THE HEART
A FLOWING
STREAM

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Essays on the Buddhist Path

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(Geoffrey DeGraff)

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THE BUDDHA ON ENDING THE ĀSAVAS

The third knowledge the Buddha gained on the night of his awakening—the knowledge that led directly to his total release—he called "knowledge of the ending of the effluents." An effluent, *āsava*, is a tendency that flows out of the heart and mind. Because the word *āsava* is also used to describe wine made from fermented fruit, it can also be translated as "fermentation." The āsavas that the Buddha ended were tendencies that bubbled up in his heart, intoxicating it and leading it to flow along in saṁsāra.

We often think of saṁsāra as a place, but it's actually a process. The word *saṁsāra* itself literally means "flow," and there's a fairly consistent pattern of imagery in the Pali Canon that compares the repeated saṁsāra of rebirth and redeath to the flow of the currents in a river at full flood. Effluents are the springs from which those currents arise.

When the Buddha ended the effluents, he stopped the flow at the source and was freed from ever having to be born again. In fact, the first two thoughts that occurred to him on gaining awakening were: "Released!" and "Birth is ended."

He identified three effluents in all: the effluent of sensuality, the effluent of becoming, and the effluent of ignorance.

- Sensuality is the mind's fascination with planning and fantasizing about sensual pleasures.
- Becoming is the act of taking on an identity in a world of experience—either in the world of the mind or in the world outside.
- Ignorance is not looking at your actions in terms of the four noble truths to see (1) which actions constitute suffering, (2) which ones cause suffering, (3) which ones cause suffering to cease, and (4) which ones take you to the point where you can do the actions that bring about that cessation.

A little reflection will show why these three tendencies would flow into rebirth:

- The desire for more sensual pleasures is often the motive force for wanting to be reborn.
- Around that desire there grows a sense of the world in which those pleasures might be found and into which you could be reborn, along with a sense of your identity in that world, capable of attaining those pleasures. That's the beginning of becoming.
- Ignorance of the stress and suffering involved in the process of becoming blinds you to the fact that whatever pleasures might be gained through becoming would be far outweighed by the suffering inherent in the attempt.

It's because ignorance provides the cover for you to go wholeheartedly for sensuality and becoming that it's said to be the most basic of the effluents. If it can be ended, all of them end. However, ignorance ends only when the mind fully sees things in terms of the four noble truths, and as the Buddha learned when teaching others, you can fully accept those terms only when you see "the drawbacks, degradation, and defilement in sensuality, and the rewards of renunciation" (MN 56). In other words, before you'll willingly make the effort to adopt the point of view that can see through ignorance, you have to see that it would be good to escape from sensuality. This means that all the effluents have to be attacked together for any of them to end.

One of the insights that the Buddha gained in the second knowledge on the night of his awakening—knowledge of how beings are reborn in line with their karma—was that your level of rebirth was determined not only by past karma, but also, and sometimes more forcefully, by your present karma: the choices made at the moment of death. This insight showed him that the effluents acted not only over time, but also immediately in the present moment.

He then used that insight to focus his attention on the effluents bubbling up in his mind in the immediate present. Instead of waiting for the moment of death to deal with them, he saw that they were fermenting in the mind all the time in its relationship to the world of the six senses—the five physical senses plus the mind as the sixth. By watching how these effluents flow out of the mind and into the world, he saw not only how they

originated, but also how they could be brought to an end by training the mind in the factors of the noble eightfold path. Once he had ended these effluents in relationship to the senses in the immediate present, he knew that they could no longer pose a danger at the moment of death. That's why his total release in the present moment also meant that there would be no more birth after death.

When he taught his listeners to deal with their own effluents, he had them take the same approach. Don't wait until the moment of death to do battle with all your accumulated karma from the past. Instead, learn to abandon the effluents at work in your engagement with the world of the senses right here and now.

Even though you won't put a stop to the effluents until the very end of the path, you can begin weakening them in the early stages of the practice. The more you can resist the pull of their flow, the freer you'll be. That's why the Buddha left behind several sets of instructions on how to begin attacking the effluents right from the start.

Two sets in particular stand out, because they're related to two of the dimensions of right effort: (1) knowing what type of effort is appropriate for abandoning a particular unskillful mental state, and (2) knowing how to motivate yourself to *want* to abandon that state.

TYPES OF EFFORT

In MN 2, the Buddha discusses seven approaches for abandoning the effluents. These are called:

1) abandoning by seeing,

2) abandoning by restraining,

3) abandoning by consuming,

4) abandoning by tolerating,

5) abandoning by avoiding,

6) abandoning by destroying, and

7) abandoning by developing.

Of these approaches, the first one, *seeing*, focuses on the effluents of becoming and ignorance. The next four—*restraining*, *consuming*, *tolerating*,

and *avoiding*—focus on the effluent of sensuality, while the last two—*destroying* and *developing*—relate to all three of the effluents.

The entire list is prefaced by the Buddha's observation that the effluents end only for a person who knows how to apply appropriate attention. And the explanation for each approach notes that it involves "reflecting appropriately." So appropriate attention is basic to all seven approaches.

This is why ***seeing***—i.e., seeing what counts as appropriate attention and what counts as inappropriate attention—comes first. Only when you know what appropriate attention entails can you practice restraint in a skillful way.

The Buddha defines appropriate attention in terms of the questions you see as worth paying attention to. He gives a long list of questions *not* worthy of attention, and they're all framed in the terms of becoming. In other words, they're concerned with your identity and with the world in which that identity has played or will play a role.

> "This is how one attends inappropriately: 'Was I in the past? Was I not in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what, what was I in the past? Shall I be in the future? Shall I not be in the future? What shall I be in the future? How shall I be in the future? Having been what, what shall I be in the future?' Or else one is inwardly perplexed about the immediate present: 'Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where has this being come from? Where is it bound?'"

The Buddha notes that these questions aren't worthy of attention because they lead to "a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a writhing of views, a fetter of views." In other words, they tie you down rather than leading you to release. Prominent among the fetter of views, he says, are such views as "I have a self," and "I have no self." He doesn't explain why these views are a fetter, but one reason in particular stands out: When you start taking positions like this, you get entangled with those who argue an opposing position, and you start clinging to the views for their own sake.

It may seem somewhat paradoxical that the Buddha would single out the above questions as unworthy of attention. After all, questions along the

lines of, “Was I in the past? Was I not in the past? How was I in the past? Where has this being come from?” were the questions that led him to incline his mind to gain his first two knowledges on the night of his awakening: knowledge of his previous births, and knowledge of how beings pass away and are reborn through their karma.

But there’s really no paradox. In stating that these questions were not objects of appropriate attention, he’s explaining why the first two knowledges, on their own, didn’t lead to release. When we compare these questions to the observations that *are* worthy of attention, we can see why. As he says, you attend appropriately when you think in these terms:

> “This is stress … This is the origination of stress … This is the cessation of stress … This is the way leading to the cessation of stress.”

This is an expression of the four noble truths. When you identify these truths in your experience, you’re answering questions that aren’t framed in the terms of becoming. In other words, they don’t deal with such concepts as “I” or “where.” They’re phrased simply in terms of actions and results: “What is stress? What’s its cause? Can it cease? And how?” At the same time, this way of phrasing the four noble truths deals not in abstractions, but in direct observations: “this… this… this.” It was by abandoning reference to a sense of identity located in a world, and simply focusing on the causal interaction of actions as they were happening in the immediate present that the Buddha was able to bring the effluents to an end.

This means that appropriate attention means looking at actions not in terms of who’s doing them where, but simply in terms of their causes and results, and in particular, in terms of whether they’re useful in bringing stress and suffering to an end. It also means that in the remaining approaches, “reflecting appropriately” means adopting each approach in a skillful way that actually leads to the end of suffering.

The Buddha notes that when you reflect appropriately on the four noble truths in this way, you cut the first three fetters that bind the mind to the flow of saṁsāra: self-identity view, doubt, and grasping at habits and practices. In other words, unlike the unskillful questions that entangle you in the fetter of views, the questions that underlie the four noble truths

actually release you from fetters. That's why they're skillful and appropriate.

The next four approaches, as noted above, focus on the effluent of sensuality. They all follow a common pattern dictated by the role of sensual pleasure on the path. When the Buddha was trying to find the path to awakening, one of his earliest realizations was that sensuality—the fascination with indulging in fantasies about sensual pleasures—could play no role in leading to awakening. But he also found that completely denying yourself any sensual pleasures would lead literally to a dead end. Part of the middle way that he ultimately formulated was the set of principles expressed in MN 101:

You don't load yourself down unnecessarily with pain.

You don't reject pleasures that are in accord with the Dhamma.

You're careful not to be infatuated with those pleasures.

But you're willing to endure pain when you find that pursuing even seemingly innocent pleasures gives rise to unskillful qualities in the mind.

The four approaches dealing with sensuality expand on these principles. They set out standards for judging what kinds of pleasures are in accordance with the Dhamma, how not to be infatuated with those pleasures, and how to endure necessary pains. As you adopt these standards, they also sensitize you to the strength of the effluent of sensuality in the mind: When the urges in your mind run up against these standards, you get a visceral sense of how the mind flows out into the world, and how that flow needs to be brought under control if you want to stop the mind from compelling itself to suffer.

Restraining is the first of these four approaches. It refers specifically to restraint of the senses, being careful not to engage in any of the six senses in a way that would give rise to unskillful mental states. It doesn't mean not looking or listening to things at all. Instead, it means viewing your engagement with the senses as part of a causal process: what causes you to engage in the first place, and how the resulting engagement has an impact on the heart and mind.

You can ask yourself, when you look at something: Who's doing the looking? Greed? Lust? Anger? Or discernment? If unskillful mental states are flowing out your eyes, you have to develop the discernment that knows how to look at things in a way that counteracts those states. The same principle applies to all the senses. If you see something beautiful, look for its unappealing side. If you hear something that makes you angry, contemplate to see how you might not get angered by it.

You learn similar lessons from the next approach, which is called ***consuming.*** This refers to the way in which you use the requisites of life: food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. Whenever you're about to use any of them, you remind yourself of the proper attitude to have toward it so as not to excite greed or attachment around it. Then you watch over yourself as you're actually using it to make sure that no greed or attachment arises.

For example, here's how to reflect appropriately on food:

> "Reflecting appropriately, he consumes alms food, not playfully, nor for intoxication, nor for putting on bulk, nor for beautification; but simply for the survival and continuance of this body, for ending its afflictions, for the support of the holy life, thinking, 'Thus will I destroy old feelings (of hunger) and not create new feelings (from overeating). I will maintain myself, be blameless, and live in comfort.'"

This reflection deals partly with the *amount* of food you eat: You're not trying to put on bulk, but you do want to live in comfort. Its main emphasis, though, is on your *purpose* for eating. Here again, the fact that you're setting limits on what counts as a proper attitude toward the requisite makes you sensitive to thoughts that would overflow the limits. If you notice that you are eating playfully or for the purpose of beautification, you know you're dealing with the force of sensuality as it flows out toward food. As you do what you can to keep the mind within bounds, you gain some control over the effluents that otherwise would flow freely and inundate the heart.

The next two approaches—***tolerating*** and ***avoiding***—form a pair, in that together they chart a middle way in approaching pain. *Tolerating* deals with your ability to recognize necessary pains and your willingness to endure

them skillfully. *Avoiding* gives counsel on how not to load yourself down with troubles and pains when you don't have to.

The approach of tolerating focuses on two types of pains: sharp bodily pains and the pain of harsh, unkind words. Strangely, even though the Canon frequently speaks of the need to endure bodily pains, it gives very little practical advice on how to go about it. For that, you have to look to the teachings of contemporary meditation masters. Ajaan Lee, for example, recommends using the breath energies of the body to dissolve patterns of tension that can build up around pains. Ajaan Maha Boowa recommends questioning the labels and perceptions the mind applies to pain and that can aggravate it.

Still, the Buddha does note that the main problem with pain is not the physical pain itself, but the mind's attitude toward it. In his imagery, physical pain is like being shot by an arrow. Your unskillful reactions to physical pain are like shooting yourself with another arrow (SN 36:6). As he makes clear, the second arrow is the main problem—and it's there that you'll see the effluent of sensuality in action, as it gets frustrated with the pain.

Similarly with harsh, unkind words: As Ven. Sāriputta notes in MN 28, the ideal response to harsh words is to tell yourself that an unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear, and to leave it at that. Any urge *not* to leave it at that—to complain to yourself about the person who said the words even after the contact has ended, or about how outrageous it is to be subject to such unkind intentions, etc., etc.—you can recognize as an instance of the effluent of sensuality flooding your ears.

As for avoiding, MN 2 gives a fairly common-sense list of difficulties and dangers to avoid.

> "There is the case where a monk, reflecting appropriately, avoids a wild elephant, a wild horse, a wild bull, a wild dog, a snake, a stump, a bramble patch, a chasm, a cliff, a cesspool, an open sewer. Reflecting appropriately, he avoids sitting in the sorts of unsuitable seats, wandering to the sorts of unsuitable habitats, and associating with the sorts of bad friends that would make his observant companions in the holy life suspect him of evil conduct."

As the list makes clear, you're not so stupid or bullheaded in your willingness to put up with pain that you're careless about avoidable dangers. When you're heedful in avoiding external dangers, it strengthens your ability to be heedful of dangers in your own mind.

The last two approaches—***destroying*** and ***developing***—also form a pair in that they both deal directly with the practice of meditation. *Destroying* means doing away with unskillful mental states in general, but in particular with the three types of wrong resolve that stand in the way of practicing right mindfulness: sensuality, ill will, and harmfulness. Your practice of tolerance doesn't extend to allowing these states to move in and take over the mind. Instead, when you sense that they've arisen, you "abandon them, destroy them, dispel them, and wipe them out of existence."

You do this by *developing* skillful mental states in their place. MN 2 focuses particularly on developing the seven factors for awakening: mindfulness, analysis of qualities, persistence, rapture, calm, concentration, and equanimity. This list of qualities details the steps by which the practice of discernment—in the factor of analysis of qualities and the practice of "reflecting appropriately"—helps to move the mind from right mindfulness to right concentration.

Because concentration counts as a state of skillful becoming, the approaches of destroying and developing, at this level, count as a form of sublimation. In other words, they use appropriate attention to direct the effluent of becoming away from sensual thoughts and toward the more skillful non-sensual pleasure of concentration. That heightened pleasure then helps to weaken the flow of the effluent of sensuality. The resulting state of concentration also creates a space of clarity in the mind that helps to weaken the effluent of ignorance.

But the approaches of destroying and developing can then go beyond sublimation. MN 2 notes that you develop the seven factors of awakening "dependent on seclusion… dispassion… cessation, resulting in letting go." This means that you continue reflecting appropriately to develop the seclusion of concentration as far as you can take it. The greater stillness and stability of your concentration, in turn, foster even sharper discernment. You come to discern clearly the flow of becoming and ignorance that shapes the tendencies that would pull you off the path. Eventually, you begin to

discern that this flow of becoming and ignorance also shapes, in an extremely subtle way, your practice of concentration and discernment. You come to see how the drawbacks of these fabricated flows outweigh the pleasures they can provide. They can give only a fabricated happiness, subject to the limitations of anything fabricated. When you realize this, you begin to sense dispassion for all things fabricated. This inclines the mind to the possibility of an unfabricated happiness, as promised in the third noble truth.

Because the flows were driven by passion, the arising of dispassion deprives them of their motive force, allowing them to cease. That's when you let go of everything fabricated, including the fabrications of the path. In so doing, you put an end to the effluent of ignorance that was driving the whole show. The mind is then totally freed, and the conditions for further rebirth are ended. The mind can no longer be forced by any conditions at all.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

The seven approaches listed in MN 2, taken together, flesh out two general principles about the practice stated elsewhere in the Canon.

The first principle is the Buddha's observation in the Sutta Nipāta:

> Whatever streams
> there are in the world:
>   Their blocking is
>   mindfulness. Mindfulness
>   is their restraint, I tell you.
> With discernment
>   they're finally stopped. — *Sn 5:1*

When the seven approaches keep the effluents in check, they count simply as a form of mindfulness, which—on its own—isn't enough to genuinely stop the effluents. Mindfulness builds a dam across the stream, but the dam could still be breached and washed away at any time. Only when discernment, in the form of appropriate attention, brings a deep sense

of dispassion toward the effluents, are the effluents stopped for good at their source.

The second principle is the Buddha's observation in AN 10:73 that the Dhamma is nourished by two things: commitment and reflection. You commit yourself to all seven approaches, and you reflect appropriately on them as you follow through with them. The commitment is what allows you to clear a space in the mind where you can become sensitive to the flow of the effluents. The reflection, when it applies the terms of the four noble truths to what you're doing, allows you to develop the dispassion that puts a stop to the flow of the effluents once and for all.

MOTIVATION

When you've trained your mind to a high level of concentration and discernment, you can clearly see, on reflection, that ending the effluents would be a good thing. The problem is, to get the mind to commit to that level of training in the first place, you need to see the benefits of putting forth the effort to arrive there. When the effluents are flowing strong—as they usually are in an ordinary mind—they tend to pull you away from wanting even to attempt the path, much less commit to it. This is because you identify their strength as *your* strength, and you tend to delight in that strength. Because you see it as yours, you don't regard it as a type of coercion. As far as you're concerned, it's how you extend your influence into the world. So the idea of abandoning that strength runs directly counter to what the effluents keep promising. The flow of sensuality promises the delights of whatever sensual pleasures you can imagine. The flow of becoming promises you that you can create identities that can influence worlds where your desires can be fulfilled. The flow of ignorance tells you that any stress or suffering involved in sensuality and becoming either doesn't exist or, if it's too blatant to deny, that you'd be wise to accept it as part of the price you have to pay for the good things in life.

This is why so many of the Buddha's teachings focus on the many sufferings that sensuality and becoming always entail, and insist on the possibility of a happiness where there's no suffering at all. When people arrive at junctures in their lives where their suffering is obviously

oppressive, they can begin to admit that what they've accepted as wisdom has actually been lying to them, and that the Buddha might be right: A happiness without suffering is a worthwhile goal.

But simply opening your heart to the Buddha's wisdom isn't enough to carry you all the way through to the higher levels of the path. You need extra encouragement.

So, to counteract whatever delight you may find in the effluents, the Buddha in AN 6:78 offers six alternative objects of delight that can provide you with pleasure and happiness in the here-and-now, and at the same time "activate the source" for your motivation to go all the way to bringing the effluents to an end. Even though all forms of delight can cause stress, and ultimately will be abandoned at the end of the path, still you first need to delight in the path and its goal so that you can get started in the right direction and carry through.

The six objects of skillful delight are:

1) the Dhamma,

2) developing,

3) abandoning,

4) seclusion,

5) the unafflicted, and

6) non-objectification.

When you find delight in these things, you counteract the mind's tendency to delight in things that would keep you flowing along in the currents of saṁsāra.

For instance, ***delight in the Dhamma:*** You can take delight in the fact that there is a Dhamma that explains the big issues of life: aging, illness, death, grief, and despair. It teaches that suffering can be ended through human effort. It explains how we suffer, why we suffer, and how we don't have to suffer. It gives reliable guidance in how to act, speak, and think skillfully so as to gain total release. It reassures us that the effort put into developing skillful actions is well spent.

The Dhamma explains these issues clearly and in an honorable way. As the Buddha said, it's admirable in the beginning, admirable in the middle, admirable in the end. The words of the Dhamma are inspiring. The practice

is a noble practice, one in which we engage in developing the noblest qualities of our own hearts and minds. And the end is total freedom from restrictions of any kind. It's a good Dhamma all the way through. We can take delight in that.

This delight helps to counter the tendency that prefers to delight in the idea that there are no genuinely objective standards for truth, that birth and death are all a big mystery, that right and wrong are simply a matter of different people's opinions, so there's nothing standing in the way of your doing whatever you want. Of course, if you adopt that attitude, you give your effluents a wide field in which to flow. If good and bad are simply social constructs, you're free to invent your own social constructs. No one can say definitively that you're wrong, because criticism is just a social construct, too.

But if you leave the processes of birth and death as a mystery, you don't really know what to do to escape suffering. You have no reliable guidance for how to calculate if or how long the effects of your actions can possibly last. As the Buddha said, you're left unprotected and bewildered, and you leave unanswered the question that's our common reaction to pain: Is there anyone who knows how to bring this pain to an end?

So delight in the Dhamma helps to hold in check these dangerous attitudes that flow on, not just into saṁsāra, but into some of its worst destinations.

The next two types of delight—***delight in developing*** and ***delight in abandoning***—refer to the delight you take in developing skillful qualities and abandoning unskillful qualities. These are the most fundamental principles of the practice, so fundamental that they were among the first lessons the Buddha taught to his son, Rāhula, when Rāhula was still a child. As he told Rāhula, when you can see that your actions are harmless—both in the immediate present and over the long run—you should take delight in that, and keep on training. When you act in this way, you're being heedful—choosing your actions not according to whether they bring immediate pleasure, but according to whether they bring long-term welfare and happiness. As the Buddha says, your ability to choose long-term good over the short-term good, and to be happy as you make that choice, is a measure of your practical discernment.

To delight in developing and in abandoning helps to counteract the tendency to delight in heedlessness, the callous part of the mind that thinks, "I don't care what happens down the line. I want what I want right now. Thinking about the future gets in the way of my enjoying the here-and-now." If you have no sense of heedfulness, you leave yourself unguarded, unprotected, an easy prey for your effluents.

These two objects of delight help you to find joy in committing to the path. The remaining three help guide your reflection as you commit. Each focuses on countering a specific effluent.

Delight in seclusion helps to counteract delight in the effluent of *sensuality.* When the Buddha talks of seclusion, he's referring only tangentially to the physical seclusion that comes when you get away from other people. His main emphasis is on secluding the mind from sensuality by getting it into concentration. When you learn to appreciate the pleasure and rapture that can come when the mind is rightly concentrated in the present moment with its awareness filling the body, that offers a skillful alternative to the tendency to delight in sensual fantasies. You can see that there are better pleasures than those promised by the effluent of sensuality flowing freely through the mind. At the same time, you can anticipate how good it would be to attain the even higher level of seclusion that comes when the mind is free from the influence of all the effluents.

Delight in the unafflicted: The "unafflicted" is one of the Buddha's names for nibbāna, highlighting the fact that nibbāna is totally devoid of the slightest limitation, constraint, discomfort, or coercion. But even prior to the experience of nibbāna, as you develop concentration to higher and higher levels, you become sensitive to how those higher levels are free from the afflictions of an unconcentrated mind and even from the refined afflictions of the lower levels of concentration. As you develop an appreciation for high levels of concentration, you come to look favorably at the prospect of total absence of affliction in nibbāna. This helps to counteract the tendency of *ignorance* to say that suffering is inevitable, and the pleasures of saṁsāra are worth whatever pains and difficulties they entail.

Delight in non-objectification: "Non-objectification" is another name for nibbāna, focused on the fact that it's free of the disturbances that come

from objectifying yourself and others. "Objectification," as the Buddha defines it, is the type of thinking that starts with the idea, "I am the thinker." From there you identify yourself as a being who needs to feed and so needs a certain part of the world to feed on, whether for physical food or for the food of emotions and ideas. This type of thinking, as it proliferates, leads to further becoming.

But, as the Buddha notes, objectification also leads inevitably to conflict. When you stake your claim in a world, you have to fight off other people who want to lay claim to the same parts of that world to provide themselves with the food they want.

So when you delight in non-objectification, you delight in thinking in terms that avoid that conflict. This inclines you to adopt the viewpoint of the four noble truths, with their focus on identifying what is suffering, what is the cause of suffering, what is the cessation of suffering, what is the path to the cessation. These thoughts, as we've noted, have nothing to do with objectification or the terms of becoming, and they lead to a greater happiness totally free of conflict.

As you delight in that, you call into question the side of the mind that actually enjoys conflict, that likes assuming an identity and taking a stance, laying claim to things and fighting off anyone who would dispute that claim. To delight in non-objectification is to see the downside of the desire to exert power in the world. So when you can adopt delight in non-objectification, it helps you to counteract the effluent of *becoming*.

It might seem anomalous, given that delight is listed in many discourses as a cause of suffering, that the Buddha would advocate fostering these six forms of delight as part of the path. But even though AN 6:78 is a minor discourse, its message is by no means out of line with the rest of the Canon. When we look at the Dhammapada, for instance—one of the most famous of the early Buddhist texts—we find that its verses, too, extol a similar list of objects in which a wise practitioner should delight: the Dhamma, heedfulness, harmlessness, seclusion, stilling, renunciation, what is inward, developing the mind, non-clinging, and the ending of craving.

The seeming anomaly here can be resolved by considering the difference between fabricated and unfabricated happiness. Fabricated happiness—happiness dependent on conditions—gets amplified when you talk about it in positive terms to yourself or to others. For example, when you've had a good meal, you actually derive more pleasure from it when you can exclaim about how good it was and can elaborate on why you liked it. That increased pleasure inclines you to want to have similar meals again.

In the same way, when you undertake the path, you can develop more enthusiasm for it by telling yourself how good the goal will be and how much you want to do whatever is required to get there. When the path begins to yield results in terms of the pleasures of generosity, virtue, and meditation, then the more you consciously take joy in those pleasures, the more likely you'll be to pursue the path even further. It's for this reason that the Buddha recommends that you delight in practices that help to counteract the pull of the effluents. This is in line with what the Canon has to say about the Buddha's teaching style in general: In a typical Dhamma talk, he would not only instruct his audience, but also "urge, rouse, and encourage" them. By doing so, he was showing them how to urge, rouse, and encourage themselves.

The dynamic changes, though, when the path finally brings you to the unfabricated happiness of nibbāna. Because that happiness is not dependent on conditions, it's not affected by praise or blame—yours or anyone else's. Praise adds nothing to it; criticism takes nothing away. This is why those who have reached this attainment are said to have left delight behind—not because their senses have been dulled, but because they have no need to increase the happiness they've already found.

So, the Buddha teaches strategically, advocating delight as it is needed to arrive ultimately at an attainment where the need for delight is gone.

AGAINST THE FLOW

There's a common tendency in many circles to depict the path as one of going with the flow, trusting in the natural goodness of the forces acting in the body and mind. The tendency to like that sort of depiction, though, has its source in the effluents themselves. They prefer that the flow of the mind

be portrayed as natural and innocent so that you won't try to resist them. When you go with the flow, the currents of sensuality, becoming, and ignorance have nothing to stand in their way.

The effluents may be natural, but then so is the flow of birth and death in saṁsāra, with its endless ups and downs. And the downs are far from innocent. As the Buddha noted, over the course of our long, long history of submitting to the flow, we've shed more tears than there are waters in the oceans.

In Iti 69 and Iti 109, he shows clearly his take on the currents of the mind: They're a massive river, lovely and alluring, but with dangerous waves and whirlpools, sharks and demons ready to drown you downstream. And in AN 4:5, he gives an extended image to show the best way to navigate that river. To go with the flow, he says, is to indulge in sensual passions and to do unskillful deeds. When you do that, of course, you're going to drown. To go against the flow, though, is to refrain from indulging in sensual passions and from doing unskillful deeds—even if you find it so hard to do that your face is in tears. To stand firm in the river is to have abandoned the fetters that would cause you to return to be reborn into this world. To have crossed over the river and stand on high ground is to have gained release from all fetters—a release that's totally effluent-free.

The six forms of delight the Buddha recommends in AN 6:78 are meant to foster a change of heart, helping you to see that it's worth your while to resist the flow of the river and to do your best to get to high ground. The seven approaches listed in MN 2 show you how to use mindfulness and discernment to channel those forms of delight toward that goal until you finally arrive.

Everywhere & Always

THE BUDDHA'S CATEGORICAL SHOULDS

One of Buddhism's distinctive features is that its founder started out imperfect, so he knows what it's like for us to face our own imperfections. The story of his quest for awakening tells of one mistake after another, as he sought happiness in some very wrong places. More importantly, though, he admitted his mistakes and mastered the skill of how to learn from them so as not to repeat them. That's how he was able to attain awakening.

On the night of his awakening, he saw the mistakes he had made not only in this lifetime, but also in countless previous ones. At the same time, he saw the mistakes that all other beings throughout the cosmos had been making and were continuing to make, causing themselves and one another a great deal of suffering. The main reason he decided to teach the Dhamma after gaining this knowledge was to help others to avoid those mistakes and the suffering they caused.

He knew that he couldn't impose his new knowledge on others. After all, he wasn't their parent or creator, so he couldn't place obligations on them, but that doesn't mean he wasn't secure in knowing which actions were skillful and which ones were not. His shoulds were conditional—if you want to put an end to suffering, this is what you have to do—but once you accept that condition, they hold in all cases.

He made a list of unskillful actions to avoid, and the list is quite clear-cut. He divided it into three categories: bodily, verbal, and mental actions. The bodily actions to avoid were killing, stealing, and illicit sex. The verbal actions were telling lies, speaking divisively, speaking coarsely, and engaging in idle chatter. The mental actions were inordinate greed (the type that would lead you to kill or steal), ill will, and wrong view—in particular the wrong view that skillful actions don't lead to pleasure, and unskillful actions don't lead to pain. Skillful actions he defined as refraining from the first nine of these unskillful acts, and as actively developing right view to replace wrong view.

This list is pretty conventional. Where it gets unconventional is in the Buddha's explanation of it. Conventional morality admits exceptions to these standards, saying that there are times when you have to kill or lie for the greater good, and viewing these exceptions as a necessary part of life. The Buddha, though, was a radical. He never admitted any exceptions of this sort. When asked if there was anything whose slaying he approved of, he answered with only one thing: anger (SN 1:17). As for lying, he said that if you feel no shame over telling a deliberate lie, there's no evil you might not do (Iti 25). He even told his son, Rāhula, never to tell a falsehood even as a joke (MN 61).

For him, the principle that unskillful actions should be avoided and skillful actions should be developed was a "categorical" teaching (AN 2:18). In other words, it was always true, always beneficial, so it should be adopted in all situations, everywhere and always. That's saying a lot. Of all the many other teachings he gave, only one qualified as categorical in his eyes: the four noble truths (DN 9). Not even the three characteristics—or, more accurately, perceptions—of inconstancy, stress, and not-self qualified as categorical, because even though they're always true, they're not always beneficial perceptions to adopt (MN 136). The same with the principle of acceptance: There are some things you should accept, and others you shouldn't (MN 2).

So the Buddha obviously saw the distinction between skillful and unskillful actions as extremely important. His explanations of this distinction were clear-cut, not out of a desire to be punitive, but out of compassion: He wanted people to stop harming themselves through their ignorance. That's why he warned them that mistakes in these areas were really serious. As far as he was concerned, it wasn't a compassionate act to leave people to their own devices in trying to figure out which actions would or would not lead to suffering. After all, he himself hadn't figured these things out until he had gained full awakening, and that had required an immense amount of effort and time.

So, it wasn't that he simply wanted to pass judgment on the actions of others. Instead, he wanted to teach people how to pass skillful judgment on their own past, present, and future actions so that they could avoid repeating the mistakes that had been causing them suffering all along.

It may seem strange to hear that the Buddha expected his students to pass judgment on their actions, given all that has been said about how he taught a non-judging and accepting attitude toward all things. Actually, though, he stated that the skillful use of your powers of judgment plays a crucial role in practicing the Dhamma. For instance, when discussing the steps that lead from hearing and pondering the Dhamma to actually awakening to the truth, he cited four: desire, willingness, judgment, and exertion. First there has to be the desire to practice, then the willingness to measure your actions against his teachings, followed by acts of judgment in which you weigh how your actions have measured up. Only then can you make the effort to abandon unskillful behavior and develop the skillful behavior that leads to awakening (MN 95). And the act of judgment doesn't happen just once. Throughout the practice, you have to repeatedly pass skillful judgment on your actions to make sure that you stay on course and improve your mastery of the skills of the path (MN 61; MN 121). For him, judgment is not a final verdict. It's a matter of judging a work in progress until it arrives at its goal.

His compassion in giving his categorical teaching on skillful and unskillful actions can easily be seen in his instructions for how to judge your own past mistakes in a way that encourages you to learn from them.

There are five steps in all (MN 61; SN 42:8):

1) Recognize the mistake as a mistake, and that it was not right to do it.

2) Talk it over with someone more advanced on the path, to get ideas on how not to repeat it.

3) Develop the proper attitude to your mistake. This is the most delicate part of passing judgment. On the one hand, you shouldn't wallow in feelings of remorse, for that doesn't erase the mistake you've made, and actually can sap your confidence that you can learn from it. On the other hand, you should be ashamed of the mistake, although here it's important to understand what the Buddha meant by "shame": not the debilitating shame that's the opposite of pride, but the conscientious shame that's the opposite of shamelessness. The shame the Buddha's recommending here is actual a part of

healthy self-esteem: You value yourself so much that you see harmful actions as beneath you, and you'd be ashamed to stoop to doing them.

4) Resolve not to repeat the mistake.

5) Spread thoughts of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity to all beings in all directions. Goodwill for others motivates you not to harm them ever again. Goodwill for yourself motivates you not to harm yourself with useless recriminations, and encourages your conviction that you are worthy of following the path.

The fact that these steps in judging your past actions could bear fruit in present and future happiness is based on the Buddha's analysis of how the results of action play out. As he had seen on the night of his awakening, skillful actions tend to lead to fortunate rebirths, unskillful actions to unfortunate rebirths. The word "tend" here is crucial. He had also seen that the workings of karma were complex. For instance, some people engaged in unskillful actions but gained a fortunate rebirth in the next immediate lifetime. This was because they had either done skillful actions beforehand, had changed their ways and done skillful actions afterward, or had adopted right view at death. These mitigating factors didn't erase the bad karma of their mistake, but it did give them something of a reprieve.

This means that if you recognize a mistake and learn not to repeat it, you can delay its results, which would give you the opening to practice for the sake of awakening and gaining release from the results of past actions entirely.

The Buddha's understanding of karma, along with the steps he recommended in judging your past mistakes, help to avoid two extreme ways of passing judgment that can actually get in the way of learning from them.

The first extreme is based on the deterministic interpretation of karma that whoever does bad things is destined to suffer in a bad destination. This extreme was taught by other sectarians in the time of the Buddha, and as the Buddha said, if you believe it and then reflect on your past mistakes,

you see no escape from suffering. It's as if you were thrown into hell in this very lifetime (SN 42:8). This thought discourages you from making an effort to change your ways, as you feel you're doomed no matter what.

The other extreme is to deny that your mistakes matter. In the Buddha's time, this extreme was also taught by other sectarians, some of whom argued that actions were unreal to begin with, while others argued that there was no such thing as right or wrong (DN 2). At present, this view is held by those who believe that, because right and wrong are just artificial conventions, we're better off not passing judgment on one another's behavior at all. That way, we can all maintain our self-esteem. This attitude, of course, makes it impossible to learn from your mistakes because it refuses to recognize that there are such things.

From the Buddha's point of view, both extremes are heartless and irresponsible. Mistakes really are mistakes, and people really suffer from them. Sadly, they don't see the connection between their actions and their suffering, so they keep on making the same mistakes again and again. But because they can alleviate the results of their past unskillful actions when they learn of the connection, the most compassionate thing is to show them the connection and to teach them a wise and effective way to put that knowledge into practice.

As the Buddha saw it, the duty of any good teacher was to give protection to one's students and to end their bewilderment (AN 3:62). In his experience, people actively sought reliable advice on how to end their suffering, regarding advice of this sort as an act of kindness, rather than an imposition (AN 6:63). In his case, he protected students from their ignorance about the results of their actions, and ended their bewilderment by giving them a firm grounding in deciding what should and shouldn't be done. In providing his categorical teaching on skillful and unskillful behavior, he was simply doing his duty and responding to his listeners' most genuine needs.

A common complaint, though, is that the Buddha's teachings on this topic lack nuance. Aren't some unskillful actions more unskillful than others? What about instances when you want to do an action listed as unskillful but with a compassionate intent? And what about times when

you're faced with conflicting moral obligations, as when, in wartime, you want to protect your loved ones from enemies who threaten rape or murder, and you see no other way out than to kill the enemy? How could a fully awakened being be an absolutist in such situations?

Actually, the Buddha does address these issues. In listing the results of the different unskillful actions, he does note, for instance, that the results of killing, lying, and wrong view are much worse than the results of idle chatter (AN 8:40).

As for the remaining questions, he gives a framework for answering them in a set of six of discourses in the Aṅguttara Nikāya (4:233–238), where he divides actions into four sorts: bright; dark; dark and bright; and neither dark nor bright, leading to the end of action. Bright actions correspond to following the five precepts or training rules based on the list of skillful actions. Dark actions break those precepts. Actions that are dark and bright are defined as involving both injurious and uninjurious intentions. The Buddha doesn't give examples of this category, but apparently it would cover cases of breaking the precepts with compassionate intentions or out of a sense of conflicting moral obligations.

As for the destinations to which these actions can lead: Bright actions lead to the high levels of heaven, dark actions to hell, and dark-and-bright actions to the realms in between, from the realms of deprivation up through the human world and to the lower levels of heaven. The wide range here shows that actions in this category can vary greatly in their level of skillfulness, and that, given the complexity of karma, an action that would send one person to a level of a low level of heaven could send another person to deprivation.

Nowhere in this set of six discourses does the Buddha give advice on what to do when faced with a moral dilemma of conflicting shoulds and obligations. For that advice, we have to look elsewhere in the Canon.

What we find is that he never advised people to engage in actions that were both dark and bright. The only actions he advised were in the categories of bright or neither dark nor bright. It's easy to understand why: Given that you don't know your full karmic background, he'd be asking you to take a great risk if he recommended an action that could possibly lead to a lower realm.

We also find that, when weighing conflicting shoulds, he didn't regard all shoulds as having equal weight. Here again, it's easy to see why. If every should had equal value, two conflicting shoulds would cancel each other out—like a proton and an anti-proton annihilating each other—and you'd end up with no shoulds standing. This would be a severe weakness in his teachings: Precisely when you most need guidance as you're faced with conflicting obligations, the Buddha would be abandoning you, offering you no protection at all.

Instead, he was clear in stating which obligations took precedence over others. Here, though, we have to note that he never used the language of obligations. Instead, he simply offered his advice to people on the basis of their desire for happiness: If you really want to take on the training leading to a long-term reliable happiness, the principles of action dictate that this is how you have to weigh your shoulds against one another.

He notes that it's good to offer protection to those threatened with danger and fear (AN 4:184; Iti 31) but he doesn't list it as a precept. That alone should indicate that he holds the precept against killing as more important than the desire to provide physical protection. On top of that, he notes that there are five types of loss: loss of relatives, loss of wealth, loss through disease, loss in terms of virtue, loss in terms of views. He then goes on to show that loss of relatives, loss of wealth, and loss through disease are relatively minor, whereas loss of virtue and loss in terms of views are serious. The former forms of loss won't send you to a bad destination after death, whereas the latter two would (AN 5:130).

The Buddha's way of ranking these forms of loss flies in the face of many conventional domestic values, but it does provide comfort of an important sort: The losses that he ranks as important are largely under your control. It's inevitable that someday you'll be parted from your relatives, your wealth, and your health, but you can lose your virtue and right views only if you yourself abandon them. If you don't abandon them, no one can take them away from you.

And your virtue and right view don't save their rewards only for the next life. The Buddha lists them as the prerequisites for right mindfulness (SN 47:16) and as qualities conducive to group harmony here and now (AN 6:12).

Given the way the Buddha states these values, it would appear that his advice in the case of war would be to find ways of stopping enemies from causing harm but without killing them. This requires exercising your imagination and discernment to find alternatives to killing—but then, if you're serious in your quest for happiness, this is what training in skillful action is for. It's not a mere matter of obeying rules. It's aimed at forcing your discernment to grow.

As for the fourth category of action—neither dark nor bright, leading to the end of action—the Aṅguttara discourses explain it in three different ways. In every case, though, they show that it doesn't mean abandoning conventions of right and wrong, or the categories of skillful and not. Instead, it means adopting skillful behavior in a way that transforms it to serve a higher purpose than a good rebirth. It becomes the skillfulness of achieving total freedom. This is reflected in the fact that the Buddha, when describing his own path to full awakening, said it was a quest for what is skillful (MN 36). And when he taught the path to awakening to others, he defined it as the eight right factors of the noble path, to distinguish them from eight wrong types of action (MN 117).

In fact, one of the discourses, AN 4:237, defines the category of neither-dark-nor-bright action as the noble eightfold path itself. The factors of this path are well-known—right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. What's rarely been noted, though, is that these factors include within them the Buddha's list of skillful actions: Skillful bodily actions come under right action, skillful verbal actions, under right speech, and skillful mental actions under right view and right resolve.

These factors then form the basis for the factors of right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration, and a heightened level of right view, all of which transform them to a level of skill that can lead the mind to a state of total freedom from intention. This state is described in AN 4:235's definition of neither dark-nor-bright action: the intention to abandon all actions in the present moment, whether bright, dark, or both. This intention can be fulfilled only inwardly—primarily when in meditation—and leads directly to awakening.

After awakening, you're said to be beyond both skillful and unskillful actions, but again, this doesn't mean that you don't continue to act in skillful ways. Instead, you're described "virtuous, but not made of virtue" (MN 78). In other words, your behavior is in line with the precepts, but you don't define yourself in terms of your virtue. That's one of the ways in which your mind, when awakened, is free.

This is where the Buddha's teachings on skillful and unskillful action lead. They're a necessary part of the practice for total freedom. You follow them everywhere and always to take you ultimately to a dimension beyond space and time—i.e., beyond everywhere and always. This is why he taught it as a categorical truth that you should develop skillful actions and abandon unskillful ones. Although he wasn't a doctrinaire absolutist, he wasn't a doctrinaire relativist, either. After all, he had seen through his awakening that some truths were beneficial to use only under certain conditions, whereas others were beneficial in all times and places.

In particular, he had seen that the guidelines for skillful action, if you stick to them, are for the sake of your genuine happiness. As he once said, if it were impossible for people to stick to these guidelines, he wouldn't have taught them. And if following them didn't lead to long-term happiness, he wouldn't have taught them, either (AN 2:19). The message is that you have it within you to adhere to these principles through thick and thin, and that you'll be more than glad that you did.

At War with the Dhamma

There's a depressing pattern in human behavior that Mark Twain noted more than a century ago, and it's with us still: The powers-that-be want a war. Politicians and the media start beating the drum, denouncing the evil intentions of the enemy and calling for all patriotic citizens to attack them. At first, people are reluctant to go along, but then religious leaders jump on the bandwagon, telling their followers that it's their sacred moral duty to support the war machine. Soon the whole country is aflame with the moral need to fight the enemy. Those few who question this need are branded as traitors.

Young men march off to battle, only to find how ghastly war actually is. They realize that they were duped, and that their side is not as virtuous as they had been led to believe. Many of them are killed. Those lucky enough to return home tell their families and neighbors: Never again will they be tricked into going to war ever again.

But then, after a while, the powers-that-be want another war. Politicians and the media start beating the drum. If the arguments for the last war no longer work, they find new ways of raising the emotional pitch of their rhetoric so that soon the whole country is swept up in war fever all over again.

The only way to keep yourself from getting sucked into this pattern is to have strong principles against killing, principles you hold to no matter what. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha formulated the precept against killing in the most uncompromising way: Don't intentionally kill anything or anyone. Ever. Don't tell other people to kill. And don't condone the act of killing (Sn 2:14). When asked if there were anything at all whose killing he would approve of, the Buddha answered with just one thing: anger (SN 1:71).

That's as clear-cut and absolute as you can get, and it's clear-cut for a reason: Clear-cut rules are easy to remember even when your emotional level is high—and that's precisely when you need them most.

If you approach every argument for war with this precept in mind, then no matter what reasons people might cite for supporting the war, you protect yourself by always putting the precept first. If you leave room in your mind for exceptions to the precept, someone will find a way to exploit those exceptions, and you'll be back where you were before you had the precept, fooled into supporting another war.

The precepts are like a fence around your property. If there's a gap in the fence, anything that can fit into the gap—or enlarge it by wriggling through—will be able to get in. It'll be as if there weren't a fence there at all.

Now, it's important to remember that the Buddha never forced the precepts on anyone. Instead of calling them obligations, he called them training rules, and the training is something you take on voluntarily. Your moral behavior is a voluntary gift of safety to the world. If you can make that gift universal, with no exceptions, you can have a share in universal safety as well (AN 8:39). If you actually break a precept, the safe course of action is not to try to redesign the training to justify what you've done. Instead, you honestly admit that your training has lapsed, and do your best to get back on course.

Given that the texts are so clear and unequivocal on the issue of killing, it's hard to conceive that anyone would even think of trying to formulate a Buddhist theory of just war. Yet there have been such attempts in the past, and they're with us again now. If we have any concern for the Dhamma at all, it's important to reject these theories outright. Otherwise, we find ourselves quibbling over when and where it's right to issue a Buddhist license to kill. And no matter how strictly we try to restrict the license, it's like running a tank through the back of our fence and putting up a sign next to the resulting hole, saying that only those thieves and bears who promise to behave themselves nicely will be allowed to enter, and then leaving them to police themselves.

Because the early texts rule out killing in all circumstances, attempts to formulate a Buddhist just-war theory ultimately have to fall back on one basic assertion: There's something wrong with the texts. Because this assertion can take many forms, it's useful to examine a few of them, to see how misleading they can be. That way, we won't fall for them.

The big one is this:

• *The moral ideals expressed in the early texts may be inspiring, but they offer no practical guidance for dealing with the complexities of real life. Real life presents situations in which holding strictly to the precepts would entail loss. Real life contains conflicting moral claims. The texts recognize none of these issues. They teach us no way of dealing with evil aggressors, aside from passivity and appeasement, hoping that our loving-kindness meditation will inspire in the aggressors a change of heart. So on this issue, we can't trust that following the texts will protect us.*

Actually, the early texts are not silent on issues of moral complexity. They do answer questions about the losses that can come from holding to the precepts and about the desire to meet obligations at odds with the precepts. It's just that their answers aren't the ones we might want to hear.

Of course, these answers are based on the teaching of karma and its effect on rebirth, teachings that many modern Buddhists view with skepticism. But the Buddha dealt with skeptics in his own day. As he told them, no one can really know the truth of these teachings until awakening, but if you take them on as working hypotheses in the meantime, you're more likely to be careful in your behavior than if you didn't (MN 60). If it turns out that they're not true, at least you can die with a clear conscience, knowing that you've lived a pure life free from hostility or ill will. When you discover that they are true, you'll be glad that you kept yourself safe (AN 3:66).

The Buddha readily acknowledged that there are times when following the precepts will put you at a disadvantage in terms of the world. You might lose your wealth, your health, or even your relatives. But those losses, he says, are minor in the long run. Major loss would be to lose your virtue or to lose right view. Those losses could harm you for many lifetimes to come. Here the lesson is obvious: For the sake of your long-term benefit, be willing to suffer the lesser losses to keep from suffering the major ones (AN 5:130).

At the same time, there are many occasions when breaking a precept brings short-term rewards in this world, but from that fact, the Buddha never drew the conclusion that those rewards justified breaking the precept (SN 42:13).

As for conflicting obligations, the texts tell of the case of a person who, finding that he's about to be thrown into hell for breaking the precepts, pleads with the hell wardens for leniency: He broke the precepts because of his social obligations to family, friends, or king. Does he get any leniency? No. The hell wardens throw him into hell even as he's making his plea (MN 97).

The Buddha said that if you want to help others, you can provide them with food, clothing, shelter, or medicine as needed. Better yet, you get them to follow the precepts, too (AN 4:99). By this token, if you tell others that there are times when it's their moral duty to break the precepts, you're actually working for their harm. If they act on your recommendation and are thrown into hell, will you be on hand to plead their case? And will the hell wardens give you a hearing?

So when the texts tell us to stick with the precepts in all cases, they're actually teaching us how to protect our long-term well-being.

This doesn't mean that the precepts leave you totally defenseless against an enemy, just that they force you to think outside the box. If you're determined not to kill under any circumstances, that determination forces you to think in more creative ways to keep an adversary from taking advantage of you. You learn methods of self-defense that fall short of killing. You put more store in diplomacy and don't look down on intelligent compromise.

• *The ideals of the texts are for those who want to go straight to liberation undeterred: They are the ones who should hold to the precepts no matter what, even being willing to die rather than to kill. However, there has to be guidance for those who want to take the longer road to liberation, through many lifetimes, at the same time fulfilling their social obligations, such as the duty to kill in defense of their country.*

Actually, the early texts do describe a slow route to liberation, and a prime feature of that route is holding to the precepts in all situations (AN 8:54). Don't do anything that would land you in the lower realms.

By this standard, it's hard to see how an even slower route, one that allowed for theories of just war, would count as a route to liberation at all. As the Buddha pointed out, if you're in battle with the enemy, trying to kill them, your mind is immersed in ill will. If you get killed at that point, your

mind-state would take you to hell. If you have the wrong view that what you're doing is virtuous, you can go either to hell or to rebirth as an animal (SN 42:3). Neither of these destinations lies in the direction of nibbāna. It would be like flying from Las Vegas to San Diego via Yemen, with a long layover in Afghanistan, during which you'd probably forget where you were going to begin with.

• *The texts are obsessed with the letter of the precepts, but it's important not to let the letter get in the way of their spirit, which is to cause the least harm for the greatest number of people. Sometimes you have to kill people to prevent them from doing greater harm.*

This "spirit" is never expressed in the texts, and for good reason. It assumes that there's a clear way of calculating when doing a lesser evil will prevent a greater evil, but what clear boundary determines what does and doesn't go into the calculus? Can you discount the retaliation that will come from people who want to avenge your "lesser evil"? Can you discount the people who take you as an example in committing their own ideas of what constitutes a lesser evil? How many generations or lifetimes do you take into account? You can't really control the indirect effects of your action once it's done; you can't tell for sure whether the killing you do will result in more or less killing than what you're trying to prevent. But what *is* for sure is that you've used your own body or your own speech in giving orders—things over which you *do* have control—to kill.

A principle that's actually closer to the precepts, and allows for no misapplication, is that you never use other people's misbehavior as justification for your own. No matter what other people do, you stick to the precepts.

• *Maybe the texts are hiding something. Maybe the Buddha didn't intend the precepts to be taken as absolutes. There must have been times when kings came to consult with him on when war might be morally justified, but for some reason the texts never tell us what he said.*

This conspiracy theory is probably the most dangerous argument of all. Once it's admitted as valid, you can turn the Dhamma into anything you want. I personally find it hard to believe that, after painting the picture of the soldier destined for hell when dying in battle, the Buddha would have

privately discussed with King Pasenadi the grounds on which, for reasons of state, he could rightly send people into that situation.

The texts tell us that he once told Pasenadi that if you break the precepts, then no matter how large your army, you leave yourself unprotected. If you keep the precepts, then even if you have no army at all, you're well protected from within (SN 3:5). Was this teaching meant just for public consumption? Are we to assume that the Buddha was a two-faced Buddha who taught a secret doctrine to kings so completely at odds with what he taught in public?

The Buddha had so many chances to make exceptions to the precept against killing, but he always stuck by his principles: No intentional taking of life. Period. When you try to cast doubt on these principles, you're working for the harm of many, leaving them unprotected when they try to determine what should and shouldn't be done (AN 3:62).

That's much worse than leaving them without a license to kill an aggressor, no matter how bad.

Free the Dhamma

The Sutta Nipāta, an early collection of poetry in the Pali Canon, contains a dramatic discourse (Sn 1:4) in which a wealthy brahman farmer chides the Buddha for not farming. If he were to farm, the brahman argues, he wouldn't have to go for alms. This was a typical brahmanical criticism of the Buddhist monks in that day: If they want to eat, they should work rather than go begging for food.

The Buddha, however, responds that he too, in his way, is a farmer. The brahman then questions him in verse: What kind of farming does he do?

The fact that the question is in verse is a challenge. To properly answer it, the Buddha has to compose verses on the spot in the same meter as the brahman's question.

The Buddha more than meets the challenge, reciting extemporaneous verses on how the qualities of mind developed in Dhamma practice correspond to different farming skills and implements, yielding the highest fruit: the deathless.

The brahman, impressed by the Buddha's virtuosity, offers him a bowl of milk-rice as a payment for his skill in teaching the Dhamma. But the Buddha rejects the rice, saying that he can't accept such a payment. He then advises the brahman to throw the rice away on a spot where there's no vegetation or into water where there are no living beings.

The brahman drops the rice into water where there are no living beings, and in the words of the discourse: "Just as an iron ball heated all day, when tossed in the water, hisses & sizzles, seethes & steams, in the same way the milk-rice, when dropped in the water, hissed & sizzled, seethed & steamed."

The brahman—in awe, his hair standing on end—goes to the Buddha and throws himself at his feet, asking to take refuge in the Triple Gem and to be accepted into the Saṅgha as a monk. In no long time, we're told, he becomes an arahant.

The drama of this incident makes it hard to miss the point: The Buddha saw any payment for teaching the Dhamma as unacceptable.

Another discourse in the Canon, AN 5:159, shows that this principle applied not only to him personally. When learning that one of his monk disciples is teaching the Dhamma, the Buddha lays out five conditions for how Dhamma should be taught, one of them being, "The Dhamma should be taught with the thought, 'I will speak not for the purpose of material reward.'"

So the Buddha was very clear on this point: It's inappropriate for a monk or nun to accept payment for teaching the Dhamma, or for anyone to teach the Dhamma for the purpose of material reward. The image of the milk-rice hissing and sizzling, seething and steaming, sears this message into the mind.

Which raises the question: What about Dhamma books? Should they not be sold? The Canon doesn't answer this question directly, because there were no Dhamma books when the Buddha taught or the Canon was assembled. Dhamma texts were memorized, because—given the rigorous training in memorization that was perfected in ancient India—it was felt that the person-to-person communication of the Dhamma was more reliable than copying the Dhamma out in writing.

A few centuries later, though, attitudes changed, as some texts almost disappeared during wars in which many of those who had memorized the texts were put to the sword. So people began writing the Dhamma down in the form of manuscripts and books. At that time, those who wrote and received these written texts seemed to have kept the above two passages in mind: A Dhamma book was deserving of special respect. The commentaries to the Pali Canon, for instance, list Dhamma books as a type of memorial, on a par with memorials containing the Buddha's relics. For this reason, some of the earliest written Dhamma works state that they should be bowed down to. Even today in Asia, there's a strong etiquette around how Dhamma books should not be placed on the floor or stepped over. When stored, they should be stored above the head. A book may be an object, but a Dhamma book should be treated as the Dhamma itself.

However, there was the question of whether the scribes who copied Dhamma books should be paid. The general attitude seems to be that

professional lay scribes could be paid, but that monks and nuns—in line with the principle stated in AN 5:159—should not.

An additional change came more recently as printing presses came to Theravāda lands, and Dhamma books were mass-produced. In some cases, the printing presses belonged to the monasteries themselves. To cover their costs, the monasteries began putting a price on the books they printed.

This trend brought about a counter-trend: those who insisted that Dhamma books shouldn't be treated like merchandise in the market. Lay printers could be paid to print Dhamma books, according to this view, but once printed, the books should be freely given away. This would provide those who sponsored such books the opportunity to engage in the highest form of giving: the gift of Dhamma (Dhp 354). It would also provide the recipients of such books the heart-warming opportunity to be recipients of a gift of Dhamma, and not just purchasers of Dhamma merchandise.

In Thailand, this latter view has been most forcefully asserted by ajaans in the Forest Tradition. In the rare cases where communities in this tradition have consented to have their books printed for sale, they have never argued that they were doing so in light of anything the Buddha did or said. It was simply for the pragmatic purpose of getting the Dhamma to as many people as possible, and was seen as a concession to the degenerate times in which we live.

Even the monks and lay people outside of the Forest Tradition who sell Dhamma books have never tried to cite the Buddha as their authority for selling their books. Their rationale has been straightforwardly pragmatic: They couldn't afford to print Dhamma books otherwise.

However, now that the Dhamma has come to the West, entrepreneurs who sell Dhamma books have become more aggressive in their reasoning as to why there's nothing wrong with what they are doing. Some have actually cited passages from the Pali Canon that, according to them, show that the Buddha himself would have approved of the practice. This, they say, shows that those who criticize the practice of selling Dhamma books are actually arguing in opposition to the Dhamma.

These arguments avoid mentioning the two passages cited above where the Buddha shows most clearly his attitude toward receiving payment for teaching the Dhamma. But it's good to keep in mind the image of the milk-

rice hissing and sizzling as we examine the three sets of reasoning offered by the apologists for the practice of slapping a price on the Dhamma and putting it up for sale.

The first set of reasons are similar to the pragmatic reasons cited in Asia: You get more Dhamma to more people more effectively if you take advantage of the commercial book distribution network already in place here in the West than you do if you give your books away. People can more easily find books offered for sale than those for free distribution, and—because modern people have so little time to judge books for themselves—they can save time by trusting that books offered for sale have been peer-reviewed, and are thus more reliable than Dhamma books given away.

The apologists then cite the Buddha as an authority in support of these considerations by quoting the passage from the Vinaya in which the Buddha first sent his arahant disciples out to spread the Dhamma to as many people as possible:

> Then the Blessed One addressed the monks, "I am released, monks, from all snares, human & divine. You, too, monks, are also released from all snares, human & divine. Wander, monks, for the benefit & happiness of many, out of sympathy for the world, for the welfare, benefit, & happiness of devas & human beings. Don't any two of you go by the same way." — *Mv I.11.1*

Now, telling a group of arahants to teach many people is not the same as telling them to print and sell Dhamma books. The Buddha was not a sales manager willing to sacrifice his principles in order to meet quarterly goals. His desire to get the Dhamma to many people was balanced by his sense of fitting and right ways to do it. This point is especially clear when we look at his remarks to the brahman in Sn 1:4. By rejecting the brahman's offer of milk-rice, he risked offending him. And this was not the only instance in which he risked offending his listeners when taking a stand on what's fitting and right. Sn 4:9 tells of another, when he rejected, with a few sharp words, another brahman's offer of his daughter.

The Buddha had standards for when and to whom he would teach the Dhamma. That's why he formulated the *sekhiya* rules in the Pāṭimokkha

concerning situations in which it is not proper to teach the Dhamma, all of which deal with situations in which the listener is not showing the proper respect. This means that the Buddha didn't regard his desire to spread the Dhamma far and wide as overriding questions of when it is appropriate or inappropriate to teach. And as Sn 1:4 and AN 5:159 show, teaching the Dhamma for material reward was, in his eyes, inappropriate. So in situations like that, it shouldn't be taught.

Which means that using Mv I.11.1 as an excuse for selling the Dhamma is simply taking it out of its larger context and, as a result, distorting its meaning.

The rise of the Internet has meant that Dhamma books can be distributed widely across the world at no cost at all, so there's no reason to believe that books for sale are more easily obtained than books offered freely.

As for the argument that books for sale can be trusted to have been peer-reviewed: There's always the question of what standards are being used by book publishers when they decide whether to print a book for sale. Even if we limit our attention to academic publishers—those least likely to print a book just because they anticipate a healthy profit—it's an indisputable fact that academic publishers have printed some pretty abominable books about the Buddha's teachings that have done a great deal to foster widespread misunderstandings about Dhamma. It's hard to imagine that the Buddha had these books in mind when he told the arahants to teach the Dhamma out of sympathy for the world.

The second set of arguments draws on an incident reported in SN 3:13. King Pasenadī of Kosala has been eating too much, and one day, right after a heavy meal, he comes to see the Buddha, breathing heavily. The Buddha senses that the king is overeating, so he recites this verse:

> For a person always mindful,
> knowing moderation in the food he's obtained,
> his pains grow slender;
> gradually he ages, guarding his life.

The king, pleased with the verse, turns to one of his courtiers, a young brahman named Sudassana, and tells him to learn the verse from the Buddha and then to recite it every day when the king is taking his meal. As a reward, he offers Sudassana a considerable stipend: a daily payment of 100 kahapaṇas.

The Buddha teaches the verse to Sudassana, Sudassana recites it every day, and the king begins to restrict his intake of food. Ultimately, when he becomes quite slim, he exclaims over how the Buddha showed sympathy both for his benefit in this life and for his benefit in lives to come.

The apologists for selling Dhamma books cite this passage as proof that the Buddha approved of people getting paid to teach the Dhamma. After all, he didn't object when Pasenadi offered the stipend to Sudassana, and even taught the verse to Sudassana knowing full well that Sudassana would get paid for reciting it. Ergo: The Buddha approved of the general principle that people be paid for teaching the Dhamma.

This is a particularly tone-deaf interpretation of the sutta. To begin with, the Buddha was not so foolish as to interfere in the way the king ran his palace, telling the king how he should or shouldn't reward his lackeys. And that's what Sudassana is: the king's lackey. By accepting payment, Sudassana is affirming his servitude to the king. And of course, the king wouldn't pay Sudassana for reciting any passage of Dhamma that he didn't want to hear. He who pays the piper calls the tune.

So the actual message of the passage is that if you accept payment for teaching the Dhamma, you're putting yourself in the position of a lackey, free to teach only what your audience is willing to buy.

The third set of arguments takes the following passage as its jumping off point:

> "Monks, there are these two kinds of gifts: a gift of material things & a gift of the Dhamma. Of these two kinds of gifts, this is supreme: a gift of the Dhamma." — *Iti 98*

Here the apologists, after noting the canonical distinction between gifts of material things and gifts of the Dhamma, and the superiority of the

latter, come up with a novel way of interpreting the distinction when applied to Dhamma books. A book, they say, is not Dhamma. It's just a material thing. So giving a Dhamma book is a lower form of generosity. The actual gift of Dhamma occurs when one teaches the Dhamma. In the context of Dhamma writings, they claim, the actual gift occurs when a writer, without ulterior motive, puts the Dhamma into writing. Whether that Dhamma is then printed in a book for sale or in one offered for free distribution doesn't alter the fact that the superior gift of Dhamma has already been given.

This argument is based on a bizarre misunderstanding of the act of giving. In reality, a gift doesn't become a gift until it's been given freely to a recipient. In a genuine gift of Dhamma, a teacher puts the Dhamma into words and freely conveys those words to a recipient. Until there's a recipient, there's no gift. And if the recipient has to pay for the words, there's certainly no gift. The mere act of writing the Dhamma doesn't count as a gift at all.

The fact that people who make this third argument understand so little about something as basic as the act of giving raises the question of how they can be trusted to know anything else of the Dhamma.

I've often been told that people in the West don't appreciate free books, and that they measure a book's value by its monetary price. So, to convince Westerners that Dhamma books are worthwhile, those books should have a price attached to them. Only then will Westerners want to read them.

But surely, one of the purposes of spreading the Dhamma is to change people's attitudes, and in particular to get them to stop measuring value by monetary price. The best way to do that is to offer high-quality Dhamma books for free, as evidence that the price of an object is no indication of its quality, and that generosity is a heart-warming activity. I know of many people who initially regarded free Dhamma books with suspicion—as one person told me, she assumed that a free-distribution book was worth what she paid for it, i.e., nothing—only to learn that some free Dhamma books were free because they were too valuable to have a price.

The Buddha taught generosity as the bedrock of the practice. The best way to teach generosity is not to get someone to buy a book on the topic, but to practice generosity yourself, as when you give the Dhamma freely. When people have to pay for a Dhamma book, the fact that they can't get the book without paying for it places a barrier between them and the Dhamma on the one hand, and between them and the teacher on the other. When they obtain a Dhamma book as a gift, those barriers are torn down.

Mindfulness to the Fore

THE MEANING OF PARIMUKHAṀ

The Pali Canon's descriptions of mindfulness of breathing start with a standard introduction:

> "There's the case where a monk, having gone to the wilderness, to the shade of a tree, or to an empty building, sits down folding his legs crosswise, holding his body erect, and establishing mindfulness *parimukhaṁ*. Always mindful, he breathes in; mindful he breathes out."

The question is, what does *parimukhaṁ* mean in this context? As it turns out, it's a controversial point.

The suttas, or discourses, don't explain or define the term. A later text in the Abhidhamma, Vibhaṅga 12:1, interprets it as meaning the tip of the nose or the "sign" of the mouth—*nāsikagge vā mukhanimitte vā*. According to the commentary to this passage, the "sign of the mouth" is the middle portion of the upper lip. The Vibhaṅga's interpretation of the word is a strictly literal one. If you take it apart into its root and prefix, *pari-* means "around"; *mukhaṁ* means "face" or "mouth." This would mean in practice that you should start breath meditation by establishing your mindfulness on the tip of the nose, on the upper lip, or around the mouth.

However, this interpretation doesn't fit in with the way the suttas actually use the term *parimukhaṁ* or other key words associated with meditation practice. In other words, even though the suttas don't explicitly define the word *parimukhaṁ,* the ways they use the term, and the contexts in which they use it, show implicitly that neither "tip of the nose" nor "around the mouth" would be the best meaning to adopt for the word.

What's interesting is that the commentaries to the suttas and even to the Abhidhamma seem to note this fact. So—in what's a rare move for them—they differ from the Vibhaṅga on this point and offer their own interpretations of *parimukhaṁ,* stating that it refers to the *manner* with

which mindfulness is established in relation to its object, rather than the physical point where it's focused.

In fact, when we look at the suttas, we'll see that the question of what spot in the body is ideal for focusing your awareness while doing breath meditation is a total non-issue. Instead, it seems that the commentaries are right in saying that *parimukhaṁ* indicates the manner with which you establish mindfulness when you start meditating. However, even the commentaries' definitions for the term are not quite in line with the suttas. They indicate that *parimukhaṁ* refers to the relationship between mindfulness and its object, whereas the suttas suggest that it refers to the relationship of mindfulness to other mental factors prior to choosing an object. It's meant to take the lead in the training of the mind.

To understand this point, we have to look not only at how *parimukhaṁ* is used in the suttas, but also at the meaning of two terms in the suttas that establish the context for understanding how it's used: *cittassa ek'aggatā* and *sabba-kāya-paṭisamvedī.*

CITTASSA EK'AGGATĀ

The first term, *cittassa ek'aggatā,* is the suttas' standard definition of concentration. Now, some modern schools of meditation teach that concentration practice is radically separate from mindfulness practice, which would mean that because *parimukhaṁ* describes mindfulness, the meaning of *cittassa ek'aggatā* would have no bearing on what *parimukhaṁ* means. But in the suttas, the relationship between mindfulness and concentration practice is very close. As the Buddha indicates again and again, the practice of right mindfulness is meant to lead straight to right concentration (SN 45:1). The four establishings of mindfulness *(satipaṭṭhāna),* which are the definition of right mindfulness, are the themes of right concentration (MN 44; AN 8:70); the fourth level of right concentration, the fourth jhāna, is where mindfulness is purified (DN 2). And as we'll see below, the fourth jhāna is where the fourth step in the Buddha's instructions for mindfulness of breathing is fully realized (AN 4:38; AN 10:20).

So, given that right concentration is where mindfulness practice is aimed, any understanding of mindfulness of breathing requires knowing the state of mind at which it's aimed.

Cittassa ek'aggatā is another term that the suttas don't explicitly define. Modern scholars often translate it as "one-pointedness of mind." Cittassa obviously means "of the mind." But there are good reasons for holding that "one-pointedness" is not the best translation for *ek'aggatā* in this context.

First, let's look at the parts of the compound: *eka* means "one"; and *–tā* is a suffix turning an adjective (in this case, *ek'agga)* into a noun. That much is uncontroversial.

The issue is around *agga,* which many people translate as "point."

To begin with, *agga* has many other meanings besides "point." In fact, it has two primary clusters of meanings, in neither of which is "point" the central focus.

The first cluster centers on the fact that a summit of a mountain is called its *agga*. Clustered around this meaning are ideas of *agga* as the topmost part of something (such as the ridge of a roof), the tip of something (such as the tip of a blade of grass), and the best or supreme example of something (such as the Buddha as the *agga* of all beings). AN 5:80 plays with these meanings of *agga* when it criticizes monks of the future who will "search for the tiptop flavors *(ras'agga)* with the tip of the tongue *(jivh'agga)*."

The second cluster of meanings for *agga* centers on the idea of "dwelling," "meeting place," or "gathering place." A hall where monks gather for the uposatha, for example, is called an *uposath'agga*. The spot where they gather for their meals is called a *bhatt'agga*.

So the question is whether *agga* in the context of concentration has a meaning closer to summit (and thus, possibly, "point") or to gathering place.

Here, the best guide is furnished by the similes the Buddha provides in various suttas (such as DN 2, MN 119, and AN 5:28) for the four jhānas that constitute right concentration.

> *The first jhāna:* "Just as if a dexterous bathman or bathman's apprentice would pour bath powder into a brass basin and knead it

together, sprinkling it again & again with water, so that his ball of bath powder—saturated, moisture-laden, permeated within & without—would nevertheless not drip; in the same way, the monk permeates & pervades, suffuses & fills this very body with the rapture & pleasure born of seclusion. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by rapture & pleasure born of seclusion."

The second jhāna: "Just like a lake with spring-water welling up from within, having no inflow from the east, west, north, or south, and with the skies supplying abundant showers time & again, so that the cool fount of water welling up from within the lake would permeate & pervade, suffuse & fill it with cool waters, there being no part of the lake unpervaded by the cool waters; in the same way, the monk permeates & pervades, suffuses & fills this very body with the rapture & pleasure born of concentration. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by rapture & pleasure born of concentration."

The third jhāna: "Just as in a lotus pond, some of the lotuses, born & growing in the water, stay immersed in the water and flourish without standing up out of the water, so that they are permeated & pervaded, suffused & filled with cool water from their roots to their tips, and nothing of those lotuses would be unpervaded with cool water; in the same way, the monk permeates & pervades, suffuses & fills this very body with the pleasure divested of rapture. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded with pleasure divested of rapture."

The fourth jhāna: "Just as if a man were sitting covered from head to foot with a white cloth so that there would be no part of his body to which the white cloth did not extend; in the same way, the monk sits, permeating the body with a pure, bright awareness. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by pure, bright awareness."

Now, obviously these similes indicate that concentration is a full-body experience: "[T]he monk permeates & pervades, suffuses & fills this very body with the rapture & pleasure…There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by rapture & pleasure… There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by pure, bright awareness." If your awareness were restricted to

a single point, you'd have no way of knowing whether rapture and/or pleasure had pervaded the entire body in the first three jhāñas, and your body certainly wouldn't be permeated with a pure, bright awareness in the fourth.

• There's an opposing interpretation here, stating that the word "body" in these similes doesn't mean the physical body, because a person in jhāna has to be oblivious to the physical body aside from the one focal point of concentration. Instead, "body" is meant metaphorically as a term for the "body" of the mind.

However, it's hard to understand why, if the Buddha really did mean for concentration to be a state of awareness restricted to a single point, the similes would have occurred to him in the first place as a useful or appropriate way of describing the jhānas. And it would call into question his skill as a teacher if, wanting to convey that jhāna was an exclusively one-pointed concentration, he used these similes of fullness and extensiveness to describe such a narrow experience.

But putting that question aside, we can simply note that in MN 119 the Buddha gives the similes for the jhānas immediately after his discussion of six ways of focusing on the physical body. If he had meant "body" to mean "physical body" in the first context, and "mind body" in the discussion immediately following it, he would have signaled that he was redefining his terms. But he didn't.

So unless we want to assume that the Buddha was careless or devious in his meditation instructions, it seems best to interpret *agga* in the compound *ek'aggatā* as meaning "gathering place": All the factors of jhāna are gathered around a single object or theme, but awareness embraces the entire body so that the body can be filled with pleasure, rapture, and a pure, bright awareness as these qualities are developed in the course of deepening concentration. Given that the state of concentration is said to be a dwelling *(vihāra)*, and that a person enters and dwells *(viharati)* in concentration, this meaning of *agga* seems to be the most appropriate for the context.

This, then relates to the second term that establishes the context for *parimukhaṁ: sabba-kāya-paṭisamvedī*. This word appears in the third step of breath meditation instructions as listed in MN 118 and other places in the Canon. It means "sensitive to the entire body."

> "[1] Breathing in long, he discerns, 'I am breathing in long'; or breathing out long, he discerns, 'I am breathing out long.' [2] Or breathing in short, he discerns, 'I am breathing in short'; or breathing out short, he discerns, 'I am breathing out short.' [3] He trains himself, 'I will breathe in sensitive to the entire body.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out sensitive to the entire body.' [4] He trains himself, 'I will breathe in calming bodily fabrication.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out calming bodily fabrication.'

The question is, what does "body" mean in the phrase, "sensitive to the entire body"? Looking at this in terms of the similes for jhāna, it would seem obvious that "entire body" here means the entire physical body.

However, the Visuddhimagga (VIII.171), a commentarial text, insists that "body" in this compound cannot mean the physical body, and instead must mean the "body of breath," and that the entire compound means being sensitive to the entire length of the breath.

There are three reasons, though, for not accepting the Visuddhimagga's interpretation here.

1. The first is that these four steps for mindfulness of breathing appear in MN 119 in the context of other meditation practices, all of which focus on the physical body. If the Buddha had meant "body" to mean "physical body" in the context of those exercises, but something else here, he would have said so. But he didn't.

2. The second reason is that the Visuddhimagga's interpretation of step 3 in the Buddha's instructions makes it redundant with steps 1 and 2. It's hard to understand how you could discern whether the breath is long or short in those steps without being aware of the full length of the breath.

3. The third reason is that the Visuddhimagga's interpretation leaves a huge gap between steps 2 and 4. Step 4, as the above passage shows, is to

train yourself to breathe in and out calming bodily fabrication. Now, AN 4:38 and AN 10:20 explain what this means:

> "And how is a monk calmed in his bodily fabrication? There is the case where a monk, with the abandoning of pleasure & pain—as with the earlier disappearance of elation & distress—enters & remains in the fourth jhāna: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain. This is how a monk is calmed in his bodily fabrication."

In other words, the purpose of step 4 is to lead the mind to the fourth jhāna. As we saw above, when you're in the fourth jhāna, your entire body is permeated with a pure, bright awareness. As we learn from other sutta passages, the fourth jhāna is also the level of concentration where the in-and-out breaths stop (SN 36:11; AN 10:72). In practice, this requires two stages: developing a full-body awareness (as implied in the similes for the first three jhānas) and then getting the mind so quiet and still that there's no felt need to breathe.

Step 4 focuses on the calming of the breath. If we were to follow the Visuddhimagga's interpretation of step 3, the Buddha's breath meditation instructions would be missing an important step: how to get from simply detecting the length of the breath to a full-body awareness of the body not breathing in and out. But if we take the Canon at its word—it doesn't say "body of breath," as some translations gloss it in light of the commentary, it simply says "body"—then the essential step is right there in step 3: You go from discerning whether the breath is long or short to training yourself to be sensitive to the entire body. Then in step 4 you train yourself to calm the in-and-out breaths so that you end up in the fourth jhāna with the entire body permeated with a pure, bright awareness.

• This interpretation of *sabba-kāya-paṭisamvedī* has been challenged by citing the simile that the Buddha uses to describe the first four steps of mindfulness of breathing when they are given in the Satipaṭṭhāna and Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas (MN 10; DN 22).

> "Just as a dexterous turner or his apprentice, when making a long turn, discerns, 'I am making a long turn,' or when making a short turn discerns, 'I am making a short turn'; in the same way the monk, when

> breathing in long, discerns, 'I am breathing in long'; or breathing out long, he discerns, 'I am breathing out long.' … He trains himself, 'I will breathe in calming bodily fabrication'; he trains himself, 'I will breathe out calming bodily fabrication.'"

The turner here is a traditional version of the modern lathe worker. Videos of turners who still practice the traditional method of turning wood show that their eyes are intently focused on the point where the blade of the cutting knife meets the wood being turned. From this fact, it has been argued that the simile is making the point that, when doing these four steps of mindfulness of breathing, one should have an intense one-pointed focus like a turner, and not be aware of the whole body.

However, the videos also show that the turner has to be aware of much more than just the point where the blade of the knife meets the wood. Unlike modern lathes—where a machine turns the wood, and lathe workers are responsible only for where they place the knife and with how much pressure—the traditional turner also has to turn the wood himself. He does this with a bow whose string is wrapped around the wood. So in addition to being aware of the knife, he also has to be aware of how long or short a turn he makes with the bow, which will determine how deep or shallow his cut will be. And videos of these craftsmen show that the way they use their bows is very subtle and complex. To know whether they are making a short or a long turn—the main focus of the Buddha's simile—they have to be aware of how their arms are moving the bow.

In other words, the simile of the turner is actually an illustration, not of an exclusive one-pointed awareness, but of full-body awareness.

• Another sutta passage cited in support of the Visuddhimagga's interpretation of *kāya* in *sabba-kāya-paṭisamvedī* is the following explanation from MN 118 as to why the first four steps of breath meditation develop the body in and of itself as a frame of reference for establishing mindfulness:

> "I tell you, monks, that this—the in-&-out breath—is classed as a body among bodies, which is why the monk on that occasion remains focused on the body in & of itself—ardent, alert, & mindful—subduing greed & distress with reference to the world."

This passage, according to the argument, defines what "body" means in the third step of breath meditation: the in-and-out breath. Therefore, "entire body" must mean the entire temporal length of the in-and-out breath as felt at the nose.

There are many reasons for not accepting this argument, some of which we have already cited in pointing out the general problems with the Visuddhimagga's interpretation. But here we can cite two more:

1. This passage from MN 118 is not offered as a definition of "body" in the third step. Instead, it's offered as an explanation as to how all four of the first steps of breath meditation develop the body in and of itself as a framework for establishing mindfulness. This passage is found only in the few suttas that analyze the relationship between the sixteen steps of mindfulness of breathing on the one hand, and the four establishings of mindfulness on the other—such as MN 118 and SN 54:13. It appears in none of the many passages in the Vinaya and suttas that list the sixteen steps without reference to this relationship, such as the origin story to Pārājika 3, SN 54:6, SN 54:8, SN 54:9, SN 54:11, and AN 10:60. So the context of the explanation doesn't point to the third step.

But even if, for the sake of argument, we were to take this explanation as defining "body" in the third step, the fact that it is referring to all four steps means we would also have to take it as defining "body" in the fourth step, which, as we pointed out above, would make no sense. Given that the whole compound *kāya-saṅkhāra* in the fourth step means the in-and-out breath, how could *kāya* in the compound also mean in-and-out breath?

2. Also, if we were to take *kāya* in *sabba-kāya-paṭisamvedī* to mean in-and-out breath, why would "entire in-and-out breath" be limited to just the temporal length of the in-and-out breath as felt at the nose? After all, the in-and-out breath can be felt in many places in the body, most obviously in the shoulders, chest, diaphragm, and abdomen. Some people are so sensitive to the in-and-out breath that they can feel it throughout in the entire body. Given this fact, how could "*entire* in-and-out breath" mean only a very small part of the actual expansive in-and-out breathing experience? Because the first four steps of breath meditation aim at inducing a state in which awareness fills the body, it makes more sense to interpret *sabba-*

kāya-paṭisamvedī as an instruction to develop a full-body awareness as you breathe in and out.

PARIMUKHAṀ

Which brings us to the issue of *parimukhaṁ*. The above discussion should be enough to indicate that the issue of which part of the body you must be focused on as you start being mindful of the breath is a total non-issue. Because you're working toward a full-body awareness in right concentration, the spot where you begin should be a matter of personal choice.

In fact, when we look at how the word *parimukhaṁ* is used in other suttas or passages in the Vinaya, we can see that it's highly unlikely that *parimukhaṁ,* in the context of meditation instructions, refers to a particular part of the body at all. This is what we find:

Parimukhaṁ appears in Cullavagga (Cv) V.27.4, a Vinaya text, where it's listed in a passage discussing ways in which body or facial hair should not be "dressed." Judging from the terms around it, it could either refer to the place where the hair grows, or to the style of dressing the hair itself. The commentary to Cv V.27.4 translates *parimukhaṁ* in this context as "chest." But because the context here is not meditation, and because the term as it stands in the Canon could be interpreted in different ways, this doesn't give us much to go on.

More relevant to our purposes are the many places in the suttas where *parimukhaṁ* describes how mindfulness should be established when meditating. The first thing to note is that it's used not only in the context of breath meditation, but also in the context of other meditation themes. Some suttas use it to indicate that someone—the Buddha or a monk—is meditating, without reference to what his meditation theme is (as in Ud 3:4 and Ud 5:10). It's also used in contexts where the monk is described simply as abandoning hindrances—again, with no reference to the breath or any particular object of meditation (as in DN 2, DN 25, MN 27, MN 38, MN 39, MN 51, and many other passages.)

Most telling, though, are cases where someone is meditating and he *cannot* be understood to be consistently focusing on one particular part of

the body. For example, in AN 3:64, the Buddha describes his practice of doing *brahma-vihāra,* sublime-attitude, meditation with his mindfulness established *parimukhaṁ*. Obviously, if he's extending goodwill, etc., to all beings in all directions without limit, his mindfulness can't be established exclusively on the nose tip or around the mouth—or on any other part of his body at all.

Now, it might possibly be argued that the Buddha first established his mindfulness at his nose before extending goodwill, etc., to the entire cosmos—possibly, but it's by no means necessary. And even if he did start there, he couldn't have stayed there as he continued meditating.

Ud 7:8 offers an example, though, where the meditating monk cannot even be construed as starting his meditation at the nose. There, Ven. Mahā Kaccāyana is sitting with *kāyagatāsati,* mindfulness immersed in the body, "established *parimukhaṁ* within." Because this meditation involves being mindful of the entire body, Ven. Mahā Kaccāna's mindfulness can't be established exclusively at the nose-tip or around the mouth. And because the passage refers to this whole-body awareness being established *parimukhaṁ* and within *right from the very beginning,* it's clearly not referring to a step prior to his choosing his topic of mindfulness. It's whole-body and inward from the start.

Because the suttas use the term *parimukhaṁ* in these ways when describing the establishing of mindfulness regardless of the theme of the meditation, it seems best to regard it—at least in the context of meditation—not as a place on the body with body hair, or as a style of fashioning body hair, but as having an idiomatic meaning that would apply to all meditation practices, even those where the focus can't be on one particular part of the body.

The Commentaries

The commentaries themselves recognize that *parimukhaṁ* cannot mean a particular part of the body when it's mentioned in the suttas in reference to meditation.

The earliest commentary to discuss the meaning of *parimukhaṁ* is the Paṭisambhida-magga, which predates Buddhaghosa's commentaries by many centuries. In fact, it is so old that the Burmese and Sri Lankans have

included it in their versions of the Pali Canon. The Thais, however, seem to be more correct in regarding it as post-canonical.

This text, in its discussion of mindfulness of breathing, agrees with the Vibhaṅga that attention, at least initially, should be focused on the breath at the tip of the nose. However, it doesn't argue this point on the basis of the word *parimukhaṁ*. Instead, it offers it simply as a recommendation independent of anything in the Canon.

When it comes to explain *parimukhaṁ,* it takes the word in an entirely different direction. Dividing *parimukhaṁ* into its prefix and root, it derives what's called an *edifying* etymology for it—i.e., one that has less to do with the word's actual verbal roots, and more to do with the meaning the commentator wants to draw from it. Its explanation (Paṭis III, 192) is this:

> ***parī****ti pariggahaṭṭho,* ***mukhan****ti niyyānaṭṭho.*
>
> which means: "*pari-* has the sense of *pariggaha* (embracing; enclosing; taking up); *mukhaṁ* has the sense of *niyyāna* (outlet/going out/setting forth)."

In other words, in this interpretation, mindfulness has been taken in hand and moved forward or out into the object.

It's interesting to note that Buddhaghosa's commentary to the Vibhaṅga, after explaining the Vibhaṅga's definition of *parimukhaṁ,* directs the reader to the Paṭisambhida-magga for a fuller explanation of the term and the topic of mindfulness of breathing in general. In other words, Buddhaghosa seems to side with the Paṭisambhida-magga against the Vibhaṅga on this point.

This fact is even clearer in his commentaries on the suttas. Every time they explain the Buddha's sixteen-step instructions for mindfulness of breathing, or even just the first four, they refer the reader to the full-scale treatment of the topic in the Visuddhimagga. There, Buddhaghosa explains the phrase, *parimukhaṁ satiṁ upaṭṭhāpetvā* as meaning, "having placed (or placing) mindfulness facing forward to the meditation object":

> *parimukhaṁ satiṁ upaṭṭhapetvāti = kammaṭṭhānābhimukhaṁ satiṁ ṭhapetvā* (Vism VIII.161).

Buddhaghosa then cites the Paṭisambhida-magga definition as an equally valid alternative.

Here again, the quality or manner of establishing mindfulness is emphasized: It faces its object directly.

The commentaries to Ud 7:8, the passage related to mindfulness immersed in the body, and AN 3:64, the passage related to the practice of the brahma-vihāras, follow the Visuddhimagga in interpreting *parimukhaṁ* in this way.

The commentary to Ud 7:8, for instance (which appears to postdate Buddhaghosa), defines *parimukhaṁ* in line with Buddhaghosa's own definition:

> ***parimukhan****ti abhimukhaṁ,*
>
> which means, "*parimukhaṁ* = facing forward"

The commentary to AN 3:64 gives Buddhaghosa's own definition, plus the Paṭisambhida-magga definition as an alternative. However, it slightly tweaks the latter definition, changing *pariggaha* (enclosing/taking up) to *pariggahita* (taken/seized). Why the change, it doesn't say.

> ***parimukhaṁ satiṁ upaṭṭhapetvā****ti kammaṭṭhānābhimukhaṁ satiṁ ṭhapetvā, pariggahitaniyyānaṁ vā katvāti attho*
>
> which means, "Having established mindfulness *parimukhaṁ* = having established mindfulness facing his meditation theme or having made it *pariggahita-niyyāna*."

The change looks minor on the surface, but the commentary to Ud 3:4 picks it up and runs with it, giving a more forceful explanation for its meaning:

> *pariggahita****niyyāna****satiṁ katvāti.* ***niyyāna****nti ca satiyā ogāhitabbaṁ ārammaṇaṁ daṭṭhabbaṁ*
>
> which means: "*niyyāna in the phrase, pariggahita****niyyāna****satiṁ katvāti*: This should be seen (understood) as: The object should be plunged into by mindfulness."

Here again, this commentary is stating that *parimukhaṁ* refers, not to the place in the body where mindfulness is established at the beginning of meditation, but to the *manner* in which it's established. In this case, the commentary is emphasizing the intensity of how it's established: You seize mindfulness and set it forth, plunging it fully into the object.

The commentary to Paṭis III, 192—or, in the Thai reckoning, the sub-commentary to that text—shows that, at the time of its composition, many other interpretations of the Paṭisambhida-magga definition of *parimukhaṁ* had developed in the monastic community as well. This commentary's discussion of the issue is long and prolix, but here we can focus just on the meanings it offers for *niyyāna* (outlet/going out/setting forth): concentration based on mindfulness of breathing; the setting-out from the wandering-on *(saṁsāra);* and the point of entry and exit for the in-and-out breaths. This last alternative is the only place in the non-Abhidhamma commentaries where the Vibhaṅga's definition of *parimukhaṁ* is even entertained, and the fact that it's last in the list of alternatives indicates that it was considered the least likely.

Apart from this one exception, the commentaries seem to be unanimous in interpreting *parimukhaṁ* as indicating the manner with which mindfulness is established in its object, rather than the physical place where it's established. The various commentators differ in how they define that manner, but by and large the overall impression they give is one of intensity and directness: Mindfulness faces its object directly or is seized and plunged into the object.

At present, one common way of trying to sort out the differences between the Abhidhamma on the one hand, and the commentaries on the other, is to state that, in the context of breath meditation, *parimukhaṁ* means at the upper lip and at the tip of the nose, and in the context of other meditation topics, it means the manner with which mindfulness is established. But this doesn't make linguistic sense. Because it's part of a stock phrase used to describe meditation practice regardless of the topic of the meditation—even when no topic is specifically mentioned—it should carry the same meaning across all mindfulness practices. If the Buddha had intended for it to mean different things in different contexts, he would have said so. Yet he never did.

There is one obvious argument for interpreting *parimukhaṁ* as meaning the tip of the nose or around the mouth in the context of breath meditation, and that's because those are the parts of the body where the flow of the air as you breathe in and out is most obvious. Literally, they're right in your face. Now, it's not wrong to focus there, but it's important to remember that the touch of the air at the tip of the nose or around the mouth is classified as a tactile contact, felt via the body in its role as one of the six external sense media. But when the suttas classify the in-and-out breath under the factors of dependent co-arising, they don't place it under the factors of sense media or contact. In MN 44, it's listed as a type of fabrication *(saṅkhāra)*, or intentional action. In MN 28, it's listed under the wind or energy property, which is one of the aspects of form *(rūpa):* the body as felt from within.

These facts have three implications:

1) Both fabrication and form are listed prior to sensory contact in dependent co-arising (SN 12:2). This means that the contact of the air at the nostrils is conditioned by the in-and-out breath—i.e., it's a result of the in-and-out breath—and is not the in-and-out breath itself. So even though the flow of the air at the nostrils may, for some people, be the most obvious way of sensing the in-and-out breath, there's no reason to regard it as having priority over other parts of the body where the actual in-and-out breath can be sensed.

2) The movement of the in-and-out breath energy, as an aspect of form, can be felt in many parts of the body, not just at the nose. So wherever you sense the energy of the in-and-out breath, it's fine to begin your practice of mindfulness of breathing by focusing there.

3) The contact of the air at the nose doesn't admit of a wide range of pleasant or unpleasant feelings. However, the in-and-out breath as felt in other parts of the body *can* be extremely pleasant or unpleasant. Think of how the front of your torso feels as you breathe easily in a relaxed mood as opposed to how it feels when your breathing is labored or affected by strong anger or fear. Because mindfulness practice is meant to lead to states of jhāna characterized by intense pleasure and refreshment, it makes more sense to focus special attention on the more sensitive areas of the body where the breathing process can be made very pleasurable.

As noted above, because jhāna is a whole-body experience, it makes no sense to insist that attention has to be focused first on a particular part of the body to the exclusion of others. Even if you do start with one point before spreading your awareness to the entire body, there's no reason to insist that it has to be the tip of the nose or around the mouth. There are people who get headaches when trying to focus there, so why force them to? For the sake of gaining the pleasure and rapture of right concentration, you can focus anywhere that you find it easiest and most pleasant to maintain focus.

This is why, as I said above, the issue of which particular point in the body mindfulness should be restricted to is really a non-issue.

Translating *parimukhaṁ*

We're still left with the question of how best to translate *parimukhaṁ* into English.

Looking at how the suttas use the term, it would seem that the commentaries are right in interpreting it as describing the manner in which mindfulness is established. However, there is still one problem with the commentaries' definitions: They all describe *parimukhaṁ* as indicating the manner with which mindfulness relates *to its object*. However, in many of the sutta passages where it appears, no object is mentioned. In some of those passages, mindfulness is used, not to connect to a meditation object, but to rid the mind of hindrances. In passages where the meditation object *is* mentioned—such as the in-and-out breath or the brahmavihāras— the fact that the meditator establishes mindfulness *parimukhaṁ* is mentioned first, and only then is there any reference to the object that the meditator focuses on. The only passage where the object is mentioned in the same phrase as the act of establishing mindfulness is Ud 7:8, where Ven. Mahā Kaccāyana is sitting with *kāyagatāsati*, mindfulness immersed in the body established *parimukhaṁ* within. In this special case, *mindfulness* and *immersed in the body* are part of the same compound word. But nowhere else in the Canon does this particular way of using the term occur. In all other cases, the object, if mentioned at all, comes in a later sentence.

This suggests that *parimukhaṁ* refers metaphorically, not to the relationship between mindfulness and its object, but to its position in the mind in relation to other mental factors in preparation for applying it to the

meditation object. In other words, it shows how much importance mindfulness should have. Because the term contains *mukha*—mouth or face—and in some contexts *parimukhaṁ* could mean the chest, for a native speaker the word could easily have had connotations of something that is made prominent or placed to the forefront. This would mean that, in preparing to meditate, mindfulness is placed to the forefront of the mind and put in a position of leadership in eradicating hindrances from the mind and bringing it to concentration.

For this reason, it would appear that the best translation for *parimukhaṁ* would be "to the forefront" or "to the fore." When you meditate, you establish mindfulness in the forefront of the mind, in a position of leadership among the other qualities that will engage in the meditation, and then you bring it to its object. Given that SN 48:10 defines mindfulness as a faculty of the memory—"one is mindful, is endowed with excellent proficiency in mindfulness, remembering & able to call to mind even things that were done & said long ago"— this means that when you sit down to meditate, you establish the intention to bear in mind the instructions that you want to follow, and to remember to stay focused on your task. That's the kind of mindfulness that develops into right concentration and prepares the mind to apply its discernment to whatever is experienced in the course of concentration practice.

This interpretation of *parimukhaṁ* has the advantage of encouraging you to understand the importance of mindfulness in developing the mind, rather than limiting you to where you have to focus it. So for both textual and pragmatic reasons, it seems the best way to translate the word.

Thinking about Jhāna

Ajaan Fuang, my primary teacher, once said that people coming to the practice of concentration fall into two types: those who think too much and those who don't think enough. This, of course, raises the question of how much thinking, in the context of concentration, is just right. This question requires a clear answer because there are many ways in which the mind can be concentrated, anywhere from those in which the concentration consists totally of thinking to those in which the mind is so forcefully and narrowly focused that all sense of the body and of the five senses is blotted out and in which it's impossible to think.

When we look into the suttas, or discourses of the Pali Canon, the earliest extant record of the Buddha's teachings, we find that the Buddha's discussions of the four jhānas—his standard definition of right concentration—recommend a middle way between these two extremes. However, the "just-rightness" of the practice of jhāna is not only a matter of how much you think, but also of what you think about, how you think, and when.

The suttas' descriptions of the role of thinking in concentration practice fall into four stages of practice:

1) thinking prior to jhāna,
2) thinking in the first jhāna,
3) mental activity in the remaining jhānas, and
4) the mental activity of discernment based on the jhānas.

These stages are demarcated mainly by questions of vocabulary focused on two sets of words.

• The first set consists of the word *jhāna* itself, along with its accompanying verb, *jhāyati*.

• The second set consists of the general Pali word for thinking, *vitakka;* the word for evaluation, *vicāra,* which is often paired with *vitakka;* and their accompanying verbs: *vitakkati, vicarati, anuvitakketi,* and *anuvicāreti.*

In the context of the four stages just mentioned, jhāna applies directly only to stages two and three, although the fourth stage can be practiced while you're in jhāna. As for vitakka and vicāra, they're used only in the first two stages.

JHĀNA

Unfortunately, what these two words mean in these stages has provoked controversy. So before we can go into detail about how they function in the four stages of the practice, we have to resolve the controversies around both of them.

The best way to resolve the controversy around the word *jhāna* is to start by quoting the standard sutta passages describing the four jhānas, and then the standard list of similes that expand on that description.

> "There is the case where a monk—quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful dhammas—enters & remains in the first jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by vitakka & vicāra.
>
> "With the stilling of vitakkas & vicāras, he enters & remains in the second jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of concentration, unification of awareness free from vitakka & vicāra—internal assurance.
>
> "With the fading of rapture, he remains equanimous, mindful, & alert, and senses pleasure with the body. He enters & remains in the third jhāna, of which the noble ones declare, 'Equanimous & mindful, he has a pleasant abiding.'
>
> "With the abandoning of pleasure & pain—as with the earlier disappearance of elation & distress—he enters & remains in the fourth jhāna: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain." — SN 45:8

As for the similes:

> *The first jhāna:* "Just as if a dexterous bathman or bathman's apprentice would pour bath powder into a brass basin and knead it together, sprinkling it again & again with water, so that his ball of

bath powder—saturated, moisture-laden, permeated within & without—would nevertheless not drip; in the same way, the monk permeates & pervades, suffuses & fills this very body with the rapture & pleasure born of seclusion. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by rapture & pleasure born of seclusion."

The second jhāna: "Just like a lake with spring-water welling up from within, having no inflow from the east, west, north, or south, and with the skies supplying abundant showers time & again, so that the cool fount of water welling up from within the lake would permeate & pervade, suffuse & fill it with cool waters, there being no part of the lake unpervaded by the cool waters; in the same way, the monk permeates & pervades, suffuses & fills this very body with the rapture & pleasure born of concentration. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by rapture & pleasure born of concentration."

The third jhāna: "Just as in a lotus pond, some of the lotuses, born & growing in the water, stay immersed in the water and flourish without standing up out of the water, so that they are permeated & pervaded, suffused & filled with cool water from their roots to their tips, and nothing of those lotuses would be unpervaded with cool water; in the same way, the monk permeates & pervades, suffuses & fills this very body with the pleasure divested of rapture. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded with pleasure divested of rapture."

The fourth jhāna: "Just as if a man were sitting covered from head to foot with a white cloth so that there would be no part of his body to which the white cloth did not extend; in the same way, the monk sits, permeating the body with a pure, bright awareness. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by pure, bright awareness." — *DN 2*

The word *jhāna* is usually translated as absorption, and although it's mainly used in the suttas to denote the four jhānas of right concentration, MN 108 shows that it can also be applied to excessive absorption in unskillful thoughts of sensual passion, ill will, sloth and drowsiness, restlessness and anxiety, and doubt—what are called the five hindrances.

The excessive and absorbing nature of this thinking is indicated by the way the relevant passage in MN 108 plays with the verbs that describe it:

> "'It wasn't the case, brahman, that the Blessed One praised mental absorption *[jhāna]* of every sort, nor did he criticize mental absorption of every sort. And what sort of mental absorption did he not praise? There is the case where a certain person dwells with his awareness overcome by sensual passion, seized with sensual passion. He does not discern the escape, as it has come to be, from sensual passion once it has arisen. Making that sensual passion the focal point, he absorbs himself with it, besorbs, resorbs, & supersorbs *[jhāyati pajjhāyati nijjhāyati apajjhāyati]* himself with it.
>
> "'[Similarly with the remaining hindrances.]'" — *MN 108*

The longstanding habit of translating jhāna as "absorption" has been called into question, largely because the verb *jhāyati* is often translated in a more generic way as "meditate." From this, it's been argued that, because the verb has a generic meaning, the noun should, too. From that, it's been further argued that because the suttas devote more space to the practice of using thought to abandon unskillful qualities and to develop skillful qualities than it does to absorptive practices like mindfulness of breathing, that kind of thought most deserves to be called right concentration. In fact, absorptive practices, devoid of thought, would get in the way of the skillful use of thought, so they should be excluded from the definition of jhāna. Therefore, the jhānas must not involve absorption in physical sensations, as is commonly believed.

In other words, this argument defines the word jhāna in a way to be more inclusive, but then uses the newly included inductees to expel the practices more traditionally associated with jhāna: "X must include not only Y but also Z; but then, because Z, which is more numerous, is included in X, Y has to be thrown out."

But even if we ignore the argument's weak logic, we can note that its starting point—the persistent habit of translating *jhāyati* as "meditate"—is itself questionable. There's nothing in the suttas to indicate that *jhāyati*, used in a positive sense in the context of meditation, means anything other than specifically, "do jhāna." The habit of translating it in a more generic

sense as "meditate" came from the post-canonical belief, unsupported in the suttas, that it's possible to attain awakening without having attained any of the four jhānas.

So when the Buddha pointed to the roots of trees and told the monks *jhāyatha*—the plural imperative form of the verb—he was telling them explicitly to do jhāna there.

Second, even though the suttas do devote a lot of space to the practice of using thought to abandon unskillful qualities and to develop skillful qualities, that doesn't mean that such a practice should be called jhāna. The actual fact of the matter, as we will see, is that the suttas describe this practice as a step *prior* to jhāna (DN 2; AN 10:99), and not as jhāna itself.

Third, as we will see below, MN 44 defines the themes of concentration as the four establishings of mindfulness. In other words, right concentration is focused on the activity of right mindfulness. In fact, the descriptions of right mindfulness show how to get the mind into right concentration. This is why right mindfulness precedes right concentration in the factors of the path.

Now, the extended descriptions of right mindfulness in MN 10 and DN 22 start with the first four steps of mindfulness of breathing, which SN 54:8 indicates is both a mindfulness and a concentration practice. This means that the suttas' descriptions of how to get the mind into jhāna actually start with mindfulness of breathing. So that practice shouldn't be excluded from the definition of jhāna.

Fourth, and most graphically, the fact that doing jhāna would involve, not just thinking, but actual absorption in physical and mental sensations, is shown in the similes we've quoted above: The meditator is said to pervade the body with feelings of pleasure to the point where, in the third jhāna, nothing in the body is unpervaded, and then moving on to a state in which the body is filled with a pure bright awareness. It's hard to interpret this simply as a process of thinking, and not to see it as a state of full-body absorption in bodily and mental sensations.

What's more, the suttas frequently describe the fourth jhāna as the basis for developing such psychic powers as the ability to read minds and to recollect past lifetimes. This would be impossible if the fourth jhāna were simply a thinking process of abandoning unskillful qualities and developing

skillful ones. But it would be entirely possible that these psychic powers could develop from a still, full-body awareness.

For these reasons, "absorption" still seems to be the best English translation for "jhāna."

VITAKKA & VICĀRA

As for vitakka and vicāra: In the suttas' descriptions of the stage prior to jhāna, these terms can refer either to skillful thinking and evaluating or to unskillful thinking and evaluating. In the first jhāna, though, the vitakka and vicāra that act as component factors of the jhāna are exclusively skillful.

The controversy here is over whether vitakka and vicāra mean the same thing both prior to jhāna and in the first jhāna. It has been argued that vitakka and vicāra in the first jhāna cannot mean thinking and evaluating, and that instead they have a technical meaning totally divorced from thinking and evaluating. But here again, the fundamental basis for this argument is extrinsic to the suttas: There are states of concentration so one-pointed and oblivious to the body that they make thinking impossible. From this fact, the argument states that they, and they alone, should be identified with the four jhānas. But nothing in the suttas indicates that this is so.

To begin with, the standard similes indicate that the jhānas are states of full-body awareness.

But here there's a counter-argument, that "body" in the similes doesn't mean the physical body but a mental body, because the physical body cannot be perceived while you're in jhāna. But if that were the case, why would the Buddha have used the similes to begin with? He would have described jhāna by using similes of narrow single-pointedness and darkness, avoiding mention of the body altogether, so as not to confuse people, rather than using similes of brightness, expansion, and full-body sensations.

In either instance—his use of the terms "vitakka" and "vicāra" in the description of the first jhāna, and his use of the term "body" in the similes—if he had meant for these terms to have special meanings in the context of

jhāna, he would have said so. But he never does. In fact, the opposite is the case. In MN 19, he describes the first and second stages of the practice, using the word "vitakka" to describe thinking prior to jhāna and then continuing to use the same word in the context of the first jhāna. Had he meant the word to have a different meaning when changing the context, he would have said so. But he doesn't. Similarly in MN 119, where he uses the word "body" when describing mindfulness immersed in the body, obviously meaning the physical body, and then he proceeds to use the same word in the similes for the jhānas. If he had meant it to have a different meaning in the second context, he would have said so. But again, he doesn't.

So given that the one-pointed oblivious definition of jhāna requires that the Buddha was either devious or incompetent in his teachings—using "body" to mean not-body, and "thinking" to mean not-thinking—we have to reject that definition of what jhāna entails.

In other words, we have to assume that vitakka and vicāra have the same meaning both in the first jhāna and in the stage prior to it. This means that the difference between the first jhāna and the stage prior to it is not a matter of thinking and not thinking. As we'll see, it's more a matter of what you're thinking about and why.

STAGE ONE: PRIOR TO JHĀNA

The standard description of the first jhāna says that it begins when you're secluded or withdrawn from sensuality and from unskillful mental qualities. So the duty of mental activity in the stage of the practice prior to the first jhāna is to rid the mind of these activities.

Different passages in the suttas define these unskillful mental activities in slightly different ways. AN 6:63 defines sensuality as passion for one's resolves for sensual pleasures. In other words, it means, not the sensual pleasure themselves, but your fascination with thinking about them. SN 45:22 defines unskillful mental qualities *(dhammas)* as the factors of the eightfold wrong path, from wrong view through wrong concentration. DN 2, which treats the stages of practice, describes this stage of secluding the mind as the act of getting rid of hindrances. MN 19 describes it as getting

rid of thoughts *(vitakka)* related to wrong resolve: thoughts of sensuality, thoughts of ill will, and thoughts of harmfulness.

Of these passages, MN 19 is most explicit in describing what kind of mental activity this stage entails. It falls basically into two sorts. The first involves replacing unskillful thoughts with their opposite, skillful thoughts *(vitakka):* thoughts of renunciation, thoughts of non-ill will, and thoughts of harmlessness. The verbs used here are *anuvitakketi* and *anuvicāreti:* You keep thinking and evaluating these skillful themes.

The second sort of activity involves acts of metacognition, in which you step back from your thinking, observe it, and decide whether it's worth doing. In the context of the Buddha's instructions for meditation, the purpose of metacognition is basically to develop dispassion for the mental processes you're observing. In other words, the metacognition is aimed at arriving at the conclusion that, no, they're not worth the effort that goes into them, and are best abandoned. The verbs used in this case are not *anuvitakketi* or *anuvicāreti*. Instead, they're *pajānāti,* to discern; *paṭisañcikhati,* to notice, reflect, or consider; *paccavekkhati,* to reflect or examine; and *samanupassati,* to regard or to envision. Although these verbs may be used to describe both skillful and unskillful mental activities outside of the practice of meditation, they're used within that practice exclusively to describe skillful mental activities aimed at inducing dispassion.

Note that these verbs do not indicate bare awareness or bare attention. Instead, you reflect on skillful and unskillful thinking as actions, you discern that they lead to consequences, you envision the long-term consequences, and then you judge whether they're worth pursuing, based on the consequences you see and anticipate. Although this sort of metacognition does involve a type of thinking and evaluating, the Buddha never used the terms vitakka or vicāra to describe it. Apparently, he wanted to indicate that meditative metacognition involved mental activity of a special sort.

> "Thinking *[vitakka]* imbued with sensuality arose in me. I discerned *[pajānāmi]* that 'Thinking imbued with sensuality has arisen in me; and that leads to my own affliction or to the affliction of

others or to the affliction of both. It obstructs discernment, promotes vexation, & doesn't lead to unbinding.'

"When I had noticed *[paṭisañcikhato]* that it leads to my own affliction, it subsided. When I had noticed that it leads to the affliction of others… to the affliction of both… it obstructs discernment, promotes vexation, & doesn't lead to unbinding, it subsided. Whenever thinking imbued with sensuality had arisen, I simply abandoned it, destroyed it, dispelled it, wiped it out of existence.

"[Similarly with thoughts of ill will and harmfulness.]" — MN 19

Two things are worth noticing in this step of the practice. First, one of the drawbacks that the Buddha discerned about unskillful thinking is that it leads to the affliction of others. In other words, it would lead him to act in ways that would harm them. The fact that he saw this as a drawback meant that he was concerned not only with the state of his own mind, but also with the impact of his actions on others. In this way, his contemplation had a moral dimension, which explains why right speech, right action, and right livelihood function as necessary parts of the path. Only if your actions truly avoid afflicting others can you say that you've definitely set unskillful thinking aside.

The second point worth noticing is that the Buddha, while seeing the rewards of skillful thinking, saw that it, too, had its drawbacks:

"And as I remained thus heedful, ardent, & resolute, thinking *[vitakka]* imbued with renunciation arose in me. I discerned *[pajānāmi]* that 'Thinking imbued with renunciation has arisen in me; and that leads neither to my own affliction, nor to the affliction of others, nor to the affliction of both. It fosters discernment, promotes lack of vexation, & leads to unbinding. If I were to keep thinking & evaluating *[anuvitakketi anuvicāreti]* in line with that even for a night… even for a day… even for a day & night, I do not envision *[samanupassāmi]* any danger that would come from it, except that thinking & evaluating a long time would tire the body. When the body is tired, the mind is disturbed; and a disturbed mind is far from concentration.' So I steadied my mind right within, settled, unified, &

concentrated it. Why is that? So that my mind would not be disturbed.

"[Similarly with thoughts of non-ill will and harmlessness.]" — *MN 19*

This passage provides one of the reasons why you as a meditator would want to go beyond even skillful vitakka: You want to reach a state in which the body is not tired and the mind is undisturbed. In other words, resting the mind from thought doesn't get in the way of skillful thought. It gives the mind a chance to rest and to gather its strength—as we will see below—for more precise discernment.

As DN 2 explains, the fact that you're able to get past the hindrances calms the body and gives rise to a sense of joy, gladness, and rapture, all of which are conducive to getting the mind into jhāna. MN 19 adds that the fact that you've eliminated unskillful thinking puts the mind in a state where its mindfulness is unmuddled. It's in this way that skillful thinking and metacognition can prepare the mind for an alert state of concentration in which it doesn't have to think.

But as the description of the first jhāna indicates, there is still some more thinking that has to be done before the mind can attain a state where vitakka and vicāra can be totally dropped. Although, with one possible exception, the verbs used to indicate metacognition—to discern, to reflect, to regard—don't appear in any of the descriptions of pure jhāna practice in the second and third stages of the practice, they will reappear in the fourth stage, where the meditator reflects on the drawbacks of jhāna. Vitakka and vicāra, however, still appear in descriptions of the second stage of the practice, the first jhāna, only to disappear from descriptions of the remaining two stages.

STAGE TWO: THE FIRST JHĀNA

Two questions then arise: What kind of thinking and evaluating occur in the first jhāna? And what purpose do they serve? The suttas don't provide direct, explicit answers to these questions, but they do state in an indirect way that the thinking and evaluating are focused on the topic or theme

(nimitta) of the jhāna itself, and that their purpose is to maximize the pleasure and rapture that can be derived from focusing on that theme.

MN 44 defines concentration as singleness of mind: *cittass'ekaggatā,* literally "one gathering-placed-ness of mind" *(eka* = one; *agga* = gathering place; *-tā* = -ness). This suggests that the activity of vitakka and vicāra have to stay within the bounds of the one object of the first jhāna. Otherwise, the mind wouldn't be gathered in or around one place.

As we noted above, MN 44 also states that the themes of concentration —and here it must be speaking of right concentration—are the four establishings of mindfulness. These are defined in SN 48:5 as follows:

> "And what, monks, is right mindfulness? There is the case where a monk remains focused on the body in & of itself—ardent, alert, & mindful—subduing greed & distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on feelings in & of themselves—ardent, alert, & mindful—having subdued greed & distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on the mind in & of itself—ardent, alert, & mindful—subduing greed & distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on mental qualities in & of themselves—ardent, alert, & mindful—having subdued greed & distress with reference to the world. This, monks, is called right mindfulness."

AN 8:70 expands on this point, showing how the practice of right mindfulness leads directly to the practice of the four jhānas, although it inserts an extra step between the first jhāna and the second, in which there's no vitakka and a modicum of vicāra. None of the suttas expand on what this would mean:

> "You should then train yourself thus: 'I will remain focused on the body in & of itself—ardent, alert, & mindful—having subdued greed & distress with reference to the world.' That's how you should train yourself. When you have developed this concentration in this way, you should develop this concentration with vitakka & vicāra, you should develop it with no vitakka & a modicum of vicāra, you should develop it with no vitakka & no vicāra, you should develop it accompanied by rapture… not accompanied by rapture… endowed with a sense of enjoyment; you should develop it endowed with

equanimity. [Similarly with the other establishings of mindfulness.]" — *AN 8:70*

Curiously, the suttas provide detailed instructions for how to develop concentration using only one of the four frames of reference on which mindfulness is established: the body. However, the suttas' most detailed instructions on how to focus on the body take the breath as their object, and they make the point that if you follow their instructions on how to focus on the breath, you at the same time establish mindfulness in the remaining three frames of reference as well (MN 118; SN 54:13).

The direct connection between right mindfulness and right concentration is shown in an interesting passage in MN 125, where the Buddha compares the training of a monk to the training of a wild elephant. The sutta lists the same steps for the monk's training set forth in other suttas that provide similar maps of the practice, such as DN 2 and AN 10:99, but with an important difference: In the spot where the other suttas place the practice of the first jhāna, this sutta mentions training in the four establishings of mindfulness. But its treatment of these establishings shows that when they are successfully mastered, they're equivalent to the first jhāna. It also gives an important clue to what the thinking and evaluating in the first jhāna are about.

> "Having abandoned these five hindrances—imperfections of awareness that weaken discernment—he remains focused on the body in & of itself—ardent, alert, & mindful—having subdued greed & distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on feelings… mind… mental qualities in & of themselves—ardent, alert, & mindful—having subdued greed & distress with reference to the world. Just as when the elephant tamer plants a large post in the ground and binds the wilderness elephant to it by the neck in order to break it of its wilderness habits, its wilderness memories & resolves, its distraction, fatigue, & fever over leaving the wilderness, to make it delight in the town and to inculcate in it habits congenial to human beings; in the same way, these four establishings of mindfulness are bindings for the awareness of the disciple of the noble ones, to break him of his household habits, his household memories & resolves, his

distraction, fatigue, & fever over leaving the household life, for the attainment of the right method and the realization of unbinding.

"Then the Tathāgata trains him further: 'Come, monk, remain focused on the body in & of itself, but do not think any thoughts connected with the body *[mā ca kāyūpasañhitaṁ vitakkaṁ vitakkesi]*. Remain focused on feelings in & of themselves, but do not think any thoughts connected with feelings. Remain focused on the mind in & of itself, but do not think any thoughts connected with mind. Remain focused on mental qualities in & of themselves, but do not think any thoughts connected with mental qualities.' With the stilling of vitakkas & vicāras, he enters & remains in the second jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of concentration, unification of awareness free from vitakka & vicāra—internal assurance." — *MN 125*

These instructions for entering the second jhāna—to remain focused on the body, etc., in and of itself but without thinking thoughts connected with the body—suggest that in the first jhāna, one is focused on the body in and of itself while thinking thoughts about the body. And the reason you're thinking those thoughts is so that you can delight in remaining focused on the body, just as the elephant is being taught to delight in staying in the town.

This point is seconded by the image of the bathman in the standard simile for the first jhāna: Of the four similes, it's the only one where a conscious agent is purposefully doing something: kneading the water through the soap powder. Water in these similes stands for pleasure; movement, for rapture. The bathman apparently stands for vitakka and vicāra, as they work to spread the rapture and pleasure of the first jhāna throughout the body, maximizing the pleasure that can be found by staying focused with a full-body awareness.

The pleasure of the first jhāna is a necessary part of the concentration not only because it makes it easier to stay concentrated, but also because it's nourishing. AN 7:63 explicitly compares the jhānas to food for the soldiers of right effort.

What's more, MN 13 makes the point that even when a monk can see the drawbacks of sensuality, if he cannot attain the pleasure of the first

jhāna or something higher, he won't be able to resist going back to sensuality.

So this is a second reason why the practice of stilling the mind in a sense of well-being is a necessary part of the path: It strengthens your resolve not to revert to sensuality.

This passage also indicates that the phrase, "secluded from sensuality" in the definition of the first jhāna doesn't mean that meditators must have totally abandoned sensuality once and for all before entering the first jhāna. It simply means that they've withdrawn the mind temporarily from sensual thoughts. After all, if they had totally abandoned sensuality, they'd have no need to use the pleasure of the first jhāna to fortify their resistance against going back to sensuality.

At first glance, it may not seem that there's much difference between the vitakka and vicāra in the first jhāna and the activities of metacognition described in stage one of the practice. After all, both involve observation and passing judgment. However, the differences are there.

The first difference has to do with purpose. The activities of metacognition described in stage one—and to be further described in stage four—are done with the purpose of developing dispassion. Vitakka and vicāra in the first jhāna, though, are done not for the sake of dispassion but for the sake of enjoyment and strengthening concentration.

As for the second difference, it's not always the case that vitakka and vicāra in the first jhāna are limited to direct observation. This can be seen in the alternative description of vitakka and vicāra in what amounts to the first jhāna described in SN 47:10. That sutta notes that when you have trouble focusing on any of the standard themes for right concentration, the frames of reference for establishing mindfulness—when, in its words, a fever based on that frame of reference arises in the body, there's sluggishness in your awareness, or your mind is scattered externally—your mind should be directed *(paṇidahitabbaṁ)* to an inspiring theme *(pasādanīye nimitte)*.

The sutta doesn't give examples to illustrate what it means by "inspiring theme," but some possible candidates would include the six recollections described in AN 3:71 or the four sublime attitudes described in SN 48:2. None of these themes involved direct observation. Instead, they're more

discursive, and yet they appear to qualify as proper objects for vitakka and vicāra in the first jhāna.

According to SN 47:10, the purpose of thinking of these themes is to gladden the mind in a way that induces rapture, calms the body, induces pleasure, and promotes concentration. When you receive these results, you can withdraw the mind from the inspiring theme and remain mindful and at ease while engaged in no vitakka or vicāra at all. Apparently, this means that you return to the frames of reference for establishing mindfulness and enter the second jhāna.

What's important in either case—whether you focus on observing any of the frames of reference or on thinking discursively of an inspiring theme—is that vitakka and vicāra in the first jhāna are focused on relating to your chosen theme of concentration in a way that induces and maximizes pleasure and rapture. This requires active thought as you make adjustments in the mind or in the object of meditation, and not mere acts of setting the mind on its object and keeping it connected there. Only when the mind and the object have been brought into harmony through thought and evaluation can vitakka and vicāra have the desired effect, allowing the mind to settle down pleasurably into even deeper concentration and to ward off any further thoughts of sensuality.

STAGE THREE: THE REMAINING JHĀNAS

As MN 125 notes, beginning with the second jhāna, you keep track of your frame of reference—such as the breath—but without thinking thoughts about or evaluating the breath. This is where full absorption in the experience of the body, etc., begins. This, apparently, is what the phrase in the definition of the second jhāna, *cetaso ekodi-bhāvaṁ,* unification of awareness, means: Your awareness seems to become one with its object.

And these levels of jhāna are apparently what Sister Vimalā is referring to in one of the verses attributed to her:

> "Today, wrapped in a double cloak,
> my head shaven,
> having wandered for alms,

> I sit at the foot of a tree
> and attain the state of no-thought *[a-vitakkaṁ]*." — *Thig 5:2*

Awareness still pervades the body, as indicated by the similes for the second through fourth jhānas, but as the similes also indicate, no discursive thought is required to allow feelings of rapture or pleasure to pervade the body. There's no conscious agent spreading cool water through the lake in the simile for the second jhāna. The cool water of the spring permeates the lake effortlessly. In the simile for the third, there's no motion at all, reflecting the fact that rapture has faded, and the lotuses are simply saturated from their roots to their tips with cool, still water.

In the simile for the fourth jhāna, as in the simile for the third, everything is perfectly still. In fact it's so still that, as SN 36:11 and AN 10:72 indicate, in-and-out breathing has stopped. The lack of water in this simile symbolizes the transcending of pleasure, and all that remains is a pure, bright awareness filling the body.

These similes don't describe a narrow concentration where all awareness is blotted out. And they don't describe an experience that consists simply of skillful thinking. They indicate full absorption in the sense of the body. Yet even in these states of absorption, some mental activity is going on. After all, they're fabricated and have to be maintained.

MN 111 gives a detailed description of what mental activities are required to maintain absorption. This sutta describes Ven. Sāriputta's special ability to get these activities ferreted out one by one *(anupada-vavatthikā)* even while he was in these states of jhāna. Here it must be noted that his ability properly pertains to the fourth stage of the practice, to be discussed in the next section, but what Ven. Sāriputta was able to perceive must be present in all these states of concentration, regardless of whether you can detect them while in these states or not.

The list of mental qualities falls into two parts: qualities that are present in all four of the jhānas, and those that are particular to each individual jhāna.

The qualities they all have in common are these: the five activities that are listed under "name" in dependent co-arising—contact, feeling, perception, intention, and attention; three qualities that constitute right

effort—desire, persistence, and intent; and then four qualities that do not form a standard list from elsewhere in the suttas—decision, mindfulness, equanimity, and the defining feature of concentration: singleness of mind. What's interesting in this part of the list is that the three qualities constituting right effort are also three of the bases of success *(iddhipāda)*. The fourth basis of success—discrimination, which is identical with the activity of metacognition—is missing. This is one of the indications that metacognition is not an intrinsic part of the practice of the jhānas.

The qualities particular to each jhāna are these:

The first jhāna: vitakka, vicāra, rapture, pleasure.

The second: internal assurance or confidence, rapture, pleasure.

The third: equanimity, pleasure, mindfulness, alertness.

The fourth: a feeling of equanimity, neither pleasure nor pain; unconcern due to calmness or purity of awareness. ("Calmness" is the Burmese reading here; "purity," the Thai reading).

There are some anomalies in this second part of the list, especially in regard to the third jhāna: Equanimity and mindfulness get listed twice—both as qualities that apply to all four jhānas and as qualities that apply specifically to the third; and for some reason alertness is listed under the third but not under the other jhānas.

The important point is that the mental activities cited in both parts of the list are needed to keep the mind focused and absorbed. Those who say that, beginning with the second jhāna, the mind isn't engaged in any activity at all are blind to what's actually going on. At the same time, none of these activities require discursive thinking. They can simply maintain the decision to stay absorbed in repeating the same mental acts, most prominently around the two activities that MN 44 lists as mental fabrication: feeling and perception. The importance of these two activities is reflected in the fact that standard description of each jhāna defines it by its feeling tone, and AN 9:36 classifies all these jhānas as perception attainments.

Although staying in a particular jhāna doesn't require active thought beyond the qualities included in MN 111's list, the sutta does raise the question of whether moving from one jhāna to another requires a separate

act of discernment. In Ven. Sāriputta's case, we're told that after ferreting out the activities in each jhāna, he discerned the higher escape from that jhāna, and so was able to move to progressively deeper states of absorption. This discernment would be an act of metacognition. As AN 9:41 indicates, it could include seeing the drawbacks of whatever is the disturbing factor in the earlier state of jhāna and understanding the reward of abandoning it. However, it's also possible that meditators can simply incline their minds to more and more restful states of absorption without being consciously aware of where they are on the map of the jhānas.

What's important to note is that, aside from cases in which an act of discernment plays a role in progressing from a lower jhāna to a higher one, none of the metacognition verbs are used to describe the practice of the jhānas in and of themselves.

STAGE FOUR: DISCERNMENT BASED ON JHĀNA

Of course, given that the jhānas are part of the path, they're not done in and of themselves for their own sake. They're done for the sake of a further purpose. AN 4:41 lists four legitimate purposes for right concentration: as a pleasant abiding in the here and now, as a basis for psychic powers, as a basis for mindfulness and alertness, and as a basis for ending the mental effluents. The discussion in AN 4:41 can give the impression that it's talking about four different types of concentration, with the four jhānas mentioned explicitly for only the first purpose, as a pleasant abiding, but other passages in the suttas show that the jhānas must be understood as implicitly involved in the other three purposes as well. DN 2, MN 39, and many other suttas that provide a map for the whole practice show that the jhānas are a basis for the psychic powers. MN 122 shows that they can provide a basis for alertness, and, of course, the standard definition of the fourth jhāna shows that it's the mental state in which mindfulness becomes pure.

Here we're most directly concerned with the fourth purpose—the awakening that puts an end to the mental effluents—and here again there are many suttas showing that the discernment leading to awakening can be developed within any of the jhānas. In fact, the meditator doesn't need to

leave any of the four jhānas to do the analysis required by discernment at all. Among these suttas are MN 52, MN 111, MN 140, AN 5:28, and AN 9:36. These suttas show most definitively that thinking is possible even in the higher jhānas. It's important to note, though, that this thinking is not intrinsic to any of the higher jhānas, and that it's never described as vitakka or vicāra. Instead, it's described by the verbs related to metacognition.

A few examples:

> "Further, with the stilling of vitakkas & vicāras, the monk enters & remains in the second jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of concentration, unification of awareness free from vitakka & vicāra—internal assurance. He reflects *[paṭisañcikati]* on this and discerns *[pajānāti]*, 'This second jhāna is fabricated & intended. Now whatever is fabricated & intended is inconstant & subject to cessation.' Staying right there, he reaches the ending of the effluents. Or, if not, then—through this very Dhamma-passion, this Dhamma-delight, and from the total wasting away of the five lower fetters [self-identification views, grasping at habits & practices, uncertainty, sensual passion, and irritation]—he is due to arise spontaneously (in the Pure Abodes), there to be totally unbound, never again to return from that world." — *MN 52*

> "Just as if one person were to reflect *[paccavekkheyya]* on another, or a standing person were to reflect on a sitting person, or a sitting person were to reflect on a person lying down; even so, monks, the monk [who has attained the four jhānas] has his theme of reflection *[paccavekkhaṇā-nimittaṁ]* well-grasped, well-attended to, well-pondered, well-penetrated *[suggahitaṁ sumanasikataṁ sūpadhāritaṁ suppaṭividdhaṁ]* by means of discernment *[paññāya]*. This is the fifth development of the five-factored noble right concentration." — *AN 5:28*

> "Suppose that an archer or archer's apprentice were to practice on a straw man or mound of clay, so that after a while he would become able to shoot long distances, to fire accurate shots in rapid succession, and to pierce great masses. In the same way, a monk, with the abandoning of pleasure & pain—as with the earlier disappearance of

> joy & distress—enters and remains in the fourth jhāna: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither-pleasure nor pain. He regards *[samanupassati]* whatever phenomena there that are connected with form, feeling, perception, fabrications, & consciousness, as inconstant, stressful, a disease, a cancer, an arrow, painful, an affliction, alien, a disintegration, an emptiness, not-self. He turns *[patiṭṭhāpeti]* his mind away from those phenomena, and having done so, inclines *[upasaṁharati]* his mind to the property of deathlessness: 'This is peace, this is exquisite—the pacification of all fabrications; the relinquishment of all acquisitions; the ending of craving; dispassion; cessation; unbinding.'
>
> "Staying right there, he reaches the ending of the effluents. Or, if not, then—through this very Dhamma-passion, this Dhamma-delight, and from the total ending of the five lower fetters [self-identification views, grasping at habits & practices, uncertainty, sensual passion, and irritation]—he is due to arise spontaneously (in the Pure Abodes), there to be totally unbound, never again to return from that world." — *AN 9:36*

As with the metacognition described in stage one, the acts of metacognition described here involve stepping back from one's state of mind and observing (reflecting, regarding, discerning) it with the purpose of developing dispassion for it (turning the mind away from it and inclining it elsewhere). The simile in AN 5:28 of the sitting person reflecting on the person lying down, etc., gives an especially clear image of the need to step back from what your mind is doing in order to engage in this type of metacognition.

The main difference between the metacognition employed during the first stage of the practice and that employed in the fourth stage is that here it's aimed, not at clearing the ground for jhāna practice, but at developing dispassion for jhāna itself and, by implication, for all other fabricated mental states as well.

As we noted when discussing the mental activities employed in all states of jhāna in stage three of the practice, the component activities of all the jhānas include all the factors of name in dependent co-arising. These are the factors that provide a basis for the craving that leads to further

becoming—the second noble truth. So when acts of metacognition can develop dispassion for these factors, it attacks the problem of suffering—the first noble truth—at the causes of its cause.

The component factors present in all the jhānas also include right mindfulness, the elements of right effort, and concentration itself. This means that when dispassion can be developed for these factors, it allows the mind to let go of its last attachment, to the path—the fourth noble truth—itself.

So here we see a third reason for getting the mind into a state of stillness with no vitakka or vicāra: It provides you with a background of stillness that allows you to ferret out the mental events that can lead to suffering, and instead to abandon them with finesse. Without that stillness, those events would remain hidden to you in a confusing blur of mental activity.

JUST RIGHT

When we see how the practice of meditation falls into four stages, and the care with which the Buddha described the types of thinking appropriate to each, we can understand why the answer to the question, "How much thinking is just right in the practice of concentration?" is not a simple one. Instead, it depends on three things:

- which stage of the practice you're in;
- what kind of thinking is appropriate to that stage;
- what its purpose is.

In the first stage, prior to jhāna, you engage in enough skillful vitakka and vicāra to counteract any unskillful thoughts, and in enough metacognition to see the drawbacks of unskillful thinking, the relative merits of skillful thinking, and the need for the mind to rest even from skillful thinking by entering concentration.

In the second stage, the first jhāna, you engage in enough vitakka and vicāra focused on the theme of your concentration to maximize the pleasure and rapture you can gain from staying with that theme and to spread that pleasure and rapture throughout the body.

In the third stage, the remaining jhānas, you engage in just enough mental activity, devoid of vitakka and vicāra, to maintain the focus of your concentration. You might engage in metacognition only to the extent of discerning a drawback of a lower jhāna and moving the mind to a higher one, but even that much metacognition is not always required.

In the fourth stage, building on the practice of the jhānas, you engage in enough metacognition to see the drawbacks of the jhānas and, by extension, all fabricated phenomena. This metacognition is what leads to the noble attainments and, ultimately, to release from all suffering and stress.

Two practical considerations flow from this answer to our original question.

The first is that people who tend to think too little tend to dislike thinking. This is why they have to put extra effort into engaging in metacognition in the fourth stage, and not just to rest in the jhānas in the second and third stage. Otherwise, they'll never reach any of the noble attainments.

Conversely, people who think too much tend to like thinking, which is why they have to be encouraged to engage in the sort of metacognition that sees the advantages that come from allowing the mind to stop thinking: to allow it to rest, to strengthen its resolve against sensuality, and to clarify the mental activities of name and the path, so that they can deepen their dispassion for them.

The second practical consideration is that, just as thinking needs to be just right in order to get the best results from the meditation, concentration needs to be just right as well. If your concentration is devoted totally to thinking, it'll never yield the results that come from allowing the mind to be still. If it's so narrowly focused that it allows no room for thinking at all, it'll never allow for the sort of metacognition that's needed to lead the mind to the deathless.

So, just as the Buddha's path to the end of suffering follows a middle way in general, his teachings on the practice of right concentration teach a middle way, too. Of course, the middle here is not simply a matter of finding a halfway point between two extremes. It requires that you be sensitive to where you are in the practice and to the task at hand. In other

words, for concentration to be right, it has to be just right for what's needed right now.

FURTHER READING:

- *Right Mindfulness*, Appendix Three: "Jhāna & Right Concentration"
- *On the Path:* "Right Mindfulness"; "Right Concentration"
- "Silence Isn't Mandatory"
- "How Pointy Is One-pointedness?"

Fun & Games

PSYCHIC POWERS IN THE WILDERNESS

When I first met my teacher, Ajaan Fuang, I had never heard of the Thai Forest Tradition, even though I had been living and working in Thailand for almost two years. This was in the early 70s, before knowledge of the tradition had penetrated the consciousness of the university circles in which I worked.

As a result, I had no idea what to expect. As the days passed during that first three-week period, I realized that I was in an entirely new reality. On the one hand, I was drawn to Ajaan Fuang's extraordinary wisdom and kindness, and especially his clear-sighted perspective on Thai society. It was as if I were meeting him on a direct human level, outside of the usual expectations of my encounters with Thai people, which were filtered through the gap between Thai and Western values. I came to trust him more and more, until I was convinced that he was the teacher I had long been looking for.

On the other hand, I came to sense that he and some of his students, lay and ordained, had psychic powers. For one, he could obviously read my mind and anticipate future events, and although he never talked about his powers, his students would—and it seemed that some of them, at least, had powers of their own.

This was not a little disorienting. I had read the standard list of psychic powers in the Pali Canon, but for me it was just a string of words: things like astral travel, psychokinesis, clairaudience, clairvoyance, the ability to read minds, recollection of past lives—one's own and others'—the ability to contact beings on other levels of the cosmos, and knowledge of where others have been reborn and why. The list had no relevance to my own concerns, so I hadn't given it much thought.

Now I was living among people for whom the powers in the list, plus many others, were taken for granted as simple facts of life. With the passage of time, as I returned to study with Ajaan Fuang on a more permanent basis, I had a number of experiences with the powers exercised

by people in the Forest Tradition, which finally convinced me that I had to accept that I was now living in a reality where these powers were real.

This, as I said, was disorienting at first. I felt somewhat exposed, living with people who had powers that I didn't, and I was fairly envious of the powers they had. The immediate effect, sensing that people could read my mind and keep track of my behavior at a distance, was that I became very careful about my thoughts and actions, which was all to the good.

And Ajaan Fuang made it clear that these powers were nothing to aspire to. If you had them, you had to use them wisely, because if you mishandled them, they could do you more harm than good. It's common knowledge that, if you're not fully awakened, supernormal powers have a way of engendering supernormal defilements. If you start trusting the knowledge you gain from these powers, there's always the chance that your greed, aversion, or delusion could scramble the message, and you start believing things that simply aren't true. If you share your mistaken knowledge with others, you're misleading them as well. If you advertise your powers but then lose them—which can happen—you lose the trust of those who believed your original claims. The damage you do to their trust could also spread to make them look down on the Dhamma as a whole.

There's a widespread belief in some parts of Thailand—but not shared by the Forest Tradition—that if you want psychic powers, you should practice *kasiṇa* meditation: a concentration practice where you stare at a candle flame or at a colored disc. But the people I met who had tried that method had either gone blind or become seriously unhinged. It was probably for reasons like these that the Forest ajaans actively discourage their students from that method of practice.

Their general attitude is that if you have the past karma to develop any of the psychic powers, they'll come on their own as you practice concentration. If they come, learn how to use them wisely and with caution. If they don't come, no problem, as they're not necessary for awakening. At the same time, the fact that other people have such powers is no proof that they're awakened. In fact, unawakened people who have them are always in danger of letting their defilements slip in, so that their powers turn on them and ruin their meditation. I saw many cases of this. So, as Ajaan Fuang told

me, there's no need to get excited about other people's wealth. Focus on developing wealth of your own.

As I stayed with him, I gained an increasing sense of the integrity with which he used his own powers. He never claimed to have special knowledge, so there was never any hint that he would use his powers to influence others for his own purposes. If he knew of what was going on in your meditation, he would bring up the topic as if it were a random issue—although as he knew that I knew he was reading my mind, there were occasional times when he would be more direct. One time, for instance, I had gotten into a strong, trance-like state while meditating in my dwelling up the hill from his. I thought that I must be on to something good. But when I came down that evening to help clean his hut, he immediately said to me, "Don't ever meditate that way again, okay?" Just enough to keep me on my toes.

Often, when a group of us would be meditating with him, if something came up in your meditation, he would immediately address the issue: "If this occurs in your meditation, do this." This happened so frequently and quickly that we took it for granted. But if you ever mentioned his special abilities to his face, he would glare at you, and that was the end of that conversation.

I learned from one of his students that when Ajaan Fuang had gone to study with Ajaan Mun in his early days as a monk, he had devoted some of his meditations to checking out the devas inhabiting the nearby hills, to see who might be there. He happened to mention what he saw to one of his fellow monks, and that night he had gotten a stern reprimand from Ajaan Mun: What you see in your meditation is your own business, and no one else's. If you have any strange knowledge, you can talk it over with your teacher so that he can solve any problems you have in getting past it, but don't go advertising it to others. What is the desire to tell others but a defilement? If you're not careful, you may become proud over what's actually a delusion.

Ajaan Fuang himself told me that one of the important lessons he learned from Ajaan Mun was how to interpret visions and other intuitive lessons that may come in the course of meditation. Say you have a vision of the Buddha coming to teach you Dhamma. The issue is not whether it's

really the Buddha or just your own imagination. The issue is whether the Dhamma is genuine or not. To decide, you first compare it with what you know of the basic principles of the Dhamma. If it doesn't fit in with those principles, let it go—no matter how real or impressive the message or the Buddha may have seemed. If it *does* fit in with what you know of the Dhamma, put it to the test by practicing it. Only if it helps to improve your concentration or discernment in practice should you accept it as a worthwhile lesson. Even then, you have to realize that some lessons are right for some situations, and not for others. If it's not the sort of teaching that can be put into practice, treat it as irrelevant to what you're doing and put it aside. This was the principle that enabled Ajaan Mun and the other Forest ajaans to practice alone in the wilderness without going crazy.

So what are these powers good for? Ajaan Fuang *would* sometimes talk about the psychic powers exercised by his own primary teacher, Ajaan Lee, and the lessons that could be drawn from how he exercised them. As Ajaan Lee once said, knowledge of past lives can be dangerous if you get proud when seeing yourself in a position of power and influence, or depressed by seeing yourself born in the lower realms. The best use of this knowledge is to induce a sense of the meaninglessness of continued rebirth. This helps to put the issues of this birth into perspective, and fosters a desire to go beyond rebirth entirely.

At the same time, people exercising these powers have proof—for themselves, at least—that the mind has a power superior to, and independent of, material realities. As the Buddha said in the first verses of the *Dhammapada*, the mind comes prior to all experience. It's not just a side effect of physical processes. Even on an ordinary, everyday level, the mind plays a major role in shaping its experience. Psychic powers simply take this principle to a higher level and make it graphically clear.

One thing I came to notice in Ajaan Fuang's stories of Ajaan Lee's powers was that although he held Ajaan Lee in the highest possible esteem, there was always an element of humor in the telling. The humor concerned either Ajaan Lee's witty uses of his powers, or the fact that his powers could occasionally backfire, even when used with the sincerest intentions to be helpful to others. This was in keeping with the humorous way in which

stories of psychic powers and encounters with devas are treated in the Canon, and with Ajaan Fuang's own observation one evening: "The whole aim of our practice is purity of heart. Everything else is just fun and games."

But the fun and games can serve a serious purpose. One of my favorite stories about Ajaan Lee concerns a time when he was invited to teach meditation at a monastery in Bangkok. The abbot of the monastery had been a sworn opponent of the Forest Tradition for many years, creating many problems for Forest ajaans who had tried to practice in the part of Thailand over which he had ecclesiastical jurisdiction. But when he fell ill, Ajaan Lee went to visit him, and sat meditating in a corner of his room. Apparently the abbot felt a power emanating from Ajaan Lee and asked him, "What are you doing?" "Offering a gift of stillness," was Ajaan Lee's reply. "Well, whatever you're doing, keep it up. It feels good."

Over time, as the abbot began to recover, Ajaan Lee taught him to meditate, and the abbot ended up changing his opinion of the Forest Tradition. That was why he invited Ajaan Lee to teach the monks and lay supporters of the monastery as well.

Now, this was at a period when the ecclesiastical authorities in Bangkok had been teaching for many decades that the time for nibbāna was over. The door was closed even on the practice of jhāna. Monks should devote themselves to teaching in public schools and promoting social welfare projects instead.

Many of the monks in the monastery, following this line of thinking, criticized Ajaan Lee for deluding people into assuming that they could practice jhāna. So what did Ajaan Lee do to change their opinion?

It so happened that there was an old woman whose job was to clean the bathrooms in the monastery. During her free time, she would go to meditate with Ajaan Lee, and as a result she developed the ability to read minds. The first minds she read were those of the monks in the monastery. Shocked at what she saw—monks thinking about things that monks shouldn't be thinking about— she went to complain to the abbot that this monk was thinking these thoughts, and that monk was thinking those. The abbot, knowing the monks in question, felt that she was probably right. So he called the monks together and warned them, "You all should be more careful. These people can read your innards."

That was the end of the criticisms, and the beginning of a more general trend by which the Forest ajaans and their teachings became increasingly accepted in mainstream Thai society. The path to jhāna and nibbāna was reopened to the public at large.

So if you have psychic powers, that's how you practice them: not publicly, and not for sake of fame or power. You practice them indirectly, with a sense of humor, keeping in mind the virtues of the Buddha: wisdom, compassion, and purity—wisdom in not letting the powers aggravate your defilements, compassion in using them for your own genuine good and that of others, and purity in keeping them under wraps and not using them for your own selfish ends. That's how you keep yourself, and the people around you, safe.

If you don't gain psychic powers in the practice, don't dismiss them, but at the same time, don't be overly impressed by those who do have them. Instead, focus on fostering within yourself the two qualities that the Buddha looked for in a student: your honesty and your powers of observation. These may seem very ordinary, but they can be developed to the point where they yield extraordinary results.

Perception

This morning I saw raccoon tracks on the clearing at the top of the hill in the monastery where I live. They ran across a part of the clearing that I had swept the night before, and it was because I had swept the area that I could actually perceive the raccoon tracks, in both senses of the word *perceive:* one, to detect that they were there, and two, to be able to identify them.

The Thai ajaans like to use this as an analogy: You sweep the monastery, get everything clean, so that you can detect what's been coming and going in the monastery. In the same way, you try to sweep your mind clean—developing your mindfulness and concentration to get the mind still—so that you can perceive things arising in the mind. If greed, lust, or any other unskillful emotion arises, you want to be able to perceive it early on so that you can deal with it appropriately and in time.

The two senses of the word *perceive* in English—to detect something and to identify it—are actually two separate words in Pali. The first, simply acknowledging the presence of something, would be an act of *viññāṇa,* consciousness. You cognize it.

The perceiving, *saññā,* is the act of identifying. Of course, my ability to identify the raccoon tracks depended on more than just the fact that I had swept the clearing. I had to remember the characteristics of raccoon tracks from my previous experience. Memory is an important part of this type of perception.

Some people limit the word *saññā* simply to memory, but there's more going on in the process than just that. To identify something right in front of you in the present moment, you remember that certain characteristics mean this or that, but you also have to apply that knowledge right here, right now to recognize what's going on.

We see this often in the Vinaya, the rules that the monks have to follow. The severity of the punishment for breaking a rule, in many cases, is measured by how you perceive the object you're involved with at the moment you're involved with it. For instance, if, with lustful intent, a monk touches a woman while perceiving her to be a woman, the offense is

serious. If he were to perceive her as something else—such as a man or a mannequin—the offense would be much less serious. This is not a matter of mere memory: You're not just remembering whether what you touched was a man or a woman. What matters is how you identify what you're touching while you're touching it.

As you live by the rules and get to think of your actions in their terms, you see that they place a lot of emphasis on this role of perception: how you identify what you're dealing with, and how important it is to get your perceptions right.

Take, for instance, the case of touching a woman you perceive to be a man. Even though the punishment imposed by the Vinaya isn't serious, the consequences in real life can be much more drastic if the woman takes offense at being touched. So you have to check your perceptions carefully to prevent trouble of that sort.

Or take the case of the monk who, seeing a pile of clothes on a chair, perceived it just as a pile of clothes and sat down very forcefully on top of it. Actually, there was a baby child wrapped up in the pile of clothes, and the child died because of the monk's carelessness. In this case, the Buddha said, before you sit down always make sure that you correctly perceive what you're sitting down on.

In other words, check your perceptions of the present moment to make sure they're right. This isn't simply a matter of remembering names. You have to correctly identify what you see and hear, and at the same time think about its meaning or value.

This connection between identity and value is a natural one. As beings, we're defined by our need to feed. Even as very small children, we identify with our physical and emotional hungers, giving them value, and then identify the things in the world around us by how well they're able to satisfy those hungers. So when we use perceptions, it's not a disinterested activity. It's driven by our desires and by the values our desires give to things.

This connection between identity and value is reflected in the Thai definition of the word *saññā: cam dai, maai ruu. Cam dai* means to recognize or remember something. *Maai ruu* means to label it and to determine what it means.

In the case of the footprints in the clearing, the fact that they were raccoon tracks meant nothing much, just that we have to be careful: Raccoons can steal things but they pose no real danger. However, if the tracks had been grizzly bear or wolverine tracks, that would have been another matter. We'd have to be a lot more wary because we now have signs that there are more dangerous animals around.

It's in this element of the meaning of the perception, or how you perceive the value of what you perceive, that perception plays such a huge role in the practice. If you perceive a certain desire as something worth developing, you'll deal with it in one way. If you perceive it as a cause of suffering, you'll deal with it in another way. And the difference in how you deal with it will make a difference in whether you experience suffering or well-being as a result. When we adopt the practice, we're adopting a particular way of ordering our perceptions, judging them by their efficacy in helping us to find total freedom from suffering.

Another teaching from the ajaans is that when you focus on the five aggregates—form, feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness—you can start out with any one of the five, and it'll give you insight into all the rest. For instance, you can focus on the body, analyze your attachment to the body, and the analysis will start spreading around to feelings and perceptions and fabrications and consciousness as well. What's particularly important is how it spreads to include your perceptions.

Think, for instance, of how the contemplation of the body progresses. It's all a matter of learning how to perceive the body as not worthy of attachment. We ordinarily come to the practice with the perception that the body *is* worthy of attachment. We correctly perceive it as a body, but we have a wrong perception about its meaning and value.

So we contemplate the parts of the body to see that they're not anything worth identifying with. We contemplate the drawbacks of the body in terms of its many potential illnesses. We learn to develop the perception of its being inconstant, stressful, not-self, and unattractive, all in order to change our ideas about its value. After all, it's through the value that we get attached to it. If we learn to perceive it as having not much value at all—at least not much value in terms of how our lust or pride might want to value it—then the attachment goes away.

Now, the body *does* have value as something we can use in the practice, so we take care of it just enough to keep it going, so that we can continue our practice in reasonably good health. That's a correct evaluation for the body. But to arrive at that evaluation requires that you strip away a lot of your other wrong perceptions.

The same principle applies to feelings. As you sit in meditation, you're bound to encounter feelings of pain. As long as you perceive the pain as being the same thing as the part of the body in which it's located, it's going to be very difficult to not suffer from it. Your perception that it has invaded the body you claim as yours is what creates the bridge between the physical pain and your mental pain.

So one of the instructions in dealing with physical pain is to ask yourself, "Is the physical pain the same thing as the body?" The body of course, is the four elements. Pain is something else, but we've glommed the two together. So how do you un-glom them? One way is to ask yourself, "Where is the sharpest point of the pain right now?" Instead of running away from the pain, go toward it, be proactive, and you'll see that the sharpest point moves around. You keep following it around and around until there's a weird sense that "Yes, the pain does separate out from the body"—so much so that it's as if they're no longer in the same place anymore. When you separate them out, sometimes the pain remains, and other times it disappears. What's really weird is when it slips along your nerves into your heart and disappears there, which shows how much of a role the perception plays in your experience of the pain.

So no matter which of the aggregates you focus on, the analysis always seems to come down to perception, and especially the perception of value, the perception of meaning.

This relates to Ven. Sāriputta's answer to the question: "When you go to a foreign land and intelligent people ask you, 'What does the Buddha teach?' how do you answer them?" His first answer was, "The Buddha teaches the end of desire and passion." If the people asking the question are intelligent, they'll then ask, "Desire and passion for what?" His answer: "The five aggregates." "Why is that?" "Because if you have passion for these things, then when they change, you're going to suffer. But if you don't have

passion for them, then no matter how much they change, you're not going to suffer."

He's boiling the Buddha's teachings down to a value judgment: The aggregates are unworthy of passion. This, of course, is an issue of perception. If you see these activities—and they *are* activities, rather than things—as worthy of pursuing, you're not going to let them go. You're going to keep doing them again and again. But when you begin to see that they can't provide the happiness you want, and particularly when you learn about the happiness that can come when you *do* let go—that's the message of the third noble truth—then you see they're not worth pursuing. You stop doing them, and you don't have to suffer from them anymore.

So the practice is a matter of training your perceptions to be able to identify not only what an aggregate is, but also what it's worth.

This is where the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self come in: to call into question the worth of these things, the meaning you give to them. If something that you're attached to is undependable and causing you pain, is it worth identifying with? No. Apply these perceptions first to activities that are clearly unskillful and then you'll be in a position to apply them even to skillful ones.

When you can use these perceptions to let go of all the aggregates—including even the perceptions that tell you to let go—then you open to something that's even greater than you can imagine, in which there's no perception, but there is the greatest happiness possible, a happiness that doesn't have to depend on perceptions of its worth.

So perception plays a huge role in the practice, both in identifying what's what and in learning to retrain your perceptions of the value and meaning of what's what. If you focus on this issue of perception, you find that you can go far in freeing the mind from its attachments—which are based on mistaken perceptions—and developing perceptions that allow you to let go.

Of course, you eventually have to let go of even these perceptions because they, too, are aggregates. But that's simply a part of the Buddha's strategic approach in general: You use aggregates to get beyond the aggregates. Then you let them all go.

When I was teaching a retreat in Canada last year, one of the retreatants mentioned that she had been told that we can't change our perceptions, which is probably one of the most un-Buddhist teachings imaginable. It's because we *can* change our perceptions—learning how to identify the world in a new way, learning how to identify its value in a new way—that the whole idea of learning and practicing the teachings makes sense. It's because we can change our perceptions that we can decide to follow the path. It's because we can change our perceptions that we can be free.

Just Right as It Is

THE TEACHING: ALL PHENOMENA ARE NOT-SELF

In his first discourse, the Buddha explained to the group of five monks that suffering was the act of clinging to any of the five aggregates of form, feeling, perception, fabrication, or consciousness. As a result of that discourse, one member of the group gained his first glimpse of awakening. In the succeeding days, the Buddha gave instructions to the remaining members of the group until all five had gained the same glimpse.

He started his second recorded discourse—the one that led the five to total awakening—with a series of assertions to the effect that each of the five aggregates is not-self. His first argument in support of these assertions was that none of these aggregates could qualify as self because they don't lie totally under your control—the implication being that if they were really you, they would always follow in line with your wishes.

He then went on to cross-question the five monks about each of the aggregates: Is it constant or inconstant? Inconstant. If something is inconstant, is it easeful or stressful? Stressful. And is it fitting to regard what is inconstant, stressful, subject to change as: "This is mine. This is my self. This is what I am"? No.

He followed this questionnaire by pointing out that you should see all instances of the aggregates, regardless of their level of subtlety or where they are in space or time—inside or out; near or far; past, present, or future—as, "This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am." When you see this, you grow disenchanted with the five aggregates. From disenchantment comes dispassion, and from dispassion, release.

Apparently the five monks, while engaged in this questionnaire and listening to the Buddha's conclusions, examined their own aggregates in real time and applied the Buddha's lessons to what they saw, because the discourse ends by saying that, while the Buddha's explanation was being given, their minds were released through not clinging (SN 22:59).

The Buddha had many occasions throughout his teaching career to engage other listeners in the same questionnaire and to draw the same

conclusions, the result being that he led many of his listeners either to partial or to total awakening. In every case, these instructions were aimed at getting the listeners to focus on examining the aggregates as they experienced them, and to develop the disenchantment and dispassion that would lead to release.

In the millennia since, many people who have read or listened to reports of these instructions have been able to use them to gain dispassion for the aggregates, while many others, on reading them, have focused their attention on a different aim. They have tried to draw out the logical implications of these instructions to answer a metaphysical question: Is there a self, or is there no self? Even though this question diverts attention from the Buddha's original aim, it has long been a central issue in Buddhist philosophy.

Broadly speaking, there have been two main ways of answering this question, arriving at opposite conclusions as to how to draw logical inferences from the Buddha's teachings on not-self.

1. One school of interpretation argues that the five aggregates cover all of sensory experience, so the Buddha's questionnaire leaves no room for anything to be described as self. Therefore, it's safe to draw the conclusion that, in his eyes, there is no self.

This interpretation has been fortified by two other observations.

a) The Buddha would occasionally apply the same questionnaire in an even more thoroughgoing way to the six senses, their objects, consciousness at the senses, contact at the senses, and any feeling, perception, fabrication, or consciousness that arises in dependence on sensory contact (MN 147). Because this covers everything that the Buddha includes in the term, "the All," and because nothing can be described beyond the All (SN 35:23), that leaves no room for anything to be described as "self."

b) The aggregates and the senses are all classed as *saṅkhāras*, fabricated phenomena *(dhamma)*, which might leave open the possibility that there could be an unfabricated dhamma that qualifies as self. However, the Buddha often would extend the range of the term "not-self" *(anattā)* by saying that all dhammas are not-self. This statement follows on the assertion that all fabricated phenomena are inconstant and stressful, so his

choice of words here leads to the obvious conclusion that "phenomena" in the statement, "all phenomena," must include not only fabricated dhammas, but also unfabricated dhammas as well.

The unfabricated dimension is described as "dispassion, the subduing of intoxication, the elimination of thirst, the uprooting of attachment, the breaking of the round, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, the realization of unbinding" (Iti 90). This covers everything that could be experienced as an object of the mind, so the logical conclusion must be—given that all things fabricated and unfabricated are not-self—that there is no self.

2. Another school of interpretation arrives at the opposite conclusion. It does this by asserting that in all these cases, the Buddha leaves unmentioned a dimension of experience that is not covered by the things he describes as not-self. According to this interpretation, the Buddha is asking his listeners to dis-identify with things that are not their true self so that they can arrive at an experience of what is their true self in the dimension not covered by the terms "the All" and "unfabricated dhammas."

The arguments in support of this interpretation can be summarized as follows:

a) Even though there can be no description of anything outside the "All" of the six senses, the Buddha does state that there is a dimension where the senses cease and their objects fade away, and that that dimension should be experienced (SN 35:117).

b) Although the realization of unbinding is described as a dhamma—which can mean that it is either a phenomenon or an action or both—unbinding itself is neither an action nor a phenomenon, and the Buddha in fact describes it as the ending of all dhammas (AN 10:58). This statement is supported by Sn 5:6, which quotes the Buddha as saying that, on reaching the end of the practice, "all dhammas are done away with." It's also supported by Sn 4:10, which states that the arahant is "beyond dispassion," said to be the highest dhamma.

Thus, according to this interpretation, when the Buddha encouraged a group of young men—who were searching for a woman who had stolen their belongings—to search for the self instead, he was encouraging them to search for the self that lay beyond all dhammas (Mv I.14.4).

The arguments of the second school are easy to refute, in that the Buddha explicitly stated that to believe that there is a self would not be in keeping with the arising of the knowledge that all phenomena are not-self (SN 44:10). Apparently, his reasoning here is that any belief in a self would leave something to which the mind would cling, and that would get in the way of the mind's release through non-clinging.

This means that it would be against the Buddha's intentions to infer from his statements about not-self that they were intended to leave room for belief in a self.

Here it's relevant to note that the Buddha gave a general principle for how to draw inferences from his teachings. He divided his discourses into two sorts: those that need to have their meaning further drawn out—in other words, they're intended for the listener to draw further logical conclusions from them—and those that already have their meaning fully drawn out and shouldn't have further logical conclusions drawn from them. He also stated that it would be an act of slander to treat discourses of one sort as if they belonged to the other sort, the point relevant to our discussion here being that it would be an act of slander to draw further meanings—further logical conclusions—from teachings of the second sort:

> "Monks, these two slander the Tathāgata. Which two? He who explains a discourse whose meaning needs to be further drawn out as one whose meaning has already been fully drawn out. And he who explains a discourse whose meaning has already been fully drawn out as one whose meaning needs to be further drawn out." — *AN 2:24*

Unfortunately, AN 2:24 doesn't give any examples of which of the Buddha's teachings belong to the second sort, but it's apparent that the teaching, "All phenomena are not-self" would fall into that category, in that it would be a mistake to draw from it the conclusion that there is a self.

However, there are passages in the Canon indicating that it would also be a mistake to draw from this teaching the opposite logical conclusion: that there is *no* self. To begin with, two passages indicate that the question of whether there is or is not a self belongs to the category of questions that the Buddha would put aside, meaning that using his questionnaire on not-self or the teaching "all phenomena are not–self" to answer a question that

he refused to answer would be to slander him. In MN 2, the Buddha states that such questions as "Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I?" are not worthy of attention. To answer these questions by saying either, "I have a self," or "I have no self," is, in his words, "a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a writhing of views, a fetter of views. Bound by a fetter of views, the uninstructed run-of-the-mill person is not freed from birth, aging, and death, from sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair. He is not freed, I tell you, from suffering and stress."

In SN 44:10, the Buddha remains silent when asked whether the self exists or not. He later explains his silence to his attendant, Ven. Ānanda, saying that if he were to say that there is a self, that would be to conform with the eternalists, those who teach the wrong view that the self is eternal and unchanging. To say that there is no self would be to conform with the annihilationists, those who teach that one is annihilated at death.

Here it's important to note that the Buddha is not stating that all views of an existing self are eternalistic. He is well aware of views claiming the existence of a self that is not eternal (DN 1). However, the statement, "There is a self" conforms with eternalism in that it shares the same practical drawbacks as an eternalist view. It can't be used as part of the strategy for putting an end to stress because, in holding to this sort of view, there's a double level of attachment: to the view itself, and to the objects that the view identifies as self. This is why the Buddha so frequently deconstructed the view of an existing self in order to help his listeners advance along the path.

Similarly, the Buddha is not saying that all views saying that no self exists would count as annihilationist. It's just that the statement, "There is no self" has practical drawbacks similar to those of annihilationism, as can be seen in MN 109.

MN 109 also shows explicitly that the questionnaire on not-self belongs to the category of teaching that should not have its logical conclusions further drawn out. In doing so, it also suggests some general reasons why the Buddha would insist that some of his teachings belonged to this category.

As the sutta begins, the Buddha is sitting in the open air on the night of a very full moon together with a Saṅgha of monks, answering the questions

of one monk in particular. When asked, "Knowing in what way, seeing in what way, is there—with regard to this body endowed with consciousness, and with regard to all external signs—no longer any I-making, or my-making, or obsession with conceit?" the Buddha responds that one regards all the aggregates as, "This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am."

Another monk sitting in the audience draws a logical conclusion from this statement: "So—form is not-self, feeling is not-self, perception is not-self, fabrications are not-self, consciousness is not-self. Then what self will be touched by the actions done by what is not-self?"

In other words, if the aggregates are not-self, then there must be no self who will be touched by the actions done by the aggregates. This conclusion, though logical, would undercut the Buddha's teachings related to right view about kamma, and would give license to all kinds of unskillful actions on the grounds that there's no one to be affected by them. This is, in fact, one of the practical implications of annihilationism: It's all right to do what you want, because you won't survive death to be punished for your misdeeds (DN 2).

The Buddha reads the monk's mind and says, "It's possible that a senseless person—immersed in ignorance, overcome with craving—might think that he could outsmart the Teacher's message in this way: 'So—form is not-self, feeling is not-self, perception is not-self, fabrications are not-self, consciousness is not-self. Then what self will be touched by the actions done by what is not-self?'"

This is the Buddha's way of saying that drawing this logical conclusion from the teaching on not-self would be to misuse the teaching. In the terms of AN 2:24, it would be to slander him. He then shows the correct use of the teaching by giving the monks the standard questionnaire on not-self, followed by the standard conclusions. As a result, the minds of sixty of the monks are released through not clinging.

This shows why this particular teaching should *not* have logical conclusions drawn from it. To do so would be to stay immersed in craving and ignorance. To take its message as stated and apply it directly to one's own mind, on the other hand, opens the way to total release. The difference in the outcome of the two approaches to listening could not be more stark.

So it's worth looking into what the Canon has to say about the right way to listen to the Dhamma and apply it to your own mind.

LISTENING TO THE DHAMMA

AN 5:151 states that if you're endowed with five qualities, you're capable of "alighting on the orderliness of the Dhamma"—its way of describing awakening—while listening to the True Dhamma. The five qualities are: You don't hold the talk in contempt; you don't hold the speaker in contempt; you don't hold yourself in contempt; you listen with an unscattered mind, a mind gathered into one; and you attend appropriately to the Dhamma.

The first two qualities ensure that you're open to taking in the message of the talk; the next ensures that you feel you're capable of following the talk and applying it to your own mind. The fourth quality ensures that you're properly focused and concentrated on the talk, and the fifth ensures that you apply the talk to the problem of how to gain dispassion for suffering and its cause right then and there.

Because the not-self questionnaire is aimed directly at inducing dispassion, appropriate attention focuses precisely on how this particular teaching can be used to induce dispassion in your own mind. SN 22:57 expands on how this is done, listing seven stages in the process leading to dispassion: You discern what the aggregate is, how it's originated or caused, how it ceases when its origination or cause ceases, and what needs to be done for it to cease: developing the noble eightfold path. You also have to see its allure, its drawbacks, and finally the escape from it, which is the ending of passion-desire for it—i.e., you escape through dispassion.

For the mental aggregates, the origination or cause is something that, if you're sufficiently focused and paying proper attention, can be observed in the mind in the present moment: Contact is the origination in the case of feeling, perception, and fabrications; name and form—i.e., other aggregates—are the origination in the case of consciousness.

If you take the message of the Buddha's teaching while listening and use it to notice how these things rise and fall in your mind, you can observe their inconstancy. From there, you can follow the questionnaire to see that

these inconstant things are also stressful and don't deserve to be seen as self. This is what it means to see their drawbacks.

Now, because dispassion is a value judgment—seeing that the passion that goes into the constant fabrication of these things yields results that aren't worth the effort that goes into them—it's also important to compare the drawbacks of these things with their allure: why you felt passion for them in the first place. If you're not clear on the allure, it's hard to come to a clear value judgment about whether the passion is worth it or not. In every case, and in general terms, the allure comes down to the pleasure and happiness that arise born from the aggregate. It's up to you to discern precisely what particular pleasures and forms of happiness incite the passion for you to keep fabricating aggregates. When you do, and the truth hits home that the specific allure of each aggregate is not worth the drawbacks it entails, that puts an end to any passion or desire for the aggregates. The mind stops producing these aggregates, stops clinging to them, and so gains release.

So the first reason why the Buddha didn't want his listeners to come to the conclusion that there is no self is that an assertion of that sort would distract them from the ideal way of listening to the teaching on not-self and using it so as to free their minds.

DEVELOPING THE PATH

The problem, though, is that people can get this result from listening only if they're fully alert and properly focused on asking the right questions of the Dhamma and applying the lessons to their minds in the immediate present. And the fact of the matter is that not everyone listening to these teachings can do this. Even on that full-moon night, not all the Buddha's listeners gained awakening. That means that they had to develop the noble eightfold path further on their own. Only then would their powers of concentration and discernment be sufficiently strong to observe the aggregates with enough sensitivity that they could give their full assent to the value judgment that the aggregates are not worthy of their passion.

However, to develop the path requires making use of the aggregates. Right concentration, for instance, the last factor of the path, is composed of

all five (AN 9:36). And in particular, the Buddha shows that right view—the primary discernment factor of the path—together with right effort—the factor responsible for generating desire to develop the path and abandon anything that stands in its way—makes strategic use of both perceptions of "self" and perceptions of "not-self" as the path develops. After all, you have to feel some craving and passion for the path to see that it's worth following (AN 4:159; AN 6:78). This requires a sense that you yourself will benefit, but that you'll also have to dis-identify with any desires that would pull you off the path.

This is apparently another reason why the Buddha didn't answer the question as to whether there is or is not a self. If he had said either that there was a self or there was no self, he wouldn't have been free to recommend the strategies needed for the path to mature. However, by leaving perceptions of "self" and "not-self" as value judgments, he was free to tell his listeners to apply them strategically in ways that were appropriate for their level of progress on the path.

Right view, which governs the use of these perceptions, starts on the mundane level with the principle of action: that good and bad actions—bodily, verbal, and mental—are real and bear real results (MN 117). The transcendent level of right view builds on this principle by focusing on the role of mental action in causing and putting an end to suffering. It's expressed in terms of the four noble truths:

1) suffering, which is identical to the five clinging-aggregates;

2) its origination, which is the craving that leads to becoming (the act of taking on an identity in a world of experience);

3) its cessation, which is dispassion for that craving; and

4) the path to its cessation, the noble eightfold path.

Each of these truths entails a duty: Suffering is to be comprehended to the point where there's no passion, aversion, or delusion around it; its origination is to be abandoned; its cessation—which is the same as the abandoning of craving—is to be realized; and the path to its cessation is to be developed.

When carrying out the duties of the first two noble truths, your use of the perception of not-self is relatively straightforward. Throughout the

practice of the path, in almost every instance where you see that you're suffering, you can try to ferret out the clinging that constitutes the suffering and the craving that causes it, and apply the perception of not-self to any of the aggregates on which that particular act of clinging or craving is focused. That's how you comprehend suffering and abandon its origination.

Here, however, it's necessary to say *"almost* every instance," because—as we noted above—the path, the fourth noble truth, is also comprised of aggregates. And there are times when the practice of the path involves some suffering, especially as you reflect on the fact that you're still far from the goal. The Buddha calls this "renunciation-based distress," and advocates that you develop it to pull yourself out of "house-based distress," the distress that comes when you're deprived of the sights, sounds, aromas, etc., that you find appealing (MN 137). House-based distress is basically hopeless, in that it aims at gaining sights, etc., that will leave you again, whereas renunciation-based distress offers genuine hope: There is a dimension free from suffering that is also free from change. In cases of this sort, as we'll see below, you hold back from applying the perception of not-self to the experience of suffering if that suffering actually helps motivate you along the path.

In fact, as we look more in detail at how to follow the duties appropriate to the third and fourth noble truths, we see that the issue of how to apply perceptions of self and not-self gets more complex. Here we'll discuss the fourth truth first, because you have to perform the duties appropriate to it before you perform the duties appropriate to the third.

To develop the path requires using perceptions of self and not-self depending on circumstances. To begin with, as we've noted, a proper concept of "self" is a useful perception for motivating yourself to develop the path. It helps you feel that you're capable of doing it, capable of judging your progress as you do so, and that you'll benefit from the efforts you put into it.

This point is widely misunderstood. Many modern teachers have claimed that, given the not-self teaching, it's a mistake to think that you're personally responsible for getting the path to mature. Instead, you should see the maturation of the path as the result of impersonal causes and conditions. The Buddha himself, however, never talks in that way. In his

recommendations for how to think about following the path, he makes frequent use of concepts of "self" and "I" as agent and beneficiary of following the path. As he stated in AN 10:73, the Dhamma is nourished through commitment and reflection, and concepts of "self" and "I" play a prominent role in providing both sorts of nourishment.

However, it's important to note that the Buddha never gives a precise definition of what "self" and "I" mean in this context. In fact, he leaves the terms undefined. This may have been to prevent his listeners from getting obsessed with defining what they are, and so limiting themselves and the range of what they could do. As he noted, any obsession with the aggregates defines you, and so places limitations on you (SN 22:36). So instead, when using the terms "self" and "I" in giving advice for following the path, the Buddha simply describes not what these concepts *are*, but how they should *function*. In other words, he views the concepts of "self" and "I" as strategies, and he gives advice on how to use them strategically with skill.

There are two main points worth noting in how he approaches this issue:

a) He assigns "self" and "I" three main functions: as the agent who's responsible for following the path, as the consumer who will benefit from following the path, and as the commentator who reflects on the actions of the agent and consumer—and itself—judging them as skillful or unskillful, and giving them advice on how better to function to make further progress on the path.

b) "Self" and "I" are used on many levels of the practice, from the most basic to the fairly advanced. Because the conceit "I am" is not abandoned until the final level of awakening, the Buddha advises getting some skillful use out of it before you put it aside.

Because of the misunderstandings around this point, it's worth quoting some examples to show how the Buddha uses "self" and "I" in this context. Some of these examples deal with issues faced on the more basic levels of the path.

> First, in the role of agent:
> Your own self is your own mainstay,

for who else could your mainstay be?
With you yourself well-trained,
you obtain a mainstay hard to obtain. — Dhp 160

Evil is done by oneself.
By oneself is one defiled.
Evil is left undone by oneself.
By oneself is one cleansed.
Purity and impurity are one's own doing.
No one purifies another.
No other purifies one. — Dhp 165

Ven. Ānanda: "There is the case, sister, where a monk hears, 'The monk named such-&-such, they say, through the ending of the effluents, has entered and remains in the effluent-free awareness-release & discernment-release, having directly known & realized them for himself right in the here-and-now.' The thought occurs to him, 'The monk named such-&-such, they say, through the ending of the effluents, has entered and remains in the effluent-free awareness-release & discernment-release.… Then why not me?' Then he eventually abandons conceit, having relied on conceit." — AN 4:159

Here are "self" and "I" in the role of consumer:

> "And what, monks, is the self as a governing principle? There is the case where a monk, having gone to a wilderness, to the foot of a tree, or to an empty dwelling, reflects on this: 'It's not for the sake of robes that I have gone forth from the home life into homelessness; it's not for the sake of almsfood, for the sake of lodgings, or for the sake of this or that state of [future] becoming that I have gone forth from the home life into homelessness. Simply that I am beset by birth, aging, & death; by sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, & despairs; beset by stress, overcome with stress, [and I hope,] "Perhaps the end of this entire mass of suffering & stress might be known!" Now, if I were to seek the same sort of sensual pleasures that I abandoned in going forth from home into homelessness—or a worse sort—that would not be fitting for me.'

“So he reflects on this: ‘My persistence will be aroused & not lax; my mindfulness established & not confused; my body calm & not aroused; my mind concentrated & unified.’ Having made himself his governing principle, he abandons what is unskillful, develops what is skillful, abandons what is blameworthy, develops what is unblameworthy, and looks after himself in a pure way. This is called the self as a governing principle.’ — *AN 3:40*

“And what are the six kinds of renunciation-based distress? The distress coming from the longing that arises in one who is filled with longing for the unexcelled liberations when—experiencing the inconstancy of those very forms, their change, fading, & cessation—he sees with right discernment as it has come to be that all forms, both before & now, are inconstant, stressful, subject to change and he is filled with this longing: ‘O when will I enter & remain in the dimension that the noble ones now enter & remain in?’ This is called renunciation-based distress. [Similarly with sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, & ideas.]” — *MN 137*

And here are two basic examples of “I” as the commentator:

> You yourself should reprove yourself,
> should examine yourself.
> As a self-guarded monk
> with guarded self,
> mindful, you dwell at ease. — *Dhp 379*

“Whenever you want to do a mental action, Rāhula, you should reflect on it: ‘This mental action I want to do—would it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Would it be an unskillful mental action, with painful consequences, painful results?’ If, on reflection, you know that it would lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it would be an unskillful mental action with painful consequences, painful results, then any mental action of that sort is absolutely unfit for you to do. But if on reflection you know that it would not cause affliction… it would be a skillful mental

action with pleasant consequences, pleasant results, then any mental action of that sort is fit for you to do.

"While you're doing a mental action, Rāhula, you should reflect on it: 'This mental action I'm doing—is it leading to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Is it an unskillful mental action, with painful consequences, painful results?' If, on reflection, you know that it is leading to self-affliction, to affliction of others, or both… you should give it up. But if on reflection you know that it is not… you may continue with it.

"When you've done a mental action, Rāhula, you should reflect on it: 'This mental action I've done—did it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Was it an unskillful mental action, with painful consequences, painful results?' If, on reflection, you know that it led to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it was an unskillful mental action with painful consequences, painful results, then you should feel distressed, ashamed, & disgusted with it. Feeling distressed… you should exercise restraint in the future. But if on reflection you know that it did not lead to affliction… it was a skillful mental action with pleasant consequences, pleasant results, then you should stay mentally refreshed & joyful, training day & night in skillful qualities." — *MN 61*

On a more advanced level, here's an example of "I" as consumer of the fruits of the practice:

"In seeing six rewards, it's enough for a monk to establish the perception of not-self with regard to all phenomena without exception. Which six? 'I won't be fashioned in connection with any world. My I-making will be stopped. My my-making will be stopped. I will be endowed with uncommon knowledge. I will become one who rightly sees cause, along with causally-originated phenomena.'" — *AN 6:104*

So the perception of self—as agent, consumer, and commentator—plays an important role on many levels in developing the path.

Of course, the Buddha also makes use of the perception of not-self on the path. The uses are primarily three:

• In the beginning, it's applied to all things that would pull you off the path.

• Along the way, it's applied to any sense of unhealthy conceit that makes you look down on others whom you regard as inferior to you: This type of conceit can begin with issues around which lay people measure themselves against others—such as family status—and can persist up through the attainment of high levels of concentration (MN 113).

• On the most advanced level, you're encouraged to abandon all thoughts of "self" and "I" as you examine the processes leading to becoming as described in the Buddha's analysis of dependent co-arising, seeing them simply as events that can provide no lasting happiness. This is why the Buddha was so resistant to people who tried to read a "self" into the description of dependent co-arising, either in the role of someone who "owns" the factors of dependent co-arising or who "feeds" on those factors (SN 12:12; SN 12:35).

This means that, with regard to fulfilling the duty to develop the fourth noble truth, perceptions both of "self" and "not-self" play an important role, depending on the particular issues you're facing at different levels of the practice.

REALIZING CESSATION

As you begin performing the duty appropriate to the third noble truth, the issues surrounding perceptions of "self" and "not-self" get even more complex.

To realize the cessation of suffering, you have to abandon all clinging and craving for the aggregates. Now, the practice of the path relies on craving (AN 4:159), so there's a general principle that to fully perform the duty of the third noble truth, there comes a point where you have to abandon the fourth. More specifically, perceptions—even the perceptions employed by right view—count as aggregates, which means that perceptions of "self" and "not-self" have to be abandoned after they've done their work in helping you abandon your clinging and craving for other things.

The general point that the path ultimately must be abandoned occurs frequently throughout the Canon—in some cases metaphorically, as in the image of the raft that has to be abandoned after it has delivered you to the safety of the further shore, or the relay chariot that you leave behind when it delivers you to your destination (MN 22; MN 24). In other cases, this point is made more explicitly, as when the Buddha recommends applying a five-step analysis to the five faculties—which are a way of analyzing the path into the five qualities of conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment—so as to induce dispassion for them. This five-step analysis is a shortened version of the seven-step analysis applied to the clinging-aggregates in SN 22:57, which we discussed above. In this case, you should look for the origination of each faculty, its passing away, its allure, its drawbacks, and the escape from it (SN 48:3; SN 48:4).

This means that right view, to be right all the way to the end of the practice, has to be expressed in a way that, after having done its work in ending passion for all other things, it's forced to reflect back on itself in a way that it can develop dispassion for itself, allowing the mind to escape from it.

And this is precisely how right view functions when it's rightly expressed. It starts with the principle of action, and applies it first to wrong views, regarding them both in terms of their content and in terms of how they function in a causal series of actions: why people cling to them, and how clinging to these views leads them to act. As the Buddha states in DN 1:

> "There, where any of those contemplatives & brahmans who are adherents of [a particular wrong view], they all experience that through repeated contact at the six sense media. For them, from feeling as a requisite condition comes craving. From craving as a requisite condition comes clinging/sustenance. From clinging/sustenance as a requisite condition comes becoming. From becoming as a requisite condition comes birth. From birth as a requisite condition, then aging-&-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair come into play. Such is the origination of this entire mass of stress & suffering."

However, in seeing this truth, the Buddha has learned how not to cling to it, by viewing right view itself as a product of actions, starting, in this case, with feelings:

> "With regard to this, the Tathāgata discerns that 'These standpoints, thus seized, thus grasped at, lead to such & such a destination, to such & such a state in the world beyond.' That the Tathāgata discerns. And he discerns what is higher than that. And yet, discerning that, he does not grasp at it. And as he is not grasping at it, unbinding *[nibbuti]* is experienced right within. Knowing, as they have come to be, the origination, ending, allure, & drawbacks of feelings, along with the escape from feelings, the Tathāgata, monks—through lack of clinging/sustenance—is released." — *DN 1*

The Canon, in AN 10:93, gives a clear example of how expressing right view in terms that focus on the action of clinging to views allows for it to be turned on itself after it has done its work in gaining escape from other views.

The incident is this: Anāthapiṇḍika, a lay disciple of the Buddha's who has attained the first level of awakening, visits the adherents of other sects. After they have treated him with some disrespect, they ask him his views. He responds that he will be happy to tell them his views, but asks that they tell him theirs first. The sectarians express their views about the hot topics of the day, such as whether the cosmos is eternal or not, finite or infinite, etc. In each case, Anāthapiṇḍika then focuses on how the view is the product of action, and on the bad consequences of holding to it. For example:

> "As for the venerable one who says, 'The cosmos is eternal. Only this is true; anything otherwise is worthless. This is the sort of view I have,' his view arises from his own inappropriate attention or in dependence on the words of another. Now this view has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently co-arisen. Whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently co-arisen: That is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stress. This venerable one thus adheres to that very stress, submits himself to that very stress."

The sectarians then ask Anāthapiṇḍika his view. He responds:

> "Whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently co-arisen: That is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stress. Whatever is stress is not me, is not what I am, is not my self. This is the sort of view I have."

Thinking that they've caught him in his own trap, the sectarians say:

> "So, householder, whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently co-arisen: That is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stress. You thus adhere to that very stress, submit yourself to that very stress."

However, Anāthapiṇḍika shows that this view allows him to escape from the trap by escaping from any attachment to it:

> "Venerable sirs, whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently co-arisen: That is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stress. Whatever is stress is not me, is not what I am, is not my self. Having seen this well with right discernment as it has come to be, I also discern the higher escape from it as it has come to be."
>
> When this was said, the wanderers fell silent, abashed, sitting with their shoulders drooping, their heads down, brooding, at a loss for words. — *AN 10:93*

In other words, when you have trained the mind to focus on the stress in clinging to anything brought into being, fabricated, willed, or dependently co-arisen, it's a small step to reflect that even that right view is brought into being, fabricated, willed, or dependently co-arisen. There comes a point where its allure—its usefulness in freeing you from your attachment to other views—has served its purpose, so you see no more value in holding on to it, even though it's true. This is how right view can be used to transcend itself. It focuses attention precisely on things that need to be comprehended and abandoned, and in doing so, it ends up focusing the same attention on itself.

The same point applies to the questionnaire on not-self and to the teaching that all phenomena are not-self.

With regard to the questionnaire, the focus is on the aggregates and the drawbacks of clinging to them. As the Canon notes, these aggregates cover the range of phenomena to which you can cling and thus create suffering. At the same time, they constitute the full range of raw material around which assumptions about self coalesce (SN 22:1). So in focusing directly on these aggregates, the questionnaire forces you to look at precisely what you're using to create any sense of self to which you've been clinging. Its purpose is to induce a value judgment about what you're focused on: that none of these things are worth clinging to. That's how you develop the dispassion at which the teaching aims.

At the same time, if you're following the questionnaire and applying it to your own mind with sufficient discernment, you have to reach a point where you realize that even the right view it espouses—"Any fabrications whatsoever that are past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: All fabrications are to be seen with right discernment as it has come to be: 'This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am'"—comes under the aggregate of fabrication. It, too, when it has done its work, should become an object of disenchantment and dispassion. When dispassion is thoroughly all-around like this, it can lead to genuine release.

The same dynamic of focus and reflective focus holds for the statement, "All phenomena are not-self." Here, though, the word "phenomena *(dhamma)*" has two meanings that cut through acts of clinging in two directions.

a) On the one hand, *dhamma* refers to any phenomenon, whether fabricated or unfabricated. As AN 9:36 indicates, the act of perceiving the five aggregates as not-self is, for some people, enough to gain full awakening. Letting go of the aggregates both in their role as objects of discernment and in their role of tools used along the path, these people can attain an experience of the deathless. If any passion and delight arise around the experience of the deathless—taking that experience as an object—they can detect the passion and delight as coming under the fabrication

aggregate, so they can apply the perception of not-self to that passion and delight as well. That's how they're fully released.

Other people, however, focus too narrowly on the experience of the deathless, so when passion and delight arise for that experience, they misperceive them as part of the experience. This would lead them to assume that the passion and delight are unfabricated. Because the unfabricated does not fall under the aggregates, and because they have been applying the perception not-self only to the aggregates as they perceived them, they would not apply the same perception to the passion and delight that they wrongly perceive as part of the deathless.

It's precisely this misperception that the knowledge, "All phenomena are not-self" is meant to cure. When this knowledge is applied even to the experience of the deathless, it can help detect the fabricated passion and delight around the deathless as actually separate from it. After all, these fabrications are dhammas, and they come from viewing the deathless as a dhamma. For this reason, the perception of not-self applies to them and to the aspect of the deathless experience that still takes that experience as an object of the mind. When this perception fully removes the last remaining act of clinging to these subtle mind-objects and events, all activity at the six senses ceases. Full awakening occurs with a full plunge into unbinding.

b) On the other hand, *dhamma* can also mean "teaching." Thus the teaching, "All dhammas are not-self," can apply to all teachings, itself included. This means that this teaching, too, should ultimately become an object of dispassion. Because it has this reflective quality, this statement is thus an ideal expression of right view for this stage in the practice in helping to lead to the all-around dispassion needed for release.

THE RIGHT USE OF RIGHT VIEW

We've already noted that one of the reasons why the Buddha refused to take a stand on the existence of the self was so that he would be free to advise his followers to make use both of perceptions of self and of perceptions of not-self as strategies for developing the fourth noble truth. Another reason is that they would then be free to drop both of those perceptions to fully complete the duty with regard to the third. The way he

expressed his teachings on not-self gave him the freedom to do just that. And it encourages listeners to use and then abandon these perceptions in the most skillful way.

The same cannot be said, however, for the statement, "There is no self." To begin with, it's a generality that lacks the precise focus of the Buddha's two ways of using the concept of not-self. Instead of focusing your attention on actions going on in your mind, it points outward as a general claim about what does or doesn't lie behind experience—which, from the Buddha's point of view, would be a distraction.

At the same time, the statement, "There is no self," lacks the reflective quality of the two statements of right view. Instead of focusing on itself, it aims its focus into the social arena, where views like this are asserted and discussed. Instead of encouraging you to look at views as actions, or to examine the mental states motivating you to make such a generality, its function is to assert the sort of position that's taken for the sake of debate. It's the type of view that ends implicitly or explicitly in the stock phrase, "Only this is true; anything otherwise is worthless," and that would entangle you in needless controversies. Instead of focusing attention on how it, too, needs eventually to be abandoned, the statement, "There is no self," becomes something to hold on to and defend.

Even if you don't assert this statement to others, the fact that you introduce it into your internal dialog can get you entangled as well. If that dialog is at all responsible, you have to work out the implications of this statement vis-à-vis your practice as a whole: If there's no self, who's going to do the practice on days when causes and conditions push the other way? And if other people have no self, what's wrong with harming them? There would just be aggregates pushing other aggregates around. Issues like this get you further and further away from the task of inducing dispassion for how you're causing yourself suffering here and now.

This is why the Buddha calls views of this sort a "thicket," a "wilderness," a "fetter," and a "writhing" of views that don't free you from suffering and stress.

In short, the statement, "There is no self," lacks the two features necessary for a skillful expression of the teaching on not-self:

(a) the proper focus and

(b) the proper reflective dynamic.

Lacking these two features, it doesn't encourage you to abandon it, which is why it's easy to fetter yourself with it.

This means that trying to force the Buddha's teachings to answer the question of whether there is or isn't a self is not just a waste of time. It actually interferes with the practice of the teachings. The Buddha wanted to be free to advise his students how to use concepts of self and not-self in following the duties of the four noble truths. And he wanted for them to be free to abandon such concepts as part of completing those duties. For this reason, the duties of the four noble truths *require* that you not take a stand on whether a self exists or not.

Instead, you take the Buddha's teachings on not-self as he expressed them—so as to have the proper focus and the proper reflective dynamic—and you apply them to the ways in which you're suffering right now. It's in this way that they can serve their original purpose and help you reach the overall aims of his teachings: dispassion and release.

FURTHER LESSONS

Looking at how the Buddha's teachings on not-self function, we can derive two further lessons about his general teaching approach.

1. These teachings show us why the Buddha insisted some of his teachings should not have logical inferences drawn from them. These are teachings that are meant not simply to be descriptive, but also to be performative: Their focus is on what they can get you to *do.* To draw logical inferences from them would be to divert them from their focus, and actually to create more fetters for the listener. This is why the Buddha said that those who draw logical inferences from such teachings are slandering him.

2. There are many passages in which the Buddha states that the fully awakened person has attained the ultimate truth—the release of nibbāna (MN 140)—but there are also passages saying that such as person is at the

same time beyond true and false (Sn 4:8; Sn 4:9; AN 4:24). This sounds like a paradox, and these passages were probably meant to sound paradoxical so as to provoke thought. But the paradox can be easily resolved. When you attain awakening, you reach the truth of a reality: the reality of release. But to get there, you need to use the verbal truths of right view, which—because they're fabrications—you have to abandon at some point so as to be totally free from fabrications. This is why right view has to be expressed in ways that lead to a value judgment—that all fabrications deserve to be abandoned—and in ways that that judgment can be applied to themselves. Once you've attained full freedom, you don't need them any more. Even though they're true, they don't have the same value for you that they did when you were following the path. That's how you're beyond them.

As the Buddha states in his simile of the raft, once you've arrived at the further shore, you feel appreciation for the raft that got you there, but see no need to carry it further on your head. You're free to go anywhere you like, with nothing at all to weigh you down.

Neither Here nor There

The Buddha's definition of the cravings that cause suffering states that they delight "now here, now there." In other words, they focus on locations, either physical or mental. Throughout the Canon, the Buddha speaks of how important it is to detect the location of a particular craving if you want to abandon it.

In the Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (DN 22), for instance, he notes that craving can be located in anything in the world that the mind finds endearing or alluring. Then he breaks down what he means by "world": the internal sense media—the senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, and ideation—or their external objects: sights, sounds, aromas, flavors, tactile sensations, and ideas—or any of the activities that surround sensory experience:

contact between the senses and their objects,

consciousness at that contact,

feeling born of the contact,

perceptions of sensory objects,

intentions for sensory objects,

craving for sensory objects,

thoughts directed at sensory objects, and

evaluation of sensory objects.

As the sutta states, craving can arise and settle in any of these spots. For example, if you crave another person, that craving could be focused on the sight or the touch of that person, your perceptions of that person, your intentions toward that person, or even on the act of craving itself: You want to experience lust, and the other person is simply an excuse to incite that experience.

If, seeing the dangers of craving, you want to abandon it and bring it to a full stop, you have to do so at the spot where it's located. For example, if your craving for a person is focused on the act of craving, you won't be able

to abandon it if you simply deconstruct your perceptions of the person. You have to locate where exactly that craving craves craving itself.

In contrast, the Canon states again and again that the end of craving leads to a liberation—unbinding—beyond locations.

> "When there is no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This, just this, is the end of stress." — *Ud 1:10*

> There is that dimension, monks, where there is … neither this world, nor the next world, nor sun, nor moon. And there, I say, there is neither coming, nor going, nor staying; neither passing away nor arising: unestablished, unevolving, without support [mental object]. This, just this, is the end of stress." — *Ud 8:1*

> "There being no passing away or arising, there is neither a here nor a there nor a between-the-two. This, just this, is the end of stress." — *Ud 8:4*

One of the Canon's idioms for a heart or mind freed from locations is that it's "everywhere released."

> Gone to the beyond of becoming,
> you let go of in front,
> let go of behind,
> let go of between.
> With a heart everywhere released,
> you don't come again to birth
> & aging. — *Dhp 348*

Sister Subhā:

> I—unimpassioned, unblemished,
> with a mind everywhere released…
> Knowing the unattractiveness
> of fabricated things,
> my heart adheres nowhere at all. — *Thig 14*

When totally awakened people pass away, they are said to be unbound through "unestablished consciousness" (SN 22:87). The suttas have an analogy for this type of consciousness: a light beam that doesn't land on any surface at all (SN 12:64).

As the Buddha noted, we've been landing here and there for eons, wandering on from one location to another with craving as our companion (Sn 3:12). In his terminology, we've been going from one becoming *(bhava)* to another. What this means is that as a desire gets centered in a particular location, a world comes into focus around that location, and we take on a sense of self-identity within that world. This combination of a sense of self operating in a particular world of experience is what's meant by "becoming." The fact that a location is the beginning point or nucleus, both of the world of experience and the corresponding sense of self, means that a focal location is central not only to our sense of *where* we are, but also of *who* we are.

What keeps us wandering from location to location is that, as one particular becoming falls apart, we latch onto another desire, around which a new becoming can form. In other words, when "here" falls apart, we crave another "there" to focus on, which, when we find it and enter into it, becomes our new "here." This process happens both on a micro level—as we go from one thought-world to another within the mind—and on the macro level, as when we die in one plane of existence and search for another place, on this plane or another, in which to take birth.

The Buddha's analogy for what happens at death is a fire that latches on to the wind, which carries it a far distance. The fire stands for the being—a bundle of attachments (SN 23:2)—going on to a new birth; the wind stands for craving, to which the being clings for its sustenance. The place in the far distance to which the fire is carried stands for the next birth (SN 44:9).

This image gives an idea of how compulsive and undependable the process of rebirth can be. Wind has the potential to be extremely erratic and blind, and fire the potential to be destructive as it spreads. Yet our addiction to the process is strong. It's how we look for happiness even though, as the Buddha pointed out repeatedly, it's why we keep on creating suffering for ourselves over and over again (SN 7:12). If we want to put an end to

suffering, we have to put out the fire. This means leaving no location to which the fire could cling for sustenance.

Because we define ourselves—consciously or not—around particular locations, this is a tall order. The whole idea of existing without location sounds alien. We've spent our many lives so focused on locations, fascinated by all the possible "there's" we could go, that it's hard to imagine that a total lack of location could offer any prospect for happiness at all. Even the idioms of our language make this point: When we say that something is neither here nor there, we mean that it's inconsequential or irrelevant. When Gertrude Stein said of her hometown, Oakland, that there was no *there* there, she meant her remark as a putdown. For something to be worthy of our attention, we feel, it has to be definitely here or there or both. We'll require more than an act of the imagination to convince ourselves that a "neither-here-nor-there" could not only be an attractive idea, but actually the ultimate goal for the heart and mind.

This was the challenge the Buddha faced in his own practice, and—after finding the freedom that comes from being everywhere released—that he faced in teaching others to see that it was a worthwhile goal.

THE BUDDHA'S STRATEGIES

In meeting this challenge, he devised several strategies for bringing his listeners to a point where every alluring "here" or "there" was seen to have drawbacks, and that release from every here and there was the only attractive option remaining. In other words, he had to corner his listeners in such a way that total freedom was the only escape.

He accomplished this task through a wide variety of approaches, which fall into two overall strategies.

In the first strategy, the Buddha would get his listeners to see that there are levels of being much preferable to the human. Once they set their hearts firmly on going to one of those levels after death, they would be willing to admit the drawbacks of the human level, and to abandon any desire to return here. Then he would point out the drawbacks of even those higher levels of being. When his listeners were ready to see the drawbacks both of "here" and "there," he would point out the rewards of escaping from

both. If his listeners were strong in their sense of wanting no here nor there at all, they'd be willing to try the escape.

In the second strategy, the Buddha would have his listeners focus on the unreliability of the components of their experience in the here-and-now, such as the five aggregates or the six sense media. Once they had a strong sense of the drawbacks of the present moment, he would then point out that all possible future moments anywhere in the cosmos—however blatant or subtle, common or sublime, far or near the level of being—would be made up of the same components. When his listeners gained a strong sense of the limitations of any experience in any location, he would point out the escape from those limitations: disenchantment and dispassion for all the components of temporal or spatial existence. Here, too, if his listeners were able to see that escape as offering the only positive alternative, they would go for it.

The first strategy, the Buddha used most often with people who were still immersed in sensuality. The second, he used primarily with people who had already seen the drawbacks of sensuality, and had mastered the alternative pleasure of right concentration.

THE FIRST STRATEGY

We can learn a lot by looking at some examples of how the Buddha used these overall strategies and adapted them to the cravings of his specific listeners. What's noteworthy is that he used these two approaches both in situations where his listeners were examining their minds in peaceful, relatively normal circumstances, and in situations where his listeners were possibly dying, and where the question of location was acute: When you know you're about to die, you're keenly aware that you're being evicted from "here," so the mind is preoccupied with whatever "there" it can find in order to escape the pain that comes with the end of this particular becoming.

Still, you don't have to be facing imminent death for the Buddha's strategies for cornering your mind to give the desired results. One of the most famous examples of his first strategy—getting you focused on the

pleasures of heaven, and then helping you to see that drawbacks of aspiring to heaven—is a case in point.

The story concerns the Buddha's half-brother, Ven. Nanda. After ordaining, he finds that he doesn't enjoy the celibate life. He keeps thinking of the Sakyan beauty who, as he left home, glanced at him with her hair half-combed and said, "Hurry back, master." So he wants to disrobe.

When he informs the Buddha of his plans, the Buddha decides to take Nanda's mind off the Sakyan beauty. Holding him by the arm, he levitates up to the heaven of the Thirty-three. There Nanda sees 500 dove-footed nymphs—this apparently means that their feet were stained red with henna—waiting on Sakka, the ruler of the devas of the Thirty-three.

> The Blessed One said to Ven. Nanda, "Nanda, do you see these 500 dove-footed nymphs?"
>
> "Yes, lord."
>
> "What do you think, Nanda? Which is lovelier, better looking, more charming: the Sakyan girl, the envy of the countryside, or these 500 dove-footed nymphs?"
>
> "Lord, compared to these 500 dove-footed nymphs, the Sakyan girl, the envy of the countryside, is like a cauterized monkey with its ears & nose cut off. She doesn't count. She's not even a small fraction. There's no comparison. The 500 dove-footed nymphs are lovelier, better looking, more charming."
>
> "Then take joy, Nanda! Take joy! I am your guarantor for getting 500 dove-footed nymphs."
>
> "If the Blessed One is my guarantor for getting 500 dove-footed nymphs, I will enjoy leading the holy life under the Blessed One."

They then return to Earth. Nanda begins to practice with his mind set on the reward he'll get after death, but word gets out among the monks as to why he's practicing so seriously. So they start addressing him as they would a hired hand or a person who's been bought out: He wants to be paid with nymphs. You can imagine how Nanda, raised in the noble warrior caste, would find their comments extremely shameful and degrading—and this is apparently what the Buddha had in mind. So Nanda now starts meditating

in earnest—we can assume that this means developing right view, right concentration, and all the other factors of the path—and as a result, he gains full awakening. He then goes to the Buddha to release him from his promise of 500 nymphs, only to learn that at the moment when he, Nanda, awakened, the Buddha was automatically released from that promise (Ud 3:2).

Another example of this strategy of focusing a person's mind on the pleasures of heaven and then undercutting any desire to go there also concerns one of the Buddha's relatives, this time his cousin, Mahānāma. The Buddha has been spending the Rains retreat near Mahānāma's home, and now, at the end of the Rains, is getting ready to set off wandering. Mahānāma comes to him with a question: If, in the Buddha's absence, a discerning lay person is approaching death, how should that person be advised?

The way the Buddha addresses this question shows that "discerning lay person" in this instance means a stream-winner, someone who has had a first taste of the deathless. He tells Mahānāma to remind the person that he is endowed with the virtues of a stream-winner, which should allay his fears of going to a bad destination.

Then the Buddha recommends asking the person if he has any worries or concerns about his family. If he does, Mahānāma should remind him that he's now in a position where he can't do anything for his family, so he should set his mind on abandoning those concerns.

Once this has been accomplished, Mahānāma should ask the dying person if he has any concerns about leaving behind the sensual pleasures of the human world. If the dying person says Yes—after all, stream-winners have not fully mastered right concentration, and they haven't yet abandoned the fetter of sensual passion—Mahānāma should call his attention to the fact that the pleasures of one of the lower levels of the sensual heavens, the devas of the Four Great Kings, are more splendid and refined than human sensual pleasures. He should set his heart on those.

Once the dying person has managed that, Mahānāma is to get him to set his heart on ever more refined levels of the sensual heavens, and then on the non-sensual pleasures of the Brahmās. These pleasures are those of at least the first level of right concentration. Even though the dying person

may not have mastered right concentration, he would have had at least a taste of right concentration at his experience of stream-entry (SN 55:5). If the dying person can bring the pleasure of that concentration to mind, then Mahānāma is to remind him that even the Brahmās are subject to the sufferings entailed in self-identity. The dying person should set his heart on abandoning self-identity. If he can manage that, then his mind can become fully released (SN 55:54).

In both of these cases, the Buddha's strategy is first to get his listener to see the drawbacks of the pleasures of the human realm by focusing on the more refined pleasures of the heavenly realms. This helps to loosen the listener's attachment to "here." Then the Buddha gets him to see the drawbacks of even the heavenly realms. In Nanda's case, he does this indirectly, by allowing Nanda to see that if he focuses on heavenly pleasures, he'll be subject to ridicule, and that the desire for heavenly pleasures is, in and of itself, degrading. In the case of the dying layperson, the approach is more direct: Even the pleasures of right concentration as experienced by Brahmās are inherently subject to the pains and sufferings associated with maintaining a sense of self-identity. This helps to loosen the listener's attachment to "there." When the listener finds himself confined by the choice between here and there—in other words, he sees the need to choose between the two, in and of itself, as confining, and there's no better location to go to—then the mind is ready for the opening that leads beyond that choice, and so beyond locations of every sort.

THE SECOND STRATEGY

As for the Buddha's second strategy—pointing out the drawbacks of the components making up present-moment experience and then teaching that all possible experience, on any level of the cosmos, would be composed of the same components—here again there are cases where he uses this strategy with people in more normal circumstances, and cases where he uses it with people facing imminent death.

An example of the first case is the Buddha's second discourse (SN 22:59). Here he's speaking to the five brethren, all of whom have attained stream-entry, the first level of awakening. In his first discourse (SN 56:11),

the Buddha has already taught them that clinging to the five aggregates of form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness constitutes suffering. In their experience of stream-entry—either on hearing the first discourse or soon after—they have already had a taste of what it's like to abandon clinging for the aggregates momentarily. Now he's going to show them how to abandon that clinging for good.

The process involves three mains steps. The first step is a questionnaire. The Buddha asks the brethren to examine each of the aggregates one by one to see if that aggregate is constant or inconstant. The answer: inconstant. If something is inconstant, is it easeful or stressful? Stressful. If something is inconstant and stressful, is it fitting to regard it as, "This is mine. This is my self. This is what I am"? No.

This questionnaire leads to a clear value judgment: that the component factors that make up "here" are not worthy of clinging or laying claim to.

The second step is to extrapolate from here: The Buddha notes that all instances of the aggregates, "past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near" are also to be regarded with right discernment as: "This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am." In other words, any possible "there" is also not worth clinging to.

In the third step, the Buddha points out the rewards of judging any possible here or there as unworthy of attachment: You become disenchanted with all possible aggregates. Then, from disenchantment, comes dispassion; from dispassion, release. When the mind is released, there comes the knowledge: "released." You discern that "Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world."

While following the Buddha every step along the way through this three-step process, the minds of all five of the brethren are totally released.

A second case of this second strategy concerns the monk, Ven. Girimānanda. Ven. Ānanda comes to the Buddha to tell him that Girimānanda is severely ill, and that it would be good if the Buddha would visit him, out of sympathy. Instead of accepting the invitation, the Buddha tells Ānanda to go himself and to teach ten perceptions to Girimānanda; when he hears these perceptions, his illness might subside. The Buddha then lists the ten perceptions.

What's interesting here is that even though the perceptions are ostensively meant to put an end to Girimānanda's illness—which, when Ānanda teaches them to Girimānanda, they actually do—the content of the ten perceptions seems tailored to the needs of a person on the verge of death.

The ten perceptions are these:

1) The perception of inconstancy: perceiving the five aggregates as inconstant.

2) The perception of not-self: perceiving the six senses along with their objects as not-self.

3) The perception of unattractiveness: analyzing the body into its many unclean parts.

4) The perception of drawbacks: listing many of the diseases to which the body is prey.

5) The perception of abandoning: not allowing unskillful mind states—such as sensuality, ill will, and harmfulness—to remain in the mind.

6) The perception of dispassion: perceiving the dispassion leading to unbinding as something exquisite.

7) The perception of cessation: perceiving the cessation leading to unbinding as something exquisite.

8) The perception of distaste for any world: abandoning any attachments for or obsessions with any world at all.

9) The perception of the undesirability of all fabrications: developing a sense of horror and disgust toward all fabrications.

10) Mindfulness of in-and-out breathing: training in the Buddha's standard sixteen-step formula for practicing breath meditation.

These perceptions fall into four classes. Perceptions in the first class, 5 and 10, concern practices for getting the mind beyond thoughts of sensuality and into right concentration. Perceptions in the second class, 1 and 2, concern the drawbacks of the fabricated components that go into making up the experience of "here." Perceptions in the third class, 8 and 9, concern the drawbacks of any possible world of rebirth "there," inasmuch as all worlds are composed of fabrications. Perceptions in the fourth class, 6

and 7, focus on dispassion and cessation as an excellent alternative to both here and there.

Perceptions 3 and 4, focused on the drawbacks of having a body, play multiple roles. As adjuncts to 5 and 10, they help get the mind into concentration. As adjuncts to 1 and 2, they focus the mind on the drawbacks of "here." Given that desire for the body can lead to rebirth, they also can be used to focus on the drawbacks of "there."

So even though the perceptions are not listed in the same three-step order as the Buddha's teaching to the five brethren, they contain all the elements of his second major approach for getting his listeners to develop dispassion for here and there, and to see the alternative to here and there as a positive goal. Rather than pinning his hopes on heavenly pleasures, Girimānanda is to get his mind in a state of concentration, and from there he can see—as the Buddha states in AN 9:36—that even concentration is composed of the aggregates. When he can see the drawbacks of the aggregates even in blissful states of concentration, he's ready for the remaining perceptions and the remaining steps in the Buddha's strategy.

CORNERED IN SPACE & TIME

The important point in all these examples is that the Buddha brings his listeners to a mind state in which they are essentially cornered, where they see that the best possible options on which they could set their hearts—either here at this point in space and time, or somewhere else in space and time—all have their drawbacks. If they could imagine another spot in space and time that might hold promise for a satisfying happiness, they'd still be able to find a location for their cravings, and not be able to let go of them. But if they sense themselves genuinely confined by this range of choices, seeing that no possible location holds any allure, only then will they willingly open their hearts to the possibility of a choice that's neither here nor there. That's how they become totally unbound: by neither staying here nor going someplace else. Because the experience of space and time is defined by choices of "here" or "there," staying or going, the alternative to these choices goes beyond space and time. That's the unconditioned.

The Buddha illustrates this point with a simile. When a deva asks him how he crossed over the flood, and he answers, "I crossed over the flood without pushing forward, without staying in place" (SN 1:1). His statement is sometimes interpreted as meaning that he didn't exert himself too much or too little, but that's not what he's saying. He defied the coordinates of space and time by neither staying here nor going anywhere else there. As he further explains to the deva, he was able to do that because he saw the drawbacks of staying here or going there: "When I pushed forward, I was whirled about. When I stayed in place, I sank. And so I crossed over the flood without pushing forward, without staying in place."

It was only because he was fully sensitive to the drawbacks of here and there, and was willing to open his heart and mind to the advantages of neither here nor there, that he was able to attain total release.

Our problem is that we're still fascinated by the possibilities offered by all the here's and there's of the world. We're proud of our ability to fashion pleasure out of even the most unlikely raw materials we can find in space and time. Only when we allow ourselves to fully admit that the Buddha was right—that the possibilities of all worlds are actually confining (SN 2:7)—will we be able to experience something better than what any here-and-now or there-and-then have to offer.

Glossary

Abhidhamma: (1) In the discourses of the Pali Canon, this term simply means "higher Dhamma," and a systematic attempt to define the Buddha's teachings and understand their interrelationships. (2) A later collection of treatises collating lists of categories drawn from the teachings in the discourses, added to the Canon several centuries after the Buddha's life.

Ajaan (Thai): Teacher; mentor. Pāli form: *Ācariya*.

Arahant: A "worthy one" or "pure one;" a person whose mind is free of defilement and thus is not destined for further rebirth. A title for the Buddha and the highest level of his noble disciples. Sanskrit form: *Arhat.*

Bhava: Becoming—an identity in a particular world of experience. These identities and worlds can exist either on a micro scale, in the mind, or on a macro scale, in the world outside, and can occur on any one of three levels: the level of sensuality, the level of form, or the level of formlessness.

Brahmā: A deva inhabiting the realms of form or formlessness.

Brahma-vihāra: Sublime attitude of unlimited goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, or equanimity.

Brahman: A member of the priestly caste, which claimed to be the highest caste in India, based on birth. In a specifically Buddhist usage, "brahman" can also mean an arahant, conveying the point that excellence is based not on birth or race, but on the qualities attained in the mind.

Deva: Literally, "shining one." An inhabitant of the terrestrial and celestial realms higher than the human.

Dhamma: (1) Event; action; (2) a phenomenon in and of itself; (3) mental quality; (4) doctrine, teaching; (5) nibbāna (although there are passages describing nibbāna as the abandoning of all dhammas). When capitalized in this book, Dhamma means teaching. Sanskrit form: *Dharma.*

Jhāna: Mental absorption. A state of strong concentration, devoid of sensuality or unskillful thoughts, focused on a single physical sensation or mental notion which is then expanded to fill the whole range of one's awareness. Jhāna is synonymous with right concentration, the eighth factor in the noble eightfold path. Sanskrit form: *Dhyāna.*

Kamma: Intentional act. Sanskrit form: *Karma.*

Nibbāna: 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. "Total nibbāna" in some contexts denotes the experience of Awakening; in others, the final passing away of an arahant. Sanskrit form: *Nirvāṇa.*

Pāli: The language of the oldest extant complete Canon of the Buddha's teachings.

Pārājika: Defeat. The heaviest type of offense for a monk or nun, automatically removing him or her from the Saṅgha for life.

Pāṭimokkha: The basic code of rules for monks and nuns. The monks' code contains 227 rules; the nuns', 311. Each code contains 75 sekhiya rules concerned with the etiquette around such things as teaching the Dhamma and eating.

Sakya: The name of the Buddha's extended family.

Saṁsāra: Transmigration; the process of wandering through repeated states of becoming, entailing repeated birth and death.

Saṅgha: On the conventional *(sammati)* level, this term denotes the communities of Buddhist monks and nuns. On the noble or ideal *(ariya)* level, it denotes those followers of the Buddha, lay or ordained, who have attained at least stream-entry.

Saṅkhāra: Fabrication. The process by which the mind constructs its experiences, and the constructed experiences that result.

Satipaṭṭhāna: Establishing of mindfulness; foundation of mindfulness. The meditative practice of focusing on a particular frame of reference—the body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, mind-states in an of themselves, or mental qualities in an of themselves—ardent, alert, and mindfulness, putting aside greed and distress in reference to the world. This practice then forms the basis for *jhāna.*

Sutta: Discourse. Sanskrit form: *Sūtra.*

Tathāgata: Literally, "one who has become authentic *(tatha-āgata),"* or "one who is really gone *(tatha-gata),"* an epithet used in ancient India for a person who has attained the highest religious goal. In the Pali Canon, this usually denotes the Buddha, although occasionally it also denotes any of his arahant disciples.

Theravāda: The Teachings of the Elders. The branch of Buddhism that bases its teachings on the Pali Canon, the earliest extant record of the Buddha's teachings.

Uposatha: Observance day, coinciding with the full moon, new moon, and half moons. Lay Buddhists often observe the eight precepts on this day. "Uposatha" also refers to the ceremony in which monks meet to listen to the recitation of the Pāṭimokkha on the full moon and new moon uposathas.

Vinaya: The monastic discipline, whose rules and traditions comprise six volumes in printed text.

Abbreviations

AN	*Aṅguttara Nikāya*
Cv	*Cullavagga*
Dhp	*Dhammapada*
DN	*Dīgha Nikāya*
Iti	*Itivuttaka*
MN	*Majjhima Nikāya*
Mv	*Mahāvagga*
Paṭis	*Paṭisambhida-magga*
SN	*Saṁyutta Nikāya*
Sn	*Sutta Nipāta*
Thig	*Therīgāthā*
Ud	*Udāna*
Vism	*Visuddhimagga*

References to DN, Iti, and MN are to discourse (sutta); references to Dhp, to verse. References to Cv, Mv, Paṭis, and Vism are to chapter, section, and sub-section. References to other texts are to section (nipāta, saṁyutta, or vagga) and discourse.