions in the mind like this, and you enjoy trying to find the answers, it's going to bring progress along the path.

And it's perfectly all right to *want* to make progress along the path. After all, that's how the Buddha taught. A lot of people like to second-guess the Buddha, saying, "He couldn't really mean what he said, using conditioned things to reach the unconditioned. There must be some trick to all this." They try to figure it all out beforehand, to clone an awakened view without having to go through the work of the path. That's the wrong way of trying to figure things out.

The right way is to take the Buddha at his word and then, when you're doing as he tells you to, to try to figure out why he has you do things this particular way.

That's one of the features of the forest tradition. They took the Buddha at his word, but in an inquisitive way. He said to follow the Vinaya; they follow the Vinaya. He said to develop right concentration, which means jhana. Okay, they do that. Then they look at what they're doing to see how it helps in bringing suffering to an end.

What this means in practice is that you learn how to question your efforts in terms of the four noble truths until you arrive at something that lies beyond effort, beyond the path. But you can't get to the "beyond" unless you go through the effort of the path. In fact, it's in focusing on the doing of the path that you actually come across the beyond.

So take the Buddha at his word: There *is* right effort. When the Buddha singled out three of the most important factors of the path in helping right concentration, they were right view, right effort, and right mindfulness. These are the most important helpmates or requisites for right concentration. These are the factors you want to focus on while you're meditating: right view, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. They all involve doing things, developing things, watching the results, and then—when you see something unskillful happening—letting it go.

If you learn how to take joy in the developing and joy in the letting go, you're on the noble path. And it's not a bad place to be. It's better than being stuck in a

place where you're trying to clone awakening and end up with nothing but wrong view, wrong mindfulness, and wrong... all the way down the line. No milk in your pail, and an irritated cow besides. So take the Buddha at his word. And be up for the challenge—because it can be a lot of fun.

Generating Desire

November 28, 2008

Part of the definition of right concentration is that you seclude your mind from sensual thoughts, from sensual obsessions, and it's not easy. The mind likes to spend a lot of time planning sensual pleasures. A man once came to see Ven. Ananda and said, "I hear that the monks, even the young ones, train their minds to put aside sensual passion, sensual thoughts, sensual plans. I don't believe that. How can that be?" So Ananda took him to see the Buddha, and the Buddha said, "Well, even when I was a young monk it wasn't easy. My heart didn't leap at the idea of giving up sensual passions. But I realized that for the mind to gain stillness, to gain a sense of solidity, it would have to put sensual passion, sensual ideas aside, at least for the time being."

The way he did it was twofold: One was to think of the drawbacks of sensuality, and the other was to think of the rewards of renunciation. If we compare this to the factors of the path, it falls under right effort—as we chanted just now, *chandam janeti*, generating desire. Desire does have a role in the path: the desire to abandon any unskillful thoughts that have arisen, to prevent unskillful thoughts from arising again, to give rise to any skillful thoughts or mental qualities that haven't yet arisen, and to maintain and develop those that have. In each case, you have to generate the desire for the effort to happen. Try to get your mind on the side of the idea that this is what you want to do. This involves psyching yourself up, giving yourself reasons that actually motivate you to put aside your usual obsessions and to look for something better.

The texts recommend many different ways of doing this. You start with the Buddha's first method: learning to see the drawbacks of sensuality. The Buddha has lots to say on this topic, gives lots of analogies for understanding the drawbacks of sensuality: It's like a pit of burning embers, a drop of honey on the blade of a knife, a chain of bones without any meat. Once when I was in Laguna someone complained, "Why is there so much on the drawbacks of sensuality?" Because we're so strongly attached to sensuality. You have to keep hammering the point home that sensual desire carries heavy drawbacks: all the trouble that laypeople go through in work, for instance, working and working and working to get paid so that they'll have the money to buy pleasures. Then there's fear that they may not get paid. Or even if they do get paid, it's not going to be enough. Or it's going to get stolen. Or, as the texts say, kings or thieves will make off with it. Hateful heirs will make off with it. It's because of sensual desire that we get into wars and battles, even battles at home.

There are a lot of drawbacks to sensuality, and it's good to think about them on a regular basis. It helps incline the mind to the idea that maybe it *would* be good to put those thoughts aside and see if you can develop a sense of ease, a sense of wellbeing that doesn't have to depend on them. It's not as if the Buddha is going to starve you. He gives you an alternative pleasure, one that's safe, that provides real nourishment. In the beginning it's hard because part of the mind doesn't want to settle down and work toward it. So you have to go on faith, on the conviction that this is something you really should want. That right there

may seem to be a contradiction: putting together the terms *should* and *want*. We think of wanting as something that happens naturally, and the shoulding as unnatural. But you *can* induce a desire—you do it all the time. So if you want to be truly happy, you should induce desires for the causes of true happiness.

Seeing renunciation as rest is another tactic for generating desire. The Canon contains a famous account of a former king who becomes a monk. He goes and sits under a tree, exclaiming, “What bliss, what bliss!” The other monks are afraid that he’s recalling his past pleasures as king, so they go tell the Buddha. The Buddha calls him into his presence and says, “I hear you’ve been sitting under a tree, exclaiming ‘What bliss, what bliss!’ What do you have in mind as you say this?” And the monk says, “Back when I was a king, I couldn’t sleep at night. Even though I had guards posted inside the palace, outside the palace, inside the capital city, outside the capital city, inside the countryside, and outside the borders of the countryside, I still couldn’t sleep at night for fear that I would be attacked and killed. But now I sit under a tree with my wants satisfied, my mind like a wild deer, feeling no fear from any direction: That’s the bliss I’m thinking about.”

That’s the bliss of renunciation, a possibility that doesn’t even occur to most people. We see this so many times: People who’ve amassed wealth, amassed power, realize that they’re in danger because of their wealth and their power. So they set up prisons for themselves—gated communities with walls, security cameras, watchmen, and guard dogs. Very few of them realize that they’d be a lot better off abandoning that wealth and learning how to sit happily under a tree in the woods with a mind like a wild deer.

So those are two ways of inducing the desire to let go of unskillful states and to develop skillful ones: seeing the drawbacks of sensuality and allowing your imagination to conceive of the rewards of renunciation. There are other ways of inducing desire as well. One is humor. The Canon has a sutta where the Buddha talks about the reasons why people are lazy and the reasons why they’re diligent. For lazy people it’s, say, if you haven’t had enough to eat, you tell yourself, “I’m weak. I’ve got to rest.” Or if you’ve just recovered from an illness, you say, “Oh, I’ve been sick, I’ve got to rest.” And so it goes: “Whatever, whatever, I’ve got to rest.” As for the reasons for being diligent, the external conditions are the same. Say you’ve been sick and now you’ve recovered a little bit. You tell yourself, “I don’t know: Maybe the illness could get worse, so I should try to practice now while I’ve got at least *some* strength.” Or you haven’t had much to eat. You realize, “My body’s not weighed down by food. I’m not drowsy. It’s great for practicing.” And so on down the line.

In other words, the externals are the same in each case. The reasons that some people see as obstacles to their practice, other people see as opportunities. The difference lies simply in the attitude they have toward them. The way the Buddha phrases these cases is humorous, for the lazy excuses are attitudes we all know too well. When you can laugh in a good-natured way at how your laziness justifies itself, it loses some of its power over you.

The Buddha also recommends using a sense of pride and honor as a reason for wanting to practice. For the monks, this means living up to the fact that you’re a monk. When you say you’re a contemplative, are you really a contemplative? Or are you just here as a tourist, checking it out, seeing what it’s like wearing robes, going for alms, playing the role of a monk? If you had any

sense of honor, you'd want to make your mind the mind of a monk, the mind of a contemplative.

This ties in with the motivation of compassion. You're here receiving alms and all these other requisites from people. You're living off their generosity. As a return act of kindness to your supporters, you want to keep practicing partly to pay back the debt, partly so that their gifts to you will bear great fruit for them. That's part of the way kamma works: If you purify your mind, those who support you will reap great rewards.

The Buddha also talks of developing a warrior's sense of pride and honor in your ability to master the practice. Monks, he says, are like five different kinds of warriors. There's the warrior who sees the dust of the approaching army and grows faint, runs away. There's the warrior who sees the top of the banner of the approaching army, feels faint, runs away. There's the warrior who actually sees the army running at him, hears the tumult, hears the noise of the army, gets faint, runs away. There's the soldier who gets engaged in hand-to-hand combat, gives up, loses. And then there's the soldier who comes out winning: doesn't get faint when he sees the dust of the approaching army, doesn't get faint when he sees the banner, hears the tumult, or actually engages in hand-to-hand combat. He comes out victorious.

These warriors are like five different kinds of monks. There's the monk who hears that there's a beautiful woman in that village over there. Just the thought that there are beautiful women out there is enough to make him give up the training. That's the one who grows faint on seeing the dust of the approaching army. Then there's the monk who gives up when he actually sees a beautiful woman: He's like the warrior who sees the top of the banner of the army, gets faint, runs away. Then there's the monk who faints on hearing the tumult of the approaching army, i.e., he's sitting out meditating under a tree and a woman comes up and teases him, makes fun of him, and he gives up the training. Then there's one who gives up when engaged in hand-to-hand combat—in other words, the woman actually comes up and throws herself all over him, so he gives up the training. The one who comes out victorious doesn't grow faint or give up with any of these things. He sticks with his resolve that he's going to try to overcome his sensual passion, regardless.

The Buddha teaches in this way to instill a sense of honor, a sense of pride that mastering this practice is an accomplishment. Some people look down on monks: There's one vipassana teacher I know whose highest praise for me is that I would have made a good layperson. For him, most monks are losers. But he's wrong. See that our ability to overcome sensuality is not a weakness; it's a strength. It requires a sense of honor to do this, a sense of pride and mastery. Of course, the problem with pride is that you tend to compare yourself with other people, but there are times when it serves a good purpose. And ultimately the Buddha tries to put a check on comparisons like that, reminding us that we're not here to compete with other people. We're here to compete with ourselves.

When he talks about the traditions of the noble ones—your ability to be content with whatever you get in terms of food, clothing, and shelter—he says that you're also careful not to compare yourself with other people who live more luxuriously, who are not so content. You don't try to exalt yourself or disparage others around this issue. You realize that you're here to overcome your own weakness, not theirs. As he says, when you're able to overcome your weakness

and heedlessness in this way, it's the same as when the moon released from a cloud illumines the world. Someone who maintains this tradition heedfully makes the world a brighter place.

The Buddha also makes comparisons with physical skills. Once, when Ven. Ananda was on his almsround, he passed some youths in the city of Vesali practicing their archery skills, learning how to shoot arrows through keyholes from a great distance. He went back and reported this to the Buddha, commenting that that was quite an impressive accomplishment. So the Buddha asked him, "Which is more difficult, to pierce a keyhole with an arrow, or to take a very fine hair and use it to pierce the tip of another very fine hair?" Ananda said, "Oh, the second skill is an even more amazing one." And the Buddha replied, "Even more amazing than that is the skill of being able to pierce the truths of suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation." In other words, he reminded Ananda that this path requires a great deal of precision and skill. When you can accomplish it, you've mastered a great skill. Have pride in your craftsmanship.

So the Buddha uses a sense of honor and pride as a way of generating desire to develop skillful qualities in the mind and to abandon unskillful ones. It's a shame that in modern society the sense of honor seems to have wasted away as we become a society of consumers. There's not much honor in consuming. We take pride in amassing things, in conspicuous consumption, but that's the pride of a fool. Honorable pride, the pride that comes with a skill, seems to be disappearing from our society—and it's a real loss. The sense of honor that's required to develop a skill makes better people out of us.

If you can think of some skill you've mastered, and the sense of pride and accomplishment that came from having overcome whatever problems, whatever difficulties lay in your way, you can take that same sense of accomplishment and apply it to the practice: realizing that this is a much more demanding skill, but also much more rewarding, much more useful. The fact that it's demanding should simply spark you to even greater efforts, greater enthusiasm, so you can generate the desire that's such an essential part of right effort.

So instead of bemoaning the fact that you have to give up this or give up that, think of the good things that appear in your own mind when you have the strength to give them up. After all, renunciation is not only a skill but also a wise exchange, a wise trade. You're trading in something of little value for something of much greater value. You're trading candy for gold. You're doing something very difficult but very honorable.

Rather than feeling faint at the difficulty, you should stir yourself up to say, "Yes, I can do this." As Ananda says, this is the proper use of conceit and pride in the path: "Other people can do this, why can't I?" That's the way in which desire and conceit are actually part of the path. We usually think of them as things to be overcome and abandoned, but if they're properly used, they do have their role. So learn to use them whenever appropriate.

When Things Aren't Going Well

November 14, 2008

Some of the discourses give an impression that the practice is a smooth upward incline, one surefooted step after another, going progressively up and up and up a staircase. Fortunately the Canon contains other passages confirming that it's not always a steady progress. There are ups and downs. Some of the passages, especially in the *Therigatha* and *Theragatha*, portray monks and nuns complaining that the practice would go well for a while and then crash, go well for a while then crash; one monk commenting that this had happened so often that he was ready to commit suicide, it had gotten so bad. Those passages are good reminders that no matter how bad things get, it's still possible to gain awakening. In each of these cases where the monks and the nuns had run amok from their dwellings, crazed over the ups and downs of their practice, they finally pulled themselves together and were able to attain total release.

This is why it's good to look to these stories for encouragement. Back in the 19th century, people liked to read the lives of great men and women. It was considered an essential part of a good education to study their examples: how they'd been through many, many hardships and yet hadn't lost heart, how they'd finally come out on top. With modern literature the taste has changed to antiheroes, people you may sympathize with but who you wouldn't want to take as examples. It's a shame that we've lost a taste for genuine heroes and heroines in our literature. Occasionally you find it, though, as in the accounts of the most recent political campaigns. Even the most well-oiled campaign machine would have its ups and downs, but what mattered was how the people in charge managed those ups and downs. One of the important lessons you can learn from these accounts is that when things get bad, it's not the end of the world. You just stop, take stock of the situation, and figure a way out.

Or you can read about expeditions like Shackleton's down to Antarctica. Things got really bad even before they could get to Antarctica. Their ship got locked at sea in the winter ice, so they had to leave the ship and walk across the ice, dragging their dinghies behind them. When they reached the edge of the ice, they set out across the ocean. Most of them thought they were doomed. But even when they thought they were doomed, they kept going because of one thing: their sense of discipline, realizing that as long as you stay disciplined, you can take advantage of whatever opportunities do arise.

That's the first lesson to take from these stories: a strong sense of discipline. As you dig down into this lesson, it reminds you that you need to get back to basics so that the consistency of your discipline has a firm foundation. In our practice, getting back to basics means reminding yourself of why you're here: You're suffering and this is the way out. What is that way out? As the Buddha says, right view comes first. In his analysis of dependent co-arising, the prime factor causing suffering is ignorance. You don't see things in terms of the four noble truths, and your attention goes wandering off to all sorts of other places. Or if you do have little bits and pieces of knowledge, that's all it is: little bits and pieces. Nothing continuous. You need to develop mindfulness and alertness so

that your knowledge becomes more continuous, and the bits and pieces connect up.

So consistency and the focus on how to end suffering are two basic principles to bring to your awareness. You're here to gain knowledge by looking at things consistently in terms of the four noble truths. Get started with the right questions: Where is there stress right now? What are you doing to cause it? What actions help to alleviate it? Then bring more consistent attention to those questions and to how they apply to what you're experiencing right now.

If it strings you out to focus on the stress, then focus on the question, "Where are the good things right now? What can you rely on as your path?" If there's a little bit of mindfulness, hold onto it. Right speech, right action, all the "rights" of the noble path: Hold onto what you've got, realizing that the situation inside and out may not be what you like, but your way out of here is to hold onto whatever you still have of the path, these states of mind. Even if all you've got is just that simple ability to stay attentive, then stay attentive, and keep that attention appropriate, without getting entangled in the story lines, the narratives, and all the other crazy ideas that the mind keeps churning out for itself.

So when things don't look good, try to get some perspective by reminding yourself: What are the basics? Why are you here? What is this all about? It's about developing some skills and learning how to comprehend your stress and suffering, learning how to abandon the cause when you can see it, learning how to develop the good factors of the path and whatever other qualities of mind reinforce the path when they arise. Endurance is important. It's the quality that gives the consistency to the path. Simply following the path one hour a night is not going to do the trick. On-again, off-again: That doesn't help at all. It may help a little, but it doesn't build up the momentum you need. Momentum comes with sticking with things over time.

It's like planting a tree. If you plant the tree and water it only occasionally, or water it just once and forget about it, the tree is not going to survive. You have to be consistent in looking after it, committed to looking after it. That's how it grows.

Take a lesson from your breathing: The body breathes continually. If it breathed just while you were focusing on it and then stopped breathing when you were thinking about something else, you'd be dead. So take some lessons from the breath because it's consistent. It keeps coming in and going out whether you pay attention to it or not, whether you like it or not. It's there. It keeps coming in and going out, keeping you alive. Take that as a lesson for the mind. You've got to be consistent. Even though the path is not yielding the quick and exciting results you'd like to see, remember that nobody promised it was going to be quick and easy, that it was going to be exciting all along the way. When the practice has its ups, you have to be heedful. When it gets down, you have to be heedful. You can't be complacent either way.

In other words, when things are going really well, you can't take your hands off the steering wheel, assuming that the car is going to drive itself. You can't let yourself get complacent or careless. Keep being attentive very, very consistently, moment by moment by moment, to what's happening. If things are going well, do what you can to keep them going well. When things are not going well, again, you can't be heedless. You can't let negativity take over your mind. It'll have lots of things to complain about—"This is not the right place to practice; these are not

good people to practice with,” on and on and on—diverting your attention from the real problem, which is that you’re not paying careful attention to what the mind is doing. The mind is a very clever politician. It can very quickly distract you from what’s really going on.

This is why the Buddha said to obtain completion through heedfulness, through being very careful, uncomplacent. That’s the discipline that will see you through. That expedition that Shackleton ran: I once got into a disagreement with someone who said that Shackleton made all sorts of wrong decisions, so his followers shouldn’t have listened to him. But if they hadn’t listened to him, the whole thing would have fallen apart. People would have died. He got people through—and inspired them to get themselves through—even though he did make mistakes. A sense of discipline is what can correct for those mistakes to make sure that they’re not disastrous.

So always remember, whenever there’s a problem, that more attention is required. In particular, you have to pay more careful attention to what’s happening in terms of the issue of stress and its causes. Everything you need to know for awakening is right here. All the factors are right here, simply that at the moment they’re out of control, they’re causing suffering. When you learn how to bring them under control, then this process of fabrication, for example, can turn into the path. Many of the elements of dependent co-arising have the potential to become path factors. Attention, in name-and-form, can become appropriate attention. Fabrication can become the comfortable breathing and directed thought and evaluation of right concentration. So it’s all right here. When you get bored or discouraged with the practice, remind yourself that it’s because you’re not paying careful attention. You’re letting your expectations get in the way, or your moods get in the way: *Something* is getting in the way so that you’re not really seeing what’s going on.

This combination of focused attention and consistency means that you pay more and more careful attention—appropriate attention—to the issues of the four noble truths. The truths are not just truths *about* something; they’re ways of looking, categories you can apply to anything going on in the mind. You can watch all the crazy thoughts in the mind and, if you do it from the perspective of the four noble truths, knowledge can arise. Learn to find what in the mind you can rely on as a path factor that will give you the strength you need to withstand the negative factors. The ability not to get discouraged by events comes down to your ability to keep talking to yourself with the right tone of voice, saying the right things to yourself. That’s what right view is all about. Remind yourself that no matter how bad things get or how long the dry stretches seem to last, it’s not the end. The possibility for knowledge is always there. This is one of the amazing things about the mind: It’s always aware. There’s always that potential for knowledge, for understanding. Sometimes it may seem weak, but it’s there, and you can encourage it.

That’s how, when things get bad, you can become your own best counselor, your own best advisor, so that when things crash, not everything gets demolished. Your determination not to keep on suffering: That’ll see you through. Ajaan Mun talked about this in his last major sermon. The one thing you hold onto all the way through the path, he said, is the determination not to come back and be the laughingstock of the defilements ever again, not having to suffer ever again. The Buddha calls this taking yourself as your governing

principle, reminding yourself that you're suffering and that deep down inside you want to find a way out. So discard your unnecessary baggage and hold onto the basics—consistency, discipline, appropriate attention—for those are the things that'll see you through.

Endurance Made Easier

January 27, 2009

We're practicing to put an end to stress, suffering, and pain. But the practice itself involves stress, suffering, and pain. As the Buddha said, there are times when you realize that certain unskillful qualities in your mind are not going away as you live at your ease. So you have to be willing to put up with some pain if you want to get rid of them. In other words, we're not out pursuing pain in order to prove a point, but we use it when we need to.

Recently someone claimed that people who choose the monastic path are the young men out looking for the hardest path they can find—kind of a macho masochism. But that's not the case at all. You don't look for pain any more than you have to, but you realize that there are times when if you don't put up with some pain or stress, then greed, anger, and delusion aren't going to vacate your mind. The image the Buddha gives is of a fletcher, someone who makes arrows. The fletcher has to straighten the arrow shaft by running it next to a flame. As long as the shaft isn't straight yet, he has to keep running it next to the flame, first this side, then that side. Once the shaft is straightened, though, he doesn't need to run it against the flame anymore.

In the same way, our practice is not necessarily heading into pain, but straightening out the mind is going to involve running alongside some pain so that we can ultimately get beyond the pain. This is why the Buddha began the *Ovada-Patimokkha*, one of his first major summaries of the path, by saying that patient endurance is the utmost austerity. Back in his time there were people who practiced austerities to burn away their defilements. But as the Buddha pointed out, the particular type of physical austerity didn't matter—such as standing on one leg out in the sun, lying down on a bed of nails, or whatever. What mattered was learning how to develop the quality of endurance in the mind: That's what burns away defilement.

So we're after a mental quality, a quality that can live with pain and not get upset by it. The comparison the Buddha gave is of an elephant going into battle. If the elephant has been trained, then no matter what horrible sights or sounds or smells or tastes or tactile sensations it encounters in the battle, it's not deterred. No matter what enticing sights, sounds, smells, tastes, or tactile sensations, it's not swayed. That's the kind of quality you want to develop in the practice. It's not going to be easy, but you can make it easier—if you know how to approach it.

The first step is to focus on the mind. To what extent is the mind making it harder to endure these things? The Buddha gives the example of a person shot by an arrow. And being shot by one arrow isn't enough: He shoots himself with more arrows. The first arrow is the actual pain; the extra arrows are all his mental flailing around in reaction to the pain. These extra arrows are the problem. As Ajaan Fuang once said, if physical pain isn't killing you, you can take it. But for most of us, the problem isn't so much the physical pain. It's all that extra suffering that we add on top of it, all the extra arrows we shoot into the mind.

So you want to keep looking into the mind. What are these extra arrows? And how can you prevent yourself from shooting them? One way is to develop a good sense of humor around the whole situation. I don't know the Pali word for humor, but you see examples of it in the Canon where the Buddha talks about the conditions for aroused effort as opposed to the conditions for laziness. The external conditions are the same in either case. If you haven't eaten enough, you sit there complaining, "I can't practice today. I have no energy. I'm feeling hungry. I'm feeling tired and weak." That's a condition for laziness. The condition for aroused effort, if you haven't eaten enough, is to say, "Ah, the body is light. I don't have to worry about digesting my food today. I'm not sleepy or drowsy or weighed down by the food." And in the way the Buddha expresses each pair of cases, there's a humor to the whole sutta. That's one thing: learning how to maintain good humor around the practice.

You may have heard the story of the 19th century Englishman who went across northern Canada with a group of Dene Indians. He noticed that on the days when they couldn't find any food, the Dene tended to joke and laugh the most. That's how they were able to keep up their spirits. The same with the passage in *Slaughterhouse Five* where the American prisoner of war visits the section of the prisoner-of-war camp where the British troops are being held: The British troops are all very organized; they're putting on comedy sketches; they're basically having a good time. They're suffering a lot less than the Americans, who just sit around moping over their individual sufferings, plotting revenge on one another. The British troops are actively determined to keep up their spirits as much as possible in the face of a very difficult situation.

So try to develop that attitude as you practice. This is why adjusting the breath is sometimes called *playing* with the breath. If you're sitting with pain, ask yourself, "What can the breath do that I've never had it do before?" And think of the breath in different ways you've never thought of before—coming in and out different parts of the body, running in different ways through the body, connecting up in different ways. See what you can do to keep yourself entertained with the breath, to gladden the mind. Become more proactive toward the pain, investigate it, be curious about it, instead of just passively suffering from it. Keeping a good humor helps to put you in a position of power. That's one attitude to ease the burden of endurance.

The second is to have an attitude of infinite goodwill. Many of the Buddha's teachings on endurance make this point. After he was wounded by Devadatta, with a stone sliver in his foot, the pain was excruciating. So he went to lie down. Mara came up to taunt him, "Are you moping? Are you drunk? Are you a lazybones? What's your problem here?" The Buddha replied, "I'm not moping, lazy, or drunk. I'm not in a stupor. I lie down with sympathy for all beings." That's what minimizes the pain: developing a sense of goodwill for everybody, even those who may have injured you. You realize that you're not the only person in the world who's suffering, and you wish no one any ill. That helps to lighten your pain.

The third attitude is to depersonalize the situation: your ability to step back from the situation and not put it into a narrative where *you're* the victim, the person who's suffering. Think of the passage where the Buddha describes the different ways that people can speak to you. They can speak in timely or untimely ways. They can speak with good intentions or bad intentions, say

words that are true or false—so on down the line. These are the kinds of speech that exist in the human world. So when something unpleasant is said to you, analyze it. Ask yourself, “Were those words timely or untimely? True or false? Beneficial or harmful?” By analyzing the words in these impersonal terms, you pull yourself out of the narrative. Remind yourself: This is the human condition. Unpleasant, nasty words are nothing unheard of. They’re happening to people all around the world all the time. As the Buddha says, when people have wronged you, have wronged someone you love, or have done good things for someone you hate, keep reminding yourself, “What else should I expect?” This is the human condition. Put things into the larger perspective. You can pull yourself out of the condition of being the victim simply by learning how to analyze things in impersonal terms.

There’s a great passage in the Canon where Ven. Sariputta says, “If someone says something really hurtful, tell yourself, ‘Ah, an unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear.’” We usually don’t think in those terms. We think, “Why is that person saying that to me? How outrageous can you get?” We create a narrative that lays more suffering on the mind. The next time someone says something really unpleasant, remind yourself: “An unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear.” That depersonalizes it. Pulls you out of it. Stops you from shooting yourself with arrows.

Then, as the Buddha says, spread thoughts of goodwill to all beings starting with the person who’s harmed you. Keep spreading those thoughts to include everyone, including yourself.

All of this applies to the physical pain that comes up in the meditation as well. Part of the mind says, “Why am I doing this? Why am I torturing myself?” Look at that thought simply as a thought arising and passing away. Look at the pain simply as momentary sensations arising and passing away. Analyze the thoughts as events. Then remind yourself: If you’re sitting here moaning and groaning about the pain, you’re not really showing goodwill for yourself. Goodwill for yourself means learning how to pull yourself out of the suffering: learning how not to identify with it, not to glamorize it, not to romanticize it, not to insist on your right to suffer. You’re here to find a way around it.

The suffering we’re trying to gain release from is the suffering caused by the mind. As Ajaan Lee says, there are two kinds of suffering: the suffering of natural causes, which comes from the conditioned nature of things; and unnatural suffering, which comes from craving. And often our craving manifests itself as the narratives we want to tell ourselves about whatever’s happening.

So the trick to developing endurance is to learn to look at what the mind is doing. Learning how to sit with pain is often a good way of seeing what’s happening in the mind. That old image of the watering hole out in the savannah is good to keep in mind: If you want to survey the animals in the savannah or take a picture or make a documentary film of the animals in the savannah, you don’t go wandering around the savannah. They’ll hide from you. You go to the watering hole. Any animal in the area will have to come to the watering hole at some point during the day or the night. That’s when you can observe and take pictures and make your documentary.

It’s the same with the mind. When there’s pain and you’re sitting with it, watching it from the point of view of the breath, all the unskillful little animals in your mind are going to come up at some point, and you’re in a great position to

observe them. You say, “Ah, this is what anger is like: This is how it comes; this is how it goes. This is how the victim comes; this is how the victim goes. This is how the whining member of the committee comes, how it goes.” You get to see them all.

And as you see them, you learn how not to identify with them. Try to develop that sense of humor, that ability to pull yourself out of the narrative simply by analyzing what’s going on in impersonal terms. Develop goodwill for all beings. When personal terms do come up, develop that sense of goodwill for all, as the Buddha says, with a mind like earth. Again, he’s got that humorous story of the man who comes along and tries to dig at the earth and spit on the earth and urinate on the earth, saying, “Be without earth, be without earth.” But of course the man is never going to succeed in making the earth be without earth, because earth is so large. You want to make your mind that large, so that no pain—physical or mental—can have an impact with its piddling urine and spit.

Humor, infinite goodwill, and the ability to see things in impersonal terms: These are the strategies for keeping yourself from shooting those extra arrows. These are the strategies for helping your endurance become less of a burden and turn into something stable, lasting, and strong.

Thinking Your Way to Stillness

January 8, 2009

There's a common perception that meditation doesn't involve any thinking. You just force the mind to stay alert in the present moment and refuse to get involved in any thoughts at all. Then it will settle down. That approach works for some people in some circumstances, but not for everyone. This is why the Buddha gave a wide range of instructions on how to deal with distracting thoughts. Just noting them and dropping them *is* one way of dealing with them, but there are other ways of dealing with them as well, many of which require that you think in order to get around them.

So it's important to know how to use your thinking processes as a part of the meditation. One method that Ajaan Lee recommends is to think about the breath, and think about how you think about the breath. He talks about the breath energy throughout the whole body, and how the breath can be good or bad for you. He also talks about how to explore the different manifestations of breath energy in the body, how to experiment with different ways of perceiving them. In other words, get yourself interested in the breath, interested in how you relate to the energy in the body. As you explore that, as you think about it and analyze it and watch it, the mind drops its other interests, objects, and preoccupations, and gets absorbed through the process of analysis. This is one of the bases of success, *vimansa*: concentration based on analysis.

But there are times when the mind will refuse to settle down with the breath. It's got other issues. So there are different ways of dealing with those issues. First, you've got to figure out what the issues are. If the mind seems restless, what is it restless about? What has it stirred up? Sometimes the agenda lies under the surface. One way to bring it up into the light of day is to refuse to think about whatever the issue is and see what part of the mind complains, saying, "This is important; you've got to think about this." And you can ask it: "Why?" Listen to what it has to say, both in terms of the content and in the terms of the tone of voice. Look into the assumptions on which that complaint is based. Then analyze the assumptions to disentangle yourself from them. You might ask yourself who in your past thought that way, spoke that way: someone whose ideas and attitudes you picked up, often without questioning. We've picked up lots of unhealthy attitudes from our parents, from our teachers, from our friends, from the media, and they keep sloshing around in the mind.

Ajaan Lee talks about the fact that you have germs in your bloodstream, and they're going through your brain. Maybe the thoughts going through your brain are *their* thoughts. Even if you don't resonate with the idea of germs in your brain having thoughts, the same basic principle applies to the people in your background: Their thoughts have somehow gotten planted in your brain. The fact that the thoughts are planted in your brain isn't your responsibility right now, but it *is* your responsibility if you take them up and chew on them. You have to dissociate yourself from that kind of thinking, to ask: "What are the assumptions behind those thoughts? Do you really believe them?" Learn how to look at them from the outside.

I had the advantage, when I was learning how to meditate in Thailand, that when I'd bring an issue up with Ajaan Fuang, he'd sometimes give me a quizzical look. He had never heard any thinking like that before. And just the fact that he regarded as strange the thoughts I regarded as natural helped me realize how much I was a product of my culture, of a particular set of circumstances at a particular time, in a particular place. And it's a really good exercise to learn to question your background, the ideas you were brought up with, the assumptions you carry around. If these things are not questioned, they'll simply lurk there and eat away at your mind and get in the way of the practice. It may turn out that, after investigating these ideas, you decide that they are useful at certain times in certain places, but not always. And especially not if they're interfering with your meditation. You have to see that they're not really appropriate for what you're doing right now. That's one way of dealing with thoughts like that.

Another is simply to look at what the thoughts are doing to the mind. If you allow the mind to think in these ways over and over again, you're creating mental ruts. Are those ruts that you want? Do you want your mind to keep lurching back into those ideas again and again and again? As the ruts get deeper and deeper, it gets harder and harder to get out. This is called looking at the drawbacks of that particular thought.

Another way of dealing with these thoughts is to actively replace them with the opposite thought. This is what the recollections taught by the Buddha are useful for. If you're feeling discouraged in your practice, you can think about all the members of the Noble Sangha who went through really miserable times in their practice for one reason or another—either outside hardships, or just their own inability to get the mind concentrated. There's the story of one monk who decided to commit suicide. He had been practicing for more than 20 years. As he said, he hadn't had even a fingersnap's worth of concentration. So he got the razor and everything all ready. And that's when he came to his senses; his mind suddenly gathered into one and settled down.

As for us, we haven't gotten suicidal in our practice yet, and I daresay that we've had more than a few fingersnaps' worth of concentration. So you can take comfort from the fact that if he could do it, you can do it. There's no need to get discouraged.

You can also think about the Noble Sangha when outside circumstances get tough. There are verses in the *Theragatha* about monks who fall sick out in the wilderness. They have no doctor, no medicine. So what do they do? They resolve to develop the factors for awakening, the five strengths, the five faculties, four bases of success, and to use those qualities as their medicine. There's also a set of verses about a monk who doesn't get any alms. He asks himself: "What are you going to do?" And his answer is, "I'm going to go back to my dwelling and I'm going to meditate." "It's cold outside, what are you going to do?" "I'm going to use the four immeasurable meditations—limitless goodwill, limitless compassion, limitless empathetic joy, limitless equanimity—to warm the heart."

These reflections remind you that when things get difficult, you want to develop the mind's resources, so that you don't just keep obsessing about the difficulties and complaining about how they make it impossible to practice. There have been people in the past who've been in worse situations than you're in, but they were able to practice in spite of that fact. In other words, you learn

how to think in positive ways, helpful ways, instead of destroying yourself with your thoughts.

There are also reflections on your generosity, on your virtue, on the fact that you've developed the qualities that make people into devas. Those are to remind you that you do have worth, that you do have potential in the meditation.

These are some of the ways in which thinking is useful in the meditation. You analyze unskillful thinking and you try to replace it with skillful thinking. As the Buddha said, once the mind has settled down with the skillful thinking, you can then bring it back to the breath, bring it back to contemplation of the body, whatever your frame of reference, so that you can deepen the concentration.

In Ajaan Maha Boowa's analogy, this is like trying to cut down a tree in the middle of a forest. If the tree were out in an open meadow, there'd be no problem cutting it down. You'd simply decide which direction you wanted it to go and you'd cut it to fall in that direction. But in the forest you have to deal with all the branches that are entangled with the branches of the other trees. You have to cut them first before you can bring the tree down. In other words, if you find that your thoughts are entangling you with the world, you've got to learn how to think in ways that help disentangle you, that cut the intertwining branches, whether through seeing the negative side of the thoughts that are pulling you away, or actively replacing those negative thoughts with positive thoughts that incline the mind to see the value of the practice, to really feel the value of the practice, and to give you confidence in your ability to do the practice.

Today I asked several people about which stories about the Buddha's life they found most inspiring when they needed confidence and inspiration in the practice. And it was interesting to see how widely the stories varied. Some people were inspired by the Buddha's physical courage. Some were more inspired by his restraint as a teacher. Some were inspired by his psychic powers, his ability to deal with devas, brahmas, and Mara. Some were more inspired by his ability to deal with simple people. There's a great passage in the *Theragatha* where an outcaste person talks about his life. His job was to gather the old wilted flowers at shrines and throw them away, one of the lowliest occupations in India at that time. One day the Buddha comes up and simply stands in front of him. The guy tries to flatten himself against the wall behind him, to get out of the Buddha's way, but then he begins to realize that that's not why the Buddha's standing there. The Buddha wants to teach him. The Buddha takes on this outcaste as a student and teaches him to be an arahant.

There are lots of ways you can find inspiration in the life of the Buddha. You have to decide for yourself which story or incident you find most inspiring. The same with the Dhamma. The same with the Sangha. There are lots of possibilities there.

This is one way in which reading the Dhamma is useful. There's a tendency among some meditators to believe that reading gets in the way of your meditation. But reading about good examples reminds you that human beings can do this. There are human beings who've succeeded in the practice. There have been in the past and there can still be in the present moment. There's a tendency in modern literature to focus on antiheroes, people whose virtue lies in their being frank about their weaknesses—which is a kind of virtue, but not the whole story of virtue. For the sake of the practice, it's more useful to read about people who've succeeded in doing what's difficult. They're our friends from the

past. One of the definitions of true friends is that they give what is hard to give, do what is hard to do, sacrifice what is hard to sacrifice. They did that for us—not just for us personally, but for everybody in the future.

There's that great story about Ven. MahaKassapa. Toward the end of his life the Buddha calls in MahaKassapa and says, "Look, you've been living out in the wilderness, living off meager alms. You don't really need to do this anymore. You're an arahant now. Come and stay near me. Live a more comfortable life." MahaKassapa says, "No, I've been doing this all along, praising this sort of life. I want to keep this up as an example for the generations to come." In other words, he did that for us.

So think about that when things get difficult. There are people in the past who wanted to encourage us, wanted to see us get the same results from the practice that they got. Take heart from that. Only when you learn how to think skillfully in this way can you get the mind to a point where it's willing to stop thinking.

So remember: Not all thinking is bad. Not all fabrication is bad. You have to learn how to fabricate skillfully before you can let go of fabrication, and these are some of the ways you can do it.

Acceptance

October 31, 2008

As with so many other issues, the Buddha took a middle road when it came to the issue of other-power and self-power on the path. On the one hand, there's the famous passage where Ven. Ananda comes to see the Buddha and exclaims that having admirable friends is half of the practice, half of the holy life, and the Buddha says, "Don't say that, Ananda. Having admirable friends is the whole of the holy life." And the Buddha gives himself as an example, saying, "Without me as your admirable friend, you wouldn't be practicing the noble eightfold path."

Notice that he doesn't say, "I'm doing it for you." He says, "I'm an outside condition." He makes it possible for you to practice. If we didn't have the Buddha, if we didn't have the Dhamma to point the way to us, where would we be right now? We wouldn't be here meditating, that's for sure. We'd be off someplace else doing who knows what.

At the same time, though, there's also the passage where the Buddha says, "It's up to you to follow the path; the Tathagatas only point the way." Or the passage where a man comes to see the Buddha and says, "Why is it that when you teach the path to people, they don't all arrive at the goal?"—implying that there's something wrong with the Buddha as a teacher.

So the Buddha responds: "Have you ever given directions to people to follow the road to Rajagaha?"

The man says, "Yes."

"Do they all get to Rajagaha?"

"Well, some people follow the directions and they get there, but others don't and they end up 'way out west. That's something I can't take responsibility for."

The Buddha then says that, in the same way, he can't take responsibility for the fact that some people follow his instructions and achieve the noble attainments, while other people don't follow them. In other words, it's up to each of us to actually put the teachings into practice so that we can get the results.

The Dhamma we're trying to attain is something that's going to be found inside the heart. The Dhamma we're listening to right now is pointing to that Dhamma. That's why the word for Dhamma talk—*dhamma-desana*—literally means pointing to the Dhamma. These words are not the Dhamma. The words point to a possible attainment inside your heart, to the potentials that are inside your heart. It's up to you to develop them.

The problem of course is that there are many "yous" in there—lots of different potentials, lots of different opinions and intentions, lots of different goals. And the mind moves from one to another. When you sit down to meditate, part of the mind is with the program and part of the mind is not, which can be the cause for a lot of frustration. But you can learn how to use these many selves to your advantage. Remember, each of your selves is the result of an activity aimed at happiness. We "self" as a verb. We're engaged in selfing. If we had one set self, we'd be stuck there. That would be our nature and we wouldn't be able to change it. Any changes would have to come from outside. But fortunately we're not stuck with one self. We have lots of different selves, formed around

lots of different activities aimed at happiness. If we use these selves properly, they can help one another along. They can provide a perspective on one another so that what one self doesn't see, another self can see; what one self can't do, another self can.

So it's important that we learn to get all of these different selves working together. This is why the Buddha focuses so much attention on the issue of happiness, because all of our activities, all our selves, are aimed at happiness in one form or another. They have different understandings of what it might be, different strategies for how to get there, but they're all aimed at the same place. A large part of the practice is learning how to get them to work together to understand where true happiness can be found.

You're going to encounter this a lot as you meditate. You're sitting here with the breath, and suddenly there's an impulse to go someplace else. You have to examine the impulse, learn how to say No, and learn how to make the No stick. Sometimes you can do that simply by noticing, "Oh. Here comes an impulse heading in the wrong direction," and the impulse drops away. You're back with the breath. No problem. Other times the impulse to go off goes deeper than that. It's based on a really deep misunderstanding about where happiness can be found. In cases like that, you have to reason with the mind. You've got an old habit that may have worked in some circumstances in the past, but it's not appropriate right now.

This is why concentration requires some discernment. As the Buddha once said, "There's no jhana without discernment." To get the mind to settle down, you have to reason with the obstreperous parts that want to go off someplace else, to think about other things, plan other things. You have to reason with that particular set of selves to show them that their notions don't really lead to any true happiness, and you're all better off coming back.

As you fight off these different distractions, you find yourself going deeper and deeper into a lot of the mind's misunderstandings. This is how concentration gives rise to insight. Or as the Buddha said, "There's no discernment without jhana." The two qualities go together; they depend on each other. So we get good instructions, hear the Dhamma, see the Dhamma practiced in a way that's an inspiring example. That's the kind of help we get from outside. As for inside, we have to develop the conviction that we can do it and that it's really worth doing.

This is where the Buddha's teachings on acceptance come in. Often we hear that a central part of practice is radical acceptance: learning how to accept who you are, just as you are, and it's all okay. But that's making a lot of assumptions right there: that there is a "who-you-are," that you are a certain way, that you're going to stay that certain way, and it's all right to stay that certain way—all of which totally goes against what the Buddha had to teach. To begin with, he didn't say that you are a certain way, or that you're stuck there. The question of who you are is something he put aside. He has you focus instead on what you do. And what *are* you doing? Is it skillful or is it not? If it's not skillful, then, one, you've got to admit the fact that it's not skillful and, two, accept the fact you could make your behavior more skillful.

This is the part of acceptance that many of us resist. We may not be happy where we are, but for some reason we resist changing. "This is the way I am, and this is the way I'm going to stay." That kind of stubborn acceptance the Buddha doesn't encourage at all. Or, "This is the way I do things, and I'm going to keep

on doing them this way.” That’s a form of clinging—clinging to habits and practices—and it’s a cause of suffering. What the Buddha wants us to accept is the fact that our actions are causing suffering but we don’t have to keep acting in those ways. We have the potential to change. Many of us resist that. Even though we know we’re suffering, for some reason we don’t want to change. We disempower ourselves.

The first step in regaining some of that power is to have the conviction that, yes, the Buddha did gain awakening through his own efforts and, yes, he did it through developing qualities of mind that we have in a potential form and that we can develop too. That conviction is meant to be a challenge: Are you going to live your life without examining these possibilities, without trying to develop these qualities? If so, you’re missing out on a really important opportunity. That’s what true acceptance is: You accept the challenge—for you see that the alternative is continued suffering.

You can also see the Buddha’s position on acceptance in the five things he has us reflect on, day in and day out. The first four are: “I am subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, subject to separation from all that is dear and appealing to me.” That’s accepting the fact of suffering in its various forms. And it’s not just you, not just me. Everybody is subject to these things.

But then the fifth thing he has us accept is that we’re the owners of our actions, heir to our actions, born of our actions, related through our actions, and have our actions as our arbitrators. Whatever we do, for good or for evil, to that will we fall heir. In other words, what we’re experiencing in the present is the result of our actions, past and present, and what we’ll experience in the future is also a result of our actions. So what we’re experiencing and are going to experience is up to us. We have to accept responsibility: There is suffering, we are responsible for the suffering that has happened, but we also have the potential not to suffer.

That’s another part of conviction, another part of the type of acceptance the Buddha has us develop: not just accepting where we are, but accepting that we bear responsibility for where we are. When we have the responsibility, we have the power to change. Again, some of us resist that. But where does that resistance lead us? It keeps us stuck in suffering. So to get out of that suffering, you develop conviction that awakening is possible and it can be found through developing qualities you already have.

That leads to the next strength, the next empowerment, which is persistence, energy, the effort we put into the practice. We realize that we can do this, and we don’t have much time, so we’d better get right to it. And stick with it. We practice when we feel like practicing, and we also practice when we don’t. We can’t let our moods be in charge. If we don’t follow the path now, who knows when we’re going to be able to follow it? It doesn’t get easier with age, you know. And nobody else can do it for us. Other people can point out the way, other people can inspire us with their example, but if we’re going to see the results, we have to do the actions. We have to train the mind, train our intentions. This takes time, so we have to stick with it.

This leads to the third strength, or the third empowerment, which is mindfulness: the ability to keep these facts in mind. You keep reminding yourself: Regardless of what you want to do, this is the way things are. If you don’t work at the practice now, you may not have the time in the future, so

you've got to remember to keep working at it now, keep at it now, keep at it now. Fortunately, it's not all work, not all strenuous effort. If you're mindful and alert as you try to develop skillful qualities and let go of unskillful ones, the mind comes to concentration. And concentration is characterized by pleasure, rapture, equanimity, a strong sense of wellbeing.

This is what gives us energy on the path. When the Buddha gives analogies for the different factors of the path, he often compares concentration to food. "We feed on rapture," he says, "like the radiant gods." Or when he compares our practice to a frontier fortress, he compares right concentration to the different stores of foods that keep the soldiers strong and well nourished. The pleasure of the concentration becomes a form of strength you can develop inside.

Based on that strength, you can strengthen your discernment, for the stillness and satisfaction of concentration enable you to perform the duties of discernment, starting with the ability to see clearly where suffering is arising and what's arising with it. You notice: What are you doing when there's suffering in the mind? When the suffering goes, what did you just do? What did you stop doing? What did you just change? You can see suffering arising and passing away, but more importantly, you can see its causes arising and passing away. That way you understand. This understanding is what allows you to cut through the causes with more and more precision, to get more skillful at all the duties of the four noble truths. When you're really skilled at these things, dropping the obsessions that cause suffering, the mind grows lighter and lighter. It's unburdened. You don't have to waste your energy, carrying the weight of suffering around.

These are all strengths we can develop within, a kind of inner power we can develop, once we know the path and are convinced that it can be done—and that we can do it. So it's important to accept that we have these potentials, that whatever way we behave, if it's unskillful, it can be changed. As the Buddha once said, if it weren't possible to abandon unskillful actions and to develop skillful ones, he wouldn't teach us to do these things. But it is possible.

This is why he has you focus on the issue of action, what you can *do* as opposed to what you *are*, or what you can do now, as opposed to what you've habitually been doing in the past. Habits can be changed. If you find yourself resisting that fact, you have to ask yourself why. Is it from laziness? From pride? And why do we engage in laziness, why do we engage in pride? What do we get out of it, what do we gain? These things may make us feel good in the present moment, but do they really make us happy? Do they really lead to wellbeing? You have to see that every action you take, every choice you make, is made for the purpose of happiness. But often it's misdirected, ill-advised. And so, given that every "you" is aimed at happiness, the wiser yous can reason strategically with the unskillful yous until you win them over. That's the kind of internal work we all have to do. This is how we take advantage of all our many selves. Accept that we have these good potentials. And accept the fact that if we don't develop them, we're going to keep on suffering.

So when we talk about acceptance in the Buddha's teachings, it's not simply accepting what you are. The Buddha has you accept *where* you are—i.e., you're stuck in suffering—but you don't have to stay there. Accept that you have the potential to go beyond suffering through training your actions, training your intentions, training the mind. We have the Buddha and his Sangha of noble

disciples as our examples. We have the Dhamma as our guide. That's the outside help, the outside power. The inside power is the determination we can generate from within as we follow their example, as we bring our actions in line with the guidance provided by the Dhamma, practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. This is the teaching that's stressed over and over again in the forest tradition: You don't change the Dhamma to suit yourself; you change yourself to fit with the Dhamma, i.e., you change your actions to fall in line with the Dhamma. That's how you develop your inner powers that can lead to true happiness, the happiness we all want.

Parts of us may resist, but we learn how to reason with those parts, reason with those attitudes. As we do, we'll find that everything converges. All the factors of the path come together. And at that point it doesn't really matter whether it was because of outside help or inside help, i.e., our inner strength. The fact is that we've reached release and that's all that matters.

So accept that that's a possibility and see where it takes you.

Perfections as Priorities

August 21, 2008

We sit here focused on the breath, mindful of the breath, alert. We want to make sure we're not just mindful and alert for a few breaths and then off someplace else. We want to *stay* mindful and alert for the whole hour. And then at the end of the hour when you get up, you want to maintain that mindfulness and alertness as long as you're awake.

That requires ardency, the willingness to give energy to the practice with the confidence that if you do it in the proper way, in a skillful way—and that's what ardency is all about, it's not just plain old effort, it's skillful effort—if your effort is skillful, then you gain energy in return. But you first have to be willing to make the investment. That often means going through periods when the effort is not yet skillful, and wondering if it's ever going to get right.

This is where your determination sees you through. In fact, all of the qualities that are called *paramis* or perfections come into play here. The practice is not simply a matter of technique. It requires developing your heart as well as your mind. We think of the heart and mind as two separate things, but in almost all the languages where Buddhism has been practiced, the words for *heart* and *mind* tend to blur into each other. *Citta* in Pali is used in some cases where it means mind, and in some where it means heart.

So you're not just training your mind here, you're training your heart as well. Which means that meditation is not just a matter of techniques, but also a matter of strengthening the inner qualities that allow you to give yourself to the practice in a whole-hearted way, in the hopes that the whole heart and whole mind will benefit.

This is what the teachings about the perfections are all about: They focus on the qualities of the heart and mind that you need to bring to the practice and are going to get developed in the practice. They're an excellent framework for looking at the practice as a lifetime process, not simply what you do when you're on retreat. They're a way of enabling you to answer the question, "What are you going to do with your life? What do you want out of your life?"

When you look back in your life as death is approaching, what do you want to look back on? And what do you want to take with you as a result of having lived this life? If you focus your attention simply on pleasures, you won't have anything at that point—just memories of the pleasures, which may or may not be pleasant memories. Or you may decide that you want to leave your mark, to accomplish something in the world, but that's a pretty risky proposition because the world has its pendulum swings. The efforts you make might come just at the end of a pendulum swing that's going to turn around and wipe out everything you've done.

I once listened to a lawyer who had worked his way up through the government echelons. He'd argued a lot of civil rights cases back in the era when the Supreme Court was liberal. But then he lived long enough to see the pendulum swing back and get conservative again. He lived to see many of the things he had worked for dismantled.

I once went with my father to visit our old home in Charlottesville. It was a house we'd built ourselves. We had worked with the architect, got the design we wanted. And even though we hired some builders, Dad did a lot of the carpentry work; we as a family did the painting—all the things we could do to help save money in building the house. So one day some 30 years after we had moved away, I went with my father and older brother to visit Charlottesville. As we swung by the house, we saw that the current owners weren't taking proper care of it. The roof was beginning to rot through in some spots.

We drove back, dropped my brother off, and then it was just my Dad and me. As he was driving, he said, "You know, I have nothing to show for my life." And he went through all the times he had been a farmer, spent all that time and energy growing his potatoes, and then was paid money by the government to destroy the crops to help keep up the price of potatoes. He'd gotten a job in the government, and worked hard to make proposals that Congress then pork-barreled beyond recognition. And then finally a president came in and wiped out the council he was working on. Thinking about what he said made me realize that if you look for your accomplishments in the world outside, they can easily get erased.

So if we're not here just for our own personal pleasures or to leave a mark in the world, what are we here for? Well, the teaching on the perfections points you to the mind. You want to be here to develop qualities of the mind. You may not want to be here, but here you are, so what are you going to do about it? What are you going to get out of this? There's a lot of suffering involved in being a human being—and this is one of the better planes of existence—so what will you have to show for your life? If you've worked on qualities of the mind, they carry over. They're an accomplishment that's entirely within your power.

That's what we're working on here. It's good to keep that perspective in mind. The qualities may not grow as quickly as we'd like, but that's what the quality of patience is for: to learn how to stick with something even through frustration, even through difficulty. In the course of that, you may find yourself getting distracted with ideas of what else might be more pleasant: That's what the qualities of determination and truthfulness are for. In fact, determination seems to underlie all the perfections. There are four aspects to determination. You use your *discernment* to decide what you want to accomplish, to see how it best might be accomplished, and then you stick with it. To stick with it requires *truthfulness*, which doesn't mean just telling the truth; it means that once you've made up your mind, you really stick with what you've decided to do. You're true to yourself. You're not a traitor to yourself. That's what'll see you through.

This is going to involve some *renunciation* and require that you develop a sense of *calm* within the renunciation, because there are many possible pleasures in this life. If you try to gather up all of them, you go crazy. Once a year I head up to the Bay Area, where there are still traces of the human potential movement. There's a strong sense up there that you can and should actualize your full potential as a human being by striving for excellence in all areas of your life: becoming physically strong and healthy, mentally sharp, artistically creative, socially enlightened, sexually active, politically active, spiritually advanced. People rarely stop to consider that excellence in one area might actually cancel out or preclude excellence in another. In the back of their minds, there's always the thought, "Well, if I'm not happy, it's because I'm not trying hard enough in

every possible direction.” That’s crazy-making. You’ve got to focus on what’s really worthwhile in life, which means resisting a lot of the currents in our culture, because our culture seems to be all about distraction in all directions—or as someone once put it, “discursive noise.”

You’re the one who has to focus your mind to keep it calmly centered and on-course in the midst of all this. You’re the one who has to decide on your goals and to realize that you’ll have to give up some of the things you like in order to attain those goals. I’ve told you the story about the Chinese woman teaching her stepdaughter, while they were playing chess, that if you want to be happy in life you have to decide that there’s one thing you want more than anything else, and you have to be willing to sacrifice everything else for that one thing. That, of course, was a lesson the stepdaughter didn’t want to hear. What she did notice though, was that her stepmother was losing chess pieces all over the board. So she decided, “Well, here’s my chance to beat my stepmother in chess.” She started playing more aggressively, but it turned out to be a trap. The stepmother had been sacrificing her pieces strategically to lure the girl in, and then she checkmated her.

Of course, the way the stepmother played chess was an illustration of the principle she was trying to teach. If you’re willing to sacrifice some pawns and knights and other pieces here and there, you can win. That’s how we should live our lives, realizing we can’t keep all our pawns and win at the same time. We have to make our choices. There are a lot of either/ors in life. We prefer the both/and—and sometimes not just the both/and. We want the both/and/and/and/and/and....

But if you really want to have something to show for your life, you’ve got to recognize where it’s strictly either/or. You’ve got to decide that there are important qualities in the mind that have to take top priority over everything else.

Priority. That’s one of the possible meanings of the word *parami*, which is usually translated as “perfection.” *Parami* is one of those words that nobody really knows why it was chosen or what it means. It doesn’t appear in any of the Buddha’s own teachings, but was a later development in the tradition. One of the possible meanings of *parami* is related to *parama*, which means to be foremost. And the idea of “foremost” can be understood in two ways: One is that you try to become really excellent and foremost in these particular qualities of the mind; and, two, you want to give them top priority, make them foremost in your life. When you’re working on a job, whether or not the job succeeds, you want to be sure to develop qualities like patience, truthfulness, determination, and discernment regardless. Sometimes the success of the job may depend on factors totally beyond your control. But patience is something you can develop, determination is something you can develop regardless of outside circumstances.

So remember as you meditate, it’s not just a matter of following a technique. You have to apply yourself fully. You have to give your whole heart to this. And as you give your whole heart, your heart gains wholeness. When you give questions of the wise heart top priority, the heart does become excellent.

It’s good to look at your life and ask yourself, “What do I want to accomplish with this life?” You don’t know how many years you have left, but you do know you have right now. And then the next right now, and the next. So as long as the

right nows are coming, use them as an opportunity to develop these qualities of the heart, because these are the things that make human life worthwhile.

An Anthropologist from Mars

May 28, 2008

Years back, I taught a course on the forest tradition at a Buddhist study center. The first evening of the course, after making some general remarks, I gave the people attending the course their first assignment: to go back to their rooms and clean them up, arranging everything very neatly. That's where a lot of the training in the forest begins. Wherever you go, you try to be neat. What this teaches you, in a very concrete way, is to be intent on what you do, to try to pare down your activities so that the few activities you do, you do carefully, heedfully, with circumspection. This is a good habit to develop as a meditator regardless of whether you're a monk or a layperson.

As the Buddha said, this is one of the things to be done by one who is skilled in aims: be a person of few activities. This doesn't mean being lazy. It means deciding what's really important in life and focusing your energies there. As for the things that fritter away your time, just drop them. That simplifies life a lot. It's the old-fashioned way of simplifying things. The modern ways of simplifying things, of course, is to buy a magazine that tells you what to buy to simplify your life. But the Buddha's way is the old way: to see which activities you're engaged in that get the mind stirred up, and learn how to abandon them. And "activities" here means everything from the way you look at things, the way you listen to things, to the actual responsibilities you take on.

The bottom line for a meditator, when doing any of these things, is to ask yourself: How does this affect the state of your mind? This is very different from the bottom line in the rest of the world. There, if you're a layperson, you have to pay attention to how much money and how many people you need to survive in physical comfort. But when you start practicing, the question is: How much do you really need for mental comfort, for the mind to find the happiness that comes from peace and tranquility? If you're engaged in work that takes up a lot of your time and energy, then even though it may provide a comfortable income, it's really not conducive to the practice. You want to find a job that you like, that you enjoy doing, so that it's not pure drudgery, but that also gives you time to practice, energy to practice, so your time isn't frittered away, frittered away.

This last weekend I was with an old friend from college, and it was sad to see how much of his life was taken up by his job. Like so many people, his question was: How much longer did he have to work so that he could finally afford to retire and then really do what he wanted to do? And you always wonder: Will the person survive to retirement? That's a scary thought. You save up and save up, but then you don't live to enjoy what you've saved. In the meantime your time is wasted—maybe not totally wasted, but you don't get as much out of it as you could have.

What this means is that, as a meditator, you don't just take the meditation and squeeze it into the cracks of your life as it is. You've got to ask yourself: How can I live my life in such a way that it will be more conducive to the practice, to give more space to the meditation?—so that the meditation, the state of your mind, can become the bottom line.

This requires that you take a skeptical look at the things that society at large views as important. As the Buddha said, basically what the world has to offer is just eight things: material gain, material loss, status, loss of status, praise, criticism, pleasure, and pain. That's it. That's what the world has to offer. And as you notice, those things come in pairs. You don't get the good side without the bad side. They trade places back and forth. If you make your happiness depend on things like this, you're setting yourself up for a fall. And yet we let these things—especially issues of status and praise—really pull us in.

So you've got to learn how to look at them with a jaundiced eye. Think about the dangers that come from having a high status, having the respect of other people, because in many cases their respect is really not worth that much. They respect you because they want to get something out of you. You have to work on seeing through that. Approach society at large as an anthropologist would. Think of yourself as coming down from the planet Mars as an anthropologist who wants to see how these strange earthlings think, how they behave, so that they don't snare you with their values. And you don't snare yourself with their values.

If you can maintain this attitude, you can cut through a lot of garbage. As Ajaan Fuang used to say, nobody paid you to be born; you're not here dependent on anybody else's approval. You're here because you want to find true happiness. Whether other people approve or not, that's their business. When you think in this way, you can start making choices that really are in your true best interest without getting snagged on whether other people approve, whether it looks strange in their eyes, or you *think* it might look strange in their eyes. When you can cut through these eight ways of the world, you find that a lot of the obstacles to practice get cleared out of the way.

So it helps to see both gain and loss as having good and bad sides. When there's material loss, you find out who your true friends are. When you lose status, as Ajaan Lee says, if they call you a dog, well, dogs don't have any laws. They can go wherever they like and do whatever they want to do. When people criticize you, it gives you a chance to reflect on yourself: Is what they say true? If it is, you've learned something important about yourself. If it's not, then you've learned something important about *them*. As for pain, we all know that the Buddha said that pain, suffering, stress—however you translate *dukkha*—is a noble truth. There's a lot to be learned there.

So try to face the ways of the world with equanimity and not let yourself get sucked into the narratives or systems of values that people use to tie you in, to keep you going along with their view of the world. After all, they want to make sure that everyone around them shares the same values so that they can feel comfortable, so they don't have to face the huge abyss inside their hearts, the huge emptiness, the huge void, when those values are exposed for what they are. And their way of avoiding that is to rest assured that everybody else believes the way they do, thinks the way they do, and acts the way they do. But you're not performing them any service by playing along. They may not like it if you don't play along, but they have to learn to accept that. Maybe they can learn from it. If they don't learn from it, well, you can't force them to learn. But you can't allow their attitudes to run your life.

This is a huge area: your reaction to other people's praise and criticism, the respect or lack of respect they give you. It's so important that, as the Buddha

said, one of the signs of a person who's reached nibbana is that he or she doesn't reverberate in response to criticism. He compares the awakened mind to a gong that's been cracked. You hit the gong and there's no sound. Or there may be little plunk, but it doesn't reverberate, doesn't continue ringing. The ability to train your mind so that it doesn't keep ringing with the words of other people: That's a really essential part of the practice.

A lot of societies have rites of passage where a person approaching adulthood is sent out to be alone. For many people it's the first time in their lives they've ever really been by themselves. It gives them a chance to gain a sense of who they are and what they really think about things, what they feel inspired to do with their lives. In our society we lack that. It may be why most people never really grow up. So try to make the meditation your rite of passage: the time when you're alone and can sort things out, from a mature position, as to what you really believe in and what you don't.

The first year when I went back to Thailand to ordain, I was sorting through a lot of attitudes and ideas I had picked up from who-knows-where all through the years of my life. I was far enough away and had enough time for myself so that I could really look at these things and decide what I really believed in, what I didn't. And meditation gives you a good place to stand so you can watch these things without getting caught up in them. When you're meditating, *all* thoughts are suspect until they show they can help you with staying with the breath or understanding what's going on in the mind. Only then do you admit them into the meditation. But everything else gets called into question. And this is a useful attitude to maintain even when you're not meditating. The press of society makes it difficult, but if you're really serious about your true happiness, you've got to press back, to develop the ability to question things that you've believed for a long time. If you simply stay with other people who share similar attitudes, that tends to reinforce old ideas, reinforce old values. So you've got to be doubly careful about that.

And when you decide that you don't agree with society's values, learn to do it in a way that's not confrontational. After all, you're going your own way. You're not a permanent earthling. You're not here to settle down for good. You're here primarily to practice, to train your mind. If, having trained your mind, you can help other people, that's fine. But if you can't, make sure that at least you get your own mind in shape. As Ajaan Suwat used to say, whether we get other people to come here doesn't matter, as long as we get ourselves: i.e., that we train ourselves and get results from the training. That's what matters.

So learn to foster a little space of separation between you and the values of society at large. Ajaan Mun was often criticized for not following the old Thai monastic customs, old Laotian monastic customs. People said, "Why aren't you doing it the Thai way? Why aren't you doing it the Lao way? What is it with these *dhutanga* practices you're following? It's just not the way other people do things." And he replied, "Well, the ways the Thais do things, the ways the Laos do things, are all the customs of people with defilements." This point applies to the customs of every society in the world, Asian or not. He was more interested in the customs of the noble ones, to delight in developing, to delight in abandoning: i.e., to delight in developing skillful qualities and to delight in abandoning unskillful qualities. That attitude right there flies right in the face of most of human society. But if you can hold to it, it gives you space, it gives you

the proper orientation so that, as you go through life and learn to be more self-reliant in your meditation, you really do have your own compass. And you can make sure that it always points due North.

A Well-Thatched Roof

December 25, 2008

There's a short verse in the Canon where a monk's sitting in his hut during a rainstorm and saying, "My hut is well-thatched, so go ahead and rain as much as you'd like." That's a symbol for a mind that's well trained. It can deal with any situation. No matter how good or how bad things are outside, the mind is protected. The good and bad things can't penetrate it.

The Pali term for those things outside is *loka-dhamma*, the dhammas of the world. Most people's minds are not simply penetrated by these things; they're totally flooded, totally overwhelmed. Gain, loss, status, loss of status, praise, criticism, pleasure, and pain: These things are constantly raining down on us, and most people are out in the open totally exposed, with no protection at all, thinking that gain must be good; loss must be bad; status is good; loss of status is bad; praise is good; criticism is bad; pleasure is good; pain is bad. So the mind is totally overwhelmed by whatever comes its way, hoping that the good things will last and the bad things will stay away. It's trying to dodge the bad raindrops and gather up the good ones.

But as we all know, these good and bad things come in pairs. And none of them last forever. They keep changing. This is why we need to train the mind so that we can separate ourselves from them, so that we can have the well-thatched roof that protects us from the rain, and the well-sealed walls that protect us from the wind.

Part of the process is just learning to get yourself inside the hut: in other words, learning how not to identify with the dhammas of the world. There's a great story that Ajaan Fuang once told. He was out in the woods and, as evening fell, he set up his umbrella tent: basically an umbrella with a mosquito net hanging from it. Now, when you set up your umbrella tent as a forest monk, you make a vow that once you've set it up you're not going to move. You're not going to relocate no matter what—which means that you have to be very careful before you set it up. You check the weather. You look all around the area to see if there are any ants or other insects that might bother you. Only then do you set up your umbrella tent. Now, that evening, he said, he saw no clouds at all in the sky, so he figured it'd be a nice night to stay out in the open. In a case like that, you run a line from one tree to another. You hang your tent from the line.

Then in the middle of night, he didn't know where it came from, but a huge storm blew up. So he immediately gathered all of his robes except for his lower robe, and put them in his bowl so they'd stay dry. And then he just sat there wearing one lower robe, as the cold wind and rain blew in through the mosquito netting. The theme of his meditation was, "The body may be wet but the mind isn't wet. The body may be wet but the mind isn't wet." And staying with that theme, he was able to get the mind to settle down and be still: to stay "not wet" throughout the night. In other words, he didn't dwell on the theme of the wetness out there or the wetness of his body—in terms of identifying with things outside, the body counts as "outside" as well. He didn't take the wetness into his mind. That's how he got through the night.

So an important part of protecting yourself from the rain of the world is learning how not to identify with things that are subject to gain and loss, status and loss of status. Don't make them part of your self-identity. Learn how to see them simply as *loka-dhammas*, aspects of the world. They're not aspects of your mind. If you don't identify with them, you're not exposed to them. That's when you can learn how to use them wisely, for they can be tools, all of them. The usefulness of gain, status, praise, and pleasure is obvious, although we usually don't use them very skillfully, which means that we don't get much actual goodness out of them. When gain comes, people tend to identify with it. They make it part of their self-image and do unskillful things with it, rather than seeing it as something of the world that has temporarily come their way.

The wise question to ask when gain comes your way is, "How are you going to squeeze the best use out of it?" This doesn't mean squeezing as much pleasure as you can. It means squeezing what is actually useful. How can you use your gains to train your mind? What's the best way to be generous with them? What's the most discerning way to help other people with them? What other good qualities can you derive from using those gains wisely?

When loss comes, what can you learn from that? There are good lessons to be learned from loss, you know, as long as you don't keep your identity all tied up in the loss. One good lesson is, Who are your true friends? Who are the people who are willing to help you even though they can't see any immediate gain coming from it? That's a good lesson to learn. When you're going around wealthy, you don't know who your friends are. You're exposed. I've known people born into extremely wealthy and powerful families. They all seem very wary and uncertain as to whom they can trust—and with good reason. There are always people trying to take advantage of them one way or another. So going through periods of loss is good for sorting out who your friends are. It also teaches you to be ingenious and resourceful in making the most of what few things you do have.

A similar principle applies to status and loss of status. When you gain status, you're gaining in power. What's the best use of that power? In other words, what will give the greatest long-term benefits to yourself and the world at large? When you've lost that status, again you learn who your friends are, and you learn to be resourceful in keeping up your good spirits in spite of the world's disregard.

When praise comes, what's the best use of the praise? It's not to let yourself get all puffed up, thinking that you're already good enough. It's to let you know that your goodness is appreciated; it's to encourage you to keep on doing good and trying to do better.

Criticism, even though we don't like it, tends to be a lot more useful than praise, and for two reasons. One, you may actually learn things about yourself that you otherwise wouldn't know. We tend to be very blind to our weaknesses, our failings, the areas where we really need to do work. Part of us may know, but we figure that as long as nobody else is noticing, it doesn't really matter. So it's good to get criticism to help you realize that people *are* noticing. You've gone out of bounds, or you're lacking something that really does matter. As the Buddha said, when someone points out one of your faults, regard that person as someone who has pointed out treasure. You've got something you can work on.

As for the criticism that's not true, well, you've learned something about the person who criticized you, which is always a useful lesson. It may not be a lesson

you want to learn or like to learn, but it's good to know who has a grudge against you, who is unfair to you. It's a good lesson to learn.

As for pleasure and pain, notice how the Buddha uses them, because they both have their uses. We tend to take pleasure as a goal in and of itself. We want as much pleasure as possible, but this gets us in a lot of trouble. Not that pleasure is bad in and of itself, just that we're pretty indiscriminate in how we relate to pleasures. The Buddha has us sort out which kinds of pleasure are actually harmful and which ones are harmless. The main harmless ones are those based on getting the mind into concentration, because this is a pleasure where you're not in conflict with anybody. When you're sitting here looking at your breath, nobody is trying to elbow you out of the way so that they can hog your breath. It's totally yours. It's an entire field open for you to explore, to reap what pleasure you can.

And that's a very rare kind of pleasure in the world. You're not creating any bad kamma with anybody. You're not creating any unskillful mental states. There may be a slight attachment to the pleasure of concentration, even a strong attachment, but it's a healthy attachment. You sometimes hear warnings about the dangers of concentration, but the danger of concentration lies in wrong concentration: concentration devoid of mindfulness, concentration devoid of alertness, concentration based on ulterior motives—to exert power over others, to win their respect—or wrong view. But concentration as a mental factor in itself is neither good nor bad. The issue is with how much mindfulness and alertness it has, how you understand it, what you're trying to get out of it. That makes all the difference. And the dangers of concentration are much less than the dangers of all the sensual passions we're otherwise attached to.

In the Canon, the Buddha has long, long lists of the dangers of passion for sensual pleasures. But as for the dangers of concentration, you have to search really hard to find a sutta that talks about them. The primary sutta that does simply notes that once you've got your mind in concentration, then when you try to incline it toward letting go of your identity views, the mind may not leap up at the idea of letting go. In other words, you're still attached to the concentration. But again, the fault is not with the concentration, it's with your unwillingness to let it go.

Compare that with the dangers of sensual pleasures and passions: When people are enmeshed in sensual passions their minds certainly don't incline to letting go of identity views. People kill one another over sensual pleasures. We have wars over sensual pleasures. Societies break apart over sensual pleasures. Families break apart. People work themselves to death. Or in their quest for wealth, they push themselves to all sorts of extremes. I've recently been reading about Arctic exploration. The dream of gold up in the Arctic killed who knows how many people. But nobody gets killed over jhana.

So it's a useful pleasure, a healthy pleasure, blameless. It's part of the path. You learn to use this pleasure to get the mind in a position where it can really look into the flip side of pleasure—pain—which the Buddha said is a noble truth. When the mind is well fed with a skillful sense of wellbeing, it's ready for what the Buddha said is the true task with regard to stress and pain, which is to comprehend it. If you're afraid of pain, if you run away from it, if you try to push it away, you're not going to comprehend it. Comprehending comes from looking at it steadily, seeing it for what it is, and seeing where you're still passionate for

things that cause stress, that cause pain. Once you learn how to feel dispassion for those things, that's when you've really comprehended stress. The pleasure of concentration is what allows you to look at pain to the point of comprehending it.

So the important point with regard to all these dhammas of the world is learning how to use them. They do have their uses, as long as you don't identify with them. They are tools you can use. It's like the water of rain. Instead of getting soaked by it, you learn how to take the run-off from the roof and store it in jars; you learn how to build a holding tank or a pond. Then you can use the rainwater to drink, to bathe yourself, to irrigate your crops. Then the water is beneficial. In other words, water does have its uses at the right time, as long as you're not exposed to the rain, soaking it up all the time, letting it penetrate your bones, shivering and catching your death of cold.

So as we're meditating, we're trying to develop that well-thatched roof: the ability to keep the mind focused on the breath and the right attitudes that allow us to see these affairs of the world for what they are. They're not really us, not really ours; they're just part of the world. They're like money. You may have money in your pocket, but it's not really yours. It's printed by the government. You look at the money and see: Does it have your name written on it? Well, no, it's got other people's names. Even with a credit card that *does* have your name on it: The bank's name is also on it, and the bank's name is bigger. It's in charge of what you can and can't do with the card. As for the value of the money, the government and the banks can change it whenever they want. If they wanted to call it back, they could do it. In the meantime, while you've got it, you use it. And you try to use it as wisely as possible, with the realization that it's not really yours to keep; it's a part of the world.

Once you can make that distinction, you find it a lot easier to live in the world and not soak up all the craziness of the world. You can stay warm and dry in your hut. It's well thatched. The rain may be falling all around, but it can't penetrate the roof. You can set out jars to gather up the run-off and put it in a tank, get some use out of it, which is much wiser than just going out walking in the rain, keeping yourself exposed all the time without any shelter at all.

So you're aiming at a combination of two things: having this place to stay with the breath and having the right attitudes toward all the things that would pull you away. That's how you learn how to thatch your roof and stay under it for your protection.

Dealing with Limitations

March 25, 2007

We live in a conditioned world, which means that we have to learn how to live with limitations. Some conditions open up possibilities; others close them off. And our range of limitations fluctuates all the time, as if we were living on a raft in the ocean with the waves rising and falling every which way. Sometimes they're small waves, sometimes big waves, sometimes huge waves that overwhelm us. Sometimes the currents in the ocean push us in the direction we want to go, sometimes in the opposite direction. When that's the case, we have to fight them. Sometimes we can win the fight, sometimes we can't. This is why people go crazy—because everything is so complex and uncertain.

They've done experiments where they put pigeons in boxes, each box with a green button and a red button. In some of the boxes, when the pigeon presses the green button it gets food; when it presses the red button it doesn't get anything. Those pigeons are very happy and well adjusted. In other boxes, though, the pigeon will sometimes get food when it pushes the green button and sometimes not; sometimes it'll get food when it pushes the red button and sometimes not. Those pigeons go crazy.

So we have to learn how to not go crazy with all these fluctuations. Look for patterns in your life because they are there—complex, but they're there. And learn how to push against your limitations. If you give up entirely, you live a totally passive life and simply become a victim of events. In other words, you say, "Well, my mind is the way it is. There's no way I can change it. Greed, anger, and delusion are natural; I just have to accept them if I want to be happy." That's totally giving in. Your raft on the ocean gets tossed wherever the currents and the waves may go, and you never get to shore. If, on the other hand, you simply go on the force of belief, believing that you have an unlimited power to go in whichever direction you want, you end up living in a total fantasy world. And then the clash of your fantasy world with the actual world can wipe you out as well.

So we have to learn how to read the currents, how to anticipate the waves, all of which requires being really observant. This is one of the reasons why we meditate: to develop our powers of observation so we can gain a sense of where our other powers lie, of what we can and cannot accomplish. This involves recognizing when we've run up against a wall, so that we can turn around and focus our energies in the directions that will get us to shore.

Our whole sense of who we are comes from the fact that as children we learned how to test the limitations we ran into: what things could we control, what things were beyond our control. This is why we started to identify with the body. The body wasn't just a mass of pleasures and pains. It also seemed to be at least somewhat under our control. We learned how to move our fingers, how to grasp things, how to stand up and walk. We kept pushing the limits. And for a while, the limits seemed to give way to our pushing. We had more and more things under control.

Then of course as you get older, things turn around in the other direction, and the limits start pushing back. In some cases you can develop a skill that you can keep working at throughout your life, but those are rare. With most skills, you get to the point where you peak and then find yourself less and less able to manage them. As the body gets older, it begins to get creaky here and painful there. Finally it gets to the point you can't control it at all. So you have to learn how to make the most of it while you've got whatever control you can manage.

What this means is that we identify with whatever we seem to have power over: Those things are "us," they're "ours." We do this in many different ways. Our sense of who we are is something we keep creating for each different situation, and it's good to learn how to be fluid in that skill of identifying yourself. If you come into a situation with fixed preconceived notions about who you are or what you are, that can become a major limitation. In other words, you turn yourself into a being. As the Buddha said, when you become a being, you identify with form, feeling, perception, fabrications, or consciousness of particular kinds. And whatever way you identify yourself, that's how you limit yourself. You gain certain powers by bringing those things under your control, but you also take on certain limitations. Those limitations may not be getting in the way of the particular task you want to do, but if you take one particular idea of who you are and try to apply it everywhere, you begin to see where the limitations are.

And of course one big limitation is always there. As the Buddha once said, "What is one? All beings subsist on food." Once you become a being, you've got to feed the things you identify with. That means you're tied not only to what you identify with, but also to your sources of food. You're tied to the process of feeding, and there's no way that feeding is not going to harm other beings somewhere, whether you're feeding off them physically or emotionally. That's a huge limitation right there. We'd like to think that we can be beings of infinite love and harmlessness, radiating beams of infinite compassion and empathetic joy in all directions. But if part of you is feeding, that places a limitation on how totally harmless you can be.

So the idea is to learn how to develop different ways of identifying your powers and using them so that ultimately you get to the point where you don't have to be a being anymore, where you don't have to identify yourself with anything and you don't have to feed. The important obstacle here is that you just can't will yourself into that position. You can get there only by learning to be skillful, which takes effort and time. But once you get there, there's total freedom from limitation. That's the one constant in all of the Buddha's discussions of nibbana, the most positive statement he makes about it: total freedom. Often he describes nibbana indirectly in terms of analogies and similes, but total freedom, total limitlessness, is his most direct description of the goal.

To get there, you've got to explore your powers, what you can and can't do within the realm of conditioned reality. There's a useful story to reflect on in connection with this. It's a little fable in the novel, *The Once and Future King* by T. H. White. I don't know if you know the book. It's a retelling of the Arthurian legend.

The first book in the novel, *The Sword in the Stone*—Walt Disney made a movie of it—tells the story of young Wart's childhood up to the point where he pulls the sword out of the stone and so becomes Arthur, King of England. As

part of Wart's training leading up to that event, Merlin the magician turns him into different kinds of animals so that he can learn lessons from animals such as ants, geese, and fish. In one of the last transformations, Wart is turned into a badger and sent down to meet an older badger in his burrow. It turns out that the old badger is like an Oxford don with his den full of papers. He's written a thesis on why human beings are better off than animals: his telling of the creation myth.

On day number five, according to the badger, God created all the animals but didn't create them in their final form. He created them as embryos. Then he lined up all the little embryos and said, "All right, you little embryos, I'm going to give you a boon. You can exchange any of your body parts for tools. If you want, you can exchange your mouths for scissors, or your feet for hoes, or your arms for wings: any kind of tool you think is going to be useful for surviving in the world. But remember, once you've made your choice, you'll have to live with it. You can't change back."

So the animals thought for two days about what tools they might want, and then one by one asked for their boons. The badgers, for instance, asked to turn their skin into shields and their forearms into garden forks. And so on down the line. Some of the embryos wanted wings, some wanted tails. Whatever tools they asked for, God equipped their bodies permanently with the tools, until the only embryo remaining was man. So finally God said, "Well, our little man, you've thought long and hard about your choice. What tools do you want?" And the little man-embryo said, "I think I'd rather use tools than be a tool. I'd rather learn how to make them, learn how to master all kinds of different tools, rather than just limiting myself permanently to one or two built-in tools."

"Ah," God said, "you've guessed our riddle. Because you have the intelligence to want to use tools rather than be a tool, you get to have dominion over the other animals."

That was the badger's creation myth. And when you strip it of its theistic trappings, it makes a good point: If you identify yourself with a particular tool all the time, you get limited to that tool. One of the animals in the badger's myth was a toad in the Antipodes who traded its whole body for blotting paper. It could soak up water when there was rain and just hold it throughout the dry season. That would help it survive in a place where there's infrequent rain, but that's pretty much the limit of its abilities. Human beings, on the other hand, can make tools. They can use different tools for different situations, and as a result can go many places and accomplish many, many things.

That's a lesson we have to learn as meditators, that "who-you-are" is a tool. It's something you've fabricated for a particular set of circumstances, and it may work perfectly well for those circumstances. But if you hold onto that tool all the time, it's like turning yourself into a hammer and then limiting yourself to the habit of hammering away at everything you meet. But there are bound to be times when what you really need is a saw or a chisel or a wrench. When it finally dawns on you that being a hammer leaves you pretty miserable, you may decide that you don't want to be anything at all. So you throw away your hammer. But that doesn't work either, because there are times when you'll need a hammer.

The trick is learning to come to a particular situation without a preconceived notion of who you are, of who you want to be, and then trying to squeeze that into the situation or squeeze a situation to fit your idea of who you are. Instead,

you've got to learn how to look at the situation for what it is, what its potentials are, and then decide what to do to maximize those potentials in the most skillful way right then and there. You then look at what powers you have, and turn them into the tools you're going to need for that particular action.

Even your sense of self can be a tool, and you have many different senses of self. If you learn how to pick them up, put them down, and have them at hand when you need them, then you have a whole chest of tools. At the same time, you're not weighed down by your tools. It's like having a tool chest floating behind you within reach wherever you go. In this way you can deal a lot more effectively with the many limitations we face as human beings in trying to find happiness.

The Buddha talks about three basic ways of finding happiness: generosity, virtue, and meditation. These are all tools, but they each have their different limitations. Generosity is sometimes limited by how much time you have, how much energy, and of course the material resources you can draw on. You have to learn to be very judicious in how you apply your resources. You can't pour them all into one basket, because then you'll have nothing left when you need them for other purposes. So even though we're taught to have limitless goodwill, limitless compassion, limitless empathetic joy for all beings, there's only so much we can actually give to any particular being in any particular situation. That creates a distance between an attitude you can develop and your ability to act on that attitude.

This is where equanimity comes in: when you realize that there are certain areas where you simply can't make a difference or areas where you *can* make a difference but they're going to require time. You have to learn how to husband your resources so you can devote yourself to that task for whatever amount of time it's going to require.

Then there's virtue. It, too, has its limitations. As I've already noted, once you're a being you have to feed. So it's impossible for any of us to be totally harmless. But we can focus on the areas where it's really important to develop harmlessness. This is what the precepts are for. As the Buddha said, when you make your precepts limitless—in other words, you decide that you're not going to kill under any circumstances, you're not going to steal under any circumstances from anyone at all, no illicit sex, no intoxicants ever at all, period—that's a universal gift. You give limitless protection to all beings, and you gain a share in that limitless protection as well. So that's one area where you can push the limits pretty far. You can start embracing the concept of all living beings, resolving that you're not going to harm any of them in any of these five ways. It's not total harmlessness, but it's a major step in the right direction.

Then there's meditation, which—as one of the forms of making merit—starts out with meditation on goodwill. Here again you run into limitations. On the one hand, you're supposed to develop limitless goodwill for all beings. The "limitless" here means that it's for all beings in all situations no matter what they do. You don't question whether they deserve your goodwill, or if you deserve goodwill. You simply focus on the idea that it'd be good for all beings that all beings find true happiness. The world would be a much better place for everyone. So you want everyone to find true happiness. You make that one of your basic motivations.

On the other hand, though, you encounter situations where you can't make everybody happy. After all, the quest for true happiness is something each person has to do for him or herself. It's a question of skill. You can't just push a skill on anybody. People have to see the need to develop the skill. They have to be willing to put in the time and the energy to do that. And they have to be in a position where they can. Sometimes people are too old or too sick to make much progress in that direction.

This is where you need equanimity again. Your equanimity has to be limitless as well. In other words, you have to be able to call on it whenever it's needed. There are bound to be certain situations that are beyond your control in terms of what you can give, in terms of your time and energy. And there are limitations on what you can do for other people given the limitations of their kamma as well. So you have to be able to call on this attitude of limitless equanimity whenever needed.

To develop these four brahma-viharas in a limitless way, you need to fight off the limiting attitudes in your mind. The various forms of aversion—ill will, resentment, cruelty—are the main limitations on the first three brahma-viharas. The limitation on equanimity is affection. The people you really love, to whom you'd like to give all you can, but who you can't help as much as you'd like: They're the ones for whom it's hard to feel equanimity, but they're also the ones who require your equanimity the most. That's why you have to realize that even affection can be a limitation and that there are times when you need to put it aside. It's not that you don't love those people or don't wish them well. You simply realize that nothing is accomplished by the sort of affection that wants to deny the limits of kamma, that's got you beating your head against a wall when you could be going through a door in the wall not too far away—in other words, being of help in areas where you *can* be of help.

So a lot of our practice is learning how to deal with limitations, how to find where your powers are, how far you can push them in a skillful direction. When you meet up with a limitation, learn to recognize whether it's permanent or temporary. Then you apply whatever tools you can find to developing your powers in as compassionate and wise a way as possible to work around those limitations.

For this you need to develop a full set of tools and to keep them in good shape. Many of us have a tendency to throw away our tools. You learn a new approach, a new tactic in your meditation, and it works for a little while. Then it doesn't work. So what do you do? You throw it away, cast around for something else. But there may be nothing wrong with the tactic aside from the fact that it works only for certain things and not for others. So don't throw these things away. Keep them in mind as possible approaches that may come in useful again.

The same holds for the whole idea of your self. Some people think that the Buddha tells us that we shouldn't have any self at all. But if you can't identify where your powers are, what are you going to work with? What are you going to depend on? What will you use to overcome your limitations? As I said earlier, think of your sense of self as a tool. You need different tools for different situations. Instead of bringing one preconceived notion of self into a situation, look at the situation in terms of the action it calls for: What's the skillful thing to do here? What tools do you have to do that skillful thing? Put them to use. That way you're no longer a toad made of blotting paper. You become the little

human being in the badger's myth: You use whatever tools you can devise, and that way you're in charge.

The more tools you can develop, the better. They help you explore where the limitations are, as well as where there are openings in the limitations that can lead ultimately to an area totally free from limitation, totally unconditioned. At that point, you can put all your tools down. As long as you're alive, you can still use them. But when the time comes to go, you don't need to carry them. Like the raft that takes you across the river: Once it's done its job, you just leave it there. You may feel some appreciation for the help it's given you, and pull it up on the bank in case anyone else wants to come along and use it as well, but otherwise you're done with it. In the meantime though, as long as you're crossing the river, hold on tight to the raft, whichever raft is going to get you past the deadly currents. Don't be too quick to throw it away.

Attachment vs. Affection

November 5, 2008

The word for clinging, *upadana*, also means to feed. The *upadana* of a tree is the soil it feeds on. The *upadana* of a fire is the fuel it clings to in order to burn. So *upadana* means food and sustenance, and also the act of taking sustenance: i.e., feeding. When we apply it to the mind, the mind's *upadana* is a place where it looks for happiness—when you feel that the life of your happiness depends on having this person, that situation: whatever it is to keep your happiness alive.

For most of us, our emotional feeding is on other people. This is the aspect of our relationships that the Buddha says leads to suffering: If our happiness feeds on things that are subject to aging, illness, and death, then our happiness is going to age, grow ill, and die as well. This is why we have to look elsewhere for our true happiness. It's why we train the mind to develop qualities inside that can provide a happiness that's more secure.

Now, this doesn't mean we don't continue to feel love, affection, and compassion for people outside; simply that we don't have to feed on them anymore, which is actually a benefit for both sides if the feeding has been a burden for both. On the one hand, the Buddha has us develop compassion for everybody. It's one of the brahma-viharas: unlimited compassion, realizing that there are people who are suffering and you'd like to do what you can to relieve their suffering. You'd also like them to act in ways that can help eliminate suffering. That's an aspect of compassion that's often missed. It's not simply a floating-around kind of wish for people to be happy. It also requires an understanding of why people are unhappy. Their unhappiness comes from their actions: maybe past actions, maybe present actions. So you want to think of them doing things that are skillful. If their past actions make it difficult to avoid physical pain right now, at least you hope they'll be able to find a way of dealing with the pain so they don't have to suffer from it. And you also wish for them to do things that will prevent future suffering as well.

There's also a more particular kind of compassion. It comes out of gratitude. The Buddha recognizes that we have special connections with other people, especially with our parents, but also with anyone who has been helpful to us in this lifetime. Those connections call for gratitude, which means that these are people to whom you want to give some special help.

You've probably heard of the passage where the Buddha says that a good person, by definition, is someone who recognizes the good that has been done for him or for her, and wants to repay it. This starts with your debt of gratitude to your parents. In the beginning, you literally fed on your mother when she was pregnant with you. You took nourishment from her blood. When you were born, you fed on her milk. And as you were a young child, your parents worked to provide you with the physical food that allowed you to survive and grow, and you continued to feed emotionally on them. As you grew older, you found other sources of emotional nourishment and took on the burden of feeding yourself, but you still have this enormous debt to your mother and father for having given you life and started you on your way.

As the Buddha said, the best way to repay that debt is not necessarily to obey your parents, because there are times when your parents have all sorts of wrongheaded and wronghearted notions. The best way to repay them, if they're stingy, is to try to find some way to influence them to be more generous. If they're not observing the precepts, try to get them to be more virtuous, to have more principles in their lives. In other words, introduce them to the practice of the Dhamma in as diplomatic a way as possible. Most parents resent their children trying to teach them, so you have to learn to do this in an indirect way. Some also resent the B-word, so you don't have to couch these teachings as Buddhist.

But you do have that special debt, and you have other debts as well. There's also a sense of affection that should go along with the debts. As the Buddha said, when a young monk ordains, he should regard his preceptor or mentor as his father. And the preceptor and mentor should regard the young monk as a son. That special connection lasts as long as both are still monks and still alive. It entails various duties in looking after each other, but more importantly it entails a sense of trust, affection, and respect.

So there's room for special affection in the practice, but the Buddha also warns that special affections can often harbor special dangers. He talks about the hatred that comes from affection, and the affection that comes from hatred. In other words, if there's somebody you love, and somebody else has been nasty to that person, you're going to hate the person who's been nasty to the person you love. Or if there's somebody you really hate, and somebody else hates that person, you're going to feel affectionate toward that person, which may bring on some unfortunate consequences.

In other words, affection is not always reliable and pure. So here you have to exercise equanimity, realizing that sometimes affection can draw you into unskillful mind states that you've got to watch out for. This is why the brahma-viharas don't contain just unlimited goodwill, compassion, and empathetic joy, all of which basically come down to goodwill. Compassion is what goodwill feels when it encounters suffering. Empathetic joy is what goodwill feels when it encounters happiness. Those three are a set. But the brahma-viharas also contain equanimity, the ability to step back and simply look on a situation dispassionately. That ability should be developed to become unlimited as well. In other words, you see that there are times when your partiality toward a particular person is going to cause trouble not only for you but also for that person and other people as well. If somebody is really sick, and all you can do is get upset about the sickness, you're going to be less effective in your help. You have to remind yourself that we're all subject to aging, all subject to illness, all subject to death, all subject to separation. There's no way you can avoid this. So accept that fact, and do what you can to mitigate the suffering.

There's a passage in the Canon where King Pasenadi is visiting with the Buddha, and an aide comes up and whispers in his ear that Queen Mallika, his favorite queen, has just died. He breaks down and cries. The Buddha's way of consoling him is interesting. He reminds him, "Since when have you ever heard of someone who was born who didn't age, didn't grow ill, didn't die? We're all subject to these things." And it's amazing how taking a larger view like that can help console you. It lightens your burden to remember that you're not the only one being singled out to suffer. You may feel singled out at first, but you have to

realize that there's suffering all over the place, people dying all over the place—what?—200,000 every day. Illness is everywhere. Aging is everywhere. So when these things become apparent, both in ourselves and in our loved ones, we have to develop equanimity, realizing that this is the way things are everywhere. That spurs us to look for another source of happiness deeper inside. If we're feeding inside and don't have to feed outside, then we can be much more effective in actually being helpful to people who are suffering one way or another.

So it's important to realize that the Buddha's teaching against clinging is not a teaching against affection, or against special gratitude or special goodwill. His teaching on the unlimited quality of the brahma-viharas is not a denial that there are people to whom we owe special debts. We do owe special debts, and there are people for whom we should feel special affection. We simply have to be aware that affection and partiality have their dangers. You probably know the teaching where the Buddha says that it's hard to find anyone who hasn't been your mother, father, sister, brother, or child in some previous lifetime. What's interesting about this teaching is that he doesn't use it as a basis for universal love. After all, we know how difficult relations can be with mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers and children. Instead, this teaching is meant to encourage a sense of *samvega*, a realization of how long this wandering-on has been going on, and how meaningless affection is in the larger context of all those people over that long stretch of time.

Your special debts in this lifetime are to people who actually have been your parents this time around. If you've been a parent, your special affection does go to your children this time around. But we have to realize that there are limitations and dangers to these affections. Affection can lead to suffering. There's the case of Lady Visakha, who came to see the Buddha after a funeral for one of her grandchildren. The Buddha asked her, "Would you like to have as many grandchildren as there are people in this city?" And even though she had just been to a funeral, she said, "Oh, yes, lots and lots of grandchildren. That'd be wonderful." "But," he said, "would there be a day when you wouldn't be going to a funeral?" And she realized, well, No.

There's another story of a man coming from the funeral of his son. And the Buddha commented, "Yes, suffering does come from those who are dear." The man got upset because he felt that those who are dear bring only happiness. His affection was so strong that it blinded him to its connection to the suffering he was feeling right then and there. The problem is not so much with the people who are dear as with our need to find our happiness by feeding on people who are dear. Yet there is a way to overcome that, which is to learn how to find a deeper happiness inside, a happiness that comes from training the mind.

There's a passage where Ven. Sariputta announces to his fellow monks that he had sat down to think one day: Was there any possible change in the world that would cause him to grieve? And he had realized that there wasn't. Ananda immediately asks him, "But what if something happened to the Buddha? Wouldn't that cause you grief?" And Sariputta says, "Well, no. I'd reflect that it's a sad thing that such a wonderful person had passed away, is no longer able to help the world." And Ananda's comment is interesting. He says, "That's a sign that you have no conceit."

In other words, our grief over the loss of other people really comes down to our own sense of loss, "my" loss, what this is doing to "what I am." If we can

learn how to get away from that identification, that need to feed and lay claim to those we feed on, then we can have affection for others, pay special attention to those to whom we have special debts, and yet not suffer for it. That's why it's important to make these distinctions—the distinction between clinging and affection; the distinction between general goodwill for all and specific goodwill for people who have been good to us. If we're clear about these distinctions, we can work on expressing goodwill, feel love, and feel affection in ways that don't cause suffering.

The Reality of Emotions

August 15, 2007

There's a passage in T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* where he raises an important question: Suppose you have a feeling of deep spiritual contentment, of oneness and connectedness with all the universe. To what extent is that feeling meaningful? Is it a sign that you've attained a heightened spiritual state? Are you in touch with some transcendent reality? Or is it simply a sign that you had a nice dinner and you feel rested, physically satisfied? This is an important question for people who want to read deep meanings into their feelings. They want to believe that their feelings constitute their true identity, and that their feelings tell the truth. But feelings can lie. A warm sense of interconnectedness may indicate simply that your digestion is good, and physically you're well provided for.

One way of getting around that conundrum is to look not at what feelings really mean, but at what you can *do* with them. This is the Buddha's approach. As he points out, our feelings are fabricated. Although the happiness of nibbana is not a feeling, every other form of happiness is a feeling, and every feeling is fabricated. This means that all feelings have an intentional element. We put them together for a certain purpose. We want a particular feeling if for nothing else than to establish who we are and what we want. There is a purpose—many times blind and unknown—that shapes what we feel.

A study was made years back of facial expressions, showing how every common emotion is expressed with a certain set of facial expressions regardless of culture. Grief, contentment, happiness, and ridicule each have their own way of getting patterned in the muscles in your face, and this pattern holds across all human societies. The researchers working on this topic wanted to master all the different expressions, so one day they were working on the expression for sadness. After trying to get all the muscles in the face together in expression of sadness, they found at the end of the day that they were sad. This shows that the emotion doesn't necessarily have to be real just because it's strong or pervasive. It may simply be a habit, a result of the way you carry your body, the way you compose your face.

So what do you do with the fact that feelings are fabricated? You learn how to fabricate them well. Instead of trying to dig down and see what your real feelings are, notice if you can create comfortable feelings in the body, good feelings, happy feelings through the way you hold your face, the way you hold your body, the way you breathe. This can cause feelings of pleasure, refreshment, and rapture to pervade the body. Admittedly, they're fabricated, but so are other feelings. The important point is that these feelings have their uses. If you can maintain these kinds of feeling, the mind is in a much better position to look at things from a calm, steady point of view.

So when you run across a good feeling like this—whether it just happens or you can induce it—learn how to maintain it. This is part of the duty of the path, learning how to develop the factors of right concentration: the ease and

wellbeing, even the sense of rapture, that can come from the way you breathe, from the way you focus on the different elements in the body.

Even uncomfortable feelings can have their uses. The Buddha gives an analysis of the different emotions that arise in people who are not on the path and in people who are. Take, for instance, what he calls householder grief, the grief of someone who's simply upset because he didn't get to see the sights, hear the sounds, smell the smells, taste the tastes, feel the tactile sensations, or think about the ideas he wanted to. He's disappointed in his aims.

For most of us, our way of overcoming that particular kind of grief is to try to find those sights and sounds and so on, to make them happen so as to feel householder joy. But the problem with householder joy is that you can lose it very quickly, and then you're back into householder grief. Things go back and forth like this, and never really get anywhere. It's like throwing a stick up in the air. Sometimes it falls on this end, sometimes it falls on that end. There's no real rhyme or reason to this, and you never get out of the cycle.

The Buddha's solution to this pattern is to substitute householder grief with renunciate grief, the grief that comes from realizing that there is a deathless but you haven't attained it yet. Even though this may create an uncomfortable feeling in the mind, it points to a way out. It acknowledges that there is a deathless, there is an escape. That in and of itself offers hope, gives you a sense of direction. It induces you to work in that direction. That's why this form of grief is a useful emotion.

Not every kind of grief or discomfort is bad. How many times have you heard people say that it's wise not to have any big goals in the practice because you'll get dissatisfied over the fact that you haven't reached your goal; you should just stay content with what you've got. That kind of attitude is like shooting an arrow without pulling the bow back and getting the string taut. The arrow's never going to fly anywhere. It just stays right where it is or drops on the ground at your feet where people can trample on it. There has to be a certain amount of tension in the practice, a certain sense that "I don't yet have the true happiness I really want in life." A sense of *samvega*, a dismay with the way you're living your life. And a sense of urgency that you've got to find a way out. Only with that tension will the practice take flight.

Samvega may be an unpleasant emotion, but you need it in order to spur yourself along the path, to do what needs to be done. The desire to be more generous, to be more virtuous, to be better at your meditation is not a bad desire. It's *chanda*, one of the bases for success. So take that desire and act on it. Decide that this really is important.

As you work on the path, you may feel deprived of this or that physical comfort, so you should remind yourself that that's not important. The important thing is that there's a deathless and you haven't found it yet. And ultimately, this sense of renunciate grief yields renunciate joy. You use it to spur yourself on to actually develop more mindfulness, more concentration, more discernment. Then you can experience the joy of having mastered these skills—and of ultimately gaining release.

So renunciate grief is a feeling with a purpose, and you can induce it. The fact that it's induced doesn't mean it's not real or that it's not your authentic self. After all, you know what the Buddha says about trying to find an authentic self in form and feeling and all the other aggregates: You're not going to find it. But

you can find things you can use. You take those aggregates and turn them into the path.

As you do this, your renunciate grief leads you to renunciate joy. You've got the breath, you've got all the elements in the body. How can you relate to them in a way that feels good? Explore the possibilities. Master them as a skill. When you can master this skill, it gives you a sense of wellbeing in the present moment that doesn't have to depend on conditions outside.

You could sit here and think about all the reasons that would make you miserable being here: It's hot outside. You don't have the comforts you might enjoy if you were living at home—all the long lists of potential grievances. But what do those grievances accomplish? They don't go anywhere at all. But you can also focus on the fact that you've got a breath, you've got the different elements in the body. The sense of liquid: You can focus on how sticky and disgusting the liquid in your body is or, for the time being, on the fact that liquid feelings in the body are cool. Focus on them so that you're not focusing on the heat. You could focus on the breath. What way is the breath light, totally unstuck, totally unfettered? It has nothing to do with heat or coolness at all. It's simply motion. Energy. Your mind tunes into that kind of sensation. You may find that you can start smiling, and then the smile on your face induces all the chemical reactions in the body that go along with smiling. You start feeling better.

So try to induce feelings that are helpful. Focus not on the issue of whether they're real, but on the fact that you've got all kinds of potentials for pleasure or pain right here. What you are going to do with them? What use can you get out of them? What's the wisest thing to do with them? In this way, instead of getting waylaid by the fact that feelings are fabricated and questionable, you focus on the fact that you can fabricate them with discernment, with knowledge. As the Buddha points out, fabricated feelings are often based on ignorance, which leads to suffering. But you can also fabricate them with the knowledge that leads to the end of suffering.

So look at where you are on the path. Sometimes it requires focusing on the grief, focusing on the discomfort. There's a passage in the sutta on transcendent dependent co-arising that traces all the factors leading up to suffering, but then states that from suffering you can develop conviction, and through conviction you develop the path. From developing the path, you develop joy. This is the Buddha's analysis of how you go from householder grief—the fact you're not getting what you want—through renunciate grief to renunciate joy. Realize that there's a goal in here, there must be a way out of suffering, but you haven't found it yet. There may be a certain amount of grief around that. But you can work with that grief until it develops renunciate joy. And then you can use that renunciate joy to get further along the path.

So these feelings have their uses. Focus on the fact that they're leading you somewhere, and you can choose the feelings that take you where you want to go. That way you get the most out of them.

Moving Between Thought Worlds

December 27, 2008

We've all had the experience when we're asleep of finding ourselves in a dream and, for a while, believing that what's happening in the dream is real. Then something alerts us that something is wrong with the dream, and finally to the fact that we're dreaming. Usually that's enough for us to wake up, to pull out of the dream.

That process is very similar to the way we create mental worlds and emotional states during our waking life, because our picture of the world around us is always partial. It's always stitched together out of bits and pieces of what we've encountered through the senses. We have a notion of what makes sense, and as long as it makes sense and seems to be real, we can stay stuck in that state of mind. Then something strikes us as incongruous, as not fitting in. We realize, "Oh, that was an imaginary world." That's when we pull out. But then we find ourselves in another world, which may be better, and may not.

The ability to recognize what's incongruous, what's wrong with a world: That's an important skill. Without it, we get stuck in states of mind—what the Buddha called *bhava*, or becoming—where we can suffer very intensely. We focus on certain things in the world around us, certain ideas about who we are in that world, and everything else gets filtered through that particular picture. Other people's actions, for example, get filtered in this way, so that someone acting with perfectly good intentions may seem to be evil, sneaky, unreliable. Or vice versa. They actually may be evil, sneaky, and unreliable, yet we see them as being perfectly reasonable, perfectly trustworthy. But because the mental world we inhabit has its own inner coherence, we think it's accurate and real.

So we have to watch out for this. In a healthy mind, it's easy to switch from one world to another, to recognize the incongruities so that one state of becoming can actually pull you out of a less healthy state of becoming. There's a certain fluidity. And the fluidity comes from your mindfulness, your ability to remember that you take on different identities and inhabit different worlds, and some are more useful than others. Some are more beneficial, less stressful than others. If you're skillful, you can adopt whichever state of becoming seems to be the healthiest at that particular time, given what you want to do in those particular circumstances. The people with real problems are those who can't get out. They get stuck in a particular thought world and everything gets interpreted in its light. They can really do themselves a lot of damage because there's no porousness between the different states of becoming. There's no connection—either you're in it, or you're out of it. The different identities you take on, the different worlds you inhabit, seem to be very radically separate.

Usually for people who are stuck in a very unhealthy state like that, their only hope seems to be some outside power. This is why so many programs dealing with addictions rely on the idea of an outside power. Addicts get stuck in a particular idea of who they are, the world they're in, what they're capable of, what they're not capable of. And given the definitions of their little worlds, they're helpless. They need somebody from outside to come in and straighten

them out. This comes from getting thoroughly trapped in a very fixed sense of who they are.

One of the purposes of the meditation is to get you out of the trap, so that you realize you have many different identities, you inhabit different worlds, and they can best be used as tools, realizing that no world that you inhabit is totally real or a totally accurate idea of where you are, in terms of your surroundings outside or what's going on inside.

William James made a lot of this point: that our idea of truth is pretty sketchy. How could you possibly know the total truth of the situation in which you're located? It would require a knowledge down to the sub-atomic particles and out to the edge of the universe—maybe even beyond the edge of the universe. That would be impossible. So to deal with possibilities, the mind lives by its sketches. Recognizing this fact is a useful step. "This sketch that I'm living with: Is it a useful sketch? Is it helpful?" It may have certain true details here and there, but you have to realize that no idea of your surroundings is going to be a totally adequate representation of what those surroundings are. The best you can do is ask if your sketch is adequate to your needs, your healthy needs, and in particular to your desire to put an end to suffering.

To learn how to pull yourself out of unhealthy worlds and into healthier ones first requires an understanding of how the mind creates these worlds, and then a development of the skills you need to move fluidly and beneficially between them.

Both of these skills are developed in meditation. In other words, you get hands-on experience in creating worlds by trying to create a world of concentration right here: inhabiting your body, staying with your breath, having a focal point. This is what these worlds are built around: a focal point based on a desire. In this case, you take the breath as your focal point, and your desire is to stay there as continually as possible. To help carry out that desire, you want to learn how to evaluate the breath and your concentration, to see how well you're doing.

For some people, this particular part is also difficult because they're adept at making negative judgments about themselves and poor at making positive ones. They start berating themselves for not being good meditators, for being hopeless. This is why it's useful to think about all beings, as we do before we meditate every time: "May all beings be happy." When you think seriously about all beings in the world, you realize that very few people out there really can get their minds concentrated, or even want to try. The fact that you're trying is a step in the right direction right there.

You can also think about all the people in the past who've meditated. It's not that everybody sat down and, as they say in Thailand, had it as easy as peeling a banana. Everybody has had to fight to get the mind to settle down. So if you find yourself having trouble, take heart that you're not the only one. Everybody has problems with the meditation at one point or another. Even the people who in this lifetime seem to be natural meditators: At some point in the past they were sure to have had difficulties because meditation goes against the grain.

So when you learn how to think in these ways, it's a lot easier to evaluate what you're doing objectively and not berate yourself when things go wrong. Look simply in terms of cause and effect, and take your idea of who you are out of the picture for the time being. Just focus on the mental states that can stay with

the breath, notice what distracts them, and see if you can be quick in coming back to the breath. When you do come back, don't berate yourself for having left. Take pride in the fact that you've caught yourself and have pulled yourself back in line. When you come back, try to come back in a way that's deft, skillful. Reward yourself with an especially satisfying breath, one that feels really, really good deep down inside. That gives you practice in slipping back into a skillful state of mind from an unskillful one, and doing it skillfully. It also develops your mindfulness.

Mindfulness is what creates the bridges between these different states. You remember that you were in one state and now you're in another. And the possibility of slipping back into another distracted state is always there, so you've got to keep on top of things to be alert for any signs of the mind preparing to slip away. It has its tricks. It has its slight moment of blanking out, after which you wake up in another world. But if you can use mindfulness as a bridge across that blanking out, it's a lot easier to direct the mind from one state of becoming into another when you want to. And it's a lot easier to stay in a state of becoming when you want to stay.

These are all very important skills because they also help in learning how to recognize when you're in an unhealthy state. You can ask yourself, "Is there suffering here?" That's the incongruity: We create mind states in order to enjoy them, but if they make us suffer, they're out of line with their reason for being.

Then you can ask, "Does there have to be this suffering?" And part of the mind will say, "Yes," but you have to learn how to question it. That's your only escape, recognizing that the suffering isn't necessary. It is possible to be in another state of mind that's less stressful. Just because a strong feeling or thought arises in the mind doesn't mean that you have to go with it, or that the feeling is genuinely you. Remember that "who you are" has to be put into quotation marks. You can make a sense of "who you are" around anything, and there are many potentials available in any given moment. So just because there's a feeling there, doesn't mean that it has to be the focal point of your sense of who you are, because many feelings that come into the mind are actually destructive.

This is why meditation is such an important skill in keeping the mind healthy. The mindfulness allows you to recognize when you've slipped from one state of *bhava* or becoming to another, one sense of who you are to another, one sense of what's going on in the world to another. And it also helps you to remember good standards for judging a particular state of mind. Even though a state of mind may have some features that are very true—you can verify it by looking at things outside that, yes, this situation really is difficult or whatever it is that you've focused on—but then you can ask yourself: "Do you have to suffer around this?" And the Buddha's answer is always, "No, you don't have to suffer." If you're suffering around a particular situation, you're not approaching it in a skillful way. There are others ways to approach it. We always have the potential not to suffer if we look for it.

So keep that in mind. And then learn how to use the skills of meditation to pull yourself out of an unskillful state and create a more skillful one in its place: one that's more beneficial, more useful, healthier. Some people will say that you're running away, but what are you running away from? You're running away from one created world into another created world—but a created world that's based on mindfulness and concentration, on your ability to discern the

causes of suffering. That's a much more useful world. It has potential. It can eventually lead you away from suffering entirely.

So whenever you find yourself in a situation that seems really difficult and you're just spinning around and around and around, try to look for that point of incongruity: Something's wrong here, something's not right. And what's wrong is that there's suffering that doesn't have to be. You can pull yourself out through that recognition. And you can use your mindfulness of the breath as your handle for getting out.

Back when I was with Ajaan Fuang, some of his students would get themselves into really strange states of mind through their concentration. And the handle out was always, "Where is your breath right now? Is it comfortable?" That would gradually pull them into the world of the breath. In other words, they'd come to inhabit the body from within.

In this way, you don't need an outside power. All you need is your own ability to recognize, "There's something wrong here and I can get out." This "something wrong" is the fact something is creating a burden on the mind that doesn't have to be there. To get out, you don't need an outside power. You just need to remember that you have the ability to create a different sense of who you are, and to create a different world to inhabit, one that's healthier.

The ultimate goal of the practice, of course, is to be able to get out of all these worlds entirely. That's what it really means to wake up. But in the meantime, you can have your little awakening when you wake up in the middle of one of your created worlds, and say, "Oh, this is suffering. It doesn't have to be here." And you look in the right place instead of placing the blame on other people in the past or in the present. The suffering doesn't come from them. The suffering comes from the way the mind thinks about things. It creates impossible situations and then burdens itself with them. It doesn't have to do that. Mindfulness, concentration, and discernment form the way out.

And those aren't just vague abstractions. Mindfulness is the ability to remember what you're doing as you move from one state of mind to another. Alertness is the ability to see, "I'm doing something that's causing suffering." And discernment is what sees that it doesn't have to be that way. There's an alternative.

So as we're sitting here, we're gaining practice in precisely the skills we need in order to keep our sanity. Just start exploring some of the mind's possibilities in terms of the different identities it can take on, and the different worlds it can inhabit. The meditation gives you a good, safe, healthy world to inhabit. Learn to appreciate this skill, because it's your lifeline. And make the most of your opportunity to master it.

Shame & Acceptance

April 13, 2009

Ajaan Fuang would sometimes tell me the story of his childhood. He was born into a poor family and didn't have many relatives. Many of them had died in a plague years before. He was orphaned at the age of eleven and was sent off to live in a monastery as what they called a *dek wat*, one of those boys who just hang around the monastery, help fix rice for the monks, and run errands. He had a little bit of an education, not much. And as he got into his teens, he began to realize that his life didn't look all that promising. He didn't have any connections, didn't have much of an education. So he looked to the Dhamma. "This," he said, "is the only way my life is going to have any meaning, is going to go anywhere at all." As he said, "I must not have much merit, so I've got to make as much as I can."

That was his original impulse to practice the Dhamma, realizing that he didn't have much to come from, but what he *did* have was enough to practice the Dhamma. And this was his hope: that he could make something of himself through the practice.

This was a common theme with a lot of Ajaan Mun's students. They came from peasant families, often poor, mainly way up in the Northeast. The basic message of Thai society was that poor people didn't have anywhere to go. They were going to stay poor. At the same time, there was a lot of pride in Bangkok that if anybody was going to understand the Dhamma, it was the scholars in Bangkok, people who had the background and education that prepared them to read and think philosophical thoughts. Although it was possible for people to come from the countryside areas into Bangkok to learn, the scholars were considered to have a monopoly on the Dhamma.

So when Ajaan Mun was teaching, he found he had to deal with the assumption many poor people had that "I just don't have the merit to get anywhere in the practice." He kept reminding his students, "You have everything you need. You've got a human body. You've got a human mind. You've got breath. You've got your awareness. You've got some mindfulness, some alertness. These are all the things you need." And so a lot of his Dhamma talks focused on, one, the fact that people were suffering; and, two, they had the resources that, if they worked at them, could take them out of suffering. That's the important point: *if you work on them*. You need to have a strong sense that where you are is suffering, but you have what it takes to get beyond that suffering if you apply yourself.

This is what motivated Ajaan Fuang. This is why he was willing to put in long hours in the practice, put up with a lot of hardships, because that was the only way to make progress.

Here in the West the problem is a little bit different. Most people coming to Buddhism come from comfortable backgrounds with a good amount of education. But they still can have a sense of low self-esteem, which in their case comes more from psychological than from social issues. They don't like to be challenged, so they like to hear that the practice doesn't ask them to do anything:

just learn to accept themselves as they are; that's all you have to do, and that's what the Dhamma's all about. But that leaves them stuck where they are. The whole point of the Dhamma is that it takes you someplace where you haven't been. As the Buddha said, you come to realize the as yet unrealized, to attain the as yet unattained, to know the as yet unknown: to find a true end to suffering.

So there is a lot of work involved. It's not going to be hard all the time, but there are times when you really do have to go against what you'd like to do, or beyond the limits of your comfort zone. This willingness to push yourself beyond your comfort zone is what's going to make all the difference. But to do that, you need to realize that you have what it takes. Often we keep ourselves back or hold ourselves back because we have a very limited notion of what we're capable of. This is where low self-esteem or an unskillful sense of shame can be debilitating. But as with so many other things, there's a skillful sense of shame and an unskillful sense of shame. Unskillful shame is what keeps you where you are: the idea that "I can't get any better than I am; I'm pretty hopeless."

That kind of shame the Buddha never encouraged. What he did encourage is your willingness to look at what you've been doing to and see where it's been unskillful. When you do this, you are passing judgment. But you're passing judgment on your actions, not on yourself. Your intentions in the past may have been unskillful, or the actions may have been unskillful, but you're not stuck there. Just because you've had unskillful intentions doesn't mean that you're always going to have unskillful intentions. You can change your mind. You can change your habits.

The skillful or healthy sense of shame comes in here and says, "What I did in the past is nothing to be proud of, but I don't have to repeat that mistake." This is what your powers of judgment are good for. We tend to think of judgment as what a judge does in a courtroom, passing a final verdict on people, either setting them free or sending them off to jail. The Buddha, however, is not talking about final judgment of that sort. What he advises is more like a craftsman judging a work in progress: "How is it going? What can be changed? If it's not going well, what can I do to improve it?" That kind of judgment is healthy. It's necessary, because people with no sense of shame, no sense of judgment, are dangerous to themselves and to the people around them because they refuse to correct their mistakes.

So learn how to use your sense of shame in a skillful way, to use your sense of judgment in a skillful way, and be willing to push yourself beyond your comfort level to find resources that you haven't yet tapped. After all, we all have the potential for awakening. The qualities that the Buddha developed on the night of his awakening, or leading up to his awakening, are qualities that we all have in a potential form: mindfulness and alertness; heedfulness, ardency, and resolution. These things can be developed. If we think that we're here just to accept the way we are, we're not accepting the fact that we could develop these qualities.

Acceptance is something you have to learn to do in a skillful way. Accepting just where you are and thinking, "That's all I have to do; I'm perfectly fine as I am": That's unskillful acceptance. It dooms you to a miserable life. If, however, you accept where you are as a starting point, accepting that you also have these potential qualities for awakening, that's the skillful use of acceptance.

We're often taught mindfulness with the idea that it's simply noting what's already there and not doing anything about it: just learning how to be non-

reactive, which assumes that our reactivity is what's causing us to suffer. Sometimes we even hear that mindfulness is an activity totally devoid of any kind of ideological background, bias, or agenda. But the way this non-reactive sort of mindfulness is taught definitely has an agenda, an ideological understanding: that where you are right now is something you're stuck with, and you're not responsible for having shaped it; or if you are responsible, it's all in the past. The only suffering that can be cured is the suffering that comes from refusing to accept where you are and who you are. All you can do in the present moment is accept, accept, accept.

But that's not the understanding the Buddha encouraged when he taught mindfulness. As he said, part of what you're experiencing now comes from the past, but you're also making choices in the present, and these choices are actually shaping the way you experience the present. The way you label things, the way you think about things, all of the aggregates that go into your sense of the present moment have an element of present intention in them. And that element can be trained, can be changed. So when we're mindful and alert, we're not simply noticing what's already there as a total given. We also have to notice, "What are we doing right now to shape this experience, and how can that shaping activity be changed?" We have to remind ourselves, "What lessons have we learned that can help us shape experience in the most skillful way?" The different teachings on mindfulness give us a framework—either in terms of the body, or our feelings, mind-states, or mental qualities—as to what has to be accepted, what can be changed, and how to go about changing it skillfully.

So we're not submitting the present moment to a final judgment. We're judging it as a work in progress, because it leads to the next moment and then the next. With each moment, there's an element of intention, skillful or unskillful. You've got to keep figuring out and judging which is which. Once you see clearly which is which, the duties are pretty clearly laid out. If you're doing something unskillful, learn how to abandon it, to stop doing it. This requires understanding where it comes from so you can undercut it by undercutting the cause. If you're doing something skillful, learn how to maintain that activity, nurture it, allow it to grow. And again that requires understanding where it came from so you can keep fostering the skillful causes.

This means that what we're watching here as we meditate is a work in progress. And we're not just watching. We're participating in the work. The type of judgment we use here is the judgment, say, of a carpenter, working on a piece of furniture. As he planes or polishes the wood, he has to keep watching, "How is it going? Am I putting too much pressure, too little pressure? What needs to be redone? What has to be thrown out and started all over again? What can be salvaged?" That's a skillful use of judgment because the carpenter would be ashamed to put out a sloppy piece of workmanship. He's got his reputation, his self-esteem, to maintain.

So think of yourself as a craftsman. And learn to develop a skillful sense of shame, self-esteem, judgment, acceptance, and non-acceptance: learning with practice which things are skillful to accept, which things are not skillful to accept, so that you can develop mastery in what you're doing.

Lust

June 7, 2009

One of the customs of the noble ones is to delight in developing and to delight in letting go. The developing refers to developing skillful qualities of mind, developing the path. The letting go is the letting go of craving, ignorance, all the causes of suffering.

This is an important point to keep in mind, but we tend to forget it in different ways. One way of forgetting it is to delight in developing unskillful qualities. We like our greed. We like our lust. We like our anger. And so we nurture these things. We may not be consciously doing it as a practice, but it is a habit. It becomes a way of nurturing, of training the mind in that particular direction. But when we come to actually developing the factors of the path, somehow it seems awfully hard.

This is where we have to generate desire to abandon what's unskillful and develop what's skillful. Right effort is, in part, the ability to generate that desire. Try to think about the ways in which lust, aversion, and delusion are really not your friends. You might think of them as pets you keep around the house. But they're the kind of pets, like snakes and wildcats, that if you're not careful are going to turn around, bite you, and eat you up.

So it's important to think about the drawbacks of things like lust. It's something we like a lot, but look at where it leads you. Think of all the stupid things, all the harmful things you've done under the power of lust. Ask yourself: Do you really want that to take over your mind again? Is it really a friend? Is it really a nice, tame pet to have around the house? Or is it the kind that shits all over the place and attacks you when it's in a bad mood? Think of all the crazy things that other people do under the influence of lust. A large proportion of murders, they say, have happened between people who've had sex with each other. If having sex were such a good thing, why would they turn around and murder each other? Family court is the most vicious and violent of the different branches of the court system. All because of the power of lust.

Or just look at what lust does to the mind, right here, right now, when it starts flaring up. Think of how much you lie to yourself, how many areas of the mind get shut down as you focus on liking this, wanting that, and totally ignoring all the consequences. The narratives you build up in the mind are total fantasies. To be attractive, they rely on huge blind spots. Large parts of the mind simply get shut down. Your reality principle goes out the window. You might want to ask: "Why does the mind do this to itself?" It's something you really want to look into.

You can also think about the sensual pleasures you've had in the past: Where are they now? All you have left is the memory, and sometimes it includes the memory of the unskillful things you did around those pleasures.

But as the Buddha said, if you don't have the pleasure that comes from a well-concentrated mind, no matter how much you think about the drawbacks of sensuality, or the drawbacks of greed, aversion, and delusion, you can't let them go. You need another form of pleasure to replace the pleasure that comes with

sensuality. This is why we have to develop the factors of the path, primarily right mindfulness and right concentration.

So learn to look at the pleasures of mindfulness and concentration as your friends. They don't cause you to do anything unskillful. You sometimes hear about the dangers of concentration, but the dangers of concentration are nothing compared to the dangers of sensuality. People don't kill, steal, cheat, have illicit sex, lie, or take intoxicants because of the jhana they've attained. On the contrary, when you have the pleasure of a well-concentrated mind, it's a lot easier to stop doing those unskillful things.

There are only a few passages in the Canon where the Buddha mentions the drawbacks of jhana, and they're pretty minor. You get so attached to that pleasure that you really don't want to start taking apart your sense of self, the way you create a sense of self around your desires. The Buddha says that this attachment is like grabbing hold of a sappy twig on a tree, and your hand sticks to the twig because of the sap. But that's an extremely minor drawback, and it's something that can be dealt with very easily. It's not nearly as dangerous as the drawbacks of sensuality, which the Buddha compares to a burning grass torch or a pit of glowing embers. Those drawbacks can pull you off the path entirely and throw you into hell right here and now.

So you want to work on developing a sense of pleasure in the form of the body as sensed from within, rather than in visualizing the attractive details of the human body's appearance. In other words, you take your sense of the body as you inhabit it right here, right now. How do you relate to it? How can you find pleasure simply in sitting here and being aware of the fact that you're inhabiting this body?

This is where the breath comes in, because it's one of the few processes of the body that you can alter, that you can manipulate. It often takes a while to learn how to manipulate it skillfully, which is why we spend so much time practicing. Sometimes you find yourself manipulating the breath and it gets worse, which means you have to step back for a while and just learn to watch it, to learn more about it. Then, when you get a better sense of it, you can try playing with it again, sensing where the different blockages are in the body, and how, when you breathe in, you can get the breath energy to go all the way down.

Learn to think about a subtle breath energy that doesn't require that you push or pull on anything. As soon as you start breathing in, it immediately permeates and enlivens the whole nervous system. Try to get in touch with that level of breath energy and allow it to have a little more room, a little more ease in spreading through the body, so that breathing isn't a chore. It's nothing *you* have to do. The breath energy will do this on its own. You just have to allow it. Give it a little room, give it a little space. Open the mind to the possibility that this can happen and you'll find that it does. When the energy is flowing well in the body, it produces a greater sense of ease.

Another way of doing this is to think of relaxing the different muscles, starting with the muscles of the fingers and the hands, then going up the arms. You can visualize the bones and say, wherever there's any tension, "That's not a bone tension, it's muscle tension. The bones hold no tension at all." Allow the muscles around those particular bones to relax. Then visualize the bones up through the arms, up to the shoulders, then start again at the feet, go up the legs, through the pelvis, up the backbone, up the neck, the skull of the head. Wherever

you sense any tension or tightness, allow it to relax. And the energy in the body will flow a lot more smoothly and easily.

This way, as you develop the factors of right concentration, you make it easier to let go of your other attachments. You've got something better to hold on to. This is also why it's important to understand that the practice is not just one of letting go. There has to be the developing as well. Ajaan Fuang once noted this. He said, "Sometimes you hear that it's all about letting go. But no, you have to develop. If you don't develop skillful qualities in the mind, you can't really let go of the unskillful ones."

So it's not just a matter of watching, watching, watching, and letting the defilements just slough off. Some defilements might slough off simply through watching, but not all of them will. There are some—and these are the really important, tenacious ones—where you have to, as the Buddha says, exert a fabrication against them. In other words, you have to do something intentional in order to get past them. Like working with the breath: That's bodily fabrication. The way you breathe can help weaken a lot of the defilements, so at the very least they don't control your sense of the body. That way you can see exactly what they're doing exclusively in the mind. They're a lot easier to deal with when they're not in charge of your breath, not in charge of the way the blood is flowing in the body, not in charge of the different physical processes in the body. For instance, when anger arises, if you can breathe calmly during the anger, and the anger hasn't hijacked your body, then it's a lot easier to deal with the anger directly in the mind.

Another way of exerting a fabrication is exerting verbal fabrication: directed thought and evaluation. This can either be directing your thoughts to the breath and evaluating the breath, or thinking about the defilement simply as an event in the mind, and analyzing it, noticing what stress it creates in which parts of the body, and how it clouds the mind. In other words, instead of looking at the object of your lust or the object of the anger, just look at the fact of the lust, the fact of the anger as it's happening in the mind: to see what it's doing, to keep yourself from siding with it. You're stepping back from it a bit. You're evaluating: Do you really want to go along with it? Is this really your friend?

A third type of fabrication is mental fabrication: feelings and perceptions. Again, this can relate to the breath. You create a sense of ease and wellbeing in the body; that feeling makes it a lot easier to let go of the need for immediate gratification through your defilement. You can say, "Look, I've got this pleasure here. Why not focus on the pleasure that's already here, rather than on the false pleasure you're dreaming about?" As you relax your hands and relax your feet, you open up a lot of other channels in the body. You gain a sense of wellbeing right here, right now, that doesn't depend on expressing anger or following your lust. At the same time, you change the perception around the defilement, to see that if you perceive lust or anger as your friend you're going to go running along with it every time it comes for a visit. Learn to look at it in a different way: "Here it comes, a cloud to obscure the mind." Or as Ajaan Lee says, "Here come some crooks and thieves and con-men. They want you see things in their way, and act under their sway, but then when the police come to catch you, they go running off. You're the one who's left, bearing all the responsibility for what you did."

So you want to use these three forms of fabrication—bodily, verbal, and mental—when you find that simply watching a defilement is not enough, simply

being equanimous is not enough, to get past the defilement. Because after all, equanimity and mindfulness are fabrications too. They're very subtle fabrications, equanimity in particular. There's a belief—you hear it sometimes—that mindfulness and equanimity are unfabricated. But that's not the case. They're part of the path. They're something you do, something you work on developing. And at an advanced stage in the practice, you do let them go.

As Ajaan Mun said, there comes a point in the practice where all four noble truths become one. What he means is they all have the same duty. In the beginning you have to comprehend stress, let go of the cause, develop the path, so you can realize the cessation of stress. That's four duties. But then there's a point, though, when you have to let go of all four truths. As Ajaan Mun said, nibbana lies outside the four truths. Each of the four truths has a duty, but there's no duty for nibbana. There's nothing you do with nibbana. At that point you let everything go. But if you haven't reached that point, the four noble truths still have their duties. You still have to do these things. You still have to learn how to delight in letting go and delight in developing.

So there's work to be done, but it's good work. Without this work, you stay stuck in your old ways, suffering in the same old way over and over and over again. As the Buddha says, the amount of suffering remaining for someone who hasn't seen the Dhamma is like all the water in the oceans of the earth, whereas the amount of suffering remaining for someone who has seen the Dhamma, has touched the deathless, is like the water you can hold in your hand.

That's a good perception to hold in mind. Even though the practice is difficult, realize it's a lot less difficult than not practicing. And if you can train the mind to delight in developing the path, you're well on your way.

Fear & Anger

April 3, 2009

One of the reasons we focus on the breath as the foundation of our meditation is to give us a good place to stand. Lots of different emotions, lots of different ideas, can come washing through the mind, and if you don't have someplace outside of the mind where you can take your stance, you get washed away. Greed comes in. Anger comes in. Fear comes in. And they can be overwhelming if you don't have a place to stand outside of them. So we focus on the breath as a way of getting outside of these overwhelming emotions, to realize they don't have to take over totally. We can have at least one corner of our awareness where they're not raging and strong.

Not only does the breath give us a place to stand, it also gives us some ammunition to use against these things. When anger comes, when fear comes, part of their power comes from the way they change the processes of the body. Hormones get poured into your bloodstream. Your heart beats a lot faster. Your stomach tightens up. And when both your mind and your body are taken over by an emotion like this, the only response that seems possible is just to give in. But you don't have to give in. You can work with your breath to counteract at least the physical side of the emotion first. Regardless of what's happening in the mind, you can still breathe calmly. In fact, this is an important way of retraining yourself. Even though scary thoughts or infuriating thoughts are coming through the mind, you can still breathe calmly. They don't need to have such a total impact.

So while we're meditating here, it's good to gain practice in being sensitive to what kind of breathing feels good, and where the different parts of the body are getting caught in unskillful energy patterns. It's one of the reasons why Ajaan Lee has you focus on the centers of the breath—the middle of the head, the palate, the base of the throat, the middle the chest, just above the navel—because they tend to be trigger points. Once a trigger point has been engaged, everything else seems to seize up as well. If you keep the trigger point relaxed, open, at ease, then the other physical reactions don't happen. That way your body can be an ally against these emotions instead of just simply being part of the victim, or dragged over to their side.

Being sensitive to the breath also helps you notice when these things are just beginning to creep up on you, because sometimes they don't come full blast. They creep up a little bit and then they build and build and build. If you're distracted, thinking about something else or aware of something else, you don't notice what's happening until they've taken over. This is why we emphasize being sensitive to the body not only while you're sitting here meditating but also as you go through the day. If you know that you have particular trigger points, keep your awareness centered on them. Keep those spots open regardless. Your first order of business is: No matter what happens, keep those spots open so the body doesn't get triggered.

That way, if something does start creeping in, you'll notice it immediately. And you find that these emotions are a lot easier to deal with when you catch

them right at the very beginning, before they trigger the hormones, before they trigger the physical reactions, because otherwise, once those reactions are triggered, you simply have to ride them out, and that may take a while. And of course when the body starts reacting, the anger seems constant, it seems to be there all the time. Actually, though, it may not be there all the time. Maybe it comes and goes. But the physical reactions seem to be constant, and they give the impression that the anger is still there. Maybe the thought that triggered those reactions is long gone. But when you see the reactions continuing, continuing, continuing, you think, “Well, gee, that emotion must still be there.” And you dig it back up again. You’re giving it more power than it really needs to have, or than it actually has.

You have to understand that even though the physical reaction is still happening, the mental trigger may have been long gone. And you don’t have to dig it back up again. You’re just riding out the after-effects of the emotion. As long as you’re determined not to be overcome, not to be swayed by these things, you’re okay. That puts you in a position where you can start looking at them as processes.

Remember that the Buddha said states of experience—and this includes emotions—have three components. The first is the physical, which is related to the breath. The second is the verbal component: the thoughts and narratives that go along with emotion. The third is the mental component: the feelings and the perceptions—the mental labels, the concepts that underlie the thinking, that underlie the verbal side. Once the physical side is relatively calmed down so that you can gain a toehold here, you can start looking at the other components: What are the thoughts, what are the ideas behind that particular emotion that got you going? What are the beliefs, the narratives? Do you have to believe them? Do you have to engage in them? Maybe you could tell yourself other narratives about this situation. That way you recast the situation in a way that doesn’t generate anger or fear.

Now, if the object of your fear is genuine and not just a dream or a random idea that’s wandered through your mind, you have to dig a little bit deeper and say, “Okay, even though there is this genuine danger, what’s the most skillful way to respond?” Simply giving in to the fear is not going to help. Ignoring it is not going to help, either. You’ve got an actual danger you’ve got to deal with.

So try to use your ingenuity to see how much you can prepare for the danger and what things you have to let go of so that you don’t magnify the danger. It’s like riding out a storm, as when we have these huge windstorms here and all you can do is just hide out in your hut, hide out in your tent, and hope that nothing falls on you. In the meantime, all kinds of damage is being done outside but you can’t do anything about it in the course of the storm. For the time being, you have to let go of any desire to protect those things. But you can protect your mental state, wait till the storm has passed, and then go out and survey the damage.

Often you’ll find that the fears, the anger, and all these other unskillful emotions come from holding onto things, laying claim to things that simply leave you exposed: a particular relationship, a particular job, a particular way of doing things, your body. As long as you continue to lay claim to these things, you’re open to danger. You’re open to difficulties. So you have to remind yourself: “These things are not me. These things are not mine.”

As you pursue the issue, you find that it often comes down to fear of death, especially if you're in physical danger. You do what you can to protect yourself, but you also have to remember that you've got your precepts. You've got to protect them, too. In fact, they should come first. There are limitations on what you can do to protect yourself physically and still maintain the skillfulness of the mind. In the forest tradition, when a monk is set to go out to a dangerous forest or a place where there's either disease or dangerous animals, the teacher will say, almost sarcastically, "Are you afraid to die?" Most people would normally say, "Of course, yes." But in the forest tradition, you're supposed to make yourself ready to die no matter what. After all, you can stay in a safe place and yet still die. You may surround yourself with all kinds of protection yet you've still got the inner workings of your body that can kill you at any time. So you have to learn how to induce the state of mind that says, "No, I don't have to be afraid." You have to realize that "I'm not the body." The body's been a very useful tool. It's been very helpful. But there will come a point where you have to let it go. So why not practice thinking that way now, so that when death actually does come you're prepared? You've been practicing. You can die without letting your virtues die. You can die and yet maintain the skillfulness of the mind.

There's that great passage in the Canon where a monk is going off to a dangerous land and the Buddha says, "The people there are dangerous. They're known to be very harsh, very barbaric and cruel. What are you going to do if they denounce you?" The monk says, "Well, I'm going to think, 'These people are really good in that they're not hitting me.'" "What if they hit you?" "These people are very good and civilized in that they're not stabbing me.'" "What if they stab you?" "They're good and civilized in that they're not killing me.'" "What if they kill you?" "Well at least my death wasn't a cowardly suicide.'" The Buddha says, "Okay, you're prepared to go."

This monk's way of thinking is his way of working with the mental fabrication, the perception, that "This body is me. If the body gets killed, that's the end, wipeout, total annihilation." You have to remember that that's not the case. Certain mental processes still survive—and you want them to survive and arrive in good shape, i.e., carrying lots of good kamma with them. So you don't want to die in the midst of doing something unskillful.

Sometimes when we're discussing the precepts, people will bring up situations such as, "What if someone is going to kill you if you don't lie?" Well, then, how do you guarantee that when you do lie, they're still not going to kill you? Or that they're not going to kill the people you love? What would that be like—you go ahead and lie and yet they still kill your children anyway? At the very least make sure that the things you *are* responsible for—your actions—stay within the precepts, within the bounds of what's skillful. The knowledge that you've maintained your honor can give you a lot of strength even as you go through the process of death. And you leave a noble example for those you leave behind.

So this is how you take apart unskillful emotions: You take apart the physical side, then the verbal side, then the mental side. For the mental side, you have to learn how to think outside the box. The same with the verbal side—because "verbal," here, refers to your inner chatter, what you say to yourself. Often what you say to yourself can be a lot more harmful than what people do or say

outside. So a large part of your training lies in learning how to talk to yourself in skillful ways.

There's a widespread misunderstanding that the most important part of the practice is bare attention, simply watching things in a non-reactive way. But that's not what the Buddha taught. He taught that the most important part of the practice is *appropriate* attention, where you learn to look at the situation and divide it up into four categories: where's the stress; where's the cause of stress; what would be the cessation of that stress, i.e., by abandoning the cause; and then how you do that: the path of practice that you develop to abandon the cause of stress. In other words, you see things in terms of the four noble truths. Each truth has a task, which has to be mastered as a skill and brought to completion: comprehend the stress, abandon the cause, develop the path, so that you can realize the cessation. That's a very different approach from simply being non-reactive, or learning to accept whatever comes.

If you see that a particular line of thinking is causing a lot of stress and suffering, remember: Abandoning is the task you do with the cause of stress. To drop that line of thinking, you actually have to change it, to think in the opposite way. Deep down you may feel, "This body is me." Well, what if it's not you? How does that change things? "My preferences are me." Well, what if they're not? How does that change things?

So the practice is not a matter of just watching or just being aware of things. If you see that something is unskillful, you've got to counteract it. And to counteract it, you've got to ask yourself: "What are your underlying assumptions?" The things you say "of course" to. Learn how to question that "of course."

Think of all the great advances in science, the people who questioned the "of course." "Why do apples fall out of trees?" "Well, of course: It's their nature to fall." That was what people believed for centuries. Yet Isaac Newton said, "Wait a minute, why?" And people made fun of him for asking why, but he ultimately came up with a totally different explanation. Not only does the apple fall, but the earth rises to the apple a little bit. Matter attracts matter. Of course now people are still trying to figure that one out. Why is there gravity? Maybe it's not a force; maybe it's a curve in space-time. But what's that? It's still a question, but it moves the discussion forward in a way that yields lots of benefits. If it weren't for Newton's formulae, we wouldn't have been able to send out satellites and space probes to gather information about the universe.

It's through learning how to question your basic assumptions that you gain and advance. You begin to see, "Oh, this is something I believed all along without even thinking about it, without examining it, and it's causing me unnecessary suffering."

Learn to dig down and question those assumptions because they're holding you captive. Or, to be more precise, by holding onto them you're holding yourself captive. Learn how to question. Learn how to let go. Learn to turn things inside out. It's like turning your pockets inside out. You sometimes find interesting things that you didn't realize were there.

So we work with the breath to give ourselves a foundation where we can start asking questions like this: looking into the mind to see where the problems are and applying the categories of appropriate attention, the four noble truths. We remind ourselves that meditation is not just a single activity where you're just

mindful, or just accepting, or just nonreactive, or just anything. There are lots of different approaches you could apply to the present moment. Learning how to figure out which one is appropriate right now and learning how to master it as a skill: That's the meta-skill of the meditation. It's the line of thinking that can set you free.

The Uses of Fear

September 25, 2008

There are three qualities that the Buddha listed as the roots of unskillful behavior: greed, aversion, and delusion. Some psychotherapists have asked why he didn't list fear as the fourth, because psychotherapy tends to see neurotic fear as the primary source of mental illness. Why didn't the Buddha have the same understanding?

Because he saw that fear has its uses. It's not always unskillful. If you go into a forest, it's right to be fearful. If you weren't fearful, you'd get complacent and careless. You could die. When you think about your own mortality—how fragile your life is, how fragile your health is, how fleeting your youth is—it's right to feel a certain amount of fear for the future: How are you going to fare when aging, illness, and death hit you? Think of the Buddha when he was still a young prince, and how he saw an old person, a sick person, a dead person. Think of the fear he felt in realizing that all of the areas in which he looked for happiness in life were subject to aging, illness, and death as well.

The feeling he felt on realizing that is called *samvæga*, which is sometimes translated as urgency, sometimes as a sense of dismay. But it can also be translated as terror: looking into the abyss and seeing you're about to fall into it. But the story doesn't stop there. The fourth person he saw was a forest mendicant. And the feeling he felt on seeing the mendicant was *pasada*, confidence: If there's a way out, this is it.

This dynamic between terror and confidence informs all of the Buddha's teachings, all of the Buddha's practice. Which means that a sense of fear is a legitimate part of the practice. It's a legitimate motivation for wanting to get your mind to settle down, for wanting to gain some insight into why you are suffering. You realize that if you don't gain control over your mind, then when aging, illness, and death come, you'll be at a total loss. At the same time, you have the confidence that if the mind *is* trained, then you can handle these things and not suffer.

So fear is a legitimate reason for coming to the practice. In fact, it's probably the most legitimate of all. We don't like the feeling of fear. The experience of fear is very uncomfortable. We feel small, weak, and threatened. This feeling can become unskillful when it gets mixed up with greed, aversion, and delusion. But a clear-sighted sense of fear combined with confidence that there is a way out can actually get you on the path.

This combination of fear and confidence is what translates into what the Buddha said is the root of all skillful behavior: heedfulness. You realize that there are dangers, but if you're careful, you can avoid them. If the dangers were inevitable, there'd be no reason to be heedful, for nothing you might do could make any difference. If there were no dangers at all, there'd be no reason to be heedful, either. But there *are* dangers in life. And it turns out that the dangers lie not so much in aging, illness, and death, but in the way we think about things. Our greed, aversion, and delusion: These are the dangers. But the care with

which we learn how to manage our thoughts, our words, and our deeds provides the way out.

So heedfulness reminds us of the dangers but also says, “If you’re careful, if you’re mindful, if you’re alert, if you’re discerning, you can gain release from those dangers.” That’s why we’re here meditating, learning how to train the mind so that it can recognize greed, anger, and delusion when they come. A large part of the problem is that we don’t recognize these qualities for what they are because delusion by definition can’t see itself; often it gets mixed up with the greed and the anger so we don’t recognize them either.

To get past that, you have to learn how to observe your own mind to sense what you’re doing that’s skillful, and what you’re doing that’s not. And to do that you have to observe your thoughts to see where they lead: to pleasure or pain. This is something we don’t normally do. We prefer to get involved in a thought world, totally *in* that world, trying to shape it whatever way we like. Then, for one reason or another, we drop that, move to another one, and then to another one. It’s like hopping trains. If you’ve ever tried to trace the trains of your thought, you know that they’re a lot more complicated than the railroad network here in America. You hop on a train of thought and find yourself in Burma, England, in the middle of Russia, up to the North Pole, down to the South Pole, out to Mars and Saturn, with brief stops along the way when you’re feeling hungry, tired, or hot.

It’s back-and-forth all over the place. And when our thoughts are totally out of control like this, no wonder they cause suffering. They can latch onto any object and worry it to death—and worry us to death. Unless the mind is trained, it has very little ability to step back and see what’s going on. You need to learn how to see where your thoughts go. In other words, you step out of the thought and see it as a part of a causal process. This thought leads to that reaction, that reaction leads to that thought, that thought leads to that reaction, and so on. To get out of these trains of thought, you also want to see how each thought gets put together. Why do thoughts arise to begin with?

When you understand these processes, then you can step back and—when you notice that a particular thought is leading toward suffering—you can drop it. You can disband it. The more alert, the more mindful you are, the more quickly you can do this until you get to the point where there’s just a brief stirring of a thought—even before it becomes a coherent thought—and you can zap it. You recognize that it’s going to go off in an unskillful direction and you stop it in its tracks by breathing right through the little knot or bundle of energy around which the thought was about to coalesce.

These are some of the skills you develop as you meditate. This is one of the reasons why we start with the breath. We start by thinking about the breath, because if you keep your thoughts concerned with something right here in the present moment, you can start to see the processes of thinking, what’s called fabrication, in action. The breath is called bodily fabrication. It’s what helps to create your sense of the body, the way you feel the body from within. And then you combine that with directed thought and evaluation, which are called verbal fabrication. In other words, you keep directing your thoughts to the breath and then you evaluate it: How does this breath feel? Is it comfortable? If it’s not comfortable, how can you make it better?

This brings in the other level of fabrication, which is mental fabrication: feelings and perceptions. Your perceptions are the labels you apply to things. In the case of the breathing process, this has to do with how you perceive what's going on when you breathe. When you visualize the breathing process to yourself, what is that visualization like? Is it helpful or does it actually cause harm? If you think of the body as a bellows—pulling the breath in, pushing it out—it's going to make the breathing process tedious, tiresome. If you learn how to perceive the breathing process more as an energy flow, not just the air in and out of the lungs, but the quality of the energy in the body as a whole—from the top of the head down to the face, down to the torso and down to the legs, and down the shoulders and out the arms—then the breathing is more pleasurable. The whole body is involved in this quality of breath, breathing, energy flow.

The body is wired in such a way that it can actually pick up energy from within itself, one part feeding another. The energy doesn't have to come in with the air. In fact, the air coming in and out is simply a byproduct of the energy flow in the body. Try holding that perception in mind and see what it does for the breathing. See which parts of the body's energy can feed the parts that feel starved. If that gets too complicated, just get back to directing your thoughts to the in-and-out breath, evaluating the in-and-out breath, and leave it at that. But as you get more sensitive to the full process of fabrication, you begin to realize what you're doing is creating a thought world here that includes all forms of fabrication: breath, which is bodily fabrication; directed thought and evaluation—verbal fabrication; and your feelings and perceptions—mental fabrication. They're all right here.

When they're all right here, you're in a better position to see how thoughts and emotions form, how they disintegrate, where they lead. Because it's inevitable as you're trying to focus on the breath that other things will come up. In the beginning you realize this only after they've taken you far away. You find yourself on the coast of Norway: "How did I get here?" But in the beginning, don't try to trace it back just yet. Just say, "Okay, I've got to go back to the breath." And fortunately you don't have to travel every inch of the way from Norway back here. Just drop Norway and you're here, back with the breath. With the next thought you're in Africa. Okay, drop that, and come back to the breath. With the next thought you're thinking about tomorrow's meal: Drop that, come back to the breath.

An unskillful reaction to all this is to get frustrated. The skillful reaction is to realize that this is what the mind's been doing all along, so it's going to take time to change its habits. The important lesson to draw is not to be surprised when the mind wanders off like that. Learn to anticipate it. You realize, "Okay, it's going to wander off again, so watch for the warning signs." How does that happen? A sudden curtain falls over the mind and, when the curtain is raised, you're off someplace else, as in a play. The curtain drops on Act One and when it rises again, you're in Act Two, off someplace else. How and why does the mind hide these things from itself? And how do you know that it's about to happen?

When you can anticipate that it's about to happen, you'll notice it's because of a sense of irritation or boredom or antsiness in the mind. Even though you're standing with the breath, the mind is beginning to look someplace else. When you can catch that happening, remind yourself that it's a sign the breath isn't interesting and comfortable enough. Start asking yourself more questions about

the breath. How could it be more comfortable? What kind of breathing would feel really, really good, gratifying, refreshing right now? You can ask the different parts of the body. “Hand, what kind of breathing would feel good for you? Left hand, right hand, stomach, legs, chest, abdomen: What kind of breath would *you* like?” And then let them breathe in whatever way they like.

The more interesting the breathing process—the more you can see the good impact it’s having on the body—then the less likely that the mind will wander off. And the more easily it’ll come back. At the same time, you’re learning some important lessons about how the mind creates thought worlds, and how it creates suffering in the process. This way you can learn how not to engage in those processes, developing the skills that will protect the mind from its own worst habits.

So as you’re practicing breath meditation like this, you’re doing something concrete about all your realistic fears: If death comes, aging comes, illness comes, if somebody drops you off in the middle of nowhere in the dark, how can you keep your mind under control so you don’t suffer? By doing what you’re practicing right now. You’re giving yourself some concrete skills that can underlie a realistic sense of confidence that you can manage your mind, that you can learn how to train the mind, regardless of the situation. This combination of fear and confidence constitutes the heedfulness that underlies the whole path. You become heedful to try to develop skillful qualities, i.e., qualities of mind that will lead to good results, leading you away from suffering; and to abandon and avoid unskillful qualities, the ones that cause suffering. If you develop your mindfulness, your alertness, your concentration, you can do this.

So fear isn’t necessarily a bad thing. It’s an important part of wisdom, recognizing that there are dangers in life. It’s a necessary function of the mind, anticipating that dangers are going to happen. The important thing is not to let the fear get tied up in greed, aversion, or delusion. You want to bring more mindfulness, more clarity to the issues you fear, and to gain more skill in the qualities that will help you avoid those dangers.

That’s the important message of the Buddha’s teaching. After he saw the forest mendicant, he became a forest mendicant himself to test and see if the confidence he had placed in that way of living was really well placed. And his awakening proved that it was: It is possible to find a happiness that’s not touched by aging, illness, death, or separation. And as the Buddha said, this realization came not through any special qualities on his part. It came through developing qualities of mind that we all have, that we all can develop, such as ardency, alertness, and resolution, but especially heedfulness: the skillful sort of fear that can get you on the path and see you through to the end.

So don’t hate your fears or fear your fears. Learn how to educate them. When they’re educated and trained, they’re part of the path to the end of suffering. This is part of the Buddha’s genius: He took things that many of us don’t like about the mind, things that actually cause trouble in the mind, and learned how to tame them, to train them, so that they actually become part of the path to the end of suffering. In this way, you can reach a place in the mind where there really is no more reason to fear. As Ven. Ananda said, you use desire to come to the end of desire. In the same way, you can use fear, treating it wisely, to bring yourself to the end of fear. And as it turns out, that’s the only way you can get there.

Medicine – Timely & Timeless

September 18, 2008

The Buddha often compared himself to a doctor. And the Dhamma was his medicine. When we think about this analogy, it's important to remind ourselves that the Buddha was not a doctor in a modern hospital. You didn't go to him for a shot. He was a traditional doctor, and traditional medicine is a lot more strategic than modern medicine is. The Canon gives us a picture of Jivaka, the Buddha's own personal physician, telling how he became an expert doctor, and it gives us a good idea of the kind of doctor the Buddha had in mind. Even though part of Jivaka's knowledge covered the medicinal uses of every plant he encountered, that wasn't the entirety of his skill. A lot of his expertise lay in his strategies: how to deal with difficult patients, how to treat difficult diseases.

So when the Buddha was saying he was a doctor, he was saying that he was very strategic. When he spoke, it wasn't just a question of saying what's true. That was just the first question he'd ask before deciding to say something: Is it true? He also made sure that what he'd say was beneficial, and that it was timely. In other words, his words were designed to have a specific effect, taking the circumstances into consideration to see if this was the right time and the right place to say that particular truth to get the desired effect.

This is why when Anathapindika—who was a stream-enterer and would seem to be qualified to know—was asked what kind of views the Buddha had, said, "I don't know entirely what views the Buddha has." This was because he realized that when the Buddha taught, he taught strategically. His words didn't necessarily encompass the entirety of his views. So when you read that the Buddha saw the world in this way, or he thought this, he thought that, you have to ask yourself, "To whom was he saying that, in what situation, under what conditions?" Because as a doctor he had to be strategic.

If you've ever had traditional medicinal treatments, you know that they're a lot more varied and strategic than what you'd get in most modern medicine. I've known a couple of cases where a traditional doctor would treat one disease by actually inducing another disease. Once the first disease had been turned into the second disease, then he could knock off the second disease. What this means is that sometimes you take a particular medicine to induce new symptoms, and then at a certain point in the treatment you have to drop that medicine and take up something else to treat the new symptoms. Some medicines you might take all the way through the treatment. But with others, once the medicine has to be changed, you can't touch the first medicine. Or in the course of taking the first medicine, you can't yet touch the second one.

So when you look at the Buddha's teachings, you have to ask yourself: Which of the teachings apply across the board and which are designed for a particular stage in the practice? For example, the Buddha makes heavy use of perceptions. He says that we suffer because of our misperceptions of things, seeing constancy in what's inconstant, pleasure in what's painful, self in what's not-self, and attractiveness in what's really unattractive. But he doesn't then just go and say,

“Simply turn your perceptions around and that’s that. The problem is solved.” That’s not how it works. The solution is more indirect.

Before you take up the three perceptions of inconstancy, stress and not-self, he has you develop other perceptions first—in particular the perceptions that lead the mind to concentration. While you’re here practicing concentration, focus in on your breath. What keeps you with the breath? A perception, a mental label that says “breath.” And a lot of the concentration practice is learning how to gain a perception of breath that you can hold in mind for long periods of time with a sense of ease, a sense of wellbeing. You test different perceptions of the breath to see which ones hold—in other words, which ones you can stick with.

This would seem to go against the perception of inconstancy, and it does. You’re actually looking for a perception you can hold onto as constant. You want to see the breath as something consistent and pleasant you can stay with. For example, if you see the in-breath and the out-breath as two radically different things, it’s going to be hard to stay with them comfortably because you have to keep switching back and forth between the two perceptions. But if you see the breath energy as something present in the body all the time, try to hold that perception in mind. You’ll come to sense the breathing process in a different way. The breath is always there, it’s just a matter of letting the in-breath meld with what’s already there. Then you check to see whether “what’s there” is getting pumped in too full or squeezed out too much.

When you see breath energy in a constant way, it’s a lot easier to adjust the breath in a way that feels right, feels healthy, feels nourishing. You can gain a sense of fullness without feeling stuffed. When you breathe out, you can begin to sense the point where you’ve breathed out too much: You’re squeezing the breath energy, depleting yourself of breath energy in ways you don’t need to.

For the time being, you simply want to hold onto that perception of the breath as constant and pleasant, something you can gain some control over. Use the three perceptions only when you find the mind being pulled away from the breath to other things. You look at the happiness, the pleasure that comes from chasing after those other things, and you learn to see it as less constant than the pleasure that comes in staying with the breath: more stressful, less under your control.

So at this stage in treating your illness, your primary focus is on constancy, on seeing the breath as always there. Ajaan Lee says that you want to see what’s constant in what’s inconstant. If you see everything as inconstant, he says, you’re missing some important aspects of the training. The example he gives is symbolic: Your lower lip has never turned into your upper lip. That’s something constant about your lower lip. Your eye has never turned into an ear. That’s something constant about your eye. In the same way, there are some aspects of the breath energy in the body that really are constant. As long as you’re alive, there will be breath energy in the body.

And you can learn to use that fact to your advantage. Just stick with that perception of breath and see how the underlying breath energy in the body goes through small fluctuations. You hold onto the idea that breath is constantly there, simply that it’s sometimes stuffed in too full, sometimes squeezed out until it’s too depleted. But you can learn to adjust the rate of your in-breath and out-breath, to see the in-ness and the out-ness as secondary and the presence of breath energy in the body as primary, the given you hold onto.

That's how you use perception at this stage in the game. When your concentration is solid enough, then you can start using the three perceptions to take the concentration itself apart. But until you've reached that stage, you don't want to think in those terms. If you start out with three perceptions and try to use them as your medicine to treat everything that comes along, it's very hard to get the mind into concentration.

So realize that there are stages in this treatment. Your mind is sick. What's it sick with? Greed, anger, and delusion. And this is the treatment. It has its different stages. You try to get as constant and easeful and controlled a state of mind as you can. You're actually fighting against those three perceptions. But it's only when you fight against a truth that you know how true it is, how far it's true, and where its limitations are.

So remind yourself that you're engaged in a strategy here. Don't try to jump the gun, wanting to go straight to the three perceptions to get everything done with so you can get on with your life. The practice has its rhythms, just as the treatment of a disease has its rhythms. Sometimes you might want to ask the doctor ahead of time, "How many months do I have to stay in this stage of the treatment before I switch it around?" He'll probably say, "Well, it really depends on how long the body takes to respond." And it's the same with concentration practice. How many years does it take? Ajaan Fuang would often say, "Don't ask. Just do what needs to be done." When the mind gets ripe, whether it's fast or slow, the important thing is that it's ripe—ripe for insight, ripe for other stages of using perception.

In the meantime, don't try to second-guess the Buddha. If this is your stage of treatment, stick with it. Trust that the Buddha was an expert doctor. There are a lot of paradoxes in his strategies, but the strategies have worked for more than 2,500 years. They deal with elements that are universal in all people's minds regardless of where you come from, what age you live in. That's why the Buddha said the Dhamma is timeless. It's not something that was true only in the time of the Buddha. It's true across time. The time-sensitive part is simply which stage you're in, in the treatment of your disease. So try to apply the Buddha's teachings in a timely way. That's how you'll finally get to the ultimate timelessness that the whole training is aimed at: total freedom from disease.

Preparing to Die Well

February 20, 2009

There's a famous passage in the Canon where a young monk, Ven. Ratthapala, is visited by King Koravya. The king asks him, "Why did you ordain? After all, you've had a lot of wealth, you had no loss in your family, no health problems. You've got everything a young man looking forward to the pleasures of sensuality can hope for. So why did you ordain?" Ratthapala replies that he had reflected on four Dhamma summaries from the Buddha. These four summaries are mentioned nowhere else in the Canon, but they were lessons Ratthapala claimed he learned from the Buddha. One, the world is swept away. It does not endure. Two, the world offers no shelter. There is no one in charge. Three, the world has nothing of its own. One has to pass on, leaving everything behind. And four, the world is insufficient, insatiable, a slave to craving.

Then Ratthapala explains them to the king. The first three he explains with reference to issues of aging, illness, and death. *The world is swept away.* The king says, "What does that mean?" In response, Ratthapala asks him, "When you were young, were you strong?" The king says, "Yes, I was strong in arm, strong in leg. In fact sometimes I think I had the strength of two men." "How about now?" The king replies, "I'm now eighty. All my strength is gone. In fact, sometimes I think of putting my foot one place and it goes someplace else." So the first summary has to do with aging. It also has to do with *anicca*: inconstancy. Impermanence. The world is swept away. Things keep changing, changing, changing all the time. And as for a body, it develops for a while and then starts to age and just falls apart.

The second summary: *The world has no shelter. There is no one in charge.* Ratthapala illustrates this with the truth of illness, and it's a truth about suffering as well. He asks the king, "Do you have a recurring illness?" The king says, "Yes, I have a wind illness"—back in those days, they believed that if you had shooting pains and cramps in the body, it was caused by a disturbance of the wind element. "Sometimes I'm in so much pain that people gather around me in anticipation of my death." So Ratthapala asks him, "Can you order the people who've gathered around you to share out the pain so that you feel less pain?" The king replies, "No, of course not. Even though I'm king, I'm not in charge of the pain. I have to put up with whatever pain there is." There is no one in charge. So that puts together the teachings on illness and *dukkha*: stress and suffering.

The third summary: *The world has nothing of its own. One has to pass on leaving everything behind.* The king says, "What do you mean? I have stores of gold and silver. So how can you say the world has nothing of its own?" Ratthapala says, "Can you take those stores of gold and silver with you when you die, or do you have to leave them behind?" "Oh, of course, I have to leave them." So the third summary has to do with *anatta*—not-self—and death.

So you see in these first three summaries a parallel between, on the one side, the three characteristics or three perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self; and on the other side the three deva messengers: aging, illness, and death. Death is the big not-self teaching. There are so many things we hold onto in life that, as

death comes, we have to let go. This is one of the reasons why meditation involves so much practice in letting go, letting go, letting go: because most of us tend to hold on, hold on, hold on. And yet no matter how tightly we hold onto things, they're going to be ripped from our grasp as we die. So it's best to learn how to let go skillfully beforehand. Otherwise we'll be stuck with that fourth Dhamma summary: *Being insatiable, finding things insufficient, we're a slave to craving*. Craving is what makes us pass on to another life, where we try to latch on again.

The Buddha compared the process of dying to a flame leaping from a house afire to another house next door. In order to make the leap, it has to depend on the wind element in the air—nowadays we'd call it oxygen—as its support as it goes from one house to the next. In the case of dying, craving is the support that leads from one lifetime to the next. The Buddha doesn't talk about *what* makes the leap from lifetime to lifetime, because we're not responsible for the what. Instead, he talks in great detail about the act of leaping itself—*how* the process happens—because that *is* our responsibility. It's something we can see happening in the present moment, something we can understand to the point where we know how to choose not to participate in it. We can choose not to fall for it again and again, craving for things that are not really ours. This is why we have to see the world is empty, for otherwise we fall under the power of the King of Death: the desire to keep on getting reborn again. Think about that: The desire to be reborn is the King of Death, lording over our hearts. To gain our freedom, to get out of our slavery, we've got to learn how to let go.

And the letting go has to be very thorough. There's a passage where Anathapindika is dying. Ven. Sariputta comes to see him and starts telling him how to let go. First you let go of the objects of your senses. Then you let go of the senses themselves. Then you let go of your consciousness of the senses, your consciousness of what's going on in your mind, your consciousness of consciousness itself: You let go of that, too. And Anathapindika starts to cry. He's never heard this teaching before. All those years he spent with the Buddha, yet the Buddha never mentioned it to him. There's a lot of controversy in the tradition as to why this was so. But the important point is that that's the teaching at the moment of death. You've got to learn how to let go, even of your consciousness of consciousness.

What is there left? Well, that's something you find out in the practice. This is why so many of the ajaans in Thailand refer to meditation as practice in dying: We gain practice in letting go and seeing for ourselves what's left when everything gets let go. But to gain practice in letting go, we need to do more than just let go. We also have to develop skillful qualities of mind. This is why the Buddha has four noble truths. If there were just one duty in the practice—whatever arises, just let go, let go—you'd only need one noble truth. But there are some things you have to comprehend, some things you have to let go of, some things you have to realize, some things you have to develop before you can finally let go of them all.

In terms of the developing, you work on the precepts. In one sense, this is a form of letting go. You let go of your desire to do and say unskillful things. But it's also a form of developing. You have to develop a strong conviction that the sacrifices you might have to make in observing the precepts are really worth making, that there are some things of greater value to be gained by letting go of

the pleasure derived from those unskillful activities. Without that conviction, you can't change your unskillful habits. So you've got to develop that conviction, keep it strong.

Then there's concentration, which also involves both letting go and developing. The developing involves finding a good solid center inside and maintaining it, looking after it. You work with the breath to make the breath comfortable so that it's easier to stay here, and you work with your perception of the breath so you can calm things down and make things more and more quiet inside, both in terms of what's called the physical fabrication of the breathing, and the mental fabrications that are the feelings and perceptions. Sometimes there's a perception of light, sometimes there are perceptions of beings coming to visit you, all the *nimittas* or signs or visions we hear about: You've got to let those go, calm them down, because they can be disturbances.

Back when I was studying with Ajaan Fuang, there were times when his lay students would sit meditating with him, and some of them would start having visions. He had this uncanny ability, as many of them said, that within a second or two after a vision had appeared, he'd ask, "What's going on in your meditation over there?" They'd say, "Wow, there's a vision." Then he'd tell them what to do with the vision. Of course a lot of people listening in were wondering, "When am I going to have *my* vision?" But as he explained, it wasn't because the vision was something special that he gave it so much attention; it was because it was an obstacle you had to get past. It's one kind of perception you have to let go of, to calm things down inside.

But there are also perceptions you have to develop about how the breathing process actually works in the body—especially if you find breathing laborious. If it takes a lot of effort to breathe in, much of that has to do with the perception of what you're doing as you breathe. If your perception is that all you have to breathe through is the nose, it can be very restrictive. Think instead of all the pores in your skin opening up, so that the breath can come in and out of the pores. And there are channels of breath in the body, through which things can be connected. Think of every little cell in the body being connected, every little cell. And the breath energy is just waiting outside the body to come in. You don't have to pull it in. Just open up the pores and it'll come in on its own. If you hold these perceptions in mind, they change the way you breathe. The breathing gets a lot calmer. The mind gets a lot calmer. You're calming down what are called mental fabrications.

You can also calm down the feeling side of mental fabrication as well. Sometimes there are strong feelings of rapture or thrill going up and down the spine. You get goose bumps, intense feelings of fullness as if you're going to drown. Sometimes it's very pleasant and other times very unpleasant, as if you're losing control. You start to pulsate or throb, and when that happens you're certainly not calming the mind down. So remind yourself that there are many levels of breath energy in the body. There's the gross level, which is what you're focused on, but there are more subtle levels you can tune-in to, like tuning from a radio station playing rock music to one that's playing something very quiet, peaceful, and soothing. So even though the waves of the rock station are still here in the air, you're not focusing on them. You're focusing on the radio waves coming from the station playing Arvo Pärt: quiet, calm, soothing music. It's the same with the breath, the same with the feelings that can come from the

breath. Try to tune in to the more subtle feelings of stillness and ease, of neither pleasure nor pain. Tune in to that sense of equanimity. That way you calm down the mental fabrication.

It's by holding onto these more subtle perceptions, cultivating and developing them, that you're able to let go of grosser things. Which means that the path begins by combining developing and letting go. Even though eventually we try to let go of all states of becoming, we do that first by developing a skillful state of becoming—right concentration of the mind—which gives a standpoint from which we can gain practice in letting go of grosser pleasures, grosser attachments.

The main attachments you let go when you're developing concentration are the hindrances, beginning with sensual desire. That's a big one. As the Buddha said, the reason we're afraid of death is because we're afraid we're going to have to let go of our sensual pleasures. And we *will* have to let go of our sensual pleasures. The problem is if we haven't had any practice in letting go of sensual pleasures, our craving will go straight to where we hope to find more sensual pleasures after death. And who knows where that may be? Ajaan Mun comments that, during one stage in his many past lifetimes, he got fixated on the sensual pleasures of being a dog. For 500 lifetimes he was a dog because he was stuck on that level of sensuality.

Ajaan Fuang was once visited by some people who'd been studying Abhidhamma. They had heard he was a good teacher, but they didn't know what he taught. He was there in Bangkok so they went to see him and asked what he taught. He said, "Well, sit down, close your eyes, focus on your breath." They said, "Oh no, no. We can't do that. If you focus on the breath, you'll get stuck in jhana and be reborn as Brahmas." Ajaan Fuang replied, "What's wrong being reborn as a Brahma? Non-returners are reborn as Brahmas. And at any rate, being reborn as a Brahma is better than being born as a dog."

The point he was getting at is that non-returners have gone beyond sensual attachment, sensual passion. Dogs are still attached to sensuality. And even though these people had learned Abhidhamma, had done all sorts of vipassana, they still were coming back to their sensual passions. They could be headed back to dogdom. The only way to avoid that fate is to let go of sensual passion, and the only way to do that is to develop another alternative to pain aside from sensual pleasure. Practicing right concentration is precisely what gives you that alternative, another place to go. As the Buddha once said, if you haven't found another source of pleasure better than sensual pleasure, then even though you know the drawbacks of sensuality, you're just going to keep going back to it, back to it, back to it.

So you've got two duties here: to provide an alternative to sensual pleasure and to see the drawbacks of sensuality, to see why you go there, to see that the allure of sensuality is really false and deceptive. It pulls you into doing things and getting obsessed with things that have no real value and can actually harm you. They dull the mind, make it intoxicated. As the Buddha said, this kind of pleasure is blameworthy, causes harm to yourself, harm to other people, and in addition to the bad kamma that often comes with getting involved in that kind of stuff, the mind gets dull, dull, dulled. Your vision gets restricted—because when you're attracted to something of that sort, it's usually to certain details. You focus on some things and willfully ignore all the things right next to them. You focus

on the skin and forget that just a millimeter under the skin is some pretty disgusting stuff. As you go deeper and deeper in, it gets even worse, right there in that very same body.

Then you turn around and focus on what the sensual passion does to your mind: Everything gets very dulled and narrowed down. But if you don't know anything better than the pleasure you get from that, that's the pleasure you keep going back to.

There's a story they tell in Thailand of a dog who was changed into a prince. A princess met him, fell in love with him, and prevailed on her parents to let her marry him even though they didn't know him. He looked like a prince, acted like a prince, but they didn't know what kingdom he came from. But she was really in love with him, so she convinced her parents that he was a good prince worthy of being her husband. Yet this prince, even though he looked like a prince on the outside, still had the passions of a dog. One day the princess found him in the bathroom eating shit out of the toilet, as dogs do in Thailand. So of course he was thrown out of the palace. Went back to his life as a dog.

That's a lot like what our mind is like. We go for the refined bliss of concentration for a while, then we turn around and go looking for the shit in the toilet. So you've got to see the drawbacks of those passions. They do have their allure, but you've got to weigh their allure against their drawbacks and try to develop this alternative source of pleasure so that you can have someplace to stand and can let go of that passion. As the Buddha said, when you reach non-returning, you've mastered concentration at the same time that you've been able to get beyond sensual passion. That guarantees that you're not going to go for dogdom or any of the other sensual-passion realms. But still there's more to let go of. Even though the Brahma realm is a very refined state, refined states don't last as long as the Brahmas think they do.

There are many instances in the suttas where Brahmas are totally deluded on this point. They think they've gone beyond anything the Buddha knows, so the Buddha has to go up to their Brahma heavens and subdue their pride, to show them that they still have more to let go of, that there is something the Buddha himself has gone beyond but they haven't. In one of the suttas, the Buddha challenges a Brahma, Baka Brahma, to disappear from him, but Baka Brahma can't do it. The Buddha sees him wherever he tries to hide. The Buddha then succeeds in disappearing from Baka Brahma, and states in a loud voice that he has found a level of consciousness that Baka Brahma hasn't known, that's not known through the senses, that's not experienced through sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, or ideas sensed through the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, or mind. It's beyond the six senses entirely.

It's only when you hit that, that you're really safe. Which means you have to learn how to let go of all the senses.

So you try to let go first of sensuality and then of the senses entirely, the contact based on the senses, the feelings based on that contact, and then the consciousness of all these things. It's a very radical letting go. But before you can do that, you've got to develop mindfulness, concentration, alertness: all the qualities of the path. Then when the path is done, it gets let go of, too. Like having a set of tools that you use to work on the mind: When the mind has been fully shaped, fully developed, you put the tools down.

This is how we prepare for death so we can learn how to do it well. As Ajaan Lee said, most people die without any rhyme or reason, flailing around and latching onto whatever the mind happens to think of in those last moments. And it's capable of latching onto all kinds of stuff if you haven't trained it. If you *have* trained it, you have more control over it. It's the same as when you're meditating. As you see the mind flickering off to yet another thought—which develops into a little thought world, a little becoming—you learn how to catch it and stop the process more and more quickly.

Then you realize that this skill is not just a matter of mindfulness and alertness but also of your sense of values: You have to undo the desire to go into those thought worlds, to see them as interesting or worthwhile. You've got to train the mind so that it doesn't get pulled in, doesn't get hoodwinked by flashy lights and sensuous curves and all the allure of these different worlds. This is why the skill of discernment is also a matter both of developing and letting go. You have to develop the right sense of values so that you can really let go of unskillful things. As you develop this skill in your meditation, you're closer and closer to having a skill that's capable of facing death and handling it well, so that you have your protection.

Death is going to happen regardless, but you can protect your mind from dying in an unskillful way. You do that by learning to live in a skillful way in all your actions, in all your words, and in the way you handle your mind. So fortunately, learning how to die skillfully is no different from learning how to live skillfully. You cover both issues while you're here as you practice.

So try to be heedful. "Heedful" doesn't mean simply being diligent and busy with the practice. It also means having a strong sense that our actions make all the difference, and that we don't have any time to waste. We have to focus our energies on the areas that really will help us in the event, say, that a little blood clot starts getting the wanderlust, roaming through your bloodstream, wandering here, wandering there and finally—whoops!—gets lodged in your heart and that's it. Or that huge earthquake they keep warning us about: These things can happen at any time. So you've got to be prepared.

Heedfulness means seeing that there are dangers here in the mind, and it really behooves you to work on them as quickly as you can, to maintain your focus and not let it get distracted off into ways of wasting what little time you've got. You've got this breath, this breath, this breath. As the Buddha said, if you're on top of each breath, realizing, "I'm fortunate that I've got this one more breath to practice the Buddha's teachings": That's when you're counted as heedful. So don't let this breath be wasted.

Equanimity Isn't Nibbana

June 16, 2009

As we sit here meditating, we're engaged in a type of kamma. It's called the kamma that puts an end to kamma. But this doesn't mean that it burns away old kamma. Old kamma doesn't burn. One of the great ironies in the history of Buddhism is that some of the teachings the Buddha explicitly attacked are nowadays attributed to the Buddha himself. One of these is the idea that simply by learning how not to react to anything in the present moment, you're not just refraining from creating any new sankharas, you're also burning away old sankharas, old kamma.

But there's a passage where the Buddha actually attacks the idea that you can burn off old kamma. In fact he gets quite satirical about it. He goes to see some Jains who believed that they could burn off old kamma by submitting themselves to different kinds of austerities, that the pain in the austerity was the burning of old kamma. He said, "Can you measure how much kamma you burned today? How much kamma you burned yesterday? Do you actually see the kamma burning?" Of course the answer is No. "And what about the pain caused by your austerities? What's that?" They replied, "This is just the old kamma burning up." He said, "Have you noticed that when you don't do your austerities, there's no pain?"

Here he's making the point that when you experience the results of kamma, it's not just the results of past kamma. It's also the results of your present decisions. If the Jains didn't practice austerities here and now, they wouldn't be experiencing those pains here and now.

In fact, your present actions are the most important part of the kammic mix. This is the lesson of the kamma of meditation. Our present decisions, what we're going to do with the mind, what we're going to focus on, how we develop it: That's the kamma we witness as we meditate. So you want to focus on doing things that help you understand what's going on in the mind right now. What is this process of intention? How does the mind create an experience of pleasure, how does it create an experience of pain, out of the raw material of old kamma?

This is why right view is at the beginning of the path, because right view itself begins with the understanding that our actions are important, and that the intention in the action is what makes all the difference. This means that issues of kamma are issues of the mind. You look into the mind to see it's doing, to see where you're adding any unnecessary element of stress. The Buddha located that unnecessary element in craving, and specifically in three types of craving. The first is craving for sensuality, and here sensuality doesn't necessarily mean sensual pleasures. The Buddha makes the point that our intentions for sensuality are what we're really attached to. The *idea* of sensual pleasure, the activity of thinking about sensuality, is a lot more attractive than the actual pleasure itself. You can obsess about the idea over and over and over again, whereas the actual pleasure, once you've experienced it, quickly grows stale and is gone. Then you have to find another one to replace it. But ordinarily we don't get so upset about

replacing it because then the new pleasure provides more fodder for our sensual obsessions, and as long as we can keep on obsessing, we feel we're okay.

So our craving for sensuality, this tendency of the mind to keep obsessing about, planning about, how it's going to experience different sensual pleasures: That's what we're really attached to. We really cling to that, feed on that. It's our fodder. So that's the first kind of craving.

Second is the craving to become something—in other words, to take on an identity in a specific world of experience. The identity often plays into the world, the world plays into the identity. Whatever identity you build around a desire will then determine the parts of the world you pay attention to, in terms of whether they help or hinder you from attaining that desire. At the same time, whichever world you're thinking about right now—whether it's the world of sports, politics, or your family—will then determine the kind of identity you want to take on in that world. And we crave these things. We feel diminished if we're unable to assume an identity in a particular world that we think is important, interesting, or attractive.

And then there's craving for non-becoming—in other words, the desire to destroy whatever identity you've had, whatever world you may be experiencing, when you tire of it.

These three types of craving are the activities that add the unnecessary suffering. People sometimes assume that you can go beyond these three types of craving simply by learning to be nonreactive. But I've never seen the texts list right non-reactivity as a factor of the path. Instead, the path is largely about doing: developing and letting go. You want to develop skillful qualities and abandon unskillful ones. Like right now: We're developing right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. These are *sankharas*: things we do, things we fabricate.

Sometimes non-reactivity gets inserted into the path under the factor of right mindfulness. But the Buddha never defined mindfulness as non-reactivity. Mindfulness in his lexicon means the ability to keep something in mind. And there is such a thing as right mindfulness and wrong mindfulness. Wrong mindfulness is when you keep in mind desires that get you worked up about the world. Right mindfulness is when you take any of four frames of reference and keep them in mind as a basis for right concentration.

Now, when the Buddha teaches concentration, he does start out with non-reactivity or equanimity as a prerequisite. Before he teaches Rahula breath meditation, he tells him first to make his mind like earth. When disgusting things are thrown on the earth, the earth doesn't react. Then he adds, "Make your mind like water. Water doesn't get disgusted when it has to wash away disgusting things. Make your mind like fire. Fire doesn't get disgusted when it burns disgusting things. Make your mind like wind. Wind doesn't get disgusted when it blows disgusting things around." You try to make your mind imperturbable like the elements.

So here there *would* be an element of non-reactivity. But this non-reactivity is for the purpose of putting your mind in a position where it can observe things clearly, and in particular, to observe your actions and their results in a patient, reliable way. Because when you start working with the breath, you're not just looking at the breath in a nonreactive way. You're working with it, playing with

it, mastering it through experimenting with it. And you want to be able to judge the results of your experiments in a fair and accurate manner.

The Buddha once recommended to the monks that they practice breath meditation, and one of the monks said, "I already do that." The Buddha asked him, "What kind of breath meditation do you practice?" The monk said, "I learn how not to hanker after the past, not to hanker after the future, and to be equanimous toward the present, as I breathe in, as I breathe out." And the Buddha said, "Well, there is that kind of breath meditation, I don't deny it. But that's not how you get the most out of breath meditation." Then he went into the sixteen steps as the way you *do* get the most out of breath meditation.

Now, if you look carefully at those steps, you'll see that they involve a lot of willing, a lot of training of the mind to develop certain qualities. You don't just sit here and watch whatever breath comes up willy-nilly, or pretend that you're not playing any intentional role in shaping the breath. Instead, you're explicitly told to explore that intentional role, first by being aware of the whole body as you breathe in and breathe out, then by calming the breath, calming the effect that the breathing has on the body, calming the intentional element that goes into the breath, making it more and more refined so that you can give rise to a sense of ease and rapture.

Then you notice how these feelings of ease and rapture play a role in shaping the mind, and how your perception of the breath plays a role in shaping the mind. You try to calm the impact of that role, make it more refined. Then you see what the mind needs. Does it need to be gladdened? Does it need to be steadied? Does it need to be released from anything it's holding on to? How do you breathe in a way that helps accomplish that? How do you play with your perception of the breath, your perception of your feelings, in order to accomplish that? What other topics—like the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, or recollection of death—can you bring to mind to accomplish that? In other words, what kinds of physical, verbal, and mental fabrications can you master to bring the mind into balance?

These are all things you do with the breath, things you do with directed thought and evaluation, with feeling and perception. And the equanimity here is simply allowing you to observe clearly what's happening so you can do these things more effectively. In the process, you see more clearly what you're actually doing.

You're using the breath to feed the mind.

This is one of the underlying images throughout the Buddha's teachings: that the mind is hungry. This is why we suffer. We're hungry for form, feeling, perceptions, thought fabrications, and consciousness. We suffer because we cling to these things. The word for "clinging"—*upadana*—also means to take sustenance from something. You feed on things, and it's because you feed that you suffer. The Buddha's solution is not simply to say, "Well, just stop feeding because there's no really good food out there." That would be a very defeatist kind of teaching. And it wouldn't be very effective. It would be as if he were saying, "Okay, you're hungry, but you learn how not to be hungry by realizing there's no such thing as good food." That doesn't work with the body, and certainly doesn't work with the mind. The way to stop the mind from being hungry is to feed it so well that it's never hungry again.

This is where the analogy between the body and the mind breaks down. There's no way you could ever put the body in a position where it's totally free from hunger, but you *can* do that with the mind. And you do that not simply by learning how to accept things as unsatisfactory. You feed the mind with the good qualities you're developing. You work on your conviction, your persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment as healthy food for the mind.

These are qualities developed on the path that strengthen the mind. And especially discernment: understanding what you're doing, the results of what you're doing, seeing where the unnecessary stress is in all of this, so that you let go of whatever activities are causing that unnecessary stress. When you don't put unnecessary stress on the mind, you lessen its need to feed.

In the course of doing that, you run across something unexpected. As you let go of your attachments, you find that the mind really can touch something that's deathless. The Buddha calls it seeing the deathless with the body, or touching it with the body. It's a total experience. It's not just an idea. It totally replaces your experience of the body. And it totally satisfies your hunger.

With your first experience of it at stream-entry, you realize that this would satisfy hunger. However, only the arahants are totally satisfied. They have totally ended their hunger and, from that point on, can be truly equanimous about whatever arises at the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body, or the mind. Not because they have become defeatist, saying, "Well, there is really no happiness to be found, so I might as well give up and just accept the fact." It's because their hunger has truly been satisfied. The mind no longer feels any need to feed on anything at all. That's why they can be equanimous toward the other things that, in the past, they looked to for food. Now they've found a much better happiness that doesn't need to feed.

But to get there requires feeding the mind with a lot of mindfulness and concentration that can strengthen your discernment to see these things. The deathless is available at any time, but our discernment isn't refined enough, isn't precise enough, to detect it. This is why discernment has to be trained. This is why the path is a gradual one. But it does have its turning points, or its sudden drops. The Buddha's image is of the continental shelf off of India: a gradual slope and then a sudden drop. The sudden drop is when you detect the deathless. It's a sudden, total experience. And a lot of comprehension comes along with that. You know immediately: This is deathless; this is something that time can't touch, because it's outside of time.

So the comprehension is instantaneous. We work toward it by gradually refining our discernment. When the path reaches that point, the comprehension goes very deep, very suddenly. It gives a lot of satisfaction. That's why the arahants no longer hunger. Now, the arahants haven't burned off any past kamma, but beginning with the point of their awakening, they do relate to past kamma in a very different way. All kinds of things can come up from the past, and there can still be a lot of negative stuff in an arahant's experience. Ven. Mogallana, for instance, was beaten again and again and again before he finally died. He realized it was the result of an action in a past lifetime when he had killed his parents. *But* his mind wasn't harmed by this, his mind wasn't hurt by it, because he didn't create any suffering out of it.

As the Buddha once said, it's through making the mind expansive that you can greatly minimize the impact of any past bad kamma—expansive in terms of

the brahma-viharas: limitless goodwill, limitless compassion, limitless empathetic joy, limitless equanimity. And also expansive through what's called developing the body and developing the mind: in other words, learning how to make the mind so large that it isn't overcome by pleasure or overcome by pain. The arahant is totally able to do this with no effort, but we work on developing these skills in a gradual way by providing alternative places for the mind to stay.

In other words, when there's pain in one part of the body, you can stay with the comfortable sensations you develop through concentration in another part of the body. You can will yourself to some extent not to be overcome by these things, to be equanimous to these things, but that willing is impermanent and doesn't totally solve the problem. Only when you've reached the deathless do you have another source of pleasure that totally overwhelms the experience of pleasure and pain. It keeps you from being overwhelmed by ordinary pleasure or pain. This sort of equanimity comes from a much deeper source. It doesn't have to be willed, and so it's totally reliable.

This is why, from the outside, nibbana looks a lot like equanimity. There's a great deal of misunderstanding around this point. It looks like equanimity, but it's not. In fact, you have to go beyond all the various levels of equanimity—equanimity around the senses, the equanimity of all the highest levels of concentration—to a state of non-fashioning if you're even going to get to nibbana. One of the *results* of attaining nibbana is that you can be totally detached and equanimous toward the six senses, but as the Buddha said, nibbana itself is the ultimate happiness. He doesn't say it's the ultimate equanimity. It's the ultimate happiness. The arahant no longer hungers, because he or she is totally satisfied with a happiness that doesn't need to feed.

And at that point, kamma is ended. They say that the arahant continues to formulate intentions, but each intention is like a seed that's been burnt as soon as it's created. This is the only place where the Buddha talks about burning the intention. He says it's like taking a seed and then immediately burning it so that it doesn't sprout into anything else. How that happens, you'd have to be an arahant to know. But the only way you can get started in understanding the arahant's answer and developing the arahant's skill, is by really understanding what you're doing right now, understanding your present kamma. You can't learn how to have intentions that don't sprout until you've learned how your current intentions do sprout.

This is what we're doing as we practice meditation. We're trying to plant good intentions and then watch how they sprout. From that we learn how to give rise to more and more refined intentions, so that they give more and more refined sprouts. At the same time we gain a greater refinement in understanding how kamma actually happens. When you finally see through it, you'll know how to do it but without having it sprout.

So you can't simply will yourself to be nonreactive and hope that that will take care of everything—or even think that it's somehow burning off kamma—because the willing to be nonreactive is a kind of kamma itself. The correct willing here is in trying to develop right mindfulness, right concentration, all the right factors of the path, as skillfully as possible. And in developing these skills, you gain a lot of discernment. The things you know the most clearly are the things you do yourself.

This means that you should learn how to do this really, really skillfully, so you understand it through and through. You comprehend it to the point where you develop dispassion for it, and in developing dispassion, that's when you stop. You know how to stop because you know what you've been doing.

This is how the kamma of the path leads to the end of kamma. It teaches you to understand kamma so thoroughly that you can plant seeds that don't sprout. You don't have to suffer from your past kamma, and you're not suffering from present kamma. The mind is no longer hungry. So it doesn't feed on its kamma, past or present, because it's found the happiness that eliminates any further need to feed.

You Can't Eat the Buddha

August 7, 2008

When you come across a situation where a friend is in pain or suffering, in mental distress, and you can help the friend overcome the pain, get over the distress, it gives rise to a very good feeling in the heart. The problem is that there are other times when we're with other people who are in pain and we can't reach them.

This is especially true around issues of birth, illness, and death. Sometimes you have a newborn child and the child is crying and crying and crying. No matter what you do, the child won't stop. It seems hard to believe that there can be so much pain and anguish in such a little tiny body. But there it is. And you can't reach the child. Or when someone is very ill and demented, you often can't reach that person. They're in their own private world, suffering their own private pains and torments. And especially at death, there comes a point where even before the actual moment of death, you realize that the person is beyond you. You can't reach in and help, no matter how much you might want to.

That's when you realize the extent to which pain is a very private matter, the extent to which anguish and suffering are private matters. We'd like to think that we can help one another through these things, but there's a lot that each person can do only for him or herself. Even the Buddha couldn't save other people; there were many people he couldn't even teach. He taught only those who could be taught—in other words, those who were willing to take responsibility for their own sufferings.

The pain of aging, illness, and death is one of the first topics the Buddha brings up in his first sermon, which we chanted just now. And he says that our suffering doesn't come from a lack of help from other people; it comes from our own lack of skill inside. Our knowledge isn't skillful; our desires aren't skillful.

And this is something that only we can take care of ourselves, because no one can teach another person to be skillful. You can teach people how they might try to train themselves to be skillful, but you can't take your skill and put it in somebody else's head or hands. They have to learn how to observe from within what kind of thinking is skillful, what kind of acting, what kind of speaking is skillful, and what kind is not. If they find themselves engaged in unskillful habits, they've got to learn how to overcome those habits and replace them with more skillful habits. We can't do this for one another. It's a personal, individual matter.

This is why the Buddha taught the way he did. He had developed the skill, and he explained to other people how they could develop the skill as well. He acted as an example, he showed the way, but that was as far as he could go. From that point on, it was up to the people he taught to develop the skill on their own.

Someone once asked the Buddha why some people, when he taught them, got the results and gained awakening, while other people didn't. Was there something wrong with his teaching? Was he playing favorites, giving the right teaching to some and not to others? The Buddha responded, "Have you ever

given directions to someone on how to follow the road to Rajagaha from Nalanda?"

The man said, "Yes."

"And did everybody get there?"

"Well, some people didn't follow my instructions," the man said. "They went astray."

"Was it your fault that they went astray?"

The man said, "No. I gave the same instructions to everybody."

And the Buddha said it was the same in his case. He gave the right instructions to everyone. Some people followed them, some people didn't, but it was beyond his power to force them to.

In this way, the Buddha keeps throwing the practice back at us. It's up to us to deal with our own lack of skill, to figure out where our thoughts are unskillful, where our attitudes are unskillful, where the way we look at things is unskillful, and then make a change. He wants us to make ourselves skillful. He wants us to make ourselves strong.

The most common image at the front of every Buddhist meditation hall is of the Buddha sitting there meditating. He's not nailed to a cross. He doesn't offer himself as food. Basically he's showing us: This is how you learn how to feed yourselves so that you eventually reach the point where you don't need to feed anymore. You develop internal strengths: conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. These are qualities we all have to some extent, but we've got to learn how to strengthen them, and they in turn make the mind stronger.

So our food here isn't bread and wine. Our food is concentration. The Buddha compared the different levels of concentration to different types of food. The first jhana, he said, is like grass and water. As you work up through the other jhanas, you get rice, beans, and finally honey, sugar, and ghee. These are our foods on the path. They're foods we have to learn how to fix within ourselves. We have to become our own cooks. The ingredients are all here. It's simply a matter of putting them together and learning how to nourish ourselves with them.

So instead of promising us an unending source of food from outside, he's teaching us how to feed from within, strengthening the mind ultimately to a point where it doesn't need to feed anymore. When you're in that position, you're not the only one who benefits. The people around you benefit as well. You're no longer forcing them to provide you with the food you want.

I remember once hearing a Dhamma teacher saying he didn't want to live in a world where there was no suffering, because he wouldn't be able to exercise his compassion. He apparently didn't stop to think of what a selfish attitude that is. You want the gratification that comes from exercising your compassion, so you need other people who suffer. What kind of compassion is that? Ideally you should want a world where no one is suffering—where, as we chant every night, they can "look after themselves with ease." And the only way to do that is to teach people how to fix their own food and learn to be more skillful inside. Some people will want to comply and some people won't. That's where you have to develop equanimity. You don't grasp onto them saying, "Please stay here and suffer so I can feel good about being compassionate." That's just another way of saying, "Even though it hurts you to stay, please be here for me when I need you."

The Buddha's final nibbana was the opposite of that, and it was an amazing act of kindness. He showed us that the best thing a person can do is to find true happiness within and then get out of the food chain. That's the example he left for us. In effect, he was showing that your pursuit of true happiness is not something to be ashamed of. It's not a lowly or a childish or a hedonistic pursuit. It's something noble—because the pursuit of true happiness is not a grasping kind of pursuit. It involves developing qualities of wisdom, purity, compassion: the wisdom to realize that you're going to have to depend on yourself for your happiness, and that the happiness that's worth working toward is a long-term happiness, not a short-term. From that realization grows compassion: the understanding that other people want happiness, too, and if your happiness depends on their suffering, they're not going to let your happiness be long-term. They're going to try to cut it short. So if you want a long-term happiness, you can't harm other people. And then purity comes from actually looking at your actions—your thoughts, your words, and your deeds—to see where your action cause harm either for yourself or for others, and then learning how to avoid that harm.

So the pursuit of happiness, if you conduct it properly, leads to noble qualities in the mind. That way you become a refuge, both for yourself and for others. You join the noble Sangha and become a refuge to other people in the sense that you become an example to them as well, so they can learn how to feed and strengthen themselves. This is how the Dhamma is passed on.

So even though our pursuit may be for something very private and individual—the way we pursue this happiness, this skill that enables us not to suffer even through illness or death—we take care of a part of ourselves that no one else can reach. If we don't take care of this, what do we do? We thrash around, placing burdens on other people and leaving them miserable because they see ultimately that they can't help our suffering either, deep down inside. But if you learn how to take care of that part inside you, you've taken care of your responsibility. And then whatever gifts you have for other people, you can offer them freely. They're not offered in exchange for, "You take care of me, and I'll take care of you." The attitude is, "Here, look, take this. I don't need it anymore."

That's a very different kind of relationship. It doesn't come with a *quid pro quo* of, "Okay, I'll be nice to you, and you'll be nice to me." It's simply: "Here, take." But the Buddha goes beyond even the "Here, take, this is my body offered to you." He says, "Come and look. This is how you can learn how to feed yourself from within, how you can learn how to grow strong so that ultimately you don't need to feed anymore."

It's probably the greatest gift there is.

Glossary

Abhidhamma: The third division of the Pali Canon, composed of texts that elaborate on lists of terms and categories drawn from the discourses.

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*.

Asava: Effluent; fermentation. Four qualities—sensuality, views, becoming, and ignorance—that “flow out” of the mind and create the flood of the round of death and rebirth.

Brahma-vihara: Sublime attitude, of which there are four: limitless goodwill, limitless compassion, limitless empathetic joy, and limitless equanimity.

Deva: Literally, a “shining one.” A being on the subtle level of form, living in either terrestrial or celestial realms.

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*.

Dhutanga: Ascetic practice that monks may voluntarily undertake.

Dukkha: Stress; pain; suffering.

Farang (Thai): Caucasian.

Jhana: Mental absorption. A state of strong concentration focused on a single sensation or perception. Sanskrit form: *dhyana*.

Kamma: Intentional act. Sanskrit form: *karma*.

Khandha: Aggregate; heap; pile. The aggregates are the basic building blocks of describable experience, as well as the building blocks from which one’s sense of “self” is constructed. There are five in all: physical form, feeling, perception, thought-fabrications, and consciousness. Sanskrit form: *skandha*.

Luang Puu (Thai): Venerable Grandfather. A term of respect for a very senior and elderly monk.

Metta: Goodwill; kindness; benevolence; friendliness.

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.

Samsara: The “wandering-on” through death and rebirth.

Samvega: A sense of dismay, terror, or urgency.

Sankhara: Fabrication; fashioning. The forces and factors that fabricate things, the process of fabrication, and the fabricated things that result; all things conditioned, compounded, or concocted by nature, whether on the physical or the mental level. In some contexts this word is used as a blanket term for all five khandhas. As the fourth khandha, it refers specifically to the fashioning or forming of urges, thoughts, etc., within the mind.

Satipatthana: The act of establishing mindfulness on any one of four frames of reference—body, feelings, mind states, or mental qualities—taken in and of themselves.

Sutta: Discourse. Sanskrit form: *sutra*.

Tathagata: One who has become authentic or has truly gone to the goal. An epithet of the Buddha.

Vinaya: The monastic discipline.

Vipassana: Insight.

Wat (Thai): Monastery.