

Antidotes to Anger

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You've probably heard that the Buddhist antidote to anger is goodwill (*mettā*, sometimes translated as loving-kindness). You may have tried it and found that there are times when it doesn't work. No matter how hard you try, it's difficult to generate goodwill for the person who cut in front of you in traffic or one whose decisions are affecting your life in a negative way. You may have come to the conclusion that there's either something wrong with Buddhism or something wrong with you. I'm here to tell you tonight that neither is the case. Actually, Buddhism has many other tools for dealing with anger. Goodwill is only one of them. It's important to understand that there's a whole array of tools you can use to deal with anger when it comes up in the mind.

I had a student once who would bring her son to the monastery. He was an autistic hyperactive child—a very difficult combination. As he grew into his teenage years, his anger became a real problem, so she brought him up to the monastery to have me teach him how not to be angry. I had to explain to her that that wasn't the way to approach the issue. The proper approach was to teach what to do when you *do* get angry. If you're told not to get angry, then you're left helpless when anger comes. It's better to realize that anger is a natural response in the mind, and that there are ways of dealing with anger that help you overcome it so that it doesn't affect your actions.

Actually, anger is an important tool in your arsenal for basic survival. We often misunderstand the Buddhist attitude toward anger. We all know that Buddhism is very much like therapy, in the sense that the four noble truths are like a doctor's prescription: There's suffering, there's a cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path to the end of suffering. It's very much like a doctor's diagnosis: There are the symptoms of the disease, there's the cause of the disease, and by attacking the cause of the disease you put an end to it. We often assume that Buddhism would therefore have a therapeutic attitude toward anger, or an attitude that's similar to American therapy culture, that is: If you're angry, it's *your* problem. But that, of course, absolves everyone else in the world of responsibility for his or her actions—which is not a very skillful attitude to adopt.

Actually, American therapeutic culture has two attitudes toward anger. One is that if you have anger inside, you should let it all out; don't let it get bottled

up. I have an older brother who believes in that. He believes that if he bottles up his anger, he'll get cancer. It hasn't been very good for his married life... I know other people who think, "Well, gee, you have to accept everything that comes your way and try to respond without anger." In that way, though, you become a Buddhist doormat. Neither of which is a skillful approach to anger.

The word *skillful* here is important. To understand any Buddhist teaching, you have to understand that the Buddha's basic distinction is between what's skillful behavior and what's unskillful behavior—and you have to apply that distinction in all areas.

There was once an occasion when one of the Buddha's lay students was approached by a person who asked, "What does your teacher teach? Does he teach that the world is eternal?" "Well, no." "Does he teach that it's not eternal?" "Well, no." "Infinite?" "No." "Finite?" "No." The person went down the whole list of what were the big philosophical issues of the day. In each case, the lay student said, "The Buddha doesn't answer that question." The other person finally, said, "Well, in that case, your teacher doesn't really teach anything at all, does he?" The lay student said, "No. There is one important distinction he makes: between what is skillful and what is unskillful." That lies at the basis of everything in the Dhamma. You may call it dualistic, but it's a very useful dualism. When you're being wheeled into an operating room, you want your surgeon to understand the distinction between skillful and unskillful. It's also useful to have that distinction in mind in your own life. It's certainly important when dealing with anger.

We're often taught that one of the basic Buddhist teachings is on acceptance—which can mean many things. It can mean accepting the situation around you, or it can mean accepting your anger. In either case, it's difficult to figure out exactly how you would balance that out, unless you had the distinction between skillful and unskillful behavior to fall back on. For one thing, I've never been able to find the Pali word for "acceptance." I don't think they had such a word. Think about that for a while. They did have the words for skillful and unskillful, but you don't see a Pali term for acceptance at all.

The Buddha often taught that there are problems in the mind for which the skillful response is to do something about it. There are other times when the skillful response is to just watch. Unfortunately, he doesn't give any simple A, B, C guidelines on how to know which is which. He does, however, give you guidelines on how to become the sort of person who can begin to make this distinction and be observant enough so that you can start coming to your own conclusions. And the issue of anger is a very important one here.

Anger arises when we see something wrong outside. There's either injustice, discourtesy, or disrespect. As for dealing with the issue of disrespect: I don't

know about you, but many times I find that Miss Manners has more wisdom than most Dhamma books. She had a great column once on the causes of crime, in which she said, "You read the newspapers and you begin to realize that the major cause of crime these days is *senselessness*: There was another senseless shooting, another senseless robbery, another senseless murder." And as she said, "We used to have such good *sensible* crime," as in crimes over love or money. Any motivation for crime aside from love or money, our culture thinks, is senseless.

She went on to say, however, that if you look a bit deeper, you begin to realize that a major cause of crime is—and you're not going to believe this—*bad manners*. You hear people say, "They didn't show me any respect!" "They were dissing me!" There *is* a lot of disrespect in the world, and people will, many times, commit crimes based just on that.

At other times, it's a deeper issue. Real injustices are being done out there. The question is: what to do about them? Often we see a situation that we don't like, anger arises, and we try to think of what to do about the situation while the anger is still in the mind. From the Buddha's perspective, the problem is not so much that we want to do something about the injustices, but that we allow the anger to color our perception of the situation and of what should be done. So he's not telling us to simply accept things as they are and try to swallow your anger, feeling that we're to blame for the anger. Rather, he's saying that we have to deal with the anger in such a way that it doesn't get in the way of responding in an appropriate way, or a skillful way, to what we see as wrong.

Once you get the anger out of the way, there are two things that can happen. One is that you may see that the situation is not as bad as you thought it was, but simply that your opinions had colored the situation. The other is that you can see the situation really *is* that bad, that something should be done, and the question is: What, when, and where? In other words: When is the right time, where is the right place, and what is the best thing to say in that time and place? So Buddhism is not saying that if you have anger you're a bad person and it's all your fault. Rather, it's saying that the anger is the unskillful element in the equation of sensing that something should be done—and that's what you want to deal with.

The main problem with anger is that it tends to block out certain parts of the mind. There's a kind of clarity that comes with tunnel-vision, but it's an unfortunate clarity, for often, after the action is done, you've got to live with the regret as your mind begins to open up and you see, from a larger perspective, "That was really stupid; I shouldn't have done that."

We had a case in Thailand one time, where two young men living near the monastery got into an argument. Now, people often think that those living in monasteries in Thailand deal with nothing but sweet Thai peasants, who are as

pure as the driven snow. For one thing, they don't have snow in Thailand. But also, in the village in which our monastery was located, we had a murder; there was prostitution; there were drunks; there was promiscuity—all kinds of stuff going on. These two young men got into an argument one night in the local store, and one of them stalked off and went home, got his sickle, hid behind a tree, and waited for the other man to head home. As the other man headed home—not knowing that the first man was hiding behind a tree, of course—they got into a scuffle, and the man with the sickle almost beheaded the other guy. Then he stuffed him in a burlap bag and dragged him down into a reservoir. And at that point, he probably realized that he'd done something very stupid.

Now, many of us don't go to the extent of murdering the people with whom we're angry, but there is that potential in the human heart, and you have to watch out for it. So we've got to get the anger out of the way, for often, as the Buddha said—and in fact, this is one of his reflections to help us deal with anger—under the power of anger, you will do precisely the things that your enemy would wish to see you do. An enemy likes to see you ugly, and when you're angry, you're ugly. He would like to see you destroy your friendships, and many times, under the power of anger, you destroy your friendships. He would like you to act in ways that go against your own advantage, and many times when you're angry, you get things mixed up: What looks like it'd be good for you turns out to be not, and vice versa.

So the dangers of anger are real, but this doesn't mean that acting on injustice has those same dangers. It's simply a question of getting the anger out of the way, and then looking at the situation with clear eyes.

This is the Buddha's attitude toward anger. It's not that if things are bad and you're angry at them then it's your fault; but rather that, if you want to give an appropriate response to a bad situation, you have to get the anger out of the way. Then you can see things more clearly. There's a series of tools that are useful for that. One of which, as I just stated, is to help get rid of that tunneling of your tunnel vision that makes a particular action seem like precisely the thing you want to say or do in that situation. You have to step back a bit to make sure that certain brain synapses have not been cut off in order to make that decision.

The synapses that tend to get cut off are two qualities that the Buddha said are the protectors of the world. One is a sense of shame. Now, "shame" here does not mean being ashamed of yourself. It means looking at a possible action that you might do and realizing that it's beneath you: It's something below your values, below your sense of who you are. In other words, the Buddha's not advocating the shame that's the opposite of pride, he's advocating the shame that's the opposite of shamelessness. This skillful kind of shame protects you from a lot of things. It's a very useful attitude to have. You realize that shame

here is not a matter of having a low opinion of yourself. It's actually part of having a fairly high opinion of yourself, realizing that certain actions are beneath you and are not really worthy of you.

The second attitude that's a protector is a quality called *ottappa*, which means fear of the consequences of your actions. Again, this is a very useful fear: You realize that you're about to do something that you're going to regret for the rest of your life, so you don't want to do it. The problem is that these two qualities of mind are precisely the ones that get cut off when anger comes barging in. You find it easier to do and say things that otherwise, in your right mind, you would never even consider doing or saying. What you've got to do is to get rid of that tunneling mind state.

To do that, the Buddha has you look at things from a larger perspective. He recommends that the attitudes worth developing to deal with anger are all four of what he called the *brahmavihāras*. *Mettā*, or goodwill, is one of them, but another important one is equanimity. We often think that equanimity is simply accepting things and having no reaction at all, but that's not what equanimity means. It means looking at things from a larger perspective and getting a sense of your priorities—i.e., what's important, what's not important—and developing equanimity for the unimportant things, where you can't make a difference, so that you can focus on areas where you can. It also involves reminding yourself that when you do respond to a situation, it's going to have consequences in the long term, so you want your response to be focused and wise.

In order to remind yourself of that fact, the Buddha has you look at the human situation from a larger perspective. One of his passages for dealing with anger against someone is to think, "This person has done something bad to me in the past. But what should I expect?" "This person has done something bad to people I love. What should I expect?" "This person has done something *good* to people I hate. What should I expect?" And so on. Then from the past tense he brings it into the present tense for all three actions: either bad things to me, bad things to people I like, or good things to people I hate. What should I expect? *This is* the human condition. Are you going to ask the entire human race to do good things to you, good things to the people you like, or bad things to your enemy? That's not the human condition; you're in the wrong place. The world doesn't act that way.

The final reflection in this list, he says, is resolving not to get worked up over impossibilities. You cannot expect everyone in the world to act in a pleasing or in a good way. Again, this is not saying that you should let the world be as it is, but it serves to remind you that injustice is *not* an extraordinary thing in this world. And because it's not extraordinary, it doesn't give *you* extraordinary rights to do and say as you like without thinking about the consequences.

This is an important point to reflect on, because often when you're angry over a little injustice, it's the *biggest* thing, it's the *worst* thing, the most *outrageous* thing that anyone has ever done.

I used to think that it was very strange to think about these things as a universal part of the human condition. I thought, "My gosh, that makes it even worse. Everybody's dying; everybody's suffering injustice." But when you back up a little bit, you realize that it's not just you. People ask, when there's injustice done to them, "Why me?" And the answer is, "Because *everybody* suffers this." It's amazing, but that does help lighten the load a little bit. You're not being singled out for abuse by the universe. It also reminds you, as I said, that because injustice is not extraordinary, it doesn't give you extraordinary rights to go and bomb Bagdad. You have to think: "Given that other people's actions have kammic consequences, mine will have kammic consequences as well." When you step back in that way, it begins to put the situation into a better perspective. Then the question becomes, "Okay, what's the best thing to do right now? Am I in a mental state where I can perceive that?" If not, you've got to look at your anger.

When looking at anger, it's important to divide it into three parts: There's the actual anger as a mental state; there's the object of the anger; and there's the physical reaction in your body that comes from the anger. Our problem is that we tend to mix all of these things together. They all seem to be parts of one and the same thing.

Now, looking at any Buddhist teaching on anything, you realize the Buddha has two ways of analyzing an issue. One is to analyze things into their component parts. The other is to see things in terms of causal relationships. In dealing with anger, you've got to use both approaches.

The first step, as I said, is to take the three component factors of anger apart. When dealing with anger, you often find that the easiest thing to deal with first is the physical reaction. It can also be the most dangerous part of the anger, because your heart is racing, your stomach is all churned up, and you've just *got to get it out of your system!* We often think that getting something out of our system means striking back. You think, "Oh, I'd really like to say this. This is my chance to tell my boss off after all the times he's been a real bastard!" Then, of course, you regret it for a long time to come. But it's that sense of physical displeasure—the physical discomfort that comes with the anger: That's what you've got to get out of your system. This is where breath meditation comes in to offer an alternative way, a skillful way, to get it out.

It's useful to know that by breathing a certain way, you can calm down your heart rate. Breathing a certain way, you can breathe through any sense of tension in your body that comes along with the anger. This is one way you can prepare yourself for dealing with anger when it strikes: When you're sitting and

meditating, try to find out what ways of breathing will have different physiological effects. What ways of being sensitive to your body, in the sense of there being patterns of tension here and there in the body, are helpful in releasing the tension? How can you breathe through them so that they don't oppress you, and you can actually get the tension out of your system without having to yell at somebody or hit somebody?

In traditional Thai medicine, there's a belief that the body has energy channels, and negative energy should be let out your hands and your feet. So you might think of the tension—any tension building up in your body—as going out down your arms and legs and out your hands, out your feet.

I had a very peculiar experience with this one time. There was a man studying with my teacher. He was a retired air force general. He had flown in the Korean War, and apparently had bombed a number of people in the war. He came back to Thailand, and he spent the remainder of his life trying to make sure that he would be a stream-enterer before he died, so that he wouldn't have to go to hell for all the people he had killed. He was a very avid meditator. It's an interesting motivation, but it seemed to work: He really meditated very hard.

One day he was sitting under my hut—you know, in Thailand the huts are built up by these stilts—and he was talking to a few people, discussing the Dhamma. A strong sense of energy—he said it was almost unbearable—started building up in him as he was talking. He didn't know what to do. It just so happened that at that point I walked past him, so he grabbed hold of my arm. I *felt* the energy, like an electric current. It went up my arm and down out my legs into the ground. I was like a lightning rod for him. It taught me a lesson, that these energy channels they talk about really exist.

So when you find that there's that tension in the stomach and your heart is racing, think of ways of breathing through the tension to get it out your system. That way you can attack the anger by coming through the back door. Then, when there's no longer that feeling of oppression inside the body, you can actually look at the mental state and the object of your anger, and see them in a much calmer light. You can look at the situation for what it is, because you've taken *that* element out.

Other times, you find that you can actually deal directly with the anger first. You can look at the state in the mind and realize, "This is a very unpleasant state to have in my mind." If you have goodwill for yourself, *why* are you burdening yourself with this anger? I'll get back to this issue in a moment. But you find that, as you think through the situation, it's really not as bad as you originally thought. *But*, your heart is still racing. Many times people will misread this and say, "Well, I must still be angry." Remember, anger is a *mental* state; it's not a physical state. Your mind churned up those hormones in your body. They

haven't yet left your bloodstream, so of course the heart is still going to race for a while; of course there are going to be physical symptoms. But don't think that just because the physical symptom is there that the mental state is still there as well. Often the mental state is gone, and it's just a matter of letting things in the body calm down on their own.

So you can attack the anger either from the physical side by breathing through the tension, or if you've found that you've attacked it through the mental side and it's gone, don't misread the physical symptoms. They're the residue of the anger, so you breathe through them to dissolve them.

Another way of dealing with the anger is to look at the object of the anger as separate from the anger itself. This is the point where you might want to look at the person's actions and get a better perspective on them: "Is this person worthy of my being angry?" Sometimes they seem to be, and other times you realize, "Well no, it's not really worth it." That's when you can actually begin to spread goodwill to that person.

Before you spread goodwill to other people, though, spread some goodwill to yourself. As I said, if you're letting yourself get worked up about the anger, if you're just feeding on the anger, you're not really feeding yourself well. The mind does have a tendency to feed; in fact, the Buddha said that's the definition of suffering: The mind's feeding on the five aggregates. In the case of anger, it's feeding on feelings, perceptions, and thought-constructs.

This is junk food for the mind. If you could take a picture of the mind feeding on the anger, what kind of picture would it be? One that you'd be proud to pass around to your friends? Not really. So as you divide the anger into these three components, you begin to see that the connections that seem so strong, as you take them apart, all begin to weaken. You look at the object strictly as an object of the anger in and of itself, without necessarily connecting it to the anger. The anger as a mental state, the anger as a physical state: You begin to see divisions between them. As they get divided, and the strength of each one is no longer building on the other, they both begin to fall apart.

That's when you can decide what should be done. You're in a better position to see things for what they are. You can ask yourself, "Is now the time and place to say something?" If you haven't been able to wrestle the anger down, you say, "Well, no, not yet, okay? No matter how much I feel like saying something, I'll have to wait for some other time." Or, if you see that there's something that should be said, should be done right now, you're now in a much better space: The mind has opened up a little bit; it doesn't have that same tunnel-vision blocking off your sense of shame and your fear of the consequences of the action.

That's taking the anger apart into its component parts.

Then, if you have time, you can start using the Buddha's other approach,

viewing the anger as part of a cause-and-effect process: Where does this anger come from? Why do you want to feed on it? The Buddha said you don't really understand something until you understand two very important things about it. One is seeing the drawbacks. Often the drawbacks of anger are obvious—after the fact. The other thing to look for is the allure: Why do you like being angry? This is the part of the analysis that probably demands the most honesty. We don't like to think of ourselves as the sort of person who really enjoys being angry, but if that enjoyment weren't there, we wouldn't engage in it. Something within us gets a good kick out of the idea that "I finally can say what I've wanted to say. I've got a real emotion here, a real passion here; my life suddenly has some color!" Whatever the allure is, you've got to look for it.

It varies from person to person. Sometimes people feel that it's their sign that "I'm a real warrior type. I'm not a wimp. I can stand up for myself and hold my own." But you know, real warriors don't go around proving that they're warriors. In fact, they try to hide the fact, because one of the worst things you can do is to let other people know that you've got a few tricks up your sleeve.

Years back, someone gave me a biography of Eisenhower—which I thought was a strange thing to do—but, as I said, when reading non-Dhamma books you often get more Dhamma than you do from a lot of Dhamma books. This biography actually contained a very important lesson. During the 1950s, when everybody was rattling sabers about the Communist threat and what America had to do about this threat—that we had to attack here, had to attack there—Eisenhower kept saying: No. He was probably the only person in the country who could get away with that. After all, he had proven himself in World War II. He didn't have to go out and prove himself any further. He wasn't the sort of person who was staying in the Texas national guard during a certain war and suddenly had to prove some points. He'd already shown that he wasn't a coward. So he was able to keep us out of a lot of wars during the 1950s precisely because he realized that if these battles cannot be *won*, then it's not the time to fight.

That's the sign of a true warrior: picking your battles; when to fight, when not to fight. Sometimes many of us think that when anger comes, that's our chance to show that we're real fighters, that we're not cowards. But think about it. There's a time and a place for responses, and you want to make sure that your responses are skillful, and that you choose your battles wisely.

So look at the issue of why you like being angry, what thrill, what allure you find in the anger. Look for that and often you'll find that seeing the allure for what it is will undercut the desire to act on the anger.

Buddhism offers many different tools for dealing with anger; not just goodwill. There *is* that famous story in the Canon where the Buddha said, "If

thieves are savagely cutting you limb by limb with a two-handled saw, you should start with goodwill for them." I have a student out in San Diego who, whenever she reads anything in the Pali Canon she doesn't like, goes ballistic. And she went really ballistic over this one. "What is the Buddha telling us? To be pushovers?" No. He's basically teaching you a parable. You remember it much more easily than if he had said, "If people say nasty things to you, then spread goodwill to the nasty person, okay?" You don't remember *that*. When he says, if people are cutting you limb by limb with a two-handled saw, then spread goodwill to them—you remember that. Secondly, you realize that if your boss is yelling at you, or your partner's yelling at you, it could be worse. They're not sawing you into little pieces. Yelling is not the worst thing that anyone has done in the world.

One of my favorite stories in the Canon is of a monk who's going off to a very savage part of India. He comes to take leave of the Buddha, and the Buddha says to him, "You know, people there are really rough. What if they yell nasty things at you?" The monk says, "Well, I'll remind myself that these are very civilized people in that they're not hitting me." "What if they hit you?" "I'll remind myself that these are very civilized people in that they're not stabbing me with a knife." "What if they stab you with a knife?" "I'll remind myself that these are very civilized people in that they're not killing me." "What if they kill you?" "Well, other people have committed suicide; at least my death won't be a suicide." So remember that. It helps to keep the day-to-day irritations in perspective.

The Buddha does, though, teach you to have goodwill. That's *one* of the techniques for dealing with anger. But he reminds you that there are others as well. There's one in which you reflect on how, by acting under the power of anger, you're doing precisely what your enemy would like you to do. Now, the psychology of this reflection is not one based on goodwill for your enemy. It's based on, "I *hate* that bastard! I don't want to satisfy him!" It's spite, but it is a realistic way of dealing with the psychology of anger. If you're *really angry* at that person, the first thing you think isn't, "Well, I should have goodwill for this person, may he be well, may he be happy... whatever..." You think, "I don't want to give him the satisfaction of seeing me destroy myself."

That's a good way of using the psychology of anger to get out of anger. Once you've kind of gotten the anger out in the fresh air a little bit, then you can start thinking in broader terms—for example, about the fact that you've probably angered other people in the world, so the fact that *you're* getting angered right now isn't one of the major injustices of the human race.

However, if there are situations that really are unjust, where you need to make a difference, you want to make sure that your difference has been handled well. This is why reflecting on the universality of injustice is not meant to make

you give up. It's to remind you that the reason there's so much injustice in the world is that people say, "Well, this person's been unjust, therefore I have the right to punish him." That, of course, breeds more injustice, because it's not a skillful reaction. But if you realize that, "Okay, it's ordinary for there to be injustice in the world; but this time I want to respond skillfully so as to at least help break the cycle this time around."

When you can think in those terms, then you can give more energy and conviction to dealing with your anger properly. You can analyze the anger first in terms of its three parts—the physical side, the mental side, and the actual object of the anger—as three separate things, taking them on separately rather than all at once.

You can also look at the causal pattern: exactly *what* inside you makes you want to feed on the anger, or gives you a sense that your anger is a good thing, that it's a good thing to get it out of your system through retaliation—whatever those unskillful thoughts are. What kind of allure do they have? Why do you like feeding on them? When you can approach the anger in this way, it makes you much more effective in dealing with situations as they arise. You're much less likely to destroy friendships, much less likely to breed the cycle of continuous unskillful responses in the world.

The Buddha's not asking you to be a milk toast; he's not asking you to be a doormat. Years back, my teacher had a student who was a seamstress. She had a customer walk into her store one day, someone who knew that she was a practicing meditator. She asked the price of certain dresses and other things that the seamstress could make. The seamstress quoted her prices, and the other person said, "Well, gee, you're a practicing Buddhist, why are you charging so much? Shouldn't you be asking just for enough to get by, instead of asking for a big markup?" Now, the seamstress knew she wasn't asking for a big markup. Her prices were perfectly fair. But she didn't know how to respond. So she went to see my teacher and asked, "What should I say in a case like that next time?" My teacher said, "Tell the person, 'Look, I'm not practicing the Dhamma in order to be stupid.'"

When there *is* injustice in the world, when people are treating you unfairly, you don't want only to roll over. If it *is* the time to roll over, then roll over skillfully. But if it's not the time to roll over, respond in another way, skillfully, but make sure you're in the right mental state for knowing what's the skillful and what's the unskillful thing to do at that time and place.

Once you clear up the issue like this, you see that, on the one hand, the Buddha's attitude toward anger is very realistic, based on the fact that there *is* genuine suffering in the world, but—one of the great ironies of life—that we also cause suffering for ourselves by our unskillful reaction to what's going on in the

world. So when he has you focus on your own inner problems like this, he's not saying that you're the one to blame. Simply that if you want to deal effectively *outside*, you've got to take care of some stuff *inside* first. Clean up the mess inside, clean up the unskillful attitudes inside. *Then* you can respond in an appropriate way outside.

On the other hand, you can also see that, in dealing with the anger, there are many more tools in your toolbox than simply trying to spread goodwill to the other person. One of them is reminding yourself of the drawbacks of acting on anger, and particularly that whoever is treating you unjustly would be happy to see you act on your anger. Often that diffuses the situation right there: When someone comes at you in an angry way, yet you don't respond with anger, they don't know how to react. Anger is a game many people play, and they know the moves: "I say this, and this person's going to have to say that." But you don't. That right there often knocks them off their feet.

You can also regard equanimity as a way of encompassing the general scheme of things in deciding where to focus your efforts. As I said, equanimity is not simply *accepting* things, it means having a sense of priorities: "What do I *have* to accept, what can I not change? If there are things that cannot be changed, why should I waste my energy on them?" Each of us has only a limited amount of energy, so let's focus the energy where we *can* make a change, where we *can* make a constructive difference. This is the teaching of equanimity. It doesn't mean simply being blasé or indifferent about things. It means having a very clear sense of priorities, and learning to distinguish what you can do from what you can't.

When you see that the Buddha's attitude toward anger really is a very helpful and skillful one, and that he also gives you many tools, then you can learn how to use the tools: both when you're in the trenches, when you're actually confronted by someone doing something that makes you angry; and also when preparing yourself beforehand. Often when we're meditating, we think of the mind as *so pure*, "How could it ever give rise to anything else again, aside from these nice, pure mental states?" Well, you know it's got the potential. When the mind is in a clear state, you can start thinking about how to handle difficult situations that may come up in the future: "How am I going to be prepared the next time someone curses me?" Or whatever.

Remember that the skills you learn on the meditation cushion are *precisely* the ones you need to use when anger comes up. Learning to be in touch with your breath is a very skillful one, because often someone says something and it strikes you the wrong way, but you're so busy or so distracted, that you haven't paid it much attention. But it's there. If you're sensitive to your breath, you'll see it. That'll alert you so that you don't have to wait till the end of the day, when you

realize that something is very wrong with you as you're coming home, shaking. You learn to deal with it right away, simply by breathing through the tension, looking at the situation, and then coming from a much better place inside.

So, those are some of my thoughts on dealing with anger. I'll end the talk here.

Questions

Are there any questions?

[Q] To me, I think the major attraction or allure of anger is the feeling of energy and power that comes with it. It's often seemed to me, in the times I've actually been able to look at it, that if there were some way to separate the energetic component from the negative emotional aspect of it, it would be really marvelous. Because there is, simply, a force to it that is so much more powerful than feelings like goodwill—the kinder sort of emotions that come up. But that remains for me as just this idea, that it would be great to find out a way of doing this. I must admit I don't have the faintest idea of how to begin.

[A] Well, can you think of holding on to that energy for twenty minutes? Of how it would feel? You'd be exhausted. So basically, you're really draining yourself by letting that energy come through. It's *not* that pleasant. If you actually looked at it from a more detached point of view, you'd realize that—while there *is* a certain thrill to getting that rush of blood right through the system—you couldn't sustain it for very long.

[Q Cont'd] It does bring a sort of mental clarity. Or, at least, things seem to be very clear.

[A] That's the problem. That's the tunnel. You're in a complicated situation, and all of a sudden all you see is one little detail, and you see it *very* clearly. I have to admit, before I was a monk, I smoked pot. And I inhaled... Before becoming a meditator, I had always thought that pot gave great clarity. You saw certain things *really*, really clearly. But then, after I started meditating, I was visiting someone and he offered me a little. I said to myself, "Well, let's see what this is like, and why this is against one of the precepts." I came to realize that that clarity was precisely this issue: that so many parts of your mind just get shut down, and you're focused on one thing. But everything else was in a haze. So it's the clarity of an amoeba. Amoebas see *one thing* very clearly: where the food is. They have a lot of energy devoted to their food. So that's a lot of the appeal of anger: It seems clear; it seems to be very energetic, but when you open up your brain a little bit, you realize it's a very narrow, distorted perception, and the energy is really a drain.

[Q] I wonder if you could talk a little bit more about the breath that you referred to. I've been reading your book, *Meditations*, which I thank you for, and I learned a lot from it. But what has been surprising to me about the book was the notion of not just observing the breath, but actively engaging the breath, and using it in various ways. Could you say a little bit more about how to go about

playing with the breath?

[A] Working with the breath is a very direct way of showing goodwill to yourself. It's also a very good way of sensitizing yourself to the relationship between the mind and the body. This is what insight basically comes down to: seeing these interrelationships. The best way to see a relationship is to play with the variables: "If I breathe *this* way, what happens? If I breathe *that* way, what's going to happen?" It also sensitizes you to the fact that often you're already subconsciously manipulating the breath. If you tell yourself, "I'll just simply sit here and allow the breath to happen on its own," then that manipulation goes underground, where you can't see it. So what you do is, you consciously bring it up to the surface.

[Q Cont'd] When you say that, do you mean, for example, to breathe fast, breathe slow..?

[A] Breathe long, breathe short, breathe deep... Think of different parts of the body involved in the breathing. If you look at the breath process, you'll see that many of us use only a certain part of our body to breathe. Those parts get overworked; other parts are not participating at all. You can just think, "Suppose my legs could breathe. What would that feel like? Or my arms could breathe. Or I could breathe in through the back of the neck, or down from the top of the head." You realize that changing your perception of how the breath process works also changes how you actually breathe. That makes you call some of your preconceived notions about the breath into question: "My preconceived notions of how the breath was working must have been forcing certain breath patterns in my body, which may or may not have been very helpful." In this way, you see how perception affects your sense of the form of the body, along with the processes of the breath.

At the same time, as I said, it's a way of showing goodwill for yourself. You give yourself a nice, comfortable place to stay. If you're going to be sitting here for an hour, *nobody's* going to know if you're playing with the breath, right? I mean, I don't know how many people have asked me, "Can I really *do* that? Am I *allowed* to do that?" Of course you're allowed to do that. And even if you weren't, how could anyone enforce that prohibition? As you're sensitizing yourself to the body in this way, you find that you can create a place where it's really *good* to stay. And you can stay there for long periods of time. That's precisely what you're trying to do in concentration practice: bringing the mind to a stable state. It's not going to want to stay there if you're beating it.

It's like a child in a house: If you treat the child well, you can open the windows and doors, and the child's not going to run away. If you *close* the windows and doors, and *beat* it, it's going to find a crack, an opening, and it's going to go and not come back. So you have this opportunity to get the mind on

good terms with the breath, on good terms with the body.

And you learn that the breath has a lot of uses like this. When you're ill, there are certain ways of breathing that help you overcome the illness. When you're tense, when you're tired, there are ways of breathing that help you overcome those issues. The breath is a resource that we all have, but it very rarely gets cultivated. We very rarely make full use of it.

So think of the length, the depth of the breath; whether it's shallow, deep, light, heavy; how it goes down the back, down the front. Again, it's not just the air coming out of the lungs, it's the whole energy flow through the body. As you sensitize yourself to that, it helps you inhabit your body more and more comfortably, so that when you want to practice mindfulness in daily life, you've got a good place to stay. It's easy to stay. It's attractive.

We were talking earlier about the mind's tendency to feed. You can give yourself really *good* food just with the breath. When you look at anger coming along, you realize, "This is *junk* food; I don't need this. I've got something much better to feed on." This is one of the attractions of anger: You're sitting there, starving, and anger seems to give you something to feed on. It's like a BigMac: It's going to give you troubles down the road.

[Q] Could you possibly elaborate a bit on which of these techniques would work in a wider sphere? When we have so many things obviously taking our country in some direction, I find I want to be focused on taking action politically and so forth. But anger comes up a *lot*. To me it feels different from someone cutting me off in traffic.

[A: Remark] Feels more justified.

[Q Cont'd] Yes. And I don't know quite how to get it to subside.

[A] Well, you basically use the same techniques. This doesn't mean not *seeing* the injustice. We get these things confused in our minds. You see injustice and you get angry, and they seem to have to go together. You've got to realize that seeing injustice and acting on it does *not* require the anger in the middle. We often think it does. That's what energizes us: "I'm really going to go out there and..." You know. But then we see political candidates who've let their anger take control, and they're shooting themselves in the foot. You've got to realize, "I *can* act on this. I can stay focused, and I don't need the anger." Seeing the injustice and seeing the need for something to be done does not necessarily mean that there has to be some anger in the equation.

So, often, the technique is to work on the physical sense of the anger. You can work on that first. Then you can start looking at the mental state in and of itself, "Is this a helpful mental state to have?" There's delusion involved in it, there's a strong sense of discomfort, and it's very easy to do the wrong thing when you

maintain that anger. Even though it feels energizing and you feel focused—as we were saying earlier—it’s a false energy. It can’t be sustained. So when you see injustice, you’ve got to say, “Okay, breathe through the physical reactions, look at the mental state of anger, try to step back from it a little bit, and then act.”

[Q] I’m interested in that story where you talked about a monk going into a part of India where people might stab him, and basically he thought, “Well, at least it’s not suicide.” I’m worried that, on some level, that *was* a suicidal move to go in there. I’m thinking about the other story you told, where it said, “If somebody has acted in a certain way, what can I expect?” The question is not just about the story, it’s also about developing discernment about when to enter into a situation where you’re encountering anger, and when it’s wiser to actually go away. And when that’s more about goodwill toward self rather than toward other.

[A] The end of the monk’s story was that he actually went and converted many people in that country. But it was his fearlessness that enabled him to act in a skillful way. Also, I must say, part of monk culture is, “I don’t have a family I have to support; I don’t have all these other responsibilities. If something happens to me, it’s not that big an issue.” If you have personal ties, you have to think about those personal ties. In either situation, you have to weigh, “If this move is going to help my practice, I’ll go ahead and go for it. If it’s just a stupid suicidal move that’s going to set me back for a long time, I won’t go.” That’s a question of personal discernment. The Buddha didn’t tell everybody to go out rushing at tigers and things. But if you happen to encounter a tiger, you want to have practiced keeping your mind under control. There’s a difference between being fearless and being foolhardy. That’s one of those differences you can only learn through practice. We’re not asking you to be suicidal.

[Q] I find this scenario keeps coming up more and more for me in the last year or so. I’ll get into a conversation with a few different people who are fairly close to me, whom I converse with quite often. For example, I’ll be on a phone call with someone who I care about very much. I’ll know, going into the phone call, that many of the previous phone calls have ended up with my feeling very frustrated, that my buttons were pushed, feeling angry and tense afterwards. So in between I’ll half not want to make the phone call, but half wanting to go ahead and make it anyway. I’ll have this mindset that I’ll go in and try to be open-minded, and end up after the phone call feeling like my buttons were pushed and I got caught up in something that didn’t even feel like it had a lot to do with me... In the end, I end up feeling super frustrated, and then find that I feel angry at myself for getting into that same scenario, having those feelings again. It

doesn't feel as if it's about one particular person; it feels more like I'm letting myself get drawn in, and then the anger stays in me.

[A] Before you make the phone call, meditate for a little bit. Deal with the breath as I was recommending earlier. Then, throughout the phone call, stay with your breath. Ask yourself: What are the expectations you've placed on this person? Of course, the person is not living up to those expectations. Then ask yourself, "Look, am I the National Bureau of Standards? Does he or she have to live up to my expectations? This is the way that person is, so I'm going to sit here and meditate through this phone call." When you see a button being pushed, just breathe right through it.

I had a student in Singapore one time who said that every day after he came home from work he had to sit down and meditate for a while. He felt that during the day he'd been like a trash can, that people were throwing trash into him, and he had to come home and empty it out. The trick is to cut a hole in the bottom of the trash can, so that when things come in they just go out the other side.

Realize that your expectations are the catching element there. So you tell yourself, "This is the way this person is. I know this person well. I know this person has this skill in pushing buttons." Just watch that happen, and try to get yourself out of the way.

[Q] I guess there are different types of anger, but I'm wondering if you think that one type of it is a way of reinforcing a sense of self.

[A] Very much so.

[Q Cont'd] The other thing, about the breathing: One thing that I thought about was the alternate nostril breathing. For me, if I get upset, that can bring it right down very quickly. That's one of a whole host of techniques, these *pranayama* techniques, and I wonder if that's, in part, what you mean by playing with the breath?

[A] Partly yes. Although, it's very difficult to talk to somebody like this while you're alternating your nostrils. So you do what works in the situation.

[Q] I think it isn't as much the anger as it is the impatience that seems to go along with it. They're almost like identical twins. I'll be in a situation and I'll feel a sense of the anger, and then the impatience, and then it's *really*...

[A] Impatience with the other person, or impatience with yourself?

[Q Cont'd] It's hard to distinguish between the two sometimes. Impatience as an energy, or as a feeling, a force.

[A] Well, it is a type of anger, you know. "This is going on, I can't stand it, why is this lasting? I want to get it over with." It's anger.

[Q Cont'd] It has a different feel, sometimes.

[A] Treat it as you would anger. Keep breathing through, breathing through, breathing through any patterns of tension that show up along with it. Part of the mind says, “How much longer do I have to keep breathing through these things?” And the response is, “Don’t ask.” Basically, impatience is the same issue as when you’re dealing with any pain. You’re thinking of how long this pain has been going on, and how much longer in the future it’s going to last, and that you just can’t stand it any longer. Stop and remind yourself, “The past pain is gone. The future pain hasn’t come yet. All you have to do is deal with the pain in the present moment.” That makes it a lot lighter.

[Q] A follow-up on the other question: It seems that a lot of what you’re talking about actually applies to any negative emotion. Is that true?

[A] Right. It’s the same pattern. One, you analyze it into its three parts: object, mind state, physical reaction. Then two, look for the allure: Why do you like to feed on this particular issue? When you can see those things, then it’s a lot easier to deal with. You’re not overwhelmed by all these things at once: the mind *and* the body *and* the situation outside.

[Q] Sometimes, if you’re having a sensitive discussion with somebody and they hurt you, can projecting a kind of anger be a useful form of indication in some ways? Is that considered skillful?

[A] If you can learn to project the anger without actually having the anger because then you know when to stop?

[Q Cont’d] Is that legitimate? Can it still be considered skillful?

[A] Oh, yes. But again, you have to *not* be angry. *That’s* the difficult part. Learn how to step back from it. When you’re dealing with people, if you want to say something really difficult to somebody else, you have to look for the right time and place. Which means not only, “Is that person receptive?” but also, “Am I in the right frame of mind so that I’m not communicating the wrong tone of voice, the wrong physical message?” That requires a lot of skill. Right speech doesn’t mean sweet, soft speech all the time. It can be like, “Look, *no*. You’ve crossed a boundary.” Make that clear.

[Q] The majority of monks, are they always able to handle their own anger?

[A] The majority of monks? The majority of monks don’t even practice, much less try to handle their own anger. It depends on the culture you’re in, as well. In Thailand, there’s a much stronger culture against expressing anger, which has its advantages and disadvantages. The disadvantage, of course, is that anger sometimes gets bottled up and then breaks out in unusual ways.

Years back, before I was ordained—and this is not just about monks, but

Asian culture as a whole—before I was a monk, I was teaching in Thailand, and then came back to the West. (I have to give a few details of my coming back, as they're relevant to the story.) I was flying on Air France. We flew into Paris to Charles de Gaulle Airport, which had just opened up. We changed planes there and flew to London. We arrived in London with nobody's baggage having made the transfer through the new airport. A new ambassador from Vietnam was coming to London on the plane, so the person on the ground who normally dealt with baggage claims was sent to take care of the ambassador's claim. Another ground stewardess was brought in, and there was a *long* line as everybody had to fill out the forms. Somebody in the line started complaining about what poor service we were getting from Air France. The stewardess *snapped back* at him: "This is *not* my job!" she said. "You're *lucky* there's anyone here right now!" And I realized: "I'm back in the West..." In Bangkok, there would've been a ground stewardess saying, "We're very sorry, please bear with us." And nothing would have happened.

A lot of it has to do with cultural training. It's not whether you're a monk or not, it's your attitude toward the anger, and your cultural training in how to deal with anger. In Asia there's a strong sense that if you lose your head, you really *lose* it: You've lost the battle. People's respect for you goes down. Whereas here in the West, sometimes it's the person who shows his anger who feels that he's getting some respect here after all. But it doesn't really work that way. Now, I have been angry since becoming a monk. It's a human thing. But it's a question of living in a culture that places a value on controlling your anger. Having the tools to deal with it, you find it gets more and more manageable all the time.

[Q] Sometimes I find that even after I've tried to deal skillfully with a difficult situation—I've tried my best to be skillful in expressing my thoughts to the person who has made me angry—some anger still stays.

[A] What you express to the other person is one thing. How you're going to be dealing with the anger inside is another. Sometimes you have to come back and deal with that. Look at the situation and see, "What do I feel has still not been settled?" Then ask yourself, "Is this the right time to settle it, or should I put it aside for the time being and make plans for something to say in the future?" Often, that's where the residual anger comes from: There's still a sense something that hasn't been properly settled in the situation, and that's normal. It's a question of looking for when would be the right time to say the next thing and what would be the appropriate thing to say. That's a legitimate thing to think about.

At the same time see, "Is there still a physical residual sense of anger, or is it just the mental state that feels upset?" A lot of times, situations like these do take

time to settle, and we're an impatient country: "I want my anger to be settled right now. Okay, I'm done with that, I'm going on to the next thing." But there are long-term issues that also need to be worked with. The legitimate part is not that you're disingenuous, but simply that the situation was not totally resolved at that time. So look at that.

[Q] Sometimes things will come up and they'll just remind me of something that I forgot. It elicits an angry response in me before I have any say in the matter. It's one thing when you're angry and you realize it, it's kind of consuming, self-fueling, and satisfying. I find that, in a certain sense, if I can distract or replace it, finding another thing that's even more compelling, and just train myself to think about *that*, instead of the thing that will always trigger the anger in me: That helps me manage it and reduces the energy in the anger. I was just wondering if you had any suggestions for a way to deal with anger that comes up spontaneously.

[A] You want to sit back and ask yourself: "If I were to let go of my anger around that thing, what part of me would feel violated?" Sometimes the old anger comes with the thought, "I've felt violated by this particular incident, and if I let go of my anger, I'll feel that I'm depriving myself of something that's owed to me." It's one thing to recognize, "This was an injustice, a wrong thing that shouldn't have been done." It's another thing to tell yourself, "I don't need the anger around that." Again, look for why part of you likes to keep the anger focused on that, why you'd be afraid to let go of the anger around that, and what part of yourself would be denied. Ask yourself, "Is this really something I want to hold on to?" You can recognize, "That was an injustice, it was wrong, it should never have happened," but you don't have to have that same churning feeling around it.

Again, you use the breath to breathe through the physical side of the anger when it comes up. That will train your body to have a different physiological reaction the next time it comes up. There's also the misperception that's saying, "I will always be angry about this." You're angry about it only when you remember. Also, remind yourself that by letting go of the anger, you're not denying the injustice. Often we keep stoking the anger because we feel that without the anger we wouldn't remember that that was an injustice, we wouldn't retain our sense of having been wronged, and we'd feel violated. Once you can make that distinction, it's easier to deal with.

[Q] [Undecipherable]... it often arises from a sense of compassion for the suffering of others. But when I'm angry about an injustice that's done to me, as you said, there's a sense of a violation of the self. I think that that's a very

different kind of thing to deal with, as opposed to dealing with it from a sense of sympathy or empathy or identification with the suffering of others. Sometimes it's almost as if it's a persecution, that that person is *out* to get you. It sometimes goes to the very core of the way you perceive yourself. How do you deal with that sense of violation?

[A] Don't see your anger as something precious. If the violation is something you can't work against skillfully when anger is overcoming you, and if there's nothing that can be done, *you're* the one who's inflicting the anger on *yourself*. Either way, it's not useful.

[Q Cont'd] If the sense of violation persists, is that basically me turning the anger inwards at myself?

[A] It's actually your old strategy of defense, this anger. You feel, "If I were to drop the anger, I would be defenseless." You need to learn that you have other defenses beside the anger. One way is to remind yourself that "I don't want to ever do that kind of violence against anybody else. If it comes up again, I want to be able to deal with it in a skillful way, rather than losing my head." So the anger there gives a false sense of security. Remind yourself that you have other ways, better ways, of protecting yourself. That helps to take what we call the *allure* of the anger away.

[Q] My anger is often the expression of energy, but it's something I can use to push back against what I fear. I fear that injustices can happen to me. And under that is sadness that conditions are such that it could happen to me or others. So if I dispel the anger, I'm left with another set of emotions to deal with.

[A] Deal with them in a similar way. Your prime question should be: "What should be done right now? What's the best thing to do right now?" If the emotion is getting in the way of your seeing it clearly, then you've got to deal with the emotion, whether it's the anger or the sadness or the fear. Often our most unskillful actions are done under the power of fear. You're afraid of somebody, and you just lash right back at that person without thinking.

This is why having the very strong sense of your inner core that comes with the meditation is essential, for it helps you to step back from those emotions. You know the practice of saying, when a distraction comes into the mind during meditation, "Just drop it right now, I don't need that." It's one of the most valuable skills that anybody can have not only while meditating, but also when dealing with other people: "This particular emotion is not helping me right now. If I feed on it, I'm going to be hurting myself."

It's not so much a question of laying blame to yourself, it's just being rational and wise in how you really protect yourself. Our ways of defending ourselves are often very harmful to ourselves. You want to clear the decks as much as you

can. If you take away the anger and there's still the sadness, deal with the sadness, deal with the fear. Then you're in a much better position to make a wise choice.

[Q] I'm wondering if you've found a way to be around an angry person without becoming angry yourself.

[A] You can use the breath here. Are you old enough to remember the Colgate with Gardol commercials? Remember those? When you've got the breath energy in your body going well, it's like the clear plastic shield they pictured in those commercials. Our energy bodies are normally very porous. But when you fill the body with the energy of the breath, it closes off the pores. When you learn to think of it in that kind of a physical way, you've got yourself very well-protected.

[Q Cont'd] I find myself not becoming angry with myself as a person, but becoming angry at them for being an angry person.

[A] First you get behind your shield and say, "Okay, that's there." Then you remind yourself that it's normal for human beings to be angry. It's something you've got to learn to deal with in this human world.

[Q] I'm not quite sure how to ask this question so that it doesn't sound philosophical. When you were talking about the aggregates, what came to my mind after a certain amount of thinking about all of this, is that I'm aware of how attached I am to what goes on in my mind. It's sometimes painful, sometimes interesting. But I know that I'm not close to having any sense—even though I heard what everybody says—of what I would give it up for. So the question that I have is: What else is there? If you give up the anger, or if you don't have your feelings, your thoughts, your perceptions—all the things that occupy your mind, my mind hasn't quite figured out what you're giving it up for.

[A] There's a happiness that comes when you're not clinging to these things. They say it's like a frog coming down to tell a fish, "Hey, there's *air* up there, you know?" And the fish says, "Why should I give up this water, huh?" In the case of the aggregates: If you cling to them, there's going to be a lot of suffering. There's suffering inherent in clinging to them right now, which you don't see because it's like the cosmic background noise that seems to be everywhere always. But when you step out of that clinging, you realize, "My gosh, there was an awful lot of suffering involved in just keeping the show going."

The aggregates are processes that we keep going, and there's an awful lot of energy that goes into keeping them going. The question is: Is the energy put into them worth whatever satisfaction we get out of them? In particular, if these things get out of our control, if your mind gets out of your control, that's really

scary.

You want to at least be in a position, as a meditator, to know what's on the other side, so that you have the opportunity to choose. At the moment, you haven't seen the alternative. But you can rest assured that if you see the alternative, you're not going to be trapped in the alternative. You have the right to choose, "Okay, do I want *this* or do I want *that*?" Invariably, though, when people see the alternative, they go for that.

That's why you want to give up the clinging. After you give up the clinging, the aggregates will still be there for a while, but you'll be in a much better position to deal with them, so that when they're painful, you're not afflicted by the pain. When they produce useful thoughts and useful ideas, you can make use of them.

[Q Cont'd] What about pleasure? I mean, we're talking about people's feelings. People can be attached to pleasure and it can also be useful.

[A] A traditional image is that the pleasure you get from the aggregates is like the food they give to prisoners. The food outside is *much* better.

[Q] I guess I'm curious: when you originally introduced anger, you mentioned that it's a mental state. I immediately reacted to that, because to me it's very emotional and physical. It feels like my whole being is involved in this situation.

[A] As I said, there is a physical side. But if the mind weren't there, the body wouldn't react. If the mind weren't sending out these signals, that this is a bad situation, then the body would have no hormonal reaction.

[Q Cont'd] I'm not sure about that. Because even in meditation, even about thoughts, I just feel that they're things that my body's comprehending and *that* gets interpreted by the mind.

[A] The question is, is the body comprehending, or are there subconscious levels of the mind that are comprehending those things? The body is giving you signals that subconscious things are going on. But it's up to you to read the signals. As for the body in and of itself: If you didn't have a mind, what would you be? You'd be dead, right? The body wouldn't react to anything at all. The fact is that you have the mind there sending these messages, and then the body reacts in certain ways to them. The body's reactions can be read as a useful signal that something has happened in the mind. Then, as I said, you use the breath to deal with that.

[Q Cont'd] So you don't think that there's consciousness in the body? Because I sort of think that consciousness is stored in the body.

[A] Well, where *is* your mind?

[Q Cont'd] I guess when you said mind, I just immediately think that's the

brain.

[A] It's your awareness of the whole extent of the body. What we're doing as we meditate is that we're bringing that awareness to all the levels that have been subconscious. It's as if something is below water. As you're meditating, the water level goes down and what's underwater get exposed. You can get more sensitive to what's going on in other levels of consciousness. So "mind" is not just the brain. It's your whole awareness.

[Q] I'm new to meditation and struck by the idea of not simply emphasizing the observing side to the mind. It makes sense what you're saying, but I'm just curious.

[A] The issue is learning to deal with the breath skillfully. If you think of meditation as a lifelong practice, you're going to have to learn how to deal skillfully with your breath, learning how to adjust it skillfully, learning when is the right time to simply sit and watch things happening, and when is the right time to do something proactive about them. That's a long-term skill.

As for the whole question of the observing *self*, that's going to be one of the last things you let go of as you practice. You have to teach your observing self to be a skillful observing self before you can let it go. If you say, "I'm not going to have a self," the practice stops. There's got to be some sense of self functioning in there: that you want to do something skillfully, you have a motivation to do it, you're capable of doing it, and you'll benefit from doing it.

What you try to do is to take your sense of observing self and turn it—through observing skillful actions and unskillful actions so that you can develop skillful ones and abandon unskillful ones—into a more skillful observing self. Then finally, it observes how to let go of itself—which is an extremely difficult skill, so first you need practice in other, more mundane, skills.

Some people think that you can short-circuit all of the problems by saying, "Oh, I'll just let go of my sense of self and that'll take care of everything." The teaching is a raft, remember? That's like saying, "I don't need this raft! I'll let it go!" while in the middle of the river. So learn to let go at the right time.