

A photograph of a cave interior. The walls and ceiling are made of textured, reddish-brown rock. A large, dark rock formation dominates the center of the frame, illuminated from below by warm orange and blue lights, creating a dramatic play of light and shadow. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and ancient.

MEDITATIONS₁₂

Meditations 12

Dhamma Talks

by

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cover

Zion National Park, Utah

Introduction

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

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

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

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May they all be happy.

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The Pursuit of Excellence

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One of the strangest ideas about the Dhamma is that it's all about being accepting and non-judgmental. This comes from getting the teachings backwards. We understand that things are inconstant and impermanent, but we also have a desire for happiness. If you put the inconstancy first, then that means you have to learn how to scale back your desire for happiness, to realize that whatever you may want is going to be inconstant, stressful, and out of your control, so you have to learn to be okay with that.

But that's got things backwards. Your desire for a reliable happiness should come first; if you see anything as inconstant, it doesn't meet the standards of that desire. When the Buddha taught inconstancy, it was basically a value judgment. Anything inconstant is stressful. Anything stressful is not worthy of being held on to as you or yours—because it wouldn't make you happy. That means you have to abandon it and look for something better to satisfy your desire for a happiness that doesn't change.

So you should honor your desire for true happiness and give it pride of place.

That's what the Buddha did. He wanted a happiness that wasn't subject to aging, illness, death, sorrow, or anything negative at all. He set out to find it and he found it. So the story of his life tells us that the desire for happiness should be honored and taken seriously because it can be fulfilled without harm to anyone at all.

Now, we're not talking here about simple hedonism, where you pursue whatever pleasure captures your fancy regardless of the long-term consequences. The Buddha wants you to take your desire for happiness seriously enough to realize that you want a happiness that's long-term. For it to be long-term, it can't depend on anyone's suffering. So you have to take other people's happiness into consideration as well. And you're going to have to be really careful about how you act, to make sure that what you do is actually conducive to happiness, that it doesn't harm anyone.

These are the principles underlying the basic qualities of the Buddha: his wisdom, his compassion, his purity. That's one of the messages of the teaching: that you develop wisdom, compassion, and purity by being mature in your pursuit of happiness. You're wise in not settling for anything changeable, you're compassionate

in taking the happiness of others into account, and you're pure in making sure that your actions actually fall in line with your ideals.

When you look at the Buddha's quest for happiness, you realize that he was passing judgment on his actions all along the way. He would do something and then pass judgment on it: "Is this conducive to true happiness? Is this what I want? If it's not, what should I change?" He was passing judgment with a compassionate purpose: to change his actions, improve his actions, so that they would yield good results both for himself and for others. He was basically pursuing excellence. He trained himself to be excellent in his actions, and he ultimately reached the highest excellence of all: nibbana.

When, later on, he gave a list of other names for nibbana, the list came down to five categories that give an idea of how good nibbana is.

One is that it's a type of consciousness. There's an awareness, but it's an awareness without an object. The image the Buddha gives is of a sunbeam. He asks the monks, "Suppose there's a house with a window in the eastern wall. When the sun rises, the sunbeams go through the window in the eastern wall. Where do they land?" The monks reply, "They land on the western wall." "What if there's no western wall?" "They land on the ground." "What if there's no ground?" Back in those days, they thought that the earth was supported by water, so the monks reply, "It lands on water." "What if there's no water?" "Then it doesn't land." The image for the awakened mind is of a light beam that doesn't land. When it doesn't land, you can't see it because it's not reflecting off anything, but it's bright in and of itself. So there's consciousness in nibbana.

There's also freedom. Someone commented today that the idea of being outside of space of time sounded as if you were being frozen, but that's like imagining yourself frozen *in* a moment in time. That's not getting out of time. That's being trapped in time. "Outside of space and time" means you're totally free of any restraints.

Another quality is bliss: total, unadulterated happiness.

Another quality is truth. In other words, it doesn't change on you. It's not deceptive.

And finally, the fifth quality is excellence: It's the ultimate. It's beyond.

So as we follow the Buddha, we're pursuing excellence in our pursuit of happiness. Nowadays, when they talk about the pursuit of excellence, it's usually in terms either of sport or of making fancy watches. But that's a very limited excellence.

You can devote all your energies to mastering a game or to making something that looks impressive and tells very accurate time, but there are so many more worthwhile things to be doing. The Buddha found the most worthwhile excellence to pursue, which is a happiness that's harmless and never disappoints.

But as many people have noted, the descriptions he gave of that happiness sometimes don't sound all that inviting. One of the first discussion groups I led when I came back here to the States, on the four noble truths, went through the truths in order: one, two, three, four. We got to the third noble truth and talked about nibbana. Then we got to the fourth noble truth and we ended up talking about jhana. Everyone in the group said that jhana sounded a lot more appealing than nibbana.

Maybe the words, or the mental images we associate with the words, are more appealing, but when you've really mastered jhana and started contemplating it, you begin to realize that it has its drawbacks. To begin with, you can get really addicted to the pleasure. It feels really, really good. But you also realize that in order to maintain that pleasure, that sense of stillness, you have to work hard. It requires an unending effort. When that fact hits you, that's when you think: "Maybe something unfabricated would be better." When the opening to the unfabricated comes, you go for it, and you realize: *It is much better.*

Think of Ajaan Maha Boowa comparing the state of the luminous mind that at first he *thought* was awakening against the actual experience of awakening that he later came to. He said—excuse me—that the luminous mind, as compared to awakening, was a pile of shit.

When you get that point in your practice, your sensitivity toward happiness, your sensitivity to what's involved in fabricating experience gets so acute that you really do see that the unfabricated is the ideal alternative even to very bright and expansive mind states. Until then, there's a tendency in the mind to say, "Well, I can imagine something else I'd prefer."

But look at your imaginings. We've been led around by our imaginings for how long? We don't know how long. We've been going around and around and around for countless eons, led by our desire to think up this, think up that: "I can imagine something better than this. I can imagine something better than that." There's a tendency in the mind to keep flowing out. The Buddha called that *asava*. We're so addicted to our imaginings that the idea of a pleasure that doesn't require that we do any imagining—or do anything at all—sounds very disorienting. A pleasure that doesn't require feeding sounds very alien to our ideas of happiness, all of which depend on feeding in one way or another, either physically or mentally.

So from the outside, nibbana may not sound all that good. But the Buddha said again and again: If you think that there's going to be any disappointment or sense of dissatisfaction at all in nibbana, that's wrong view.

What do we do in the meantime? We follow the four noble truths in refining our powers of judgment, because the four noble truths themselves are excellent standards for judgment. Wherever there's suffering, you've got to look for its cause, because it's something you want to abandon. You want to bring about the end of suffering. It's not something to just note or to continue playing with.

Of course, the Buddha's analysis of suffering—the five clinging-aggregates—when you actually think about what it means, goes against the grain. It's saying that we cling to the things we want to see as ours, want to see as us, because we like them, yet that clinging is suffering. In other words, we suffer from our likes. We have to try to comprehend what he means in saying that.

He tells us that we have to abandon our cravings, but we like our cravings an awful lot. As he said, wherever we go, we go with craving as our companion. It's constantly whispering in our ears, getting us to do stupid things. He's trying to wean us away from that harmful companionship by describing the pleasures of the path, especially the pleasures of concentration.

Try to make these pleasures your friends.

What you're doing is that you're taking some good desires and you're making them part of the path: the desire to be skillful, the desire to find a happiness that's not subject to the drawbacks of sensuality. So you're continuing to foster some desires. You're continuing to flow toward the concentration. As you get more and more used to it, you realize: "Okay, this is a better pleasure." A value judgment, but a good one.

You find that there are layers to the concentration as you peel them away. That, too, is a value judgment: You begin to realize that some states of concentration are more solid, more expansive, more peaceful than others, and so you go for them. This is what lifts your sights as to what's possible in terms of happiness and pleasure. All too many of us are afraid of this pleasure because we've enjoyed pleasures in the past and then been really disappointed by them. Or we've gotten really heedless as we enjoyed those pleasures, and we've suddenly found ourselves in danger. So there's a part of the mind that has some trepidation around pleasure.

But when you find a more reliable pleasure like this—and it really is more reliable—after a while, you begin to let go of your fear of it. You find you can really enjoy it. There's still a little bit of heedlessness possible with concentration as you just hang out in stillness, but it's a lot better than hanging out with your normal pleasures:

the pleasures of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and sensual fantasies. So here, again, you're making a value judgment.

We're not here just to rest content with whatever we've got. As the Buddha said, the secret to his awakening was that he was discontent with regard to skillful qualities, to say nothing of unskillful qualities. Anything that was unskillful in his mind, he would drop it. As for what was skillful, he said: "If there's anything more I can do, anything I still have to master that I haven't mastered yet, I'll go for it." That pursuit of excellence was what enabled him to find the true Dhamma.

This is a pursuit of excellence that really is satisfying. You see people pursuing excellence in sport, but then they get too old to play the game, and the latter part of their lives is a real disappointment. They get really good at one thing and then they can't do it anymore.

But with meditation, you can keep on doing it until your last breath—and even beyond—and it's still possible to achieve great things. There are stories in the Canon of people who gained awakening at while dying. One of the Buddha's relatives became a stream enterer at death, and when the Buddha happened to mention that that was what he'd attained, his other relatives were upset. They said, "Well, if he can do it, then anybody can do it."

That's actually good news. This is something you can keep on pursuing and pursuing. There may be some setbacks, but you can keep at it. And if you're observant and use your ingenuity—or as the Buddha would say, if you commit to it and keep on reflecting again and again—you find that there are better and better levels of practice that you can accomplish. And you see they really are better, so you go for the best you can manage. This is one area where going for the best will never disappoint.

So hold in mind the fact that the goal, nibbana, really is excellent. And even though you don't focus your primary attention on the goal—the strategy of having a path is that you focus instead on each step of the path—be confident that the path is leading you to a place so good that you can't even imagine how good it is. It's that special. And it's way better than anything else.

Joy in Getting It Right

August 16, 2022

When you meditate, you're watching your mind, so you want to give yourself a good mind to watch—"good" not in the sense of being smart with book learning, but more in the sense of having good qualities of the heart—a mind that's used to acting on impulses for generosity, virtue, and goodwill. That kind of mind is easy to watch. You want to understand the different steps in the processes of how it creates a thought and how it creates a state of becoming. These things are a lot easier to watch when the mind is creating good states of becoming, acting on good thoughts, because it would be disheartening to see all the nefarious intentions you usually give in to, if that's your habit.

Years back, I was co-teaching a meditation retreat, and one afternoon, one of the retreatants suddenly broke down and started crying. It was really freaky. He was heaving deep sobs, but everyone else in the room was sitting very quietly as if nothing were happening. I found out later, one, that he was a former drug dealer, and that as he was sitting and getting the mind really quiet, it came to him how many lives he had ruined. Then, two, I learned that this is a common occurrence in meditation retreats. Take people right off the street with no basic training in virtue, no basic training in generosity, get them to sit still with their minds, and negative things come welling up.

This was why Ajaan Suwat was so right when he was teaching another meditation retreat, in Massachusetts. The retreatants seemed awfully grim as they sat there hour after hour. And he commented that they were grim because they didn't have a good background in virtue or generosity. Part of it, he said, was that when you practice generosity and virtue, you gain confidence in the Buddha, that this path he taught is a path of happiness. But also, as I said, if you're used to acting on good intentions, then when you want to understand the process of how an intention is formed and the internal dialogue that goes around it, it's a lot easier to watch because the intentions have been good.

Which is why an important part of the meditation is not simply sitting here, knowing how to stay with the breath, but living a life of being generous, being virtuous, and developing goodwill for all beings—perfecting these good habits as

skills. In other words, you want to get it right, because after all, you're going to be trying to develop a path that's composed of right factors, everything from right view to right concentration, and they all have to be approached as skills.

So you're not just good, but you're also inquisitive as to what it means to be really good, to be skillful, to act on good intentions so that they give the best possible results.

Skill in generosity goes beyond the simple impulse to be generous. You're trying to develop the right attitude toward the act of giving a gift. You're trying to develop the right motivation. You try to give gifts that are appropriate, and you try to find good people to give them to, so that the act of generosity really does generate happiness.

You may have read the list of the different kinds of motivation you might have for being generous. It starts out with, "I'll get this back," sometimes hoping to get it back with interest later in this life or maybe the next life. That's the lowest motivation. It does count as a good motivation, though. It's better than not being generous at all. The Buddha says it leads to one of the lower levels of the sensual heavens. But just as there are higher levels of heaven, so there are higher levels of motivation, such as reflecting on the fact that giving is good. It's simply a good thing to do. Or that, when you see that there are people who are lacking in things that you have, and you have more than enough, it's not right that you don't share. That's an even higher motivation. Or you see that giving makes your mind serene and joyful. All the way up to, "It's a natural ornament of the mind"—in other words, it's just a natural expression of the mind, without your thinking about what you're going to get in return. So you can work on your motivation.

You can also work on your attitude. You're not just going through the motions. You think: "Something really important or good will come from this act of generosity."

You give gifts that are appropriate for the recipient's needs. It's interesting: When the Buddha measures the goodness that comes from a gift, he never talks about the monetary value of the gift, aside from saying that it's good to give other people things that are at least as good as the things you'd ordinarily use, so that you can be proud of the gift afterwards.

In other words, you stop and give some thought to what it means to be generous, and how generosity can give rise to happiness. As you develop that skill, you get even more thoughtful. You see implications in the act of generosity that you may not have thought of before.

The same with the precepts: In the beginning, you simply abide by the rules. Then you find that there are times when it's difficult to abide by the rules. So you figure out how to stick to the precept, yet at the same time not cause yourself or anyone else any needless harm. The primary example is when you know some information that somebody might want to abuse, and they ask for it. You've got to figure out some way of not divulging the information, but at the same time not misrepresenting the truth. That develops your ingenuity.

And the simple fact that you're keeping the precepts means that, one, you have to be mindful to keep the precept in mind. Two, you have to be alert to your actions. And three, you really have to be ardent in doing your best to withstand any impulses to break the precepts. Mindfulness, alertness, ardency: These are skills you're going to need as you meditate.

And finally, with goodwill, as you spread thoughts of goodwill, you stop to think: "What does it mean, 'May all beings be happy'?" You realize that, ideally, you're wishing for them to create the causes for happiness. If they've been behaving badly, you want them to see the error of their ways and voluntarily act more skillfully. That's a wish you can have for anyone. At the same time, you're learning how to resist any impulse to ill will. And you learn to recognize ill will for what it is. Sometimes it can dress itself up as righteous anger, a desire for justice. But wanting to see somebody suffer, no matter how bad that person has been in the past, does count as a form of ill will. So you've got to be careful.

At the same time, you're learning how to watch your mind. You learn what it means to create a mental state of goodwill. It's not a natural expression of your innate nature, because it's just as easy to have ill will for other people as it is to have goodwill. With the brahmaviharas, we're trying to take our human goodwill, which tends to be partial, and make it the goodwill of a high level of heavenly being—in other words, we're making it universal. That requires verbal fabrication, mental fabrication, all the components of a good state of concentration.

Generosity, virtue, and developing universal goodwill are the traditional forms of *puñña*, which is usually translated as "merit," but is better translated as "goodness." All too often, these forms of goodness are treated as something totally separate from the practice of meditation. But goodness and meditation are closely intertwined. Acts of goodness prepare the mind for meditation by developing good habits, particularly the habit of trying to do something well, to get it right. And, as I said earlier, they give you a good mind to watch.

I was reading, a while back, the strange idea that the hope of getting things right is a major cause for stress and suffering; therefore, you should learn how to relax around it, let it dissolve away, and just be okay with things as they are, and not try to impose your ideas of perfection on things. That attitude may be based on a misreading of the Satipatthana Sutta, where it talks about seeing feelings arising and passing away, discerning a feeling of pleasure, discerning a feeling of pain, neither pleasure nor pain, seeing mind states arising and passing away, a restricted mind, an unrestricted mind, concentrated, unconcentrated. It makes it sound as if you just watch whatever's going to happen, without wanting it to be good or bad.

But when you look into the list of feelings the Buddha talks about, there are feelings of the flesh and feelings not of the flesh. Feelings of the flesh happen pretty much willy-nilly. But feelings not of the flesh are caused by your desire to practice. A pleasure not of the flesh is the pleasure of concentration. It's not going to happen on its own. A pain not of the flesh comes from your desire to gain awakening, realizing that the desire is not yet fulfilled. That's a good pain, a pain that can help motivate you to practice. Equanimity not of the flesh—the equanimity that comes when getting into fourth jhana—is also something you have to develop.

As for the mind states, they're usually paired—concentrated, unconcentrated; released, unreleased—the implication being, if you think of the duties of the four noble truths, that if an unskillful mind state is there, you want to switch it over to its skillful counterpart.

So we are trying to get things right. After all, the duty of mindfulness is not simply to watch things arise and pass away. Its duty, if there's something you know that is skillful that's not there in your mind, is to be mindful to give rise to it. Once something good has arisen in this way, you're mindful to try to maintain it, to make sure it doesn't pass away. This is called “mindfulness as a governing principle.” So you are trying to get it right—but you're learning to find joy in getting it right. You don't treat it as a chore.

As with any skill, this comes with a sense of pride, a sense of self-esteem—and it's healthy pride, healthy self-esteem. It's all to the good. Sometimes people like to quote that passage from Ajaan Mun's poem where he talks about how one of the final things you have to get over as you practice the path is the desire to be good—the implication being, as they say, “Well, you can let go of that one pretty early on.”

But that's not what he's saying. After all, look at his practice: He really tried to make something good out of himself. Everything in the training, from the most minor rules all the way up to practice of liberation: He tried to master it. As his

students said, he made himself totally Dhamma. And he didn't do that by not trying to be good, not trying to get it right. It was by trying to get it right that he could put himself in a position where he could finally let go of right and wrong safely, because he'd mastered things. He'd brought his mind to completion. In Ajaan Lee's words, he let go as a rich person, not as a pauper.

So it's perfectly okay to want to get it right. In fact, we've got to make the effort to get it right. This is a path with right and wrong factors. If you're going to be on the path, you've got to get it right, all the way from right view through right concentration. The trick is learning how to enjoy getting it right as you do it. As you develop the right attitude, it does become a joy. You can look at your behavior, you can watch your mind, and it's a good mind to watch. There's a sense of satisfaction that comes, that's entirely in line with the practice.

So as the Buddha said, when you see that you've done something right, take joy in that fact, and then continue training. That's the right attitude to have.

Because the Mind Is Purposeful

September 13, 2023

Meditation involves two things: One is getting the mind to be still, and the other is gaining insight into its processes. We can do the two together. The Buddha talks about the process of what he calls *sankhara*—which we translate as *fabrication*. As he points out, we fabricate all kinds of things. We fabricate our sense of the body, our feelings, our perceptions, and our thought constructs. Even our consciousness has an element of intention.

Of course, we don't fabricate these things out of nothing. We start with raw material—the potentials coming in from our past kamma. And then, *for the sake of* having an experience of the present moment, we put these things together. Notice that *for the sake of*: This fabrication, these processes of intention, aim at something.

They're motivated by desire, and although we may hear a lot of negative things about desire in meditation circles, the Buddha had some positive things to say about it as well. We can take this motive force inside the mind and use it to put together the path. All of the path, the Buddha said, is fabricated. Concentration, the heart of the path, is something fabricated, and that means it requires desire—the desire to get the mind focused and to settle down. So you use these processes, you use this movement of the mind that's always *for the sake of something*, and you direct it to be for the sake of the path.

So observe yourself as you settle down with the breath. Focus on wanting to be with the breath. This is one of the proper uses of desire: You want the mind to settle down, but you don't focus directly on the mind, and you don't focus on thoughts of settling down. You focus on the breath, because you know that if you can stay with the breath, it'll get you where you want to go. You focus on assembling the causes, and the results will take care of themselves.

So pay full attention to the breath. If you find the mind slipping off, just keep coming back. Try to breathe in a way that feels good: relaxing when you're feeling tense, energizing when you're feeling tired.

Think of the breath as a whole-body process. It's not just the air coming in and out through the nose. That's just the *result* of the breathing. The breathing is the energy that goes through the movement of the muscles, the impulses in the nerves

and in the blood vessels. If you're really sensitive, you can sense these energies anywhere in the body. But notice where they're most prominent right now and allow your attention to settle there.

And keep after this. Other thoughts will come in, and you have to tell yourself, "No, not right now. Got more important work right here." The mind has spent so much time thinking about random things and about other things that are not quite so random but still scatter you about, but now you're going to devote its thinking and all of its processes to getting it to settle down. A large part of that strategy lies in making the breath an attractive place to be. That way, when you wander off, the idea of coming back is attractive—you *want* to come back. If you wander off again, you want to come back again.

Each time you come back, reward yourself with a breath that feels especially gratifying. Think of the breath as being all around you, so that you're not just in one side of the body looking at the breath in another part of the body. You've got the breath all around you, surrounding you, bathing you.

As for any other thoughts, any other responsibilities you may have right now, you don't have to think about them. You'll come back to them some other time, but not right now. You want to honor your original intention, which is to get the mind still with the breath so that it can see itself clearly.

A lot of what it'll see is this process of fabrication. We're fabricating a state of concentration. That's the best way to get to know fabrication: by doing something skillful with it.

It's like learning about wood. When you make different pieces of furniture out of wood, you learn its characteristics: how the different kinds of wood respond to being planed, how they respond to being sawed. You learn this because you want to use the wood *for the sake of* something. If you just sat and stared at the wood, you wouldn't learn much, but when you make things out of it, you learn a lot about its peculiarities, its qualities, what kind of wood is good for what kind of object.

The same with fabrication—this process of *for the sake of* something: You devote all your efforts for the sake of getting the mind to settle down in a state of being not only still, but also very clear, very alert.

The Buddha recommends three qualities to work with the breath. One is mindfulness: the ability to keep something in mind. In this case, you keep in mind the fact that you want to stay here. If you've meditated before, you want to keep in mind what techniques have worked in the past, and what techniques have not, so that if you find yourself slipping into something unskillful, you can do something about it.

This is where the other two qualities come in. Alertness: watching what you're doing. And ardency: wanting to do this well. The ardency is the discernment factor here. You're ardent with a purpose: trying to do this as skillfully as you can. That's the kind of discernment we're after: practical, pragmatic, purposeful.

Ajaan Lee points to ardency as the discernment factor in mindfulness practice for several reasons. One is that, out of these three factors, ardency is what makes the others *right*. After all, you can be mindful about anything. You can keep anything in mind: last year's baseball scores; things at work; past desires that you could dig up again. Here you've got a whole hour: You could fill the hour with sensual fantasies if you wanted to, but you realize that that would be a waste. Why do you realize that it would be a waste? Because of the ardency, and you're ardent because you have another purpose in being here.

The same with alertness: You could listen to the sound of the crickets, you could listen to the sound of the planes, the sound of the dogs off in the distance, but what would that accomplish? Nothing much. But if you're alert to what you're actually doing and the results you're getting, you're going to learn something useful.

Here again—ardency. This is a wise use of your mindfulness, a wise use of your alertness. And here again you see the whole point of doing something with a purpose. When you understand these processes of fabrication as you do them skillfully, that helps you understand them when you're doing them unskillfully.

When you're giving in to desires that actually would be harmful to you—either you would gain what you wanted, but it would involve harm or would disappoint you; or you wouldn't get what you wanted at all: That's one of the prime causes of aversion. It's because we're constantly doing something *for the sake of something* that aversion arises—because our purposes are thwarted.

You could think of all the things that are happening in the world right now, but there are a lot of areas in the world where you have no particular desire that things turn out one way or another, so you can read the news about those places and be pretty equanimous. But if the news goes against your desires, you're going to get averse.

It's amazing how many desires we have for things that have little bearing on what we can actually accomplish or influence. We may want justice all over the world, and then when you see injustice anywhere, it can get you upset.

You may have had a bad experience in your life concerning a certain kind of relationship where one person abused you or somebody else, so anytime you see abuse anywhere else, it can get you upset because you have a desire to see that abuse

not happen again. So, your desires can spread out into quite large areas, and then you can be averse to quite a large number of things.

That's one way in which desire gives rise to aversion. There's another in which you realize that when you get averse to something and you act on that aversion, other people give in to you. So you've learned that aversion equals power. This is another way in which desire gives rise to aversion. You want something to be done and you feel, "I've got to be as angry as possible to get it done."

So, it's possible to look at all the unskillful qualities of the mind and see them as the result of this tendency that we have to be purposeful—to be doing things constantly for the sake of something further on.

Fear can also be explained in this way. We're attached to certain things and we're afraid that something will come along and destroy what we have—or what we want to have.

So if you want to understand your fears, look for your attachments. To understand your aversion, look for your desires, realizing that sometimes it's not simply a case of thwarted desire leading to aversion. There's also the possibility that you desire the aversion itself.

But when you see how to use the processes of fabrication to put together a good state of concentration, and you have a sense that you can point this process of fabrication in different directions, then when you start seeing the drawbacks of your unskillful desires or your aversion, you know that you could fabricate things in a different way.

Here again, breath meditation is really helpful. The Buddha talks about three kinds of fabrication. There's bodily fabrication—the breath. Verbal fabrication—the way you talk to yourself; in technical terms it's directed thought and evaluation. And then mental fabrication—perceptions, the labels you put on things, and then feelings: feeling tones of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain.

As you're working with the breath, getting the mind to settle down, you're getting hands-on experience with all three of these kinds of fabrication: the perceptions for instance, that you have of the breath as a whole-body process; the feelings of ease, refreshment you can create by the way you talk to yourself about how you breathe—evaluating how it's going and making changes as you see fit.

When you can create a state of concentration through these processes, you look at your other more unskillful ways of engaging in them and you realize that you could

change. You don't have to follow your old ways. You can question the desires, say, that give rise to aversion, and you can question the desires that give rise to fear.

A lot of these desires seem natural because they're habitual. You've given in to them many times before, but it's good to see that they're artificial. This is why we use the word *fabrication* to translate *sankhara*—to get a sense of how things are put together in a certain way, jerry-rigged in a certain way, but they don't have to be that way, especially if they're not skillful.

It's in this way that getting the mind still can start bringing about insight into these processes of fabrication. And that's precisely how insight is defined—learning how to view fabrications in a way that gives rise to dispassion for the whole process.

So instead of pretending that you're just observing things as they are, ignoring the fact that you're actually putting them together—an attitude that doesn't lead to much in terms of genuine insight—be clear about the fact that you're putting things together, and right now you want to put together a state of stillness, ease, refreshment.

The potentials are right here. Look carefully, experiment, and you'll find them. As you find them and devote them to the right purpose, you gain not only tranquility but also the beginnings of insight. They work in tandem in this way.

Wearing the Breath

January 10, 2022

We often say to *watch* the breath when you meditate, but that may be an unfortunate choice of words. Subconsciously, it can make you think that your eyes are somehow involved. And, because your eyes are in your head, *you're* up in your head, watching the breath in another part of the body, but that's not the effect we're trying to get.

We're trying to fill the body with a sense of awareness and a sense of ease. Think of the first three frames of reference for establishing mindfulness: body, feelings, and mind. As you meditate, you're trying to get them to fill one another. The mind fills the body, a feeling of ease fills the body—and the breath filling the body is the glue that makes that happen. So, instead of watching the breath, think of yourself being bathed in the breath or wearing the breath. It's all around you.

When the Buddha describes the breath, he lists it as one of the aspects of the wind property in the body, which means it's an aspect of form. It's not the tactile sensation of the air at the nose or going over your lip. It's something already there in the body.

So, ask yourself: Where do you feel the flow of energy as the air comes in, the air goes out right now? Where is it most prominent? Focus your attention there and try to figure out which ways of breathing feel best.

Again, you're feeling it; you're wearing it. It's what nowadays we call proprioception: your sense of the body as you feel it from within. The reason why we want to get our awareness all-around is because when thoughts come into the mind, the fact that they're able to stay for a while means that there has to be a little bit of tension someplace in the body to hold them, like a little marker, and those patterns of tension can be anywhere.

So, if you're focused at one point—say, the tip of the nose—and you're trying to block out everything else, you're going to miss where those patterns of tension are. You're going to miss an important step in the meditation, which is to see thoughts as they arise and catch them when they're still in the process of forming.

At that point, they haven't turned into becomings yet. A becoming is a world in the mind. You have a desire, and then a world forms around it—the world where that

desired object is located. The next question is: Where are you in relationship to that world? Usually, once your thought has gotten to that point, you're *in* the thought; you're out of your body. Then the thought can take you anywhere.

But there are stages leading up to that point. In fact, the Buddha said, seeing the stages leading up to that is the way of getting round the dilemma of the fact that suffering is caused by the kinds of craving that lead to becoming. One of the kinds of craving that leads to becoming is craving for becoming itself, while another one is craving for non-becoming. In other words, you have an identity in a world and you want to snuff it out.

That's the dilemma: We're trying to put an end to becoming, but if you sit here thinking about putting an end to a becoming that's already happened, it's going to create more becoming. What you've got to do is to see the processes that lead up to the fact of becoming and keep it in place, and develop some dispassion for them.

The best way to do that is to be sensitive to the formation of a thought at the very early stages, when it's still just an inchoate desire—and ideally even before it becomes a desire for anything in particular. It's just a desire for something else. There's a stirring of the breath someplace in the body, and then you identify it as a desire for this, a desire for that, a thought about this, a thought about that—and then you go with it. As a meditator, you want to catch it at the stage before you've slapped on that perception.

So, we stay with the breath as much as we can. Try to settle in. Feel as if you're sitting here surrounded by breath, and your awareness surrounds you, too.

In addition to having that subconscious idea that we're watching the breath with our eyes and we're in our head, we also have the subconscious idea that we're facing forward. When you close your eyes, which direction is the mind facing? It doesn't have to face anywhere. It can be centered and then spread out, facing in all directions. That's the quality you're trying to develop.

As the Buddha said, you want the upper part of your body to feel like the lower part of the body, and vice versa. In other words, up and down, front and back: You want them to be all equal, so that wherever there's that stirring in the mind, that stirring in the body, you're going to see it.

It's like watching a play. If you're just focused on one point in the body, it's like being in the audience. Between scenes, they're going to lower the curtain to change the scenery. Once the scenery's in place, they raise the curtain again, and you're in the world of the next scene.

As for the actors who are not involved in that scene, they're behind the scenes. You don't see them when you're in the audience, so you don't see the full production. Ideally, you want to be behind the scenes. You don't want your view to be blocked by a curtain. When they're moving the scenery, you want to see them move the scenery around. When the actors are getting ready to come on stage, you want to see them in the process of psyching themselves up to get on stage. That's when you really understand the production.

In the same way, we're trying to understand the production of our thoughts. After all, where is the source of suffering? The Buddha calls it the origination of suffering. When he uses the word *origination*, one, it means we have to look for the cause and, two, we usually have to look for the cause in the mind. So, we're trying to understand our own minds. If you can understand your own mind, then you don't have to suffer. That's the simple principle, but working out that simple principle will require a lot of all-around awareness.

So, try to fully inhabit the body as you breathe in, as you breathe out, so that your knowledge of the breath energy in the feet is in the feet; your knowledge of the breath energy in the torso is in the torso. You're not trying to pull it all up into the head.

Now, there will be a center, but it's good to have the center lower than the head. If it's up in the head, sometimes it aggravates the fact that the nerves in the head tend to be overworked in our culture. So, you want to familiarize yourself with what's going on in the body—all the parts of the body.

This is why, when we give guided meditations, we take people through the body section by section—know the navel in the navel, know the chest in the chest, the hands in the hands, the feet in the feet. Open up to the awareness that's already there and see the energy already there. It may feel very still and motionless in some parts of the body, but that's okay. As long as it doesn't feel tight and blocked, it becomes a good place to settle in.

Once your awareness is enlarged like this, you're more and more firmly established in the present moment. Your concentration is the kind of concentration that can actually look at other things and not lose its center, not lose its foundation. If your concentration is one-pointed, then when you change the point, you've changed your concentration. But when your awareness is all-around like this, then thoughts can come into the framework, you can see them come in, you can see them go, you can begin to see the stages, but the framework of your concentration is not overturned by that.

It's in this way that concentration leads to discernment, so that you can do concentration work and discernment work at the same time. And in this way, your discernment is guaranteed not to turn into thought worlds or speculation worlds. It's a discernment that sees the processes as they're happening, step by step, right here, right now, without losing this frame of reference. As long as it's based in this frame of reference—the whole body as you experience it in the present—you're more and more likely to see things as processes rather than getting into processed worlds and riding along with them. That helps to liberate you from a lot of unskillful thinking.

It's in that way that you perform the duties of the noble truths: seeing clinging as clinging—in other words, a step before becoming; seeing craving as craving, two steps before becoming. That's when you can do something about the problem of suffering. When you've slipped into a becoming, it's too late. So, you want to be here, grounded, seeing things as processes. That's when you're sitting at the right place, at the right time, looking at the right things in the right way.

The Committee of the Mind

April 22, 2022

We have that phrase in English, “to make up your mind.” It’s an interesting way of saying “to decide.” So make up your mind that you’re going to stay right here with one thing, with the breath. Make that your intention and try to maintain that intention all the way through the hour. You have to keep repeating it to yourself, because other intentions will come in. It’s as if the mind is many minds.

That’s why we talk about the committee of the mind, or why Ajaan Lee talks about the various consciousnesses in your body.

So let’s just look at the committee. There are different voices in there with different agendas, and as you meditate, you’re trying to convert them all to this agenda of staying with the breath. One way you can do that is to make the breath really interesting. Of course, the breath is already interesting on its own, but you’re learning how to *take* an interest in it, noticing how it comes in and how it goes out, what effect it has on the body, and how the in-and-out breath relates to the other energies in the body.

We here in the West don’t have much of a vocabulary for describing how the body feels from inside. The Buddha describes it in terms of properties or elements. Wind is his way of describing the energy. Then there’s earth, which is the solidity of the body; fire, which is the warmth; and water, which is the coolness. Then there’s space: space permeating the body and space surrounding the body. Of these various elements, the wind or breath is the one most responsive to the mind, and it’s also the one that most readily has an effect on the other physical elements. So we’re focusing here on this sense of energy in the body.

How do you picture it to yourself? This is another way of making the breath interesting. You can think of the air coming in and out through the nose, but when the Buddha talks about breath, he’s talking more about the energy flow as you feel it in the body. The main energy flow you’re going to notice at first is the energy flow that brings the air in and out. When you do that, are there parts of the body that have to tense up? Why? You can question that. That’s a perception you’re holding in mind and it may not be the best perception for right now. You want to find a perception that allows the breath energy to flow smoothly throughout the body so that the body

feels nourished, the nerves feel nourished, the blood vessels feel nourished—everything. So try different perceptions to see what helps.

One that I've found useful is thinking of the body as like a big sponge. As you breathe in, the air can come in from all directions. The energy allows it to come in from all directions, and there are openings all around. You're not restricted just to the nose.

Once I had a cold during my first year as a monk, and I found it really useful to think about the breath coming in not just through the nose, but also through other parts of the body, all the parts of the body.

Another time, years later, when I had malaria, it got so that my breathing was really laborious. The malaria parasites were eating up all my red blood cells, so the muscles weren't getting much oxygen. The ones that were doing most of the breathing were getting fatigued. I realized I'd been holding on to one perception of the breath that required one set of muscles to keep on doing the work. I found that if I would hold to different perceptions of the main spot in the body where the breath is coming in and going out, that set of muscles could get a rest. Other muscles would move in and take over the job. When they got tired, I could change the image again.

That right there, I think, is really fascinating: that the image we have of the breath will have an influence on how we actually feel the breath. So even something as simple as breathing in and out is not a given. It's something we shape. As we meditate, we can explore the limits of how far we can shape it. It's not infinite. We can't do anything at all that we want with it, but we *do* have some leeway that we wouldn't have noticed if we hadn't sat here for a while with the breath and started thinking about how we visualize it to ourselves.

This is what I mean by making the breath interesting, because what's really interesting about this, of course, is what the mind is doing, even with something as simple as this.

One of the Buddha's basic teachings is that we suffer from ignorance. In particular, we're largely ignorant of what our minds are doing. Yet this is probably the most fascinating thing in the world. When Ajaan Suwat came to America, he went around to different cities, he went to some of the national parks. Then, when he went back to Thailand, people asked him what he found most impressive about America. He said he didn't find anything impressive at all, because all of our ingenuity went into material things. Very little went into understanding the mind in a way that could put an end to suffering. That's probably the most interesting issue of all. Why is it that even though we want happiness, even though we want pleasure, we end up doing

things that cause suffering and stress? Why is that? What is it that we don't know about what we're doing?

This is why we meditate.

We start out with the breath as our focus, but we're not here to get the breath. We're here to get the mind. But to get the mind, you need to focus it on one thing. There has to be something in the present moment that's interesting and comfortable at the same time. So learn how to make the breath comfortable.

This is what the directed thought and evaluation are all about. It's like moving into a house. When you first come in, it's just empty walls, empty rooms. You realize you have to furnish it. You have to make it comfortable if you're going to stay. When you do, then over time it does become a home. And it's the same with the present moment. The more you stay here, the more you understand about it, then the more you find that there are potentials for comfort in the body. The mind can feel soothed and eased, simply by having one thing to think about, not having to worry about issues outside.

That's one way of getting the committee together: by making the breath and issues around the breath a topic of interest. Now, there will be some committee members who say, "Well, that's okay for a while, but after a while you want to change." This is where you have to ask, "Who's talking here? What's the agenda? Where are these voices coming from?"

During my first year as a monk, I found myself up on a hilltop with lots of time on my hands. Voices were going through my head, saying, "This is a waste of time. You're not helping anybody. You should be out there doing something for society"—all kinds of reasons for not being there, sitting on the hilltop, watching my breath. One of the ways I got through that period was to begin identifying the different voices. Whose attitude was that? And whose attitude was *that*? I began to realize that there were lots of different people from my past in my head. I had to question, "What do they know? Have they ever meditated? Have they ever been exposed to these teachings?" In my case, none of the voices in my head had been exposed but they had a very strong sense of territory. My mind was their territory.

This is another reason why the Buddha teaches so much about the suffering we cause ourselves: We don't take on new ideas unless we see that our old ideas are not working. The things we think will give us pleasure are actually giving us pain. The things we think are solving problems are actually creating problems. When you can see that, that's when the committee is willing to admit a few new members in. But even then it's pretty grudging. They admit them for a while and then say, "Well, the

good you're doing isn't instantaneous. I'm not getting results right away. This must be wrong." This is where you have to argue. Again, this is strange: one mind arguing with itself. So again, think of not as one mind, but as many states of becoming, as the Buddha would call them. Each of these voices surrounds a desire, takes on an identity around that desire, and has a particular view of the world around that desire.

This is where it's good to think of all four of the Buddha's noble truths. We focus our main attention on the fourth, which is the path to the end of suffering, because that's what we have to work at hardest. But it's good to keep in mind that the Buddha promises that there is such a thing as the end of suffering.

There was one Dhamma teacher I heard one time saying, "I don't know about the end of suffering, but I've learned that suffering is manageable." She called that the third-and-a-half noble truth, which is rating it too high. It's not even half of a truth, and not at all noble. The Buddha wasn't here just for pain management or stress management. He said it is possible totally to put an end to suffering, totally to put an end to the stresses and difficulties that weigh the mind down.

So hold that out as an option, because the other voices in the mind tend not to believe that. Their idea of happiness is a lot more limited. But we can expand our ideas of what's possible as we admit some of the Buddha's voices into our heart and mind. That's what we're doing as we meditate. He's teaching us new ways to breathe, new ways to talk to ourselves, new ways of applying perceptions to the world—all three of the fabrications that go into shaping the present moment. To really take them on, it's good to keep in mind that it is possible to put an end to suffering. There's something better than the ways we've been looking for happiness in the world so far.

So a large part of the meditation is keeping some order in your committee meetings, learning how to talk to yourself: what the Buddha calls directed thought and evaluation. An important part of making sure that the conversation stays on track is directing it, so that the topic of conversation is always relevant to this issue of, "How can I understand why I'm suffering and how can I put an end to it?" Keep that question foremost. That's the topic for the meeting. And try to keep everybody on topic as best you can.

Whole-Hearted Concentration

July 11, 2023

Samadhi, the word that we translate as concentration, is defined in the Canon as *cittass'ekaggata*: singleness of mind. It's worth exploring the levels of meaning of that term. There's the singleness: *Eka* means one. *Agga* is a controversial term. Some people translate it as "point," to convey the idea that your awareness should be reduced to one point, like the point of a pencil.

But in Pali it doesn't mean point. It means the summit of something, the tip, the ridge line of a roof, the top of something. It also means a gathering place. The *uposath'agga* is where the monks meet together to have their *uposatha*. The *bhatt'agga*, the meal *agga*, is where the monks meet to have their meals. And because we're said to enter and remain or dwell in a dwelling concentration, that seems to be the more relevant meaning. We have one place where we dwell, one topic that we dwell on.

Like the breath right now: Gather the mind around the breath. If you're going to be thinking, think about the breath. If you're going to be asking questions or exploring, ask questions about and explore the breath. You do this singly in the sense that this is the one topic you're going to focus your mental activities on. If you really want to know this, give it your full attention. As you go through the day, you have to split your attention between the breath and the things you're doing outside. But right now, while you're sitting here, there's nothing else you have to pay attention to. You can give your all to the breath.

This connects with the two meanings of *citta*. It can mean *mind* but it can also mean *heart*. You want to do this with your whole heart. Ajaan Lee uses the term *temcai*—literally, full heart—which in ordinary Thai is an idiom meaning to do something willingly. But he also uses it to mean to do it wholeheartedly. Realize that if there's anything to be found in the practice, it's going to be found right here. Spread your awareness to fill the whole body. Or instead of thinking of spreading your awareness, you might think: Wake up your awareness.

That's another term that Ajaan Lee uses. Our awareness in our head tends to be pretty awake, but unless we're actively engaged in some physical skill, our awareness in the rest of the body seems to be pretty much asleep. You don't have the whole heart, you don't have the whole mind fully awake, fully alert. So wake up your

alertness in your feet, wake up your alertness in your hands, in your arms, in your legs, in your torso, all around. If you're using a meditation word, think of every cell in the body saying that meditation word. If you're focusing on the breath in and of itself, okay, every cell of the body is breathing in, breathing out. Everywhere there's a nerve end, think of its being awake to the breathing in and breathing out of every cell. Be fully present. Willingly present. Whole-heartedly present.

All too often our concentration gets cut off because we're partly here and partly not here. There are parts of the mind that can think of other things to do, other things to think about. You've got a whole hour. You can give part of it to something else and then come back to the breath. That's what they say. But why fall for them? Remember, you're here voluntarily. You're here to meditate because you see that meditation is going to be good for you. The more you give yourself to the meditation, the more you're going to receive. So don't hold back.

We sometimes have a sense of being perched in our bodies, like a bird perched on our shoulders, looking through our eyes, listening through our ears, but withdrawn from the rest of the body. Well, get back down into the body. Give it your all. It's only then that you can get the full nourishment out of the meditation. The Buddha talks about a sense of ease and well-being spreading through the body. This is how you spread it: by opening up all the channels inside, waking up everybody inside.

Ajaan Lee makes a comparison with putting roads and running electric lines through a former wasteland, so that now you can have communication, you can have transportation coming and going. You don't have to push the breath around. Simply open things up in the body, so that the breath can flow on its own. It's the same as when you build roads: You don't have to push the cars around the roads. Simply make sure that the roads are open and in good repair, and the cars will go on their own, smoothly on their own.

The important thing is that you simply don't hold back. You give your whole mind, your whole heart to what you're doing right now. This is an attitude that you should develop to the entire practice. When you're sweeping up around the monastery, be fully there. Have a sense of your body, the whole body, involved in the sweeping. When working in the kitchen, doing whatever chores need to be done, be fully there. Sometimes we notice that we're doing a lot of sweeping while someone else is doing less sweeping, but remember: We're not doing it for them. We're doing it for us. Here's an opportunity to develop your goodness. Wholehearted goodness.

Wholesome goodness. So take as much as you can by giving as much of yourself as you can, and you're going to gain a lot.

The same with the precepts, especially for the monks: Sometimes they seem pretty daunting. There are lots and lots of precepts, and when you're first ordained, it seems like a huge demand. You used to have five, eight, or ten precepts. Now you have 227, and that's just the tip of the iceberg. It may seem superhuman. But it's not. Remember that the precepts are not meant to tie you down. The fact that you're following the precepts makes other people more inspired to support your practice. So the precepts give you freedom.

I remember when I was a young monk: The first time that notion occurred to me totally changed my attitude toward the precepts. In the beginning, I put up with them grudgingly, not wholeheartedly. But then I realized, one, I had the freedom to meditate all day because of the precepts. And two, as I lived in the community, I noticed that whenever there was strife, whenever there was disturbance in the community, it was because somebody was breaking the precepts.

Because the precepts are designed for freedom, the more you give to them, the more freedom you get. So you observe them wholeheartedly. You do your duties wholeheartedly. You're generous wholeheartedly. Follow the precepts wholeheartedly. It's a lot easier then to sit down and meditate wholeheartedly, fully present, with no regrets from the course of the day, no issues brought in from the course of the day, so you can give yourself fully to being right here. The whole body, your awareness of the whole body, can be fully given over to the breath so that there's a strong sense of oneness. The breath is one. The body is one single sensation of awareness. The mind is one. Your heart is one. There's an intensity that comes from that.

I've heard people say they don't like the term *concentration* for samadhi. It sounds too tense. They prefer "lucid calm," or "collectedness." But the actual quality of samadhi can be very intense. When you fully give yourself to it, there's an intensity of well-being that comes with that, along with a sharpness of alertness that you don't get otherwise.

So the more fully you give this your whole heart, your whole mind, then the more fully you'll reap the benefits.

All Eye

December 11, 2022

When the Buddha defines concentration, or *samadhi*, he defines it as *cittass'ekaggata*. Sometimes that term is translated as one-pointedness of mind. *Eka* would be one, and *agga* is often thought to mean point, but *agga* doesn't mean point. It means the summit of something, like the ridge on a roof or the summit of a mountain. It also means a gathering place, which seems to be the translation closest to what the Buddha's trying to get at here. There's a gathering place for the uposatha, there's a gathering place for meals—all those are *aggas*.

In the case of concentration, you create a gathering place for the mind. You choose a single object and gather all your mental activities around it. Or as the Buddha also says, you enter and dwell in it. The reason we say it's not one-pointed is because when you look at the analogies the Buddha gives for the mind in concentration, they're all expansive: a lake filled with cool water; lotuses drenched with cool water, from their roots to their tips; a person entirely surrounded by white cloth.

That last one is the image for the most solid of the jhanas, the fourth. That's where we're headed. We want to be in a position where we feel surrounded by our object, as when you're with the breath.

We talk about watching the breath, and it gives the impression that you have an eye in the mind that's looking at something outside of the eye—its focal point is outside. Try to imagine instead that the eye is being focused inside the eye itself and it's aware all around. That's the quality of awareness we're trying to develop.

It's like when people go into the forest to track animals or to look for mushrooms. They have to develop what's called scatter vision—where you're fully present in the present moment, and you're aware of your whole range of vision. That takes a lot of concentration. Any thoughts coming up that would pull you away from that expanded state have to be dropped. You're not at any one point in space, but you are at one point in time. You're right here, fully dwelling in the present moment. That's where we're headed.

Think, too, of the description of the Buddha as an All-around Eye.

Back in those days, they had the belief that devas were eyes all around—they could see with their whole bodies. This image of the Buddha has that same connotation. He sees all around. After all, if you're going to be looking at your defilements, you have to see all around. If you're focused on one spot, your defilements have plenty of places to hide away. It's like a being on a stage where there's one spotlight: All kinds of characters can hide in the dark.

So the quality we're trying to arrive at is fully present and expanded. But in the beginning, the mind has a tendency—one it's picked up from long experience—of being focused on one spot. So you give it one spot, but from that spot, you survey the whole body.

The third step in breath meditation, as the Buddha says, is to breathe in and out sensitive to the entire body. A good way to build up to that whole-body awareness and whole-body sensitivity is to go through the body section by section first, because many parts of the body tend to be hidden, kept in the dark, and if you really want your awareness to be all-around, you've got to cast light on those dark spots, too.

You can think of the chakras to begin with. Ajaan Lee mentions the chakras, beginning with the one right above the naval and then on up. He doesn't mention any of the lower chakras, which might've been considered impolite in Thai society. But any spot in the body where there seems to be a center of energy, focus your attention there. Think of the breath radiating from that spot as you breathe in. If there are any obstructions to its spreading out to fill the whole body, think of those obstructions dissolving away.

Then move up to the next center of energy, and then the next. Then you can go through the body in other spots as well, to the right, to the left. Sometimes it's good to compare the left and the right side, like your left shoulder and your right shoulder. Do they feel the same? Does one seem to be holding more tension or tightness than the other side? If so, can you relax it? Think of the blood flowing freely in there, dissolving away the tension. You want to get the reflex that wherever you focus your attention, any tension in the body relaxes right there.

This counters our usual tendency, which is that when you're focused on one spot in the body, you tend to tense up around it. You want to think the opposite. Wherever you're focused, things are wide open—free, with a sense of energy radiating from the spot where you're focused.

And again, think of the image of the eye focused inside the eye itself, or a camera lens focused inside the camera lens. As you go through the body, hitting the major spots, then try to find the minor spots—the little spots, say, between fingers, between

the toes, inside your elbow, inside your shoulders, all the little muscles in the head. Make a survey so that you're really familiar with how things feel everywhere in the body.

In modern society, we tend to be really disembodied, especially as all of our attention gets drawn into screens: video games, e-mails, online videos. Our attention gets cast outside, outside, and the body becomes unknown territory, like those old maps where they just had the outlines of the continents, surrounding huge blank spaces where they wrote across, "Here be tygers." Well, there will be tigers inside your body if you don't get to know the body really well, because there will be places for your defilements to hide out. Wherever there's a lack of awareness, mental states can also hide out along with the tension, so try to make your awareness more all-encompassing.

When you've done your survey of the different parts of the body, think of one spot in the body as being your center, and your awareness radiating out from that spot in all directions: the all-around eye looking in all directions, aware in all directions, clear in all directions. That image of the man surrounded by a white cloth: Some people actually have a sense of a white light that develops as the mind gets centered. Other people don't have white light, but they do have a sense of everything being really clear.

You want to maintain the sense of everything having equal weight and importance, as in the passage where the Buddha says, "What's above is like what's below; what's below is like what's above." There are many ways you can interpret that passage, but one of them is that everything gets equal attention, as best as you can muster.

Think of every cell in the body breathing in, breathing out, and they're all breathing in unison. Every little cell is aware—it's a little eye. All the eyes function together so that everything is clear. When your awareness is spread out like this, enlarged like this, then it's less likely to go wandering off to the past or future.

It's when your awareness is small that it can travel around. It pulls out of the present moment and goes here, goes there. But if you fully inhabit the body, you have to be fully present, and it's hard to go to the past or future as long as your awareness is enlarged. You'll find that, as your awareness gets more centered and all-around like this, it's harder and harder to think, but for the time being, you don't have to think. You want to get used to being fully present with this sensation of the body as you feel it all around, as you sense it all around.

In the Canon, they tend to mix up the senses. They talk about seeing with your body. Think of the body as an eye, and it sees all around itself. In that way, you develop the quality of concentration that really is strengthening. It pulls you out of a lot of your usual ways of thinking and gives you a really good place to rest, to be solid and strong.

So hold these images in mind—the eye focused inside itself, the all-around eye, the body wrapped in a white cloth. They give you an idea where you're headed in the concentration, and what kind of concentration it is. It doesn't bear down hard on any one spot. Wherever it's focused—and there will be one spot in the body that tends to get a little bit more attention than the rest—make that spot wide open.

Wherever you focus your attention, you disperse any tension that seems to be developing there, and then learn to stay right here, dispersing, dispersing. There'll be thoughts in the back of the mind, saying, "This is stupid. Nothing's happening." Well, nothing has to happen for the time being. It's good to get the mind used to being in this state, so that when it leaves this state, it can see things clearly as the mind begins to start thinking about things again. You can see why it picks up a particular topic and you can ask yourself, "Do you really want to go there?" You have this other alternative.

That's what's so good about the Buddha's teachings. They give us other alternatives to our normal ways of thinking and relating to our thoughts. They pull us outside of ourselves, because our normal ways of thinking tend to focus on becoming.

In other words, you have a particular desire, and there's a world in your imagination that contains the desired object. Then you go into that world, take on a role there, and inhabit it—and you can get stuck in some pretty weird worlds. But the Buddha's giving you this alternative where you can get out, refresh your senses, refresh your mind, and you begin to see that the other worlds you used to inhabit are really strange. You wonder, "Why would you want to inhabit them?" This is one of the ways that you can pull yourself out of some pretty unhealthy mind states.

So try to work on the skill of developing this alternative, where—instead of being focused on what your thoughts are—you're focused on fully inhabiting the body, with your awareness spreading in all directions. Front and back, top and bottom are all equal, and everything is clear all around.

Ironclad Technique vs. No Technique

May 3, 2022

When you're practicing meditation, there are two extremes to be avoided. One is the attitude that you're given a technique and you have to follow it to the letter, without any variations. The other is the attitude that there is no technique. Just be aware of whatever is coming up, telling yourself not to do anything in particular. In neither way can you really develop discernment.

As the Buddha said, the Dhamma is to be nourished within you by committing yourself and then reflecting. When he teaches that principle to Rahula, he teaches him to look at his actions: to look first at his intentions, then at his actions as he's doing them, and then when they're done—to see if he's causing any harm. If he's causing harm, he's got to change his ways, to consult with someone else, and to make up his mind not to make that mistake again.

In this way, your reflection is meant to alter your actions. You become more and more sensitive to your actions, your contribution to the present moment. And you can begin to see what's actually causing suffering right now. You can begin to see basically what you're doing, what's causing suffering, and what's not causing suffering. You get an inkling of cause and effect, which you don't get if you're told simply to follow a technique and not to pass any judgment on it, just to do the technique.

At the same time, if you're told just to be aware of whatever, you have no sense of what you're doing. The point to having a technique is that it focuses you on your actions, what you're doing in the present moment. This is where you can see the processes of fabrication in action. This is where you can see your intentions in action—all the factors of dependent co-arising that lead up to contact and can shape the course of what's going to happen after the contact, whether it's going to lead to suffering or to no suffering. When you have a technique, you're made more aware of these things.

This is why the ideal approach is to have a technique that allows you to learn how to play with it, make variations in it. This fits in with the analogies that the Buddha uses when he's teaching meditation: the analogy of the cook, the analogy of the

carpenter—people who’ve developed skills based on their powers of observation and who make adjustments based on what they observe.

This was Ajaan Lee’s approach when he taught the basic steps in Method 2—although maybe the word “step” is not quite right, because he didn’t insist that they had to be followed in any particular order. They’re seven component factors that you put together to get the mind to settle down.

But then, in his later teachings, he would vary them. In the seven steps he talks about starting with the breath at the back of the neck going down the spine. As I’ve noted before, he developed this method after curing himself of a heart attack. Anyone who’s had heart problems knows that the back of the neck is Tension Central when you have a heart condition. But it’s also important that you learn how to straighten your spine. One of the most conducive ways of straightening your spine is to think of the breath coming in the back of the neck and then going down.

But then there are other times when the back feels weak. As Ajaan Lee noted in some of his Dhamma talks, in that case you want to start with another kind of breath: the breath in the soles of the feet going up the legs and then up the spine, or the breath starting at the navel and going up the front of the body, whereas in the seven steps he talked about the breath coming in at the heart and then going down through the intestines.

So there are lots of different ways you can play with the breath. Some of them have to do with the state of your health, the state of your body. Some of them have to do with the state of your mind. Sometimes the mind needs to be made more alert, and at other times it needs to be calmed and soothed. Different ways of breathing will function in different ways, and you learn this by playing with the breath and gladdening the mind.

If you simply put the mind into shackles, saying, “You’ve got to do this, this, this, and nothing else,” there’s no joy in that kind of practice. But the pleasure that comes from mastering a skill is one of the highest joys. For a lot of us, our joys come from consuming, taking things in. But there’s a higher level of joy that comes from mastering a skill, knowing that you can handle different situations. You’ve got techniques—plural—that you can apply, depending on what the situation is. This is how you develop your discernment. This is how you see cause and effect.

Think about what scientists do when they want to see what causes what. They don’t sit there simply watching something or putting something through one particular test. They’ll try different tests, approaching things from different angles, so that they can see which connections are simply happenstance and which are really

causal. So as you come to the breath, remember that this is an area where you have a technique to start with, to get yourself sensitive to what you're contributing to the present, but that you also have to use your powers of observation and you can make variations. This way, you become your own independent observer.

After all, what are we looking for? We're looking for the end of suffering. And who can know better than you whether you're suffering? But if you're not well trained in being observant, how can *you* even know? There are many subtle levels of suffering that can go right past you if you're not observant, if you're not sensitive.

If you're simply told to follow a particular technique, then basically it becomes the responsibility of the teacher to confirm whether you've attained a particular level or not. That's handing the power over to the teacher. Actually, meditation is meant to hand power over to you, but also to make you worthy of that power, capable of handling that power. As the Buddha said, it's when you reach stream entry that you become independent in the Dhamma.

Ajaan Lee's analogy is that it's like reaching maturity. You're now old enough to function as an adult, and adults don't simply do what they're told. True adults have a range of skills that they've mastered, starting with techniques they've been taught, and then learning how to vary them so that they become their own skills. They become the judges of what approach is required at any particular time and what counts as good results.

If you're not sensitive to what you're putting into the present moment, how are you going to know whether a particular state is fabricated or not? There are strong states of Oneness that can come in the meditation. And the Buddha says, watch out: These are fabricated. The highest Oneness, he says, is a fabricated state. So you have to see the fabrications. You have to learn how to be observant. And to learn how to become observant, you're given a technique and told to play with it. This is how you become independent in the Dhamma. This is how your commitment and your reflection lead you to attaining the Dhamma, a Dhamma you can really depend on.

A Divine Seat

June 2, 2023

A common meditation instruction is that you should sit with whatever comes up. But the important thing is that you have a good place to sit, a solid place to sit, so that whatever comes up doesn't blow you away. Some things come up and they're very strong. You need to be able to resist their strength, to have a way of counteracting them and, when you can, taking them apart.

The Buddha talks about getting the mind into concentration as a divine seat. Get the mind into the first jhana, and there's a sense of ease and rapture filling the body. You can work it through the body. When you're sitting in that state, you're in a divine seat. So create a divine seat for yourself tonight. Focus on the breath. Notice where you feel it. Remember that mindfulness and concentration are things that you construct. You don't just sit here waiting for them to come on their own. You have to give rise to them. They're the seat you have to put together.

As the Buddha said, you direct your thoughts to the breath and then you evaluate. On the one hand, you evaluate the breath. How does it feel? What kind of breathing would feel good now? This is an area where you can experiment. He calls the breath *bodily fabrication*, and the word *fabrication* is often equated with intention. There's an intentional element in the way you breathe. For most of us, we let it go on automatic pilot. But even when it's on automatic pilot, there's something inside you that directs it now to come in, now to go out.

You want to find where those directions are coming from, so experiment. See what feels good right now. You can try soft breathing, heavy breathing, fast, slow, deep, shallow, long, or short. Or simply pose the question to the mind: What would feel really good right now? See how the body responds. Open it up to all kinds of possibilities.

This is one of the duties of meditation: to expand your imagination as to what's possible. You have potentials here in the body right now, potentials in the mind right now, which, if you activate them, can give rise to a sense of intense well-being. Where are those potentials and how do you activate them? If you can get your imagination captured by this question, attracted by this question, so that you become inquisitive,

that can fill up the space in the present moment so that random thoughts and old emotions don't have an opening to come barging in.

So take an interest in this. What kind of breathing really would feel good right now? When it feels good, how do you maintain it? How do you let that sense of good feeling spread around the body? Ajaan Lee recommends having it come down the spine and out the legs, but there are other passages where he says to think of it coming from the soles of the feet up through the legs and the spine. That gives you something else to experiment with. When you breathe in, what direction should the breath flow so that it feels good inside, feels solid, so that the body is in harmony?

In addition to evaluating the breath, you can evaluate the state of your mind. What does it need right now? To be gladdened? To be made steadier? Does it need gentle reminders to stay with the breath? Or does it need more forceful ones?

You find that, in using directed thought and evaluation, you're working with three things here. Bodily fabrication, as I said, and then verbal fabrication: directed thought and evaluation itself. That's the Buddha's term for how you talk to yourself: the comments you make, the questions you ask, the answers you give to those questions. You direct your attention someplace and then you discuss it with yourself.

Then there are perceptions and feelings, which are mental fabrications. Perceptions are the mental images you hold in mind, like the image of the breath energy going down the spine, or the image of the breath coming up through the soles of the feet or filling the chest, bathing the body. Think of the breath as being all around you. We do have this tendency to think of the mind or ourselves being in one part of the body, looking at the breath in another part of the body, in front of us. But the breath can also flow all around you. Hold that perception in mind and see what it does.

So we've got bodily fabrication, verbal fabrication—the directed thought and evaluation—and then mental fabrication, perceptions and feelings. Here the feelings are feelings of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain. You're trying to emphasize the potential for pleasure here. Here again, the Buddha says, feelings can come and go willy-nilly, but you can also induce them by the way you focus on them, by the way you place labels on them. You've probably noticed this yourself. If there's a pain that comes in, and you don't know where it's coming from, you get upset by it. But if a masseur or masseuse massaging you created the same pain, you might actually enjoy it. That's because of the perceptions you have around it.

So learn how to perceive the feelings in the body in a positive way. This way, you create your safe space, you create your divine seat, so that when emotions do come

up—and they will when the mind gets quiet, when it doesn't have the usual surface disturbances that you generate as you go through the day, which keep a lot of subconscious things down in the basement—you won't get knocked over by them.

When the surface disturbances are gone, then what's down in the bottom of the lake can come welling up. Sometimes it's good; sometimes it's not so good. In the beginning, it's hard to get a handle on it, so you just hold on to whatever part of the body you can make comfortable through the way you breathe or the way you focus on it, and just hang out there for a while.

But then you have to realize that these emotions coming up are made out of those same kinds of fabrications that you're using to construct your concentration. That gives you a handle on them. You can begin to analyze them. When a negative emotion comes up, how does it change the way you breathe? Can you change it back to something good? And how are you talking to yourself? What images do you have in your mind? What feelings in the body and feelings in the mind are you focusing on? Can you change the focus? Can you change the inner conversation? You'll notice that a lot of emotions have a story aligned to them. They've been through the mind many times before and it's often the same story, again and again, and it seems designed to get you upset.

When I was first staying with Ajaan Fuang, meditating up on the mountain alone, a lot of issues from childhood, my teenage years, college years, came welling up into the mind. At first I was upset. I wanted to get the mind on the breath, but this other stuff was getting in the way. But then I began to realize that this stuff had to be dealt with, and what I had to do was get a new perspective on it. Ajaan Fuang was helpful. He would say, "Look at these things in terms of your kamma, the things that happen to you that you felt victimized by. Maybe you did that kind of kamma in the past." That thought changes the story. You realize that these issues go back and back and back, and there's so much back and forth that we have no idea how things began.

There's that famous story in the commentaries of one woman chasing another woman around, wanting to kill her child. The woman with the child goes running into the monastery where the Buddha is staying and bows down to his feet. The other woman comes up and hovers in the background, afraid to get nearer. The Buddha asks, "Do you realize how many of each other's children you've killed over your many, many lifetimes? You've been through all this back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. You have no memory of who began this back and forth. Why continue it?"

So realize, when things come welling up, that you don't know the whole story, you know only part of it. Then the question is, do you want to continue it? Why? Part

of the mind says, “I want things to get settled, to come to closure.” But there’s no closure in the world, aside from entering into nibbana. Still, you can have some measure of closure when you say, “Okay, I just don’t want to go back and forth on this anymore.” Changing the storyline like this makes it a different story, and it has a different impact on the mind.

What you’re trying to do is to remove all the Velcro from the story. Then you spread lots of goodwill to everyone involved: yourself, the other people. As the Buddha said, when you realize you’ve done something unskillful, the best response is to recognize it as unskillful and make the resolve not to repeat it. That’ll have a good impact on your kamma right there.

The fact that you recognize something wrong as wrong: That’s right view. The resolve not to repeat it, that shows a change of heart: That’s right resolve. Then you spread goodwill to everybody involved: yourself, the other people. You spread it to yourself so that you don’t keep on harassing yourself with these thoughts. You spread it to the other people involved, and then you spread it to all people you might get involved with in the future. That’s more right resolve. And that disentangles a lot of the stories.

Because they are constructs, too. Just because something comes welling up unbidden in the mind doesn’t mean it’s any more natural than anything else. It’s just a construct, one coming from the past. What we’re trying to do here is learn how to construct better things. The seats that we’ve been constructing in the past are pretty bad: wobbly and uncomfortable. Here the Buddha is teaching what he calls the divine seat: divine right concentration. When you’re well established here, then things don’t blow you around.

Ajaan Chah, one of the forest masters, has a related image. He says it’s as if you’re in a house. There’s just one seat in the house, and you’re in the seat. As long as you don’t let anybody else lure you out of the seat, you’re fine. You’re the one in charge. Everybody else is standing around waiting for your orders. You can tell everyone else to come, tell them to go. But if one of them slips into the seat and pushes you out—or lures you out—you’re in trouble. They’re giving the orders then. You’re the one who has to run around.

It’s like that famous story in Thailand. There’s a character in Thai literature named Sri Thanonchai, who was famous for the tricks he played on other people, including the king. He’d almost always get away with it because he was so clever. Once he was down in the river, and the king comes along with his retinue. He sees Sri Thanonchai down in the river and says, “I know you’re clever, but there’s no way you could get me

to go down in the river with you.” Sri Thanonchai thinks for a bit and then says, “You know, you’re right. But if you got down into the river, I could get you out.” The king says, “Oh, yeah?” He goes down into the river. Then he says, “Okay, now try to get me out.” And Sri Thanonchai says, “Well, I’ve already got you down into the river. Whether you get out or not, that’s your business.”

So watch out for your defilements that will lure you out of the seat and take the seat in your place. You stay here. Learn how to construct a good seat so that it’s a good place to stay. The breath is comfortable. It fills the body with a sense of ease and harmony. The mind is engaged in maintaining that sense of ease and comfort. And as you’re busy constructing this good seat, you find that you don’t have much time for other things. When they do a barge in, you can take them apart. If you can’t figure out how to take them apart quite yet, then just hold on to your seat. That way you can stay safe.

The Flamethrowing Mind

September 4, 2023

As the passage that we chanted just now said, everything is on fire. Where do the flames come from? From inside the mind. The mind is a flamethrower. It scorches everything we look at, listen to, smell, taste, touch, think about. Then we complain that things are hot. We have to look around and see: Why are we setting things on fire? Look in here for the source of the problem. If we can put out the fire here, then nothing outside is going to be on fire at all.

Ajaan Lee has an interesting point that he makes in his talk on consciousnesses, that when the mind gets freed, everything else gets freed as well. Ajaan Maha Boowa makes the same point. He says we've been stealing things from the world, trying to make them ours. Then, as the case is being adjudicated, the fact that everything else is stolen goods taints them. But when we remove the taints from our own mind, the world outside is not tainted, either.

This is not to say that there are not a lot of problems out in the world. The world seems to be crazy right now. People are actually planning wars as if war were something reasonable. So we do live in a world that's not the best place to be. But, we can practice, we can cleanse our minds, we can put out the fires inside so, at the very least, we don't have to suffer from things outside.

As we learn how not to suffer, we can help other people not to suffer, too. Sometimes we're told that Theravadins are selfish, looking after their own good, trying to end their own suffering, without trying to save the rest of the world. Well, you can't save other people. People suffer because of their own lack of skill. You can't make somebody else skillful, but you can show people that it is possible to behave in a skillful way. It's like the ways in which manual skills develop.

Back in the time of the European Enlightenment, they made an encyclopedia. The encyclopedia contained a lot of articles on the manual skills that people were practicing, and it tried to bring some scientific knowledge to them. Once scientific knowledge came to one craftsman, other people in the same craft picked it up pretty quickly. They saw, "This is possible. This can be done." Sometimes they'd learn it from the first person, sometimes from the simple fact that the first person had done

something like that. Others would look at what he had done and try to figure out, “How did he do that?”

Like Ajaan Lee in India: The first time he went there, he was amazed to see the sadhus standing on one leg out in the sun all day long or lying down on beds of nails. The question came to his mind, “How do they do that?” He didn’t ask them. He looked into his own meditation. And the message he got was that they worked with the breath energies in the body. So he decided to work with his own.

So sometimes the fact simply that somebody can do something inspires other people to do it. They figure out that this is a possibility that hadn’t occurred to them before, but once it does occur to them, they see that it’s good and they figure it out. This is one way in which we help the world. We figure out how we’re setting things on fire and we can put out the fires. Then other people see, “Oh, that’s possible.” It hadn’t occurred to them before. That possibility hadn’t presented itself to their awareness. But when it’s there, it sets a good example that they might be inspired to follow. So we’re looking for happiness in a way that doesn’t harm anybody and can inspire other people to look for happiness in the right way, too.

But the first thing we’ve got to do is to put our own house in order. How are we setting fire to things? We want them to be a certain way, and then they’re not that way. Or if they are that way, we want them to stay that way. If they’re not the way we want them, we’re upset. This habit we have of trying to take things and then make something else out of them is how we became beings to begin with. But then we apply it in a lot of the wrong places.

Think about the process of becoming. It starts out with some pretty unpromising raw materials: feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, acts of consciousness—very simple things that are not very lasting. In fact, they’re very ephemeral. Yet we want to create a sense of our identity as a solid thing we can depend on, and the world as something we can depend on. And we do a fairly good job—good enough, at least, that we can deceive ourselves. We try to forget that the raw materials are very, very, ephemeral. We’re proud of the fact that we can make something out of them. But then when they prove recalcitrant and don’t play along, we get upset.

So you’ve got to look back into the mind’s habit of taking something and trying to make something else out of it, and ask yourself, “Where does the problem come from?” Here again, the problem comes from within. We’re trying to make something reliable out of unreliable things. If we could learn how to stop doing that, we wouldn’t suffer.

So you have to look at that pattern we have inside: what we want to make things into. There's something wrong there. We may be perfectly right that things would be better if they could be something else, but if they don't lend themselves to be that something else, then who's wrong, who's right?

Ajaan Chah tells the story of four people going into the woods and they hear a cock crow. Three of them put their heads together and say, "Let's have a little fun." They ask the question, "What is that? Is that a cock or a hen?" The other guy says, "Well, of course, it's a cock. It doesn't sound like a hen at all. How could a hen make a sound like that?" They say, "Well, hens have mouths. They can make sounds, can't they?" So they argue back and forth. The one guy is outnumbered by the three who are having some fun, and he gets all upset. As Ajaan Chah points out, he was right, but his rightness got him upset. Is it worth it? As for the animal that made the noise, if you asked it, "Are you a cock or are you a hen?" it wouldn't answer.

So there are a lot of things in the world where, yes, you are right, things would be better if they were different from what they are. And there are some occasions when you can make them different from what they are. A lot of times, though, you can't. It's a real skill to learn how to live in the world and see where you can make a difference and where you can't, and not get upset about the areas where you can't.

You find more and more that the important differences are the differences you can make in your own mind. After all, that's where the big problem is. The mind is on fire. If the mind were not on fire, nothing else outside would be on fire; none of the senses would be on fire. So this is where you focus your efforts to put out the fire: to see what you're feeding on, what you're clinging to.

I've been looking into the question of the meanings of the words *mind* and *consciousness* and *awareness* in the Pali Canon, and it turns out that in different suttas, they mean different things. It's as if the Buddha gives us several different maps for analyzing our minds. In some cases, consciousness is just the passive registering of sensory input. In other cases, it's more active. It's actually proactive. It gets obsessed with things. It gets attached to things. What we normally think of as the activities of the mind are sometimes attributed to consciousness. The mind gets released, and a couple of suttas say that even consciousness gets released.

So you could say the Buddha was inconsistent in his terminology, or you could say that he was offering different ways of analyzing what's going on in your mind, attacking the problem from different angles, all of which are useful for dividing things up, until you find that angle that works for you, the angle from which you can see that

none of the aggregates are worthy of passion: the passion that wants to make something out of them.

You can learn to do that with your own mind. When the mind is freed, then, as Ajaan Lee says, everything else gets freed too. When you put out the fires here and stop throwing flames outside, everything cools down. Everything is at peace.

The constant theme through all this is dispassion. When you can learn to develop dispassion for these different processes that you've enjoyed so much, then however you analyze them, as long as you can develop dispassion for everything, you're doing fine. There are even passages that say when you have an experience of the deathless, you can have passion for that. So, you have to learn how to have dispassion for that too. Ajaan Lee, when he divides things up, says that some things are subject to the three characteristics, and other things are not. But that doesn't mean you hold on to the ones that are not. Everything should be let go of.

That's where we're headed. That's how you put out the fires inside. In the meantime, though, you need to have some passion for the path. A question came up this afternoon about someone who's found that, as she's advanced on the path, she's found herself less and less interested in the things that used to hold a lot of interest for her. She's afraid she's going to suffer depression. Well, depression comes from a sense of powerlessness, that your actions don't matter, whereas dispassion comes from seeing that the things that you used to find rewarding don't really hold any reward. In the meantime, though, you've learned that there *are* things where you can make a difference, a good and useful difference. You can make a difference in your mind. You can put out the fires, stop throwing flames. And that's something you can get passionate about as you practice.

Ultimately, you get dispassionate for that insight, too. You get dispassionate for everything. But at that point, it's not depression because you've found the ultimate happiness where everything can be at peace. Until you get there, though, you're going to be finding that not only is the mind not at peace, but the world, too, is not at peace because you're not at peace. The important thing is that you watch out for the areas where you're setting things on fire. As you put out the fires inside, things in the world cool down. The mind cools down.

That's where we're headed. As the Buddha said, if you see that goal as something unattractive, you've got wrong view. The closer you get there, the more you appreciate that you're really headed in the right direction.

In the meantime, watch out for the flames coming out of your heart and mind, and be very careful not to set everyone else on fire, too.

The Radiant Mind

March 22, 2023

This mind is radiant, the Buddha said, but it's darkened by passing defilements. So exactly where does that radiance lie? He's not saying that the mind is innately pure. Ajaan Maha Boowa makes this point very clear. If the mind were innately pure, then how did it get defiled? And if a pure mind can be defiled, what's going to happen to it after it gets purified again? It could get defiled again. In fact, Ajaan Maha Boowa says that the radiance of the mind is actually part of its main defilement, ignorance: the defilement that's left when all the obvious defilements go away. But, the Buddha said, it's because of this radiance that we can train the mind.

So when the Buddha says the mind is radiant, he's obviously not talking about a mind already enlightened or innately enlightened. He's talking about a mind that has the potential to clean up its act. This comes down to the fact that the mind can observe itself. Our problem is that we're not very observant, we don't get full use out of our powers of observation, which is why one of the main tasks in the meditation is to get the mind still and to get it asking the right questions so that it can observe itself well.

In particular, we want it to learn how to observe itself making choices. There are so many choices we make that we're oblivious to. We're like a large corporation where decisions are coming out of the corporation but no one seems to be really aware of who actually made the decision.

We've got to get the mind still so that we can watch it, because obviously the mind is hiding some of its decisions from itself. That's what ignorance is all about. We've got to get the mind clear about what it's doing. Part of the clarity comes from the vocabulary the Buddha gives us for analyzing what's going on, say, in terms of fabrication, particularly the way the mind shapes its experience through its intentions. The breath is shaped through our intentions: That's bodily fabrication. Then we talk to ourselves, with certain intentions in mind: That's verbal fabrication. And then mental fabrication, perceptions and feelings: the images we hold in mind and the feeling tones we focus on and encourage. Those are shaped by our intentions, too.

Usually, we're awfully ignorant of how we encourage these things. Yet, as the Buddha said, we shape both the present moment and our future lifetimes through these types of fabrication. If we're ignorant of them, that's pretty scary.

Fortunately, we can observe these processes in action right here as we meditate. In fact, we use these types of fabrication to create a state of concentration. You focus on the breath. You talk to yourself about the breath and you use perceptions to help you stay with the breath. Ask yourself what kinds of perceptions help the mind to settle down with a feeling of ease in the breath. Think of the breath as a whole-body process. As the Buddha says, when the mind settles down and has a sense of pleasure or even rapture, you want that to permeate the whole body.

The best way to do that is to follow Ajaan Lee's recommendation: You think of the breath as an element filling the whole body. What you've got here is breath breathing breath. To perceive it in that way gets rid of a lot of the harshness with which we sometimes breathe. There's the still breath, there's the subtly moving breath, there's the blatantly moving breath, and you want them to all be coordinated. Hold that perception in mind and talk to yourself in these ways. That way, you get the mind to settle down.

At the same time, you get more conscious of how you do these things. As we discussed this afternoon, it's not always the case that one type of fabrication is always the primary cause of a particular emotion or mind state, although Ajaan Lee points out that verbal fabrications are probably the most important to watch out for, because we can tell ourselves all kinds of things. The way we talk to ourselves can make us miserable or very happy, given the same set of circumstances.

And of course, when we're talking to ourselves, we're using perceptions. So those play a huge role as well. You change your perceptions, and that changes the conversation. Then again, sometimes the breath is what leads the way. You wake up in the morning, breathing in a weird way, creating headaches, creating discomfort in the body, and that can get you talking to yourself in ways that aren't particularly useful. So if you notice that happening, you've got to change your conversation. In other words, use whichever handle you can grab hold of, out of these three types.

The important point is that you become conscious of the fact that you *are* making choices. You want to be alert to see when the choice is made, what kind of discussion goes into it, and then the results of following through with that choice. That ability to step back and watch these things: That's the brightness of the mind. That's what allows us to train the mind. If we didn't have that kind of brightness inside, we'd be helpless in the face of our defilements.

So that's where you look for the radiance. And being with the breath gives you a good place to step back from what's going on in the mind so that you can watch.

It's through this radiance that we can nourish the Dhamma inside. Remember the Buddha's statement that there are two things that nourish the Dhamma. One is commitment, and the other is reflection. This ability to step back and reflect: That's how we learn. It's in the Buddha's instructions to Rahula, at the very beginning of the practice. Be conscious of your intentions. Then ask yourself, where are they going? Where would they lead you if you followed through with them?

If an intention seems unskillful, don't follow it. The reason for that is because if you act on intentions you know to be unskillful, it's going to be hard to learn from them. You'll tend to hide from yourself the fact that you could foresee that it was going to be unskillful to begin with and yet you went ahead with it anyway. When you start putting up walls inside the mind like that, the mind gets darkened.

So you try your best. After all, how are you going to grow as a person unless you try your best? Years back, when I was teaching English at the university in Chiang Mai, they had me teach literature courses. So for one of the courses, I had the kids reading *The Good Soldier* by Ford Maddox Ford. It's not the easiest book to read, even for a native speaker, because the main point of the story is that the narrator is lying to you. He's trying to keep some secrets from you, even as he's telling you the story. So the way he tells his story jumps back and forth. Every time he gets to something sensitive, he skips over it further into the future or jumps back further into the past. Of course, for the students reading this in a second language, it was pretty confusing. So I gave them a timeline of the events, did everything I could to help them. But still there were complaints. Finally, when one of the students asked me, "Ajaan, why do you give us such difficult things to read?" I said to her, "If I gave you easy things, what would you learn?" It was as if a light bulb went off over her head, and she turned from a C student into an A student.

When you stretch yourself, when you do your best and find out that your best isn't good enough: That's when you learn, because then you can ask yourself, "What could I have done that would have been better?" That's when you let some light into your mind. You allow the light that's there in the mind's ability to observe itself to have a chance. You're not constantly covering it up.

So when you're acting on skillful intentions but you discover that what you're doing is actually causing harm, you stop. You don't just blunder your way through, saying, "Well, it was a good intention, so it's got to be good." You have to tell yourself, "Maybe something was wrong with the intention, or maybe with how I carried it

through.” So you stop. There’s nothing that you’re doing that’s creating harm? Okay, you continue with the action.

Then when the action is done, you reflect: What were the long-term consequences? You see that you’ve caused harm? You talk it over with someone who’s more advanced than you in the path and then you make up your mind not to repeat that mistake. The talking it over—this is for verbal or physical actions—is to help you get so that you’re not ashamed to discuss your mistakes with yourself. As for mental actions, you don’t have to tell everything bad that’s gone through your mind. But still, you should have a sense of shame over the fact that you gave in to jealousy, you gave in to pettiness and resentment or whatever it was. When you recognize that there was something wrong with the intention, you decide not to repeat that.

This is how you learn; this is how you allow the light in the mind to show itself. This is how that light is useful for developing the mind. As the Buddha said, if the mind were not radiant like this, you couldn’t train it. You couldn’t develop it.

So through this combination of commitment and reflection you make more and more use of the light of the mind, the radiance of the mind. After all, we do have this ability to make choices in the present moment that don’t have to be determined by the past. The Buddha was very critical of people who said that everything you experience is determined by the past, which means there must be something in the present moment that’s not determined. You can take advantage of that: that ability to choose, that ability to be conscious of your choices. That’s where the radiance begins to show. That’s how you learn.

This radiant mind is not the unconditioned mind or the unconditioned consciousness. That’s something separate entirely. But it’s a part of the path there, and it’s a bright path. As Ajaan Maha Boowa points out, at the very end, you have to abandon even the bright path to get to what’s really valuable in the mind.

But wherever you see a glimmer of brightness, follow that for the time being, as it’s heading in the right direction. You want to get to the point where the brightness of the mind is the only defilement remaining. Get rid of the obvious clouds, and you can get more and more in charge of your own training. If we didn’t have this radiance, we’d have to depend on other people to come and save us. But as the Buddha said, there’s nobody else who can be your refuge. You have to be your own refuge.

So take advantage of whatever radiance you find in the mind, and encourage it through this ability to step back and observe, to be alert and mindful, so that you can check on the results of your ardency to see if they really are heading in the right

direction. That's how the radiance of the mind helps you to develop. It can take you to something beyond it.

The Dhamma Is in the Method

June 21, 2022

It's the solstice. It's bright enough outside that the woodpeckers are still squawking. This is one of the two days of the year when the Sun stands still. Night balances day. So try to get your mind still as well; try to bring things into balance inside. Look at your mind. Look at your body. Look at your posture. Make sure your spine is straight, balanced, not leaning to the right, left, forward, or back. Then make sure your mind isn't leaning, either.

The Thai ajaans use this image a lot. Leaning forward, of course, means leaning into thoughts of the future. Leaning back means leaning into thoughts of the past. Leaning left or right means leaning to things you like and don't like.

Just try to be balanced and aware.

But the awareness itself isn't enough. It's just the beginning. You want to be able to watch your mind thoroughly, so you give it a task. Remember that basic principle for nourishing the Dhamma: You commit and then you reflect.

This is basically the method of the Dhamma. Just as science has a method, the Dhamma has a method, too. In the case of science, the scientific method is what ties everything together. The knowledge we gain from that method tends to vary over time. People think they've proven something, and then another generation comes along and says, "No, that's not quite right." Things have to be adjusted or thrown out entirely. So the content changes, but the method stays the same. It's simply a matter of learning how to apply the method better and better, with more and more finesse, more and more imagination.

One of the ironies of science is that many scientists believe in strict determinism. But if you really believed in strict determinism, there would be no way to conduct the scientific method. You couldn't criticize someone for having designed a poor experiment, because he or she was determined to design it that way. And the designing of the experiment wouldn't have anything to do with how things came out anyhow. So, one of the assumptions of the scientific method is that you can make choices as to what to do, and the things you choose to do will have different impacts on the world around you. In doing that, you'll learn things about the causal relationships among things. But the really important thing is the method.

It's the same with the practice. We can learn a lot of Dhamma through reading about it. We think we understand what the four noble truths and all the different wings to awakening mean. We may have the concepts down, but we don't really know them until we've applied the method.

In other words, you try something out. Before you act, you ask yourself, "What do you expect to be the results?" If you expect any harm, you don't do it. If you don't expect any harm, you can go ahead with it.

While you're doing it, look to see if any harm is coming up. If there is, you stop. If there isn't, you can continue. When you're done, you reflect on the long-term consequences. If you acted on that particular assumption, were the long-term results harmful or not? If they weren't good, what can you do to change? You've got to go back and re-evaluate your original assumptions.

This is how we take our book knowledge of the Dhamma and the knowledge we gained from thinking things through, and we actually learn it in a new way as we try to develop good qualities in the mind.

So wherever you go, remember: Apply the method. There may be points of Dhamma you're 100 percent sure you understand. But you've really got to test them as you put them into practice if you want to understand them fully.

The forest ajaans, again, make a lot of this. They say it's like learning military science. You can draw diagrams on the blackboard, analyze old battles, see what lessons you can learn by looking at past battles from the outside. But when you have to go into battle yourself, you find it's a very different experience as you see the battle from the inside. You've got to learn how to think on your feet, to test things. If they don't work out, you've got to use your imagination, use your ingenuity, to come up with a new approach. Quickly. That's when the Dhamma becomes yours. And you know it's Dhamma because it gives good results.

This is why the teaching on kamma is such a basic part of the teaching, i.e., the principle that your actions will give results based on your intentions in line with the principles of cause and effect. If your actions made no difference, or if you couldn't choose your actions, then there would be no way that you could test any teaching. To believe that you can test a teaching by the results it gives when you put it into action means that you have to believe in the reality of action, in your ability to choose your actions, and in the principles of cause and effect.

Those principles follow a pattern, enough of a pattern that you can learn from them. That, too, is something you have to believe if you're going to test any teaching. If there were no pattern, the lessons you learned today wouldn't necessarily help you

tomorrow. But you have to do things again and again and again until the pattern becomes clear. This is why we meditate again and again, because the mind is complex. Sometimes a method that works today won't work tomorrow. The fact that it doesn't work tomorrow doesn't necessarily mean that it's bad or that there is no pattern or that you weren't observant today, simply that conditions tomorrow are different. Your mind is in a different shape. Your body is in a different shape. So you have to test things again in lots of different situations until the pattern becomes clear.

The Buddha gives some standards for judging how well the test goes. And again, you're going to learn these standards first by hearing about them but you're really going to come to appreciate them only as you try to apply them in practice. Those standards are in the list he used to teach his stepmother about how to recognize what's Dhamma and what's not.

The two main standards have to do with the goal of the practice: We're trying to practice for dispassion and for being unfettered. Being unfettered means that the mind is released. And it's interesting that those two go together. You gain freedom through dispassion. That's looking for freedom in a place where we ordinarily might not think of looking.

But remember the Buddha's prescription for how you bring about dispassion and free the mind. You look at things as they arise, see what their origination is—i.e., what event in the mind causes them. You look at them as they pass away as the cause ends. You have to see what their allure is, what their drawbacks are. When you can compare the allure and the drawbacks until you can see that the allure is false, or it's certainly not worth all the drawbacks, then you can let go through dispassion. That's the escape from those things.

Basically, you grow up. The word *dispassion* doesn't sound all that good. It sounds like you're dead. But that's not what the Buddha means. It's basically a question of maturing. It's like seeing a game you used to play that no longer holds any fascination. Like tic-tac-toe: As a child, when you haven't figured out what the best moves are, you can keep playing it again and again and again. But then you begin to see there's a pattern: If you start with X's or O's in certain boxes, you're sure to lose. When you see the patterns clearly, you lose your fascination with the game. There's no need to play it anymore.

That's dispassion. It basically sees that the mind's been playing a game with itself in going for the allure. But when you see that the drawbacks way outweigh the allure, you ask yourself, "Why continue playing that game? It's not worth the trouble." You've outgrown it.

So those are the standards we use to measure our practice in terms of the goal we want to accomplish.

Then we look at how our practice has an impact on others. The Buddha says you want to be modest. You don't want to show off whatever attainments you have. You don't go around bragging about your concentration. There's a nice story in the Canon about Ven. Anuruddha's novice. Anuruddha, you may remember, was the monk with the divine eye. He, more than anyone else except the Buddha, could see devas. He could see what's going on in all the different levels of the universe. He was also the one who, on the night of Buddha's passing away, was able to keep track of where the Buddha's mind was in the different levels of concentration before he entered total nibbana.

Anuruddha had a novice who could levitate up to the Himalayas, wash Anuruddha's bowl in the pure waters of a lake up there, and then levitate back. His main thought was how to do this without anybody seeing him. That's the kind of attitude you want to have about your practice. You're not showing off. It's your secret treasure.

You also want to practice in such a way that you don't get entangled with others. You're looking for seclusion. Physical seclusion first, so that you can gain mental seclusion from defilements in your mind.

And you try to be unburdensome. You don't make big demands that this has to be that way, that has to be this way in any fashion that would place an undue burden on others.

So as you're practicing, if you notice that the way you practice is getting you entangled or making you burdensome, you've got to change. You realize okay, what you thought was the Dhamma is not the Dhamma. Or your interpretation of it was not right. You've got to go back and look at it again.

Then there are the qualities you develop inside: contentment, persistence, and what the Buddha calls shedding. Shedding refers to shedding pride, shedding thoughts of wanting to get revenge. There's another great story in the Canon of a young prince whose parents had been executed by a king. The prince decides to get revenge, so he applies for a job in the elephant stables of the king's palace. In the evening, he plays the lute to soothe the elephants. Well, the sound of the lute wafts from the elephant stables into the king's quarters. The king likes the sound, so he has the young man brought in to play for him. That soothes him. He tells the young man to stay as part of his own private retinue.

The young prince works to be trusted by the king, and finally gets the king in a position where he could, if he wanted to, kill him. But he decides not to. He's stopped by something his father had said before being executed: "Don't look too far. Don't look too close. Animosity isn't ended by animosity. It's ended by non-animosity." In other words, the father was basically saying, "Don't try to get revenge." The prince at that crucial moment finally understood what his father's words meant.

Apparently in one of his previous lifetimes, the Buddha was the young prince. He told this story to monks who were involved in a controversy over minor, minor rules and he said, "Look, here are noble warriors who live by the sword, yet they can still have forgiveness. They can still shed their pride and thoughts of revenge. Why can't you as practitioners?"

Revenge may be too strong a word for the feelings you may have for others. But sometimes you just want to get back at somebody, with the conviction that you're right about wanting to see them suffer. But your rightness is creating a lot of trouble. There are ways of being right and yet wrong at the same time. So, you want to learn how to shed those.

Then the pair of contentment and persistence: You're content with material things. If the food, clothing, shelter, and medicine you have is enough to keep you alive, to keep you practicing, okay, then it's enough. But you're *not* content when unskillful attitudes come in and take over your mind. You don't just leave them there, saying, "Well, that's just the way it is. I've got to learn how to accept that. I shouldn't try to figure things out. I shouldn't try to pass judgment on these things. I should just learn how to accept them." That's stupidity.

These things that come rising up in the mind influence your actions. If you have any sense of compunction, you realize, as the Buddha says, that you've got to wipe them out of existence. Remember his statement that one of the secrets to his awakening was that he did *not* rest content even with skillful qualities. In other words, if they weren't skillful enough to take him all the way, he kept on looking for what was more skillful.

When he described his path of practice, he said he was in search of what was skillful. He left home in search of what was skillful. After he studied with the two ajaans and was disappointed in their teachings, he went out alone in search of what was skillful. When his austerities didn't work, he went in search of what was skillful. When he finally got the mind in right concentration, he wanted to know the skillful use of his concentration. So he used it to gain the three knowledges, and in each case,

he asked himself, once he had gained that knowledge, “What’s the skillful use of this knowledge?”

In terms of the first two knowledges, there were people who had attained those before him. There were people who had seen their previous lifetimes and then set themselves up as teachers. But the Buddha realized that that wasn’t the skillful use of that knowledge. It had to be pursued further. Seeing that the way he had been reborn went up and down, up and down, up and down, around and around, the question was, “Why? How?”

He had a vision of all beings in the cosmos dying and being reborn in line with their actions, skillful or unskillful, based on skillful or unskillful views. Again, there had been people before him who had gained similar knowledge and set themselves up as teachers. But the Buddha realized that that wasn’t the skillful use of that knowledge. The skillful use would be to figure out: How do you end the suffering that comes from this endless round? He focused in on his own intentions, he focused in on his own views there in the present moment. That’s how he was finally able to gain awakening.

So he didn’t rest content. He kept searching: “Given that I have this, what’s the skillful use of it? And if something is not skillful, how do you abandon it?” If your practice is that kind of practice, then it’s practice going in the right direction. You’re following the right method. After all, how do you know what’s skillful and what’s not skillful? You do what you think is skillful and then you look at the results: You put this principle into action, and what happens? You put that principle into action, what happens? Are the results satisfactory? It was his unwillingness to be satisfied easily—that’s how he became the Buddha.

So these are the principles, the ways of measuring your actions as to whether they’re really skillful or not, whether they’re Dhamma or not. You want to keep these principles in mind, so that wherever you go, you’ve got the method to test things.

It’s interesting that the Buddha taught these principles to his stepmother. As we see in the Canon, there were very few times when the Buddha himself went to teach the nuns. Occasionally his stepmother would come to him with a question. But otherwise, he would have the monks go teach the nuns in his place on a regular basis. But early on, his stepmother came and asked for a short teaching that would help her in her practice. He gave her these principles so that she could learn how to depend on herself, to test what is and is not the Dhamma.

So, this is the method. This is how the Dhamma gets tested, and the test is what guarantees the Dhamma. As I said, you can read the books, you can think things

through, and it can all make sense, but if you don't actually put things into practice, you don't really know. You have no guarantee. And if you don't put them into practice, you don't understand the subtleties even of some of the concepts.

We had an old man come and stay with us at Wat Dhammasathit for several years. When he was younger, he had been ordained as a monk, studied and passed the seventh grade of Pali exams, which was pretty advanced. But then he disrobed and got a job with the government. When he retired, he came out to live at the monastery, and he was constantly contemplating the meaning of different Pali phrases. He still kept his interest in Pali going.

Ajaan Fuang made an interesting comment one time. He said that this man's understanding of the Dhamma was really crude. Here was someone who passed all those exams, had lots of knowledge about the language, but that was it. It was just words, and words are crude compared to the real thing. If you want subtle knowledge of the Dhamma, you've got to practice and to be very observant. Use your ingenuity. You've got to use your ingenuity so that when there are things you think you understand but when you put them into practice they don't work, you can figure out why.

You're not here just obeying instructions. You've got to put some of yourself into this. Just like scientists—they have to put some of themselves into designing their experiments right, by using their ingenuity to figure out how they're going to detect a certain relationship. The more you put into testing the Dhamma, the more you're going to get out of it.

Think

July 15, 2022

When we built the *chedi*, the spired monument at Wat Dhammasathit, the architect was a fan of the Finnish architect, Eero Saarinen. The lines were very clean, very graceful.

A couple years later, Ajaan Fuang and I flew around the world. We came to America to visit my family, among other things, and we flew into Dulles Airport in Washington, which had been designed by Saarinen. That was back in the days when you landed at Dulles and went right into the main terminal, which has a big roof shaped like a hammock. So I pointed it out to Ajaan Fuang. I thought he might be interested. He took one glance at it, didn't say anything—that was it. So I figured he wasn't interested.

A couple weeks later, though, when we got back to Thailand, I learned that he had described the roof in great detail to the architect: talking about how it was an amazing piece of architecture. I mention this just to point out that Ajaan Fuang was extremely observant. He could glance at something very quickly and take it all in.

So, think about that when you hear that his meditation instructions tended to boil down to two things: One, be observant, and two, use your ingenuity. *Really* be observant, to understand cause and effect: Watch what you're doing, watch the results very carefully, and if they're good, keep it up. If not they're not, you've got to figure out what and how to change.

He talked about one time when he was a young monk just getting started. The meditation instructions back in those days were very simple. He didn't have Ajaan Lee's Seven Steps because Ajaan Lee hadn't formulated them yet. The basic instructions were just to get the mind to settle down, or in Thai, to bring the mind down: *hai cit long*. So he forced it down, down, down, and it got very heavy and unpleasant. So he figured, "This must not be right. Turn it around. How about bringing it up, up, up, up, up?" So he brought it up, way up—but that wasn't right, either. Eventually, he found the right balance. But he did not by just accepting things. He did it by thinking about things and trying to find solutions to problems. That became the basic pattern of his meditation.

You see this throughout the forest tradition—the emphasis on thinking. There’s a great passage in Ajaan Maha Boowa. There had been a controversy in Bangkok. A group had claimed that nibbana was your *true self*, so a lot of scholarly monks came out and said, “No, no. Nibbana is *not-self*.”

The controversy became so heated that it actually got into the newspapers. Can you imagine the *New York Post* running articles on whether nibbana is self or not-self? That’s basically what you had in Thailand. Even the popular everyday newspapers, not just the highly regarded ones, got involved in the fray.

Someone took the question to Ajaan Maha Boowa and asked him whether nibbana was self or not-self. His answer was, “Nibbana is nibbana. Self, not-self: These are perceptions. You use these perceptions on the path, but when you get to nibbana, you’ve got to let go of all perceptions.” As he was delivering this answer, he kept saying, *phicaranaa si*, which in Thai basically means *Think!* Use your brains.

It’s a theme throughout the forest tradition. Of course, it’s a theme in the Buddha’s teachings, too. He talks about how to listen to the Dhamma and put it into practice. You start out by listening well. As he says, “You lend ear.” You actually try to remember what you’ve heard, then you try to penetrate the meaning—in other words, figure out what it means—and then you contemplate it. “Ponder it,” he says, until it makes sense.

See that it fits in with the rest of the Dhamma you’ve learned, *how* it fits in with the rest of the Dhamma—because it is supposed to fit in. As the Buddha said, that’s one of the tests for the Dhamma: that it’s consistent. It leads consistently to its *attha*, its purpose or goal. It all has to work together to aim to that goal—the goal of release. Once you see that it makes sense in this way, you give rise to a desire to practice, followed by a willingness to submit yourself to what you’ve learned. And there he says, you *contemplate*. So, you don’t just ponder it to make sure that it makes sense, but you contemplate how it’s going to apply in your own case and you judge how well you’re actually applying it. You’ve got to think this through.

When you hear a Dhamma talk, it often deals in general principles, principles that are right for people at large. As I pointed out yesterday: Generally, I advise people not to force the breath into different parts of the body, but there are times when there are exceptions, and sometimes you find that you’re dealing with an exception. So be alive to that, contemplate that, use your ingenuity, and then put forth the right effort.

Right effort has to rely on your thinking powers. There’s no place where the Buddha ever says that the rational mind is an enemy or that the rational mind gets in

the way. The Dhamma is all supposed to make sense, and if it doesn't make sense, you have to ask yourself, "Okay, where is my sense of *making sense* lacking here?" Because it all fits.

I know one prominent case where people interpret the Dhamma so that it doesn't fit. This is where they interpret mindfulness as being a broad, accepting, open state of mind where you don't make any choices, don't pass any judgments, whereas with concentration and right effort, you have to develop certain states in the mind and reject other states.

The question is, how can you do all of those things at the same time? After all, the path is supposed to come together. One solution that someone proposed was that the Buddha actually taught two paths: a sixfold path of right mindfulness, without right effort and right concentration, and a sevenfold path of right effort and right concentration but without right mindfulness. Yet that doesn't make any sense.

You have to go back and see where the modern definitions are wrong. Actually, mindfulness is not an open accepting state of mind. Mindfulness has its agendas. You're trying to *keep* something in mind—in the case of the body in and of itself, you're trying to keep with the breath right now—and you're ardent, alert, and mindful.

Alert means to watch what you're doing along with the results you're getting. *Ardent* means that you're trying to do this well, trying to do this skillfully. As the Buddha said, when mindfulness is a governing principle in your practice, if there's anything unskillful in the mind or your behavior, you try to get rid of it. If there's anything that's skillful that hasn't developed yet, you try to give rise to it. When it's there, you try to maintain it and get it to develop even further.

In other words, instead of watching things coming and going, arising and passing away, without interfering, without passing judgment, you're actively trying to make good qualities arise and to prevent them from passing away. When you understand mindfulness in this way, then it fits perfectly in with right effort and right concentration, because right concentration is the result of this kind of mindfulness. And right effort, of course, is there in the ardency.

So think. And try to think in a way that solves problems. A lot of people use their thinking to create problems. The Buddha shows how to think in his treatment of questions: questions that are to be answered categorically, those that have to be analyzed before you answer them, those that require cross-questioning, and those that should be put aside. One of the important parts of developing your discernment is learning to judge when a particular question falls into a particular category—to

realize there are some issues that, no matter how much you think about them, are not going to get you anywhere on the path. Other questions have to be answered in a straightforward way. You have to figure out which is which.

And you have to develop the discernment that the Buddha says is like an archer's skills: able to shoot far distances, able to fire shots in rapid succession, able to pierce great masses.

Firing shots in rapid succession, he says, is basically seeing the four noble truths. What this means is that you watch the mind and notice when it's creating stress and when it's not creating stress. Sometimes it goes back and forth very quickly between the two. You can gain an insight and then immediately latch on to it. Okay, the insight was good, it's part of the path, but the latching on to it is not part of the path, and it's going to cause more suffering—which is why you have to be quick.

Shooting far distances means seeing implications. There's that passage in the Not-self Discourse where the Buddha talks about how you look at the five aggregates in the present moment and see that they're inconstant, stressful, and not-self. But you don't stop there. You think about the implications. Whatever you remember about the past, even if you remember past lives, comes down to just these five aggregates. And wherever you might go in the future of this life or of other lives is going to be composed of these same aggregates.

You think about the implications of that.

You realize that no matter where you go, no matter what you would latch on to, it's not worth latching on to. It's all going to slip away, like water through your fingers. You think about the consequences; you think about the implications. As you think about them, that insight into how the aggregates right here in the present moment are not worth latching on to makes you less and less inclined to want to come back here or anywhere else at all. It makes you more and more inclined to want to get out.

That desire to get out comes from the fact that you thought.

And finally, piercing great masses: You're able to pierce your ignorance. In other words, when you're looking at something and you see that there's stress, turn around and look inside: That's where the big mass of ignorance is.

Our attention, for the most part, gets directed outside, outside, outside. Even when we're practicing meditation, we're watching certain events in the mind, but who's doing the watching? The observations about what you're watching: Do they apply to the watcher as well? They do. That's where the mass of ignorance is, so turn around and look there.

If you develop this all-around set of skills, then your thinking really does lead to discernment, and the discernment does lead to release.

When we look at the Canon—all those suttas, all that analysis—we realize: This is not the fruit of a mind that didn't think. The Buddha thought very carefully, thought very skillfully, thought with a lot of circumspection. So, when you meditate and you're reflecting on what you're doing, you've got to learn *how* to think. Think in a way that cuts to the chase, that sees things as they're happening and doesn't create a lot of needless issues.

Years back, one of my students had gone to a retreat with an ajaan who liked to talk about life as an interplay of the relative and the absolute. He finished the retreat by sending everyone home with instructions to contemplate their lives as an interplay of the relative and the absolute. So my student came to me and asked a question about how to do that, and the question was so convoluted that I had to stop her. I said, "Look, just drop that issue. It's not useful, because it's dealing in abstractions. The Buddha didn't deal in abstractions. He dealt in watching realities: watching your actions and watching the results."

Those are things you can look at and think about without the abstractions. And you can see: "This action causes stress. This action leads away from stress." Keep it simple like that, and things open up. That's when you know you're using your thinking powers in the most fruitful way.

To Be Debt Free

December 20, 2022

We come to the practice indebted to others. The Thais have the concept of what they call your kamma-debt collectors, the people you've harmed in the past. And as Ajaan Lee points out, we're in debt to all those whose flesh we've eaten and to all the farmers who've provided us with vegetarian and non-vegetarian food. We're in debt to our parents for having raised us, to our teachers for having taught us. As we come to the practice, this is one way of getting ourselves out of debt. But first we put ourselves in debt to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. We take on these better debts—let's put it that way—and we practice, eventually to get out of debt even to them. As the Buddha said, the arahants are totally without debt.

He himself was without debt after his awakening. There's that story of his contemplating whether he wanted to teach or not after he gained awakening. He thought of how subtle the Dhamma was, how difficult it would be for people to see. He wondered if it'd be just a waste of time trying to teach it to them. Sahampati Brahma got upset at the prospect of the Buddha's not teaching. He came down from his heaven, got down on one knee, placed his hands palm-to-palm over his heart, and invited him, saying, "There are those with little dust in their eyes. They will benefit from the Dhamma." The Buddha checked this out with his own knowledge and saw that, Yes, there would be those who would be able to practice. So he accepted the brahma's invitation to teach.

The Commentary tries to explain this incident away, saying the Buddha was just pretending to think he might not teach so that he'd get an invitation. But I think it points to something deeper: that after he had gained his awakening, the Buddha owed nothing to anyone. Once his mind was pure, he was totally free from debt. So his teaching of the Dhamma was totally a gift, something that wasn't compulsory. It was freely chosen, a way of helping human beings who'd be happy to find a way to put an end to suffering.

Now, as we take on the teachings and follow them, we put ourselves in debt to the Buddha and to the Dhamma he taught. But even though we're not arahants yet, there is a way that we can begin to repay that debt through the practice. This practice is called "practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma," making sure that

the true Dhamma doesn't turn into what's called in Pali, *saddhamma patirupa*. It's an interesting term. *Patirupa* can mean imitation or counterfeit: to be a counterfeit or an imitation of the true Dhamma. But it can also mean improvement.

This is something we have to watch out for: the idea that we're going to improve on the Dhamma. You see this all around us, and it's nothing new. It didn't start happening only when the Dhamma came to the West. It's been going on in the Buddhist tradition for a long time. In fact, in one place the Buddha says, "As soon as improved Dhamma appears, the genuine Dhamma disappears"—in other words, the sense that when you listen to the Dhamma, you know that it's the genuine article. You can be confident in that. It's not just one person's version of the Dhamma versus somebody else's. But once the "improved" versions arise, then you're never really sure simply in the act of listening.

Fortunately, you can test the Dhamma through the practice. This requires that you develop the qualities of being a good judge. In fact, the practice of the Dhamma develops those qualities: to become more mindful, more alert, more discerning in what's going on inside your own mind, more discerning in seeing what your actions actually are, seeing your intentions for what they are, and seeing the results of acting on those intentions. This is how you put the Dhamma to the test. This means that to find the truth, you have to be true. And the way we're true is to show respect.

When the Buddha was talking to Ven. Maha Kassapa about the future of the true Dhamma, he said, "It'll be maintained by those who have respect for the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, for the training, and for concentration." Sometimes he would add a sixth factor, but the sixth factor would change from one sutta to another. These five are constant.

We show respect to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha by maintaining the Dhamma as it is, practicing it as it is, not trying to change it in accordance with our preferences. There's a statement made by the third Chan patriarch: "The Great Way is easy for those with no preferences." That doesn't mean totally without preferences. We do prefer not suffering to suffering. We do prefer to be true to the path rather than to be false. But there are times when the path demands a lot out of us, more than we might be willing to give, at least at the very beginning, yet we're willing to give extra energy in response, if that's what's need. That's how we show respect.

I've told you the story that Ajaan Fuang told about moving the cornerstone of the ordination hall at Wat Asokaram. When they started building the ordination hall, the original plan was to have the Buddha image facing east, as it does in most temples throughout Thailand. So under a spot in the west side of the building where the

Buddha image was going to be, they placed the cornerstone and filled it with all kinds of sacred objects.

But as the building progressed, Ajaan Lee changed his mind and decided to place the Buddha image on the east side, facing west. As soon as it was in place, someone noted that now the cornerstone was under a place where people could step over it, which you don't do to sacred objects in Thailand. He mentioned that to Ajaan Lee, and Ajaan Lee turned to Ajaan Fuang and told him, "Okay, tomorrow morning, move it."

Ajaan Fuang thought to himself, "There's no way you can move that." But he also knew that if he had said that to Ajaan Lee, Ajaan Lee would say, "If you don't have any faith in me, I'll find somebody who does." So the next day, Ajaan Fuang got all the able-bodied monks and novices down in the crawlspace under the ordination hall, trying to move the thing, and of course it wouldn't budge, no matter how many crowbars or ropes they used.

So that evening he came back to Ajaan Lee and said, "How about building a new cornerstone box under where the Buddha image is now, opening up the old cornerstone, taking all the sacred objects out"—the relics, the passages of Dhamma, the Buddha images, and what not—"and put them in the new box?" Ajaan Lee shook his head yes. That's what they did.

And that, Ajaan Fuang told me, was how you show respect for your teacher. You give him the benefit of the doubt, give what he says a try, and if the results aren't good, you try to figure out why and then check with him. This is how we also show respect for the Dhamma. We put it into practice as it is. If things don't work out, we try to figure out why. We don't just go back and blame the Dhamma. We ask ourselves, "Have I misunderstood it? What other way could I understand that passage of Dhamma?"

Try to use your ingenuity. It's like studying intellectual history. When you study old texts, there's a way of looking at the texts where you try to find fault with them, to see how they don't make sense. But there's another way, in which you actually try to make sense out of them, to see, "How did it make sense to the author? What was the pattern of the author's thinking?" When you take that second approach, you get to see more clearly how an author thinks, how an author puts things together, and how things can make sense in lots of different ways. When I was studying intellectual history, I found that the second approach made me grow more as a person.

So we take the same approach to the Dhamma, that there must be some way in which this makes sense, some way in which putting this into practice will give good

results. As we try to figure it out, we grow.

I know all too many Western monks who went over to Thailand and would see the ajaans do things they didn't expect or they didn't understand, and they'd write them off, saying, "That's just the Thai way of doing things," the implication being that as Westerners, if you go back to a Western country, you don't have to do it that way. But as Ajaan Fuang said, when a teacher does or says something, he has a reason. Often it's up to the student to figure out what that reason is, because the teacher's not going to explain everything. If you put in the effort, you find that you learn. Your concept of what's skillful and what's not skillful will grow. When you take that attitude, that's an attitude of respect. That's how you learn: through respect. In respecting the Dhamma, you help keep it alive by putting it into practice. And you benefit from that respect, too. It's in this way that you begin to repay your debts.

Then there's the issue of respect for the Triple Training and respect for concentration. It's worth noting that concentration is actually part of the Triple Training. The Triple Training is training in heightened virtue, what's called heightened mind—which is basically the mind in right concentration—and then heightened discernment. But then, in the verse, the Buddha goes back and emphasizes again, "and respect for concentration."

There may be several reasons why he puts double emphasis on concentration. One is that there is a tendency to write it off. Many people say, "The real work is with insight, so let's go straight to insight." But insight doesn't happen in a really deep way until the mind has been stilled through mindfulness, concentration, and right effort, which are the three concentration factors of the path.

There are times when getting the mind into concentration seems kind of dumb. Nothing new is happening in the mind: no intelligent thoughts, no insights. But you have to realize that you're learning the skills to attain a quiet state of mind and then maintain it, in spite of all the other criticisms your thoughts may make against it: the desire to move on to the next stage, the thought that this is boring, the thought that this isn't intelligent. Your ability to resist those thoughts is part of this skill.

After all, why is this skill going to be required? You need a sense of goodwill, a sense of stability for the mind to accept its insights into why it's been creating suffering for itself. It's all too easy to blame your sufferings on the situation around you. There are people saying that the Buddha didn't really appreciate the suffering that comes from the way society is structured. But society was pretty badly structured in his time, too, and he knew it. Yet he realized that that's not the problem. The real problems are in the mind itself.

Among those problems are our tendencies to blame other people, to blame the physical location. This is why one of the customs of the noble ones is to learn contentment. You find a place that's good enough to practice and then you hang on. You realize that the desire to move on someplace else is not going to solve the problem. You have to learn how to look at that desire and take it apart, as you do with all your other defilements, because there's a perverse tendency that as soon as the mind gets closer and closer to the real reason why you're suffering, it tends to veer off. It's almost like putting the north poles of two magnets closer and closer together. They push each other away.

So you've got to watch out for whatever excuse comes up for not looking directly into the mind. After all, what you're going to see is your own stupidity. You're doing something that you should've known better not to do but you're doing it anyway. This is why those who are truly awakened don't come out of the experience with any pride. They come out realizing how stupid they were. We have to fight our pride so that the mind can look at its own stupidity and admit that, Yes, the Buddha was right.

This is also why those who've gained awakening respect the Buddha more than other people do, because they've seen how genuinely good the goal is. As one of the Thai ajaans said to his students, "If you really understood what the Buddha was getting at, you'd have tears in your eyes every time you bowed down to him."

So the more you practice the Dhamma, the more you respect the Dhamma, then the more you see that it is worthy of respect and that that's the best way to repay your debt, so that you can reach the state where, as the Buddha said, you can eat the alms food of the country incurring no debt at all. He said the merit that comes from supporting those who've gained awakening is way many more times than supporting those who haven't. And it increases exponentially when you go from one level of awakening up to the next, which is one of the reasons why the accusation that arahants are selfish has absolutely no basis in reality. One of the motivations for trying to put an end to your own suffering is that those who've been supporting you will benefit greatly.

So we start out indebted in one way. We take on a better set of debts that'll get us to the point where we can be totally free of any kind of debt at all. We actually give to others by accepting their gifts. And that's just one aspect of the freedom that lies at the end of this path.

Honest & Observant

September 24, 2023

The Buddha once said, “Let an observant person come, one who is honest and no deceiver, and I’ll teach that person the Dhamma.” It’s interesting that those are the characteristics he looked for in a student.

Observant, of course, because you’re going to have to observe your mind. After all, the causes of suffering are coming from within the mind. They’re basically activities we’re doing again and again and again without realizing that they’re causing suffering. So you have to learn how to observe that.

As for the honesty, a lot of the things we do that cause suffering are things we like doing. Unless you’re honest, you won’t be able to give them up.

So these are the two qualities that Buddha teaches us to develop in the path. As he said, “When concentration is nurtured by virtue, it has great fruit, great reward. When discernment is nurtured by concentration, it has great fruit, great reward. When the mind is nurtured by discernment, it’s freed from the effluents.”

We’re looking for freedom. We have to build our search on virtue, concentration, discernment. We all know this, but it’s good to think about why it is the case. Notice that Buddha is not saying that you can’t get into concentration without virtue, or that you can’t get some discernment without concentration. But the question is, are those things going to be reliable? Will they really free the mind?

Think about the practice of virtue. You’re taking on some rules that may cut across your old behavior, cut across your desires. You have to be willing to say Yes to the rules and No to the desires. There’s a passage where the Buddha talks about how you go from listening to the Dhamma to actually awakening to the truth. The first step after listening is that you ponder what you’ve listened to, to see how it fits in with other Dhamma you’ve learned and how it may not fit in with other beliefs you’ve held to in the past. Then you decide that, Yes, you want to practice the Dhamma and put aside your old views.

That’s the next stage: desire. Then based on desire, the Buddha says, there’s willingness. You’re willing to submit to the training. Then you judge. You look at the ways you ordinarily act and you ask yourself, “Where do my actions fit in with the Dhamma and where do they not?” When you see where they fit in with the

Dhamma, then you exert yourself. That's the next stage, exertion, to develop those good qualities even further. As for things that are not in line with the Dhamma, you have to learn how to say No to them. That, too, is part of exertion.

This is where it's difficult, because a lot of these things are things we like doing. That's why an effort is involved. Sometimes we like doing them simply because it's automatic. They're old habits that we haven't examined for a long time. When you examine them, you begin to realize quite easily, "I don't want this anymore." In other cases, though, there are habits you're very familiar with, they're very blatant, and yet you follow them over and over again. It's going to be hard to say No to them. You have to learn how to create new habits. But it's through exertion of this sort that you finally awaken to the truth.

So honesty is required right from the beginning. When you start looking at your behavior and see where it follows and doesn't follow in line with the precepts, the precepts offer guidelines that are clear-cut and easy to remember.

Some people say *hard-and-fast*, but *clear-cut* is a better way of characterizing them because they're short and easy to memorize. When you're faced with difficult situations where it's hard to hold by the precepts, it's good to remember they really are clear-cut and really are absolute.

Of all the Buddha's teachings, only two were categorical—in other words true and beneficial across the board. One was the principle that you should abandon unskillful behavior in body, speech, and mind, and develop skillful behavior in body, speech, and mind. There are no cases where he would recommend breaking the precepts, no matter what your motivation might be.

The other categorical teaching, of course, are the four noble truths.

In these two cases, you keep running up against fences that the Buddha puts up, and your willingness requires that you see that "Yes, my old behavior doesn't fit in. I've got to change."

But it's not just that. You also have to be willing to look at your intentions, because the intentions make all the difference. I got an email recently from a student in Europe who owns a movie theater. The theater had an ant invasion, and he did his best to get the ants out without killing them, but of course he ended up killing a few. But as I told him, it was the intention that counted. You didn't intend to kill them, so you didn't break the precept. This means that the precepts are not there to make sure that we're absolutely harmless. They're there to make sure that we get sensitive to our intentions, to make sure *they're* harmless. When you do something, what do you

expect? What do you want to attain? Be very clear about that. That's where the precepts point you. They point you at the mind.

A Dhamma textbook in Thailand written back in the beginning of the 20th century defines virtue as holding to the precepts in body and speech. Just that. This was brought to a Ajaan Mun's attention, and he said that an important element was missing in that definition: the mind. It's the mind that creates the intentions, and the intentions are what make the difference between what does and doesn't fall under the precepts. In fact, one time he said he himself observed one precept, which was the mind: Keep the mind in good shape, keep the mind skillful, and you don't have to worry about acting in unskillful ways because, after all, it's the mind that gives the orders. When you realize that an intention goes against the precepts, you've got to make sure you don't act on it. You can't slough it off, saying it's unimportant, or try to excuse it on other grounds. When you develop that kind of honesty and that kind of restraint, then your concentration is concentration you can trust.

As I said, it's not the case that you can't get into concentration without virtue. You can. But if your mind is full of denial about the harm you've been doing through your behavior and you're not used to looking at your intentions clearly, the concentration will be full of walls where you've closed off parts of your mind, closed off parts of your memory to yourself and painted murals on those walls, telling stories that have nothing to do with reality. That's not the kind of concentration that's going to help you see things clearly as they function, which is the role of discernment.

So here again, you want to be honest with yourself. You make up your mind to stay with one object and you've got to maintain that intention. Now, you will have had some practice with the precepts in maintaining an intention. You also will have had practice in developing the three qualities that the Buddha said are necessary for the mindfulness that leads to concentration. One, of course, is the quality of mindfulness itself, with which you're able to keep things in mind. You have to keep the precept in mind. Alertness: You watch your behavior, and especially your intentions, to make sure they're actually in line with the precept. And then, ardency: If you see that there's a temptation to break the precept, you've got to do something about it. You can't just give in to it. You can't just go with the flow.

Those three qualities that are needed for the precepts are what you bring to the practice of concentration. You keep your object in mind, like the breath, and you're alert to see how the breath is going and whether the mind is sticking with the breath or not. If there are any problems with the breath, you adjust them. You make the breath a good place to be. This is one of the functions of ardency. The other function

focuses on the mind: If it's wandering off, you've got to bring it back. It wanders again, bring it back again. While you're with the breath, try to be as sensitive as possible to how the breathing feels, because that sensitivity is what's going to develop into discernment.

After all, discernment isn't just a matter of imposing the Buddha's concepts on your mind. You have to be sensitive to what you're actually doing and the results you're actually getting from what you're doing, and that's nothing you can get out of books. It's something you develop by being observant inside. As you get more and more sensitive to the breath, you find that you can get the mind into deeper and deeper stages of concentration. As you see things in the breath that are uncomfortable, you smooth them out. Any gaps in your awareness, you try to connect them.

It's normal that you start out with gaps in your concentration. You're with the object for a while, then you slip off, then you come back, slip off again. Don't throw away those little moments of concentration, though. Realize that it's through connecting those moments of concentration that you're going to get deeper concentration, more solid concentration.

So whenever there's a tendency to blur out a little bit, plow right through. Stay, stay, stay right here as continually as possible, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath, all the way through the spaces in between, and then into the spaces to the next breath and the next.

All too often our concentration is like a phrase in music; then there's a pause, then there's another phrase and a pause. But here we want to make it like a single note that the musicians just hold for many measures. As you try to keep the mind still like this, you're bound to see what comes in to disturb it. This is where the discernment gets based on concentration. It's not just about watching things coming and then noting that they go. It's trying to figure them out. You'll notice that some things come into the mind and have no appeal. They just drift in, drift out. Other things have hooks, and the hooks can dig into you. You can't say, "Well, I'll just sit here and watch them come and watch them go." They will come and they will go, for sure, but you've got to get the mind in a state where they don't come anymore. Or if they do come, they have no hooks at all.

That requires that your discernment is not just a matter of being with awareness or being with the knowing or just being still. It requires that you think, but this is a kind of thinking that's not far-away and discursive. It's thinking about what's going on, what you're *doing*, right now: Where is the appeal? When this thing comes in,

why does the mind go for it? Which part of the mind goes? To what extent was it already prepared to go?

This is where the honesty comes in. Sometimes it seems as if the thought comes out of nowhere and you're knocked off by it. But if you're really observant, you'll begin to notice that even before you go off with the distraction, there will have been a little discussion at one corner of the mind: "The next chance we get, we're going to go for x ." And then it pretends like it didn't say anything.

If you're not honest, you'll go along with the pretense. But if you're honest, you begin to realize that there are traitors inside this committee of the mind. You've got to learn how to ferret them out. And the best way of doing that is trying to catch the distraction more and more quickly until you can see the moments where decisions are being made even before the thought is clearly a thought. This is where the discernment comes in, because you can see where the thought is going to go. It's determined by the intention that oftentimes precedes the thought. Then you can learn how to question that.

So there's a lot to question here. As I said yesterday, the four noble truths basically tell us that our minds have been lying to us, telling us that x is going to cause happiness when x is actually a cause for suffering and stress. So this is where being observant and being honest comes in. And this is how we develop those qualities so they get more and more perceptive, more and more true.

The truth of the Dhamma is not the sort of thing you learn by simply reading books and understanding them or remembering the steps. You listen to the Dhamma—and here reading the Dhamma would count as listening to the Dhamma—and then you ponder it. But then you have to have the desire, the willingness, the ability to judge your actions fairly, when they do and they don't fit into the Dhamma, so that you can exert yourself properly to encourage what needs to be encouraged and to discourage what needs to be abandoned.

You begin to recognize that there are some forms of desire that should be encouraged, some forms of desire that should be abandoned. There are Dhamma teachings that sound deep and profound, but they're lying to you. You have to watch out for that. But again, you put them to the test of your honesty. If you adopt a particular teaching, does it really put an end to suffering or does it just put up walls inside? It's only when you're honest that you can see this.

But the rewards of honesty are great. As Ajaan Lee once said, "The truth in the Dhamma is something that can be found only by people who are true." Other people

can know *about* the Dhamma, but they don't really know the truth. This is one of the ways in which the Dhamma is really special.

Wise About Mistakes

August 14, 2023

One of the distinctive features of Buddhism is that it was founded by someone who made mistakes—and admitted his mistakes. So he knows what it's like to make a mistake. Can you imagine how different Genesis would be if on the seventh day God looked at the world he'd created and said, "Whoops"? Things would have come out very differently.

But the Buddha, in telling of his life story—how he sought awakening and how he was able to remember many, many lifetimes—told the story as a story of making mistakes, admitting them, and learning how to make fewer mistakes. So, when he teaches the principle of kamma, his attitude is that people do make mistakes, and there's a healthy way to respond to them—and lots of unhealthy ways to respond to them.

The unhealthy ways include saying that what you did doesn't matter at all. That's a way of sustaining a person's self-image—your own or that of a person you're trying to comfort. That's very unhealthy because people who believe that idea just keep on making mistakes. They don't learn. The opposite extreme is to say, "Well, anybody who makes a mistake is going to go to hell." You reflect back on the fact, "Well, I've made mistakes," and, as the Buddha said, if that's your attitude, it's as if you're in hell already even before you die.

The ideal attitude is to realize that it's best to acknowledge the mistake, and that it does have consequences, so you resolve not to repeat the mistake. Then you try to create the right state of mind for not repeating the mistake, by learning from it. That attitude starts with goodwill for yourself, goodwill for all beings; compassion for yourself, compassion for all beings; empathetic joy for yourself and for all beings; equanimity for yourself and for all beings. The equanimity, of course, is for realizing that you can't go back and change things. It doesn't mean that you're indifferent as to what you're going to do after that.

Two other emotions the Buddha recommends are shame and compunction. Shame, here, it's important to understand, is a healthy shame. There are basically two kinds of shame. Even though we have one word in English, there are two types. One, the unhealthy type, is the opposite of pride, where you feel really bad about yourself

and have no self-esteem. The other, the healthy type, is the opposite of shamelessness, not caring what other people think, not caring about what's right or wrong. The shame he's recommending is the second one, the opposite of shamelessness.

Think about the Buddha's instructions to Rahula. On reflecting, if you look back on your actions and you realize you've made a mistake, you cultivate a feeling of shame. Then you go talk it over with someone else more advanced on the path. You have to remember that the Buddha and Rahula were members of the noble warrior caste, which was a very proud caste. They didn't go for false humility. They didn't go for low self-esteem. Their shame was the shame of a proud person—someone who realizes that certain actions are really beneath him or her. That person doesn't want to stoop down, to lower his or her self-esteem. So this is the shame of someone who wants to maintain high self-esteem. And an attitude of goodwill maintains that, supports that.

An unhealthy sense of shame would say, "I'm a bad person. I don't deserve to be happy." The Buddha's reminding you that happiness is not a question of deserving it or not deserving. Think about the way he taught. He didn't say he would teach the end of suffering only for people who didn't deserve to suffer. We've all done things that would lead to suffering and *have* led to suffering. He wants to show us the way out regardless of our past.

This is one of the reasons why Buddhism is not so much concerned with justice. It's more concerned with learning how to be skillful. For this reason, the judgments it recommends are not final judgments on how good or bad a person was or is. The judgments are of a work in progress. Think of a carpenter working on a chair. He's using a plane and he realizes, "Whoops, made a mistake." He doesn't just throw the chair away; he doesn't give up as a carpenter. He has his tricks in the trade for how to compensate for a mistake like that. If it's a gash that can't be undone, well, what do you do to make it look like it's not a mistake? You make other changes in the chair. You use your judgment to make adjustments as you go along.

Here shame plays a role in that you wouldn't want a bad-looking piece of furniture to come out of your workshop. We can think of shame as the desire to look good in the eyes of others. The Buddha recommends looking good in the eyes of the noble ones, people who've attained awakening. If they were to look at your actions, what would they think?

You have to remember they're looking at you through the eyes of compassion, but their compassion is not the compassion of simply wanting you to feel good. It's

the compassion of wanting you to actually create the causes for happiness and to abandon the causes for suffering. So they have your best interests at heart—and they want *you* to have your own best interests at heart. A healthy sense of shame protects that.

The other quality the Buddha recommends is *ottappa*. It's a hard word to translate into English—I usually translate it as “compunction”—but it basically means concern about the results of your actions. Its opposite would be callousness or apathy, where you don't really care: You do what you want; you don't care about the results; you just want to do what you feel like doing. With compunction, your attitude is, “I want to act in a way that will lead to long-term happiness and avoid any kind of long-term suffering.” So you care about the impact of your actions.

When you have these two emotions—shame and compunction—working together in a skillful way, you reflect on the Buddha's teachings on kamma, that certain actions will lead to unfortunate consequences, other actions will lead to better consequences, and that the working out of that particular principle is very complex. As he said, there are cases where people do good things in this lifetime but then they start doing bad things and they die with wrong view. This would get in the way of those good things yielding their results. They will at some point in time, but it's going to be delayed, sometimes for quite a long time. Who knows where you're going to go in the meantime?

But the opposite is also true. If you've done unskillful things but then you have a change of heart and start doing skillful things, develop right view, and maintain right view all the way through death, then you're bound for a good destination. Of course, with the possibility of going to that good destination, you can continue to practice the Dhamma. One of the results of practicing the Dhamma to a high level is that the results of your past bad actions get weakened and weakened, and have less of an impact on the heart and mind.

Think of the case of Angulimala. He had killed a lot of people, but the Buddha saw that he had potential. So, through his psychic powers, he was able to subdue Angulimala's pride. Angulimala submitted and practiced the Dhamma under the Buddha until he became an arahant.

A lot of people were not happy with this. They may have been the relatives of people who had been killed by Angulimala. So when he was on his alms round, they would throw things at him—stones, pieces of pottery—tearing his robes, breaking his bowl, sometimes gashing his head. He'd come back from his alms round all

bloody, and the Buddha would say, “Bear up with it. This is much milder than it would’ve been if you hadn’t gained this attainment.”

So it is possible to gain awakening even with bad kamma in your background. But that means you need to have a genuine change of heart, that you don’t want to do anything unskillful. You’re motivated by shame, motivated by compunction, because you realize that even though there is the possibility that, with the complexity of kamma, some of your bad actions will have only weak results, you don’t really know for sure because you don’t know what else you’ve got lurking in your kammic past. So you do your best right now.

This is why even though the Buddha recognized that there are some actions that are both skillful and unskillful at the same time—in other words, say, when you break a precept with what you think are good intentions—he said they could lead to anything from a human birth to a much lower birth. But it’s a gamble, which is why he said categorically, “Don’t kill, don’t steal, don’t have illicit sex, don’t lie, don’t take intoxicants.” That was out of his compassion, because he had seen the results of these actions. Given his memory—and it was a long memory—he could see where these actions could go.

So, he’s concerned for our well-being and he wants us to be concerned for our well-being, too, so that we learn from our mistakes. He shows you how to adopt the right attitude for your mistakes, not just so that you can feel good, but so that you can learn how to stop making them. That’s the protection he offers as a teacher. And from him we can learn how to protect ourselves.

Non-Reactive Judgment

December 29, 2023

I received a letter today from someone who's having a problem with his inner critic, basically asking, "How do you get the inner critic to shut up?"

That's not the solution. We all need an inner critic to pass judgment on what we're doing as we practice, to get an idea of what's going to be helpful and what's not. The problem is, our inner critic was trained by somebody else, not by the Buddha. It was trained by the mass media, by our parents, by our friends, by our teachers, by the internet, internet, internet—all of whom have lots of conflicting standards of value. No matter what you do, you can be criticized from somebody's point of view. When you do something, one set of values will say it's good, but another will say it's wrong. Then you try to please the second, and the first set of values will say, "No, *that's* wrong."

What you need is to let the Buddha train your inner critic, the inner voice who passes judgment on what you're doing, to let you know what's really skillful and what's not. This is a theme that runs all the way through the practice from the very beginning, up to the highest levels.

In the beginning, we work with generosity and virtue, and we want to be clear about what we're doing, when we're in line with our precepts and when we're not. I got another phone call this morning from someone who, in a fit of real anger, had intentionally killed a mosquito. Even though it was a very small animal, the fact that she had intentionally killed it scared her. She had talked to some of her Dhamma friends afterwards and they had said, "Oh, don't think so much about it. You probably didn't mean to." She told me, "Well, I did mean to." The friends who were trying to make her feel good were actually trying to anesthetize her inner critic. But when that happens, your precepts start getting sloppy. When your precepts are sloppy, then your concentration gets sloppy and your discernment gets dishonest. So you have to start training the critic.

The training in meditation begins with some very basic instructions: the passage where the Buddha tells Rahula, "Try to make your mind like earth. Bad things are dumped on the earth, but the earth doesn't react." You can extend that to say that perfumes can be poured on the earth, but the earth isn't pleased.

We're often told that we try to make the mind non-reactive and non-judging, but it's more an issue of making it non-reactive for the purpose of judging more clearly. In other words, you learn to see negative things inside you without getting upset, without getting roiled up about them. Accept the fact that they're there and then ask yourself, in a matter-of-fact way, "What can I do to change them?" You recognize that they're unskillful, but you're not knocked over by that fact. If you get knocked over, that means that your sense of self—or more precisely, your prideful sense of self—has gotten in the way. You don't like to see unskillful things in yourself, so you try to hide them, which is not going to get rid of them. You need to have the mental solidity and stability to say, "Yeah, there are unskillful things in my mind, so now what do I do about them?" You have to have confidence in the Buddha's teachings, that the tools he gives you can deal with those negative voices and with the negative things going on in your mind in a skillful way.

Then we further train in mindfulness in this way. The Buddha said one of the functions of mindfulness on the path is to remember what right view tells you about what's right and what's wrong, what's skillful and what's not. Then you use your ability to keep that in mind to direct your efforts, to get rid of what's unskillful and to encourage what's skillful.

Think of the image of the gatekeeper at the gate to a fortress. The gatekeeper doesn't just sit there watching people coming in and going out through the gate. He's not a people-watcher. He's not like the mannequin policeman that one scholar once said mindfulness functions as—in other words, the simple fact that there's mindfulness sitting at the gate means that your unskillful mind states are afraid to go in the fortress. If the gatekeeper just sits there and watches whoever comes in and goes out, he's not going to intimidate anybody. It's like driving past a mannequin policeman. The first time you see him, you might slow down, but then you notice that it's not a person, it's a mannequin. From that point on, you can ignore it with impunity.

It's the same with your defilements. If you don't do something about your defilements, they're going to come in through the gate with impunity whenever they want and take over the place. Remember, the fortress is on a frontier where there are enemies: things that are actually bad for your mind. You've got to learn how to recognize them and make sure they don't come in. After all, mindfulness is coupled with alertness, and then it informs ardency, which again is right effort. So you're ardent to block the unskillful things as best you can. As the Buddha said, this is what

right mindfulness does: It blocks them. Then discernment is what uproots them, gets rid of them totally.

But to develop the ability to judge things clearly as to what they are and what they're not, you've got to get the mind in a non-reactive state. There are times when people coming into the fortress may look like friends but they're not. They can dress themselves up and disguise themselves in all kinds of Buddhist ways. Laziness in particular can dress itself up like the Dhamma and say, "Well, the Buddha said for you to follow the middle way. It leads to the highest ease, so the path itself should be easeful, too." But then you think of all the paths you've encountered in the world, and there are a lot of paths that go to really beautiful spots, spots where you can rest, gaze peacefully out across a beautiful landscape, but getting there is not easy.

There's a famous spot in the French Alps where photographers like to go to get spectacular pictures of Mont Blanc, but getting there requires hours and hours of climbing ladders built into cliff faces, and you have to be really fit to get there. It's just not the case that a path to an easeful goal has to be easeful, too.

Or sometimes we're told, "Don't think that you're doing the path. The path is doing itself. After all, if you think you're doing the path, then you believe that there's a self, and that's wrong view." Well, the path doesn't get done that way. Whatever happens to get done would have to depend entirely on your past good kamma. Your present kamma wouldn't be contributing anything at all—and that wouldn't get you very far. You need to have a provisional sense of "you" as being responsible for the path, along with the confidence that you are competent to do it and that you will benefit.

That's why the Buddha talks about the self as its own mainstay, the self as a governing principle. Even when he has Rahula talk to himself about looking at his actions, it's always: "This action that I want to do... This action I'm doing... This action I have done." "I," "I," "I." You're responsible. You're an agent. Now, you get to a point at the end where you can put the agent down, because it is a strategy, but in the meantime you've got to use that strategy all along the way.

So watch out for these voices that tell you that the path is one of ease, and if you push yourself too hard, it's not the path. Of course, pushing yourself too hard is not the path, but what does "too hard" mean? You're not going to know until you push yourself.

Think of the image of getting milk out of the cow. You twist the horn and you don't get any milk. Then you stop twisting the horn and you say, "That's much more easeful." But you still don't get any milk. Yet you need the milk. Remember, the

Buddha's definition of beings is that we're feeding on things. This is what defines us all the way to arahantship, which means that we're not going to stop feeding when we first get on the path. We have to continue feeding to nourish the path. We can't tell ourselves, "I'll just tell myself not to eat anymore and I'll be okay." You're going to starve and it's going to be painful. Then you'll go back and feed some more.

So you want to learn how to feed well. Skillfully. Train your inner critic to be a connoisseur of what kind of feeding is skillful and what kind of feeding is not, what sense of self is skillful and what sense of self is not, keeping in mind that you do have these choices.

You need to train your inner critic because, after all, a lot of the path is about value judgments. Think of what Ven. Sariputta said about the main message of the Buddha's teachings being the ending of passion and desire. Dispassion is a value judgment: that the processes of fabrication we engage in are not worth it. Before we get there, though, we have to learn how to fabricate the path and to judge what's on the path and what's off the path. There's a right path and there's a wrong path. There are causes of suffering that respond to simply looking at them with equanimity, but there are others that respond only when you fabricate a fabrication. And to master both of those approaches, you've got to develop good powers of concentration.

Think about the Buddha's teachings on equanimity. There's ordinary equanimity, which is what we start out with. That's the equanimity of training the mind to be like earth, but you can't stop there. To make the mind solid enough so that when it looks at something, it's not tempted to go for it, it has to have an inner sense of well-being. This is the type of equanimity the Buddha recommends. It requires either the well-being that comes from concentration or the well-being that comes when you see with genuine insight that letting go of something really does lift a burden off the mind. But you've got to work on the concentration first to get the equanimity based on a sense of well-being that can look at things and see right through them and not be tempted to go for them.

As for fabrication, the Buddha talks about three kinds: bodily, verbal, and mental. Bodily is your in-and-out breath. Verbal is how you talk to yourself. Mental covers the perceptions you hold in mind—the labels you put on things—and the feelings you focus on. These are the elements that go into how you shape your present experience.

And where are you going to learn about these things? Through the practice of concentration. You focus on the breath: bodily fabrication. You talk to yourself about the breath to make it comfortable: verbal fabrication. You hold perceptions in mind

that allow the breath to give rise to a feeling of ease: mental fabrication. It's by getting hands-on experience with these processes that you can do them well, and only when you do them well can you understand them well enough to let them go.

So both ways of approaching the causes of suffering to arrive at a skillful judgment about them—looking with equanimity and fabricating a fabrication—require that you work on developing concentration.

This is how you train your inner critic to be helpful in these activities—to pass judgment in a way that doesn't debilitate you. That's the main problem with most people's inner critic. It passes judgment and leaves no room for improvement, passes judgment and leaves no room for believing that you can actually do something right. Your inner critic has to be trained to understand that it is possible to put an end to suffering and you can do it. You have to be responsible, but you are capable and you really will benefit.

That's the other part of the bad inner critic, the part that says, "No matter how hard you try, it's going to be a waste, so don't even bother." That inner critic has to be banished and replaced, not with an uncritical mind, but with a more skillfully critical mind—starting with teaching yourself to be non-reactive. You can see unskillful things in you and you don't get worked up about them. You recognize them as unskillful and then you try to be very matter-of-fact in overcoming them.

So that's how non-reactivity functions. It's a support, not for a non-judging mind, but for a *skillfully* judging mind, one that knows how to pass judgment in a way that leads to the end of suffering. When its work is done, then you can put it down, but you let it go not because you hate it, but because it's done all it can for you and you can part ways on good terms.

A Tradition of Ingenuity

December 28, 2023

When I was in Thailand recently, I gave a Dhamma talk on some of Ajaan Fuang's teachings and the two words that he stressed the most, which were "be observant" as you meditate and as you go through the day, and "use your ingenuity." The Thai word for ingenuity is *patiphaan*. It's from the Pali, *patibhana*. This is an important part of working with the breath, because you've got different energies in the body, and you can do lots of different things with the breath energies, good or bad. If you find that the energy is bad, you have to think of some ways of dealing with it.

One of the things we learn from Ajaan Lee's books and Dhamma talks is that he didn't stick with one paradigm for how the breath should flow in the body. He had lots of different ways of conceiving it. Where did he get them? Ajaan Fuang told the story of how Ajaan Lee, when in India, had observed the different rishis and sadhus standing out in the sun for hours on one leg or lying on beds of nails. He asked himself, "How did they do that?"

His way of getting the answer was, of course, to look into his own meditation, and he came up with the answer that they were playing with their breath. This looked like a good skill to master, so he worked on it on his own. He may have gotten some ideas from what he saw of what they were doing, but he kept coming up with new ways in later years, too, because his body kept presenting him with new problems. It presented him with a heart attack one time. He had to figure out how to use the breath to work with that, because he was out in the forest, days away from any help. That's where we got Method Two. But the important thing is that he gives the basic principles and also shows ways of playing with them.

After I gave the talk, one of the Western monks who was there, who understood Thai well and had been in Thailand a number of years, came up and said that in all of his years of being in Thailand, he'd never heard anybody use the word "ingenuity" in a Dhamma talk. That's kind of scary, because when you're off meditating on your own, there can't be somebody holding your hand all the time, telling you what to do. If there's a problem, you've got to figure it out. If an approach you've tried in the past

doesn't work, you've got to figure out something new. This requires ingenuity. This has long been a principle in the forest tradition.

So that's something to be encouraged: using your ingenuity. Maybe the ajaans nowadays are afraid that their students will go a little bit too far afield. They want to make sure that they're first doing as they're told. That *is* a part of the practice. We've got the Vinaya; we've got the rules. You don't use your ingenuity to figure out ways of circumventing the rules. But when it comes to looking into your mind, you've got to learn how to think for yourself, to turn your ideas inside and out. As Ajaan Lee would say, "When you have an insight, ask yourself: To what extent is the opposite true?" He gives recommendations for having the breath flow down the spine, but there are Dhamma talks where he has it flowing up, and you have to figure out: Is this the right time for it to go up or to go down?

When I was translating *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, I found that there were various editions and that Ajaan Lee talked about the breath energy in the different editions in different ways. In one edition, he talked about the breath outside the body, like a cocoon around the body, which he didn't mention in later editions. It's a shame that he left that explanation out, because it provides an alternative for times when the breath energy inside the body seems to be a mess and nothing seems to work. You can think about it flowing around outside, think of the body as having an aura of breath energy, a cocoon of breath energy around it, and ask yourself: Where does it feel tangled? What could you do to straighten it out?

This principle of ingenuity doesn't apply only to Ajaan Lee or Ajaan Fuang. We notice it in the Ajaan Chah and Ajaan Maha Boowa as well. They don't use the word "ingenuity" that much, but they certainly exemplify it: Ajaan Chah in all his many similes, Ajaan Maha Boowa in the questions he asks, say, around pain or other issues that come up in the mind. He's very good at framing unusual questions, getting at the issue of the relationship between the pain and the mind and the body in different ways, because, as he saw, you can approach pain in one way in one day and get results, and then you try that same approach the next day and you don't get results. After all, pain can be related to different things in the mind.

Look at dependent co-arising and you see that feeling appears in the list of factors in lots of different places, lots of different contexts. In some cases, it's included with the different kinds of fabrication—bodily, verbal, mental. So maybe the way you're breathing has something to do with the problem of the pain. Maybe the way you're talking to yourself has something to do with the problem, or maybe it's the perceptions you're holding in mind.

Feeling also appears in name and form. There it's associated with attention, intention, perception, and contact. What are you paying attention to when you're suffering from a physical pain? Could you change that? Pay attention to something else? Pay attention in a different way? What are your intentions around the pain, and what intentions do you think the pain has toward you? That, again, is an issue of perception. Maybe the problem lies in how these mental activities interact and are in contact with one another. So the problem of pain, from one day to the next, may be a different problem, which means you've got to use your ingenuity in coming up with a new approach. These things are exemplified in the teachings of the ajaans, even if they don't talk about it.

And you find it in the Buddha's teachings. After all, the word *patibhāna* is a Pali term and it does appear in the Canon. It's not in any of the standard lists, except for one very important one. The Buddha is talking about the qualities you need to develop, the things you have to be sensitive to, to have all-around discernment. One of them is having a sense of yourself. What are your strengths right now in the practice? What are your weaknesses?

You measure yourself in terms of six qualities, starting with conviction. How is your conviction? Is your conviction strong or is it weak right now? Are you convinced of the Buddha's awakening, or are you convinced of other teachings that you've picked up here and there? Are you convinced that you can follow what the Buddha taught?

Then there's the question of virtue. How meticulous are you about your precepts?

And how about your generosity? Are you truly generous with the things you have? And not just things: Are you generous with your knowledge? Are you generous with your time? Are you generous with your forgiveness?

Then there's learning. How much do you know about the Dhamma? The Buddha said you want to take what's in the suttas and in the Vinaya as your standard for judging what's Dhamma. So it's good to have a good working knowledge of those texts. You may think about the Thai ajaans not knowing much about the suttas, and in some cases that's true, but they certainly knew a lot about the Vinaya, that's for sure. And actually, the more you read in the suttas, the more you see that the analogies that Ajaan Lee and Ajaan Chah would use were often rooted in something in the suttas, such as Ajaan Lee's simile of the cook. In the Canon, it simply says that the wise cook knows how to read what his master likes. Ajaan Lee adds that a good cook also knows how to vary her offerings.

It's good to have some knowledge of the Dhamma and Vinaya so that you can compare your insights, when they come up, against that knowledge, because that's one of the tests. Say you have a vision of a deva or the Buddha coming to talk to you. Whether it really is a deva or really is the Buddha is not the real issue. The real issue is, what are they saying? And does it fit in with the Dhamma? The more you know of the suttas, the more you know of the Vinaya, the better chance you have of figuring out if what they say is in line with the Dhamma or not. And even when it's passed those tests, the next question is, does it really work? You have to put it to the test in your actions and learn to be circumspect in judging the results.

This is where the next quality comes in, which is discernment. How clearly do you see what's going on in your own body and mind? How clearly do you see your own actions? And in particular, how clearly do you see where you're causing suffering and what you can do to stop?

Then there's the sixth quality, which is ingenuity. How good are you at figuring things out? A lot of this has to do with figuring out what's a good analogy for framing the issue of what's going on in your body and mind right now. There's a whole body of thought around the idea that our thinking, even though we may use abstract terms, is never really abstract. There are hidden metaphors behind the way our language shapes things, even in the abstractions. You want to be sensitive about what metaphors you're applying unconsciously to your practice. Are you applying the right metaphors?

This is why the Buddha would engage in cross-questioning. Someone would ask him a question, and he wanted to make sure that the person had the right paradigm for understanding the answer—as when he was asked if he'd ever say anything unpleasant. It was a trick question. A prince had been put up to asking the question by some Niganthas, with the idea that if the Buddha said yes, he would say things that were unpleasant, then the retort could be, “Then what's the difference between you and ordinary people down in the market?” If he said he never would say anything unpleasant, they had him on record for saying things about Devadatta that Devadatta didn't like—such as the fact that Devadatta was going to go to hell for having caused a split in the Sangha.

So the prince posed the question to the Buddha, and the Buddha said, “There's no categorical answer to that.” But before he explained how he would determine when to say something pleasant and when to say something unpleasant, he asked the prince, “Suppose your baby son got a sharp object in his mouth, what would you do?” The prince said, “I'd hold his head in one hand, and with my other hand use a finger

to get the sharp object out, even if it meant drawing blood. Why? Because I have compassion for the child.” The Buddha said, “In the same way, there are times when you have to say something harsh out of compassion.” Then, having given the paradigm, he gave the answer.

So when we read the similes in the Buddha’s teachings and teachings of the ajaans, they’re not just there for decoration; they’re there to help us understand, to give us the right pattern for thinking. It was the Buddha’s ingenuity that made it possible to see what precisely was the appropriate analogy in any given case.

There’s a sutta where a monk has been asked by a prince, who was a relative of his, if making a wish for results makes a difference in the practice. The monk answered, “Whether you wish for results or don’t wish for results, if you do the practice correctly, you’re going to get results. If you don’t do it correctly, you’re not going to get results, no matter how much you wish for the results.” The prince decided that was a reasonable answer and shared some of his food with the monk.

The monk then went to see the Buddha, and the Buddha said, “What you said was right.” Then the Buddha went on to give a whole series of analogies: If you want to get milk out of a cow, if you’re twisting the horn, no matter how much you want the milk, you’re not going to get the milk. If you pull on the udder, you get the milk. Even if you don’t wish for milk, but if you happen to pull on the udder, you’re going to get milk.

He went down through a whole series of analogies like this. Then he said to the monk, “If you had given these analogies, then the prince would have been even more impressed with your answer.” The monk replied, “How could those analogies have occurred to me? They’re *your* ingenuity.” It’s interesting, the verb he used there. They actually had a verb for ingenuity: “ingenuitize.” The active part of the verb is not what your mind does, it’s what the idea does: The idea comes to you. So this is part of what ingenuity means: You leave your mind open to new ideas coming in. Where they come from doesn’t really matter. The question is, are they appropriate?

So it’s good to leave your mind open for new possibilities, because after all, we suffer because of our limited range of what we think is possible. We have to open our minds and say, “Yes, true happiness is possible. It is possible for someone like the Buddha to gain awakening and to be able to teach the way to others. I’m one of those others, so it’s possible for me to gain awakening, too” That’s what conviction is all about.

Think of the Dhamma as opening possibilities in your heart and mind that weren’t there before: things that you had closed off without having even thought

about it. Then try to develop this quality of ingenuity in yourself.

The Buddha encourages it in his meditation instructions. You read the sixteen steps, and they're like a set of sixteen riddles. They start with two steps: discerning short breathing, discerning long breathing. What does it mean, to "discern"? Do you simply watch willy-nilly to see what the breath does on its own, or do you try to explore cause and effect? When the Buddha talks about discernment being penetrative, it's more than just watching things arising and passing away. It's understanding cause and effect. So does it mean that you experiment with the breath to see what long breathing does for you and what short breathing does for you, and you decide which is better? That's one of the ways in which you can understand discernment. Then the question is, which way of understanding is better? Which gets better results?

Then there's the question of training yourself to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. What does that do? And how do you do that? He also talks about breathing in sensitive to rapture, sensitive to pleasure. What if you don't feel any rapture, you don't feel any pleasure, what do you do? Where are the potentials for those things, and how do you develop them? We know that when rapture and pleasure do come you're supposed to spread them through the body. How do you do that? Ajaan Lee gives some answers with his analysis of the breath energies. That's something to fill in some of the blanks. But there are still a lot of blanks in the steps he gives.

The same with the factors for awakening: The Buddha says there are potentials in the body for calm and concentration, there's a potential for energy, and you should pay appropriate attention to those potentials to develop them. Where are those potentials? He leaves it to you to find out. In other words, he's encouraging you to explore.

We're not here just copying and pasting the Buddha's discernment into our minds. He's giving us questions to ask and telling us which sorts of questions don't get results, which sorts of questions do get results. But it's up to us to formulate the questions for ourselves so that we can find useful answers. That's where the ingenuity comes in.

So think of this as a tradition of ingenuity, a tradition in the sense that it directs you to ask questions, and it gives you an idea of what some of the possibilities are that following this path can do. Then it encourages you to follow the Buddha's example in being ingenious in figuring out how to get past problems. We have the example of the tradition, that all the problems in the mind that could get in the way of awakening

have been solved by somebody, someplace. So take that as encouragement. That's a possibility you should be open to. See what that kind of openness does for your mind.

The Need for Agency

January 16, 2023

When you look at the Buddha's sixteen steps for breath meditation, you see that in every case he's telling you to *do* something. In fact, you *train* yourself to do something: You very consciously look at your actions to see whether they're in line with what the Buddha recommended, and if not, you figure out how you can change them. This is a point that seems so obvious that you wonder why anyone would have to mention it.

But there are a lot of people out there who teach some very strange things about meditation: that it's not a *doing* at all. Some of them explain this idea by saying there is no self, therefore there's nobody doing anything. There are just causes and conditions, and you simply get out of the way to allow them to do their own thing.

This evening I heard a new twist on that theme: that trying to interfere with the way things do their own thing is clinging, so if you stop interfering, there'll be no clinging, and therefore no suffering. Now, there *is* a point in the practice where you apply the perception of not-self to everything to let go of everything. Some people feel that if that's where we're going, we might as well start out with that. But you can't start out with that. You're actually suffering, no matter how much you say you aren't. There has to be a sense of you doing the path here before the path can take you to the point where you no longer need a "you." Until then, you're the one who's responsible for following the path. This is why the Buddha says, "The self is its own mainstay."

It's as if people had the cheat sheet on the enlightenment test, and they knew all the right answers: Question 1 is answered with 'B,' question 2 is answered with 'A,' and so on. They know all the letters for the multiple choices, but they don't really know what the questions are, and they don't know what the letter for the answers represent, either.

If you're going to gain any discernment, you have to look at what you're doing, see where you're causing stress—and then you can change. Some of the change comes from what other people tell you to do. Some of it has to come from your own powers of observation, because *your* discernment is the factor that's going to make the difference. You can borrow other people's discernment for a bit, but real

discernment depends on your own sensitivity to what you're doing and to the results you're getting from what you're doing.

That's how the Buddha talks about his own quest for awakening: He tried this, he did this, he developed these qualities, and then he saw that the results were lacking. So he figured, "What else could I do?" He went to two teachers and put their teachings to the test by putting them into practice. He didn't get the results he wanted, even though he had completed that practice to the satisfaction of the teachers—but it wasn't to his own satisfaction.

So he tried self-torment. That didn't work, either. Then he finally got onto the right path. It was all through trial and error, taking responsibility for his actions, and when things didn't turn out right, trying to figure out other ways he could do things.

Now, if you think the practice is not something you *do*, you're going to miss that opportunity. But who's the you who's doing it? The Buddha doesn't talk too much about that. You already have a you; all he's asking is that whatever "you" you have, it's part of a state of becoming you've developed, so train it to be competent, train it to be *confident* that you can do this.

That's what the teachings on conceit that Ven. Ananda once gave to that nun are all about: "Other people can do this. They're human beings. I'm a human being. If they can do it, why can't I?"

We ultimately try to get rid of the conceit, but we have to learn how to use it skillfully first. The same with craving: It's okay to crave awakening. Other people have gained awakening. The fact that they've done it—there's the *news* that they've done it—and you have a desire to have what they've got: It's not that you're going to take away what they've got, but you want to have that same attainment. That's a craving that keeps you on the path.

So, throughout the practice, it's a matter of doing things, *using* things, that you will then have to overcome. You use your sense of self that at some point you'll have to put aside. But you do that first through using your sense of self as agent so that you can really get to know the principle of kamma.

As you're sitting here right now, there are some things appearing in the mind caused by what you're doing right now; other things appearing in the mind are a result of past actions. So, there are some things that are happening in the mind that you don't take responsibility for right now because they come from past actions and can't be changed, but you do take responsibility for what you do with them. You're sitting here focusing on the breath. Other thoughts may come into the mind, but for the time being you say, "Nope, not going there."

You do your best to make the breath interesting and to make the skill of meditation interesting—to get some satisfaction, not only out of the comfort of the breath, but also out of the fact that you’ve developed some skills and you can use them. There’s a real pleasure that comes from mastering a skill. It’s not the same as simply having a pleasant sensation. There’s a real sense of joy in agency.

I mentioned the other day the case of the psychologist who was observing infants, and noticed that one of the things that makes them happiest is when they see they can do something and get a result, and they can repeat it and get the same result. They’ve realized they’ve figured something out: You do this action, you get that result. That sense of agency, that sense of figuring out cause and effect, makes them really happy.

On the other hand, you can think about people in depression: It usually comes from a sense that they’ve lost their agency. They’ve tried, tried, tried to find happiness, but they’ve been stymied in every direction, so they just give up.

So a sense of agency is something that really gives happiness to the mind. What we’re doing in the practice is to take that desire for agency and we try to use it really well—to develop it as a skill. There’s a sense of the *you* who can do these things, the *you* who’s trying to benefit from them, and the *you* who comments on what you’ve done, notices the patterns, and then begins to judge: What kinds of actions really are worth doing? Which ones are not?

Now, for the most part, we’ve created a lot of suffering that way, by going for things that seem to give rise to happiness but ultimately don’t. Or, whatever happiness they do give rise to stays for a while, laughs in your face, and runs away—and then you’re left with the suffering.

So, the Buddha’s not saying, “Just give up.” That would put you into a depression. He’s saying, “Be more observant. Be clearer about what you’re doing and the results you’re getting.” He gives you some advice as to where to focus your actions, what kinds of actions to master. But then he says that a lot of it is up to you.

This is why he asks for students who are honest and observant. It’s also why he said that the Dhamma is nourished by commitment and reflection: You commit to doing it, and then you reflect on the results of what you’ve done. Then you take your reflections and use them to inform your next action, and your next.

Pursue this as a skill because it’s through pursuing these skills—the skills of mindfulness, the skills of concentration—that you really get to know the principle of kamma. After all, we’re working on a type of kamma here that’s really special. The Buddha says there’s bright kamma, there’s dark kamma, there’s a mixture of the two,

and then there's kamma that's neither bright nor dark: It's the kamma that leads to the end of kamma. That's the path to the end of suffering.

You're not going to put an end to kamma without understanding it, without understanding the principle of cause and effect, and seeing exactly how far your agency can go.

So, instead of having you simply accept that you can't do anything and be okay with that and dress it up so that you forget that it is a kind of mild depression—or sometimes a severe depression—the Buddha has you take that process of delighting in your sense of agency and pursue it, using it to delight in abandoning unskillful qualities and to delight in developing skillful qualities.

That's the practice of delight that he recommends. He said this is how people put an end to the effluents: You delight in the Dhamma, you delight in abandoning, you delight in developing, you delight in seclusion. You delight in the unafflicted, a term for nibbana, indicating that it's totally free from any limitation or disturbance. Before you get to the unafflicted, you delight in the idea that your actions can take you to such a place. And you delight in non-objectification: the kind of thinking that's able to avoid conflict. You delight in the idea that you can attain a state that's totally conflict-free.

So you're taking your delight in agency and you're applying it in the direction of delighting in the path that will take you to the end of the effluents. But this requires that you actually know the questions and the answers that come from committing and reflecting.

You realize the question about self and not-self is not whether there is or is not a self. You've already assumed one, so you might as well use it. But there will come a point, as you get to see things more and more in terms of actions and their results, that you see your sense of self as a kind of action. You begin to notice, "When is it skillful? When is it not?" Eventually that pursuit will take you to the point where the perception of not-self does get applied to everything.

In other words, you've answered that question: *What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?* That's the question. The answer is found in *doing* the practice—committing yourself to it and reflecting on it. This is something the enlightenment cheat sheet can't tell you.

So it requires commitment. A lot of people don't like to hear that. They'd rather hear that they don't have to do anything and they can be enlightened just as they are. But that's depressing. What we already are is as good as it gets? That's a horrible idea. The Buddha's teaching you a path that leads to the highest happiness. And you do

that first by pursuing the happiness you can find through perfecting that sense of agency—that you really can make a difference.

So, instead of seeing the attempts to make a difference in things simply as clinging or craving that you've got to abandon, you learn how to be really skillful in how you make a difference in things. Then you reach the point where you can let go of that sense of agency—the voice inside that's telling you what to do next.

At this point, letting go in this way is not going to be depressing. The depressing way of abandoning agency is when you get on a raft, go one foot away from the shore on this side, and then you get off the raft and just sit there soaking in the water. Which is very different from taking the raft all the way across, and then reaching the point where you don't need the raft anymore because you've reached the safety and freedom of the other side.

So, this is a path to delight in, and the delight comes from that sense of agency—perfected to the point where you don't need it anymore. It's taken you to the highest happiness you could possibly want—even more than your wants could conceive of. After all, that's what agency is all about: You want to find happiness. The situation where you are right now is not happy, or it may be happy in some ways, but it's not satisfying. You want to find something better. And the Buddha says there really *is* something better, and it's something that you can reach through your power of action—which is why this is a path of delight.

So, don't listen to the people who would like to hand out an enlightenment cheat sheet at the door. You really want to master the skills of the path. That's the only way you're going to arrive at real answers and find the real thing.

A Good Independent Self

September 3, 2022

There are people who say that the idea of an independent self is the root of all evil. As long as you have the idea that you're somehow separate, that you're not totally dependent on everyone else, you're going to be selfish. You'll try to amass as much as you can for yourself and push other people away unless they can serve your selfish interests. But that's not always the case.

When you realize that your true well-being lies in acting in skillful ways, acting on skillful intentions, then even if you have the idea of an independent self, you'll want to act on impulses for generosity, virtue, the desire to train the mind so that you can be truly happy.

At the same time, you avoid a lot of the problems of the idea of an interdependent self.

For instance, if everybody were interdependent, nobody could gain awakening through his or her own efforts. That would mean that the Buddha never gained awakening; we'd all have to gain awakening together. You know how long that would take.

When the Buddha was asked whether the whole world would gain awakening, only half, or a third, he refused to answer, because it's going to depend on each one of us deciding independently that we want to take up the path and follow it all the way through.

The idea of an independent self also has the advantage of reminding you that if you're going to look for goodness in the world, you can't always depend on it coming from outside. You want your goodness to come solidly from within, independent of the ups and downs of the world. After all, look at the world we live in: It's not 100 percent pure, not 100 percent compassionate. When you look at interdependent systems in the world, you can see that it's not the case that they're designed for the well-being of everyone.

We're having a heat wave now. Somewhere, somebody's having good weather. If we weren't having our heat wave, they wouldn't be having their good weather. There have been times in the past when we've had good weather that's caused other people to have bad weather.

So it's not the case that interdependent systems are reliable. In fact, it's because they're unreliable that the Buddha said we've got to get out if we want to find a dependable happiness. Each of us has to make that decision for him or herself, and follow the path him or herself.

That means we have to learn how to make our goodness independent. It's a good practice when, for example, you're suffering from a disease, and there are a lot of things you can't do, you can still think thoughts of goodwill. That way, the goodness and happiness of your mind don't have to depend on the health of your body.

Think of the case of the Buddha. Devadatta had rolled a stone down a mountain trying to kill the Buddha. Fortunately, the stone crashed against a rocky promontory and so was diverted. But it broke into some slivers, and one of the slivers pierced the Buddha's foot. It was very painful. They were able to get the sliver out, and he had to lie down and rest. Mara came and taunted him, saying, "Hey, you sleepyhead, why are you moping here?" The Buddha said, "I'm not moping, I'm lying down with sympathy for all beings." That can mean two things: One is that he looked after himself so that he would be able to continue his work of teaching. But also while he was lying there, he was thinking about all beings, not just thinking about himself. When you do that, it lifts the level of your mind.

Remember the image of the salt crystal. If your mind is expansive, then whatever painful results you're experiencing from past kamma will be greatly reduced. Just as when you throw a salt crystal into a large river of water: Even though you've put some salt in the water, there's so much more water than there is salt that you can still drink the water and it won't taste salty at all.

So look inside yourself for the sources of goodness. They're there. They start with the desire to find true happiness. Around that desire you're going to develop a sense of self, and you'll find that your sense of self will start out with a lot of the bad habits of your old senses of self. Every becoming has a sense of self, or more accurately, three senses of self playing three roles.

The first is the self as the agent who's going to do the work that needs to be done to find the happiness on which that particular state of becoming is centered, or the desire on which it's centered. Then there's the self as the consumer who's going to enjoy the results. Then there's the self who comments on how well the agent is doing its job, offering recommendations for how it might improve.

We're still going to use those three senses of self as we practice, but we have to train them so that the self as the consumer raises its standards, the self as the agent gets more energetic and skilled, and the self as commentator knows how to talk so as

to spur the agent on to do good things. It'll have to offer criticisms when it's necessary, but not in such a way as to kill your motivation, because you've got to keep your desire to practice going strong. As long as you're working on concentration, there has to be the desire that acts as a center, as a kernel for the state of concentration, and you don't want to snuff that out.

So you've got to train your inner critic to be a useful critic. You read so much about how you should try to get rid of the inner critic because it's toxic. But then who's going to make recommendations? Who's going to be able to look at what you're doing and give suggestions? Teachers can't step into your mind and give suggestions. You've got to absorb their values, and learn how to use them yourself.

Think about the Buddha's way of teaching: There was instructing, but then there was also urging, rousing, encouraging—giving you energy. In fact, even when he talks about self—the self is its own mainstay, the self as its governing principle—it's what you might call the idea of self as a performative truth: something that's meant to make you perform well, that rouses you, urges you on, that, yes, you can do this, and yes, you'll benefit from it.

And yes, you do have the resources inside. What have you got? The three kinds of fabrication: You're breathing; you're talking to yourself; you're dealing with perceptions and feelings—but you can learn how to do all three of those things in skillful ways.

You keep on breathing, but now you breathe in different ways. You breathe with the whole body. You think of the breath energy coming in and out from different parts of the body. You explore the nature of the breath energy in the body as a whole. When the Buddha talks about the in-and-out breath, he doesn't classify it as a contact at the body. He classifies it as part of one of the properties in the body itself. So the breath is already there. The air just comes in and goes out: That's what makes contact. But the breath energy in the body, which brings the air in and lets it out, is something you want to explore, and it has lots of potentials.

The same with the way that you talk to yourself: You can talk to yourself in ways that destroy your desire to practice, but why would you want to do that? Your inner critic may be good at putting you down, but you have to ask the critic: What does the critic get out of this? Who's benefiting? There may be some parts of the mind that would rather not practice, and they put on the voice and the appearance of your inner critic. But you've got to take that role back—and make it serve the Dhamma.

So here you're talking to yourself about the breath. Talk to yourself about how well the mind is settling down with the breath. What can be done to fix the breath if

they're not settling down together? What can be done to the mind? That's useful conversation, useful criticism.

And finally, feelings and perceptions: We have our old perceptions that we keep plastering on to things, but those can be changed. The Buddha gives us so many useful perceptions to apply. Think of all the different skilled craftspeople that the Buddha recommends that you imitate: a good cook, a good archer, a good soldier, even a good elephant, a good horse, a well-trained horse. You think about the trained animals: They don't start out trained. It takes a while for them to get used to being trained, but then they develop those abilities. They can do it. If animals can do it, why can't you?

Think about the nun, Sister Dantika, who spent the whole day meditating in the forest without getting good results. She comes out of the forest and sees an elephant with a trainer. The trainer says to the elephant, "Okay, give me your foot." The elephant lifts his foot in such a way that the elephant trainer can use the foot to get onto the elephant's neck. And the nun thinks, "Even animals can be trained. Why can't I?" She's encouraging herself.

So think in ways that urge, rouse, and encourage you, because you do have the potentials inside. There are potentials in the body in terms of the breath element, the water element, earth, fire. There are potentials in the mind: the potential for stillness and rapture. It's in this way that the perception of self, when it's skillful, can actually help you along the path.

We hear so much about how the five aggregates lie beyond your control, but they're not *totally* beyond your control. If they were totally beyond your control, you wouldn't have the illusion that they were you or yours. As the Buddha points out, right concentration is made out of the five aggregates. You can control them to that extent, to give rise to concentration and stay there. It is possible. They have that potential. And it's not just the Buddha's aggregates, or Ajaan Mun's aggregates, or Ajaan Lee's aggregates: *Your* aggregates can be shaped as well—they have that potential, too.

So there are times when thinking about an independent self is a really useful idea, especially at times like this when the world is going crazy. You have to remind yourself that there are sources of goodness inside and they're totally independent of things outside. We owe a debt to the Buddha for having shown us the way, and to that extent we're totally dependent on admirable friendship. But we can take those lessons and use them to find the resources within ourselves, so that our goodness can be

independent of the situation around us. If we want true happiness, that's what we *have* to do.

You can think about the heat wave, but don't make the heat wave an obstacle. You can think about the situation of the world at large, but don't make that an obstacle. You have pains in your body. Don't make them an obstacle. There's a way around all those obstacles and it can be found from within.

Those are some of the ways in which a sense of independent self is useful, so make the most of them.

Attahi Attano Natho

April 1, 2023

In a few days we'll observe the twenty-first anniversary of Ajaan Suwat's passing away—enough time for someone who was born on that date to be an adult now. But his teachings are still with us. And of course, the monastery he founded is still here, offering an opportunity for us to practice. So it's good to extend thoughts of gratitude his way.

Of course, the best expression of gratitude is to continue the practice every day, to take his teachings and make them your own. Each of us fabricates his or her experience, so our understanding of what he had to say, what he had to teach, is going to be filtered by the way we fabricate things. This is why the Buddha, when he was teaching Rahula, started out by saying, "Be truthful." So try to register correctly what you experience and what you're doing.

Then be reflective. Look at how well what you've learned is helping you. If it's not helping you, there are two possible problems: One is that what's coming in from outside may not be good. The other is that you haven't learned how to put it together well. A lot of times, both things are the problem. When you make up your mind that you really are convinced by what the Buddha had to say, you want to listen more carefully to what he had to say—and every teaching that's in line with what he had to say—to make sure you get the message right.

Then figure out, "Something is wrong, still. Where is it wrong?" It's wrong in how you're putting things together. You have to learn how to correct yourself. The teacher is there to help make suggestions, give pointers, but ultimately, the work is up to you: in being truthful, in being reflective, in being observant as you reflect.

Ajaan Suwat made this point again and again. All the forest ajaans would talk about how much you have to depend on yourself, because all of them had to depend on themselves. Most of them came from very poor backgrounds. Ajaan Suwat apparently had eight siblings, born in a very poor part of Thailand. What he became was what he made of himself. In other words, he had to pull himself up by his bootstraps.

You can imagine how audacious that may have seemed in Thai culture in those days—that the forest tradition took birth among people who were at the bottom of

the social ladder. But they saw that the Buddha's teachings were available and that they were good. They decided to lift themselves up to be worthy of those teachings.

So try to follow their example and listen to what they have to say. One of Ajaan Suwat's favorite sayings was that each of us has only one person—ourselves—that we're responsible for. We have to be responsible for listening to the teachings properly, looking at our behavior, seeing where our behavior doesn't measure up, and then figuring out what we can do to make it measure up. It's a matter of skill, and you can't make other people skillful. The best you can do is give them advice and set a good example by being skillful yourself. But it's up to each of us.

So we reflect on what we're doing, how skillful we are. We have to be responsible for ourselves. Our problem is, all too often, we're trying to be responsible for other people. We try to say, "They should do this this way, and they should do that that way." Our own work gets tossed off to the side, neglected.

Like right here, focusing on your breath: No one else can focus your mind on the breath. I can stay here and keep repeating over and over again, "Stay with the breath, stay with the breath," but that doesn't focus your mind on the breath. It gives you an idea of maybe what to do, but it's up to you to exercise your mindfulness and alertness, and to make your mindfulness and alertness better and better, so that you really can stay with the breath. That's the element of ardency. That's what you're responsible for.

You're doing this because you know that your thoughts, your words, and your deeds are your contribution to your experience of the world, and also to everybody else around you. So in looking after your own well-being, your own skill, you're helping other people as best you can.

This relates to another comment Ajaan Suwat made one time. There was a teacher in Thailand who had taught that all the Buddha's teachings boil down to, "Don't be selfish." The Thai way of saying that is, "Don't look out for yourself," the implication being that you should look out for others instead. They even took that phrase and made a little Buddha sketch out of it. In the Thai it's *yaa hen kae tua*. *Yaa*, which means "don't," became the head. *Hen* became the neck. *Kae* became the shoulders, arms, and torso. And *tua* became the legs. The little diagram was all over Thailand because the teacher was famous.

Ajaan Suwat took issue with that message. He said, "You do have to look out for yourself. After all, who else is going to look out for you?"

The question is, do you look out for yourself in a skillful way? If you really look after your true best interest, it's not going to harm anybody. Too many people see that

our choice is either that we help ourselves or we help others, but that we can't do both. Yet the Buddha's insight is that if you really are helpful to yourself, it's going to spread out. It's going to be helpful to other people, too, because you're looking for happiness in a way that doesn't harm anybody. If you harm others, it's going to come back and harm you.

So we have to work on this skill—and it's a skill that requires work, persistent work. It's not that we jump from being totally unskillful to totally skillful all at once. It's success by approximation. You work at it and you find yourself getting more and more perceptive, more and more sensitive, more and more discerning as the practice progresses, as you keep committing yourself to the practice and reflecting on what you're doing, and then taking what you've noticed and plowing that back into your next decision for what to do.

So you do look out after yourself. This is what the phrase, *attahi attano natho*, means: You're your own mainstay. You have to depend on yourself. This relates to another teaching Ajaan Suwat made one time. We were just getting the monastery started, and he said one day, "We're not here to get other people. We're here to get ourselves. Now, if other people come and they like the way we're practicing and they want to practice, too, we're happy to have them join us. But we're not going to change the Dhamma to attract people, to 'get' other people, because if you do that, you lose yourself."

The practice keeps pointing back in here, inside. Try to practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. So when you're practicing mindfulness, where do you do that? "Keeping track of the body in and of itself, ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world": It points inside to body, feelings, mind, mental qualities, all in-and-of-themselves, right here. That's where the work is to be done. That's your frame of reference. Other people are just thoughts in that frame of reference. They're not the focus. The focus is on what you're doing, because what you're doing is what shapes your experience and shapes the world around you. So you want to shape it well.

And take responsibility for your actions. That means being truthful and admitting your mistakes. The Thai term for "responsibility," *khwaam rap phit chawp*, means that you're willing to accept what was right and what was wrong in your behavior. In accepting it, you admit that you're the one who made the choice, and you're the one who'll have to face the consequences. So when the consequences depend on what you do, you pay careful attention to what you're doing. Don't let your focus get distracted outside.

There's an aspect of the practice that has an impact on other people, but it comes down to the qualities of your mind. You want to be unburdensome. You want to be modest. You want to be content with what you've got in terms of material things. That has an impact on other people, but these are qualities you develop inside your mind.

Think of the image of the acrobats. When you keep your balance, it helps other people keep their balance, too. As you focus inside, keeping your balance means being focused on any of the four frames of reference in establishing mindfulness. That helps other people maintain their balance.

It's too bad that that particular sutta doesn't have an image to go with the opposite side of its message, which is that when you're helpful to other people, it comes back and develops good qualities in your own mind: kindness, goodwill, patience, equanimity. So it's not the case that we don't think about other people at all. In fact, we think about how not to be harmful to them, and how we can benefit by helping them. In that way, the real skill develops, which is how to find happiness in a way that harms no one, and how you can depend on yourself to do this.

Be responsible. Look after yourself—or, in Ajaan Suwat's words, "get yourself." That's the task for each of us. As we focus on that task, that's how we show our gratitude to the people who've maintained the teachings of the Buddha, the Dhamma, through all these generations—and especially for Ajaan Suwat, for his desire to start a place like this where people of all races and nationalities can come and practice together in an environment conducive to the practice.

So we've got the trees. We've got the orchard. That's conducive. Try to make your attitude conducive as well. Keep looking inside. See how you can improve what's inside. When you take responsibility like that, good things are bound to result.

Swept Downstream

April 11, 2023

An issue came up in our Zoom meeting yesterday. One of the people was commenting on how he first encountered that questionnaire about things being *aniccam, dukkham, anatta*. *Aniccam* usually was translated as “impermanent.” The question is, “If something is impermanent, is it easeful or stressful?” He said he didn’t see any direct connection between things being impermanent and their being stressful, because with some things, when they’re impermanent it’s actually good. When a disease is impermanent and goes away, that’s a good thing. Or if a bad situation of any kind is impermanent, that’s a good thing.

But when you translate *aniccam* as “inconstant,” that helps you to see the connection. Something that’s inconstant is undependable, unreliable. Ajaan Chah’s translation in Thai is *mai nae*, which means, “not for sure.” When you see that something is unreliable and not for sure, you realize, “Okay, it is stressful.” Whatever comfort you’ve gained from it so far, you can’t depend on it. It’s going to change at some point, and you don’t know when, which means you have to be prepared. That’s stressful.

As we chanted just now: “The world is swept away.” Time is passing. If you could see time pass, it’d be whizzing right past you all the time, without rest. You wonder, where can you settle in? Every place you’d settle into would be whizzing past, whizzing past. There’s one theory, actually, that space-time moves at the speed of light. That’s how fast time passes. It’s awfully fast, and there’s nothing you can really hold on to. There’s no way you can freeze a moment or call the past back.

The Buddha gives an image of someone swept downstream in a flood. He’s afraid of being swept away, so he tries to grab onto the grasses on the bank. But they’re just grass, and either they get pulled out by the roots, or they have sharp edges, they cut his hands, and they end up getting swept away together with him.

So when you live in a world like that, what are you going to do? Most people decide to pretend it’s not happening. When they create their little worlds of security, deep down inside they know that those worlds are not secure, but they keep going for them anyhow.

You know the story of King Koravya talking with Ven. Ratthapala about why Ratthapala had ordained. Ratthapala points out: “The world is swept away. It does not endure. It offers no shelter. There’s no one in charge. The world has nothing of its own.” He illustrates his points with incidents from the king’s life, starting with the fact that he’s aged. When he means to set his foot one place, it goes someplace else. This was after he was endowed with superhuman strength when he was young. When he has a disease, his courtiers are standing around, basically waiting—maybe even hoping—for him to die. He has no power over the disease to say, “Can you courtiers take out some of this pain that I’m feeling so that I can feel less?” Even though he’s king, he has no sovereignty over his pains. And even though he has storerooms filled with gold and silver, he can’t take that gold and silver with him when he dies.

So he’s been reflecting on this. Things are inconstant, stressful, not-self, subject to aging, illness, and death. Then Ratthapala asks him, “If a reliable person were to come with word that there was a kingdom to the east with a weak army but lots of wealth, and you could conquer it, would you go for it?” Even though the king has been reflecting on the impermanence of life and how he can’t really hold on to anything, he’d still be willing to send his army out to kill and plunder so that he could have more wealth.

As Ratthapala points out, this is what is meant by his fourth Dhamma summary: “We’re a slave to craving.” These things keep slipping past, slipping past, slipping past, yet we keep trying to come back to them because we don’t see anything better. When the Buddha tells us there is something better, we don’t really believe him. It seems like the path there is awfully stringent and requires a lot of us. But then, just taking what seems to be the easy way out requires a lot of us, too, because it means we’re subject to the fears of what’s going to happen when we die. If you haven’t gained the Dhamma eye yet, you’re not really sure.

You say you take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, but do you really take refuge in them? Where do you take your refuge? As Ajaan Maha Boowa says, for most of us, the reality is, *Kilesam saranam gacchami*: “I take refuge in defilement.” We look for some fun in thinking about sensuality or in getting worked up and angry about something. There’s a pleasure there. You’ve got the whole list of the defilements, and those are where you really look for refuge.

It’s like an addiction. You know it’s bad for you, but to give it up requires effort and imagination. And part of you has too much inertia to make the change. What’s going to make you see that you really do have to make the change? How bad do things have to get? You look around. It seems like the world is falling apart. It always

has been falling apart, but it seems especially obvious now. We've got crazy people in power who think that war is a good thing, greed is a good thing, lying is okay. We even have monks telling us that the Buddha didn't really mean that we should observe the precepts all the time, that there's a time when killing and lying are moral duties. It's insane.

So look at the world. It's swept away, swept away. What are you going to do so that you're not swept away with it? You've got the practice. It's been laid out. It makes sense. So what's the obstacle? This is a question each of us has to ask ourselves, because what you are—this “being” that you are, which you've taken on as your identity—is made out of a lot of clingings and attachments to things, like the grass on the side of the river bank. The Buddha lists five kinds of grass corresponding to the five aggregates. They all get pulled out as you try to grab on to them, as the flood washes you downstream.

So where is your island? The Buddha says you try to establish your mindfulness—ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world—so that you can get the mind into concentration. This gives you an island that gets you out of the flood for a bit, but you're still in the middle of the river. You haven't made it all the way across. But it gives you something to hold on to in the meantime.

You want to be really good at this. As Ajaan Lee used to say, the people who manage huge farms, with thousands of acres—he could have added the people with corporations, with many thousands of employees—can manage to handle it. Here you have only four jhanas, and yet, as he says, you can't catch hold of them right. Isn't that embarrassing? As a meditator, this should be something you really should have under your control. This is what you should master. At the very least, you should get out of the flood a bit.

Then look at what you've got. This island you're on—it, too, can get washed away. But you don't want to go back into the flood. Where are you going to go? What are you going to do? That's the challenge of discernment. But at the very least, get to that island. That should be your main concern every day as you wake up. It's only then that you can begin to rely on yourself and keep your nostrils above the water flowing past.

Surveying the World

March 12, 2022

Sometimes it seems like the Buddha had all the fun. In his meditation, he got to survey the world—the whole world. As for us, he tells us when we meditate: Focus on your breath. We don't get to move around that much. We don't get to expand our horizons. We have to *narrow* our horizons.

But those two facts are connected, because when the Buddha surveyed the world, he surveyed it several times. The first two times, the lesson kept coming back: Look into your awareness of the present moment. Look into what the mind is doing right here, right now—because that's going to solve the problems you see when you survey the world.

The first time he surveyed the world, he saw it as being like a stream drying up. There were fish in the stream, fighting one another over the water. No matter who won out, they were all going to die anyhow. It all seemed pointless.

Then he looked around. He said that every place he could look for happiness, somebody had already laid claim to it. If he was going to find his happiness outside, he'd have to fight somebody off, just like the fish. So he looked inside. He saw that there was an arrow in the heart. If you could pull that arrow out, then you'd be free from the suffering.

So the problem is not with the world. The problem is in the heart.

On the night of his awakening, when he surveyed the world again, he had already seen his previous births, going up and down on all sorts of levels. The question was: Was there a pattern? He saw that there was. All beings pass away and then are reborn in line with their kamma. Their kamma depends on their views, and their views depend on who they listen to. He also saw the complex way kamma worked itself out. It wasn't the case that if you did something this lifetime, it would automatically lead to a certain type of rebirth next time around. You were simply adding it to your kammic mix. Then, at the moment of rebirth, there were choices you had to make, and they could change your immediate course. So the final upshot of that second survey of the world was: Look at the mind in the present moment, because that's where the important choices are being made.

After his awakening, he surveyed the world again, this time with the eye of an awakened one. He saw beings on fire with the fires of greed, aversion, and delusion. But his fires were out. So his relationship to the world was very different this time around. Now he was free. The first time around, there was a sense of terror—*samvega*—because he was trapped in this world. But after his awakening, he was freed—totally free, to the point where, if he had decided not to teach, he still wouldn't be in debt to anybody. He didn't owe anybody anything. So if he had decided not to teach, nobody could do anything about it.

But as we know, Sahampati Brahma got upset. Here the Buddha had been devoting all that time and energy to developing the perfections to become a teaching Buddha, and now he was going to change his mind. So Sahampati came down and pleaded with the Buddha: "Please teach. There are those with little dust in their eyes. They'll understand." So the Buddha surveyed the world again, this time with an eye to seeing if there was anyone who would respond to his teaching and benefit from it. He saw that there was, which is why he decided to teach, even though it was going to involve a lot of difficulties.

When you read the story of his life, even just the section in the Vinaya, you see all the problems that the monks and nuns created for him—and those were the people who were supposedly his disciples. On top of that, he had to deal with sectarians of other kinds. Here he was, offering them a path to the end of suffering, and they didn't like it. They would attack him. That's the way it is with the human world. There's a lot of ingratitude. But there are people who will benefit from the Dhamma. So it's up to us to decide which category we're going to be in, and to take to heart the lessons he learned. With every survey of the world before his awakening, his focus had to come back into the present moment each time.

So ask yourself: Do you have that arrow in your heart that the Buddha was talking about, the arrow that keeps you running after things that you're going to have to fight for? Kurt Vonnegut could imagine a world in which beings didn't have to feed off of one another, didn't have to compete with one another: The planet Mercury, he said, was a honey-combed crystal that sang because one side faced the heat of the Sun, while the other side faced the intense cold of outer space. Little beings called Harmoniums fed off the vibrations of the crystal, instead of feeding off one another, so they were always filled with empathetic joy for themselves and for all the other Harmoniums on the planet.

But that was just in Kurt Vonnegut's imagination. The world we have is one where there's going to be competition. There's going to be struggle, because we all

engage in the type of thinking that the Buddha called *papañca*. It's a hard word to translate, but basically it's the kind of thinking that starts with the perception, "I am the thinker." With that perception, you've taken on an identity, and once you've taken on an identity as a being, you have to feed.

Where are you going to feed? You're going to feed in the world. And guess what? There are other beings out there, feeding in the same world—and not only that, they're often feeding off of one another. Some of them want to feed off of you. There's bound to be conflict, often pretty brutal. So as you take on an identity in that way, you're putting yourself in a position where you have to get into conflict, all because of the way you think.

The trick is to learn how to think in ways that don't involve an identity and don't involve a world. Where are you going to do that? Again, right here in the present moment. As you sit here meditating, you can look at things in terms of "you" as a meditator, successful or not successful. Or you can simply think, "Here are some events: events in the body, in terms of the four properties; events in the mind, in terms of the four mental aggregates. And what can be done with these things?"

Try to use good perceptions of the breath. They give you an anchor. Then you apply acts of attention and intention. As they stick here, they pay careful attention to what's going on, and you can create a state of concentration. If you can stay on this level, then when you see thoughts that would go out into the world again, you put them aside. Try to stay just on this level of events happening right here, right now. You're doing this to clear the decks, because eventually you'll want to see how those thoughts form—the ones that pull you away, that want to go back to more *papañca*. And from a still mind, you can see what motivates them: the arrow that the Buddha talked about.

So as you're here right now, if there are any thoughts of who you are or what world you're in, just put them aside. You might think of a picture of the globe, covered with one of those "cancel" symbols, the circle with the line through it. No worlds. Just events. That's how you learn to take these things apart, because once those worlds are formed, you want either to maintain them or to destroy them. In either case, you're going to have passion for the maintenance or passion for the destruction, and that passion will create more becoming and then more becoming.

But if you just look at the events that would lead up to becoming, if there has to be a becoming, let it be the becoming of concentration, where you're focused on your inner world, where there's no conflict aside from your own inner conflict. At least you don't have to fight other people off. No one else is pushing you off to the side so that

they can get a better view of your breath. You've got the breath and your mind, as you experience it from within, all to yourself. And you get to see what's going on simply in terms of events.

Learn how to survey this inner world in these terms, and the Buddha promises that you'll be able to get out of that sense of entrapment in the outer world—so that someday, you, too, can survey the world from an awakened perspective, with a sense of being freed from it. If you have something to offer to the world at that point, fine. It's a free gift. But even if you don't, you've still accomplished a great deal.

The World of Conviction

August 30, 2023

Sometimes you read that the Buddha was a really nice guy. He had some interesting ideas. He didn't push them on anybody. He didn't think that they were necessarily true for anyone else, but they had worked for him and they might work for you. He didn't mean them as absolute truths.

But when you actually look at his teachings and the claims he made—that he achieved unexcelled supreme self-awakening, and he had tested it from many angles—the fact that he didn't push his ideas on people didn't mean that he wasn't 100 percent sure about them. It's simply that he realized that he wasn't anyone's creator, he wasn't anyone's father, aside from Rahula, so he wasn't in a position to make demands of you. But he was sure that if you were sincere in putting his teachings to the test, you would find that they were true. All he asked was that you had enough conviction that you'd be willing to give them a fair test.

Here again, there's a lot of misinformation out there: that there's no faith in Buddhism. It's all very rational. But even rational teachings require some faith, require some conviction.

And in this case, it requires a fair amount. You're going to be sitting here focusing on your breath, restraining yourself from doing a lot of other things you would rather do. You hold to the precepts, again, restraining yourself from doing things you'd rather do. So you have to have some sense at least that it's worth it.

Conviction comes in here. It's why the Buddha lists it as a strength, a treasure, and as a quality that he hopes becomes dominant in your mind, because it asks you to rethink who you are and the world you live in.

We know what that means. Your sense of who you are in a particular world is a state of becoming, so he's asking you to take on a new state of becoming: The world you live in, if you have conviction in the Buddha's awakening, is a world in which someone has gained awakening through his own efforts and is articulate enough, and observant enough, to know how to teach it to others—and compassionate enough to *want* to teach it to others. And his compassion is pure. There was no compulsion that he teach.

There's that story of how, after he gained awakening, he thought about how subtle it was—the realization he'd come to—and he wondered if it would be a waste of time to try to teach it to anyone else. Sahampati Brahma read what was going on in the Buddha's mind and was alarmed. Here the Buddha had gone to all this trouble to gain awakening and he might not share his knowledge. So he came down from his heaven, got down on one knee, and pleaded with the Buddha: "Please teach. There are those with little dust in their eyes. They will understand the Dhamma." The Buddha surveyed the world with his own knowledge and realized that that was true. So he decided to teach.

The commentators get tied into knots about this story. The idea that the Buddha could even entertain the notion of not teaching others bothers them. But it's related to the fact that when you gain full awakening, you're totally free of debt, with no obligation to anybody. Yet even in that state of no obligation, he had the compassion to teach and to go through all that effort—walking all over northern India for forty-five years, teaching the Dharma, establishing the Vinaya, establishing his fourfold *parisa*: monks, nuns, lay-followers, male lay-followers, female lay-followers. That was a lot of work.

So think about that. Here's someone who's gone through all that effort to show the path to total freedom. We live in a world where that path has been shown. What does that mean about us? It means that we have the capability to follow that path. And if we have any sense of gratitude at all, we should really give ourselves to the path.

This requires that we straighten out a lot of things inside our minds, because we have many different identities. A lot of them would rather not be bothered. They'd be perfectly content to live an ordinary life. But then there's that part of the mind that would like to be free and feels so stifled by conventional society, conventional values. There's a large part of society that wants to teach you how to treat that part of your mind with disrespect.

Years back there was a movie called *The Devils*, about a priest and a nun in the Middle Ages. In the first scene, the nun's walking around with her head off to one side at a 90-degree angle because she's so warped from not having given herself over to natural desires. You could tell where the movie was going, so I walked out—because it seemed so unhealthy to treat the idea that the mind that desires purity, the mind that desires a true happiness, should be mocked.

But it wasn't just that one movie. It's a theme throughout our society: making fun of people who want to keep their virtue pure, making fun of people who want to find

a happiness that doesn't involve sensuality.

The Buddha's saying that if you give respect to the part of the mind that wants genuine happiness, a happiness that's totally harmless, you will benefit. So he's asking you to assume the identity of someone who wants genuine happiness.

That will require that you sort out any of your other identities that don't fall in line with that desire, that feel threatened by it. This is what the teaching on not-self is for: to realize that the different identities that you have, have been gathered from who knows where—lots of different places, lots of different situations in which you observe yourself taking on a particular desire and getting some benefit from it. Sometimes you observed accurately; sometimes not. The fact that the observations were not accurate doesn't mean that those particular senses of self are going to be weak, though. Sometimes they're the most tenacious.

This will require sorting through your many selves and learning how to dis-identify from those that really are not in your true best interest.

But it's a noble task. That's the other feature of the Buddha's teachings, that it confers nobility on all the people who practice it. There's the convention of nobility that's based on birth, based on family inheritance, which is always very questionable: Where did they get all that money? Are they really worthy of honor?

That's not the kind of nobility the Buddha's talking about. He's talking about the nobility of a mind that wants to find a happiness that doesn't die, and is willing to do whatever is needed to find it—as long as it causes no harm.

The truths that inform that path are also noble. Someone once asked, "What's noble about clinging? What's noble about craving?" What's noble about them is not so much the clinging or the craving in themselves, but the attitude that the Buddha's truths about these things advise. You realize that your suffering is not caused by anything outside. There may be bad things happening outside, but the fact that the mind is suffering comes from your own actions, your own clingings and cravings. So you're taking responsibility and learning to step back from the very things you cling to, you hold on to, and say, "I need to comprehend these things so that I have no more passion for them." That's what's noble about the first noble truth.

The same with the second noble truth: You step back from your craving. You realize, "I have to abandon this craving for sensuality": the fascination with thinking about and planning sensual pleasures. Craving for becoming: taking on more identities. Craving for non-becoming: craving to destroy any identities you have that you don't like. The fact that you're willing to step back and abandon them: That's what's noble about that truth.

So this is the becoming that the Buddha has you assume through conviction as you take on the practice: that you live in a world where awakening is possible, true happiness is possible, release is possible, and you live in a world where you can become noble. And you have it within you to do so.

Think of the ajaans in the Forest Tradition. Most of them were born into peasant homes. Someone looking from outside might say, “Where are these people going to find nobility?” Someone might say “Well, the fact that they would put up with their sufferings stoically: That’s noble.” But they just didn’t *put up* with their sufferings. They realized that they lived in a world where it was possible to find a way out, and they made the sacrifices that were needed.

So when the Buddha asks that you have conviction in his awakening, that’s what he’s asking: that you assume that you live in a world where true freedom is possible, and you through your efforts can find it—and you’ll be ennobled in the process.

Those are good assumptions to make. All he asks is that you take them on as working hypotheses. You don’t have to swear on a stack of Bibles or the whole Pali Canon that you believe. Simply look at your actions, see where they’re causing harm, and figure out how not to cause that harm. That’s all that’s asked.

Infinity

September 26, 2023

All too often, we come to the meditation straight from the narrative of the day, and then the narrative becomes part of the meditation, where it interferes with the mind's settling down. If you managed to do something klutzy during the day, then if your meditation is not going well, that becomes part of that same klutzy narrative. If something upsetting or disturbing happens, it becomes part of that bad narrative, too.

This is why it's good to start the meditation with thoughts of all beings. Open your mind to infinity for a while. As I said earlier, it's the way the Buddha approached the night of his awakening. He started with his own narratives, and if you think you have lots of stories from the day, he had eons. The question for him was, why were there so many different narratives, so many different lives? There were brahmans during his time who said that whatever you were in this lifetime, you're going to be in the next lifetime. That obviously wasn't the case, because he had changed identity so many times.

There was actually one strange belief that all beings after they died went to the Moon and fed off the Moon—which is why the Moon looks so mottled: It's being eaten. Then they would fall as rain, and then turn into plants, and then, depending on what animal ate them, they would become that kind of animal. That was obviously not the case, either.

So the question was, what determined all these different levels of being? To answer that question, he got out of his individual narratives and started looking at the cosmos as a whole. He extended his mind in all directions to all beings. He found that they, too, had many lifetimes. They, too, kept changing identities. But he began to see a pattern. They went up and down depending on the skillfulness or lack of skillfulness in their actions.

He also saw that the pattern of how this simple principle worked out was complex. Sometimes you would do something skillful in this lifetime and go to a bad destination next time around, either because of something bad you had done before, or because of some bad action you did afterwards, or because you had wrong view at death. And vice versa: You could do bad things in this lifetime and go to a good destination next time, either because you had a fund of good kamma from the past,

or you changed your ways and refrained from harmful actions, or developed right view at death.

But the basic principle still held. Just because you escaped a bad destination for some bad actions in this lifetime didn't mean that those bad actions wouldn't eventually lead to pain or suffering someplace down the line—or vice versa.

So he saw that it was through your actions that you shaped your life. It was through your intentions based on your views, and your views based on who you respected—whether you respected the noble ones or respected your greed, aversion, and delusion more. That was how you determined the course of your lives.

But the power of your views at the moment of death alerted him to the fact that mental actions in the present moment could have a lot of power. So it was with that understanding that, in the third watch of the night, he focused on his present mental actions. What kind of views, what kind of intentions would lead outside of the cycle? As part of his second knowledge, he had seen that the cycle just goes around and around. It's not really a circle. It has a lot of complex feedback loops. But it goes nowhere. You go up and then you go down, then you go up again and down again. In some cases, it's almost as if *samsara* were a sick joke. You do lots of good things, you're generous, you're virtuous, you get rewards for that in a future lifetime, but then, in enjoying those rewards, they eat away at your own good qualities. You get lazy again, complacent again, and you fall.

So he wanted out. Which meant that the question was: What kind of intentions, what kind of actions right now, what kind of views right now, would lead to the way out? As the answer to that question came, he saw that the way out was to see things in terms of the four noble truths, to understand what suffering is, and what he was doing right now to cause suffering right now. He also saw that he could stop doing those things, but that it would require a path of practice. He couldn't just stop. There was a path of practice he had to follow. That was the noble eightfold path.

So he followed the path, completed all the duties with regard to the four noble truths: fully comprehended suffering, abandoned its cause, realized cessation by developing the path. That's how he gained awakening.

It's good to reflect on the pattern of that night, going from his narratives to infinity, the cosmos at large—infinite in the sense that you can't see its limits—and then back to the present moment. In the same way, it's good to start each meditation with thoughts that spread out as far as you can think.

The Buddha has you think about all beings in two major contexts. The first, of course, has to do with the brahmaviharas, starting with goodwill. You wish all beings

to be happy. Sometimes you hear the word *metta* translated as loving-kindness, but that doesn't seem to do justice to the attitude the Buddha's recommending. Pali has a separate word for love, which is *pema*, and the Buddha didn't place his trust in *pema* or recommend it as a universal attitude, because as he said, sometimes love leads to love; sometimes love leads to hatred; sometimes hatred leads to love, or hatred to hatred. Love leading to love means there's somebody you love, someone else treats them well, so you're going to love that second person. Love leading to hatred: Someone mistreats someone you love, so you're really going to hate that person. Hatred leading to love: If somebody mistreats someone you dislike, you're going to like the person who mistreated the object of your hatred. Then hatred leading to hatred: You hate somebody, somebody treats them well, so you hate that second person. It's all very partial, very arbitrary, and not very trustworthy.

What the Buddha trusts more is the simple wish, "May all beings be happy." Think of that second sutta we chanted just now. We thought about how to express goodwill for all the snakes and creeping things, and then said, "May you depart." In other words, it's not in the nature of things that snakes and human beings can get along well in close proximity. They're better off if they keep to their separate ways.

A lot of human beings are like that, too. So goodwill, or *metta*, doesn't mean that you're going to have to love other people. Sometimes it means simply respecting their desire for happiness and hoping that they can look after their own happiness: "May they all look after themselves with ease."

And although *metta* is meant to be a limitless attitude, the Buddha does talk about it as restraint. He talks about it as a determination that you keep in mind. Now, if limitless goodwill were innate in all of us, you wouldn't have to exercise any restraint around it or to make a determination to stick with it. You'd just express your innate nature and that would be it.

The problem is that we as human beings tend to be partial in our *metta*. Some people we like; some people we don't like. Some people we wish well; some people we wish ill. So to lift our minds from our human state to the level of the brahmas takes work. It's a determination. You have to make up your mind that you're going to make your goodwill universal, without limits. Then you have to be mindful to keep that determination in mind so that you don't forget. And you have to restrain yourself from any impulses that go against goodwill for all—which means you also have to protect your goodwill.

That's the meaning of that passage, by the way, where the Buddha is talking about the mother's love for her child. Sometimes we hear it interpreted as, "Just as a mother

cherishes her only child, so you should cherish all beings.” But the Pali doesn’t say that. It says, “Just as a mother would guard with her life her only child, in the same way you should guard your goodwill for all beings.” That’s something different. After all, you’re going to be meeting with lots of beings who are not especially lovable, but you’ve got to have goodwill for them.

The image the Buddha gives is of bandits who have come to grab you, pin you down, and they’re sawing you up in little pieces with a two-handled saw. He says that, even in a case like that, you have to have goodwill, starting with them and then, from them, spreading to the whole cosmos. Otherwise, if ill will takes over your mind at that point, you’ll be reborn in line with that ill will, and that’ll lead to a life that’s not especially auspicious. Whereas if you protect your metta with your life, you may lose your life, but you protect a treasure inside that will lift the level of your mind.

So as we reflect on goodwill, we realize it doesn’t stop with just thoughts of, “May all living beings be happy, happy, happy.” It’s an attitude that you have to protect, to maintain, and to bring into all of your encounters with others.

This is where it’s good to think of some of the other images the Buddha gives of thinking about other beings. One is that if you see someone who’s really wealthy, powerful, and has every advantage in life, the Buddha says, “Remember that you’ve been there, too.” If you see someone who’s really poor, destitute, suffering from a disease, you’ve been there as well. These thoughts can, one, induce a fellow feeling toward everyone you meet. You’ve probably been like that person in the past. So that’s something you have in common. You shouldn’t be jealous of those who are more powerful; you shouldn’t look down on those who are more miserable than you. Feel empathetic joy for the first, compassion for the second.

But also, the Buddha says, when you start thinking about that, it should give rise to a sense of samvega: All things are possible. That’s pretty scary.

This relates to another passage where he has you think about all animals. Just focus on the common animals, he says, and you realize how variegated they can be: everything from tiny, tiny insects to whales and whale-eaters, and everything in between. Not only the creatures we know of now, but all the creatures that have been in the past that we know only through fossils. He says to think about how variegated the animal world is, and then to realize that your mind is more variegated than that. In other words, it’s because of the mind that these animals have taken on those shapes, taken on those characteristics. And your mind has those potentials as well. That’s a scary thought, too. Do you want to go back there? Well, no. So watch out for any thoughts of your mind that would go in that direction.

Ajaan Mun once said that he, on recollecting his past lives, could remember a period where for 500 lives he was reborn as a dog because his mind was satisfied with the pleasures of dogs. What happened to him has probably happened to us.

And if we don't get our act together, we're headed back in that direction. This is where thinking about all animals leads beyond goodwill, empathetic joy, compassion, and equanimity. It goes to samvega. That's a sense of terror at the prospect of having to go through all this again and again. It leads to a sense of having enough of all this and wanting to get out.

That gives you good motivation for meditating, getting the mind under control, regardless of what the narratives of the day may have been. Think about that reflection we chant: "I'm subject to aging, illness, death, and separation. Whatever I do, to that will I fall heir." In the original sutta, it doesn't stop there. It goes on to remind you that all living beings are subject to these things, too. No matter where you might go in the cosmos, no matter what the level, you'd be subject to these things. The Buddha says that when you think about that, it gives rise to a sense of samvega, and then from the samvega, to a desire to get on the path.

So it's good to think about these things. Air out your mind with infinity every time you sit down to meditate. It'll give you much better perspective on what you're doing right here and why.

Metta Math

January 12, 2022

Every evening before we meditate, we have a chant on the sublime attitudes: universal goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. Because we do it every day, it's all too easy for us to simply mouth the words without really thinking about what we're saying, even though it's translated into English. So it's good to stop and think: One, why do we have the chant? And two, are we getting the most out of it?

The chant is there to remind us of our motivation for being here. We're looking for a solid, reliable happiness. Not only that, we're looking for happiness in a way that doesn't harm anybody, which means that we have to think about the happiness of others. So primarily, we're doing it for ourselves, because if we can have ill will for anybody, that means we're probably going to behave in an unskillful way toward that person. And that becomes our kamma. It's a drain on our resources.

The Buddha talks about goodwill and the other sublime attitudes as being the practitioner's wealth. And it's an interesting kind of wealth. It's not the kind where you have to go out and do something to get it from somebody else. It's something you can produce from within. It's as if you had your own printing press and you could print as much money as you wanted. And the more you print, the wealthier you are.

So why is our account so small? Why do we not see goodwill as wealth? There's a strong tendency to keep score. "Someone else said this to me. Someone else said that to me"—things you don't like. That's keeping garbage. It's like those pack rats that pick up garbage and stash it away, stash it away. They treat it like wealth, but it's not wealth at all. It's just garbage. And why clutter up your mind with garbage? You can produce abundant goodwill, abundant genuine wealth.

Think of all the images the Buddha has for the wealth of goodwill. The whole Earth: You want your goodwill to be large like the whole Earth. A puny little man comes along and wants to make the Earth be without earth. He digs here and spits there and urinates here, thinking, "Be without earth, be without earth." But the Earth is so much bigger. You have look at other people's misbehavior as like that pitiful little man trying to make the Earth be without earth. You want your goodwill to be that much larger, that much more abundant.

Make your goodwill like the River Ganges. Someone could come with a torch and try to burn the river away but would never succeed. The water just puts out the flame. Goodwill can be like space. People can try to draw pictures on space, but there's nothing there for the pictures to hang on to. You want your attitude to be like that: something that nobody can draw pictures on. No matter what they do, you don't keep it in mind, and in particular, you don't keep tally as to who owes what to you.

So make your goodwill large. You can be as wealthy as you want. The Buddha talks about how, if it rained gold coins, we still wouldn't have enough for our sensual desires. But with goodwill we can create huge amounts of a different kind of wealth, and it can always be more than enough. Make that your attitude: If people misbehave toward you, you want to overwhelm them with goodwill. After all, just look at this world: People are so poor in goodwill. With the least little bit of disagreement, people draw lines and get all upset and want to attack the other side. For what? We keep battling, battling, battling, then we die. We have nothing to show for it except a lot of bad kamma.

But goodwill raises the level of the mind. It's not innate. You start out having goodwill for some people. The normal human attitude is that you have goodwill for some but not for everyone. But with the sublime attitudes, the brahmaviharas, you're trying to raise the level of your mind to a brahma level. It's the brahmas who have goodwill for everyone, with extra left over. If you can learn how to think in those terms, you become a brahma inside.

So ask yourself: What's keeping you from generating as much wealth as you want? What attitudes are getting in the way? And remind yourself: It is heedful of you to be generous with your goodwill. As the Buddha said, all skillful qualities start with heedfulness, are rooted in heedfulness, and goodwill is one of those qualities.

Sometimes we're told that we need only get in touch with our innate goodwill and allow it to bloom. But you look at little kids behaving, and it's not as if somebody told them that they had to be partial in their goodwill. When you first try teaching goodwill to children, there are some who will say, "No, I can't do that. How can I have goodwill for that person? That person did this or that mean thing." You have to remind them, "Okay, the goodwill is not so much for them. It's for you."

Which means that universal goodwill is an attitude that has to be cultivated. It has to be developed. You have to think your way to goodwill.

They talk about a *citta* of goodwill: *mettacittena*. The word *citta* means both "heart" and "mind." The main emphasis in goodwill, of course, is with the heart, but it

requires some of your head as well. When you think of somebody for whom you have trouble generating goodwill, try to ask yourself: Why are you so stingy with your goodwill? What's the obstacle?

After all, what does goodwill mean? It means, "May that person be happy." How is the person going to be happy? Through his or her actions. So basically you're wishing, "If this person is behaving in an unskillful way, may he or she see the error of his or her ways and be willing to change, willing to become more skillful." That's an attitude you can have for everybody. Then you can ask yourself: "Is there anything I can do to help that person be more skillful?" Rather than tallying up all the bad things that person did in the past, you're looking at him or her as someone with potential, the potential to change for the better. So, make it your challenge: Is there anything you can do to help that person become more skillful—to *want* to become more skillful?

You probably know the folktale of the Sun and the Wind. They got into a discussion one day, and then into an argument: Who was stronger? Who had more power? The Wind said, "I'll show you that I'm stronger. See that man down there on Earth, walking down that road with a blanket around him? I can blow that blanket away. You can't do that."

So the Wind blew and blew and blew, and of course the man just clutched the blanket tighter and tighter and tighter. The Wind couldn't blow it away. Then the Sun said, "Okay, let me try." The Sun just beamed. The man, feeling the warmth, took the blanket off of his own accord—the lesson, of course, being that if you try to force your ideas of what's right and wrong on other people, they're just going to hold even more tightly to what they've been doing all along. But if you figure out some way to make them *want* to change, they'll be happy to do it.

So goodwill requires more than just an attitude of the heart. It requires some thinking. This is why the Buddha gives those images—the Earth, the River Ganges, space—and talks about goodwill as wealth. They're perceptions to shape your thinking. Once you generate goodwill, then you try to protect it, as with all wealth, because there will be people who misbehave, and you can't let that erode your goodwill away. Think of the example of the mother protecting her child. The poem says, "Just as a mother would protect her child, her only child, so you should try to protect your goodwill." Sometimes that passage is mistranslated as, "You should cherish all beings as a mother would cherish her child." But the word "cherish" doesn't appear in the poem at all. The word is "protect." And it's not that you're

protecting beings; you're protecting your goodwill, so that no matter what happens, even if you have to die, you're not going to give up your goodwill.

The Buddha gives a related image in the simile of the bandits who are trying to cut you up into little pieces with a two-handled saw. He says that if you let any ill will arise in your mind toward those bandits, you're not following the Dhamma; you're not following his teachings. You have to have goodwill for them even as you're dying, because after all, if you die with ill will, you're going to die with a vengeful attitude, wanting to get back at those bandits. That's going to pull you down. Again, it's a case where a lack of goodwill is bad for you.

So it's not a question of other people deserving or not deserving your goodwill. We talk about "deserving" when we have limited resources and are trying to parcel them out: "This person deserves that much. That person deserves this much." But here, your goodwill is supposed to be unlimited. You give unlimited goodwill, infinite goodwill, and then you give more infinite goodwill. It's like one of those weird math problems where there are levels of infinity. You can give infinite goodwill, then you can give more infinite goodwill the next day, and more infinite goodwill the next. There doesn't have to be any limit. When you have that much, you don't have to worry about who deserves and who doesn't deserve. You just give it to everybody all around.

So learn how to be generous with your goodwill. The more generous you are, then the more you get, the more you have. Don't approach goodwill with a shopkeeper's mind, one who has to tally things up and do the math for fear of being shortchanged and running out of money. You should be engaging in the math of infinities. You don't need to keep tally of that. Just keep producing. And as the Buddha said, when you give abundantly, you're going to receive abundantly as well. You may not receive goodwill from other beings, but there's an inner sense of well-being that you create within your own mind, and you want that to be abundant.

And it's something you *can* do. If there's anything in the mind that resists the idea, you've got to question it, grill it. Don't let it have any force, because it's just going to make you poor. You have to ask yourself: Why do you choose to be poor when you can be wealthy?

So keep that image in mind: Goodwill is your wealth. As I said, it's like having your own money press where you can print as much money as you like. And unlike the money of the world, the value doesn't get reduced when there's more of it. The math of goodwill is not like the math of poverty. It's the math of infinite wealth.

Tough Goodwill for a Tough World

March 18, 2023

Sometimes when you hear people talking about goodwill, it's as if they're living in a different world, especially when they're talking about goodwill for all: They say that we're all One; we appreciate our Oneness; goodwill comes easily, naturally.

But even though our lives may be interconnected, it's hard to say that we're One, or that the interconnectedness is necessarily a good thing. People are interconnected when they're at war with one another, when they're torturing one another, when they're scrambling over limited resources, when they're arguing about how the world should go: There's an interconnection there, but it's not a good one.

Think about the fact that you're living in a world where you would like to have everyone act in a skillful way so that we could all be happy, but some people are very determined to act in unskillful ways. And their lack of skill affects not only them, but also a lot of people around them, including us.

As long as our happiness is dependent on food, clothing, shelter, and medicine from the world, based on relative peace in the world, we're always in a precarious position. There are a lot of people out there who would be all too happy just to destroy the world. And some people have the capability to do that. So it's a rough world in which to develop thoughts of goodwill for all.

This may be one of the reasons why the Buddha doesn't call the immeasurable sublime attitudes *manussa-viharas*, human attitudes. They're more-than-human attitudes—all the *brahmaviharas*. They're the attitudes of brahmas who live in relative security. They're not involved in the rough and tumble of the world. They're not affected by human beings' actions.

So it's a lot easier for them to have unlimited goodwill, unlimited compassion, unlimited empathetic joy, and unlimited equanimity. But it's not the case that they got there by living in easy worlds. They had to develop their goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity here in this tough human world. So everybody who develops these attitudes has to go through a lot of difficulties first, such as learning to think about how you might have goodwill for beings who would be all too happy to see you die.

Of course, the first thing you have to think about is: Who are you extending the goodwill for? You're extending goodwill *to* other people, but it's *for* your own good. You realize that if you allow yourself to have ill will for anyone, you're going to do some very unskillful things around those people, and that's going to become your kamma. So it's primarily as a protection for you.

This is a theme you see throughout the Canon—that goodwill protects you from your own actions. At the same time, the fact that you're not doing anything unskillful means that the bad actions of other people are less likely to reach you.

Which is why that sutta we chant every now and then, the *Karaniya Metta Sutta*, talks about how to live in a way that's actually in harmony with universal goodwill: You're easy to instruct. You don't have lots of activities going on that involve taking advantage of other people. Your senses are under control. There's a whole list at the very beginning of the sutta of the different qualities and activities that are in line with attitudes of goodwill.

So you have to start out by looking at your own behavior: To what extent does your own behavior express goodwill for others? In what ways could it *better* express goodwill?

Which is why I say that when you're dedicating merit and when you're extending thoughts of goodwill, the responsibilities are very different. When you dedicate merit, it's really up to the other beings to learn about the fact that you're doing that, and then to express their appreciation for the good you've done. That then becomes their merit. You have no responsibility for them after you think thoughts of dedicating merit. It's up to them whether they appreciate what you're doing or not.

With goodwill, though—along with compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity—you have to carry these attitudes through in your actions. There's more responsibility there. And you have to remember that it's going to require that you be strong. I don't know how many people have complained to me, saying, "If I have goodwill for everybody, they're just going to step all over me."

That's not what goodwill means. The Buddha's not teaching you to be a simpering Buddhist doormat. Goodwill means that you wish beings would behave in skillful ways *for their own good*. You hope that they can do it voluntarily, and you'd be happy to assist them in any way in that direction.

Letting them step all over you is not going to induce them to voluntarily learn how to be skillful. You have to know when to say No. It's totally possible to have boundaries within limitless goodwill, because the help you give to others is a form of generosity. Goodwill may be limitless, but your generosity has its limits in terms of

your strength, your wealth, your position in life. It's good that you see the difference between the two. When people are taking advantage of you, you can say to yourself, "Look, that's beyond the realm of what the Buddha said in terms of generosity, where you don't harm others, and you don't harm yourself in the way you're being generous."

And you can forgive others. In fact, it's always a good thing to forgive others, but that doesn't mean you condone their behavior or that you allow them to continue stepping all over you.

This is where the teachings of the forest ajaans are helpful. When they talk about goodwill, they always talk about it as a strength. It's the kind of goodwill that lives in this real world where other beings are really difficult.

Think of the story of Ajaan Lee with the elephant in rut. He could have been killed. Instead, he sat there and, as he said, he fought the elephant off with goodwill. Think about that: radiating thoughts of goodwill to fight off other beings that could harm you. Or think of that time when he was with a large group of monks and laypeople on a tudong: They were in a forest down by the ocean, and they all had their umbrella tents. They saw a huge cloud of mosquitoes coming in off the ocean. So Ajaan Lee ordered everybody to put up their tents—in other words, tie-up their mosquito nets and sit outside the mosquito nets—and he was going to fight off the mosquitoes, as he said, "With no holds barred." I'm sure he appreciated the humor of that statement—that you're fighting with goodwill—but it is possible.

You just think of the ajaans going through the forest, and their protection was what? That mosquito-netting for their mosquito-netting tents was very, very thin. Even when they were in huts, the walls of their huts were flimsy. There's a story about Ajaan Khao living in a hut, and an elephant comes crashing through the wall on one side of the hut facing him. His only defense was goodwill.

But in all cases: In the case of the mosquitoes, they just disappeared; in the case of the elephants, they backed away very slowly.

So you can imagine how the ajaans felt about goodwill, that it was not just a nice, sweet attitude toward others, being nice to others. It was a strong mental state. You can think of it as tough goodwill, tough compassion, tough empathetic joy, tough equanimity. That's the kind of attitude that allows you to think thoughts of goodwill for everybody, but at the same time realizing that you have your boundaries.

After all, having goodwill for others doesn't mean you're weak in the face of whatever they want to do. You want to be determined that you're not going to let them do anything unskillful, if possible. Of course, you have to do that in skillful ways

yourself, which is where goodwill involves a fair amount of discernment and equanimity. But think of goodwill as a strength.

And it is a protection. When the Buddha talks about the rewards of goodwill, he talks about the protection that it gives from physical dangers, among other things. This theme is carried out in the teachings of the ajaans.

So when you start out thinking thoughts of goodwill, first think goodwill for those for whom it's easy to think those thoughts, and then go to those for whom it's harder and harder. Then think it through: what it means to have goodwill in light of kamma, and what it means to have goodwill as a means of protecting yourself. After you've thought through some of the really difficult people, then the next time you do it, it's going to be easier. The next time after that, it'll be easier still.

Once you've adjusted your views, goodwill becomes very easy. Of course, the other aspect of all this is that you have to have a source of happiness inside that's not going to be touched by anyone else's behavior. You can construct states of concentration, you can construct attitudes of goodwill, and they do provide you with a strong independent source of happiness inside.

Think about the monks and nuns in Tibet who were tortured by the Chinese and were able to survive because they maintained goodwill for their torturers. The fact that they were able to maintain it was a source of happiness for them.

If you think about being in a prison where you're being tortured, there aren't many sources of happiness being made available to you. In fact, when the torturers come and try to act nice to you, they're actually trying to get information out of you so that they can make their tortures more devious.

So you have to really be on your guard in terms of your outside environment, which means you have to have a source of happiness inside. The happiness of concentration, the happiness of goodwill: These are fabricated things, but you can make them strong. This is how brahmas become brahmas. They started out as human beings and learned how to make their goodwill strong, so that they were able to feed off of that goodwill. That then got them to the brahma realms.

Ideally, though, you want to find something better still, something that's not fabricated. In other words, you work on the path to awakening and, when you reach the stages of awakening, then you've got something really secure inside—which makes goodwill a lot easier, because you know that the happiness that comes from the noble attainments cannot be touched by anything anybody does anywhere or at any time. You're in a much more secure position where it's easier to extend thoughts of goodwill to everyone without exception.

So it gets easier as you go along if you do it right. Think about goodwill in the right way. Think about your sources of happiness, and develop the ones that really are more and more secure, until you get to that point the Buddha calls *The Secure*. That's one of his epithets for nibbana.

So goodwill requires not only that you develop an attitude of goodwill, but also that you live your life in such a way that it gets easier and easier to maintain that attitude, and to express that attitude in whatever you do.

Bringing Daily Life into the Practice

March 24, 2022

The question is often asked: how to bring the practice into daily life. The best way to answer it is to switch the priorities around. Make the question: how to bring daily life into your practice. In other words, you want your practice to create the context, the frame, and then you allow certain parts of daily life into that context.

It's an important lesson in realizing how much your mind shapes your environment. All too often, we let our mind be shaped by what's around us, but *we* want to shape the environment. And we can. The mass media come at us with such force that it's often hard to realize that we should be in charge of our environment—what we take in, what we don't take in, and what we put into our environment.

You start with the precepts. You want to hold to the precepts no matter what. Don't let the world tell you that there are good reasons for breaking the precepts. Sometimes they'll try to get to you through fear of loss of wealth, loss of health, or the loss of your relatives. But, as the Buddha said, those kinds of loss are not really serious. You lose them and you can get them back. The serious losses are loss of your virtue and loss of right view. If you lose those, it's going to be a long time before you can get them back.

So, you don't want the four types of bias to influence you. In other words, you don't break the precepts for somebody's sake because you like them and want to please them, you don't break the precepts because there are people you don't like and you want to treat them unfairly, you don't want to break the precepts out of delusion, and you don't want to break them out of fear—fear of somebody's power. You've got to hold to the precepts no matter what.

Remember, you're trying to hold to the precepts in a way that's pleasing to the noble ones. If you're going to please anybody in your observance of the precepts, try to please *them*, because they themselves have held by the precepts and have seen that they really are advantageous. So, always think of the noble ones watching over your shoulder. They hold you to a high standard because they have compassion for you.

This is where you bring in the principles of shame and compunction. The word "shame" has gotten bad press in the West for a long time now, but you have to remember that there are two kinds of shame: unhealthy shame, which is the opposite

of pride, and healthy shame, which is the opposite of shamelessness. The Buddha, of course, is advocating healthy shame. A shameless person doesn't care what other people think, even the best people in the world. But, if you're wise, you want to keep the standards of the noble ones in mind and try to live up to them. You'll find that a lot of the principles for bringing the world into your practice require mindfulness. In this case, you're keeping the standards of the noble ones in mind in terms of your precepts.

This carries over into the next principle, which is restraint of the senses: being really careful about how you engage with sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas—realizing, again, that your mind is what goes out and looks for trouble. If the mind were not actively involved in *wanting* to see and hear and engage with other senses, it wouldn't receive any input. There's an act of the mind that goes out to these things—flows out to these things, as they would say in Thai—and you want to watch for that.

Who's flowing out? Your greed and your anger? Or your discernment? You want your discernment to be the strongest flow, so that when you look at things, you can take them apart and see where they might draw you into lust or anger or greed or fear. Then remind yourself: You don't have to be drawn in that way. Again, have a sense of your own power. Don't let yourself be overpowered by influences from outside.

Sensory input is not a given. Remember that it's a construct. There's the kamma of how you watch, the kamma of how you listen, and so on, so you want to look at (1) the intention and (2) the result. Then, in line with the principle that the Buddha taught to Rahula, if you see that the way you engage is causing trouble—causing harm to yourself or others—you go back and figure out: What's a different, less harmful way of looking? What's a less harmful way of listening?

If you just keep on exercising your greed and your other defilements as you engage with the senses, they're going to get strong. When they're strong, they move in on your meditation. So remember, as you go through the day engaging the senses, that you're practicing meditation. You need to have the same vigilance over what your mind is doing—where it's going and where it's coming from—that you would while sitting here with your eyes closed.

Another important principle for bringing the world into your practice is moderation in your conversation. Remember Ajaan Fuang's comment that "If something's not necessary, why say it?" Get some control over your mouth.

Then think of the Buddha's standards for saying things: (1) It would have to be true, (2) it would have to be beneficial, and then (3), it would have to be in line with

the right time and place to say pleasing things, or the right time and place to say displeasing things.

Here again, don't let your fear or dislike of other people get in the way of your sense of what's the right time and place to talk to them in those ways, because what you talk about as you go through the day will be reverberating in your mind as you sit down to meditate. So, be careful about what you say, and how and when you say it.

If you treat your words as if they have value—in other words, hand them out slowly, in a parsimonious way—other people will begin to value them as well. If you gush out with a big flood of words that goes on and on and on, after a while it means nothing. People don't value it. So, show that you value your words, and you find that other people will listen more carefully. At the same time, your speech becomes a good influence on your meditation.

What the Buddha calls verbal fabrication is something you're engaging in all the time: directed thought and evaluation. Every time you speak, you first have to choose a topic and then make a mental comment on it. You'll be bringing those two activities, or those two skills, into your concentration, so make sure they're well trained before you apply them to concentration. You'll find that your practice will go a lot more smoothly.

The fourth principle is seclusion. You've *got* to find time to be off by yourself—away not only from other people but also from your devices—able to look at your own mind without being constantly subject to the chatter and the allure of things from outside. You want to see the mind on its own terms. You want to keep in touch with it day after day after day, as much as you can, so that you can stay grounded. And remind yourself that seclusion is the context.

When the Buddha talks about seclusion, he doesn't speak only of physical seclusion. He also talks about mental seclusion, when you're secluded from your defilements, secluded from unskillful states—in other words, when you get the mind into concentration so that it can watch things directly, on the level of mental events. You can watch the body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, mind in and of itself, dhammas in and of themselves.

You're going to have to become really familiar with these things because, when death comes, this is what you'll be dealing with directly, and you want to be able to deal with these things on these terms—in other words, the body in the context of the body, not the body in the context of the world and the narrative about how this body's going to have to die and leave the world. Or your feelings, again, in the context of feelings, not in the context of the world.

This is why I said you want to make sure the practice forms the context: because, as you maintain this context, you're in touch with your refuge. You keep yourself safe, because it helps you see things in terms of their true value—what's really important, what's only of secondary importance. When you don't allow the narratives of the world to come and get in the way, the mind will be a lot more stable. And a lot more secure.

This then, of course, connects with the last of the principles, which is right view. You start with right view about kamma and rebirth in general, thinking about what those principles say about your life. If you think that life ends with death and that's it—there's nothing more—then that's going to put everything else in your daily life into one context. But if you think of samsara as something that's going to lead on for more and more and more lives, then your actions take on a different meaning.

You want to keep that larger context, the right context, in mind, so that you can have a clear idea: What really is worth doing? What's not worth doing? When you start getting attached to ideas, memories, material things, you can remind yourself, "Okay, you've had these things before, you've let go of them before, you've come back to them again, and now you're setting yourself up to miss them again. Haven't you had enough?"

If you think everything ends with death, there's never any sense of enough. You want to grab as much as you can before you go. But, if you realize that you're going to keep coming back, back, back, back again, and you've been through this many, many times—and what do you have to show for it?: That changes things. As the Buddha said, you've shed more tears than there is water in the ocean. So, keep that larger context in mind.

What this comes down to, of course, is those first three principles: following the precepts, restraint in terms of your speech, restraint of the senses. Those come under virtue—training in heightened virtue. Seclusion comes under training in heightened mind, or concentration. And right view comes in training in heightened discernment.

So, you're taking this triple training and you're making *this* the framework for your life. Then you can judge which parts of your life as you've been living it so far fit into that framework and which ones don't. You can sort things out that way.

In some cases, it's going to require some radical changes in how you've been living, but it's all to the good, because when you put everything in the context of the practice, then what you do and say and think, even when you're not meditating, becomes part of the development of your perfections—those qualities that sustain you and lead to the further shore.

So, put your daily life in the right context, and your actions will take on a new meaning. Instead of pulling off in different directions, they head toward a happiness you really want—one that's really worth wanting—as long as you keep your priorities straight.

The Long-Distance Meditator

September 20, 2022

Everything you experience is rooted in desire, and because our desires are all over the place, it means our experiences are all over the place, too. If we want to accomplish something, we have to learn how to bring some order to our desires, to have a set of priorities—what’s most important, what’s less important—and learn how to stick to those priorities. That’s what determination is all about.

In the autobiographies of the *ajans*, they talk a lot about determination. Usually it seems to have to do with times when they put forth a special effort, “special effort” meaning an especially energetic effort. But there’s another kind of special effort that also underlies the practice, and actually is more important. That’s the effort to stick with it.

On the days when you feel like practicing, you practice; on the days when you don’t feel like practicing, you practice. When things are going well, you practice; when things are not going well, you practice. That stick-to-itiveness requires all of the qualities that the Buddha said go into a good determination, starting with discernment.

Most of us are like sprinters in our practice. We put forth extra effort for a while, and then we collapse, rest for a while, and then we put forth some more effort, and then rest. Instead, we have to think of ourselves as long-distance meditators, like long-distance runners. We’re in this for the long haul. We have to learn how to pace ourselves, to figure out what kind of effort we can maintain on a consistent basis, and then stick with it.

Ajaan Fuang made a comment one time—it’s a pun in Thai: The practice is *ryang nit, tae tawng tham pen nit*. The practice is something small, but it’s something you have to do consistently. The word *nit* can have two meanings—small and consistent. The practice is something small in that all you’re really asked to do is be aware of your body. The hard part is keeping your awareness consistently rooted right here.

As you go through the day, both as you’re doing formal meditation and as you’re *not* doing formal meditation, you want to be right here. Have a sense of the breath energy in the body and be sensitive to when it feels good as you breathe in, as you breathe out. That’s not asking very much, but for it to have any power, you have to

stick with it. Otherwise it just becomes one more thing you think about in the course of the day.

You want to make this your home base. Keep reminding yourself that you're never far away from it. Even when your thoughts go far, far away, they're thoughts that you're thinking in the present moment, right here, right now. When you can make that switch from the content of the thought to the fact of the thought or the activity of the thought, then right next to the activity of the thought is the breath.

So no matter how far your thoughts may roam through the universe, it doesn't take much to bring them back to the breath. Think of it that way: You don't have to haul the mind back for miles and miles. There's nothing heavy that you have to drag. You're just moving your attention, changing your frame of reference, and then learning how to keep your frame of reference right here.

This is why the Buddha talks again and again and again about establishing mindfulness. Once it's established, then you've got to *keep* it established.

This has a lot to do with learning how to talk to yourself, which is another aspect of discernment. If your mind obeys only when you come down really hard on it, it's going to look for times to slip away, because you can't come down hard on yourself all the time. The mind will rebel.

Or if it's a matter of learning how to read what your mind needs, think of the different kinds of horses that the horse trainer told the Buddha about. There are the horses that respond only to gentle treatment, there are the horses that respond only to harsh treatment, and there are those that respond to a combination of harsh and gentle treatment. As the Buddha said, meditators are the same. For most of us, it's a combination of harsh and gentle—learning how to be encouraging when you need to be encouraged, learning how to be strict when the mind is beginning to get lazy—but not so strict that you get discouraged.

Think of the verbs the texts use to describe how the Buddha taught: He instructed, urged, roused, and encouraged. His instruction was basically giving information, but also coming down hard when he needed to. But then there's urging, rousing, encouraging—lifting your spirits, telling you that you're going to benefit from this, and that you *can* do this.

So look at how you talk to yourself and see what the mind responds to. Teach it to respond to gentle encouragement, because that's the kind of inner voice that can keep you at the practice in-out, in-out, up and down, keeping your mind on an even keel when everything else is going in and out and up and down.

Discernment here covers all the other qualities of a good determination as well, because you need to be discerning in how to be true to your determination, how to stick with it. You need to be discerning in what you're going to have to give up. As the mind wants to wander around, thinking about this, thinking about that, ask yourself: How many times have you been thinking about these things? How many lifetimes have you allowed your mind to wander? Isn't it time for something new?

Be discerning in seeing what the mind is like when it stays comfortably in the present moment and can watch itself in the present moment. And, of course, discerning in how you calm the mind down when it begins to rebel.

So determination is a matter of combining discernment with effort.

Think about the Buddha's image of the lute player tuning the strings of his lute. You see what level of energy you have, and then you make sure to put in at least that much energy. There will be times when the body is sick, you're feeling weak, and you can't expect yourself to put in the same number of hours or the same amount of pressure on your practice as you can when you're feeling healthy. So you adjust the way you talk to yourself, but you don't give up.

There's a book we have floating around in the monastery about how to swim. The reason we have it is because it gives very good instructions on the right attitude to take toward a practice that you're going to stick with for a long period of time. One of its instructions is that even on days when you don't have a lot of time to put into swimming practice, for the few minutes that you *do* put in, make sure your form is correct.

So when you're feeling sick, make sure the form of your meditation is correct, that you're with the breath. It doesn't require that much to breathe comfortably, one breath, then two breaths, then the next breath, then the next breath. As Ajaan Fuang said, "It's a little thing, but you stick with it. Do it continually."

It's in the continuity that you begin to learn new things about yourself, because the mind does have this tendency to jump around. It goes from one state of becoming to another, and there's a little blanking out between the states. A lot of things go on during that blanking out, and you want to be able to see them. So you need this quality of continuity in your focus, continuity in your attention, if you want to see the things going on inside. After all, everything you need to know is happening right here. It's simply that you're not watching carefully; you allow yourself to get distracted. The mind puts down a curtain, and you're content to be blinded to what's going on as it points your attention someplace else.

It's like an arrow that's pointing in one direction. Think about the koan about the finger pointing to the moon. They usually say, "Don't look at the finger. You're supposed to look at the moon." But you should ask yourself, "Why is your mind pointing at the moon? Why is it putting up that finger pointing away from itself?" That's what you have to look into.

You'll see things like this only if you develop the talent to be as continuous as possible in the practice. Whatever waves may wash over you, they wash away. You don't let yourself get drowned, because you realize there's part of the mind that's larger than any wave that can come at it. And that's all that's coming: just a wave. It comes and it goes. Your awareness, remind yourself, is larger—larger than anything the world can throw at it.

So don't make it small. Don't allow it to be covered up with curtains or deceived by arrows. Right here is where everything is going to happen, so you want to be continually aware right here and not get distracted. And learn to develop this quality of a long-distance meditator. We're in this for the long haul.

Look at the way you talk to yourself. When you find that you've wandered off, remind yourself: *It's just a little thing to move back to the breath.*

Wherever your thoughts may go, the thought itself is right next to the breath. That way, it's no big deal to come back, and it doesn't require a lot of browbeating, just a little nudge. If you learn how to keep on nudging, nudging, nudging yourself in this way, you can stay on course.

Stake Out

June 6, 2023

Meditating is like trying to catch a criminal, someone who's been creating a lot of trouble: stealing things, killing things, killing people. You have an idea of where the criminal is hiding, but you want to catch the criminal in action to have a strong case against him. So think of when police stake out a joint. They have to get someone nearby all the time to watch the criminal come and go, and to expect that they won't see much. There'll be long periods when nothing happens, and they have to learn how not to get bored and inattentive, because sometimes the criminal can slip in, slip out very quickly.

In the same way, you're trying to watch the mind to see where your defilements come from, how they slip out. Even though you're trying your best not to let the defilements come out, they come out as they want to. Then they slip back. All too often you're not aware of them until they're really full-blown. By that time, it's really hard to deal with them and to understand them. How is it that the mind shapes these things? It's not totally through the influence of past actions. Past actions have a role to play, of course, but there's also your present-moment complicity. You've got to watch out for that.

So if you're a policeman staking out a joint, one, you have to be very quiet, and not get bored by the quiet. In fact, boredom is one of the first things you've got to learn how to counteract. It seems strange that we try so hard to get the mind to settle down, and then once it's there, we say, "Okay, what's next?" That voice that says, "What's next?" has to be answered with, "This is what's next. We're going to settle in here." One of the reasons why we work with the breath is to give us something to do, partly so that we can settle in comfortably, and also so that we can have a few skills up our sleeve. That way, when thoughts do begin to appear, you're sensitive to them not only on the mental side but also on the physical side, because there's a physical side to each thought.

That's one of the reasons why people whose work involves a lot of thinking can be so physically tired at the end of the day. I was reading a Chinese medical text one time saying that mental work takes three times as much out of your body as physical labor does.

So we focus on the breath and the breath energies in the body. As the Buddha says, you want to be aware of the entire body.

Some people are going to interpret that as being entirely aware of the whole length of the breath, in which case they say that the word “body” there means the body of the breath as felt at the nostrils. Well, the body of the breath is not just the length of the breath at one spot in the body. It’s the whole body, because the whole body is breathing.

In fact, that’s a good perception to hold in mind: that every cell in your body is breathing in, breathing out, and everybody is breathing together. See what happens when you hold that perception in mind. You can get more and more familiar to subtle breath energies in the body and to where the energy is blocked. Learn which blockages you can work through easily, and which ones are more resistant.

The resistant ones often are very tender, sensitive parts of your body-mind complex. You’ve forced them into a little hardened pod of tension, so they don’t trust you. One of the ways you learn to get them to open up is to be very gentle with them and not go directly at them. Work around them and content yourself for the time being with the fact that you can make other parts of the body comfortable.

Ajaan Lee’s image is of going into a house where the floorboards are rotten in some spots. You accept that fact. Just make sure you don’t lie down on the rotten spots. There’s plenty of room in the house where you can lie down where the floorboards are solid and sound.

At the same time, in the course of working through these energies, you get more sensitive to how thoughts form. The formation of a thought has both a physical side and a mental side, and the breath is the ideal place to see this. After all, it is a physical property, but of the physical properties, it’s closest to the mind and the most sensitive to what’s going on in the mind. When a thought comes up, you can see that it reverberates both in the body and in the mind. You make up your mind that you’re not going to, as they say in Thai, continue the weave of the thought.

As soon as a thought appears, you zap it. In other words, you take that skill you have of breathing through patterns of tension, and use it wherever you sense any tension around the inchoate thought. You don’t have to even think of whether it’s physical or mental tension at that point. But there’s an act of construction, an act of fabrication, beginning to put things together, and there’s going to be some tension and some stress there: Breathe right through it. Dissolve it away. Then wait and be quiet for a while. Something else will begin to form, and you zap that, too. A part of the mind may say, “This is getting boring,” or “This is kind of dumb. You’re not

thinking about anything.” Well, zap that thought as well. And try and catch these things as quickly as you can.

Think about the Buddha’s analysis of why we suffer. It’s because of craving, and there are three kinds of craving. There’s craving for sensuality, which in this case means wanting to think about attractive sights, sounds, smells, tastes, or tactile sensations. A lot of our thinking goes there. And a lot of our sense of becoming develops around the pleasures that we’d like to get in that way. So that leads to the second kind of craving, which is craving for becoming: having a sense of you in a world of experience where those pleasures might be found. Then there’s craving for non-becoming. You have a sense of you in a world of experience and you don’t like it. You’d be happy to see it end and you do what you can to put an end to it. But, as the Buddha said, simply in having that desire, you’re taking on an identity in another world, the world that sees this first world being destroyed.

So that’s the dilemma. You try to end states of becoming by wiping them out, and in the process you just create more states of becoming, more craving for becoming. So what do you do? As the Buddha says, you try to see things as they have come to be: *yatha-bhuta nana-dassana*, knowledge and vision of things as they’ve come to be. Which basically means seeing the steps that lead up to the creation of that sense of you in that world of experience.

This is what dependent co-arising is all about. The most interesting factors in dependent co-arising are the ones that come prior to sensory contact: intention, attention, perception, feeling, directed thought, evaluation, and even the way you breathe.

If you take these things simply as events in and of themselves, you begin to see there’s not much there. That’s the level that the Buddha wants you to operate on, before these things have a chance to become a state of becoming, because as you get a sense of dispassion for them, in seeing that there’s not much there, it aborts any states of becoming that would come from them. As for the states of becoming already there, they’re going to end at some point on their own anyhow.

This is how you work your way through that dilemma, but it requires that you catch these thought patterns or the activity of thinking as quickly as you can. Zap each one as quickly as you can so that you can get it down to these raw materials. Then you can start dealing with the part of the mind that objects. It says, “Hey, using these raw materials to create a state of becoming is actually kind of fun.” And yes, there are times when you do get some pleasure out of it, but you have to keep thinking about all the suffering that goes with becoming as well.

This is why it's good to keep the Buddha's awakening in mind. That's one of those events that it's always good to keep coming back to. There are some events that have happened in the world that have affected the state of the world for a while, but the Buddha's awakening has made the most radical long-term change in our sense of possibilities here in the world. Part of that comes from the perspective he gained through his first two knowledges: seeing all the times he had died, had been reborn, and had died again and had been reborn again. Pleasure, pain, feeding, dying; pleasure, pain, feeding, dying, over and over and over again. When you think about that, it gives you a sense of *samvega*. You begin to look at this process of becoming with a more jaundiced eye—that, and all the dialogues and narratives and monologues that you have around it, that clutter up your mind.

The way to deal with those is, on the one hand, to try to replace the wrong views lying behind those monologues with right view. Then, on the other hand, learn how to take apart the process of thinking, so that you can see how arbitrary the whole thing is, how insubstantial it is. There's so much suffering that we can create out of these insubstantial things. We tend to be proud of the fact that we can create all kinds of states of becoming, to get the things that we decided we wanted, out of almost nothing. But then when you begin to realize: There's a lot of suffering that you're creating out of nothing, and the suffering is real.

I was listening to someone recently talking about how he was in dialogue with a monk who had been studying some Mahayana texts. At first he felt really offended by those texts, because they were saying suffering isn't real. Suffering doesn't exist, the cause doesn't exist, the path doesn't exist. He thought, "Well, holding on to these views that we say are right is making me suffer, so maybe I should let go of them."

That's the wrong attitude. As the Buddha said, suffering is real. It's not other than what it seems. Craving really is the cause of suffering. The end of craving really does put an end to suffering. And this path that we're following really does work. That level of right view is something you should hang on to, because it points your efforts in the right direction. When you don't need it any more, then you can let it go. But as long as you're suffering, you still need it. As for those who deny the truth of these things, don't let their thoughts invade your mind. That way, you don't have to suffer from them.

So try to inform your meditation with right view. These processes of creating thoughts do have a lot of potential for suffering, and you want to learn how to take them apart. Now, there will come times in the path, of course, when you do have to think. Look at the Buddha. He thought quite a lot. All those suttas, all those

teachings he gave: It's not that he was on automatic pilot. He was thinking, but by that point he had learned how to think. As he said, he thought the thoughts he wanted to think and he didn't have to think the thoughts he didn't want to think. Yet he had a very clear set of values as to what was worth thinking and what was not.

To develop that same skill, we first have to learn how to not think, or how to de-think our thinking by taking our assumptions apart. It requires some thinking to do that. But make sure it's all thinking in line with right view. Any thinking that goes off into wrong view, you've got to zap. And a good part of right view is knowing when you don't have to hold on to what you've remembered about right view. You pick it up when you need it as a tool and then you put it down.

It's like going into the kitchen. You'll have lots of different utensils, all kinds of spoons and spatulas and pans and pots and things. You know you're going to have to use them all in the course of the day, but you don't carry them all around with you all the time. They have their places. You pick them up when you need them and you put them back down when you don't. That way, you're not weighed down.

Think of right view in that way. It's a whole series of utensils. All the factors of the path are different series of utensils, and your mindfulness is there to remind you that you have these things on hand if you need them. You just want to get the mind into stillness and then you can put them down. All you have to remember is to stay still, right here. Be ready to zap any thought that comes up as quickly as you can. That's not too much to keep in mind. And learn how to enjoy that. As the Buddha said, if you take delight in developing and delight in abandoning, that does an awful lot to keep you on the path.

This way, as you're staking out the lair of this criminal, you don't have to suffer. You watch, you wait, and the criminal is bound to show his stripes. He's actually been showing his stripes all along, but you haven't seen the stripes because you've been looking other places. Your mind's been drifting off. When you get firmly established with your vantage point here and can take some delight in stepping back from all the different identities and dialogues and monologues that have been going on in your mind, you can tell yourself, "I don't have to participate in those things anymore."

When you can pull yourself out of a particularly sticky one, there should be a sense of accomplishment, and that should nourish you, keep you going.

So you can take this as your sport. You can catch the criminal in action. See where he's guilty and get him sentenced. Then you can live in peace.

Discipline Is a Choice

July 1, 2023

When you practice right mindfulness, you're making a choice. The basic formula tells you, on the one hand, to follow the body in and of itself, and on the other hand, to subdue thoughts of greed and distress related to the world. You're choosing to follow one part of your experience and to subdue another part. And you try to do that consistently.

Normally, we jump back and forth, focusing on our bodies for a while, then going out into the world for a bit, then coming back in. But that's not much of a path. It's a very zigzag path. You want to make up your mind that the path of right mindfulness is the one you want to follow, and anything that's going to pull you off that path is something you have to discipline. That's the implication of the word that we translate as subduing: *vineyya*. It's related to Vinaya, the discipline.

Discipline is a word we don't like. We tend to think of it as having to do with punishment and harsh regulations. But it's simply a choice that you're making. You're learning from your past experience that some of your desires are in your best interest, and some of your desires are not. No matter how much they may like to dress things up to lure you to get you on their side, they're not in your long-term best interest.

This, of course, is a part of wisdom: "What when I do it will be to my long-term welfare and happiness?" Once you've got a good answer to that question, you want to stick with it consistently. If you look at discipline not so much as something imposed on you, but as a choice you make to stick with the desires that are in your best interest—having considered carefully where you want your life to go—then it's a lot easier to stick with it.

The Buddha talks about there being many paths in the world: There's the path that leads to heaven; there's the path that leads to hell. There are the paths that lead to an animal rebirth, a hungry-ghost rebirth, a human rebirth. There's a path that leads to nibbana. Most of us jump around from one path to another.

It's as if we have a little helicopter that picks us up and puts us on one path. Then it picks us up again and puts us on another path. That helicopter is something we've got to watch out for, because it requires that we forget about where we really want to

head in life, and the implications of our choices. It inclines us to look for the short term: How would it feel to go someplace new, try out something new, right now?

Now, this desire to try something new is what got us on the path to freedom to begin with. But just because it got us here doesn't mean that we have to follow it wherever it goes.

Once we're here, we have to realize that this is a good path to keep following. So if any impulse would pull you off, you've got to subdue it. You've got to discipline it.

The English word *discipline* comes from a root different from subduing: It relates to the fact that you're learning. Learning, of course, requires that you dedicate yourself to a particular subject and stick with it. In this case, it means that you have to learn how to deal with your vagrant notions, your vagrant desires, and not feel that you're being punished when you say No to them when you subdue them.

This is why the Buddha has you understand the process of becoming. When a desire comes up, then around it develops a sense of *you* wanting the desired object and *you* being able to attain that object. Then there's the world in which might you do that. You slip into that world and you go with it.

Ajaan Suwat calls becomings "the traveling places of the mind." Discipline requires you to say, "No, I don't need to get into those. I don't have to go traveling around. And I don't have to identify with those desires." This is why the Buddha analyzes things in terms of clinging, craving, and all the other steps of dependent co-arising, in an effort to depersonalize the whole process.

So realize that it's simply a vagrant impulse. It's not *you* or *yours* necessarily. You have the choice to claim it if you want, but why bother? Get good at seeing where these things go and really taking to heart what you see, learning from that—not just jumping with any impulse.

Discipline requires that you take the long view. You're willing to say No to some desires because you have a bigger desire.

This is where many of us fail to understand discipline. We think we're being hemmed in by other people's desires for us. But you have to realize you have this one great desire—to find freedom, to find a happiness that doesn't cause harm to anyone, a happiness that's not going to disappoint—and you want to protect it. You want to keep choosing to go in that direction. So you have to learn how to talk to yourself. You have to learn different perceptions to hold in mind to remind yourself that this is where you really and consistently want to go.

Some people say it's narrow, being committed like that. But then the people who refuse to commit to anything in life, where do they go? What do they accomplish? They just wander around aimlessly, off into the woods on the side of the path. They may find some interesting mushrooms and other plants and animals in the woods, but we're not here just to find interesting or fun plants and animals. As the Buddha said, there are only two things that we can expect for sure when we're born: aging and death. We have to prepare for them. If we don't prepare for them, we're being very shortsighted. And this is the best preparation: the path to something that doesn't age, doesn't grow ill, doesn't die.

When the Buddha talks about people dying, he notes that even the wealthy have to die. When he talks about arahants, he says that they, too, have to lay down their body, or their bodies are subject to being laid down, subject to breaking apart. But the part of the mind that's awakened—that doesn't die.

That's where this path leads. But it doesn't lead there if you let yourself get tied down by lots of different vagrant notions, things that you haven't learned how to subdue yet. Again, we don't like the word *subduing*, it sounds like we're being harsh and oppressive, hemming in our creative impulses. Well, there is room for creativity in the path, but the creativity is in learning how to be clever in saying No to your defilements. Apply your creative talents there, because they're going to be needed. Your defilements are very clever. They come up with one argument, and you say No to that, but then they come up with another one.

So be creative in learning how to say No to those things, creative in learning how to subdue greed and distress with reference to the world. You'll be making a good choice and you'll be learning how to use your creative talents in the right way, in a way that's consistent with your ultimate choice, which is the desire to be free.

Moods Are Not-Self

April 4, 2022

Sometimes you wish the Buddha had included moods as the sixth aggregate because they're something we hold on to really tightly. Of course they're there in the aggregates. They come under fabrications. These are states of mind and body that get put together. But we're so used to our moods that we don't see them as fabricated. We have our own what you might call signature moods that make us very unaware of how we're putting them together. They're just there, it seems. We hold to them very tightly, because they seem to be us even more than our thoughts. We know that we get a lot of our thoughts from other people, but our moods seem to be totally coming from within. They're totally ours. Yet as long as you identify with them, they're going to color everything. You've got to see that they're dangerous, especially when you put yourself in a bad mood.

Often we tend to roll around in our bad moods the same way a dog would roll around in a dead squirrel—and the dog is perfectly happy to do that. Even though you know it's a bad mood, you still roll around in it.

Part of the reason is that you feel surrounded by it. It's in your body. It permeates your mind. It seems to be coloring the air all around you. But it is something you can get out of, and it's good to remember that you can.

So think about why you might want to get out of those moods, even though it feels alien to not be in that mood.

One thing you could ask yourself is, "Do you want to be in a bad mood when you die?" You think, "Of course, that would be a perfectly natural time for a bad mood, because what could be worse than the fact that you're dying?" But for the sake of your future happiness, that's precisely when you *don't* want to be in a bad mood. You want to be confident that you can handle whatever's going to come up in the course of dying.

So practice a little mindfulness of death. This is something that's really misunderstood. Some people think that this practice is there simply to remind you that someday you're going to die, so you've got to prepare. That's it. But there's more. The important point is knowing *how* to prepare. A lot of times, death is all around us, and yet we'd rather not think about it. The Buddha's saying, "Look, think about it.

This is how you think about it, how you prepare.” You’re going to need to get your mind in good shape, and that includes your moods. If any unskillful moods are hanging around, you’ve got to learn how to get rid of them.

We think about death in this way because the Buddha goes on to show us how to prepare.

The common way of thinking about it is that death is going to come anyhow, there’s nothing much you can do about it, you’re just going to die and be annihilated, so what’s the skill? But the Buddha’s saying there *is* a skill involved, and you want to be in the right mood to do that. This is where it’s useful to remember what the Buddha said.

Moods would come under fabrication. What are the kinds of fabrication that go into it? The three big ones: bodily fabrication—the way you breathe; verbal—the way you talk to yourself; and then mental—the perceptions you hold in mind and the feelings you focus on. Those are the things that went in to create the mood you’re in, so you can change them. There are lots of ways you can change them. Think about those lists of topics the Buddha tells Rahula to think about before he does breath meditation, because one of the times you’re really going to need the mind in the right mood is when you sit down to meditate.

Some people have trouble. They come from their daily life where there’s frustration and they’re impatient. They sit down and focus on the breath, and they get frustrated and impatient with the breath. So the first order of business is get the mind in the right mood to be with the breath on good terms. To begin with, the Buddha recommended that you try to make your mind like earth. Think of the part of the mind that can just be with anything, no matter what, and not feel upset or elated by it—because that part of the mind *is* there. When you’re in a good mood, it knows. When you’re in a bad mood, it knows. But it doesn’t become good or bad with the mood. That’s the part you can make like earth.

Then look at the way you talk to yourself around goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity; the way you talk to yourself about your body; the way you talk to yourself about things around you outside. Try to get yourself in the right frame of mind to settle down.

Those are some of the ways you can talk to yourself.

Then you can ask yourself: Which part of the mind resists changing the fabrications, saying, “I’m not true to myself if I’m not true to my moods.” Ask in return: How have your moods been true to you? Are they always helpful? Always there when you needed them? Not at all. They come and go. They’re not responsible

in any way. And they're certainly not going to feel neglected if you don't indulge in them. So talk to yourself, first in a way that makes you more and more inclined to say, "Okay, I can get rid of these moods or let go of them, and yet not be a traitor to myself. I'd actually be showing that I have some concern for myself."

Then look at the images you hold in mind. These will be individual words, phrases, sometimes pictures. They're lurking around in there someplace. If you're not sure what they are, try a few images that are more of a sunny disposition, a confident disposition—you as capable of doing the meditation, you as not being worn down by your daily routine—and see which part of the mind will say, "You're lying." That's where you're going to find where those perceptions are, because there is that part of the mind that tends to believe when you're in a bad mood that that's the real you, that that's where you see reality for what it is, how miserable it is. It believes that happy moods are false.

You have to call out that part of the mind. It's based on what? You've had disappointments in the past and you feel that your way of shielding yourself from disappointments in the future is to be in a bad mood all the time, not to expect anything. But then you can't accomplish anything.

After all, as long as your experience is going to be fabricated, fabricate it well. Do it in a way that allows you to attain things that you wouldn't have attained otherwise.

So when you can see that your moods are fabrications, and they seem to be you simply because they've been around for a long time—they're habits, old habits—then you realize that you can change the way you fabricate things. Develop some new habits. And it doesn't matter how old you are. As long as you have a breath that comes in and goes out, you can change the way you fabricate your breath. You can listen to what the Buddha has to say about how we are capable of changing our habits, abandoning unskillful habits and developing skillful ones in their place.

Think about it. The Buddha was not some dreamy Pollyanna type who simply said nice things and cooked up sweet wise-sounding thoughts. He had tortured himself to the verge of death. He came back and found the middle way. Okay, you can find the middle way too. He's shown that it's possible. And the confidence that there is a way out: That's what kept him going, even when things looked pretty bleak. It can keep you going, too. That can be the mood you hang on to: the confident mood. And you can make it you.

This is one of those areas where you don't apply not-self across the board. You're trying to create the good mood and identify with it, for the time being at least. You're confident, capable, competent, too. The more you can take these moods apart and

reassemble them in a way that's helpful for the path, the more you're going to believe that—because you can *make* it true.

Remember those two kinds of truth: the truths that are true whether you want them to be or not, and then the truths that will be true only if you want them and act on that desire. They're just as true. It's just that your relationship is different. The second type takes more out of you. The Buddha teaches the truth of a path that can take you to the end of suffering. It's a truth of the second type. Even if it takes a lot out of you, it's really worth it because it pays back many times over.

When Things Regress

December 21, 2022

One of the facts you're going to have to face as a meditator is that there are times when there's progress, there are times when you seem to hit a plateau—nothing seems to go up or down—and there are times when things regress and seem to fall apart. The states of concentration you used to have, you don't have anymore, or at least you don't have them right now.

The important principle is that you don't let the mind get worked up about any of those things. Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about the early years of his practice when his mind would settle down in ways it hadn't before. He got really excited about it. But then it would deteriorate. He'd get upset. He began to notice a pattern. It would go up for a while and then down for a while, and he finally realized he couldn't let himself get worked up about the ups and the downs. He should just do the practice. Stick to the basics. And he found that he was able to get the mind into concentration more and more consistently.

So you have to apply the same principle to your own times of regress. It's a normal thing that's going to happen. The mind is a complex phenomenon. You're dealing with lots of different defilements, not just one. Ajaan Lee's image is of the difference between a banana tree growing and an oak tree growing. A banana tree has only one soft stalk to grow only in one direction. It does it pretty fast and then dies pretty fast. The oak tree has to grow sturdy branches in many directions. Its branches tend to twist around, so it's going to take a long time. Sometimes this branch gets nourished, and another branch doesn't grow so much. Then the tree starts growing the second branch, and the first branch stops for a rest. So, given that your mind is complex, it's going to have its ups and downs. It's going to take time.

But the basics are, to begin with, to think of the Buddha's recommendations to Rahula. The very beginning of his instructions of meditation: Make your mind like earth. We tend to forget that. When things are going really well, we get puffed up. When things are going poorly, we get deflated. But notice earth. It doesn't get puffed up or deflated. You can pour garbage on the earth and it doesn't get upset. You could pour perfume on the earth and it wouldn't get excited by it. It just stays right there.

Now, this doesn't mean that you'll just stay right there all the time, simply that this becomes the foundation you need for the work that has to be done. The Buddha's not saying, "Be passive, just accept whatever comes, and don't try to do anything about it." You *will* have to do something about it, but to do something skillful about it, you first have to have the right attitude and not get upset by what's happening so that you can remember the lessons the Buddha taught.

Think about the qualities that the Buddha said are an important part of every practice: mindfulness, alertness, ardency. So you go back to the basics. Make your mind like earth, and then try to be mindful. Here mindfulness means not remembering everything that happened in the past, but remembering what's useful to remember right now.

You may know that story by Borges about a character who can't forget anything. He has total memory of everything that's happened in his life, and he's miserable because it's just so overwhelming. Our memory has to be selective. You have to choose what's useful right now. Your memory of how good the meditation used to be is not going to be useful right now. It's like remembering that you had a piece of cake a while back and it was really good, and wanting to have that same cake all over again. Well, where is the cake now? It's down in the septic tank. And even if you didn't eat it then, or there was an extra piece of cake left over that you kept all this time, it'd be moldy by now. So think of your memories of how good the meditation used to be as moldy memories. You don't want to eat moldy food.

Remember that if you want results in the meditation, you have to focus on the causes. So you're mindful of the breath: each breath coming in, each breath going out. All too often, we're in so much of a rush to get on to the next step that we don't have the time to watch each breath as it's coming in, watch each breath as it's going out. Try to be right here. Stay right here. As for the mind's anticipations of what's going to happen next, remember that right anticipation is not part of the path. There's a lot of anticipation in craving, but that's not what you're trying to develop. You do have a desire to do the practice, and without that desire, you can't practice. But the desire has to be focused on the causes.

So be right here as much as you can—that's the alertness part. You watch what you're doing—those are the causes—and watch the results you're getting from those causes right now. Don't worry about the results you had last year or a month ago or whatever. Focus on what's actually happening right now. And you can make adjustments.

Remember that when the Buddha talks about breath meditation, it's not just, "Be with whatever breath comes in." There was a time when he was telling the monks to do breath meditation, and one of the monks piped up and said, "I do breath meditation." This was a monk who was known to be not that good at the practice, so the Buddha asked him, "But what kind of breath meditation do you do?" The monk said, "I put aside thoughts of the past. I put aside thoughts of the future. Whatever comes up, I'm equanimous in the present as I breathe in and breathe out." The Buddha said, "Well, there is that kind of breath meditation, but it's not the kind that's going to give you good results."

Then he went into the sixteen steps. And remember that one of those steps involves trying to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in and breathe out after you've been watching the breath for a while. So as you're watching this, you maintain a whole-body awareness. Then you try to calm the breath. You don't suppress it. Just allow it to get more and more gentle as you spread your awareness to fill the body so that when the breath gets really subtle, you don't lose your focus. Your focus becomes the sense of breath energy throughout the body. You do this in such a way that you can observe what kind of breathing is most pleasant right now.

And here again, don't think how pleasant it was last month. Just notice which ways of breathing are more pleasant than others right now. They may not seem all that gratifying or special, but at the very least, find a way of breathing that feels okay. If that's the best you can do, stay with okay breathing. The more you can stay with it, the more the mind can settle down, and the more refined the breath can become.

This all comes under ardency. You try to do this well. Here again, the ardency has to deal with what's actually coming up in the present moment. If memories of the past are beginning to interfere, remember that they're not anything you want to focus on right now. They're unskillful thoughts that you try to abandon. The skillful thoughts are the ones that focus on, "What can I do right now? I'll take on whatever I can do right now as best I can and maintain it."

Sometimes, in the simple maintaining, it's going to get better. Say, you want another cake. Well, you have to cook it. You don't just stick the batter in the pan and then put it in the oven, take it out right away, and say, "Gee, It's not getting cooked as fast as I wanted." So you stick it back in, then take it out again, stick it back in, take it out again. If you keep that up, it's never going to get baked. You have to stick it in and let it stay there.

The difference, of course, is that when you stick a cake in the oven, you don't have distracting thoughts running around in the oven, disturbing the cake. They may

be running around in your head right now, but again, you have the choice. You've found yourself here. You wanted a quiet room with nobody else inside, but the room you're in has people populating it. Well, you don't have to get involved in their conversations.

This is where mindfulness comes in. Try to remember what's important to remember right now and what's important to *forget* right now, where you pay your attention. Alertness is not all about being alert to whatever is coming up in the present moment. It's focused precisely on: What are you *doing* in the present moment? The other people in the room may be running around, but what're *you* doing?

There was a time years back when I visited a school in Korea where they were teaching classical Korean music. The year before, I had learned the Korean drum to help a friend who was playing the *kayagum*. She had gone back to Korea, and I visited her on my way back to Thailand. She took me to the school where she had taken her lessons. It was a cacophony. They had little booths along the walls of a large room, and there were people in the booths playing different instruments or learning Korean opera. Each person really had to focus precisely on what he or she was doing and not pay attention to the music coming from the booths all around.

That's how you've got to focus right now. If there's a lot of conversation in your mind, let other people in the mind carry on the conversation. You're not responsible for it. Just stay right here.

What this means is that you have to get your mindfulness, alertness, and ardency well-tuned: mindful not to keep in mind how good it used to be, but mindful to remember the basic steps that will be the causes for how it's going to be good here and now. Alertness: What are you doing right now? Don't focus on other things that are going on in the mind. And ardency: If memories of the past are getting in the way, recognize them as unskillful thoughts that you have to let go.

So when things are going downhill, remember, you can be saved by the basics. In the process, you'll get to know the basics even better, because you find this happening again and again and again, and you have to keep coming back to the basics and re-examining them. You'll see things in them that you didn't see before. Realize that the basics may not be as simple as you thought they were to begin with. The reason they're basic is because they uphold everything else. As you have more and more experience, you get to know the basics better.

It's in this way that the meditation finally does become a skill. It requires patience and that quality of making your mind like earth, so that you're not upset by whatever

happens. You're not excited by whatever happens. You take a matter-of-fact attitude. Then, based on that, go back to your basic skills. That's how the meditation deepens and grows.

Self-Starting

August 29, 2023

Once, when the Buddha was discussing the amazing qualities of a Buddha, he focused on things that didn't directly have to do with him but with the people who were born during his time. He said that people usually are focused on sensuality, obsessed with sensuality, and they don't want to hear about renunciation. But it was amazing that in the time of a Buddha there were people who did want to hear of renunciation. People are usually fascinated with becoming, but at the time of a Buddha there would be people who would be fascinated with the idea of going *beyond* becoming.

So, the fact that we're practicing is unusual. It's not normal. It's not ordinary. The ordinary way of the world is just to keep going around and around. The idea of getting out may occur to people sometimes, and there may be a few people who are determined to get out, but they have to be self-starters.

After all, the Buddha himself was a self-starter. It's very unusual for a prince, surrounded by all the luxuries that a prince would have in those days, to think about going beyond that.

There's a passage in one of the Victorian books about the Buddha—*The Light of Asia*—saying that the Buddha had the chance to choose between goodness and greatness, and he chose goodness. What the author meant by goodness was the goodness of a moral life. Greatness, of course, meant power.

But I think the author had it backwards: Ordinary goodness, domestic goodness, is the goodness where you don't put your release from suffering first. You want to learn how to fit in, to be part of the community, part of the society. You take on all the burdens and responsibilities that come with being a social being—and you're *good* in that sense. But to be *great*, in the genuine sense, means you see that there must be something better: The mind and the heart deserve something better.

After all, your body is subject to aging, illness, and death. If you're looking for happiness in things that are also subject to aging, illness, and death, there's nothing special about it, and even if you gain those things, nothing is accomplished.

Think of all those eons and eons of lives that the Buddha saw that he had lived, and what was accomplished? The ones that accomplished something were the ones

aimed at getting out. And that's rare. So that fact that you're here practicing—that's rare.

It means you're going against a lot of your social conditioning, both good and bad, in the normal sense of the word. You realize there are certain needs for the mind, certain needs for the heart, that can't be met by ordinary social arrangements. You have to train from within, and fortunately the Buddha set out a good course of training.

This is where traditional Buddhist countries differ from ours: They have a system of training for people who want to drop out, basically, whereas here in America, when people drop out, they don't have much guidance.

I remember reading the book, *Into the Wild*, about a young man who was disillusioned with his family, disillusioned with society. He was trying to find some way of being authentic. But he didn't have much guidance, and he ended up dying because of his quest.

Think of how fortunate we are that we have the Buddha's path set out for us in a way that's actually supported by the society. Here in America it's not supported by the society at large, but there are enough Buddhists here that we can survive, we can practice, and be well-supported. So try to take advantage of that, not in the sense that you're taking advantage of other people, but in the sense that you're taking advantage of an opportunity to do something special with your mind—something out of the ordinary.

Ajaan Suwat commented that during his time with Ajaan Mun, one of the themes that Ajaan Mun liked to talk about most was the customs of the noble ones. He himself had come under a lot of flak, especially when he was starting out. He wanted seriously to practice the teaching that the Buddha had taught, for the purpose for which it was taught—for the sake of dispassion. That's what it means to practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma: to practice for the sake of disenchantment, for dispassion, and not simply to fulfill a social role.

Monks at that time were expected to stay in the village—often they were the village doctors—to perform social services. The monks who went out into the wilds weren't trusted. We think of the forest tradition as being an integral part of Thai society, but at that time it was definitely outside of the bounds of normal Thai values.

And again, Ajaan Mun had to be a self-starter. He had to see within himself that the problem of suffering was *the* big problem in life, and if he didn't give himself over to solving it, as he said, he'd keep coming back to be the laughingstock of his defilements. So when people criticized him for following the *dhutanga* practices and

not settling down, he said, “Those are the customs of ordinary Thai and Lao, people, domestic society. They’re the customs of people with defilements”—a point that applies to the customs of any country. He was more interested in the customs of the noble ones.

And one of *the* big customs of the noble ones is to delight in developing and to delight in abandoning. In other words, you delight in developing skillful qualities in the mind, and you delight in abandoning unskillful qualities. That delight is what keeps you going.

We’re not here to please anybody. As Ajaan Fuang would often say, “Nobody hired us to be born, nobody hired us to get ordained, nobody hired us to come here to the monastery.” We’ve done this all of our own free will. So we don’t have to please anybody, but we have to please our better selves—which means doing our best.

When we find ourselves getting discouraged, we do our best to *en-courage* ourselves. During my time with Ajaan Fuang, he never praised me to my face. I found out after he died that he’d been saying good things about me in my absence, but to my face he almost never gave me any praise. Part of the reason was, I guess, that he didn’t want it to go to my head. But secondly, he wanted me to realize that I wasn’t there to please *him*, I was there to take care of the wound in my own heart—or the many wounds in my own heart—and he wasn’t going to get in the way. But he did give encouragement, and part of the encouragement was holding me to a high standard.

It was up to me to figure out the reasons for why I wanted to continue with the training and to keep at it. In doing so, I developed an important part of the mind: the part that tends to get starved in regular society but is allowed to flourish when you say, “It is possible to find true happiness, it comes from developing all your best qualities, and here’s an opportunity to do it.”

So, keep reminding yourself of why you’re here.

The Buddha gives three ways of talking to yourself when you’re getting discouraged:

One is to take the Dhamma as a governing principle. Appreciate the fact that we have such a good Dhamma here to show us the way. It would be a shame not to take advantage of it.

Two, take yourself as a governing principle. Realize that you started on this practice not because anybody hired you or forced you. You did it of your own free will. You saw that you were suffering, and here was an opportunity to go beyond

suffering. It would be a shame to turn away from that. If you really care for yourself, you stick with the practice.

Then there's the world as a governing principle. Realize that there are people in the world who can read minds. When you're getting discouraged, what are they going to think if they read yours? You'd be embarrassed for them to see your thoughts. But you also realize that most people who can read minds—and the kind of people you'd want to look good *in the eyes of*—also have compassion. They have compassion for you in holding you to a high standard, so why don't you have compassion for yourself?

These are just a few of the ways in which you can encourage yourself on the path, to keep yourself going in a way that doesn't have to depend on anyone else. This is a motivation that comes from within. This is one of the few things in the world where you are totally a self-starter, totally responsible for your own actions, in a way that doesn't harm anyone at all, and actually does a lot of good for you and for the world at large.

So take heart.

Not the Predictable Thing

September 25, 2022

Once, I was giving a Dhamma talk in New York City. The person introducing me mentioned that I was a New Yorker myself, having been born out on the eastern end of Long Island and grown up on a potato farm. Even though it was a farm, it wasn't that far from the city. After the talk, a woman came up and mentioned that she and her family had had a vacation home in Cutchogue, which is just a few miles down the road from where I grew up. She was amazed that a little potato-farm boy from the eastern end of Long Island would end up studying the Dhamma in Thailand.

At first I felt a little insulted. Don't farm boys have hearts? Can't they dream? Can't they aspire to something better than what they've got? But then I realized that this is a pattern throughout the history of Buddhism: people doing unexpected things, unpredictable things.

A similar incident happened when I was in Thailand. Someone new to the monastery noticed a Western monk at the monastery and so asked Ajaan Fuang, "How is it that Westerners can ordain?" His response was, "Don't Westerners have hearts?" Maybe he was sensitive to that issue because he himself had been looked down on many times. After all, he was a peasant boy, orphaned when he was very young. Looking at him from outside, you wouldn't expect anything much out of his life. But he was able to make himself something special—not because he was trying to make himself into something special, but he wanted to find something special in life.

This goes for almost all of the great ajaans: sons of peasants. Looking at them from the outside, you would have predicted either a life trying to struggle up the social ladder, or being stuck at the bottom of the social ladder, or rebelling in predictable ways. As Ajaan Fuang once told me, if it hadn't been for the Dhamma, he could have very easily ended up in a life of crime. But fortunately, he saw that there was the possibility of something better, and so he did the unpredictable thing.

This is a tradition that goes back to the Buddha himself. The predictable thing for a young prince back in those days would have been to enjoy his life of pleasures, perhaps get involved in a war or two. But as he saw, that kind of life was simply

looking for happiness in things that age, grow ill, and die. He himself was going to age, grow ill, and die. What would that accomplish? Isn't there something better?

So he left home. At first he did some predictable things: He went to study with other teachers. But then he started doing unpredictable things: When the teachers offered to have him teach as well, he realized that what they had taught him to attain wasn't what he wanted. He wanted something better. So he tried something else that was predictable. People who have been indulging in pleasure for a long time and finally see the drawbacks of that kind of life tend to go to the other extreme. So that's just what he did: six years of self-torment, to the point where he realized he had tortured himself more than anyone else had ever done. But he saw that it was a dead end—literally. If he continued down that route, he would die.

That's when he did something else unpredictable: He said there must be another way. And he found it.

This may be one of the reasons why he was so firmly opposed to the doctrine of determinism. When he found the true way and was teaching it, he wasn't the kind of person who would usually go out and look for people to argue with, but there were a few cases where he did. One of them was when he sought out some teachers who taught that everything you experience in the present moment is determined by the past: either by the actions of a creator deity or your own past kamma. He would argue with those people: If everything you experience right now is determined by the past, he said, then if you're going to kill right now, steal right now, have illicit sex right now, that's all been determined by the past. You can't have any choice in the matter. In that case, there is no "should be done" or "shouldn't be done." People just do what they have to do. When you teach that, you're leaving people unprotected, bewildered.

In other words, they're just stuck in the original problem of suffering: They're bewildered by the pain. And because they're told that they have no way of dealing with it, they're unprotected. They have no reason for trying to say No to their unskillful urges. He saw the importance of the fact that there is an opportunity for freedom in the present moment. Not everything you're experiencing right now has been determined by the past. You can make a difference. You don't have to do the predictable thing.

As when you're sitting here right now, when things are going well, the predictable thing is to get carried away and complacent. But what if you did something unpredictable? Tell yourself, "Okay, no, I've got something good going on here. What's the best thing to do with my concentration? Is this the time to maintain it? Or is this the time to use it for something else?"

When things are not going well, the predictable thing is to get upset, and you can go into a downward spiral. But how about doing the unpredictable thing: not getting upset? See what happens when you're with a state of mind in the present moment that's not good, but you're not upset by it. This doesn't mean you say, "Well, I'll just accept it and be okay with it"—that's another predictable thing. Ask yourself, "What can I learn? What would be the best thing to do with this state of mind?"

That attitude is what allowed the Buddha to do those unpredictable things. He kept asking, "What's the best thing to do with what I've got?" Once he got into right concentration, he didn't just stay in concentration. He asked himself, "Is there knowledge that can be derived from this state of concentration?" The first question he asked himself to gain knowledge was: "How about previous births? Have I been born before?" He saw that he had. He could see back, many, many thousands of eons.

The predictable thing then would have been to set himself up as a teacher with knowledge of past lives. But he said, "No. What's the best thing to do with this knowledge?" That question led to another question: "What causes the patterns and the ups and downs of previous lifetimes?" That's when he gained his second knowledge: seeing beings dying and being reborn in line with their kamma, and seeing how complex kamma was.

There's a basic principle that's pretty simple: You act on skillful intentions and you get good results, good rebirths. You act on unskillful intentions, you get bad results, bad rebirths. But even though the principle is simple, its working-out is not. It's not automatic that what you do in one lifetime will determine what's going to happen in the next lifetime, because you have other kammic influences coming in from the past, perhaps other lifetimes, and then there's the influence of your views and intentions at the moment of death. Those actions can have an influence as well.

Here, again, he could have set himself up as a teacher, teaching people about kamma and rebirth. But then he asked himself, "What's the best use of this knowledge?" One of the things he had seen in the way kamma worked out was that your state of mind at death could actually go against a lot of kammic tendencies coming in from the past. In other words, if your state of mind at death was really good, it could compensate for a lot of bad things you'd done. If your state of mind at death was bad, it could delay the results of past good kamma—which meant that the state of your mind in the present moment doesn't have to be shaped by the past. And it can counteract influences coming in from the past.

So the next question was, "What's the best use of that knowledge?" Here the answer was, "See what you can do in the present moment to get out of this system

entirely.” That’s a question that would have been totally unpredictable—aside from the fact that the Buddha-to-be really wanted freedom. This is the one thing you could say was predictable once you knew him as a person: He would do everything for the sake of freedom.

But people like that are hard to predict. Sociologists look at classes of people and say, “This class of people will tend in this direction; that class will tend in that direction.” But what they can’t see is who among those people would really do everything for the sake of freedom.

Even the Buddha himself couldn’t say. There was that time when he was asked if the whole world was going to go to awakening, or half the world, or a third of the world. He refused to answer. The brahman who asked the question seemed upset, so Ven. Ananda pulled him aside and gave him an analogy: Suppose there’s a fortress with an intelligent gatekeeper. He walks around the fortress, inspecting the wall. Aside from the one main gate into the fortress, he doesn’t see a hole big enough even for a cat to slip through. So as a result, what does he know? He doesn’t know how many people are going to come in and out of the fortress, but he does know that if they’re going to come in and go out, they’re going to come in and out through the gate.

In the same way, the Buddha doesn’t know how many people will choose to want to do the unpredictable thing and go for total freedom. But the ones who will go for total freedom will have to follow this path: the ten guidelines for moral action, the four establishings of mindfulness, the seven factors for awakening.

So remember, we have this opportunity to be unpredictable. We live in a monastery where the routine is pretty standard. The predictable response is either to simply fall into the routine or to try to rebel against the routine. The unpredictable thing is to use this opportunity to find freedom, freedom from your defilements—because the defilements are giving you the worst routines. When the meditation goes well, the defilements tell you to get excited or complacent. When the meditation doesn’t go well, the defilements tell you, “Maybe it’s better that you give up.” Or they just get you depressed. So try to work free of the routines of the defilements. You know your predictable patterns, but you don’t have to follow them.

That’s why the Buddha, when he gave his shorter synopsis of the awakening, boiled it down to a pattern of causality in which what happens in the present moment is shaped partly by the past but also partly by independent decisions in the present moment itself. And those are free. They don’t have to be predictable.

So take advantage of that. It's because of that principle that meditation can take you someplace that you wouldn't have predicted: something surprisingly good.

Think Outside the Ruts

March 26, 2022

There's a strange passage in the Canon where the Buddha talks about how we take the potential for a form, feeling, perception, fabrication, or consciousness, and we fabricate it into an actual aggregate of form, feeling, etc., for the sake of having that aggregate. It's expressed in a strange way in the Pali, but the basic message is: All our experience is for the sake of something. It's purposeful. This is why we have questions about what the meaning of life is, hoping that somehow the "for the sake of" can be determined. Otherwise, we're pretty much making stabs in the dark, making things up as we go along, trying to figure out what will make us happy.

Usually that's what that "for the sake of" is: to find happiness of some kind. We do our best to find some pleasure. The question is: Is our best good enough? As the Buddha pointed out, we're usually operating in ignorance, which means that we end up creating suffering instead. We're ignorant of what we're doing. Our ideas of what's worth doing and what's not worth doing can be really skewed, because our perceptions are skewed.

There are four aberrations of perception the Buddha talks about: seeing constancy in things that are inconstant, seeing ease in things that are stressful, seeing self in things that are not-self, and seeing beauty in things that are not beautiful. Those are the big ones. But, if you look at how the mind operates, there are lots of variations on those themes, because every time we do something, think something, or say something, it's for the purpose of something, and we think it's worth it.

Basically, what discernment teaches us is that a lot of the things we think are worth doing are not worth doing at all. Our perceptions have been skewed one way or another. We have to learn to develop some dispassion for them, so that we can get out of them, because they tend to be like ruts in the mind.

The Buddha uses the word "bending" the mind. You keep thinking in certain ways and the mind gets bent in those directions. Nowadays, we'd say they're like ruts—like a rut in a road. You get stuck in the rut, and it takes a lot of energy to get out. In the same way, the mind just follows its old patterns again and again and again, even though there may not be much allure. It's simply a question of what it's familiar with, and it would take a lot of energy to change.

One of the purposes of meditation is to try to get out of those ruts, to think in new ways, to think at cross-purposes with the ruts. If you've ever tried to get out of a rut in the road, you've noticed that you have to turn the wheel at a really sharp angle to get out. In the same way, you have to learn how to think in radically new angles.

One of the major causes of ruts in the mind is that we have limits in the way we think. There seem to be only one or two alternatives that are worth doing or worth thinking about at any one time. But when you have only two alternatives, it's like politics. Think of all the wonderful people who could be really good presidents in the United States, but somehow the sorting-out situation gets down to two people who are not really worth voting for at all. Then, we get really worked up about which one is the lesser of two evils, trying to see the lesser of two evils as actually something good. The problem is with the sorting-out process.

It's the same with the mind. The mind has its way of sorting out things, saying, "This has to be that way; that has to be this way," and denying other alternatives. So, when you find the mind in a rut, you have to ask yourself, "Are there any other possibilities?" Maybe there are three or four possibilities; or maybe we're asking the wrong question.

As I said, we often find ourselves doing things that we *know* are harmful, that cause suffering. When we ask ourselves, "What's the allure?" there doesn't seem to be much. It's because we've caught ourselves in a box. So, when you find yourself faced with two alternatives like that, ask yourself: Maybe there are other alternatives; maybe there's another way of dividing up the territory.

There's that whole issue of, "I do everything just for me, me, me, me, me"—and it becomes a very horrible "me," and, as long as you think there's only one "me" in there, it's really difficult to figure out exactly what is it that the "me" wants. But when you start dividing it up, you see that there are lots of little "me's" in there. Then the question becomes, what does this "me" want right now? What does that "me" want right now? That changes things; you're not stuck with just one or two alternatives. So, learn how to turn your thoughts inside out.

We know that the Buddha's analysis of things is: The way you gain insight is to look for the origination of something, and the origination is in the mind itself. When the Buddha uses the word "origination," it's not just "arising"; something is caused, and it's caused from within the mind. You want to look for the cause. So when a certain thought pattern comes up, try to look and see, when it arises, what's coming up with it? What's pushing it into or out of your mind?

Sometimes these thoughts seem to arise simply because of the force of past kamma, but there'll be a present-kamma addition. Look for that. In fact, the Pali word for "origination," *samudaya*, means something "arising together." So, what's coming up together at the same time? We like to talk about deep underlying causes, but maybe the cause is right there on the surface—so much on the surface, like a film on the surface of water, that we look right through it.

Then try to see, when that thought is allowed to pass away on its own, *how* did it pass away? And what causes it to come back? Because then you'll see: There's part of the mind that's not allowing it to pass away. That's the part you want to look at.

What's the allure driving it? Sometimes it'll just say, "Well, this is just the way it has to be." That's why you find yourself ending up doing things that you know are really not all that good and don't have that much allure, but you've blocked off better alternatives. So, you want to see the sorting-out process. How did you block them out? It's when you see *that* that you begin to understand the allure of certain things, because the allure is not so much in the thought; it's in the way of thinking that's got you trapped.

That's something you want to learn how to step out of. It's hard to figure out precisely what the problem is unless you have a place to stand outside of it. That's what the breath provides: a place to stand outside your thoughts. You can be with the breath coming in, breath going out, bathing your body in the breath, bathing your own sense of "you" in the breath—"you" inhabiting the body. You want to fully inhabit the body so that you can get out of your mind, or at the very least get out of the discussion inside, and gain a chance to rest from it.

This is why we talk about the karate chops: Sometimes your old thoughts will come in, and you've got to have a quick retort to get them out of the way. This is one of the reasons why we read those books of short Dhamma passages by Ajaan Fuang, Ajaan Lee, Ajaan Chah: because they give some ideas on how you can stop a thought in its track with a few well-chosen words and step out of it.

You see a student coming to say something really stupid to Ajaan Fuang, and he's got a quick retort. Sometimes what the student said doesn't seem all that stupid to begin with, but Ajaan Fuang's got a good retort and you see that, Yes, what the student thought was stupid. Where did Ajaan Fuang learn that ability? By learning how to use karate chops on his own thoughts. Not that he was sitting around trying to think of clever things to say to people; he was trying to think of clever things to do with his own defilements, to cut them out for the time being so that he could gain some space for the mind to settle down.

Then, when it's settled down, that's when you can do the real work: beginning to see the assumptions that place limitations on your thoughts, because those are the things that have the allure. This way, you can start questioning things, more in the sense of, "Why do you like this way of thinking?"

Part of the mind will say, "Well, this is the way things are. This is the way I put together my reality, and it's worked good enough for me." Well, if it really were working good enough, it wouldn't be causing suffering like this.

They've discovered that, as children develop, it's not that they simply add new information to what they've had before. They go through periods where they develop a paradigm—their understanding of the world—but then finally the new information gets so dissonant with their understanding of the world that they've got to drop the old paradigm, drop the old structure of their thoughts, and come up with a new structure. They do this in several stages. That's how they grow; that's how they mature. The problem is, as adults, we figure that we've got our structure and it works.

And the Buddha's saying, "No—the way you structure your thinking is causing you to suffer." So, you have to look at the larger pattern, because that, as I said, is where the allure lies. Then, when you can see its drawbacks, it's a lot easier to get rid of the individual thoughts that are coming in, driving you crazy.

So, the ruts in the mind are not so much individual thoughts. They're patterns of thinking that we hold to.

This is one of the reasons why it's so important to see that, as we're bringing the Dhamma to the West, we shouldn't be in such a great hurry to make the Dhamma fit in with our Western views of reality. After all, our views of reality are making us suffer. The Dhamma's offering us another way of looking at reality altogether. Learn how to use the teaching on kamma, learn how to use the teaching on rebirth in a skillful way, so that you can come up with new narratives—new patterns of thinking that *don't* cause you to suffer.

So, think outside the ruts. Turn at sharp angles from them. It takes effort because you have to figure out exactly where the ruts are. And, because you're in the ruts, they seem a very natural place to be. But the mind doesn't have to stay in those ruts. That's the good news. It's simply a matter of learning how to take that good news and seeing how you can apply it to the way the mind is making itself suffer right here and now. You can let go of the things that you thought were worth holding on to. You see that they really do cause you to suffer, but you don't have to think in those terms. That's when the Dhamma gets liberating.

Ugly Body, Happy Mind

March 20, 2023

Gladdening the mind is an important part of meditation. It's listed as one of the steps in breath meditation, and there are many places where the Buddha talks about how creating a sense of gladness, a sense of well-being, is an important prelude to getting the mind to settle down.

He also talks about two ways in which you develop that sense of gladness. One is through getting the mind to be tranquil and calm. He talks about breathing in such a way that feels comfortable and then spreading that sense of comfort throughout the body. Another way to gladden the mind is through insight. He talks about what he calls renunciation gladness, when you see that all the things in the senses—sight, sounds, smells, taste, and tactile sensations—are inconstant and not worthy of attachment. The fact that you're able to lift your mind above those things can make you glad.

So when you find that the meditation is down and you're feeling discouraged, think of ways to lift up and gladden the mind. And have a broad repertoire for how you're going to do that.

There's the passage where the Buddha's talking to Rahula, teaching him how to meditate, and before he talks about breath meditation, he gives him a series of other contemplations: contemplating the body in terms of elements or properties, contemplating the four brahmaviharas, and contemplating the foulness of the body. We don't usually think of that last contemplation as a way of gladdening the mind. In fact, the Buddha himself lists it as a painful practice. Yet when you can think in ways that lift you above your ordinary obsessions with the body, that can give a sense of refreshment, a sense of expansiveness.

You'll notice when you're focused on the body as being attractive, you usually focus on certain details that set you off. You have to narrow your vision to a really narrow tunnel vision to do that, because the things you find so attractive are right next to things that are not attractive at all. Just go down beneath the skin a tiny bit, and there's a lot of stuff you wouldn't want to get anywhere near if the skin weren't there. But the fact that the skin *is* there makes a big difference. Why is that?

You see that the practice of contemplating the foulness of the body is not so much to get down on the body, it's to learn how to understand your mind. Why is it that you can do this practice of going through the body section by section, organ by organ, each of the 32 parts, and you can admit that there's nothing attractive about any of them when they're taken alone—and then the mind switches, and all of a sudden they're attractive again. We're a slave to that switch, so that's what you want to contemplate.

All the contemplations ultimately get down to understanding perceptions. When the ajaans talk about contemplating feelings, especially feelings of pain, the issue comes down to: What's creating a bridge between the physical pain and the pain that you're suffering from in the mind? It's a perception. What kind of perception? Why do you think in those terms?

The same with the contemplation of the parts of the body: The Buddha recommends that you start with your own body first and then realize that any other body you're attracted to has pretty much the same parts. There may be a few details different here and there, but it's all the same stuff. So why do you let yourself get so attracted to that?

Part of it, of course, is that you want to find yourself attractive. Most of us find it exciting to think of ourselves as attractive. We fantasize about other people finding us so attractive that they can't resist us. What's that all about? That attractiveness then gets reflected back to us when we see other people's bodies as being attractive. Why do we do this? What does the mind want to accomplish? What's the allure? And how can you see through that?

One way, as I said, is to think about how the parts that you're attracted to are very near parts that are not attractive at all. Why is it that you're able to perceive such a clear, distinct, firm line between them? There's no such line in the body itself. So you want to see why you're doing this to yourself. And also, how you don't have to.

The Buddha says you're not going to get past lust, you're not going to get past attraction to the body, until you hit non-return. So this issue is always going to be there until then.

It's interesting that non-return is also the point where you've perfected concentration. So when you can get the mind concentrated—focusing on the breath, getting some gladness out of the calm—see if you can also get some gladness out of the insight that comes when you contemplate the things that have tied you down for who knows how long.

As Ajaan Fuang pointed out, the things that we lust after, the things that we desire strongly in terms of the senses, are things we've had in the past. We miss them, which is why we want them back again. As he said, if you think about that a bit, it's enough to give rise to a real sense of *samvega*. After all, if you get them again, you're going to lose them again and you're going to lust after them again and miss them again.

It's like that carrot they use to get a donkey to move. They put it on a string, hang it from a stick, and dangle it just a little bit out of the donkey's reach. The donkey goes after it, keeps going and going, and of course, the carrot gets further and further away. Every now and then they'll give it a bite, then they'll hang it out far away again. How much longer do you want to be in that position, chasing something that's being dangled just out of reach in front of your nose?

It's when you can see through the attractiveness, or *why* the mind wants to deceive itself around this: That's when the mind can get glad—because there's a gladness that comes with the freedom that you don't need that kind of stuff anymore. You're not a slave to that anymore.

So when the time comes to gladden the mind, have a wide repertoire of the things you can use to gladden it with. That way, you can find a way of keeping the mind interested in the meditation, keeping it happy to be here working on its internal problems.

You have to remember, we're really fortunate we have this opportunity. Look at the world outside. There are all kinds of disturbances going on, all kinds of conflict. Most people don't have time to just stop and breathe, but as you're listening to this, you do have that opportunity, so make the most of it. Gladden the mind so that it can keep on going.

Think of the Buddha's instructions to Rahula: When you realize that you've done something well, be gladdened by that, and then use that sense of gladness to further your practice—to get even more diligent. In that way, you *use* the gladness for something even better.

One of the forest ajaans who's reputed to be an arahant said that when he was able to get past his attraction to the human body, he could see the auras of people. So when you think thoughts of the unattractiveness of the body, don't think that you're cutting off an avenue to pleasure. You're opening up the mind to possibilities that you may not have thought of.

So even though it's listed as a painful practice, contemplation of the body can be gladdening because it's liberating. The gladness of liberation is the best form of

gladness there is.

Sense Pleasures & Sensuality

August 13, 2022

Vivicc'eva kamehi vivicca akusalehi dhammehi, secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities: That's the beginning of the Buddha's description of the first jhana. To get the mind into right concentration, you have to seclude your mind from sensuality. This doesn't mean that you have to uproot sensuality, simply that you put sensual thoughts aside.

Sensuality and sensual pleasures are not the same thing. Sensuality is your fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures. We like to fantasize about sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, all the narratives that go around lust, the narratives that go around our desire for food—how you want to fix the food, how you want to eat the food, or the great meals you've had in the past.

Sensual craving is actually craving to fantasize about sensual matters. The mind has free range. The world itself offers only a limited number of sensual pleasures compared to the huge variety that the mind can think of. The pleasures themselves and the sensuality are both a challenge in the practice.

They challenge in different ways—and you deal with them in different ways as well. Starting with sensual pleasures, the Buddha said we don't try to weigh ourselves down with pain; we're not here just to do without. But, he said, if you notice there's a pleasure where, when you indulge in it, unskillful qualities increase and skillful qualities decrease, you've got to step back from that pleasure, you've got to deny yourself that pleasure because it's going to be bad for your mind.

After all, there are some sensual pleasures that are actually good for the practice. A nice quiet place, natural surroundings, a harmonious community: These all count as sensual pleasures, and they're actually very positive supports for the practice.

There are others pleasures, though, that will depend on the individual. For some people they're no problem; for others, they're big problems.

A good way to test your ability to do without sensual pleasures is to take the eight precepts, because the precepts that get added onto the five are basically matters of sensory restraint. The rule against eating after noon places some restraint on your tongue. The rule against watching shows places restraint on your eyes. The rule against wearing cosmetics and perfumes: restraint on your nose. Listening to music:

restraint on your ears. Lying on beds that are not luxurious or high: restraint on your body. The rule against sexual intercourse of any kind: restraint on all your senses. See how you handle these kinds of restraint. Some people have real difficulties; others find it relatively easy.

This is a typical practice for the uposatha days—the days of the full moon, new moon, and half moons—when, in Thailand and other Theravadin countries, people take the day off, go to the monastery, and spend the day there meditating. These precepts, by limiting the pleasures of the senses, are really good for focusing you on where you really need to be focused, which is finding pleasure in concentration.

So with sensual pleasures it's a matter of *selective* restraint. With sensuality, though, it's a matter of trying to escape from it entirely. First you have to see the drawbacks of that kind of thinking. When the Buddha was giving his graduated discourse—the step-by-step discourse to get people ready for the four noble truths—that would be the turning point. He would start with a talk on generosity, a talk on virtue, a talk on heaven. Heaven, of course, would be a description of the pleasures you could experience up there based on the fact that you'd been generous and virtuous down here.

But then the talk would turn: He would say that actually there's a downside to sensuality. He called it not only the drawbacks, but also the degradation of sensuality—the fact that the mind becomes a slave to its sensuality and gets nothing of any value out of it.

The Buddha gives lots of images to get you to think about the drawbacks of sensuality. First there are the examples: It's because of sensuality that we have to work hard to find the money for sensual pleasures. We gain the money, and who knows if we can actually keep it? It's because of sensuality that people get into fights: husbands with wives, parents with children, brothers with sisters, and from there it heads out to wars between nations.

People commit crimes based on sensuality, and many of them get caught and have to be punished. The Canon has a very long and graphic description of the gruesome tortures meted out to criminals in those days. On top of the drawbacks in the present life, it's because the mind is overcome with sensuality that it ends up doing things that pull it down, leading to a bad rebirth.

Then there are the images and similes of the drawbacks of sensuality. As the Buddha said, even if it rained gold coins, we wouldn't have enough for our sensual pleasures. Our minds are insatiable. Even if there were two mountain ranges the size

of the Himalayas, totally gold, it wouldn't be enough for one person's sensual desires. So there's never going to be any satisfaction.

Then there's image of the dog gnawing on a chain of bones from which all the meat has been removed: gnawing, gnawing, gnawing, getting no nourishment at all, just a little bit of taste—the taste of its own saliva. That's what sensual fantasies are: your own saliva, basically.

If you get attached to a particular sensual pleasure, you're going to have to put yourself in a position where it can be taken away from you. The image is of a hawk that has a piece of meat: It takes off, and other hawks, crows, and kites take after it to pull the meat away. If it doesn't let go, it's going to get mangled.

Sensuality is like carrying a torch against the wind: You burn yourself with the sensual fantasies. A drop of honey on the blade of a knife: There's a little bit of sweetness, but a lot of danger.

So the Buddha has you reflect that if you're devoted to sensual pleasures, and you're fascinated with thinking about them, you're putting yourself in a really weak position. You're going around with borrowed goods, and the owners can take them back at any time. You're in a tree with a lot of fruit, but somebody else wants that fruit as well, and they're willing to cut the tree down, even as you're in it. There are disadvantages all around, both inside and out, in a life devoted to sensuality.

It's when you can think in those terms that you're willing to find pleasure of a non-sensual kind.

The Buddha's not saying that when you practice renunciation you should simply do without. He provides you with an alternative pleasure: the pleasure of right concentration, the pleasure of jhana. The absorption you get in when you're fully inhabiting the body, the sense of ease that comes with the breath, the sense of fullness that comes with the breath as you allow it to spread throughout the whole body: When you have this alternative pleasure, you learn how to cultivate it, enjoy it, and then you can use it for getting the mind into even deeper concentration.

You hear people say, "Watch out for the dangers of jhana. The pleasures are so attractive that you just get sucked in." But the Buddha very rarely talks about the dangers of jhana. There's one passage where he compares it to having your hand on a branch that has some sap. As long as you're not willing to go beyond the practice of concentration, it's like there being sap on your hand from the branch. You're stuck. But being stuck on concentration is a minor problem compared to being stuck on sensuality.

You actually need the pleasure of jhana to get away from sensuality. Otherwise, all you see are two alternatives: sensuality and pain. To escape the pain you go for the sensuality. As the Buddha says, without the pleasure of right concentration, then even though you can see the drawbacks of sensuality, you're still going to go back to sensual pleasures.

So you've got to cultivate this sense of well-being inside: the pleasure of form, even though it feels very embodied. I know a lot of people say, "What's the difference? This feels very sensual." It's different: The sensuality of the body relates to your tactile sensations, the things you touch. This is something totally inward that has none of the drawbacks of sensuality. It's not intoxicating and it doesn't require that you do anything unskillful.

That's one of the other areas where you have to exercise restraint with sensual pleasures. There are some sensual pleasures that require you to break the precepts in order to get them. You have to say No to those. The same goes for sensual pleasures that require that you get into conflict, to develop unskillful mental attitudes.

Sensual pleasures are intoxicating, and they certainly don't help you observe your mind with any clarity, whereas the pleasure of jhana is not intoxicating in that way. It doesn't require anything unskillful, and it helps you see your mind very clearly.

As the Buddha said, when the mind settles in like this, you can begin to see that the concentration itself is composed of aggregates, and you can start using the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self, first to pry yourself away from any thoughts of sensuality, any of the hindrances, any of the unskillful qualities ranging from wrong view up through wrong concentration. Then you turn that analysis on right concentration itself.

This leads to another stage. Ajaan Fuang talked about this. He told me one night of a time when he was suffering from really bad headaches for weeks after weeks after weeks, having tried all kinds of medicine. Finally, he realized the pain was not something to try to run away from or to cure. The pain was something to be comprehended.

So he sat up and watched the pain. From the way he described the experience, it sounded like stream-entry for him. He said one of the realizations that came afterwards was that once you've been away from the senses, you come back to the senses and you realize just the fact of engaging in the experience of the senses is painful in and of itself. Even the pleasures are painful. You open your eyes—*bap*—and there's stress.

Which made me think of that sutta where the Buddha's talking about the leper. The leper cauterizes his wounds because it feels good. His relatives and friends take him to see a doctor, and the doctor is able to cure him of his leprosy. Once he's cured, then he looks back at the other lepers: Does he envy them their burning sticks with which they cauterize their wounds? Not at all. If someone were to take him into a pit of burning embers, would he willingly go? No. Why? Because the fire is hot, scorching, painful to the touch. So the Buddha asks Magandiya, the person he's talking to: Is the fire painful only now that the leper has been cured or was it already painful to begin with? It was painful to begin with. It's simply that the leper had distorted perceptions.

As the Buddha said, it's the same way once you've seen the deathless: You see that your previous perceptions of sensuality were distorted. You realize that even the pleasures of the senses are painful because you've found something so much better.

So, when you're dealing with sensual pleasures, it's a matter of learning how to exercise proper restraint: restraining yourself from any pleasures that would give rise to more unskillful qualities that would require you to break the precepts. When you're dealing with sensuality, it's a matter of seeing the drawbacks, developing an alternative absorption for the mind, getting the mind absorbed in the sense of the body as you feel it from within, and finally changing your perception of sensuality all together—so that you no longer miss it.

That's when the mind really is free. Up to that point, we can be slaves to sensuality to a greater or lesser degree, but it's important that you realize that once you've gone beyond it, you don't miss it. It's not a case of deprivation. You hear the word "renunciation," and it sounds like you're being pulled away from your pleasures and offered scraps of old bread and a little bit of stale water—prison food.

But it's the other way around. You begin to realize that the pleasures of sensuality are prison food. The pleasure of jhana is nourishing, healthy food. The image in the Canon is of different types of food all the way up to ghee, honey, and butter. And then there's the point where the mind goes beyond the need even for that kind of food. When it no longer needs to feed—that's when it's free.

Smart About Lust

July 10, 2023

A few years after I came back to the States, a friend of mine from college who was teaching at a college in the Midwest invited me to speak to his classes. He was a professor of comparative religion and he wanted to expose his students to a real Buddhist monk. The school was something of a party school, so I didn't expect much in terms of the students' response. He told me afterwards that one of the responses that the students gave was that they were surprised to see a monk who was fairly intelligent and had an active mind. One woman said she expected monks to be sub-human, and she was surprised to see that I actually thought for myself.

That's a fairly standard reaction among people who are attached to their passions, and particularly attached to their lust: that anyone who's not giving in to lust, not following a life of lust, is a loser. All of the glamour, all the prestige, and all the intelligence seem to be on the side of those who give in to their lust: the pride that you're able to think thoughts of sensuality, think of the things and people you desire, invent lots of different scenarios for what you might want, and figure out how to get what you want out of the people you desire.

There's a belief that there's a fair amount of intelligence and creativity that goes with that. The people who don't follow their lust tend to be little goody two-shoes, not all that bright. They may be wise in the sense of the wisdom of books that have little wise phrases, one on each page, but they don't have any street smarts. They don't know how to get what they really want. The basic picture is of people who are dried-up, world-weary, who simply can't get it on with other people.

I must admit that when I first learned about arahants having no passion, no aversion, and no delusion, their lives seemed awfully dry. But then I met Ajaan Fuang and other masters of the forest tradition, and the impression I came back with was totally different. These were the people who were really sharp. They had learned how to see that their lust, their greed, and their aversion were really dumb. They had seen through these things. They had figured them out.

So an important part of learning to overcome your lust is just that: seeing that it requires intelligence to overcome it, and that the people who give in to lust are the ones who are dumb. When you change your perspective that way, it tips the balance.

Now, we have to admit that our defilements are pretty clever in their way. They do figure out ways of getting what they want in the short term. And they're especially smart in making us feel that we're smart in giving in to them. They're like websites affiliated with political parties. We all know deep down inside someplace that the political parties don't care much about most people. All they care about is their wealthy donors. But you go to their websites, and they'll tell you the latest put-downs of the other side, their in-jokes about the other side, so that you feel that you're on their side, they're on your side. And we willingly allow ourselves to be duped this way.

You have to realize that the real intelligence comes in learning how not to be duped, learning how to figure out why greed, aversion, delusion, and lust have such power over the mind. Where does their power come from? If you've learned to see this as an intelligent quest, that a really good use of your intelligence would be to understand how to get past these things, that's half the battle right there, because it does require figuring things out. We're not here to just watch things come and go and say, "Oh, yes, they come and go. And the pleasure of lust doesn't last very long, so I might as well give it up." That's like saying, "The pleasure of eating doesn't last very long, so I might as well just stop eating." If you don't have something better to feed on, you just keep coming right back to eat some more.

The first step in overcoming lust is learning how to develop good strong concentration, realizing that there is a sense of well-being that can be immediate, visceral, right here, as you spread feelings of ease and refreshment through the body simply by the way you breathe, simply by the way you relate the rest of the body to the areas where it's obvious that you're breathing, until you begin to see that, "Yes, the whole body is breathing." That gives you some support.

But then, the rest of the work is figuring things out. You see this in the teachings of the forest ajaans. As I've said many times, during my time with Ajaan Fuang there were a lot of things he wouldn't explain. He'd tell me that I was doing things wrong when I was arranging things in his hut or arranging a construction project in the monastery. But when I was doing something wrong, he wouldn't say what the right way was to do it. It was up to me to figure it out.

As he said, his purpose was to get me used to figuring things out for myself. If everything were to be handed to me on a platter, ready-made, ready-solved, I wouldn't develop any intelligence, I wouldn't get practice in solving problems on my own. After all, when you're off meditating on your own in the forest, there are a lot of

times when something comes up and there's nobody you can run to. You have to figure things out right then and there.

The Buddha gives you some questions to ask. When lust comes, where does it come from? He uses the word *origination*. What is its origination? The origination isn't the object outside. It's something inside the mind itself. There's a thirst, a sense of lack, and then there's the thought that "Well, I could fill in this lack with thoughts of sensuality. Even if I can't get what I want, I can fantasize." Of course, fantasizing leads the mind to think more and more in terms of actually acting on those fantasies.

So, what's the origination? Can you pinpoint it?

And then, how does it pass away? In other words, what happens in the mind that makes it pass away? Does it remain constant or does it come and go? There are times when you'll notice that it's coming and going, but the fact that it comes back makes you believe that it must be deeply entrenched. Yet maybe that's not the case. It can last only for a certain amount of time and then it stops, but then there's something in the mind that wants it back. What is that something? What is that desire?

This is where you start looking into the allure. What do you find attractive about lust? This, on the one hand, is why we have the analysis of the 32 parts of the body, starting with your own body because that's the body you're most familiar with. But also, as the Buddha said, it's the one you're most attracted to. Ask yourself, "What in there is really all that attractive?" You take it apart, part by part, and there's basically nothing. So if this body isn't attractive, how can you assign attractiveness to another body? It's the same sort of stuff. You have a digestive system with all the digestive juices and the things that come out from digestion. Well, the other person has all that too. What's the big deal?

Then you dig a little bit deeper, and you realize it's not necessarily the object that has the allure. There's your role as someone who can think up these thoughts, who, in your fantasies, is clever enough to get somebody else attracted to you. There's not just lust operating there. There's a lot of pride. And as I said earlier, there's that sense of intelligence: "I can figure this out, how to get what I want." But then what do you really get?

This is where you have to think about the drawbacks. As the Buddha said, there is a happiness that can come through getting past your passion, past your sensuality. The first step, as I said, is with the concentration. But then there's a higher well-being, happiness, pleasure—the Pali word *sukha* covers all of that—that comes with the deathless. Everyone who's attained the deathless says, "How stupid I was not to go for

this.” That’s why people who gain genuine awakening don’t become proud over the fact of their awakening, because they’ve seen how stupid they were for so long.

So hold that in mind as an ideal. You haven’t seen the third noble truth yet, but that’s the whole purpose of the Buddha’s teaching the four noble truths: There is that possibility for the cessation of suffering. And it’s not just a blank lack of suffering, it’s a very positive well-being. Anything that stands in the way of that has a lot of drawbacks.

This is why we bring out the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self to help underline the drawbacks of your fantasies so that you can develop dispassion for them and gain release, escape from them.

The Buddha compares sensuality to a fetter. It’s like being in prison. Your defilements have managed to make the prison nice enough so that you feel like you’re actually pretty clever being there, figuring out how to score a few nice things to decorate your cell. You even think that being lustful makes you attractive, so you’re attractive in your prison. But it’s a prison nonetheless. When you get past it, you’ve escaped. You’re free. And now you realize how much you were oppressed before you got out.

So you have to change your allegiance. The part of the mind that thinks you’re smart for indulging in sensuality has to be shown, “No. That’s the dumb side. The smart side, the glamorous side, is what can figure lust out and get past it.” Try to be active in taking this as a challenge. “Why is it that I fall for these things? Why is it that they keep having power over me?”

There was a famous French intellectual who decided to do a history of sexuality. It was going to be a multi-volume series, but after doing a couple of years of research on it, he finally decided sex was the most boring topic of all. It sounded cool in the beginning, but it’s just the same stuff over and over again. Whatever variety there is in it gets repetitive pretty fast. But freedom from sensuality—there’s no boredom there at all.

So see it as a challenge. There’ll be setbacks. But just make yourself up for the challenge. Tell yourself that this is a good use of your intelligence. And every time you come out victorious, don’t listen to the voices that say, “Well, you’re going to give in again tomorrow, so why bother?” Regard each little victory as important, because the victories can add up. You keep using your insights. When the insights don’t work, you keep trying to figure out new ones, new approaches. That’s a really worthwhile use of your intelligence. The intelligence that goes into sensuality and lust is pretty

worthless. You're taking a good talent and trashing it. Appreciate the intelligence of renunciation and make it your sport.

You're not just being wise in the sense of little books of wise sayings. You're developing street smarts of a different sort: street smarts for the noble path. And there's a real satisfaction in seeing these things through.

Nobility Is the Best Policy

October 15, 2023

We repeat the terms, “noble truth,” “noble eightfold path,” to the point where the word “noble” seems to lose all of its meaning. It’s good to stop and think about what it does mean.

Part of its meaning comes from the context: what the Buddha described as the noble search for happiness. Instead of searching for happiness in things that age, grow ill, and die, things that will leave us or that we will leave, we search for happiness in what doesn’t age, doesn’t grow ill, doesn’t die. In other words, we search for a happiness that doesn’t let us down. And it requires that we take a noble attitude toward our suffering instead of blaming other people, blaming the stars, or blaming the creator of the universe. We don’t blame, we just try to understand where it comes from. We realize that it comes from within us. The suffering itself is our clinging and it’s caused by our craving. When we understand suffering that way, we’re taking a noble attitude toward it.

The same with the path: It’s a path of practice in which we take responsibility for our suffering and for putting an end to it. We realize that we’ve been making mistakes. We see our mistakes, admit our mistakes and the foolish ways we’ve been looking for happiness, causing a lot of unnecessary suffering for ourselves and for others.

So we take a noble attitude toward the whole problem of suffering. The important thing is that taking the noble attitude works. It’s not just empty noble ideas or vague noble sentiments. It’s pragmatic. When you take a grubby attitude toward happiness, just grasping whatever you can, that’s what doesn’t work. It leads to more misery. If you take the noble attitude and use it to direct your actions, your search really does lead to something satisfactory.

I’ve been thinking about this because yesterday I gave a talk to a group in Brazil on the topic of fear and anxiety. In particular, I talked about how to overcome fear and anxiety by recognizing that some fears really are worth fearing, and others are not.

I framed the issue in the context of rebirth. If you look at all the many lifetimes you’ve been through, you see again and again and again that the things you love, the things you hold on to, get taken away from you, or you leave them: things like wealth,

your health, your relatives, your family. The question is not so much *whether* you'll be separated from them. You *will* be separated from them. The question then becomes, "How do I get the most out of them before the separation?" And here, "getting the most out of them," means getting both the most happiness and the most goodness.

Think of Ajaan Chah's image of the broken cup. He picked up a good cup one day and told his listeners, "This cup is already broken." Then he explained himself, saying that you know the cup is going to break someday, but this doesn't mean that you use it casually or carelessly. You realize that you can get some good out of the cup, so you take care of it. But there will come a day when it breaks, and you shouldn't be surprised. The fact that you've used it well means that you don't get torn up with regret when it's broken. The fact that you've cared for it means that you don't have to blame yourself when it breaks. In that way, you engage with the cup in a way that leads to the least amount of suffering.

It's the same with your wealth, with your health, with your relatives. As the Buddha said, loss of wealth, loss of health, loss of your relatives, is relatively minor compared to loss of right view and loss of your virtue. But he doesn't say that these things are totally worthless or that you should treat them carelessly. After all, you can use your wealth to develop the perfection of generosity. You don't have to give it all away. In fact, he doesn't recommend giving it all away. He says you use it to provide for your own enjoyment, for the enjoyment of your family, to put some away for the future, but then also to give it, to be generous with it.

The day will come when you don't have any wealth, when it's taken away for one reason or another. But then, when you look back at the time that you *did* have it, you realize that you got good use out of it, particularly as you used it to develop the perfection of generosity. You've got an inner wealth now that, as the Thais say, can't be burnt by fire, can't be washed away by floods. You've made a good exchange.

The same with your health: The Buddha recognizes that health is very useful for the practice. When the body gets weak, it's more difficult to practice. It's not impossible, but when the body is strong it's a lot easier to put in the effort that's required. So you look after the body. In the Vinaya, the monks' rules, there's a very large section devoted to medical care. The Buddha recognized that some illnesses respond to medicine and others don't. When the medicines are available, use them.

Think of that story about Ajaan Mun that Ajaan Fuang told. When there was a monk who was sick and there was no medicine, if the monk asked for medicine, Ajaan Mun would scold him. He'd say, "What kind of meditator are you? Use your discernment to deal with the pain, to deal with the suffering." But if there *was*

medicine and the monk refused to take it, Ajaan Mun would scold him, too: “Why are you making yourself difficult to look after?”

It sounds like you’d get scolded either way, but the lesson, of course, is that you adjust your desires to be in line with what’s available. If the medicine is available, use it. If it’s not, learn to use whatever resources you *do* have. Like Ajaan Lee when he had that heart attack when he was deep in the forest: He used his breath. He used his concentration to heal himself so that he could continue practicing and teaching.

So you look after your wealth; you look after your health. And you look after your relatives. You take good care of them and try to engage with them as best you can. If they’re junior to you, you try to teach them. If they’re senior to you, you try to help them. Make sure you have goodwill for them all the time, even when they’re difficult, even when *you’re* difficult. In that way, when the time comes to leave, there’s a minimum of regret.

The point here is that you know you’re going to lose these things someday, but you make sure that you don’t lose your virtue or your right view in trying to hang on to them. Because even as you hang on, they get taken away, and then you’ve lost everything.

Virtue, right view: These are things you *don’t* have to lose. You can lose them only if you abandon them. Otherwise, they’re yours. So you want to maintain them. And there’s a strong sense of well-being that comes with that, a strong sense of your own nobility.

I explained this to the group in Brazil yesterday. The question came at the end, “This all sounds very noble, but how about some real practical advice on how to deal with fear and anxiety?” The question, of course, missed the whole point. Taking a noble approach to fear and anxiety is what allows you to overcome those emotions in the most effective way. Taking the noble approach is what works. Noble is practical, pragmatic. Nobility is the best policy. When you can be inspired by your behavior, there’s a strong sense of well-being and confidence that comes with that.

So try to take the noble attitude toward the fact that the world is swept away, and the things we love, the people we love, are going to get swept away as well. But make sure your virtue doesn’t get swept away, your right view doesn’t get swept away. Maintain something solid inside.

A story appeared in the newspapers a while back about a young man in Iran who had been murdered. They caught the murderer, tried him, found him guilty. Apparently, under Islamic law, it’s the right of the parents of the deceased to decide whether the death sentence would be carried out or not. The mother had decided

that she wanted to see it carried out so that justice would be served. But she started having dreams. Her son came to her and said, “Mom, Mom, don’t go for revenge. Forgive the guy.” As she later told newspaper reporters, she didn’t want to have those dreams, but they kept coming again and again.

So the day came when the decision was to be made. The guilty party was sitting in a chair with a noose around his neck. The mother goes up, slaps him in the face as hard as she can, and then takes the noose off. As she told the reporters later, she then felt a huge sense of relief. It’s in this way that you can pull out of this back and forth, back and forth that entangles you if you go for justice. That’s how the mind can be freed.

We have a story like that in the Buddhist tradition as well. There was a king and a queen whose kingdom was taken away from them by another king. So they disguised themselves and went and lived in the capital of the king who had defeated them. They had a son, and they realized after a while that the son was in danger. If anything ever happened to them, he’d probably get killed, too. So they sent him off to live with relatives out in the countryside. And he would come back to visit them from time to time.

One time, he came back and saw that they had been captured. They’d been tied up, their heads were shaved, and they were marched around the city to the sound of a harsh drum. He saw them. They saw him. The father said, “Don’t look too far. Don’t look too close, because animosity is not ended with animosity. It’s ended by non-animosity.” The people around were asking, “Who’s he talking to? What’s he saying? It doesn’t make any sense.” But the young son heard it.

The mother and father were taken off to the south of the city, where they were drawn and quartered. Guards were placed to watch over the body pieces, in case anybody wanted to perform funeral rites for the dead. Well, the young son got the guards drunk, built a pyre, cremated his parents, and then decided on revenge.

He got a job in the king’s elephant stables. At night he would play the lute for the elephants. Of course, the lute music didn’t stay just in the stables. It wafted into the royal apartments. The king liked the sound of the lute, so he had the young flute player brought into his apartments to have him play for him. The young man played the lute as best he could, and the king said, “Okay, you stay here with me.” So the young man did his best to become a trusted member of the king’s personal staff: He’d get up in the morning before the king, go to bed at night after the king. The king came to trust him more and more and more.

Finally, the young man was in a position where he had the king alone: The king was lying down with his head in his lap. The young man was thinking about all the mischief this king had done in killing his parents and taking the kingdom that would have been his. He pulled out his sword. Then he thought about what his father had said. So he put the sword back in the scabbard. Then he started thinking, and pulled out the sword again, but then thought of what his father said. This happened three times.

The king woke up in a fright, saying he just had a horrible dream in which the prince, the son of that king he had executed, had come after him. So the young man grabbed the king by the hair, pulled out his sword, and said, “Do you know who I am? I’m that prince.” So the king begged for his life. And the young man said, “No, I beg you for my life.” So they both swore that they wouldn’t harm each other.

In the end, the young prince married the king’s daughter, which meant that he was going to take over the kingdom.

And so, by not getting revenge, that huge pile of death after death after death that would have followed was ended, and both sides were freed.

It’s when you take the noble path that you find that it’s the path that works. It’s the practical path. It’s simply a matter of learning how to inspire yourself that you can do it. You can be noble, too.

That’s another one of the meanings of the noble truths and the noble path: They’re ennobling. As you follow them, as you take them on, you become a noble person. It’s the noble people who are truly happy, because they’ve followed the noble path that works.

The Graduated Discourse

July 22, 2022

Ajaan Fuang was orphaned at an early age, around eleven, and as he said one time, he lived as a temple boy for five years without really listening to the Dhamma at all. Then, when he turned sixteen, he began to listen. He started thinking about himself. The teachings on kamma told him that he must have had some bad kamma. Here he was, orphaned, poor, didn't have much of a schooling. If he was going to find any happiness in life, he would have to change his ways.

It was that turn-around that got him interested in practicing, and why, when he finally ordained as a monk at age twenty, he was really upset when he discovered, after reading the Vinaya, that they weren't observing the Vinaya very well where he was staying. And they certainly weren't practicing meditation.

Which is why he was so happy to find Ajaan Lee when Ajaan Lee came the following year to Chanthaburi. At that point, Ajaan Fuang took to the Dhamma like a fish to water. But he wasn't always that way: As the texts say, the mind untrained is very unpliant, it's very resistant, like the kind of wood that snaps when you try to bend it, whereas the trained mind is pliant. When you try to bend it in the right direction, it'll go that direction.

The problem is that *you* have to train your mind. It's a matter of the mind training the mind. So how does it go from being totally unpliant to being pliant? Well, Ajaan Fuang's story gives an illustration: You have to see that you've been foolish, that you've been unskillful, that you're suffering, and then you may be willing to change. Then maybe you'll be willing to listen to the Dhamma.

One of the ironies of how Buddhism has come to the West is that if you're introduced to Buddhism in college, taking a course either in Buddhism itself or in comparative religion, often the first teaching they tell you is the four noble truths. Whereas, when the Buddha was teaching the four noble truths, he was very careful about how he would introduce them. He often wouldn't start out with those truths.

There are a few cases where he did, as with the five brethren. But their minds were already inclined away from sensuality. Most people, as the Buddha found, see sensuality as their only escape from pain. And as the four noble truths point out, our

craving for sensuality is one of the reasons why we're suffering. Clinging to sensuality is suffering in and of itself. Those teachings go against the grain.

So, how do you change the grain of a person's mind? The Buddha would usually give what's called a graduated discourse, or step-by-step discourse—*anupubbi-katha* is the Pali. We're told many times in the Canon that that was the kind of discourse he would give before introducing the four noble truths, especially to lay people, but we don't have the text of any of those discourses.

It may have been that the Buddha tailored each discourse to the needs of the person he was talking to. One of the cases was the householder Upali, who had been a strong supporter of the Jains and had gone one day to argue with the Buddha, thinking that he would bring greater glory to his Jain teacher by showing that even a lay disciple of a Jain teacher could defeat the Buddha. Well, he ended up getting converted. So, as the Buddha taught him the step-by-step discourse, you can imagine one way in which he would have taught it.

Another case was a leper, Suppabuddha. One day he's going through the city and he sees a large group of people gathered. He thinks, "Maybe there's a food distribution. Maybe I can get some food there." As he gets close, he realizes: no food distribution. It's a group of people who've come to listen to the Buddha teach the Dhamma. So he says to himself, "Well, I might as well listen to the Dhamma, too." As the Buddha surveys the crowd, he sees that the leper is the one who's going to be able to benefit from the teaching. So he gives a graduated discourse for him, which you can imagine would be somewhat different. Even though the main outlines were the same, it would be different in the details from what he taught Upali.

And of course there are the cases of the archers who were sent to kill the Buddha—and then to kill the archer who'd kill the Buddha, and then to kill those archers, then to kill *those* archers. He taught them all the graduated discourse, group by group, and they all gained the Dhamma eye after their minds were ready to hear the four noble truths.

So there probably were a lot of variations in the details. The general outline is that he would start with a talk on generosity and the good that comes from generosity in this lifetime: the fact that people respect you, people love you, and you gain a sense of self-confidence.

He would then talk about virtue in a similar way: People respect you. He said the wealth that comes from being virtuous tends to be solid. In other words, it doesn't fly in, but it doesn't fly out. When you go to a meeting of your fellow citizens, you're not

abashed. You're not afraid that somebody might rightly accuse you of a breach of virtue, because you don't have any breaches of virtue.

Then, when the Buddha saw that people were amenable to hearing about what was good about generosity, what was good about virtue, he would talk about how after death, generosity and virtue are rewarded with the pleasures of heaven. And here, it's interesting: In the Canon there are a lot of suttas on generosity, there are a lot of suttas on virtue, but there's almost nothing on heaven. There are two big suttas on hell, but about the pleasures of heaven the Buddha simply says: Take the pleasures of a king who is loved by his subjects, who doesn't have to engage in war, who rules over a wealthy kingdom, who enjoys his wealth, and then multiply that many times—that's heaven.

Now, one of the reasons the Buddha talked about these topics was that he was going to be pointing out the drawbacks of sensuality, but first he wanted people to see that, yes, he did appreciate the fact that there are pleasures in the sensual realm, and that some of those pleasures come from goodness. So it's not that he's denying the fact of the pleasures, but as he says, it's because of the pleasures of form, feeling, perceptions, fabrication, and consciousness that we're stuck on them—that's the problem. But still, he wants people to have a sense that, yes, he does appreciate that there are pleasures in life. Then, when he gets that far, he turns the tables and starts talking about the drawbacks of sensuality, even heavenly sensual pleasures.

To begin with, they're not going to last forever. They're going to end. And when you've been used to food appearing when you want it to appear, and whatever pleasure you want appearing when you want it to appear, and then you fall from there, you find that pleasure is hard to find. It's a sharp fall.

You also think about the mental qualities that were developed through virtue and generosity, but then they begin to get eaten away by the fact that everything is so easy for the devas, and they get so complacent. That's the problem: The very rewards for generosity and virtue eat away the goodness you developed, and you're back where you started, sometimes worse.

At that point, the Buddha would see if you were ready to regard renunciation as rest, as a good thing. This comes from seeing the dangers of complacency. This is how heedfulness arises: You realize that you've been complacent all along and you've suffered for it. How much longer do you want to suffer? It's *sensing* that suffering: That's what makes the mind begin to be a little bit pliant and willing to develop heedfulness.

Heedfulness, of course, is the basis for the five strengths, and the first of the five strengths is conviction. There's a passage where the Buddha talks about how conviction arises out of suffering. And it's precisely in this way: You see that you've been suffering and you realize that it's because of your own actions—you can't blame other people. You were the one who fell for the pleasures that made you complacent. So you begin to realize: Okay, there's something you've got to do.

This is how you develop conviction in the Buddha's awakening: "Maybe this is the way out." Again, conviction is not necessarily one hundred percent sure. There's a *maybe* built in, but it's a maybe of a possibility. You're at the very least willing to listen to the Buddha's teachings, especially on the power of your actions, and you're willing to take them on as a working hypothesis.

That's when you're ready for the four noble truths. What you've done is that you think about your sensual pleasures and the mind's fascination with *sensuality*—its fascination for planning for sensual pleasures, fantasizing about them—and then you step back, saying, "Maybe that's the problem."

The mind really resists, but when you have a sense of your own foolishness and the suffering you've gone through because of your foolishness, that's when you're willing to step back. That's what helps you to develop a noble attitude. When the Buddha calls the noble truths "noble," there have been people who've complained, "What's noble about suffering? What's noble about craving?" The suffering and the craving themselves are not noble, what's noble is the *attitude* the Buddha has you take toward them.

If we see, "Oh. The clinging: That's the suffering; that's a problem," that's when we develop a noble attitude. We usually don't see our clinging as a problem at all. It's what we like to do: We're expert clingers. The same with craving: We're expert cravers. As the Buddha says, "Everywhere we go, we go with craving as our friend." It whispers into our ear, and whatever it says, we tend to believe it. But now you step back and say, "Wait a minute, the things that I like because of my craving and clinging, the things that I hold on to most dearly: Maybe I'll have to learn how to let go of them." That attitude is noble, and that's what's noble about those two noble truths.

The same with the truth of the path: You say, "I can't blame anyone else for my complacency. I was the one who fell for these things to begin with. I've got to do something about it." That's why the path is noble: You take responsibility for your own suffering and for putting an end to it.

Think about that question the Buddha said results from suffering, results from pain, even for little children: “Who knows a way or two to bring about the end of this suffering?” The question itself is not too picky about what the way might be. Especially when we’re children, we probably hope that somebody will just come and take the pain away for us. Like when you go running to your mother with a cut on your finger, and she blows on it to make the pain go away: That’s the kind of thing we look for all too often—somebody who’ll do the work for us.

As we mature, though, we begin to realize that we’ve got to do the work ourselves because we’re the ones who were foolish enough to create the problem in the first place. That’s why the path is noble. And of course it’s noble in the sense that it leads beyond just putting an end to particular pains. It takes you to a dimension where there is no pain, no suffering, no stress anymore.

That’s when the mind is really pliant, when it’s ready for the solution. But the graduated discourse is what makes the mind pliant to begin with.

Now, there were cases where the Buddha may have started out on a graduated discourse and found that he could take his listeners only so far. That’s why we have the talks about generosity that stop just with generosity, or the talks on virtue that stop with virtue. There were people who had trouble getting their heads even around the fact that virtue and generosity could be good. Those were the minds that were really brittle and stiff.

But the Buddha would plant a seed: Maybe someday they would be able to look at themselves and see that there was something wrong in what they’d done, and they could have listened to the Buddha and could have benefited.

Yet if you’re wise, you’ll follow the line of thought in the graduated discourse all the way through, until your mind is ready for the four noble truths. As the Buddha said, when you’re ready to see that renunciation of sensuality would be a good thing, then it’s as if your mind is like a piece of cloth that’s ready for the dye. It’s been cleaned, has no stains, and it can take the dye easily.

Don’t be the sort of person who takes just a little bit of the dye on a dirty piece of cloth, and the cloth comes out all splotchy. Try to make your mind pliant enough to listen, pliant enough to follow along. We tend to be stiff and proud of our pride, and that’s why there are so many people who claim to be Dhamma teachers here in the West but who keep on wanting to change the Dhamma.

There’s something about the Dhamma they hate. Some of them don’t want there to be four noble truths, they don’t even want there to be truths, or noble even. That attitude goes nowhere.

After all, here's the Buddha, who's put all that effort into finding the way, and he's offering it to us for free. Don't be the sort of person who turns him down.

Fourth Truth, First Duty

July 23, 2023

When the Buddha gave his first sermon, the topic was the four noble truths. But he didn't start with the first truth. He started with the fourth, the path. In doing so, he showed that that was what the truths were all about. That's the purpose they served, as part of the path to the end of suffering.

But you can also take this fact as meaning that of the different duties for the truths, the duty for the path is the one you work on first. You try to develop it—all the factors, right view down through right concentration—and by developing it, you're getting yourself ready to perform the duties for the other truths: to comprehend suffering, to abandon its cause, and to realize its cessation.

So focus on what you're doing right now to develop the path. Right now you're working on right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. You find a topic, like the breath, and you stay focused there. Keep track of the breath coming in, going out. In the beginning, you simply discern how the breath is going in the body right now, whether it's long or short, but then you train yourself: You train yourself to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. You train yourself to calm what the Buddha calls bodily fabrication, which is the in-and-out breath. He calls it that because he wants to call attention to the fact that there's an intentional element in how you breathe.

That's going to play a huge role in the rest of the breath meditation, because you can then intentionally train yourself to breathe in a way that feels refreshing, train yourself to breathe in a way that feels pleasant, train yourself to be sensitive to how feelings and perceptions play a role in influencing your mind. In this case, that means the feelings of pleasure you're trying to create along with the perception, the image of the breath that you hold in mind to stay with the breath.

You can picture the breath to yourself in any number of ways. Think of it as the energy flowing through the body. After all, the Buddha lists breath not as the tactile sensation at the nose, but as part of the wind element in the body itself. That's energy, the energy that allows the air to come in through the nose and allows it to go out. Where do you feel that energy? If you can perceive it as a whole-body process, going down through all the nerves and blood vessels, that allows the sense of ease, fullness,

and refreshment to spread throughout the whole body. It opens up channels in the body that otherwise you may have forced to close because your imagination couldn't think of them as possibly being open.

Then you train yourself to calm the feelings and the perceptions. In other words, you try to see which perception of breath is most calming to the mind, which feelings are most calming to the mind.

If you have any background in what the Buddha said about the first noble truth, you begin to realize you're dealing directly with some of the aggregates right here. You've got the form of the body, which is the breath. You've got the feeling of pleasure that you're trying to create. You've got the perceptions—the mental images, the mental labels—that you hold in mind. You've got the process of fabrication: the way you breathe, the way you talk to yourself as you're doing this and as you hold perceptions in mind. Those are four of the five aggregates, and then of course you've got consciousness, which is aware of all these things.

So in the course of developing concentration, you're getting hands-on experience with the aggregates. This is going to be really important because in the Buddha's analysis, suffering is clinging to the aggregates. So you're getting to know the aggregates as you develop them in the right direction. It's one of the ways in which developing the path helps you to comprehend suffering, which is the duty with regard to the first noble truth. You get to see what these aggregates are.

Especially when you start out, the term "aggregates" makes them sound like things. And you may wonder, why is the Buddha dividing your experience up into things like this? But as you're getting hands-on experience with them as you bring the mind to a state of concentration through right mindfulness, you begin to see that they're activities: Feelings feel, perceptions perceive, fabrications fabricate, consciousness cognizes. They're defined by the activity they do. And you can begin to see how you constantly hold on to those activities, which is what suffering is.

Now, for the sake of concentration, you do want to hold on to them for the time being. But an important part of both right mindfulness and right concentration is that you put aside any thoughts—any aggregates—about anything else that has to do with the world. You begin to see that those are perceptions and fabrications, too. This will sensitize you to other perceptions, other fabrications, and other feelings as you go through the day. After all, the work we do with the breath here isn't meant to be done only while you're sitting here with your eyes closed. These are skills you can carry with you as you go through the rest of the day.

There are times when you're engaged in other work, and it may be too much to be engaged in the work and have a sense of when the breath is coming in, when the breath is going out, but you *can* have a general sense of how the breath energy feels throughout the body. It's a general feeling tone—and you can keep it relaxed. If you sense yourself tensing up, you automatically relax it again. Breathe through the tension. Again: hands-on experience with feelings and perceptions. You begin to see the ways in which you really do make yourself suffer by the way you cling to unskillful fabrications, unskillful feelings and perceptions. Then you can ask yourself why.

You'll see that a lot of them have to do with sensuality. *Sensuality* in the Buddha's terminology deals not so much with the actual sensual pleasures themselves, but more with the mind's fascination with thinking about them. You begin to realize that that fascination is one of the big enemies as you're trying to get the mind into concentration. But getting the mind into concentration helps you separate yourself out from that kind of thinking, gives you an alternative form of pleasure—what the Buddha calls the pleasure of form, sitting here breathing, as you inhabit the body and sense the body from within, the whole body, from the head down to the feet. You can make it all pleasurable by the way you breathe and by the way you perceive the breath. That gives you a good alternative to sensual pleasure.

As the Buddha said, for most of us our only alternative to pain is sensuality. That's as far as we can see things, as far as our imagination goes. The practice of concentration actually stretches your imagination, stretches the range of your experience here. It gives you new options. As the Buddha said further, if you don't have this alternative form of pleasure, the mind is going to go back to sensuality no matter how much you tell yourself about the drawbacks of sensuality.

So you're strengthening yourself at the same time that you're sensitizing yourself to how you put your experience together and how you have choices in putting your experience together. These are things you learn by developing the path. They help you see your clingings and your cravings a lot more clearly. And you can see the drawbacks of your cravings, which enables you to perform the duty with regard to them, which is to abandon them.

So the path comes first. When you develop the path, it gets you started on performing the other duties with regard to the truths. So focus your attention here. Get really good at this. Develop this as a skill and you're going to learn a lot about the mind. You're going to learn about the body and the processes by which you

ordinarily cause suffering for yourself. And you get insight into how you don't have to do that anymore.

This is where your main focus should be. The Buddha calls right concentration the heart of the path, while the other factors of the path are its requisites or supports.

So place your attention right here. Work on these skills. You don't have to know too much about Buddhist theory in order to do this, but you find that you'll learn an awful lot about what the Buddha is talking about—not only what he's talking about, but also about how to do the duties he's set out.

So stay focused on the breath. You don't even have to think about right mindfulness or right concentration. Just be focused on the breath, making it comfortable, allowing that sense of comfort to spread throughout the body, then maintaining that as best you can. Your mindfulness and concentration will develop without your having to think about them. Then everything else you need to know will appear right here.

Attention & Intention

October 31, 2023

On the night of his awakening, the Buddha discovered that people's lives, and particularly their experiences of pleasure and pain, were influenced by their acts of intention and acts of attention. The intentions, of course, were the intentions that drove their actions. These intentions, in turn, were influenced by what they paid attention to, and who they paid attention to. The *what* was a matter of right views and wrong views. The *who* concerned the issue of whether, in forming their views, they paid attention to the teachings of the noble ones.

This pairing of attention and intention runs very deep throughout the whole teaching. Attention basically comes down to paying attention not only to what you believe is true, but also to what you believe is important to know about, what's important to have views about. This is why the Buddha described attention as an issue concerning which questions you pay attention to and which questions you put aside. A lot of questions, he said, are totally useless when it comes to putting an end to suffering. You want to focus your attention on questions that, when you answer them, help in that direction.

This is why he defined appropriate attention as focusing on two issues. One is what is skillful or unskillful to do with your thoughts, words, and deeds. The other issue is the four noble truths. These two issues are connected in that the four noble truths take the principle of skillful and unskillful action and apply it specifically to the question of why there's suffering and how you put an end to it. Unskillful actions in this context would equal the second noble truth, the cause of suffering. Skillful actions would equal the fourth noble truth, the truth of the path. That's attention. Then your intentions are to act on those truths.

The interaction of attention and intention basically defines what the Buddha calls the strength of conviction. Conviction is defined in terms of who you believe, what you believe, and what you do as a result of those beliefs. You believe people who have integrity. What you believe is that your actions can, if they're skillful enough, put an end to suffering.

That has a lot of implications. The fact that you can choose skillful actions over unskillful actions means that you have the power of choice. The fact that you can see

the results of your actions means that you can recognize mistakes and learn from them. As a result, you can begin to anticipate that a particular action will lead in a particular direction. So you're responsible for what you do. You're responsible for the results.

But most importantly, you're free to choose. You do have that freedom. We're not here just to accept causes and conditions as they play themselves out or, as someone once said, to simply witness "empty phenomena rolling on." We play a role in their rolling. We roll some things up the hill and some things down the hill. All this is part of what you do, based on who you believe and what you believe—and in particular, what your beliefs tell you to pay attention to.

This means that, after paying attention to the noble ones who teach you these things, you have to pay attention to your actions, to see if they're skillful. That the Buddha describes as an act of judgment. You weigh what's right and wrong. Then your intention is to carry through with what you've observed, to abandon anything you judge to be unskillful, and to do what you judge to be skillful in all situations.

This grows from conviction into the two discernment factors in the noble eightfold path: right view and right resolve. Conviction is essentially mundane right view. Noble right view pays attention to the questions of what suffering is, what's causing suffering, and what you can do to put an end to that suffering. Right view is not just a collection of some interesting facts about suffering. It's also stating that this is *the* big issue you should pay attention to.

Right resolve starts on the mundane level by applying the insights of right view to your actions. It consists of three intentions: the intention to renounce sensuality, your fascination with thinking thoughts about sensual pleasures; the intention to renounce ill will, the desire to see other people suffer or "get theirs"; and the intention to renounce harmfulness. The noble level of right resolve carries all three of these intentions to a higher level in focusing on the intentions that put the mind into the first jhana, the first stage of right concentration.

It's in this way that these two mental functions—attention and intention—work together in guiding the path. Then, based on the acts of attention and intention in right view and right resolve, you develop the rest of the path factors.

These, of course, include right concentration, which is what we're trying to do right now. Its connection with right resolve shows that it very definitely is composed of acts of intention. You intend to pay attention consistently to one object and you're going to fight off all the other intentions that would pull you away from that first

intention. The reason you do this, of course, is because you realize that this is part of the path to the end of suffering. It's something to be developed as part of the path.

It's important that you remember that we're on a path here. There's sometimes a temptation, when the concentration is good, to just lie down in the middle of the road. It feels good to be here. Everything is settled, balanced inside. You just want to stay. And it *is* good to stay, up to a certain extent, because the mind does need to rest. It's like being outside on a cold night like this and lying down on an asphalt road warmed by the Sun during the day.

It's certainly better than lying down on patch of brambles, i.e., the pleasures and pains of the senses. The Buddha's image of going through the world of our senses is that it's like being a flayed cow standing next to a bush that harbors lots of biting insects. The insects come to bite, bite, bite, and chew, chew, chew away at the cow's wounds. They keep coming and coming, coming, these sensory contacts. Some of them have only a little impact on the mind. Some of them have a huge impact on the mind. But they all bite, bite, bite away.

Ajaan Fuang once described an experience he had in his meditation. Looking back on it, I'd say that he was probably talking about his experience of stream-entry. He said he came out of it and realized that as soon as you open your eyes, there's pain. As soon as you engage in the senses, there's pain. That's the primary meaning of the word *dukkha*. Some people translate that as "unsatisfactoriness," but that's a very unsatisfactory translation. You don't say, "I have an unsatisfactoriness in my hip." You have pain in your hip. And it's important that you realize that, in comparison to what the mind could be experiencing right now, even the most pleasant experiences in terms of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations are painful compared to the deathless.

It's because of the third noble truth that we have the motivation to stick with the path, to keep on paying attention to the things the Buddha tells us to pay attention to and to maintain our intention to keep developing the path. So we do that as part of the work of right view and right resolve. We know that the duty with regard to the suffering and pain of clinging is to comprehend it; our duty with regard to the cause of suffering, craving, is to abandon it. So to get to work on our duties, we start looking at the things we hold on to, the things we cling to, the things we crave, in light of the three perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self. It's a choice we make.

Here again, there's an intention involved. As the Buddha said, fabricated things do offer their pleasures. Sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas; form, feeling, perceptions, thought fabrications, and consciousness can be very

pleasant. He doesn't deny it. But he says that if you focus on their pleasures, it just gives rise to more passion. And it's because of our passions that we keep getting involved in these things, craving them and clinging to them. From his point of view, that's how we make ourselves suffer: through our passions.

So we take his teachings seriously. He's one of the people we pay attention to—ideally, the primary one. We focus on the drawbacks of fabrications, seeing that they are inconstant, i.e., that the pleasure they offer is undependable. And because it's undependable, it's painful. Because it's undependable and painful, the question is, is it worth laying claim to as your self when you go around engaging in I-making and my-making? Is it really worthwhile? With some things, at some stages in the path, the answer is actually Yes, because we use some of the aggregates to make the path. So you hold on there. But with other things, the things that would pull you off the path, you learn to say, “No, I'm going to pay attention to the fact that they're inconstant, stressful, and not-self so as to induce a sense of dispassion for them.” Anything that would pull you off the path—away from your precepts, away from your concentration, away from the exercise of your discernment—you've got to view in such a way as to see that it's not really worth it. Pay attention to its drawbacks.

Ultimately, you get to the point where you can turn around and pay attention to the drawbacks of the path itself. You realize that although the road is nice and warm to lie down on, it's ultimately unsafe, because it, too, is composed of aggregates of form, feeling, perceptions, thought constructs, and consciousness. Aging, illness, and death could come along in a car and run you over. So when you've rested enough, you have to get up and move further along.

The Buddha's image is that we're on a raft crossing a river. When you're still in the middle of the river, don't be too quick to let go of the raft or you'll drown. Wait until you've gotten to the far shore. Then you let go.

But all the way across the river, from this shore to the far shore, it's a matter of developing attention and intention. You let go of these activities only when you've perfected them. You've paid attention to things that really are important to pay attention to. You've acted on skillful intentions in light of what you've seen. You keep doing this on higher and more refined levels.

In this way, these two themes, attention and intention, play a role all along the path, just that they get more and more subtle as you progress. They get closer and closer to each other as you pay more careful attention to your intentions, and you intend to pay attention more and more precisely to the things the Buddha said you really should pay attention to. Your focus narrows down, but not in a way that's

confining. Instead, it's getting more and more *to* the point, the whole point of what the Buddha taught.

That's why the Buddha said that the path is nourished by commitment and reflection. You commit yourself to doing it. You focus your intentions on really following the path, and then you reflect: You pay attention to what the results are. And then, based on what you've seen, you try to fine-tune your intentions again. And again and again. As you work on developing these two qualities together, they can take you far.

Thoughts About Thinking

March 2, 2023

We start with thoughts of goodwill to clear the decks. Any issues you may have had with people during the day, get them out of the way, because you're trying to give the mind a place it can settle down in, right here, right now, and you don't want those attitudes to be getting in the way.

If you're worried about issues in the future, remind yourself: The best way to prepare for the future is to develop your powers of mindfulness, alertness, and ardency right here, because the future is uncertain. But you do know that when you're dealing with uncertain things, unexpected things, the more mindfulness and alertness you have, the better off you'll be. So you're preparing the right tools.

As for thoughts of the past, if there are any mistakes you made in the past that suddenly come thronging into the mind, remind yourself: You can't go back and change those things. The best that can be asked of a human being is to recognize a mistake as a mistake, to resolve not to repeat it, and then to develop thoughts of goodwill again—for yourself, for the person you wronged, for all beings in all directions. This helps to put things into perspective, because when you start thinking about all beings in all directions, you realize: Everybody's done wrong things in the past. It's not just you.

That thought gets you more and more inclined to think about all of the wrong things that could be done in the future as long as you stay in this cycle of death and rebirth and kamma and more kamma and more kamma. Maybe it'd be good to get out. How are you going to get out? Well, the exit is right here. In other words, you're learning how to think in a way that brings the mind into the present moment, where it can then put a lot of its thinking down.

Now, in the beginning, you do think. After all, two of the factors of the first level of jhana are directed thought and evaluation. So you direct your thoughts here and you evaluate what's going on. You're using thinking to bring the mind to stillness.

Sometimes you find that you can spend the whole hour thinking about the breath: different breath energies in the body and how you can coordinate them. If there's a pain someplace in the body, you can ask yourself: How can you use the

breath to help with the pain, so that even though the pain may stay there, you don't feel so afflicted by it?

Other times, it doesn't take all that much thought, and the mind will settle down and get the breath comfortable very quickly.

Then you learn how to stay here. That's a different set of skills: less thinking, but a lot of vigilance. You check to see whether the mind is ready to run off anywhere else. It'll send its signals.

Scientists have studied people who aren't aware of when they've made a decision. The decision comes to the surface of their minds after it's been made someplace deeper down, and the scientists often use that fact to "prove" that people are not really making decisions at all. The decisions are made someplace in their molecules or their nerves. But actually, their ignorance of what's going on in the mind is just a sign that their minds have lots of walls inside. They've learned how to cover up a lot of things below the surface.

But if you get the mind really quiet, you can start seeing when a decision is made way before it becomes obvious, before it comes to the surface. When you can detect that, then you can make whatever adjustments are needed so that you don't go with it: either just reaffirming your original decision to stay with the breath, or making the breath more comfortable, going back and doing a little more directed thought and evaluation, or just breathing right through wherever you sense a physical correlate to that thought.

Otherwise, you just watch. And you learn how to watch again and again, continually.

You're like a hunter. You're waiting to see when the animals are going to come. You can't determine ahead of time when they're going to come, so you have to be ready for them at any time. Or like a sentry up in a fire tower in the forest: You have to be quiet. You have to watch. You have no idea when the fire you're watching for is going to come. But you do know you have to be ready.

So develop that same kind of attitude. You're ready to watch. Maintain that. Protect what you've got. As you do this, you begin to see the mind settling down even more, even more. Then there will come times when you've had a sense that the mind is thoroughly rested and it's ready to think again. The question is, what do you think about now?

Well, think about that sutta where the Buddha talks about how he got on the right path. He started dividing his thoughts into two types: those that were going to

be skillful and those that were not. What does that mean? It means he wasn't looking at the contents so much. He was looking at where the thoughts were coming from and where they were going. In other words, he was looking at them as processes, part of a causal chain.

Now, that approach to thinking is really useful. It's in line with the four noble truths. We want to see which thoughts are part of the cause of suffering and which thoughts are part of the path away from suffering. It's as if you have a factory here that's producing very erratically—sometimes good products, sometimes bad—and you're trying to figure out: Why is that?

Sometimes it'll require looking at the product itself, to get an idea of what could go wrong. But a lot of it has to do with going back and just looking at the machinery in the factory, looking at the workers, looking at the whole process, starting from the design of the product, through the implementation, and then the final product coming out. That's what you want to investigate. What happens to the product as it goes out into the world is not the problem. The problem is, why is the quality control in the factory so bad? Can you blame it on the workers? On the designers? Can you blame it on the middle-level management, the upper-level management? Can you blame it on the materials? Can you blame it on the machinery? There's a lot to explore here. There's a lot to investigate.

Investigation requires questions, of course. Just think of investigators out in the world. They have to ask questions. The people who analyze what's going wrong with a particular company have to ask questions of everybody in the company. But they have to ask the right questions.

Here the Buddha gives you some guidance. This particular factory is best understood in the framework of the four noble truths. There's suffering in here, and there's something causing the suffering. The Buddha gives you some indications. He doesn't just say, "There is suffering." He says what it is: clinging to the five aggregates. Okay, what are those aggregates? How many types of clinging are there? You can read about them in the books, but how do you actually experience them yourself? How do you get a sense of how the terms in the books apply to what's going on inside you?

Then there's the question: What can you do to put an end to that clinging and craving? You find that you have to take some of the things you've been clinging to and turn them into a path. There's clinging to the five aggregates—that's suffering. But then the five aggregates are involved in the path. Concentration takes all five of the aggregates. Your discernment is going to require perceptions and thought-fabrications.

So if you come across a perception, how do you know whether it's part of the problem or part of the solution? You ask some questions. You look at its behavior. This is an aspect of the Buddha's teachings that's really distinctive: looking at the behavior of those activities in the mind, the activities that we use to try to understand the world outside. Look at those activities in and of themselves. Try to understand them. Try to understand the activities of the path.

And have a sense of when your investigations are going off course. The Buddha mentions that there's a distinction among his teachings: There are the teachings that should be explored to see what the implications are, and there are other ones where you don't try to draw out their implications. That second category is interesting. One, it shows that the Buddha wasn't concerned about building a view of the world in and of itself. If he were trying to develop a consistent theory about the world, everything would have to be consistent, and all the implications would have to be drawn out and explained.

In some cases, he does talk about how the world works, especially how the world of the mind works. But at other times, he has you take teachings and hold on to them as tools for making a change in the mind itself: what we might call "performative" teachings.

Like the questionnaire about things being inconstant, stressful, not-self: That's meant to perform a function on your mind, to change things in your mind. That's one of those teachings where the Buddha tells people: Be very careful about how far you explore the implications. When you look in the Canon, you can see where the Buddha scolds people for taking some of those teachings and trying to work out the implications too far. It's usually around what are called, "the three characteristics," as in the case where one of the monks said, "Well, given that all feelings are stressful, and all your actions creates feelings, that means all actions create stress and pain."

The Buddha says, "When you're talking about kamma, you have to talk about the three kinds of feelings: pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain." After all, if you tell everybody, "Whatever you do is going to lead to pain," then why would they want to bother trying to be skillful? You've misapplied the teaching. You've worked out implications that are not useful. You've taken teachings meant to be performative, and you're trying to use them to describe.

The same with the teaching, *sabbe dhamma anatta*: "All dhammas are not-self." Some people take that to mean, "Well, the Buddha must be saying that there is no self." But then he says that when anybody tries to draw that implication out of his teachings, they've gone too far, as in the case of the monk who said, "If all the

aggregates are not-self, what self is going to be affected by the actions done by what's not-self?" That's a recipe for all kinds of unskillful behavior.

The Buddha specifically says that the theory that you have no self is just as bad as the theory that you have a self. In other words, both of these theories can get you tied up in knots. He calls them "a thicket of views, a wilderness of views." But if the mind is ready for the teaching, *sabbe dhamma anatta*, "All phenomena are not-self," then it really can perform its effect on the mind.

It's like one of those messages you'd get in *Mission: Impossible*. They say, "Read this message and then destroy it." *Sabbe dhamma anatta*—The Buddha uses that partly to remind you that even if you've had an experience of the deathless, it is possible to cling to that experience, as you turn it into an object of the mind. So you've got to see that that's not worth holding on to.

But then the sentence itself is a *dhamma*. If you were to follow it through in performing it, you'd have to abandon it, too. That's when you can abandon all the aggregates, including the fabrications and perceptions that go into *sabbe dhamma anatta*. That's when you're totally free.

That's a teaching meant to do something to the mind, rather than just describe things. It gets you to develop a value judgment of dispassion toward everything. But it has to come at the right time. If you're dispassionate toward everything at the beginning of the path, you abort the whole process.

So thinking, especially thinking about the Dhamma, requires that you have a clear sense of how far you should go with the teachings. Some teachings you can carry all the way through in terms of their implications. Other teachings, you can take only so far, because if you take them away from exactly what they say, they no longer can perform on the mind. If you try to hold on to the idea that there is no self, what does that do? It becomes a position that you have to argue over, that you have to defend against all takers. And that's certainly not going to put an end to suffering. It becomes an object of clinging for you, too. But *sabbe dhamma anatta* teaches you: "Let go of everything else, but also let go of me."

So try to be very clear about how to think about things, how to think about the Dhamma—because you do have to think. You can't just concentrate your way to awakening or jhana your way to awakening. You get the mind still and then you have to develop not only tranquility but also insight. And insight is not just a technique where you note things. Insight is where you figure things out inside. Know when to think. Know when not to think. Know how to think, how far to think. Know when your thinking should be descriptive, and when it should be performative.

That's when you become a master of your thoughts. We've lived our lives so long with our thoughts as our masters. Now it's time to turn things around.

The Desire for Things to Be Different

September 23, 2022

You're going to be sitting here with your eyes closed for an hour, so try to make it a pleasant experience. Take a couple of good long, deep, in-and-out breaths, and ask yourself: Where in that process of breathing is the potential for ease, pleasure, a sense of fullness in the body?

If there doesn't seem to be much pleasure just yet, focus on the parts that are okay, but don't think that they'll have to stay just okay. Learn how to develop the potentials you have here, because the breath does have a lot of potentials.

You'll find that the use of your perceptions will make a big difference: how you visualize the breath to yourself, how you pay attention to the different parts of the body, how you react to the parts of the body where there are patterns of tension. Can you focus on them in a way that begins to disperse the tension? Can you spread your awareness around so that it envelops the body and dissolves away any bits of tension here and there that otherwise would stay there because you're not aware of them, or you're not paying attention to them?

Ajaan Lee talks about the breath being the medium by which the medicine of alertness and mindfulness can make a difference in how you're feeling your body right now. That's one of the big lessons in concentration practice, one of the most important lessons: that you *can* change things.

Think of how Ajaan Lee discovered this method: He'd gone into the forest, walked with another monk for three days to a very out-of-the-way place. They were going to spend the Rains retreat there, depending on a hill tribe village for alms. Well, a few days after they arrived Ajaan Lee had a heart attack. As he later said, he was ready to die if he had to, but he wanted a sign: Was there a possibility that he might survive? And there were a couple of signs that indicated that, Yes, he could.

So he set about to see what he had to work with. He didn't have much. The diet there, from the point of view of Thai medicine, was really bad for the heart—a lot of bamboo shoots. In Thai medicine, heart attacks are basically considered a disease of the wind element, and bamboo shoots are bad for the wind element. So his food wasn't going to be his salvation. He realized he would have to work on the wind element from within.

Now, he'd already seen some yogis in India, noticing how they used the breath element in their bodies to stand in single positions for long periods of time out under the sun. He had learned a little bit about that. Now he was going to explore it even further.

That's how he pulled himself together. He looked at the potentials he had, saw what he could do with them, and as a result, at the end of the Rains retreat, he was able to walk out—three days to get back to civilization. He lived for another eight years.

So he didn't just say, "Oh, this is what a heart attack is like. It's like this." He didn't tell himself that the desire for things to be different was bad. He wanted to explore: What are the potentials here? To see how far they could go.

This is why we have Method Two in *Keeping the Breath in Mind*. It's also why we have that passage where he talks about how when you're working on concentration, you're taking what's inconstant and trying to make it constant. You're taking what's stressful and trying to make it easeful. And you take what's not under your control and see how far you can control it. You push against those three perceptions, and in doing so, you create a path.

This is how the path works in general. You don't start with equanimity; you start with the principle of action: that your actions can make a difference.

Back in medieval India, when they introduced the four noble truths in the basic textbooks for Buddhist doctrine, they would start with the five aggregates; move quickly to the three characteristics, and *then* get to the four noble truths. In other words, they started with a picture of reality: Reality is composed of aggregates, and the aggregates are marked by the three characteristics. The message of that picture was that reality is pretty much out of your control. It's not worth your while trying to exert control over it. That attitude has permeated a lot of Buddhist practice ever since.

But when the Buddha introduced the four noble truths, he didn't start with a principle of reality. In fact, there are passages in the Canon that make fun of teachers who, when you ask them a question about what's worth doing in life, will start with how many elements there are in the world, or whether good and bad are just social conventions, or the idea that actions are unreal. In other words, they start with a picture of reality, and then from that picture of reality, all too often the message is that human action is totally powerless.

The Buddha, though, started with the power of human action. His graduated discourse—his introduction to the four noble truths—starts not with principles of

reality, but with truths about actions. He talks about generosity, he talks about virtue, and the good that can come from doing these things—how you can make your life a better life when you practice these things. Of course, he's going to get to the point where the goodness of just virtue and generosity has its limitations, but even then, he doesn't tell you to just give up on action.

When he then teaches the four noble truths, the most important part of the four noble truths is the path: a path of action that will lead to the end of action.

But it *is* a path of action: It's instructions on how you make things better, how you take that desire for things to be different and you don't snuff it out. You train it. You realize that simply wishing for things to be different is not going to get you there, but it can motivate you to do the things that *will* get you there.

One of the definitions of suffering is not getting what you want: in other words, being born and not wanting to die. You can't get that simply by wishing. But there is a path—the path of virtue, the path of concentration, the path of discernment—that will get you where you want to go. It'll take you to a different place from where you are right now, a place where there is no death because there is no birth.

What's important is that you *can* make a difference, and you shouldn't try to deny your desire to make a difference or for things to be different. Instead, simply learn how to train that desire. After all, that kind of desire is one of the bases of success; it's part of right effort. And with each of the skills you learn on the path, you find that you really *can* make a difference.

Now again, you do run in to limitations. Ajaan Lee couldn't make himself live forever. During his eight remaining years, he had heart trouble again and again. For a few years he was able to pull himself together. There came a point, though, when he couldn't, but by then he had other things that were more important that he could do.

Which means when you start thinking about equanimity, remember the Buddha's pattern for teaching equanimity. You don't just go straight to equanimity. Think of those different lists that talk about developing equanimity: You develop equanimity through insight. You develop equanimity through concentration. You develop equanimity as part of the brahmaviharas.

Equanimity comes *after* you've made a difference in your mind, after you've found a sense of well-being, the potential for well-being in each of those activities. The equanimity of insight comes after the joy of insight. You gain insight to things that have been burdening the mind, and you realize that you don't have to carry those burdens. There's a joy that comes with that.

The equanimity of concentration: First you go through the first, second, and third jhanas—rapture, pleasure, more rapture, more pleasure. Pleasure gets more and more refined. Only then do you settle into the equanimity of the fourth jhana.

And then the *brahmaviharas*: You start with a sense of well-being that comes from goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, when you realize that you don't mean ill to anyone at all. Your heart is wide. You have compassion for all beings, including those who have harmed you. You have empathetic joy for others, with no sense of narrow resentment. The heart finds joy as it gets more and more expansive.

Then you develop equanimity, because after all, no matter how much you wish for all beings to be happy, it's not going to happen. Not everyone wants to do the work involved in being truly happy. There does come a point where you have to say, "That's as far as I can go in that direction," but you've already gone pretty far.

The same with the practice of concentration: You stop the directed thought and evaluation when you realize that no matter how much more you talk to yourself about the breath, it's not going to get any better. It's good enough as it is, so you settle in. Then you find that the rapture that comes from settling in like that becomes oppressive. It's too strong. You want something that's better, something more refined. So you drop the rapture.

You get the mind to the point where there's just pleasure in the body, equanimity in the mind. Then you find that even the need to breathe in and breathe out feels oppressive. Your sensitivities have been heightened at that point, so you allow the body just to be there. Because your awareness fills the body, breath energy fills the body, and the mind is very still, the body doesn't need to breathe. And you don't have to force it.

So you come to equanimity with a sense of fullness. If you go straight to equanimity before you've done anything, it becomes defeatist. Equanimity has to follow on joy for it to be the large-hearted equanimity that's a good part of the path. But then you see that it, too, has its limitations.

This has been the pattern all along. You saw the limitations of generosity and virtue; now you begin to see the limitations of concentration. But if things stopped there, it would be like the Serenity Prayer, "May I have the courage to change what I can change, the patience to accept what I can't, and the wisdom to tell the difference."

But there's more. When you take the powers of discernment you've developed as you've been getting the mind to settle down and you've gained an understanding of the mind—its tendency to run off to hindrances, and how you can put a stop to that tendency, and then all the processes that go into creating this state of concentration,

developing the potentials you have in the breath, in the body, in the mind, in your perceptions—then you begin to see: “Oh, this, too, is fabricated. This, too, has its limitations. Is there something better?” And the Buddha’s answer is Yes.

And you find that opportunity within yourself. That’s when you realize that the practice is not just a matter of running up to limitations and accepting them. You’ve seen where the limitations are everywhere else in the world, and that funnels your interest into the deathless, because prior to that, the mind seems to want to do anything else, go anywhere else, but to the deathless.

So you’ve got to show it that there are going to be limitations no matter where you go. Even the good things you do with generosity, virtue, concentration, and discernment have their limitations. Maybe it’s time that you open up to the possibility of something better. That’s why the Buddha is steering you in this direction.

You learn to accept those limitations because you’re going to go to someplace that’s unlimited.

That’s the message from the beginning, all the way through to the end: the power of your actions, the power of human action based on that desire for things to be different. You don’t snuff out the desire. You don’t deny it. You learn how to make it skillful. You learn how to focus it on skillful actions and you pursue the different skills of generosity, virtue, concentration, and discernment to see how far they can take you.

As in that image of the relay chariots: The first one can’t take you all the way, but it can deliver you to the next one, which can take you further to the next one, which can deliver you to the next one, which can take you even further. You don’t stop with equanimity, because you see that it, too, is fabricated, and there must be something better. You finally reach the chariot that takes you to where you want to go, a place with no limitations at all.

It’s the end of desire. It’s the end of wanting things to be different—not because you’ve told yourself that it’s a bad desire, but because you’ve gotten to a place that’s totally satisfactory and couldn’t be improved if it were different.

I saw recently someone quoting Ajaan Maha Boowa saying that, “Nibbana is a place of enough.” Their idea was that teaching people to have a sense of enough would take them to nibbana right now. That’s got things backwards.

When you get to nibbana, *then* things are enough because they really *are* enough—because you’ve made a difference.

You've seen how far desire can take you—it can deliver you to the threshold of where you want to go.

So don't look down on desire. That was another one of Ajaan Lee's lessons: It's because of our desire to practice, our desire for true happiness, that we're going to be able to find it. Just take that desire seriously. It's going to require skill, many skills, but they're skills that we can all develop by nurturing the potentials we already have.

Shoulds & Desires

May 24, 2022

I was leading a retreat on the brahmaviharas one time, and the question came up, “Given that the Buddha assumes that we’re all basically good, how does he explain the evil in the world?” And I had to say, “Wait a minute. The Buddha never said anything about people being basically good. What he assumes about people is something else: that we all want happiness.” Of course, it’s easy to explain why there’s evil in the world, because people operating out of ignorance have some very strange ideas about how to find happiness.

But that fact of desire: The Buddha said, “All things are rooted in desire.” All things skillful, all things unskillful, are rooted in desire. His purpose in teaching was to show people how to find true happiness in line with their desire to be happy, laying out what they should and should not do.

Now, a lot of people don’t like the idea of shoulds and should nots. But the Buddha said that that was a teacher’s basic duty: to give you a framework for understanding what kinds of things should and shouldn’t be done if you want to be happy. He’s not forcing this framework on you.

There’s a passage in the beginning of the Karaniya Metta Sutta: “This is what should be done by one who appreciates the state of peace.”

I was sitting in on another course on the brahmaviharas one time. They were going over this sutta line by line, and they started with the first line. As soon as they hit the word should, a hand went up: “I thought Buddhism didn’t have any shoulds.” The teacher had to spend the whole morning explaining how there could be a should in the Buddha’s teachings. But it’s not that difficult to explain. If you really appreciate the idea of peace as being the ultimate happiness, then this is what you should do. But it’s up to you to decide if that’s the path you want to follow.

Perhaps a lot of the problem about shoulds has to do with our background. Think about the Freudian analysis of the mind: You’ve got the id, which is your basic desire. And you’ve got the superego telling you what you should and shouldn’t do, and the shoulds there have nothing to do with your happiness. The superego is not saying that you should do this if you want to be happy—simply, “You should do this. Period.” So, of course, there’s going to be conflict with the id. Then the ego, which is

caught in the middle, has to negotiate between the two. You never find peace because there's always going to be conflict.

Whereas the Buddha's shoulds are of a different order. They're the four noble truths with their duties. These are the things you should do if you want to be happy: You should try to comprehend suffering. You should try to abandon its cause. You should try to realize the cessation of suffering. And you do that by developing the path.

All that activity you should and should not do is also about directing your desires, because the craving that leads to suffering—craving for sensuality, becoming, and non-becoming—doesn't cover all the possible desires there are. There are also the desires to be skillful, to develop skillful qualities and abandon unskillful ones. That's in the other half of the four noble truths, the skillful half.

You can divide the four truths into two sides: There's the unskillful cause, craving, and the undesirable result, which is suffering. Then there's the skillful cause, which is the noble eightfold path. You can't say the cessation is the result of the path, but the path takes you there.

The important element in the noble eightfold path is right effort. And right effort is about generating desire to prevent unskillful qualities from arising, and if they have arisen, to abandon them; to give rise to skillful qualities that are not there yet, and if they are there, to develop them even further. The Buddha's basically saying: This is guidance for your desire for happiness.

Now, a lot of his analysis is counterintuitive. Take, for instance, his analysis of the first noble truth. He talks about the suffering of aging, illness, death, separation from what we love, having to be with things we don't love—all of which are things that we know. But then he boils it down to the five clinging-aggregates.

The important word there is the "clinging." The Pali term for clinging, *upadana*, can also mean "to feed." This is where things get counterintuitive, because for most of us, our relationship to the world is that we want to feed off it. We like to take in not only physical food, but also sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, trying to find some nourishment from them. We feed on our intentions. We feed on our awareness. We're constantly trying to take things in, and that's precisely why we suffer.

When the Buddha talks about ways to counteract this, you basically have to change your relationship to the world.

Start with generosity: finding happiness by giving things out. Of course, you'll be feeding off the happiness that comes from the act of generosity, but it's an initial lesson in the principle that, with a lot of good things in life, the best ways to feed are to do the opposite of feeding: They're to radiate something good out. The same with the precepts: You're making a gift of safety for all living beings. Instead of taking things from them, you're giving them safety.

Then there's meditation. When they talk about meditation in the context of the acts of merit, they're talking about developing goodwill, and here again, you radiate. You're not taking in. You're producing goodwill from within that you can radiate out. It's a form of wealth that doesn't require that you take anything. You've got the resources inside. Simply by the way you think, you can create a good energy. You can create something that's a gift to others. And of course, you benefit. If you have goodwill for all beings, you're very unlikely to do unskillful things. You're very unlikely to harm them. In that way, you protect yourself.

So this is a basic pattern of the path: Instead of taking things in, taking things in, taking things in, we're learning how to radiate good things out, out, out. As when you're meditating here, right now: Focusing on the breath may seem as if it's just between you and your breath, and nobody else is involved. But when the mind settles down, it does have an energy. That energy radiates out. And when the mind settles down, it's a lot less likely to be hungry to act on greed, aversion, and delusion. So again, you're giving safety to other beings.

We're looking for happiness in ways where there's no clear line between who benefits and who doesn't benefit. You, of course, are the prime recipient of the goodness of your actions in thoughts, words, and deeds. But other people benefit as well, which is why searching for happiness in this way is so good. People usually look for happiness in material gain, in status, getting praise from other people, looking for physical pleasures. But with those kinds of happiness, some people gain and other people lose. Yet in the happiness that comes from generosity, virtue, and meditation, everybody wins.

So this is a pursuit of happiness that actually creates harmony in the world. We think about that phrase "the pursuit of happiness," and it sounds kind of grubby, especially if you're looking for happiness where people have to fight one another over what they're getting. But if you pursue happiness that's wise like this, you're actually generating more well-being in the world at large.

This is why I said that with the Buddha's shoulds—if the Buddha were to analyze the mind in terms of id, ego, and superego—it's not the case that there has to be a

conflict in the mind between the shoulds and the desires. Now, there will be conflict in the beginning—that's for sure—because you have lots of other shoulds sloshing around in the mind, based on what you've done in the past to find pleasures, and the mind may be addicted to those things. It resents being told, "There's a better way of finding happiness."

But the conflict isn't unending. As you go through the practice and you show to those parts of the mind that haven't been won over yet that you really can be happy being generous, you really can be happy being virtuous, meditating, developing goodwill, developing concentration, gaining insight, then you can win the whole mind over. This is one of the ways in which we bring about unity of mind: by following shoulds that are aimed at happiness and really do work.

That's what's special about the Buddha's teachings: The shoulds are designed for you to be happy. So if you find that there's any conflict in the mind as you're practicing, it's not because the Buddha's shoulds are unreasonable or punitive. It's because there's all that ignorance still in your mind about what actually would lead to true and reliable happiness. There are voices in the mind that can say, "Hey, I can find some quick pleasures my way. Why bother with the long term?" But that's blindness right there, saying that you don't care about the long term.

We all want happiness. The question is, do we care about the long term? If you're wise, you'll say Yes.

Location, Location

August 24, 2022

Tatra tatrabhinandini—delighting now here, now there: That's part of the description of the craving that gives rise to suffering. It has a location, a here or a there. It focuses on a spot, and in that spot it creates a little kernel of what you want. Around that kernel comes your sense of who you are who's able to get that thing, and the world in which you're going to get that thing. That's how becoming comes from craving.

That sense of location is important to understand, because sometimes it goes here, sometimes it goes there, all very quickly. It's very hard to track down. As the Buddha points out, often we're not really clear about where our cravings are. These are the things that run our lives, yet often we don't even know exactly what we're craving.

You may have a desire for a person and think that the desire is focused on the person, but maybe it's focused on your perception or on the way you talk to yourself about the person. Or your idea of how you look when you're with that person. Maybe that's the real allure.

This is one of the reasons why interpersonal relationships can be so fraught. You think the other person wants you, but they don't want you, they want their idea of you. Or they're attracted to a narrative they create around you that involves their identity but has very little to do directly with you. And, of course, you're doing the same thing to them, too.

This is why the Buddha has you stop and look and think. There's a passage where he says, *Something you've never seen before, is there any craving there?* Your first reaction might be, *Well, yeah, there are lots of things I haven't seen that I crave.* But when you stop to think about it, it's not really the thing itself that you crave. You crave your mental image of it, your anticipation of it, how you paint that picture or perception of it in your mind. That's where the craving is focused.

You really do want to pay careful attention to where your cravings are located, because they can easily lead you astray. You know the image the Buddha gives of rebirth as being like a fire spreading out from a house, clinging to the wind. The wind stands for craving. If your craving is totally unknown to you here and now, it'll be

even harder to comprehend then. You'll be giving your next life over to a force that you don't even know. It's a scary thought.

So he gives you a checklist of the various places where craving might be focused: any of the six senses; any of the objects of the six senses; and then contact at the senses; consciousness at the contact; feeling born of the contact; perceptions for sights, sounds, smells, taste, tactile sensations, ideas; intentions for those things; directed thoughts; evaluation—the way you talk to yourself—around those things. Craving itself can be an object of craving. So you see how slippery it is, and how it can be focused just about anywhere.

When you stop and think about it—that when you die, this will be the force that leads you on—and when you see how fickle craving is, it makes you really want to figure out some way to get to know it, so that you can get beyond it.

This is one of the reasons why we practice concentration: to get to know our cravings. And we start by *craving* stillness of mind.

It's a perfectly legitimate attitude to have toward the path. Sometimes you're told that you should practice the path without any desire, without any sense even that you're doing the path, but the path's not going to get done on its own that way. And if you pretend not to have any desire around the path, the desire that's actually there goes underground, into the dark. The right approach is to consciously develop the desire of right effort to do the work—the desire to prevent unskillful qualities from arising or, if they have arisen, the desire to abandon them; the desire to give rise to skillful qualities and, once they're there, the desire to maintain them and develop them. That effort is directed here at getting the mind into concentration.

As you give the mind a location, you give your craving a location. You're going to stay here with the breath and you're going to watch over it to make sure it doesn't move. And, of course, it will move, but you want to be alert to its movements.

You're beginning to understand: This is what craving does. It focuses here, delights now here, then delights over there someplace else—it's pretty fickle. We complain about the objects of craving, saying that they're impermanent or inconstant, but the craving itself is pretty inconstant and unreliable. Still, it is something you can tame.

As you tame it and use it to keep the mind concentrated, you get to know it better and better. You see what it means to have a location, and how the mind creates a sense of identity around that location: you as the meditator, and the world inside the body as the world in which the meditator functions. You're seeing all the processes of becoming, the ones that can eventually lead to birth again.

But at the same time you're making your gaze a lot more refined and a lot steadier. That way, you can sense when the location of your craving moves and you can exert some control over it. That, at the very least, is what you want to be able to do as death approaches, so that craving doesn't just run off, taking you someplace you don't anticipate at all—or you suddenly find that it's been lying to you all the time.

You're making honest people out of your cravings by making them steadier, more focused, more reliable. Then you learn how to understand them. It's through understanding them by working with them that you can take them apart.

This is what the Buddha means by comprehension: You see why craving leads to a state of becoming by creating that sense of location. You see that precisely as it's happening because you're trying to make it happen right here, so that you know it really well. I think it was Kant who said, "We know best the things that we do."

So you're going to do the craving consciously, fully alert, rather than in ignorance. That way you can begin to see through it. You see how it creates locations—and how the sense of location is something that's not necessarily there.

After all, when you get rid of craving, as the Buddha said, you're released everywhere. There's no *there* there. As he says in one spot, "It's neither here nor there nor between the two." There's no sense of space or the dimensions of space, because there's no craving there to create locations.

We think that craving simply finds pre-existing locations, and sometimes it does, but it creates them, too. When you get really skilled, you can find out what it's like not to have a location. That's when you're free.

This is one of the reasons why we work so hard at getting the mind into concentration and keeping it here: so that we can come to know this process of creating a location—exactly how the mind does that—and so that we can take it apart and free ourselves from it.

So don't be afraid to desire concentration. Don't be afraid to desire to do it well, because it's in doing the concentration and desiring it that you learn what desire does. When you see the subtle stress even in a state of concentration, and the mind inclines to something better than that, you've raised your sights. It's when the mind is inclined in that higher direction that the opportunity for the deathless will open up.

This is how we use desire to put an end to desire, how we use craving to put an end to craving. We use it so that we can understand it, because only when you understand it can you get past it to be free.

Realizing Cessation

February 8, 2023

The duty with regard to the third noble truth is to realize it, to realize that there is a dimension totally free of suffering. It's unchanging, blissful, a type of consciousness that has no object, no restrictions: what the Buddha calls unrestricted awareness. And it's the best thing there is. As Ajaan Maha Boowa once said, if you could take nibbana out and show it to other people, they wouldn't want anything else. We don't talk much about the duty with regard to this truth because it depends on doing the duties with regard to the other noble truths. In other words, you have to comprehend suffering, you have to abandon craving, and you have to develop the path before you can finally reach a realization of the third noble truth. In particular, the act of abandoning craving is part of the definition of the third noble truth itself.

But the third noble truth also plays an important role in our inspiration, our motivation for taking on the duties with regard to the other noble truths to begin with. We have to want to go there.

So it's good to realize that it really is something positive. The Buddha said that if you think there's anything negative at all about nibbana, anything negative at all about attaining this truth, that's wrong view. The end of suffering is totally positive. It's good to think about that because it's an alternative to what we're experiencing now. We hold on to our old ways largely because we think there's no alternative. The Buddha showed us that there is, and that it can be attained through our own efforts. So he talks about it enough to give us the desire to go there.

After all, desire is the root of all *dhammas*. Even the path is based on desire. And, of course, all the things we do that lead to suffering are based on desire, too. The only thing that's not based on desire is nibbana itself. But to get there, we have to desire to put the path together. This is in line with the first verse in the Dhammapada: All dhammas have the mind as their forerunner, and they're achieved through the mind. In other words, the mind is proactive.

It's because we sense this truth, even though we may not fully know it, that we give so much credence to our cravings, because we know it's through our desires that we can get things done. Now, the question is, "Do they get done well? Do they get done to our satisfaction?" The Buddha's telling us, "Not really." Look at the things

that you might desire here in this world or in any world. Either you suffer when you don't get what you desire, or else there's the suffering that comes when you *do* get what you desire, and it turns out to be disappointing. There's always going to be that disappointment. This is why the Buddha has us think about those perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self, to remind us of the drawbacks of the things of the world.

We have to learn which kinds of desires we should follow, which ones we shouldn't. The Buddha gives us some guidance in his list of the different kinds of emotions that he divides into household-based emotions and renunciation-based emotions. Each type has three. There's joy or happiness; grief or distress; and then equanimity.

Most of us muck around in the household emotions. We get what we want for a while and then we don't get what we want. So we want to go back and get some more of what we like. In other words, we go back and forth between household distress and household happiness. But it's never really satisfying. Now, if we felt that that was all there was in the world, we'd put up with it. Or we would desire that we not want anything at all. We've had enough of this, and so we just hope for annihilation. But that hope for annihilation, the Buddha discovered: That, too, leads to more becoming—in other words, more experiences of happiness and distress on the household level. And “household” here doesn't mean only human households. Deva households, brahma households: They're all on the same level as far as the Buddha's concerned.

He tells us that there's something else, something much better, so that we don't have to keep mucking around in those emotions. The way there starts with what he calls renunciation distress, in which you have a longing for unexcelled liberation and you ask yourself, “Oh, when will I be able to dwell in that dimension in which the noble ones already dwell?” In other words, you believe that it is a possibility. You believe that there are noble ones who have attained that dimension. The distress here simply is the fact that you're not there yet. But, as the Buddha said, this is much better than trying to go for more household happiness.

If there's household distress, go for renunciation distress, realizing, “Okay, here I'm suffering from the ways of the world, but going back and trying to find happiness in the world is not that desirable, either. Something totally free from those limitations would be more desirable.”

That means, of course, that you're convinced that there's a path you have to follow. That conviction is what leads to the good path.

Think about the Buddha's analysis of what's called transcendent dependent co-arising, where he goes through all the factors of dependent co-arising and gets to suffering, but this time he doesn't stop with suffering. The next factor is conviction. In other words, you finally decide, "Okay, there must be a way out." Then you start practicing the way, and that way gives rise to joy.

This is an important element on the path. There's the joy of being virtuous, the joy of concentration, and the joy of insight. When you see that the things you used to be a slave to are not worth it and you can rise above them so that you're no longer attracted to them, a strong sense of freedom comes with that.

And when you attain the goal, there's an equanimity that goes along with that. The goal itself is not equanimity. The goal, of course, as the Buddha said, is the highest happiness, the highest bliss. But then you look back at all the things that used to weigh the mind down and you can be equanimous about them. In the Buddha's terms, you're *disjoined* from them, so they make no inroads on the mind.

So realizing that there is this alternative is what gives hope to our lives. Otherwise, if this alternative were *not* there, then it would simply be a matter of personal preference: Do you like struggling to gain the pleasures of the world? Or are you so tired of that you'd like to try annihilation for a while? It'd really be up to you to decide what you prefer.

But when the Buddha says there's something objectively much better, you owe it to yourself to give it a try. It's because of this something-much-better that the contemplations of inconstancy, stress, and not-self really work.

Again, if everything that could be experienced were inconstant, stressful, and not-self, you'd say, "Well, I'll go for it, or I may not go for it if that's all there is." But it's because there's something else that's not inconstant, not stressful, that's beyond perceptions of self or not-self: That's why these perceptions are useful. One of the epithets for that something-else is "the permanent."

It's kind of ironic. There are people who say, "Even believing that there is anything at all possible in human experience that could be permanent is an eternalistic view." But the Buddha never said that. He said that thinking that the *self* is eternal: That's eternalism. That would be a wrong view.

But nibbana, he said, is permanent. It's actually outside of time, which means that *eternal* isn't even an adequate word to describe it. But it is unchanging. And it's because of that unchanging dimension that the three perceptions actually work. In other words, you believe that they lead you to something unchanging, which is why you apply those perceptions to all the things you could crave, all the things you could

cling to, to reinforce the perception that they don't measure up to what you really want.

So it's for the sake of this something-else that we try to comprehend suffering, abandon the cause, which is craving, and then we develop the path. This is what gives meaning to all the other noble truths, and what makes them noble.

Remember the Buddha's definition of a noble search. It's for something that's deathless: free from aging, free from illness, free from death. This third noble truth is what satisfies those criteria. It's the truth that makes all the other truths noble as well. So it's for the sake of realizing this truth that we're sitting here meditating. Let that inspire you. That alternative is there.

We tend to think that it's superhuman. But, after all, the Buddha came to teach human beings. It's like the story they tell of Richard Feynman. Someone had written to him one time after learning that Richard Feynman liked to play the bongos, saying that, "This makes you human." And he was offended. He wrote back and he said, "Doing physics is actually human as well." In the same way, suffering is human, that's true. Having craving is human. But the fact that we can, through our efforts, find total release from suffering, totally realize the cessation of suffering: That's human, too, and it's what makes being human worthwhile.

The Not-Self Discourse

August 6, 2023

Five days ago we marked the day when the Buddha gave his first sermon—Setting the Wheel of Dharma in Motion. He explained the four noble truths and the duties appropriate for each. As a result, one of his listeners in the five brethren, Kondañña, gained the Dhamma eye, becoming the first noble disciple in the Buddha’s teachings, and also the first member of the Sangha—the conventional Sangha—when he received ordination after the end of the sermon.

The story doesn’t end there. It goes on to say that over the next few days the Buddha taught the remaining members of the five brethren to gain the Dhamma eye as well. Then at some point he gave the second sermon—the sermon we chanted just now—which the commentary has named The Not-self Characteristic. In the Canon it’s simply called Five, *Pañca*, referring either to the five brethren or to the five aggregates.

According to a tradition in Thailand, that was on the fifth day after the first sermon. So that would be tonight. This was the sermon that led all five of the brethren to become arahants—to gain full awakening. It was on the theme, of course, of not-self.

That should alert us right there. Some people say that stream-entry is the point where you see there is no self, but if that were the case, then why would the Buddha have given this sermon to the five brethren? They would have already seen there was no self, and there would have been nothing more to say on the topic. But the fact is that there is more to say.

Actually, with stream entry you let go of the fetter of self-identification. In other words, you no longer think that “I am any of the five aggregates.” You no longer think that “I own any of the five aggregates,” or that “the five aggregates exist in me,” or that “I exist in the five aggregates.” With the letting go of this fetter, that kind of identification with the five aggregates is gone. But there still is a lingering sense of *I am* hovering around the aggregates. That sense of *I am* is called conceit, and that fetter isn’t cut until arahantship.

There’s a sutta where a non-returner talks about what this lingering conceit is like. He says a lingering sense of *I am* hovers around the five aggregates just as when

you've washed a cloth and there's still the lingering scent of the detergent around the cloth. So it was that lingering scent that the Buddha was trying to get rid of.

He started out by pointing out that the five aggregates are not totally under your control. They can suffer dis-ease: There's dis-ease in the body, dis-ease in your feelings, in your perceptions, in your thought fabrications, even in your consciousness. If these aggregates really were you or yours, you could totally control them.

Now, this doesn't mean you have no control at all. As the Buddha admitted in other places, the aggregates do offer some pleasure. If they didn't offer any pleasure at all, we wouldn't be attached to them. And they do respond to some extent to our control, which is why we're able to take them and turn them into the path.

But ultimately, no matter what you do with them, it's all going to fall apart. Except for one thing: You make the noble path out of them, the path leads you to the deathless, and then when the aggregates fall apart, it doesn't matter, because you've found the deathless, which isn't affected by their falling apart.

After pointing out that the aggregates don't lie totally under your control, in the next step the Buddha gave the five brethren a questionnaire about them. This was a questionnaire that he was to give many, many times throughout his teaching career, starting with form: Is form constant or inconstant? We look at it, and can see it's inconstant. If something is inconstant, is it easeful or stressful? The fact that it's inconstant and undependable means that it's stressful.

It's like building a house in a place where there are earthquakes and landslides all the time—you know no peace. So if it's inconstant, stressful, and subject to change, is it worth calling it your self? And the answer is No.

He continued with the same questionnaire down through the remaining aggregates: feelings, perceptions, thought fabrications, and consciousness. That dealt with the aggregates in the present moment. Then he continued by saying you can extrapolate from the present moment and think back to the past. Those who are able to remember past lives, what are they remembering? They're remembering form, feeling, perceptions, fabrications, consciousness. And wherever you could go in the future in the universe, even the most refined levels, the far distant levels, anywhere in space and time: just the same aggregates with the same features.

So, you look at the present moment, you see that it's not worth latching on to. Then you extrapolate and you realize anything you could create out of these aggregates into the future would not be worth latching on to, either.

This is where the five brethren abandoned their clinging to the aggregates. That's how they gained full awakening.

Basically, they developed dispassion. *Dispassion* is a word we don't like to use a lot in the West. It sounds gray, dull, dead. But what it basically means is that you've outgrown your fascination with something. You're no longer intrigued by it because you've seen that it's got its limitations.

There two ways you can do this. For one, think about tic-tac-toe: When you're a little child and you haven't thought through all the various ways that tic-tac-toe could be played, it's fascinating. You have fun playing it with your friends. But there comes a point where you realize there are only so many different ways you can play it. If you start in a particular way, you're bound to lose; if you start in another way, at the very least you're going to come to a draw. You lose your fascination because you've seen all the potentials. They no longer hold any interest; they no longer capture your imagination.

For an example of another way you could get dispassionate, think about chess: It'd be very hard to think of all the possible ways of playing chess. Some people find it fascinating and can spend their whole lives doing it. But if you look at the rules, you realize: This is all very artificial. And what's really accomplished by playing such an artificial game? So even though you don't know all the possibilities, you realize that whatever they are, they're not worth it.

This was the kind of dispassion that the five brethren developed, looking at the aggregates and realizing there's not much there.

We can create all kinds of things out of the aggregates. Universes can go on and on and on for billions of years, with all kinds of different configurations. Beings can take on all kinds of identities. As the Buddha once said, "Look at the animal world. All the different animals, from the little tiny ones to the huge whales." Back in those days they had stories of whale-eaters, whale-eater-eaters, and whale-eater-eater-eaters: enormous sea creatures. All of that comes from the mind. It's all just five aggregates, but those aggregates can take all kinds of shapes, all kinds of identities.

But it's still all very artificial and it's all going to come crashing down. Even whale-eater-eater-eaters have to die. Then you try to take on a new identity again—and again and again. You can think about that: Cast your mind to the past, about the vast number of eons you've been doing this. And into the future: How many more eons do you want to keep on doing it?

Now, the five brethren had the advantage that they had actually experienced the deathless already and they were looking at this teaching in terms of the four noble

truths. In fact, that questionnaire makes sense only in terms of the four noble truths. If you believe that all there is in this world is the five aggregates, then you say, “Well, even though they have their limitations, this is what I’ve got, this is all there is—I’d better hold on.”

But they’d already seen there was something else that was *not* encompassed by the five aggregates. That was consciousness without surface, a consciousness apart from the aggregates because it’s not known through any of the senses and has no past, future, or present: It’s deathless. They realized that by letting go of the aggregates, they could fully realize that. So, their minds were already inclined to see: There must be something better; there must be some way out of this universe of limitations.

The Buddha’s Dhamma talk was designed to help encourage that sense of dispassion, so that whatever lingering sense of *I am* there might be around the aggregates would be gone—because the five aggregates lost their appeal. They no longer captured the imaginations of the five brethren.

Our problem is that we still find them fascinating. For most of us, we haven’t seen the deathless, so the range of our imagination is encompassed by these aggregates. And as we’ve seen, you can do all kinds of things with them. But you have to learn to realize that in spite of their many potentials, all those potentials have their limitations. You have to trust the Buddha when he says that if you can develop dispassion for these things, there’s something a lot better.

So we follow his strategy: We take these aggregates and we do the most useful thing we can with them, which is to make them a path, the noble path. Right view, for instance, is made up of perceptions and thought fabrications. Right concentration is made up of all five aggregates.

Do the best thing you can with the aggregates and then reflect on what you’re doing. You push against those three perceptions: inconstancy, stress, and not-self. You try to make your concentration as constant as you can, as easeful as you can, and bring the mind as much under control as you can. You learn to appreciate the state of concentration that can develop, and the many levels it can go through. That becomes your main attachment. It helps you let go of a lot of other, less skillful attachments.

But then, when you begin to see—as your sensitivities get developed—that this, too, has its limitations, and keeping in mind the Buddha’s third noble truth, you say, “Well, how about letting go of even this?” That’s the task that lies before us. The five brethren have shown the way. And as I said, the Buddha would give this questionnaire with the follow-up reflection many, many times throughout the course of his teaching career, bringing many people to awakening.

So, trust the Buddha when he says that dispassion is the highest of all dhammas. Trust Ven. Sariputta when he taught those monks who wanted to introduce the Buddha's teachings to strangers in foreign countries: "When they ask you, 'What does your teacher teach?' Start out by saying, 'He teaches the end of passion and desire.' 'Passion and desire for what?' 'For the five aggregates.' 'What advantage is there in ending passion and desire for those things?' 'If you still have attachment to passion and desire for the five aggregates, then when those aggregates change, you're going to suffer. If you abandon that passion and desire, then no matter how much they change, you're not going to suffer.'"

As I said, he taught this because it's something that people *can* do; and they'll benefit from it. They'll find the ultimate happiness.

In fact, this theme of dispassion is so important that when the Buddha's stepmother asked him for some basic principles of the Dhamma to take and put into practice, he started out by saying, "You know something is genuine Dhamma if it leads to dispassion."

So, trust the Buddha on that point. Learn to see the limitations of the five aggregates. They're like chess: You don't have to encompass all their possibilities, but just look at them right now: They show their limitations all the time right now. You try to develop a feeling of ease, and it'll last for a while, but then it'll change. You try to develop a perception of the breath that gives rise to concentration, and it'll last for a while, but then it'll change; and so on through the aggregates.

Learn to keep looking at this again and again and again until you've finally decided you've had enough. And that state of *enough* is not a dead weariness. It comes with the realization that when you've had enough of these things, something much better opens up.

So, follow the path, have trust in the path, and that's where it'll take you.

Getting Your Head Around the Goal

October 20, 2023

I know a lot of people who complain that they can't get their heads around what it would be like to be awakened, what nibbana is like. But we have to remember that that's not the duty with regard to nibbana. We're not here to get our heads around it. We're here to realize it. The word for realizing, in Pali, *saccikaroti*, basically means to verify, to witness. In other words, our goal here is to have a direct experience. We do that by following the path.

Now, the right view that begins the path *is* informed by reading and listening. There'd be no point in having Dhamma talks like this if that weren't the case. Then there's the discernment that comes from thinking things through, and then the discernment that comes from developing. A lot of times, our problem is we want to think things through beforehand in the hope that the more we analyze the issue, the more we read and think about things, then the more we'll have a good idea of what it's like to be awakened. Sometimes we even hope that that anticipation will lighten our burden and take us there. We want it to be our shortcut.

Of course, it does help to have a clear grasp of what the Buddha actually taught. But there's only so much that listening and thinking can do for you. And there are no shortcuts on the path.

Right view has to be made truly right by developing the qualities of the path. The temptation when you anticipate is to think, "Well, maybe I could clone awakening." There are even people who describe the practice as the practice of being awakened. In other words, you think about what the qualities of an awakened person would be, and you try to find or reproduce them in your mind. But that's actually the practice of pretending to be awakened because those qualities don't come about simply through thinking about them, or perceiving ideas about them and trying to impose those perceptions on the mind—or to say, "Well, awakened beings have gone beyond duality, so I'll just go beyond duality myself." That's just playing with the concepts.

You have to put the mind through its exercises because realizing awakening requires that the mind develop strength in its powers of perception, its powers of attention, its powers of reflection. They're going to be sharp enough and strong enough only if you put them to work in developing the factors of the path.

This is what we're doing right now. We're developing mindfulness. We're developing concentration. Instead of focusing on our ideas of awakening, we're focusing on the actual sensation of the breath. Instead of trying to figure out the goal, we keep coming back to the breath, exploring and figuring out what we've got here.

It's through these exercises of mindfulness and concentration that the mind's powers of perception can grow. When the mind is more still, it can see subtler things. It develops a more refined sense of what kind of pleasure can be experienced in the present moment. It also becomes sensitive to more refined levels of stress, dis-ease, or disturbance in the mind. It's when you can see those things that you're more likely to be able to see things that are deeper still inside.

So we focus on following the path. We don't try to turn the path into the goal. That would be like wanting to go to the Grand Canyon when you've heard that the Grand Canyon is like a big trench in the earth, and you dig a big trench across your path: your own personal Grand Canyon. That makes it impossible to go any further. You just get stuck in the trench.

You don't have to anticipate what awakening is going to be like in order to find it. Right anticipation is not one of the factors of the path. Instead, the Buddha says, "Try to focus on comprehending your suffering." Again, it may seem like a diversion or a distraction. But if you exercise your mind through developing powers of concentration and mindfulness, and then turn them on understanding how it is that the mind creates suffering for itself—suffering around physical pain, suffering around mental pain—you can see a lot of the levels of fabrication going on in the mind.

There's a book someone once did of Ajaan Chah's Dhamma talks, and the translation was full of distortions. One of them was when Ajaan Chah was talking about how as you sit down here and your mind gets still, it's like a still forest pool. The translators add that all sorts of wonderful and rare creatures will come to drink in the pool, and you as a meditator get to gaze at them in wonder and amazement. Well, the pool is actually your focus on stress and pain, and those wonderful and rare creatures are actually all your neurotic reactions around pain, all your unskillful attitudes.

You come to see a lot of things in the mind that usually go under the radar. After all, you've been dealing with pain since before you were born. When you were in the womb, it was bad enough. When you came out, you were suddenly exposed to air and they spanked you. This is after having gone through that very narrow passageway where you could've died.

Anyone who's been around babies knows they cry a lot. And there's nothing you can do to explain pain to them to let them know that this particular pain is not going to last forever, or that this particular pain is not going to grow and overwhelm their awareness. Babies have to figure pain out on their own in a pre-verbal way. Then, as they learn language, they can start articulating their attitudes toward pain, but they still maintain a lot of their pre-verbal notions. They—we—have carried those with us on into adulthood. And it's only by getting the mind really still and asking the right questions around pain, around your perceptions of pain, that you're going to dig out a lot of these old attitudes and be able to free yourself from them.

The path is something you *do*. It's not something you anticipate. The goal is something you will actually experience directly, and the path will take you there, regardless of whether you had your head wrapped around it before or not. It's always going to surprise you. So don't worry about getting your head around the goal. Try to get your head in proper shape to actually experience the goal by exercising it: focusing on what you're doing, focusing on the path.

People look at the factors of the path and wonder, "How could this possibly lead to something transcendent?" But that question comes from looking at the path from the outside. When you put yourself *into* the path, you see what ways your mind gets stretched, see how it gets exercised, see how it gets strong, how it develops a sensitivity inside, both to the things that come at it through the senses and to its own processes of fabrication.

A lot of the insight is going to be not about things you're looking at, but about the way you look at things. In fact, once you've gotten the mind into right concentration, one of the ways of getting insight is to reflect on the concentration, to see where it could be more subtle, where it could be more solid, and where there are variations in the coming and going of levels of stress. When stress goes up, what did you just do? When it goes down, what did you just do? In asking questions like that, the activity of the path becomes the object that you try to understand.

So the path functions in two ways. One, it makes you more sensitive. And then two, it pares a lot of your activities down so you can watch them as they happen, as you're doing them—and you can start questioning the doing that you're doing.

So remember the duty with regard to the goal is to realize it. And you get there by following the duty for the path, which is to develop it. As you develop the path, you find that your mind develops to the point where it's ready to directly experience the goal. You don't have to pretend that you're awakened. When awakening comes, it's always going to be unexpected. So prepare to be surprised.

Glossary

Ajaan (Thai): Teacher; mentor.

Anatta: Not-self. One of the three perceptions used to induce dispassion for clinging, craving, and their objects.

Anicca(m): Inconstant. One of the three perceptions used to induce dispassion for clinging, craving, and their objects.

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: Fermentation; effluent. One of a set of three mental qualities—sensuality, becoming, and ignorance—that “flow out” of the mind and keep one stuck in *samsara*. Sanskrit form: *asrava*.

Brahma: A high level of deva, inhabiting a non-sensual realm of form or formlessness.

Brahman: A member of the priestly caste in India.

Brahmavihara: Sublime attitude of unlimited goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, or equanimity.

Deva: Literally, “shining one.” An inhabitant of the terrestrial or heavenly realms higher than the human.

Dhamma: (1) Event; action. (2) A phenomenon in and of itself. (3) Mental quality. (4) Doctrine, teaching. (5) Nibbana (although there are passages in the Pali Canon describing nibbana as the abandoning of all dhammas). Sanskrit form: *dharma*.

Dhutanga: Optional ascetic practices, related primarily to restrictions on food, clothing, and shelter.

Dukkha(m): Suffering; stress; pain. One of the three perceptions used to induce dispassion for clinging, craving, and their objects.

Jhana: Mental absorption. A state of strong concentration focused on a single sensation or mental notion. Sanskrit form: *dhyana*.

Kamma: Intentional act. Sanskrit form: *kamma*.

Metta: Goodwill; benevolence. See *brahmavihara*.

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.

Parisa: Group. Usually a reference to the four groups of the Buddha’s followers: monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen.

Samsara: The wandering-on through rebirth and redeath.

Samvega: A sense of dismay, terror, or urgency.

Sangha: On the conventional level, this term denotes the communities of Buddhist monks and nuns. On the ideal level, it denotes those followers of the Buddha, lay or ordained, who have attained at least their first taste of the deathless.

Sankhara: Fabrication. Sanskrit form: *samskara*.

Satipatthana: Establishing of mindfulness. The act of being ardent, alert, and mindful to stay with any of four things in and of themselves—body, feelings, mind-states, or mental qualities—while putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.

Sutta: Discourse. Sanskrit form: *sutra*.

Tudong (Thai): The practice of meditating and wandering in nature, often as a way of observing the *dhutanga* practices.

Uposatha: Observance day, coinciding with the full-moon, new-moon, and half-moon days. Lay Buddhists often observe the eight precepts on this day. Monks recite the Patimokkha, the code of the basic rules they follow, on the full-moon and new-moon uposathas.

Vinaya: The monastic discipline.

Wat (Thai): Monastery.