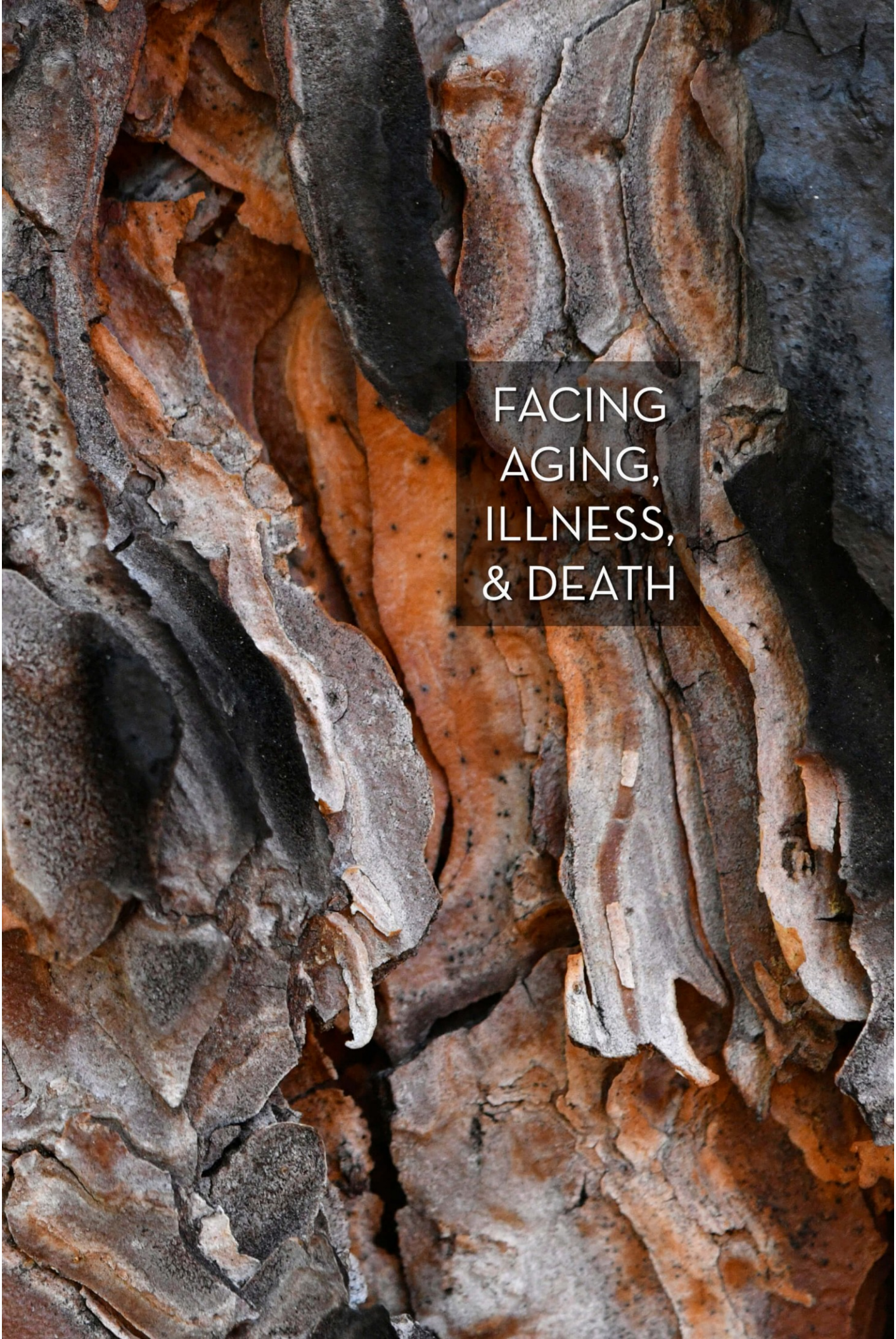
FACING
AGING,
ILLNESS,
& DEATH

Facing Aging, Illness, & Death

THE CENTRAL TEACHING
OF THE BUDDHA

Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu
(Geoffrey DeGraff)

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Preface

In April of last year, members of Le Refuge, a Buddhist group located near Marseilles, invited me to lead a nine-day retreat on the topic of how not to suffer from aging, illness, and death. The talks I gave at the retreat were based on my book on this topic, *Undaunted*, but because they incorporated new material, and because the questions asked by the retreatants dealt with topics not covered in that book, I thought it would be useful to publish the transcripts of the retreat as an adjunct to what was already covered in the book.

The talks of the retreat were presented in two series: a series of evening talks on the five faculties, and a series of morning talks on practical issues arising in meditation, treating them in light of the theme of the retreat. Every afternoon, there was a period for questions and answers concerning issues arising from the talks and from the retreatants' experiences in meditation.

The present book is based on both series of talks along with some of the questions and answers taken from the Q&A periods, presented chronologically. In a few cases, questions have been taken out of order and placed immediately after the talks to which they seem most clearly related. The talks, questions, and answers have been edited and expanded so as to make their coverage of the main topics of the retreat more complete than I was able to manage on the spot.

The talks draw on suttas, or discourses, from the Pāli Canon and on the writings and talks of the ajaans, or teachers, of the Thai forest tradition, in which I was trained. For people unfamiliar with the Canon, I have added passages from the discourses at the back of the book to flesh out some of the points made in the talks. These are followed by a glossary of Pāli terms.

For people unfamiliar with the Thai forest tradition, you should know that it is a meditation tradition founded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth

century by Ajaan Sao Kantasīlo and Ajaan Mun Bhūridatto. The ajaans mentioned in the talks trained under Ajaan Mun. Of these, Ajaan Fuang Jotiko and Ajaan Suwat Suvaco were my teachers. Ajaan Fuang, although he spent some time training directly under Ajaan Mun, spent more time training under one of Ajaan Mun's students, Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo.

Many people have helped with the preparation of this book. In particular, I would like to thank the people of Le Refuge who made the retreat possible; my interpreter, Khamaṇo Bhikkhu (Than Lionel); and Philippe and Watthani Cortey-Dumont, who hosted my entire stay in France. Here at Metta, the monks at the monastery helped in preparing the manuscript, as did Addie Onsanit. Any mistakes in the book, of course, are my own responsibility.

Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu
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Metta Forest Monastery
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Abbreviations

AN	*Aṅguttara Nikāya*
Dhp	*Dhammapada*
DN	*Dīgha Nikāya*
MN	*Majjhima Nikāya*
Mv	*Mahāvagga*
SN	*Saṁyutta Nikāya*
Sn	*Sutta Nipāta*
Thag	*Theragāthā*
Thig	*Therīgāthā*
Ud	*Udāna*

References to DN and MN are to discourse *(sutta)*. Those to Dhp are to verse. References to other texts are to section *(saṁyutta*, *nipāta*, or *vagga)* and discourse in the suttas; and section and sub-sections in the Vinaya text, Mv. Numbering for AN and SN follows the Thai Edition of the Pāli Canon. All translations from these texts are by the author and are based on the Royal Thai Edition of the Pāli Canon (Bangkok: Mahāmakut Rājavidyālaya, 1982).

April 25, 2023, 1900

Introduction

Good evening, everyone. Welcome to our retreat. It's always a pleasure to be here meditating with you, and I hope the retreat is helpful for you all.

I recommend that you meditate while we talk.

The topic of our retreat this year is aging, illness, and death. These themes are central to the Buddha's Dhamma, his teaching, which is primarily aimed at answering the question of how not to suffer from aging, illness, and death. This issue, of course, is of central concern for all of us. The Buddha answers this question by offering practical advice on two levels. The first level is how to experience aging, illness, and death without suffering from them. The second level is how to find a dimension where aging, illness, and death are never again experienced. As we'll see, these two answers are closely related.

Some people, especially in the West, will be surprised to hear that these issues are central to the Dhamma. After all, questions of aging, illness, and death deal with what is, for most of us, something that will happen in the future, whereas modern versions of Buddhism focus almost exclusive attention on the present moment. In fact, modern Buddhism often focuses on the present moment as a way of avoiding the issues of aging, illness, and death. "Don't think about things in the future," we're told. "Try to find happiness by appreciating the present moment as an end in itself."

The Buddha's approach, though, is to focus on the present moment as a means to a further end, because the present moment is where skills can be developed that will help you to handle the pains and suffering of aging, illness, and death when they inevitably come. This approach is based on the principle of heedfulness: There are things you can do to prepare, so you have to do the work needed to master these skills *now* because you don't know when aging, illness, and death will come. Death, for instance, could occur without warning at any time.

An important lesson of this retreat will be that these skills are not just a matter of accepting the fact of aging, illness, and death. We need to proactively develop specific skills so that, to repeat, you'll know how to experience aging, illness, and death without suffering from them, and ideally, so that you can know how to find the dimension where aging, illness, and death will never be experienced again.

When we look at the story of the young prince who went forth and became the Buddha, we realize that aging, illness, and death were his primary motivation for going forth. He had an audacious desire, not just to resign himself to facts of aging, illness, and death, but to be free from aging, illness, and death altogether. He didn't sit under the Bodhi tree just to rest in the present moment. On the night of his awakening, questions of aging, illness, and death, and particularly death, were foremost in his mind. They were questions for which he was trying to find the answers.

We can see this in the three knowledges he gained that led to his awakening. The first knowledge was knowledge of his previous lifetimes. The lesson that he learned from that knowledge was that death is followed by birth. In the second knowledge, he realized that rebirth is directed by your kamma, which are your intentional actions, which in turn are shaped by your views and the people whose teachings you respect.

He also learned that the connection between kamma and rebirth is not simple. The results of the actions you've done during this lifetime can be counteracted by previous actions, by subsequent actions, or—most importantly—by the views and states of mind you have at death. The causal principle that the Buddha learned from seeing this was that present-moment kamma is necessary to shape how your past-moment kamma is experienced in the present moment. He also saw that the round of rebirth didn't serve any overarching purpose or lead to any permanent destination. The only prospect for an undying happiness would be to get out of the round entirely.

So he applied these lessons to his state of mind, looking at his intentions and views in the present moment to see if there were views that could lead to the way out. The four noble truths were those views. This was the third knowledge he gained on that night: By completing the duties appropriate to

each of the four noble truths, he gained knowledge of unbinding, which is the deathless.

Now, in finding an escape from death, he confirmed what he had learned about how death happens, and in particular about how cause and effect operate in human action in general, and in the actions that lead to suffering or away from it in particular.

The principles of causality underlying the four noble truths are two. We'll be discussing them in detail in the course of the retreat, so here I'll just set them out briefly. The first principle is called *this/that conditionality*. The second is *dependent co-arising*. These principles underlie the Buddha's explanations for how aging, illness, and death happen, how they can be approached so as not to suffer from them, and how they can be brought to an end.

The basic statement of this/that conditionality is this:

1) "When this is, that is.
2) "From the arising of this comes the arising of that.
3) "When this isn't, that isn't.
4) "From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that."

Essentially, what you have here are two causal principles interacting. One is what we call *synchronic causality*, statements one and three, which describe causes and effects arising and passing away at the same time: When the cause arises, the effect immediately arises. When the cause disappears, the effect immediately disappears. For example, when you stick your finger in the fire, you don't need to wait until the next lifetime before it hurts. It hurts immediately.

The second principle is *diachronic causality*, statements two and four, describing causality over time. The cause happens at one time, and the result can happen later, sometimes much later. But the fact that the first cause eventually ends means that the result will eventually end as well. For example, when you plant a redwood seed, you won't immediately get a full-grown redwood tree. That will have to take time. But just as the action of planting the seed ends, the redwood tree will eventually have to die.

Now, the Buddha is basically saying that what we experience in the present moment is the combination of these two principles acting together. This means that some of our experiences of pleasure and pain in the present moment come from causes arising in the present moment itself, and others come from things we did in the past. In fact, our present-moment intentions take the raw material coming from past actions and shape it into our actual experience of the present moment.

This understanding of causality underlies the focus of Buddhist practice related to aging, illness, and death. You can do things ahead of time to prepare for death that will provide good opportunities when aging, illness, and death come. But you can also develop skills that you will need to use when faced with aging, illness, and death in the present moment. This is why we practice generosity and virtue to provide good opportunities when aging, illness, and death come. This is also why we develop good qualities of mind through meditation—such as mindfulness, alertness, ardency, and discernment—to handle whatever conditions may arise at the time of aging, illness, and death.

When we follow these two types of practice together, then at death we're likely to have better things coming in from the past, and also we'll have the skills to deal with whatever occurs in the mind at that moment. This is one of the reasons why the theme of this retreat is that you can do something about aging, illness, and death. You don't simply have to accept what's happening. You can actually act proactively to shape your experience for the better.

That's the first basic principle: this/that conditionality.

The second basic principle is dependent co-arising. Several years ago, Bernard asked if I would do a retreat on dependent co-arising, and I told him we would need an entire month. However, there are a couple of basic facts about dependent co-arising that are useful for us to know for the topic of this retreat, and we can cover them briefly.

The first fact is that the causes of suffering and of aging, illness, and death come from within the mind. In fact, almost half the factors in dependent co-arising come prior to sensory contact. In other words, even before you see or hear or touch something, factors in your mind have already primed you to suffer from that contact or not.

The second fact that's important to know is that the immediate cause of suffering is craving. From craving comes clinging, which is the actual suffering. From clinging you go to becoming, which means taking on an identity in a world of experience. Now, the process of becoming is what makes it possible to take birth. This happens both inside the mind and in the outside world.

For example, right now, suppose that, as you're sitting here, the thought comes into your mind that you'd like some ice cream. Then you think of the world related to your desire for ice cream: the things that either would help you with that desire or would get in the way. The things that would help you are the fact that you have a car parked out in the parking lot and you have money in your pocket. Things that get in the way include the two monks talking to you right now, and it would be impolite to leave the room while they're talking. That's the world of a becoming that could happen in your mind right now.

As for your identity in that world, if you decide that, Yes, you want some ice cream, you play the role of the person who is capable of getting the ice cream and the role of the person who will enjoy the ice cream. On top of that, there's also the "you" who is commenting on whether "you" in these two roles is acting rightly or not: This is "you" as the commentator.

Now on the larger level, if you're dying and you want to continue existing, a mental image will come to your mind showing you another world in which you could be reborn. If you go into that world, you die from this lifetime and you would be reborn as a being in another lifetime. Images of this sort could be telling you the truth, or they could be false, but even when they're true, that doesn't guarantee that the world they lead you to would be as good as it seems in the image. For instance, suppose that it's showing you a beautiful world, but it doesn't tell you that when you enter into this world, there will be more aging, illness, and death again. Yet even if it does tell you that, it's often the case that when you die from this body, you're desperate, thinking, "I'll take what I can get." That's a tendency over which you want to get some control.

This is an important reason for why, when we meditate, we observe the mind in the present moment and try to gain some control over it, because

you're seeing the processes of becoming happening again and again right here and now in your mind. In particular, you want to gain some control over the cravings that would otherwise lead you to take on bad states of becoming.

Now, the craving that causes suffering is not just a desire for things to be different from what they are. Actually there are three specific types of craving that lead to clinging and suffering: craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, and craving for non-becoming. We'll discuss these later in the retreat. As we'll also see, to escape from becoming requires that we understand the steps leading up to craving and becoming, and then to develop dispassion for those steps.

There was one time when Ven. Sāriputta was teaching a group of monks who were going to a foreign country. He said to them: "The people there are intelligent. Suppose they ask you, 'What does your teacher teach?' What will you tell them?" The monks said that they would like to hear Sāriputta's answer, and what he said was this: "Our teacher teaches the ending of desire and passion." That's an interesting way of boiling the Buddha's teachings down to their basic message.

A lot of people don't like to hear this message. Dispassion, the ending of passion, strikes us as a dead, dull mind state. The best way to understand dispassion, however, is to see that when you feel dispassion for something, you've basically outgrown it. It's like outgrowing tic-tac-toe or chess. When you're a certain age, tic-tac-toe is fascinating, but then there comes a time where you've figured out all the possible moves, so it no longer holds any interest for you. As for chess, you may never figure out all the possible games, but you see that the rules are so artificial that whatever skill you develop in the game won't be worth the time invested. In either case, you develop dispassion for the game. You've outgrown it.

This is why we meditate: We're basically outgrowing our infatuation with the steps that lead to craving, and developing dispassion for them. When we develop dispassion for them, craving goes away without our having to attack it directly.

In dependent co-arising, there are a lot of steps before craving, prior even to sensory contact, such as ignorance, fabrication, and name and form. These

are the mental events that can prime you to suffer even before sights, sounds, etc., have made contact at the senses. We won't be going through all of these different factors on this retreat. We'll focus on two.

The first is ignorance of the four noble truths and the skills related to them. The second factor we'll be concentrating on will be fabrications, or *saṅkhāra*, the mental processes that are the sources of our bodily, verbal, and mental actions.

The solution to the problem of suffering is to bring knowledge, based on the four noble truths, to the processes of fabrication. When you do that, you develop dispassion for them, and then the causal links that will lead up to craving and suffering will fall away. Now, it turns out that when the Buddha taught breath meditation, he taught it in such a way as to focus appropriate attention on just those factors of fabrication, seeing them in the light of the four noble truths. So an important part of the retreat will be to get some practice in breath meditation in line with the way the Buddha taught it.

The organization of the retreat is this: In the evening, we'll have talks on aging, illness, and death in the light of the insights the Buddha gained on the night of his awakening. The morning talks will be related to issues of breath meditation. In the afternoon, we'll have time to answer questions related to both issues. We'll place a bowl up here in which you can put your questions.

(Guided meditation, no questions)

One question that often comes up when we're doing breath meditation like this is, "Are we using our imagination too much by imagining these breath energies?" Actually, the breath energies are already there, but it's only when you allow yourself to imagine them that you can perceive them. It's like imagining that the world is round. When you first heard that as a child, you didn't have any evidence. You had to imagine that it was round. But as you get older, you gain experience to prove that it's true. For instance, when flying from Los Angeles to Paris, the fastest route is over northern Canada. If the world were flat, you wouldn't save time by flying that route.

April 18, 2023, 0900

Mindfulness of Breathing: Body

This morning, I'd like to begin talking about how we can use the Buddha's teachings on breath meditation to help prepare ourselves for aging, illness, and death.

Given how mindfulness of breathing can have a positive impact on your health, it's obvious that breath meditation can be helpful as you age and grow ill. But given that the breath stops at death, it may seem odd that the breath could help prepare you for the process of dying. But it's important to note that many of the factors that will be playing a role in the mind as you approach death are the same factors that are listed in dependent co-arising prior to sensory input. Two in particular stand out: *fabrication* (intention) and *attention* (under the factor of name and form). For a meditation method to give rise to discernment and insight, it has to direct attention to precisely these factors. Otherwise they stay in the dark, underground. And you don't want any important forces in the mind to be in the dark as you're about to die. You want to be on familiar terms with them.

Now, when we look at the Buddha's instructions on breath meditation, we find that the steps he lays out do precisely that: They focus attention on the processes of fabrication (intention) and attention so that you can know them well in real time.

There are sixteen steps in all, divided into four sets of four, called tetrads. Each tetrad deals with one of the frames of reference for the establishing of mindfulness: body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities. These frames of reference, in turn, are the themes for getting the mind into concentration.

The Buddha put four steps into each tetrad apparently for ease of memorization, because when we see how he elaborates on these steps in other parts of the Canon, some of the tetrads contain a number of implied steps. So to understand them, it's good to know what those implied steps are.

This morning we won't have time to cover all four tetrads, so I'll focus the discussion on the first one, dealing with the body. We can save the other tetrads for the mornings to come.

The main thing I want you to notice this morning is that even though the first tetrad focuses on the body, it does so in a way that underlines the role that the mental event plays in shaping your experience of the body. This is in line with the first verse of the Dhammapada: *Phenomena are preceded by the heart and mind.* The first tetrad focuses on how this principle applies to your experience of the breath.

Part of this focus lies in the way the Buddha uses the word *fabrication* in the fourth step of this tetrad. The basic dynamic—which he follows in other tetrads as well—is that he first tries to sensitize you to the fact that you fabricate this aspect of your awareness through your intentions. Then he has you use that sensitivity first to energize yourself, and then to calm yourself. In this way, he's having you develop tranquility and insight together. As he says elsewhere, insight is developed by understanding fabrications. Tranquility comes from calming the mind down and allowing it to enjoy the resulting stillness. So when you use the processes of fabrication to calm the mind down, you're gaining both insight and tranquility together.

The emphasis on fabrication means that you're not just learning about the breath here. You're also learning about the mind. This is why breath meditation is such a good preparation for death. Given that we're using the breath to become more sensitive to the mind's activity of fabrication, the breath is actually leading us *to* the mind in a way that helps us master the processes of fabrication, knowledge that will be especially useful both in daily life and as we encounter death.

One more point before looking at the first tetrad: It's not the case that the four tetrads are to be followed in numerical order. Actually, each tetrad deals with an aspect of experience that's constantly present throughout the meditation. When you're with the breath, feelings are right there, your mind state is right there, mental qualities are right there. This means that the four tetrads have to be practiced together. As you focus on the breath to get the mind to calm down but encounter problems, sometimes the problem is

breath, sometimes feelings, sometimes the state of mind and the mental qualities you're bringing to the breath. So your focus will have to shift among these tetrads to deal with the problem at hand. In all cases, though, you stay anchored in the breath to ensure that you're staying with what's actually going on in the present moment.

The four steps in the first tetrad are: discerning when the breath is long; discerning when the breath is short; training yourself to breathe in and out sensitive to the whole body; and then training yourself to breathe in and out calming what the Buddha calls bodily fabrication, which is a technical term for the in-and-out breath. All these steps fall under the body in and of itself as a frame of reference.

Let's look at these steps in detail.

The first two steps consist of simply discerning distinctions between breaths: How do you experience the difference between long breathing and short breathing? Which feels better? Ajaan Lee would add a few more variables here. He would note that there are a lot of other ways you can adjust the breath, too: in long, out short; in short, out long. You can do heavy breathing, light breathing; fast, slow; shallow, deep.

The purpose of discerning distinctions in the breathing is to see what really feels good right now, because ultimately—as we'll see tomorrow in the section on feeling—you try to arrive at a state where you're sensitive to rapture, sensitive to pleasure. These states of rapture and pleasure don't just happen on their own. These feelings are called "pleasure not-of-the-flesh," the pleasure associated with strong concentration, and that pleasure doesn't happen without your intending it to happen.

How is that going to happen? Through the way you intend to breathe. So you want to get sensitive to variations in the breath. What kind of breathing feels good right now and what way of breathing would induce, say, a state of rapture?

That requires the next step, which is to train yourself to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. Ajaan Lee notes that as you become sensitive to the whole body, you will sense subtle energies flowing through the body in sync with the breath. This perception is

useful, because in other suttas where the Buddha's talking about concentration, he says that you then want to take whatever sense of feeling of pleasure or rapture you've developed and let it permeate the entire body, suffuse the entire body. Having a sense of the breath flowing throughout the body makes it easier for those feelings to flow without interruption as well.

Now, there's an implied step that follows here, which is that when you become aware of the whole body, you try to energize the body as you breathe in and breathe out. That's because the next step is to calm bodily fabrication. As the Buddha says elsewhere, in his explanation of the factors for awakening, if you try to calm things down before they're energized, you go to sleep, which is not what you want. So you've got to energize things first.

This is why Ajaan Lee, when he gives breath meditation instructions, says to start out with long breathing, deep breathing, and then let the breath adjust to what seems to be just right. Otherwise, you're going to put yourself to sleep. The important point here is that you don't just stay with whatever way the body is breathing on its own. You're going to take advantage of the fact that you can adjust the breath to create feelings of rapture and pleasure.

In the fourth step of this tetrad, you train yourself to calm bodily fabrication. This doesn't mean that you try to suppress the breath. It's simply that as the mind grows calmer, the breath naturally grows more gentle on its own. This is where you can see how the state of the mind has an influence on the breath. You can actually reach the point where the in-and-out breathing stops—again, not because you're holding it or suppressing it, but simply that you feel no need to breathe: The breath energy in the body is sufficient. In fact, there's one sutta where the Buddha says that's precisely where bodily fabrication has been calmed: when you're in the fourth jhāna, where the sense of the in-and-out breathing has stopped. The oxygen-use in the body is very low at that point.

I've heard different explanations as to whether there's oxygen exchange going on through the skin. Some people say Yes; other people say No. What's important for you as a meditator, though, is that the sense that the energy in the body is sufficient. You don't feel the need to breathe, because you feel breath energy already saturating the body. All the breath channels are so well

connected that if there's a lack of breath energy in one part, the excess energy in another part will flow right there, so everything is kept in balance.

The question sometimes is asked, why does the Buddha use a technical term, *bodily fabrication*, when he's simply talking about the in-and-out breath? The answer, as I've already indicated, is that he's pointing to the role that your intentions play in shaping the way you breathe. The breath is a rare bodily function that can be both automatic and intentionally shaped. The Buddha is emphasizing this so as to turn your attention inside, toward the mind, and the mental processes that will play a role in calming the breath: choosing what to pay attention to, which intentions to follow, which intentions to drop.

That's the first tetrad. We'll look in more detail at feelings tomorrow.

We'll now begin our period of walking meditation. We suggest that you try to find a path that's no less than 30 steps long. There are two ways you can do meditation while you walk. One is to focus on the breath. In other words, you try to take the same meditation topic you've been focusing on as you sit and then carry it into the next step, which is to stay focused there even while you move the body. In America, we would say that you learn how to meditate while you walk and chew gum at the same time.

The other way is to focus on the movement of your feet. You can think of a meditation word as your feet go left, right, left, right. You can use the words "left, right" or "Bud-dho, Bud-dho." Try to walk at a normal pace, because the purpose of walking meditation is to learn how to carry your concentration into the movement and activities of daily life.

If you have a path where you're walking back and forth, when you reach the end of the path, stop for a moment, make sure that your mindfulness is established, then turn and head in the other direction. Make up your mind ahead of time that you will always turn in the same direction, clockwise or counterclockwise. Do your best to maintain your mindfulness all the way to the other end of the path.

The image they give in the Canon is of a man with a bowl on top of his head, filled to the brim with oil. On one side of him, there's a beauty queen singing and dancing. On the other side, there's a crowd of people excited about the beauty queen singing and dancing. He has to walk between the two.

Behind him is a man with a raised sword. If he drops one drop of oil, the man with the sword will cut off his head. We'll meet back here at 10:45. I hope you all will still have your heads on.

April 18, 2023, 1530

Q & A

Q: I can either breathe automatically without being aware of my breath or when I observe my breath, I feel I am controlling it. Only once I had the experience of observing my breath without controlling it. It was a deep spiritual experience, but it only lasted ten seconds. How am I supposed to interpret this experience? Why isn't it happening again? What can I do to have this experience every time that I meditate?

A: I'd like to have that every time I meditate. We are always controlling the breath to some extent or another, except when the mind is in very deep concentration. The way to duplicate the experience of sensing the breath without controlling it is first to learn how to control it skillfully—in other words, to maintain the breath at a comfortable rhythm, with the sense of ease spreading throughout the body. There will come a point where the breath is comfortable enough that the mind puts aside its desire to control, and you can simply be one with the breath.

An image I use is that it's like focusing a camera lens. Normally the point of focus is outside of the lens. This is how we normally relate to the breath. The mind is at one point, the breath at another point. Now, if you can imagine the focal point being *inside* the lens, that's the stage where the breath is not under your control. In other words, you can be aware of the breath without controlling it.

Now, in terms of the Buddhist map of mental states that you can get into when you meditate, this would be the same as the second jhāna. The way to get to the second jhāna first is to get really good at the first jhāna. Have your mind centered on one spot and then fill your body with your awareness. Then allow the breath to be as comfortable as possible, and when it's comfortable, allow that sense of comfort to spread through the body, too, dissolving away any patterns of tension you may feel in the body.

Q: What to do to cure negative emotions that come from an avid desire that can't be realized? Is it necessary to separate oneself from the source of the desire or should one confront it to observe what will happen?

A: First, what do you understand to be the source of the desire? Remember, the source of the desire is not, say, the person outside or the thing outside. The source of the desire is actually inside your own mind.

Ajaan Fuang once made the comment that the things that we desire most in life—especially in terms of the pleasures of the senses—are things we used to have in a previous lifetime. Then he said to think about that for a few minutes: Even if you get what you desire again, you're going to lose it again and miss it again, so the question is: How many times do you want to keep on losing it?

In other words, the desire comes from a sense of lack. When you realize that you've had this object many times before, but then you've lost it again, tell yourself you don't really lack that thing. You've had it enough already. You can be perfectly happy without it. When you've decided that you've had enough, that will end the desire and the suffering that goes along with it.

Q: Yesterday you said that at the moment of death, images of intense pleasure could arise. That is a possibility, yes? There might be a temptation to go to a marvelous world that awaits us, but there might also be the choice not to come back, to cut this chain of lives. Is this what you actually said? At every moment of death, would we have this choice with a mind that is acutely desiring to cut the chain of saṁsāra?

A: Many things can possibly arise at the time of death. There can be some visions of intense pleasure, but also some visions of possible pain and suffering. We will have the choice at that moment—if we have our wits about us, we'll be able choose where we want to go. The problem, though, is that you may see a world of suffering awaiting you, and you think back on the bad things you've done in the past, you think that you deserve to suffer, and you'll actually feel compelled to go to that world of suffering.

This is what happens to most people when they die: Different visions will appear to them, based on their past kamma, and they will go to one or feel compelled to go to another because of their memories. We'll get into this topic in a couple of days. You would think that people would automatically go

to the places that look happy, but sometimes you can see a strange tendency even as you're meditating, when a sense of pleasure comes to you and you feel that you don't deserve it, or that you're not good enough for it. This is one of the reasons why, when we meditate, we try to think of healthy narratives of our ability to become happy. We're practicing how to formulate new narratives so that we can have a healthy attitude toward pleasure, remembering the good things we've done. This is one of the reasons why, in Buddhist countries, when someone is dying, people around them will try to remind them of the good things they have done in terms of their virtue and generosity.

Now, simply willing the process of rebirth to end is not enough to make it end. You have to understand the process of becoming, as we described it last night, and learn how to abort that process. What usually happens at death is that the mind wants to find a new location in space and time. This is a very old habit that we've been through many, many times before: trying to find a new location, thinking, "I can't stay here, I have to go someplace else." To get out of saṁsāra, we have to learn how to break that habit: learning how not to feel compelled to stay someplace or to go someplace.

One of the reasons why, when we meditate, we try to get out of the worlds of our distractions is so that we can begin to break that habit. After all, if you can be distracted while you're sitting and meditating in this beautiful place, what's it going to be like when you're dying in a hospital and there are lights and beeping sounds all around you and people crying? So, the first step in getting out of saṁsāra is learning how to get past your distractions. We'll talk about this in more detail in a few days.

Q: Some people have skills to hear, see, or communicate with other beings, humans who have passed away, with souls, but not in a Catholic context. Those souls have a center and a mind, a center and a mind to gather a soul body and energy body and centered together. Also, human beings in transition, dying, will be reborn in the next life as human beings with the kammic potential in this center and mind as a continuity of the process of the mind. How to explain this apparent split or bifurcation of this center or mind?

A: There is no split or bifurcation. There are lots of alternatives that face us after death. Some human beings, when they die, go to a higher level where

they can just stay there with an energy body, as a deva or brahmā. Some of those beings on the higher levels then become deluded, thinking that they have found their permanent place, but they haven't. They will eventually fall from that state and take rebirth on a lower level. Other human beings come back as human beings, or on a lower level. It depends on your past kamma and on your state of mind at death. But none of these states of being are permanent. The higher beings can fall; the lower animals can come back up. So our task is to try to come back to a good level where we can practice so that ultimately we get out of this mess entirely.

And it is a mess. Ajaan Mun said that he could remember having been reborn as a dog 500 times, simply because it appealed to him at the time.

One thing you have to watch out for at the moment of death is the worlds that appear attractive but have bad potentials. I don't know if any of you saw the movie *Ice Age 2*. I happened to see it on a plane ride one time. A child sitting in the seat in front of me had the whole Ice Age series, which he watched going over the Pacific. In the second film, there's a scene where the main characters, female and male animals, are drifting in a boat in a fog and suddenly they see beautiful mermaids and mermen appearing brightly in the fog, and all of the animals are really attracted to them. But as you get closer to them, you begin to realize that in the images of the mermaids and mermen, there's a lot of static. If you look into the static, you see piranha fish with teeth and fangs. So, watch out! Look carefully. Another good reason not to come back.

Q: Is there something we can do to try to create the conditions for a good rebirth when it comes to our animals and pets? I'm thinking of the last days and moments of death itself. My sister's cat is dying and visibly suffering. How to help it grow on the path?

A: Basically, what you want to do is help calm the animal's mind and also try to eliminate as much of its pain as you can. Show that you love it, and that will be very encouraging for it. Now, for an animal that's not yet dying, you try to do your best to keep it from killing other animals. Again, Ajaan Mun: He had a cat and, as he told the other monks at the monastery, the cat used to be a tiger. So he told them do their best not to get the cat angry, so as to raise the

level of its mind. When animals are around humans, it's good for them. It helps them to develop more human characteristics.

April 18, 2023, 1900

The Process of Rebirth

Yesterday we said we would be approaching questions of aging, illness, and death from the perspective of what the Buddha learned about these topics during his awakening. This raises the question, "How can anyone, even the Buddha, know what happens at death before they die?"

There are two answers. The first is that the Buddha found a deathless dimension on the night of his awakening, and that fact shows that he came to a correct understanding of death in the course of his three knowledges. The second answer is that he saw that he had died many times, and he was able to understand the process of what happens when you die.

It's an important point that he saw the process *as a process* that comes from the mind and that can be stopped by training the mind. He never got involved in the question of what dies or what gets reborn. He focused totally on the events of death and rebirth in and of themselves as actions that constitute steps in a process: one that we can control and can bring to an end. You're not responsible for what you *are*, but you are responsible for what you *do*, and what you do can make a difference, even as you're dying.

This brings up another question: "How can a human being, as a conditioned being, experience something that is deathless and unconditioned?" The response is that the question has the context backwards. It starts with a definition of what we are and then, arguing from that definition, places limits on what we can know. The Buddha saw that by defining yourself, you place limits on yourself, so he put aside the question of what he was and experimented to see what he could *do* with the mind and know as a result. And he found that it was possible to act in such a way as to cut the process leading to rebirth and to reach the deathless.

The realization of nibbāna comes with the knowledge that the mind is released from aging, illness, and death. There's no more birth, and that

realization is what gives you total freedom from limitations.

One of the reasons why the Buddha taught not-self is so that you don't place limitations on your ability to find the deathless, too. The Buddha knew that he couldn't prove his understanding of death and rebirth to you. You have to practice the path he taught so that you can learn about death and rebirth on your own, but he did recommend adopting his teachings on these topics as a working hypothesis.

And he offers two pragmatic proofs for doing so. The first is that you will tend to behave more skillfully and harmlessly if you adopt, as a working hypothesis, his teachings on the connection between kamma and rebirth: If you believe that your actions have an impact on whether you experience pleasure or pain, you'll be more heedful and careful in what you do. If you don't believe that your actions can have that impact, you'll tend to be less skillful in what you do.

The second pragmatic proof is that by accepting these hypotheses, you leave open possibilities that you would close off if you didn't accept them. If you don't believe in the deathless, you won't make the effort to see if it could possibly be a reality. If you are open to the possibility that there could be a deathless dimension, you'll be more inclined to do what is necessary to prove whether or not it's true. Now, because you don't yet know for yourself, why close off good things that could be possible?

As we'll see, the Buddha recommends developing strengths in the mind to compensate for the weakness of the body as you age, grow ill, and die, and conviction in his awakening is one of those strengths. This is a point we'll explore further tomorrow.

Tonight, we're going to talk about the process of rebirth. The Buddha calls this "further becoming," *punabbhava*. As we've already said, "becoming" means taking on an identity in a world of experience. This happens on many levels, both micro and macro, i.e., both inside the mind and in the world outside. Examples on the micro level start with a desire and then you cling to it, purely as a mental act.

Now, clinging can take four forms: clinging to sensuality, clinging to views, clinging to habits and practices, and clinging to doctrines of self.

These four types of clinging correspond to four mental functions that are recognized by modern psychology.

The first, clinging to sensuality, corresponds to raw desire, which Freud would call *id*.

Clinging to views corresponds to what's called *the reality principle:* what you feel is real in the world and how reality works in terms of causes and effects that you can and cannot control.

Clinging to habits and practices corresponds to what you think should be done given your view of reality. This is what Freud would call your *superego*.

Clinging to doctrines of self basically is your sense of who you are and whether you will benefit from following your desires or not. This corresponds to what Freud calls the *ego*, which negotiates among the other clingings.

Now, even though Buddhism and modern psychology both recognize these mental functions, the Buddhist interpretation of them differs from modern psychology on two points.

The first is that, from the Buddhist perspective, no desire is raw. Each desire has its reasons. In fact, the Buddha defines sensuality as your thoughts and plans for sensual pleasures. In other words, the problem is not the pleasures themselves; the problem is your fascination with thinking about them. For example, a pizza, in itself, is not a problem. If you're sitting here thinking about how you want to eat a pizza after the talk tonight and how you plan to slip out to Moustiers, that would be a problem because you're not going to be hearing what I'm saying. You're going to be absorbed in your thoughts about a pizza. That's the first point of difference.

The second point of difference is that modern psychology sees a constant conflict among your clingings, a conflict that is never resolved. The Buddha's view, on the other hand, is that it is possible to develop skillful forms of clinging that are not always in conflict. They can actually help you hold on to the path that leads to awakening. We can think of the path as being like a raft that you take across a river. While you're on the river, you need to hold on to the raft. When you get to the other side, then you can let the raft go.

I'll give you some examples of how clinging then leads to becoming. For a micro-level example—i.e., the small level in the mind—we can talk about that

evening snack in Moustiers. People tell me that I talk too much about pizza, so we'll talk about ice cream instead. During this evening's meditation session and during the talk, suppose that you're fantasizing about ice cream. Now, the world in that desire or fantasy would be the things in the world outside that would help you get ice cream—such as the ice cream parlors in Moustiers—and the things that would get in the way. There are other aspects to the actual world outside that would be irrelevant to your desire for ice cream, so they don't play a role in that particular becoming.

Another part of becoming is your role in that world—in other words, the things you'd be willing to do to get the ice cream. It's like a theater piece with three characters. There's the self as the producer, in other words, the self that has the ability to get out of here, go to Moustiers, and buy the ice cream. There's the consumer, the self that anticipates the joy in consuming the ice cream. And then there's the commentator that decides, "Is this really worth going for or not?"

Now, sometimes there's a conflict among these three roles, and there can also be a conflict among different becomings because of a conflict among the desires on which they're based. These conflicts can add extra suffering and stress on top of the suffering that's inherent in each becoming. The inherent suffering comes from the fact that the desire underlying your becoming gets frustrated for one of three reasons: Either you can't get what you want, or you get what you want but it's not as good as you thought it would be, or it is good, but then it leaves you.

The same principles apply to becoming on what's called the macro level in the world outside. For instance, imagine that you're dying and you can't stay in the body. Options of where you could go will start appearing to you. You focus on craving one of them, you cling to that craving, and then you enter into that world and take on an identity in that world around what you crave. The Buddha's image is of a fire going from one house to another. In his days, they believed that fire, in order to burn, had to cling to something. In this case, the fire clings to the wind that takes it to the next house. So you're riding the wind as you go to the next life. This may sound good—you get to go where you want to go—but it's actually very risky.

Think of all of the different dangers facing you at the moment of death. First, you're desperate: You can't stay here and you're being pushed out, so you'll go anywhere. Sometimes, because of your past kamma, you see no good options available, so you're forced to take whatever is available.

Second, your craving can be very deluded. Think about that example from *Ice Age 2* that I talked about earlier this afternoon. The mermaids and mermen look attractive, but they'll eat you up.

Third, the mind and its cravings can change directions so quickly that the Buddha said there's no image to illustrate how fast that change can be. Even the image of the wind blowing a wildfire is too slow. So if you suddenly happen to be overcome by lust or anger or any of the other mental hindrances at that point, that mind state will take you to a bad destination.

And it could happen at the moment of death that you're not very lucid or alert. You've had an experience like this many times: As you're falling asleep, your mind can just grasp on to anything at all, with no sense of right or wrong, good or bad. It just goes.

So there's a need to train the mind so that you can recognize craving and learn how not to fall for it.

As we said last night, the Buddha taught that there are three kinds of craving that lead to becoming. You may have heard that craving means to want things to be different from what they are, but that's not the Buddha's definition. After all, wanting to become awakened is actually part of the path. At the moment of death, you have to watch out specifically for the three types of craving that lead to becoming.

The first is craving for sensuality. As I said earlier, this is focused not so much on sensual pleasures as it is on the mind's fascination with fantasizing and planning for sensual pleasures. Now, becoming—your sense of your identity in your imaginary world—often plays a big role in these fantasies: You might like to play the role of the seducer, or the seduced.

There's an example of this in the Therīgāthā, the verses of the elder nuns. The story is that a nun is going alone through a forest, and a libertine comes up to her and tries to persuade her to leave the nunhood and become his wife. Instead of talking about having sex, though, he talks to her about *what she will*

become if she goes with him. He basically says she will become a golden doll, surrounded by a beautiful house, loving servants, and all kinds of beautiful things. In other words, he's creating a world in which she can imagine herself taking on a new identity. You've probably seen this in your own sensual fantasies: They tend to be about who you are and the role you play in a particular world.

Just as an aside, I'll tell you how the story ends. It turns out that the nun is a non-returner, which means she has no interest in sensuality. So she asks the libertine, "What do you imagine to be attractive in this ugly body?" And he says, "Your eyes." So she says, "But these eyes: They're full of eye secretions, and they're just ugly little balls stuck into the face." And he says, "But they're really beautiful. I really crave your eyes." So she plucks out one eye and hands it to him: "Here, then, take it." All of a sudden, it's not beautiful anymore, and her fierce determination scares him. So he apologizes and leaves her alone. She then goes to see the Buddha, and as soon as she sees him, she gets her eye back.

The second form of craving is craving for becoming, the desire simply to have an identity in a world someplace.

Then finally there's craving for non-becoming, which is wanting to see your current becoming demolished. In other words, you don't like who you are, you don't like the world in which you live, so you'd like to see the whole thing destroyed. Now, it may seem counter-intuitive that craving for non-becoming would actually lead to more becoming, but if you keep thinking in terms of a self and a world to destroy, and of how much you'll enjoy the oblivion that comes when they're destroyed, you're thinking in the terms of becoming—a self in a world—and that creates the conditions for a new state of becoming. In fact the Buddha said that seeing how there is becoming in the act of craving for non-becoming was one of his special insights on the night of his awakening.

Now, these three kinds of craving can come on very strong at death. For example, if you're suffering a lot of pain at death, the mind will immediately go to sensuality. As the Buddha said, for most people their only escape from pain is to start thinking sensual thoughts. Or if you fear annihilation at the

moment of death, then you'll go for any possible becoming that might appear to you. Or the hatred of suffering and the exhaustion that comes from the pains you feel as you're dying could lead you to want to be obliterated, which would be craving for non-becoming.

Now, this presents a strategic challenge. If craving for non-becoming leads to more becoming, what can you do to get out of further becoming? The Buddha's answer to that is you turn your focus away from becoming and focus instead on the processes that lead up to craving before they coalesce into becoming. If you can develop dispassion for those steps, that will abort the process. As for whatever state of becoming you already have, that will end on its own.

This is why dispassion was a central theme of the Buddha's teachings. You see that the effort to continue fabricating becoming out of raw material that's inconstant and undependable isn't worth it. It's like seeing that you're building a house out of frozen meat, and you realize that the house is going to melt and create a huge mess when summer comes, so you feel no desire to continue building such a thing.

The Buddha says that there are five steps that lead to dispassion. First, you see the origination of the steps in the process leading to craving, in other words, what causes them—and when the Buddha uses the word "origination"—*samuddaya*—he's usually referring to causes that arise in the mind. Second, you see how those steps in the process pass away. Third, you see their allure: why you're attracted to them. But then fourth, you also see the drawbacks of clinging to them. The fifth step is when you see that the allure is outweighed by the drawbacks. That's when you develop dispassion, which is the escape. We'll discuss these steps in more detail later on in the retreat.

You can begin to see how meditation is ideal preparation for dying. You get to see events in the mind as processes in these terms before they turn into a becoming. Ideally you should want to put an end to the process so that there's no wind going to the next house, and no more fire to ride the wind—i.e., the act of identifying with the being that clings to the craving.

However, most people don't develop that much skill. So the second best skill is making sure that the house next door is a good house to go to, and this

is done by creating good kamma. This is why the Buddha advises practicing virtue, generosity, goodwill, and the other perfections, as we taught at the last retreat, until they become habitual parts of your character. In this way, even though there is a wind, it'll be likely to take you to a good house. This is why the Buddha's instructions on how to prepare for death include qualities you develop in daily life right here and now.

As I mentioned last night, the teaching on good kamma is not a simple teaching. For a good rebirth, not only do you have to do good deeds, but you also have to continue doing good deeds throughout life and to maintain right view all the way through the moment of death. He saw that there were cases where people did good deeds but then they had a bad change of heart at the moment of death, which pulled them down. On the other hand, though, he saw that there were people who had done bad deeds during this life but had a good change of heart at the moment of death, and so they went up in the next life. Now, the results of their earlier bad actions were not destroyed. They were simply delayed.

Cases of this second type are heartening. If you know that you've done bad deeds in the past, you're not doomed to a bad destination. But cases of the first type warn you that you need to be heedful. You can't just accept things as they happen and be nothing more than a passive witness to the passing show. You play a role in shaping events, so you want to do your best to shape things in a good direction.

So, stay confident that when death comes you'll be able to do something about it: In other words, you can do something good about what's going to happen next, after death. As for aging and illness, in dealing with them skillfully, you learn skills that will be needed at death. As you learn how to deal skillfully with aging, you learn how not to be overcome by physical weakness. As you learn how to deal skillfully with illness, you learn how not to be confined by pain. Both of these developments—physical weakness and pain—tend to diminish the range of the becoming that you're experiencing right now. It's as if the world is beginning to close in on you, so there are fewer and fewer options as to what you can do. So you need to learn how to keep your mind from being restricted by pains and physical weakness as you age and grow ill. These will be the topics we'll talk about for the next two nights.

I'll end with a story. In Thailand, funerals often last for months, which means that before the cremation, they have time to print a book and hand it out at the cremation in honor of the person who passed away. The book can be about anything—the Dhamma, how to run a kitchen in the old-fashioned way, how the kings of the past used to punish their children, all kinds of things. There will usually be a little biography at the beginning of the book. It'll talk about how the deceased person was born, their education, how they got married, how they had children, how they succeeded in life, and then how they began to have a little illness here or there, and then the illnesses got stronger and stronger, and the doctors always did their best to help the patient, but then they reached the point where even the best doctors couldn't help. For me, that was always the most important part of the biography: the point where nobody can help you. What do you do? This is what meditation is for: to give you skills to use at that point, so that even when no one else can help you, you can help yourself.

April 19, 2023, 0900

Mindfulness of Breathing: Feelings

This morning I'd like to continue with some instructions based on the Buddha's instructions on breath meditation, this time focusing on the second tetrad, which deals with feelings as its frame of reference.

As I noted yesterday morning, it's not the case that the four tetrads are to be followed in numerical order. Actually, each tetrad deals with an aspect of experience that's constantly present throughout the meditation. So even though we'll be talking about feelings today, remember that you want to stay grounded in the breath as you observe how feelings play a role in developing both tranquility and insight as you meditate.

The steps in this second tetrad are these: You train yourself to breathe in and out sensitive to rapture, to breathe in and out sensitive to pleasure, to breathe in and out sensitive to mental fabrication—which are your feelings and perceptions—and then to breathe in and out calming mental fabrication.

With regard to the first step, of inducing rapture, note that the word for rapture here, *pīti*, can also mean refreshment. In some instances and for some people, these sensations will be strong and clearly rapturous, even ecstatic. For others, they will be gentler and simply refreshing. This is not a measure of the power of your concentration. It's simply an indicator of how much energy your body has been lacking, and how it responds when the energy becomes more full.

The Buddha says elsewhere that the kind of rapture you're trying to induce here is both physical and mental. You induce physical rapture or fullness by the way you breathe; you induce mental rapture by the perceptions you cultivate.

For instance, if you breathe out in a way where you're squeezing the energy out of the body, that's not going to help with the physical sense of rapture. You have to breathe out in a way that doesn't squeeze things. You can tell

yourself, "I'll put energy into breathing in. Let the body breathe out on its own. I don't have to squeeze the breath out." You also have to be careful not to squeeze anything at the end of the in-breath or the end of the out-breath. This, too, is a common mistake when people are doing breath meditation: They want to have a clear dividing line so that they can know, "This is the in-breath; this is the out-breath." So they make a little squeeze between the two in the energy field of the body.

Learn how to resist that temptation. You don't need that clear a dividing line. Think of the in-breath flowing into the out-breath, and the out-breath flowing into the in-breath: breath breathing breath. Don't squeeze to make a distinction between the two. You'll find that if you don't squeeze the energy out as you breathe out, and you don't make a little squeeze as you're switching from one breath to the next, a sense of fullness begins to develop in the body. That, Ajaan Lee would identify with rapture. It's a sense of refreshment, a sense of energy flowing around.

Then you can do the same thing with pleasure—*sukha*, which can also be translated as *ease.* Wherever there are feelings of ease or pleasure in the body, breathe in a way that protects them. Don't squeeze them; don't destroy them.

Once you've got these feelings established, then allow them to spread through the body, following your sense of the breath permeating the whole body.

As you do this, you're using your intentions to shape the breath and the feeling, and then the feelings will turn around and have an effect on the mind. The perceptions of breath energy flowing, the pleasure flowing, will also have an impact on the mind, making it more focused, happier to be here in the present moment. You're seeing feelings and perceptions as mental fabrications in action. That's the third step in this tetrad.

Then, for the fourth, you want to see which perceptions, which feelings, will calm the mind down. There might come a point after a while when you decide that the rapture is just too much. This is where you have to learn how to change your perceptions. Ajaan Lee and Ajaan Fuang would talk about having the energy flow out the arms, out the palms of your hands, flow down your legs, out the soles of the feet. I've also found it useful to think about the energy

flowing out through the spaces between the fingers—or else flowing out through your eyes if there's an excess energy in your head. You can simply hold these perceptions in mind—without pushing anything physically—and that will allow the excess energy to release.

Or you can think of the body being like a big colander: You've got little holes in the pores of the body, through which the excess energy can flow out. Or your body is like a sponge: The energy can flow out in any direction; there's nothing to hold it in. Usually, the problem with excessive rapture is that you start identifying the breath with the flow of the blood in the body, and the flow of the blood begins to push against the walls of the blood vessels. That leads to a perception of pressure or containment. You want to hold in mind the perception of permeability, through which that energy can flow out.

Another way of calming mental fabrications has to do with perceptions of the breathing process as a whole. When you begin meditating, there's a sense that the breath is coming into the body from outside. After a while, though, you develop a sensitivity to how the breath energy actually originates inside the body: the only thing coming from outside is the air. This is in line with the Buddha's way of analyzing the breath: He doesn't say that it's a tactile sensation felt at the skin. Instead, it's part of the wind property in the body itself: the flow of energy in the body as felt from within.

So look into the body to see where the breath seems to originate. Ajaan Lee talks about "resting spots" of the breath—the tip of the nose, the middle of the head, the base of the throat, the tip of the breastbone, above the navel—but there are other possible spots as well. Focus attention on wherever the breath seems to originate, and think of breath energy radiating effortlessly from that spot. If there are any feelings of tension that seem to get in the way of that radiating energy, think of them dissolving away.

An even subtler perception is one where you think of every cell in the body breathing, and all the cells are breathing together: No one spot takes precedence; your attention is evenly distributed throughout the whole body. It's like a photograph of the Alps taken in the pre-dawn hours when the light is diffuse and every detail has equal importance. This perception can have an extremely calming effect both on the breath and on the mind. At the same

time, it helps you not feel threatened or fearful if the breath stops, because you sense full breath energy in every part of the body. You're not starving yourself of breath energy at all. In fact, the opposite: The breath energy feels satisfying and still.

These are some of the issues that come up when you're dealing with rapture and pleasure, and then trying to calm the effect that these feelings—along with the perceptions that go with them—have on the mind. You calm the mind down, one, by the way you breathe, two, by the perceptions you're holding in mind, and you ultimately get to a feeling of equanimity, the calmest type of feeling, which will have a very calming effect on the mind. You can get the mind into very deep states of concentration this way, by using perceptions that are more and more calming.

The overall process is similar to the first tetrad. As I said yesterday, when you calm bodily fabrication to the point where the in-and-out breath seems to stop, it can take you all the way to the fourth jhāna. In this tetrad, when you calm mental fabrication, you can develop states of concentration that take you all the way through the formless jhānas, where there are very refined feelings of equanimity, and perceptions so subtle that it's hard to say whether they're perceptions or not. In the very highest level of concentration, the texts say that perceptions and feelings can actually cease. The two tetrads help each other along in this way.

So that's the second tetrad.

Here, as with the first tetrad, you'll notice the emphasis on the role of the mind, in the components of mental fabrication. In the case of perceptions, this is obvious: Perceptions are products of the mind. But this is also true in the case of feelings: The Buddha says elsewhere that the pleasant feelings engendered in concentration come from careful attention, which is an act of the mind. And, of course, we're fostering feelings not-of-the-flesh—the feelings that result from concentration—which can occur only when you intend to give rise to them.

It's in this way that even though the first two tetrads focus explicitly on body and feelings, their real purpose is to call attention to the role of the mind in shaping your sense of the body and your feelings: through the way you talk

to yourself about the breath, intentionally change the breath, and create feelings of pleasure by the careful way you pay attention to the breath. As you gain more sensitivity in this area, you come to see that the Buddha's basic principle in the first lines of the Dhammapada is right: All phenomena really do have the heart and mind as their forerunner. This is the beginning of real insight into how the mind contains the causes of suffering, but also the potentials for bringing suffering to an end.

April 19, 2023, 1515

Q&A

Q: If I correctly understood your teaching this morning, the breath should be a pleasant flow, with no holding or pressing, etc. In yoga practice, there is *kapalbhati* breathing and alternate-nostril breathing, where we hold the breath for 16, 20, or even more counts, which is not always pleasant. How is this breathing technique related to meditative breathing?

A: The technique we're teaching here is basically designed to get the mind energized through the processes of bodily and mental fabrication and then get it to calm down with a sense of ease. In other words, the main emphasis is on the effect on the mind. We do it as a means for giving rise to insight and tranquility together.

As for the yoga technique, that's mainly for the sake of bodily health. But you can also use the Ajaan Lee technique for bodily health as well. He himself discovered this technique after he had had a heart attack deep in the forest, and he was able to recover from the heart attack and walk many miles out of the forest after practicing it. I myself used this technique to counteract the pains of malaria and to overcome my migraines. I used to have migraines very frequently, and I found that if I breathed in as much as I could, expanding the stomach as far as I could, it was uncomfortable, but it got me out of an unhealthy breathing cycle. So it is okay to use this technique for health purposes, too.

Q: Nothing in existence seems to escape from dependent co-arising. However, only memory seems to escape it. Why is that?

A: Actually, memory is made up of perceptions, *saññā*, and fabrications, *saṅkhāra*, both of which are parts of dependent co-arising. They come under the factor of fabrication and under the factor of name and form.

Q: If I understood this correctly, intention exists before the craving for sensuality, for becoming, or for non-becoming, and then it brings forth clinging and becoming. The question is, what is it that causes this process to get into existence? If the intention exists before the contact at the sense object, what is it that causes the intention to come? Is it the past experience? Is it the memory?

A: The things that influence the present moment can come from past influences, such as past experiences and memory, but because the mind has the ability to observe itself, sometimes what sets things in motion is a decision made right in the present moment. It's because we have this freedom to act in the present moment that the path of practice to the end of suffering actually makes sense. The Buddha doesn't explain why we have this freedom, but he says that because we have it, we should learn how to take advantage of it. There's a passage where he says that the Dhamma is nourished by commitment and reflection. The Dhamma grows within you because of these two things. And the training and practice is a matter of learning how to develop that quality of reflection so that you can be more observant and take more advantage of the freedom that your powers of observation make available to you.

Q: What is the difference between saṅkhāras and kilesas or defilements? Is it that they are the patterns of functioning that are put into action in a repetitive manner in our life? Does meditation permit us to be aware of this or to realize this? Does it let us be liberated from it?

A: Actually, kilesas are a kind of saṅkhāra. Saṅkhāra, remember, is fabrication, which can be good or bad. Sometimes it's repetitive, sometimes not. Kilesas are basically negative saṅkhāras. What we do in meditation is that we learn to use good saṅkhāras to put an end to bad saṅkhāras. After all, the path itself is a kind of saṅkhāra. Virtue is a fabrication. Concentration, discernment: These are all fabrications. We use them to overcome negative fabrications and then, when they've done their work, we let go of them, too. Here again, I think it's useful to think of the image of the raft that you hold on to, to swim across the river and then, when you've arrived, you let it go.

Two questions:

First Q: Something has always seemed paradoxical to me for a long time in the Buddha's teachings. He teaches us to aim for leaving the cycle of existence, which means to have a desire for non-existence, but nevertheless he denounces this desire for non-existence in other places. Isn't wanting to get out of the cycle a desire for non-existence?

A: There is a distinction between the desire for non-existence, or rather, non-becoming, and the desire for no *further* becoming. The desire for non-becoming basically is the desire to see this current becoming destroyed. The desire for no further becoming is the desire not to start up any new becomings after this one. This is why the Buddha's technique is to allow this current becoming to continue until it runs out on its own, while at the same time you have to be careful not to create the conditions for any new becomings.

Notice, I use the word "becoming" rather than "existence" for the word, *bhava.* It's wrong to describe the goal as one of non-existence, because the state of the arahant after death cannot be described as existing, not existing, both, or neither. Because people are defined by their desires, and because an arahant has no desires, the arahant cannot be defined and—for that reason—can't be described in any way. In the Canon, they illustrate this point with the image of the ocean: The arahant is indescribable in the same way that the water in the ocean is immeasurable.

Second Q: Wouldn't it be more generous to return as a bodhisattva in existence to aid others to liberate themselves as the Mahāyāna teaches?

A: When you're liberating other beings, what are you trying to teach them to do? Aren't you teaching them to leave the process of creating suffering? We all suffer because of our lack of skill. Now, we cannot make anyone else skillful. We can show them how to become more skillful, but each person has to develop the proper skills for him or herself. And one of the best ways of showing people how to do this is to do it by example. Learn how to develop the skills yourself.

Here it's important to understand the word, *saṁsāra.* We usually think of *saṁsāra* as a place in which beings die and are reborn. Actually, it's an activity.

The word literally means "wandering-on." It's something we do. We create a state of becoming, enter into it, and then, as it falls apart, we wander on and create another. The Buddha teaches that this activity is a bad habit. You could say that it's like smoking or drinking. He was able to kick the habit, and he's showing the rest of us how to kick it, too. To say that it would be more compassionate to keep on wandering on to aid others, rather than to stop wandering on, is like saying that it would be more compassionate to keep on smoking and drinking while you teach others to stop smoking and drinking.

I must admit my image of the Mahāyāna view, that you shouldn't leave *saṁsāra* until everyone else has left, is this: There's a fire in a movie theater, and everyone is rushing for the door. Bodhisattvas are clustered at the door, and one says, "You first," and each of the others say, "No, you first." The result is that everyone is going to get burned to death.

Q: What relationship exists between the kamma of parents and those who are their children? Is it an illusion to want to repair or ameliorate the unskillful behavior of our parents? And do our children carry with them part of our own kamma in them?

A: The fact that you were born to your parents means that you have some kind of kamma in common. Either you did this kamma together or you did it separately in separate places, but it's still similar kamma. That's why we have the phrase in the chant "*kamma-bandhū*": We're related through our kamma. But each of us has our own individual kamma. Your parents do not infect you with their kamma, and your children don't carry on part of your own kamma. However, if you're the child and you want to improve your parents' kamma, it is possible. You set a good example. But you know how difficult it is for children to teach their parents, so you have to be very diplomatic. The best way to teach is through example.

Q: Can you form the hope to be welcomed at the moment of death, the grand passage, with "people" you've loved or the "people" for whom you may have some devotion or teachers who have put us on the path of the Dhamma? I have lots of gratitude for these "persons."

A: There's no need to put the word "person" or "people" in quotation marks. There is the belief sometimes that the Buddha teaches that there are no persons, but actually, he teaches that there are persons as long as there's the process of becoming. We keep on taking on the identity of people, of persons, through our attachments and clingings as we go from life to life to life. It's only when you reach nibbāna that you go beyond being a person.

Now, the question concerns the hope for being welcomed by the people you love or to whom you're devoted: You have to be careful, because sometimes the people you have loved are not in really good destinations. They may have gone to a lower destination. If you tell yourself, "I want to be with them," that aspiration might pull you down to their lower level.

Second, the fact that you loved each other in this lifetime doesn't necessarily mean that you're going to love each other in the next lifetime.

In Thailand, I knew of a monk and a nun who were meditating one time, and each saw that they had been married in a previous lifetime. So they disrobed and picked up where they'd left off. Apparently in the previous lifetime, they had loved each other very much, but in this lifetime they separated eight times and had eight children. When I met the woman, she looked pretty miserable. This is why the Buddha says not to focus on people. Focus instead on the good actions you've done. He says that your good actions will actually be like relatives welcoming you to the new life.

Q: At the moment of death, is it possible that there will be beings who will come to look for you or to accompany you to the next life? Is this going to be good or bad?

A: Well, it depends on the beings. There are stories of devas coming to help you go up to the deva world; there are stories of hell wardens coming to take you down to the lower realms. There are also stories of people who don't have anyone to guide them at all: Either they go to a new life of their own accord, or they get lost and wander around aimlessly for a while. So, it's best to depend on yourself. But if you see hell wardens come for you, that's when you should bring to mind all the good actions you've done in this lifetime: your acts of generosity, virtue, and meditation. That's your protection from hell wardens.

Q: Even though there are not necessarily treatments or doctors against aging, from the point of view of the practice, is there a particular difference between aging and an incurable disease, such as a degenerative disease?

A: From the point of the view of the practice, you treat them the same. You realize that because of the weakening of the body, you need to strengthen your mind, which is going to be the topic of tonight's talk.

Q: Because morphine is considered to be an intoxicant, in the case of a human being—such as a dying relative, or an animal who is suffering the pains of death—is it appropriate to give morphine to them or would it be contrary to the fifth precept?

A: No, it's not contrary to the precept. The fifth precept is against the use of intoxicants such as alcohol, but there is an exception. For the monks, the use of alcohol is allowed when it's part of a medicine. Based on that principle, morphine and other similar drugs are considered to be allowable as painkillers.

However, you want to be as alert as possible at the moment of death. If you're the patient, ask the doctor to give only the amount that's really needed to take the edge off the pain, and not so much as to make you confused. The amount will depend on how much pain there is and how much pain the person can stand. They've found in America that if you allow the patient to control the amount of morphine that he or she gets through a morphine drip, the patient will tend to take less. Often in hospitals, the nurses are overworked: They won't have time to come back and give you another shot for the next 24 hours, so they tend to overdose you to carry you through the whole day.

As for animals, I would give them a little morphine. They don't need to be all that sharp, and you can't ask them, "Is this enough morphine or is it too much?"

Q: A close friend of mine is in palliative care, aware that morphine will make her less and less present. She meditates, but none of her close family does. What can she do for herself, besides remembering all of her good actions rather than the not-good ones. What else? What can I do while I'm

here on retreat? What happens to the mind when the body is under powerful sedation, which is going to be the case because of the pain?

A: The best things she can do for herself are, one, to think of her good actions in the past, and two, to learn how to relate to her pain in the present in such a way that she can see that the pain and her awareness of the pain are two different things. This is a point that we explained in previous retreats, and we're going to be talking about it again tomorrow night. If you want to read a book to her while she's in palliative care, read the relevant passages from *Good Heart, Good Mind* and *The Five Faculties*, which are available in French translation.

What you can do while you're here on retreat is that you can spread lots of goodwill in her direction. When the body is under sedation, the mind tends to be in a suppressed state. It's as if it's in a fog, so it's difficult to make clear decisions. The power of your goodwill might help to lift some of the fog.

There's always the question of what exactly happens at the moment of death to people under sedation. Sometimes they suddenly wake up and come to their senses when they realize they're dying; sometimes they don't. And that moment of death: Even though for us it looks like a very short moment, for the person who's experiencing that moment, it can be quite long, and choices can be made in that moment.

I was almost electrocuted to death one time. For me, it felt like five minutes; but for the people who saw it happening, it was just like a finger-snap. It seems long because your mind's spinning very fast. So, if you're with a person who's passing away, even if they seem to be sedated or in a coma, it's good to read passages of Dhamma to them or to talk to them about the good things they've done. Things like that may help to penetrate the fog.

Q: How to deal with the death of a loved one: your loved companion, your dearest grandmother, your cat—the best cat ever? How to deal with loneliness, emptiness, absence, lack of contact, no exchange, just silence? I'm afraid of that.

A: This is a topic that we'll be covering later on in the week, but the first thing to realize is that death is not the end of your contact with that being.

Because of your kamma in common, you will most likely meet each other again unless either of you attains nibbāna first. So it's not totally the end.

Second, the worst part of the silence is the sense of being powerless to help the other person, but as the Buddha explains, you can make merit and dedicate it to the person who's passed away. You can do this with animals, too.

From the Buddha's point of analysis, when you leave someone or someone has left you like this, it's almost as if a part of your identity—your sense of "what I am"—has been ripped out, so it's going to take a while for that wound to heal. So whatever expression you want to give to your grief, go ahead and express it until you realize that it's becoming self-indulgent. Then bring to mind the fact that this happens to everybody. Look around: Everybody's lost somebody. When you reflect on this, it can turn your grief into compassion for all the suffering that goes on in saṁsāra, which is a much more skillful emotion than grief. We'll talk more about this later in the week.

Can I tell one funny story before we go? One time, when I was at the monastery in Thailand and Ajaan Fuang was away, one of the local neighbors came in and said he wanted two monks to come to his house to chant a funeral chant. So I asked him, "Who died?" He smiled. I said, "If somebody has died, how can you smile?" And he said, "You'll see."

So two of us went to the house. They had planted vegetables the Chinese way, in raised beds with little walls, with each bed full of vegetables. And in several of the raised beds, all the vegetables had died. The wife was convinced it was foul play, so she wanted to monks to chant the funeral service for the vegetables. Then, when the monks gave the blessing—you may have seen Thai people do this sometimes, they'll pour water into a little bowl to dedicate the merit to the deceased, and then they pour the water in the bowl under a tree. But this time, the wife was going to put hot peppers and salt in the water, and she was going to put a curse on whoever killed the vegetables.

So we said, "Wait a minute. What if your husband used a tank for pesticide and then put fertilizer in the tank without washing out the pesticide? Do you want to put a curse on your husband?" My favorite part of the story was that she stopped for a moment before she said, "No." But then the neighbors, who had come to watch, said to us, "Well, as long as you're here, go ahead do the

chant anyhow." So we did it. I think the other monk and I are probably the only monks who ever did a funeral service for vegetables.

April 19, 2023, 1900

Lessons for Aging

Tonight's talk is on the topic of aging and the lessons that the Buddha learned about aging from his awakening.

There's a story in the Canon about a conversation between a monk and a king. One day, the monk, Ven. Raṭṭhapāla, was spending the afternoon meditating under a tree in the pleasure garden of King Koravya. When the king learned of this, he went to Raṭṭhapāla and asked him, "Why did you ordain?" He knew the monk's family. They were wealthy, the relatives were still alive, and Raṭṭhapāla himself was healthy. So the king didn't understand why he would ordain.

Raṭṭhapāla told him there were four Dhamma summaries that he'd learned from the Buddha and that had inspired him to ordain.

The first Dhamma summary was, "The world is swept away. It does not endure."

The king asked him, "What does that mean?" So the monk asked him in return, "When you were young, were you strong?" The king said, "Yes, I was very strong. In fact, I knew no one else who was my equal in strength." Then the monk asked him, "How about now? Are you still strong?" The king said, "Oh no, I'm 80 years old. Sometimes I mean to put my foot in one place, and it goes someplace else." So Raṭṭhapāla said, "That's what it means: 'The world is swept away. It does not endure.'" This is a lesson in *anicca* or inconstancy. At the same time, it's a lesson in aging.

The Canon's treatment of aging focuses on two issues. One is the loss of physical beauty and the other is the loss of physical strength. In both cases, it teaches how to compensate for these losses by developing mental beauty and mental strength. As Ajaan Lee once taught one of his students who was on her deathbed, physical strength has to deteriorate but mental strength doesn't

have to. It can continue to grow, even as the body is aging and approaching death.

The Canon's discussion of **mental beauty** is fairly brief. It focuses on two main qualities. The first type of mental beauty is virtue, which means restraining yourself from causing harm. You do that by observing the five precepts: against killing, stealing, illicit sex, lying, and taking intoxicants. In each case, the precept is against *intentionally* doing any of these things. So the emphasis is on the state of the mind with which you observe these precepts.

There's a passage in the Canon saying that virtue makes you beautiful even when you're old. The Buddha also says that virtue is one of your most valuable possessions. Loss of virtue is more serious than losing your wealth, losing your health, or even losing your relatives.

Now, there's a challenge in observing these precepts. On the one hand, the ideal virtues are said to be unspotted and untorn—in other words, you never break them—but at the same time, they're practiced in a way that's conducive to concentration. This means that you're strict with yourself in holding consistently to the precepts, especially around the issue of lying, but you're not obsessed with little actions that might cause you to be worried about little details: "Did I do this wrong? Did I do that wrong?" As you come to know your intentions more clearly, you gain more and more confidence and control over them, and you can feel more at ease about observing the precepts because you can be sure that your intentions are always good. And because you get to know your intentions better as you practice concentration, this is the way concentration and virtue help each other along.

The second quality that the Buddha describes as a form of mental beauty is actually a cluster of three things: composure, forbearance, and equanimity. The challenges in life don't grow easier as you get old. When Than Lionel was trying to get me to revive my French, he got me a lot of biographies of famous French people, and a lesson I learned from each of them is as you get older, life gets harder. You would think that as you get older, people would be more understanding and kinder. But actually that's the time when the vultures come in and swoop down on you.

One of the most striking cases was in the biography of Louis XIII and Richelieu. Late in life, Louis took a lover—*un amant*—much to Richelieu's disapproval, so the lover started plotting against Richelieu and tried to kill him. Yet in spite of all that Richelieu had done to help Louis throughout his reign, Louis just stepped back and allowed the plot to go ahead. So Richelieu had to take matters into his own hands, even though he was very old and sick. Ultimately, he managed to get rid of the lover and had him sentenced to death, but the whole process almost killed him.

And this was not just the case with Richelieu. It seemed as if, in every biography I got from Than Lionel, the older you got, the worse life became: Mazarin, Clemenceau, everybody. This is a universal pattern that you have to accept and deal with skillfully. You may not have kings and their lovers plotting against you, but as you grow older, you do have to become more dependent on other people, and it's likely that they're not always going to do what you want. So you have to be careful to restrain your anger so as not to drive away the people who are trying to help you.

This is the lesson of composure and forbearance: They're a kind of endurance, in which you have the ability to lash out in anger or to punish or hurt somebody, but you don't.

As for equanimity: Equanimity gives you the ability to draw strength from the principle of kamma. There are some things coming in from the past that you simply have to accept so that you can focus your energies or attention where they can do the most good: in the present moment.

Because this perspective comes from the Buddha's awakening, this is where the principles of mental beauty connect with conviction, which is the first factor in developing **mental strength**.

The Buddha teaches two different lists of mental strengths. Each list has five factors. One consists of conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. The second list is conviction, shame, compunction, persistence, and discernment. Put the two lists together, and you have seven factors:

conviction,
shame,

compunction,
persistence,
mindfulness,
concentration,
discernment.

The first three members of this last list—conviction, shame, and compunction—form a set in that they motivate you to focus on developing skillful actions.

Conviction here means conviction in the Buddha's awakening, and particularly, what his awakening says about the importance of your actions. If you act on skillful intentions, the results will be good. If you act on unskillful intentions, the results will be bad. The Buddha also learned that the results of actions can be very complex in their working out, and often take a lot of time. Which means that you cannot give in to weakness when it seems as if your skillful intentions are not yielding results as quickly as you like. You have to be confident that the good results will come at some point, so you should always focus on what you can do that's skillful right now, even if it's simply focusing on your breath.

There was once a woman who was a student of Ajaan Maha Boowa who was diagnosed with an advanced stage of cancer, so she asked if she could come to his monastery to meditate for a couple of months to prepare for her death. He told her, "I can help you look after your mind, but I can't look after your body. You'll have to find either a doctor or a nurse to come along with you." She had a friend—a retired female doctor who was 80 years old—who was willing to come along to help look after her. They stayed at the monastery for three months, and Ajaan Maha Boowa gave them a Dhamma talk almost every night they were there. They recorded every talk.

A few months after they returned to Bangkok, the first woman died. The old doctor suddenly found herself with a big pile of more than 80 Dhamma-talk tapes. She wanted to transcribe them to make a book, but because she was old and her eyesight was bad, she felt daunted by the task. When she informed Ajaan Maha Boowa of her plans and her worries, he told her, "See how much goodness you can squeeze out of your body before you have to throw it away."

This sentence gave her the strength to complete the project, and as a result, we now have two huge books of excellent Dhamma talks on the topics of aging, illness, and death. Some of them have been translated into English in the book, *Straight from the Heart.*

So the basic lesson is, as you get older, don't focus on what you can't do, focus on what you *can* still do that's good.

I don't know if you've ever heard of the American concept of the bucket list. There's an idiom for "dying," which is to "kick the bucket." I've tried to find out where this expression comes from, and although there are a lot of theories, nobody really knows. At any rate, the idea of a bucket list is that you make a list of the things you want to do before you kick the bucket. For most people, their bucket list consists of places they want to go, foods they want to eat, famous paintings they want to see—that kind of thing. But for a Dhamma practitioner, your bucket list should be focused on the good things you want to accomplish before you die. This attitude is based on the conviction that the good that you do never goes to waste.

Shame as a strength has to be explained. In English, there are two types of shame. One is the shame that's the opposite of pride, and the other is the opposite of shamelessness. When the Buddha talks of shame as a strength, he's talking about the second one. Now, shame is basically the desire to look good in the eyes of the people you respect. So here the Buddha's recommending that you try to look good in the eyes of the noble ones.

Now, remember, the noble ones—people who have gained at least the first level of awakening—will hold you to a high standard of behavior, but they do it out of compassion.

There's a passage where the Buddha talks about various motivations for sticking with the path, and one of them is called taking the world as your governing principle. The way he explains this is that in the world there are people who can read minds, and if they were to read your mind when you're thinking of giving up, what would they think? In other words, you can ask yourself, "If I were thinking these thoughts, what would Ajaan Chah think about it? What would Ajaan Mun think about it? Or how about Upasikā Kee, what would she think about it?" If you feel ashamed about that kind of

thinking, then stop thinking it. This is how shame is a strength: It keeps you on the path.

This connects with what the Buddha said is the most important external factor for your first taste of awakening, which is admirable friendship—in other words, finding admirable people to be friends with and trying to follow their advice and example. Healthy shame is wanting to look good in their eyes.

The next strength is **compunction.** This is fear of the consequences of doing unskillful actions. In this context, there's the realization that if you waste your time by doing unskillful things, you're going to suffer later, so you're causing yourself suffering by not using your time well. As we'll discover later, when the Buddha talks about fear of death, most of the fears come from a sense of powerlessness in the face of death. But compunction is fear that comes from sensing your power: You realize that you do have power to make a difference, but you're afraid of not using it wisely. This connects with the most important internal factor for your first taste of awakening, which the Buddha calls appropriate attention: *yoniso manasikāra.* You feel the imperative in abandoning unskillful actions and developing skillful ones.

This leads directly to the next strength, which is **persistence.** Persistence here is not simply brute effort. Instead, it's the effort to generate the desire to do what is skillful and to abandon what's not. This means that the effort here is aimed primarily at your ways of motivating yourself to practice.

One way would be through heedfulness: You realize that you can make a difference with your actions, so you really do want to do your best to act in a way that's skillful. You remind yourself, "If I don't act skillfully, there's going to be trouble down the line, but if I do act skillfully, I can avoid that trouble."

Another way of motivating yourself to act skillfully would be through compassion. Do you want to cause yourself suffering down the line? Do you want to cause other people suffering by doing them harm? If you have compassion for anyone, you say, "No, I'm going to try to be harmless by developing as much skillfulness as I can."

Now, this will take some energy. There's no way to relax into awakening.

Sometimes it's said that the awakened state is peaceful, so straining yourself to get there would be counterproductive, but the Buddha and the

ajaans never said that. You're sitting here and your knees are hurting, your back is hurting, and you say, "Isn't there an easier way to get to awakening? Can't I just lie down on the raft to go across the river?" The Buddha says, "No." The images they use—both the Buddha and the ajaans—to illustrate the way to awakening are of people who are developing skills, people who are struggling against hardships, or people who are going into battle. These images are meant to stir up your energy to practice in spite of the difficulties involved.

The remaining strengths are related to meditation, which we're going to be discussing in the mornings.

Right now, I'd like to talk about some examples of how to apply these strengths to deal with issues that come directly with aging.

For example, as we get older, we might start getting discouraged about the things we cannot do, the future looks pretty bleak, so we could start dwelling in the past. These can lead to three mental preoccupations that can sap your strength, waste your time, and lead to an unfortunate future, both in this life and after death: nostalgia, regret, and resentment.

In the case of *nostalgia*, your strengths of conviction, shame, and compunction can help you see that this is not just an innocent pastime, because the mind tends to be pulled in the direction of the topics to which it frequently returns. Nostalgia is thinking about good things that happened in the past but are no longer here—and, actually, no longer there. Even if you went back to the same place where those good things happened, it wouldn't be the same. Even if you were to find the people with whom you did enjoyable things in the past, they wouldn't be the same people. Think about the story I told this afternoon about the monk and the nun who wanted to get married again and it just didn't work out. Even if you could somehow regain your lost pleasures, you would lose them again and again and miss them again. Remember what Ajaan Fuang said about the pleasures you miss: If you get them again, you're going to lose them again, so why bother?

As for *regret*, you have to realize that past kamma cannot be undone by regret. There's a line of thought that we may have picked up from our upbringing, which is that if we show a lot of regret, then we'll be freed from

punishment. You've seen dogs do this, right? They pee on your carpet and they know that they did wrong, so when you come home, they just lie on their back to show that they're really, really sorry so that you won't beat them. Sometimes people think like that, too. But that's not the best way to deal with regrets for past bad actions. According to the Buddha, the best response is to acknowledge the mistake and then to resolve not to repeat it: "I will not pee on the carpet ever again."

Then you develop the brahmavihāras: goodwill for yourself, goodwill for the people you harmed, and then goodwill for all beings. By having goodwill for yourself, you stop beating yourself up over your past mistakes. After all, when you beat yourself up, after a while you get tired of doing that, and you say, "Well, maybe it wasn't so bad after all." Then you could easily be tempted to make the mistake again. So, it's best to have goodwill for yourself, and then for the people you harmed, and then for everyone else. When goodwill gets established in the mind, it'll help prevent you from making that mistake again.

As for protecting yourself from the results of past bad kamma, the Buddha said that you can actually weaken the results of past bad kamma by your state of mind in the present moment. The best things to do to improve your state of mind here and now are to develop the brahmavihāras and to train your mind in concentration and discernment so that it's not easily overcome by pleasure or pain.

Sometimes you hear people say, "Stay away from concentration. It's dangerous. It's very pleasant, and you might get attached or addicted to the pleasure." But if you really develop concentration as a skill, you find that it involves training the mind so that it's *not* overwhelmed by the pleasure of concentration.

You've probably seen this happen: You're focusing on the breath, and the breath is really comfortable, so you drop the breath and focus just on the pleasure, and then you blur out. To stay concentrated, you have to foster and maintain the pleasure, but you can't be focused on the pleasure. To maintain the foundation for the pleasure, you have to stay focused on the breath. In this way, you can get into deeper states of concentration, the mind has experiences of pleasure and equanimity, but it's not overcome by them.

As for pain, you're learning to stay focused on the body even though there is pain there, and then you learn how to analyze the pain, which is a topic we'll talk about tomorrow.

If you have this ability to stay with pleasure and not be overcome by it, to stay with the pain and not be overcome by it, then when the results of past bad kamma come, they don't overcome your mind, even when you're not in concentration.

As for *resentment*, this is basically ill will toward the people who have wronged you. This counts as a mental hindrance, which is a topic that we'll cover in a few days.

The Buddha's basic message on aging is that it's an early warning sign of problems that will get heavier as you grow older and approach death. Now, he does encourage a style of living in which you try to keep yourself as physically strong and healthy as possible. His examples would be doing a lot of walking, as a way of keeping up your strength, and eating a healthy diet, but you do these things with the understanding that inevitably the body will start getting weaker as it gets older no matter what you do. You may feel betrayed by the body, in that you've done everything you can to delay aging—Americans are especially obsessed with this—but the body owes you nothing. After all, it didn't sign a contract with you. You just moved in and you seized possession of it without asking if it was willing to submit to your terms. So don't feel betrayed by it when it starts getting weak.

I knew a Dhamma teacher in America who was very much involved in the pursuit of health for most of his life. He was one of the founders of IMS, the Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts. In the early days, when they would have their three-month retreats at IMS, they would end the retreat with humorous skits to lighten the mood of the retreatants. So in one of the skits, this particular teacher hops in a car and goes to Boston. He goes to see an acupuncturist, he goes to a masseur, he goes to have his colon cleaned out, he visits several other naturopathic doctors, and he's gone for the entire day.

Now, there was someone else on the retreat who was famous for the fact that she would walk very slowly during walking meditation. So in the skit, at the same time that the first teacher hops in the car, she starts walking across

the room. When he comes back after many hours in Boston, she arrives at the other end of the room.

Well, the first teacher, in his later years, suffered a stroke. He told me that, when the stroke first hit, his first thought was, “I did all of this for my body, and now it’s betrayed me.” That’s an attitude you have to drop.

Instead, you should focus on developing your mental beauty and strength, which was what he eventually was able to do. These qualities of virtue, composure, forbearance, and equanimity; conviction, shame, compunction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment will carry you through whatever happens with the body and will continue to support you after you and the body part ways.

The message here is that you don’t have to just accept the suffering that comes with aging, and you don’t accept the unskillful mental states that come as your strength and beauty fade. You can develop the inner strength and beauty that will minimize the suffering and prepare you for the bigger challenges that lie ahead.

April 20, 2023, 0900

Mindfulness of Breathing: Mind

This morning we'll focus on the third tetrad in the Buddha's instructions on mindfulness of breathing. This tetrad focuses on the mind, although as was the case with feelings, remember that you try to stay grounded in the breath as you observe and train the mind.

One of the paradoxical aspects of meditation is that when you meditate, the mind is training the mind. It's both teacher and student—or, if you see meditation as a sport, both the trainer and the athlete being trained. As teacher, it learns instructions from outside, but it has to oversee the actual training. As student, it has to follow the instructions. This means that, as you meditate, the mind has to learn how to read itself: to see what state it's in as you begin to meditate, and then to try to get itself to act in a way that brings it into a better state, to reflect on how well it's succeeding, and then to continue to make adjustments until it settles into a state that's just right.

Two points are relevant here: When we think of the mind training the mind, it's useful to think of the mind as a committee, with different members playing different roles. These are the different senses of self you have inside that are in constant dialogue. In meditation, we're training three of these senses of self in particular: (1) the self who wants to enjoy the results of the practice and provides motivation; (2) the self who is developing the skills needed to bring those results about; and (3) the self who watches over the whole process, to see how well the other selves are doing and to suggest improvements. That's the first point.

The second point is that for the mind to bring itself into balance, it will need a variety of meditation techniques for dealing with specific problems. The Buddha didn't teach a one-size-fits-all vipassanā or concentration technique. He emphasized breath meditation as his central technique, teaching it in more detail and more often than any other technique, but he

would also teach it in conjunction with other techniques. As he said, if you try to stay with the breath but there's a "fever" in the body or the mind, switch to another theme that you find inspiring, one that allows the body and mind to calm down, and then return to the breath.

Or in Ajaan Lee's terms, the breath is a home for the mind; the other themes are places where it goes foraging for whatever food it needs that the breath doesn't provide.

So as you're practicing, reflect every now and then on the state of your mind. If it's not falling into the three ideal steps that this tetrad sets out for the mind—gladdened, concentrated, and released—then you might want to make some adjustments in your practice. Remember: You're meditating on the breath, not for the sake of the breath, but for the sake of the mind. Always keep the well-being of your mind as your top priority.

The steps in the third tetrad are these: The first step is to breathe in and out sensitive to the state of the mind, the second step is to breathe in and out gladdening the mind, the third step is to breathe in and out concentrating the mind, and the fourth step is to breathe in and out releasing the mind.

The first step is simply a matter of noticing what state of mind you're bringing to the meditation as you sit down, and watching it as you try to get it to stay with the breath, to see whether it's happy to stay with the breath, or if something is getting in the way.

This sounds simple, but it's actually a central skill in the practice: the ability to step back from your own moods and to recognize whether they're skillful or not. If they're not, you have to be willing to change them.

The Buddha said that his own practice got on the right path when he was able to step back from his thoughts and divide them into two sorts: skillful and unskillful. Instead of judging them as to whether he liked them or not, he decided to see where they came from, and where they would lead. If they came from unskillful attitudes—the desire to fantasize about sensual pleasures, ill will, or harmfulness—he knew that they would lead to unskillful actions, and that would lead to long-term harm. So he had to be willing to bring those thoughts under control. If his thoughts were based on skillful attitudes—like

renunciation, goodwill, and compassion—he let himself think them until he was ready for the mind to settle down to rest in concentration.

As you've probably noticed, you won't succeed in stopping unskillful thoughts simply by telling them to stop. You first have to convince yourself that you don't secretly side with them. Instead, you'd be happy to have them stop. This is where the next step comes in, gladdening the mind: You actively try to make yourself take delight in abandoning unskillful thoughts and developing skillful thoughts in their place.

If, when you try to stay with the breath, you notice that the mind is happy to stay there, then you can keep your focus on the steps of the first and second tetrads.

If it's not happy with those steps, then you have to talk to the mind to get it in the right mood—what the Buddha calls verbal fabrication, or directed thought and evaluation: You try to talk yourself into being happy that you're here mediating and that you've got this opportunity to watch your own body and mind, to gain freedom from your attachment to thoughts that you know are not good for you.

Sometimes you can get the mind in the right mood simply by changing the way you breathe, to give both body and mind more energy. This is where you can tell yourself to emphasize the steps of breathing in a way that gives rise to refreshment and pleasure, and to stay with those steps as long as it takes for the right attitude toward the practice to permeate the mind.

But sometimes you might have to abandon the breath for the time being and focus on some other topic that will energize the mind: A few examples include contemplating how inspired you are by the Buddha, Dhamma, or Sangha. Another example would be developing the sublime attitudes: unlimited goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, or equanimity. When any of these contemplations succeeds in gladdening the mind, you can return to the breath.

The third step in this tetrad is to breathe in and out concentrating the mind. In this case, you're trying to get the mind steadier and more focused. Sometimes, when there's too much energy, you have to clamp down on it a little bit if the mind is getting too scattered.

Here again, you first try to use the breath to get the mind more concentrated. If focusing on the whole body is too distracting, focus on one spot and make the breath there as satisfying as possible, so that it feels really good to direct all your focus on that spot. If any pressure builds up, think of it radiating out from that spot in all directions. Don't follow it out. Just stay focused in your center. I've found that a spot in the middle of the head is good for this kind of practice. Then, when the mind feels more firmly established, you can think of letting the range of your awareness expand until it fills the whole body. Then your concentration will be firmly established in a larger frame of reference.

Sometimes, though, to get the mind more concentrated, you have to talk to it so that it loses its interest in thinking about other things. This is where you can bring in an alternative topic of meditation that's more sobering, such as recollection of death. You don't know when death is going to happen, but you do know that when it does happen, you're going to have to be well prepared, because your mind could easily latch on to some vagrant craving. If you're not in control at that point, it's like handing your car keys over to any crazy person who comes running past you on the street. You have no idea where the crazy person is going to drive you. So you want to have some control over your mind. This kind of reflection can get you more solidly focused and can calm the mind down.

Finally, the last step in this tetrad is to breathe in and out releasing the mind. Now, this can mean release on many levels. To begin with, you're releasing the mind from its fascination with sensuality, its fascination with sensual thoughts and plans, and from the hindrances in general, which, in addition to sensual desire, include ill will, sloth & drowsiness, restlessness & anxiety, and doubt. When you can drop that fascination, you can get into the first jhāna.

When you've been there for a while, you can bring back the step of being sensitive to the mind. Is there any disturbance in your concentration? Here we're not talking about disturbances coming from outside. We're talking about disturbances in the concentration itself.

In some cases, the disturbances are the beginnings of thoughts that would distract you. In a case like that, once you're established with a full-body awareness of the breath, you can keep watch to see if any thoughts are beginning to form. Usually, they'll start as a little stirring in the breath energy, in an area where it's hard to detect whether it's a physical sensation or a mental sensation. It's a little bit of both. If you decide that it's a mental sensation, you tend to put a label on it—that it's a thought about such and such—and then you get into it and ride with it.

So you've got to stop the process as quickly as you can. It's like being a spider on a web. The spider sits in one spot on the web, but because the strands of the web are all connected, it'll sense any disturbance anywhere in the web. As soon as there's a slight vibration in the web, it'll run over and deal with any insect that's gotten caught in the web, and then return to its spot.

In the same way, if you sense a little disturbance anywhere in the breath energy in the body, you leave the center of your focus and go over to zap that little stirring to disperse it. Then you return to your spot.

That's one kind of disturbance.

Another kind of disturbance is in the actual state of concentration itself. For instance, when you're already in the first jhāna, you're engaged in directed thought and evaluation. After a while, though, you reach a point where you realize you don't need to do that anymore. The breath is really good, feels fine—you don't have to keep thinking about adjusting the breath and spreading the breath, you can just be with the breath—then you can drop the directed thought and evaluation, and yet still stay with the breath. In fact, you can settle into the breath even more firmly, with a strong sense of oneness.

A similar process continues through the various levels of jhāna: You release the mind from the rapture, you release it from the pleasure, release it from the need to breathe—not that you force the breath to stop, simply that the breath energy in the body is so full and well-connected that you don't feel any need to breathe.

You can even release the mind from the need to focus on the body. You can have a sense of space or sense of awareness as your topics.

Those are some of the ways you can release it, ultimately on the way to total release.

It's in this way that you can use the mind to train the mind—to read its moods, to make it glad to be abandoning unskillful thoughts and developing skillful ones, to get it more concentrated, and to release it, step by step, from its various burdens.

So even though, in breath meditation, we're focusing primarily on the breath, we can't help but learn about the mind—and learn how to train the mind—at the same time. In fact, that's what the practice is all about. We're not here to get the breath, we're here to use the breath to get to the mind. When you can learn the skills of making the mind happy to be here, you're well on your way to getting the most out of the practice.

April 20, 2023, 1515

Q&A

Q: If the air doesn't enter by the mouth or by the nose, is there still a breath energy? In other words, does the breath energy mean to breathe inside the body?

A: Yes, there always is an energy in the body as long as you're alive. When the mind gets very concentrated in the fourth jhāna, the in-and-out breathing will stop, but that doesn't mean that you don't have breath. The breath energy actually fills the body very intensely at that point.

Q: Concerning the breath when you meditate, how do you breathe in? Does it come in through the entire body, through all the pores, or through one spot, for example, as when it comes in through the bottom of the feet?

A: Actually, it comes in and out all the pores of the body all the time, but there are some times that you want to emphasize the energy in one spot of the body or another—say, when you want to deliver more energy to that spot. You focus on the spot and you visualize it opening up to make it easier for the energy to enter and leave.

Q: I can't come to establish myself completely in the body or with the breath. I always have a little thought that presents itself. Each time I see it, I'm able to leave for a couple of seconds before coming back to the breath or the body. I'm present for all of this but I can't arrive at meditating completely with a sensation of the breath or the body. What do I do? I don't have the impression that I'm agitated. In fact, my mind is calm.

A: When you start meditating, there will be little thoughts nibbling away at the outside of your awareness, and one of the best ways of dealing with them is simply to ignore them. If they do come, think of them as a dog who's coming around begging for some food. If you give it some food, it'll come back again. If you don't give it any food, it'll come a few more times and

whimper and whine, but after a while, it'll realize that you're not interested in it and it'll go away. Simply paying attention to the little thoughts is to feed them. So pay them no attention at all. At first, they may say outrageous things, to get your attention, but if you're consistent in not feeding them, after a while they'll go away.

Once I was teaching meditation at a university in America, and the room they gave us had a very loud clock. At the end of the first meditation session, all the students opened up their eyes and said, "That clock!" So I told them, "The clock didn't destroy your breath, right? It's just the fact that you paid attention to it. So allow the sound of the clock to go right through you." In the same way with your thoughts, just allow them to go past and don't get involved.

Q: After a couple of days of meditation, it actually becomes harder for me. I get a lot of tension in my head, and my mind becomes heavier, with too much striving. I guess I focus around my head. How can I dissipate this tension while meditating?

A: There was a Zen monk named Hakuin who suffered from the same problem. His way of solving it was to imagine a large ball of butter on top of his head, and it was melting all the time, dripping down, down, down his body. So when you focus on the breath, think of the energy going down the body instead of coming up into the head. Another way of avoiding having too much energy or too much tension in the head is to focus your attention on the hands and the feet. Or you can think, excuse me, of the breath coming in and out of your rear end, the coccyx. That way, you can counteract the sensation of having to pull the energy in through the nose when you breathe.

Q: Ajaan, I did not understand how you were able to stop your migraines. I have the same sort of problem. Could you explain more in detail? Thank you.

A: I found that when I had migraines that it was closely related to the rhythm of my breathing. And there was something of a vicious cycle. The pain in the migraine restricted the way I thought I could breathe, and then the more my breathing was restricted, the worse the pain got.

Now, migraines can be a very strict master. In other words, if you find one way of breathing that helps to cure them today, it may not work tomorrow. So you have to explore. However, I found a couple of things that did work fairly consistently: One was to break that vicious cycle by breathing in as much as I could, expanding the belly in all directions as far as I could, and then breathing out as much as I could. If you can keep that up for a couple of minutes, even though it may be painful, it seems to break the vicious cycle. Another way is to release as much tension as you can in the lower part of the back. One of the basic principles that helps you, though, is realizing that if, when you breathe in, you tend to feel that the breath has to work its way around the pain that's already there, you restrict the breath and aggravate the headaches. To counteract that, you can think of the breath being there in the body prior to the pain. If you hold that perception in mind, it gives you more room to breathe. Those are a couple of tips.

Q: Yesterday when you were saying not to be obsessed with the details when observing the precepts, it made me question myself because I believe that is my case. I can sometimes exasperate the people around me. I have a hard time finding out what are mere details and what is the real heart of the matter. So what are the criteria that I can trust, to use as a measuring stick? When I don't follow the precepts in detail, what can I do that would not have any consequences or at least minimize the consequences?

A: The important part of the precepts is being sure about your intentions. The people who tend to be obsessed about the details also tend to be unsure about their intentions. This is one of the reasons why doing meditation will help with the precepts. It will help you see: Maybe you did step on the ant but you can be clear about the fact that you didn't *intend* to step on the ant. When you can be clear about your intentions, then the issues about the precepts become a lot easier.

Q: When I'm not practicing or on retreat, it's challenging to abide by the fifth precept, not drinking alcohol or smoking, especially when I'm socializing or simply just want to relax and have some fun. Do you have any advice or suggestions?

A: To begin with, smoking is not forbidden by the fifth precept.

As for drinking: When you come home after work, instead of pouring yourself a glass to drink, lie down on the floor and relax all the muscles in your body, starting with the top of the head and going down to the feet. That's how you can relax without drinking. As for fun, there are many ways of amusing yourself that don't have to involve drinking.

And as for socializing, this group has heard this point before, but I'll mention it again: Tell your friends that your doctor says that you can't drink. Don't tell them that your doctor is the Buddha. This is actually an old image that goes way back to the Pāli Canon, that the Buddha was the best doctor of all, so you're not lying.

Q: A fugitive is demanding protection with me. I have accepted to hide him in my house. The fugitive is a political opponent to the government. The regime is repressive and tyrannical. The police pound at my door and ask if I have the fugitive in my house and I respond No. Is this a lie?

A: That would be a lie, and the way around that situation would be to figure out some way to not give information about the fugitive to the police without, at the same time, lying. This sort of thing is going to be a challenge for each of us as we practice the precepts. My experience has been that the ways of not giving information will vary from culture to culture and language to language. It would be hard to tell you how to do it in France, but I could tell you how we might do it in America: Look the police in the eye, act indignant, and tell them that you are hiding nothing shameful in your house and that they're welcome to search to confirm that. This strategy, though, might not make sense in France.

Following the precepts requires that you use your imagination and discernment. So when you find yourself suddenly waking up in the middle of the night and can't get to sleep and you don't know what to think about, come up with your own answer to this question.

Q: How do you cultivate skillful mind states when the body is not well without using nostalgia?

A: One of the easiest things is to develop thoughts of goodwill: May all beings be happy. To whatever extent you're able to stay focused on that thought, stay focused there. That gives energy to the mind.

Q: A preoccupation that causes me to worry: what to do with all of the photos and albums of photos and everything that have piled up over the course of time. Nobody wants to take them. I'm in the process of detaching from everything that would encumber me in the last part of my life. Now is the time of aging, illness, death, and insight into death. I want to be as free from the past as much as I can.

A: You can do one of two things with your photos. One is to burn them all. The other is to hide them away someplace, say, in an attic or basement somewhere, with the thought that maybe some day, somebody will come across them in two generations and will find them fascinating and valuable. But as for you, you can say, "I've had enough of that." This is when you think about what Ajaan Maha Boowa had to say: Direct your thoughts to the goodness you can still squeeze out of your body in this last part of your life. When you think about death as being the end of everything, you feel like you have less and less time and opportunity to do good things. But when you think about death as being a transition to a new chapter, you can think about what would be a good transition and what would be a good way to start the next chapter.

In other words, think about your next life and the best way to prepare for it. It's as when you travel. When I come to France, I think about what I may be doing in France so that I can prepare when I pack my bags. Preparing for the next lifetime is like sending a package in the mail to yourself ahead of time.

Q: When rapture or intense joy can be felt, are they related to our true nature, to our Buddha-nature within us, or is it just a play of the mind? Where Hinduism and Christianity see the intervention of divine grace, how does Buddhism interpret these states that are more or less ecstatic?

A: Buddhism interprets these emotions as the result of your actions: either your past actions or your present actions right now. What appears to be grace

is actually the result of your past actions, or of present actions that you may not be aware that you're doing.

Q: How do we know what kind of being we were in our previous lives and what levels we were in? Can the first rebirth be something other than a living being, for example, something like a rock?

A: You don't really need to know what kind of being you were in a past lifetime. The most important thing is to focus on what you're doing right now. As for how the process of rebirth begins, the Buddha says that it's incomprehensible. The process has been going on for a very, very, very long time, in many, many, many universes. It's so long that it's longer than this universe we're in right now, that's for sure. So, the question is not "How do things get started?" but: "Do you want to keep on repeating the process again and again?" If you want a way out, the Buddha shows you the way.

And no, you can't be reborn as a rock. You can only be reborn as a living being.

Q: "Everything is conditioned, everything is co-produced by dependent co-arising, everything is a creation of the mind." ...

A: Maybe not. The Buddha says all dhammas are forerun by the mind—in other words, your *experience* of things is based on your intentions. As for things in and of themselves out there, the Buddha doesn't talk about them.

Q: Continuation of the same question: "So therefore, is the self something instantaneous and ephemeral?" If not, how would you explain *anattā* and how should we understand the title of the book by Ajaan Chah, *There Is No Ajaan Chah?* The notion of a person that you spoke about yesterday is not quite clear to me.

A: The Buddha never said that there is no self; he never said that there was a self. What he did say is that the things that we hold on to through our idea of self cause us to suffer. When we hold on to our idea of self, of what we are, that causes us to suffer. So the teaching on not-self is basically a teaching on what is worth holding on to or identifying with, and what is not worth holding on to or identifying with.

In the beginning of the practice, you have to hold on to the idea of your self as responsible for doing the practice, as competent to do the practice, and that you'll benefit from the practice. Then, as your practice progresses, you'll find that there are fewer and fewer things that are worth holding on to—until you actually get to the end of the path, and then you let go of the path, too. That's when you see everything as not-self. When the mind gains freedom through that act of letting go, then you let go of that perception of not-self as well. That's the last step to reach awakening. In that case, nibbāna would be neither self nor not-self.

There's a book on this topic in the back of the room, *Les sois et le pas-soi—Selves & Not-Self*, and I recommend that you look at it.

As for the book about Ajaan Chah: At that point in time, Ajaan Chah wasn't Ajaan Chah anymore. He had let go of everything, but he was still alive. People are defined by their attachments. When there's no more attachment, then they're not defined, so you can't say anything about them.

Q: When there is no person or being, why is there an illusion that there is a person or a being? It is so strong and difficult to overcome. What point of view is the best practice for seeing that there is no person?

A: As long as there is the process of becoming, there is a person being created by this process. The practice is not so much seeing that there never was anybody. Basically, it's seeing how you are creating that person all the time, and you have to decide whether you want to keep on creating that person or not. The Buddha gives you instructions on how to stop, with the assurance that when you stop, it does not lead to annihilation. What's left is the ultimate happiness. And as Ajaan Suwat once said, once you've attained the ultimate happiness, you don't care whether there's a being there or not. Everything is satisfied.

Q: As for the topic of *anicca*, what is the difference that you see between impermanence and inconstancy?

A: Impermanence covers things like mountains, which can be pretty stable. You know that someday the mountain will be demolished through geologic forces, but you feel, "As long as I'm alive, it's not going to be demolished, so I

can safely build my house there." Pāli actually has another word for impermanent: *adhuva*. Inconstancy, *anicca*, is like a mountain that's subject to earthquakes all the time: Would you still want to build your house there? No, because it's too undependable. That's inconstancy.

Q: When do we produce penetrative visions or insight? Is it during the meditation? Is it during another moment during the day? Do they happen during dreams? Is it an intellectual comprehension of phenomena as they are? And how do we know that this is not the fruit of our own imagination?

A: To begin with, genuine insights don't happen during dreams.

An actual insight is when you see that you're creating suffering and you don't have to. Then you can stop creating the cause. The measure of how true it is, is how much suffering stops. Insight is not insight into things as they *are*, it's insight into things as they *function*, and particularly how they function to cause suffering and how you can stop doing that. We're the ones creating the causes of suffering, and insight shows us, one, that we're doing it, and two, how we can stop.

Q: What's the difference between *samādhi* and *nimitta*?

A: The word *nimitta* has two meanings. In the commentaries, it's a vision that can occur during concentration. In the suttas, it's the theme that's the focus of your concentration, such as the body in and of itself. *Samādhi* is the actual solidity of your mind as you're concentrating.

(Meditation)

This afternoon, we had a question that was quite long. I'll just give you the general outlines, but I think it's of interest to everyone. The person said there was a relative who had done something that was very hard to forgive. The relative never asked for forgiveness and is now dead. The person who wrote the note said that he or she is still angry with the dead relative and tries to send thoughts of goodwill to him, but realizes that it comes only from the head and not from the heart.

The solution to this is, one, to realize what forgiveness means and, two, to realize what goodwill means. To forgive doesn't mean that you wipe the slate

clean. It means that you decide not to try to get revenge. As for goodwill, remember that goodwill is a wish for happiness, and when you extend goodwill to someone, it means basically, "May this person understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them." So if somebody's done something really bad, what you're basically hoping for is that they will see the error of their ways and make up their minds not to repeat that kind of action. You're not saying, "May you be happy as you are," but "May you be happy through learning how to act skillfully."

As for the fact that this action has happened, remember what the Buddha said about our many lifetimes: We've been through many, many, many universes. The Buddha doesn't advocate a big bang theory. It's more like a bang, bang, bang, bang theory. When the Buddha described his memory of previous lifetimes, he remarked that those who are able to remember forty universes of lifetimes have a very short memory.

So think about all the different things that we've all done to one another in those many lifetimes. Just imagine how many lifetimes you've been through in all that time. You've done many, many good things, and many, many bad things. For the bad things you did in the past, I'm sure you would want to be forgiven. So try to extend this attitude toward other people for their bad actions. When you can think in these terms, it's a lot easier to let go of your anger and to actually feel goodwill.

So for this last session of the afternoon, you may want to spend some time thinking goodwill for all the beings there are and giving forgiveness to yourself for all the bad things you've done, even the many things you can't remember.

April 20, 2023, 1900

Lessons for Illness

Tonight we'll be talking about the lessons for facing illness that can be derived from the Buddha's awakening.

To continue with the story of Ven. Raṭṭhapāḷa and King Koravya: Remember that Raṭṭhapāḷa told the king about the four Dhamma summaries that inspired him to go forth as a monk. The second one was, "The world is without shelter, without protector." You can imagine what the king thought about that.

So Raṭṭhapāḷa asked the king, "Do you have a recurrent illness?" The king replied, "Yes, I have a wind illness," which basically means shooting pains throughout the body. He added, "Sometimes I'm lying in bed and my courtiers are standing around, saying, 'Maybe this time he'll die. Maybe this time he'll die.'" So Raṭṭhapāḷa asks him, "Can you command them to take part of the pain and share it among them, so that you don't have to feel all the pain yourself?" The king said, "No, I have to feel all the pain on my own."

"That's the meaning of the phrase, 'The world is without shelter, without protector.'"

This is a lesson in *dukkha*, the stress and pain of this state of becoming. And, of course, it's a lesson in illness.

The Canon, in its treatment of illness, takes hunger as the primary example of illness. It's something that affects all of us, and it's a paradigm for how to treat other illnesses. It comes from a lack or imbalance in the physical properties, and you treat it when you can, but you learn how to bear up with it when you can't.

Ajaan Fuang tells a story about when he was with Ajaan Mun and there were occasions when a monk would be sick, but there was no medicine for his illness. If the monk was begging for medicine, Ajaan Mun would scold him. "You're a meditator, use your discernment to comprehend the pain," he would

say. But when there *was* medicine and the monk refused to take it, Ajaan Mun would scold him, "Why are you making yourself so difficult to care for?"

It sounds like you'd get scolded either way, but the message was this: Treat the illness with medicine when medicine is available, but otherwise, use the strengths of the mind to treat it in any event.

You start with the strength of **conviction** in the Buddha's awakening. Think of the teaching on kamma: In line with the principles of this/that conditionality, some of your diseases come from past kamma, some come from present kamma, some come from a mixture of the two. This is why not all diseases go away when you get your mind free of defilement: Past kamma is playing a role. Even the Buddha, the most spiritually advanced person who ever was, suffered from diseases every now and then because of his past kamma.

He classed diseases into three categories:

1) those that will go away without medicine,
2) those that won't go away even when you do take medicine, and
3) those that will go away only when you do take medicine, but not if you don't.

You can't know ahead of time which category a particular disease falls into, so you have to treat it as if it belongs to the third type, which means that you treat it with medicine when you can. This is why the Vinaya, the collection of the monks' rules, is so full of medical knowledge concerning medicines and other treatments for dealing with disease.

It also describes the ideal patient:

> *"A sick person endowed with five qualities is easy to care for. He does what is amenable to his cure; he knows the proper amount in things amenable to his cure; he takes his medicine; he tells the symptoms as they have come to be to the nurse desiring his welfare, saying that they are worsening when they are worsening, improving when they are improving; or remaining the same when they are remaining the same; and he's the type of person who can endure bodily feelings that are painful, fierce, sharp, wracking, repellent, disagreeable, and life-threatening. A sick person endowed with these five qualities is easy to tend to."*

The hardest of those five qualities, of course, is enduring pain. This is where you have to bring in the strength of **persistence**. Your right attitude is that the body may be sick, but the mind will not be sick.

There are three main points to understand here.

• The first point is having the right attitude toward your disease. If you ask yourself, "Why is this disease happening to me?" the answer is, "Because you were born." It happens to everybody, so you have to regard it as normal and see it as an opportunity to strengthen your mind in the face of adversity.

• The second point is seeing the value of learning how to endure pain. You don't want your mind to be driven by fear of pain. Otherwise, people who don't wish you well can take advantage of that fear. Also, learning to endure the pain of illness helps to prepare you for the pains of death.

This is where you bring in the strengths of **shame** and **compunction**. Think of the meditators in the past who have been brave in facing pain and whose minds gained important insights as a result. Both of my teachers, Ajaan Fuang and Ajaan Suwat, said that they gained important insights because of their illnesses. In Ajaan Fuang's case, it was chronic intense headaches. In Ajaan Suwat's case, it was malaria. One time Ajaan Suwat said, "If malaria were a person, I would bow down to him out of gratitude." Remember that death will be even more painful, so you want to ensure that pain will not pull down your mind state at that time, so here's your chance to practice with pain.

• The third main point to keep in mind is that you're not here just to endure the pain. You're here to understand the pain so that it doesn't overcome the mind. The ideal attitude is that you want to be able to experience pain disjoined from it, which means that the pain may be there, but you can see it as something separate from your body and separate from your awareness. We cling to pain not directly, but because we cling to things we like that are right around the pain. To separate the pain out from these things, we can't just sit and endure it. We have to be more proactive and experiment with it, to see that it is distinct from the physical and mental events surrounding it.

This is where we develop the strength of discernment by remembering the analysis of feeling given in dependent co-arising, and then applying that knowledge to our specific pains.

Dependent co-arising describes the factors around feeling in two of the early factors of the list: fabrication and name-and-form. Under fabrication, directed thought and evaluation are right next to feeling. Remember that directed thought and evaluation are basically how you're talking to yourself about the pain. Another sub-factor under fabrication are perceptions, which are your mental images and labels of pain. Under name-and-form, near feeling you also have the physical properties of the body, along with perceptions, intentions, and acts of attention. Any of these factors could be making it hard to endure pain, but if you train them properly, they can actually make it easier to endure pain.

Sometimes you're told that you cannot want for the pain to go away because that's craving. That's partially true, but it has to be qualified. In order to separate the pain from its accompanying factors so that you can experience it disjoined from it, you have to see what you're doing that's aggravating the pain unnecessarily, whether physically or mentally, so that you can stop doing those things.

In Majjhima 101, the Buddha says not to load yourself down unnecessarily with pain—and, by definition, from his point of view, all mental pain is unnecessary. So the desire not to suffer *mentally* from the pain is actually part of the path. If you can lessen the physical pain in the process, that's all to the good.

In reference to those two sets of factors in dependent co-arising, you can see that breath meditation is very helpful with its emphasis on the three types of fabrication. It's also good for dealing with the extra factors that come from name-and-form: the four physical properties or elements, and the way in which the mind's intentions and acts of attention shape whatever the experience is.

It's here that you develop the remaining strengths in dealing with the pain —in other words, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment.

You may remember the four steps of **mindfulness** of breathing dealing with feeling, which we talked about yesterday morning:

> breathing in and out sensitive to rapture or refreshment,
> breathing in and out sensitive to pleasure,

breathing in and out sensitive to mental fabrication, and
breathing in and out calming mental fabrication.

These steps, in the context of meditation in general, refer to the stages in getting the mind to settle into deeper and deeper stages of concentration, through cultivating rapture together with feelings of pleasure and equanimity. But the teachings of the Thai forest masters show that these steps can also be applied to the contemplation of feelings of pain, including the pains of illness, as well.

The first two steps, dealing with rapture and pleasure, receive a great deal of attention from Ajaan Lee. His instructions for breath meditation focus on the breath energies throughout the body that accompany the in-and-out breath, and he shows how these energies can be very useful in exploring what you're doing that may be contributing to physical pain.

The first step he recommends, when there's a pain in the body, is not to focus attention directly on the pain, but instead to focus on a part of the body that you can make pleasurable by the way you breathe and by the way you allow the breath energies to flow freely through that area. Sometimes the best place to focus is in a part of the body immediately opposite to the pain. For example, if the pain is on the right side of the body, you focus on the corresponding spot on the left. If it's in the back, you focus in front. Or you may find that the pain in one part of the body is related to an energy blockage in another, more remote part of the body: In my own experience, I've had migraines that were alleviated when I focused on clearing up energy blockages in my lower back.

Eventually, you'll want to be able to focus directly on the pain itself, but Ajaan Lee's first step in approaching pain accomplishes three things: (1) It gives you a beachhead of pleasure to which you can retreat if you find that the pain becomes overwhelming. (2) It gives the mind a solid basis in **concentration,** which can provide a sense of nourishment for the work of contemplating the pain. (3) It gives you practice in learning how to focus on a part of the body without tensing up that part of the body. This will be an especially useful lesson in learning how to pay direct attention to pain without aggravating it.

Working with breath in this way also involves **discernment,** as you explore the three types of fabrication in relationship to the pain. You start with bodily fabrication—the rhythm and texture of how you breathe in and out—and you also bring in verbal fabrication: talking to yourself about how to make the breath comfortable, how to maintain that sense of comfort once it's there, and how to spread it through the parts of the body that are receptive to that good energy.

This, of course, also involves mental fabrication in terms of the perceptions you use to experiment with the breath energies in different parts of the body. Ajaan Lee recommends two perceptions to help in this step in dealing with pain: Think of the body as a house with a few rotten floorboards. If you're going to sit or lie down on the floor, choose a spot where the boards aren't rotten. Or think of it as a mango with a rotten spot: Leave the rotten spot to the worms; you eat the good part remaining.

Then, when the breath is solidly comfortable and the mind feels ready, drop those two images. Now think of spreading the good breath energy through the pain. For example, if there's a pain in your knee, think of the good energy going down the leg through the knee and out the tips of the toes. Don't let there be a perception of the pain blocking the breath. Remind yourself that breath is energy, and energy can go through anything. I've found it helpful to think of the area of the body that's in pain as being composed of atoms, and atoms are mainly space, so the breath can penetrate easily through the space. The perception of the pain as a blockage is actually conflating the pain with the solidity or earth property of the body. As long as you cling to the body, that would be a recipe for allowing the pain to invade the mind and remain.

Or, as I said earlier, you can perceive the breath as being in that part of the body prior to the pain, so that you can minimize the sense that the pain is blocking it.

There are also other questions you can ask about the pain and its relationship to perception at this stage. Do you perceive the pain as being blocked off from the breath? Are you using the parts of the body that are in pain to do the breathing? If so, think of those parts relaxing, and allow other parts of the body to do the work of breathing instead. You can also experiment

with the perception of having the breath go straight into the pain when it first enters the body. See what that does to your experience of pain.

Sometimes, when you follow this step, the pain will go away or will be greatly reduced. Even if it doesn't, you will have established an important relationship vis-à-vis the pain: You can be proactive in dealing with it. You're not afraid of it. You're not a passive victim. When you're proactive, you're not a stationary target for the pain, so it can't hit you so easily. At the same time, by learning to question your perceptions around the breath and the pain, you've learned how arbitrary some of your original perceptions were. By sensitizing you to the role of perception—mental fabrication—around the pain as you try to find perceptions that help to alleviate the pain, this insight makes some beginning forays into the third and fourth steps in contemplating pain: sensitizing yourself to mental fabrications—perceptions and feelings—and then calming them.

These are the steps to which Ajaan Maha Boowa devotes a great deal of attention. He recommends a wide range of questions that you can ask yourself about how you perceive the pain. For instance, do you perceive the pain as being the same thing as the part of the body that's in pain? If the pain is in the knee, do you see the pain and the knee as being the same thing? This question may seem strange, but remember: We may have picked up some strange ideas about pain when we were children, and often these ideas are still lurking in our subconscious. The only way to dig them out is to ask questions like this.

If the pain and the part of the body seem to be one, remind yourself that your experience of the body is made up of the four properties of earth, water, wind, and fire, but the pain is something else. The pain may seem solid or hot, but remind yourself that solidity and heat are properties of the body that you've conflated with the pain. Can you perceive the pain as being separate from the solidity or the heat? To counteract the perception of the solidity of pain, you can try to perceive it as distinct moments, arising and passing away in quick succession.

A related question is: Does the pain have a shape? If you perceive it as having a shape, again you've glommed the pain together with a property of the body.

Similarly, you can ask yourself if there are pains in several parts of the body that seem to be connected with lines of tension. This is actually another way of giving the pains a shape and of conflating the pains with the body. So ask yourself if you can see the pains as separate from one another. Or try to counteract the perception of a connection with an alternative perception: You have a knife that you can use to cut any connections as soon as they appear.

Another question: Do you perceive the pain as having an intention to hurt you? Remind yourself that pain is not a conscious agent. It has no intentions at all. It's just an event that depends on other events. If you perceive it as having an intention to hurt you, you're creating a sense of self around the perception of being the target of malicious intent. When dropping the perception of its intention, you can also ask yourself why you're identifying yourself as the target.

Another question: Where is the most intense point of pain? If you look carefully, you'll see that it moves around. Try chasing it down. This line of questioning not only helps to loosen up any fixed perceptions you might have around the pain, but it also gives you practice in being courageous in the face of pain. Instead of trying to run away from it, you run toward it—and it'll run away from you. This exercise also helps to guarantee that in your contemplation of pain, you haven't allowed the desire for it to go away to slip into first place in your intention for focusing on it. The correct intention toward it is to try to understand it.

In addition to applying these questions and perceptions—verbal and mental fabrications—to your own pains, you'll also need to come up with some questions of your own around your perception of pain to see what helps you to detect perceptions you may not have noticed and to loosen them up.

A question I've found helpful—once you can perceive the pain as occurring in discrete moments—is to ask yourself: When the moments of pain arise, are they coming at you or going away from you? See if you can hold in mind the perception that they're going away, going away. It's like riding in a train in a seat with your back to the engine. As the train runs along the track and you look out the window, you'll notice that whatever comes into the range of your awareness in the landscape outside is already going away from you as soon as

you see it. This perception helps to get rid of the perception that the pain is aimed at you. It also helps to detect and loosen up any tendency you have to cling to the perception of yourself as a target.

When you loosen up and drop your perceptions around the pain, the pain may go away—sometimes in some very uncanny ways. I myself, once, was meditating and managed to separate the perception of the pain from the pain itself, and the pain slipped from where it originally was, ran through the body, into the heart, and disappeared. But even if the pain doesn't go away with this analysis, you'll arrive at a state of mind where you sense that the pain can still be there, but your awareness feels separate from it. The body is one thing, the pain is another, your awareness is yet another. They're in the same place, but they're separate, just like the radio waves transmitted from Marseille, Nice, and Aix going through the air all around you. They're all in the same place, but at different frequencies. If you have a radio that can distinguish the frequencies, you can tune into the various frequencies without having to move the radio to one place for one frequency, and to another place for a different one.

Other times, when you can separate the pain from the body and from the awareness, you get the sensation that the pain actually moves itself away from the body and hovers at a slight distance from it.

Ajaan Maha Boowa notes that a strategy for dealing with pain that works today may not work with a different pain tomorrow. And given what the Buddha teaches about the many factors surrounding pain, it's easy to see why. One day a pain may invade the mind when you conflate it with one aggregate or factor of dependent co-arising—form, say, or a particular perception—and on the next day, another pain may invade the mind when you've conflated it with another one.

If you compare the ajaans' strategies with the various causal clusters described in dependent co-arising, you'll see that they deal not only with the issue of perception, under the factor of fabrication, but also with the issues of attention and intention under name in name and form. Attention determines not only where in the body you focus your interest, but also which questions you focus on asking and answering. Intention, of course, deals with your

reasons for contemplating the pain. As I noted above, the quest not to have the pain invade the mind can include within it the desire to see the pain go away, but it can't allow that desire to be prominent. For your contemplation to get results, the desire to *understand* the pain always has to come first.

When you understand these exercises in this way, it gives you an idea of the range of different questions you might try in your own investigation of pain to develop dispassion for the two reasons why pain could invade your mind and remain: what you're doing to aggravate the pain, and what you're clinging to that you've conflated with the pain. When you understand these two issues, you've gone a long way toward unraveling the problem of suffering.

The important point is that you don't make physical weakness or illness an excuse for not taking a proactive approach to understanding pain. As I noted above, both Ajaan Fuang and Ajaan Suwat gained important insights into pain —and into the mind—while contemplating pain while they were seriously ill. Many other people in the Forest tradition, ordained and not, have also reported similar results. If they can do it, so can you.

Which means that even though there's the pain of illness, you can do something about it. And it doing something about it, you've greatly strengthened your mind to deal with the even greater challenges facing it at the end of life.

April 21, 2023, 0900

Mindfulness of Breathing: Mental Qualities (1)

This morning we'll begin our discussion of the fourth tetrad in the Buddha's teachings on mindfulness of breathing: the four steps dealing with mental qualities, or dhammas.

Some people have asked: What's the difference between this tetrad and the third, which deals with the mind as its frame of reference?

There are two ways of answering that question. The first has to do with the image of the committee of the mind. If you see the mind as having lots of voices, with lots of different opinions, you might think of "mind" as a frame of reference concerned with the mind as a whole—the times when the committee has come to an agreement—whereas "mental qualities" refer to the individual members of the committee. In particular, when you're focusing on this tetrad, your purpose is to get rid of specific members that obstruct mindfulness and concentration, and to encourage members that help the mind to settle down.

This connects directly with the second way of answering the question. Remember the Buddha's basic formula for establishing mindfulness: "keeping focused on the body in and of itself, ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world." This formula describes two activities: keeping focused on the topic of your concentration, and putting aside any thoughts related to the world that would pull you away from that focus. The first three tetrads, for the most part, are concerned with the first activity, maintaining focus: keeping the breath, the comfortable feelings associated with the breath, and your awareness of the breath all together, filling your sense of the body.

The fourth tetrad is more concerned with the second activity: putting aside thoughts related to the world. In this way, it connects directly with the last step in the third tetrad. If you remember, that step is to breathe in and out

releasing the mind. This fourth tetrad goes into the details of how to go about releasing the mind, first from any concerns about the world that would destroy the focus of your concentration, and then ultimately from any thoughts around the world of your concentration itself. In this way, the fourth tetrad first guards your concentration, and then guards your mind from getting stuck on concentration or even stuck on discernment. That's how it brings total release.

The steps in the fourth tetrad are these:

First, as you breathe in and out, you focus on inconstancy, *anicca*, which would also include *dukkha* and *anattā*, stress and not-self. Second, you breathe in and out focusing on dispassion. Third, you breathe in and out focusing on cessation, and fourth, you breathe in and out focusing on letting go.

There's a lot to say about these steps, so this morning we'll discuss the first two, and save the last two for tomorrow.

So. Step one: focusing on inconstancy. The Pāli term here, *anicca*, is often translated as "impermanent," but that's not quite accurate. *Anicca* is the opposite of *nicca*, which means constant, as in an activity that constantly takes place or reliably happens. It's possible to know that something is impermanent—like, say, the Alps—but to feel confident that they're reliable enough so that you can visit them without too much fear that they will fall on you. But when you see that a mountain is constantly subject to earthquakes, you might decide that it's too dangerous to visit.

So when you're focusing on inconstancy, you're trying to see how you can't really rely on the things where you usually look to find your happiness. And it's important that you understand this focus: To see how things in general—such as the breath—are changing all the time doesn't have much of an impact on the mind. It's like seeing houses sliding down a hill. As long as they're not your houses, you may feel sympathy for the people who live in those houses, but it's easy to accept that this is part of life: Things are sliding down hills all the time.

But if your own house slides down a hill, it has a much deeper impact on your mind. In the same way, when you're focusing on inconstancy in a way that gives rise in a meaningful way to the next step, focusing on dispassion,

you have to be investigating places that mean a lot to you, where you've looked for happiness in the past. Only then will this reflection have an impact on the mind.

In following the first two steps, it's not the case that you can go straight from focusing on *anicca* to focusing on dispassion. In other words, you can't simply say to yourself, "Gee, this body of mine is inconstant. It changes, so I'm just going to abandon attachment to it." That doesn't work. It's like saying, "Food is unreliable. Every time I eat, I get hungry again, so I might as well just stop eating." If you did that, you wouldn't last very long. You'd either starve to death or start eating again. There are actually extra steps in between to answer the argument, "Okay, this may be inconstant, but why should I let it go?"

This is where we have to look elsewhere in the Canon to see what those extra steps might be. And we find passages where the Buddha describes five steps in the process. First, you look for origination. In other words, when anger, say, arises, you look to see what's causing it. Now, the word "origination" has two aspects that make it different from simple "arising." The first aspect is that you're looking to see what's *causing* the appearance of whatever it is. In other words, you're not just watching things appear. You're looking to see what's *making* them appear. And second, when the Buddha talks about origination, almost invariably he's talking about causes coming from *within your own mind.* So you look to see, "What's the mind doing that's causing this to arise?"

The second step is to watch that mind state passing away. Here the question is: "What's the mind doing when it passes away? What changed in my mind?" Then watch out to see if the mind picks the anger up again.

These first two steps counteract a common impression that a particular instance of desire or anger that has come into the mind is there 24/7 when it's actually not. It comes and it goes, but then you pick it up again. The picking it up again: That's the problem.

You can see this clearly with anger. When anger flares up in the mind, it has a physical component: Your breath changes and hormones are released into the blood. The mind, however, can sustain a thought of anger for only a

brief while, and then it fades. Yet the hormones are still in the blood, speeding up your heart rate, affecting your breath, and creating tension in your chest, your stomach, or your hands. You notice that, and you read it as a sign that you're still angry. So you pick the anger up again. It seems natural, but if you don't want to be a slave to your anger, you have to question that tendency. You don't really have to pick it up again. You could simply let the hormones run their course and then fade away. So why do you *want* to pick the anger up again? What's the allure?

That's the third step: After you've been looking for the origination and the passing away, you look for the allure. What's the attraction of that mind state? What makes you feel you want to go with it or should go with it? Often you find that even though there are aspects of anger that you don't really like, there is a part of the mind that likes anger. It may feel that anger liberates you from some social constraints, so that you can speak and act as you like without caring about the consequences. Or there are times when you somehow feel obligated to be loyal to your anger. You might feel that if you dropped the anger, you'd be admitting that you were a coward, or that you were wrong to be angry in the first place. Or you might feel that you should remain true to your feelings in general.

Whatever the allure, you have to look carefully for it and admit it to yourself when you see it in action. Sometimes it's hard to admit to yourself that you like your defilements, but this is where honesty is important. Otherwise, if you don't understand the appeal of a particular defilement, you'll never get past it.

Then, in the fourth step, you observe the drawbacks of that defilement. "If I follow through with this, what are the drawbacks going to be? If I keep putting energy into maintaining this feeling, how am I going to act? And even if I don't act on it, what is it going to do to my mind if I'm constantly going back to this particular type of greed, aversion, delusion?" The Buddha says you're bending the mind in the direction of those defilements. Nowadays, we'd say you're putting ruts in the mind. As soon as you get near that issue again, you just go right into the rut and get carried away wherever the rut will lead you.

Another way of looking at the drawbacks of that defilement is to see that whatever satisfaction or benefit it may give you is inconstant, stressful, and

not-self. It requires a lot of energy to keep the defilement going, but then the results don't give any real, lasting satisfaction.

Once you're clear about the drawbacks, then you can compare them with the allure. When you can see, "I'm putting all this effort and energy into this, and I'm not getting the payback that I want. I'm creating stress and suffering but getting no real satisfaction to compensate for the amount of energy I'm putting into it": That's when you arrive at a value judgment—This isn't worth the energy that goes into fabricating it. With that judgment, you develop dispassion for the act of fabricating it any further. You let it go. It's like seeing that you're making an investment that's actually costing more than it repays, so you withdraw your funds. Or you can compare it to a game you used to play as a child: When you see no more challenge or interest in playing the game, you outgrow it. As the Thai ajaans say, you sober up. When you can say, "I've had enough of this," that's dispassion, which is the escape from that mind state.

So that's how you go from contemplating inconstancy to contemplating dispassion—the fifth step in this five-step process, and the second step in the fourth tetrad of breath meditation: You train yourself to breathe in and out focused on dispassion.

We'll continue with the remaining two steps in this tetrad tomorrow morning.

April 21, 2023, 1515

Q&A

Q: Why do we meditate?

A: Ideally, we should be meditating because we realize that we're causing unnecessary suffering and we would like to stop.

Q: When one is face-to-face with a person who is suffering and is not on the spiritual path, how can one help them? With reference to all that you've said and taught us about pain, what can one say to that person? How can one aid that person simply?

A: What we were talking about yesterday were techniques for someone who believes that it is useful to learn how to endure pain but not suffer from it. So, whatever that person's background of beliefs, you try to use that background to help motivate him or her to see that, Yes, it is useful to learn how to endure pain without suffering from it.

Q: Is it possible that a person might be convinced or grasp subconsciously that his or her pain is deserved from past bad kamma and that nothing can aid that person?

A: You have to convince the person that what we experience is not just the result of past kamma. What we're doing right now in the present moment also plays a role in how we experience the present moment. Think for a moment about the Buddha. Before teaching people how to put an end to suffering, did he ask them, "Do you deserve to suffer?" He never asked that question. He said, in effect, "If you're suffering, this is how you can put an end to it." Also, he never talked about people "deserving" to suffer. He did say that certain actions in the past will tend to lead to certain results, but he was basically interested in convincing people that, Yes, they do have within their power not to suffer no matter what they've done in the past.

Q: All the instructions you've given on pain are very rich, but with all these methods and all these strategies, these questions present themselves to me. The first question is: Where do you start? And are there strategies adapted to certain types of pain? Is it necessary that you try by chance to see what works? What to do?

A: The first thing to do is remember Ajaan Lee's first step: When there's pain, don't focus directly on the pain. Focus on another part of the body and get that as comfortable as you can. Step Twp: Once there's a sense of ease in this comfortable part of the body, think of it spreading through the pain, out in the other direction, and then out the body. After that, that's when you can go to Step Three: Focus directly on the pain and ask questions about it. As for the questions you ask, it's hard to tell ahead of time which ones will get the best results. So that's where you have to experiment and test things.

Q: I have a permanent muscular pain in the upper part of my back. When I visualize the breath, the pain amplifies with the in-breath. I've tried to adjust the length of the breath to reduce the pain, but my mind really prefers long in-and-out breaths. To counteract this pain, I lead my mind to a part that's numb to the pain, but after a moment, the mind keeps going back to the pain. What do I do to neutralize this perturbation so that I can give all of my energy to the meditation?

A: You've got to train your mind to stay where you want it to stay. This is one of those points where you use the perception of not-self: "The upper part of my back is not mine. If the pain wants to have that, it can have it. I'm going to stay in another part of the body that's not in pain." When you can get your mind to stay focused that way and develop a good foundation in another part of the body, then you can deliberately return to the pain and start asking questions as we recommended yesterday, using whatever perceptions you can to remind yourself that the pain is one thing, but the back and the breath are something else. If all you can think is, "I want the pain to go away, I want the pain to go away," that's going to get in the way of actually getting past it.

Also, to make sure the pain doesn't restrict the breath, try using the perception that the breath is there prior to the pain, so it doesn't have to work around the pain. It's already there. If you can hold to that perception, it can

make it more possible to breathe in a way that you like regardless of whether the pain stays or not.

Q: Would it be useful to have a desire for the next life, for example, that you would like to become a monk or to become a great benefactor?

A: The best desire for your next life, if you're going to have to be reborn, is: "May I come back to a place where I can practice the Dhamma." If you place too many stipulations on where and why and how you want to be reborn, they might get in the way of that more important goal. For instance, suppose you were back in the 19th century and you were going to be born in Thailand. It turns out that, at that time, the upper strata of society were convinced of wrong view, believing that the way to nibbāna was closed and even the way to jhāna was closed. You might have been tempted to tell yourself, "I'd like to be born in the high level of society so that I can have power to do good," but if that aspiration came true, you'd be raised in an environment filled with wrong view. On the other hand, if you had been born as a peasant in northeastern Thailand, you would have had a better chance to practice the Dhamma.

Q: You told us that it's not really useful to know your past lives, but if someone has had a difficult life, seeing that this was due to a previous life where he misbehaved, could this possibly incite that person to change his behavior and to become more kind?

A: It is possible that it would be beneficial. But at the same time, if you know the general principle that your current life status depends a lot on your past actions, then you can just accept that as a general principle without having to know all the details.

I know a monk who used to be full of himself. In other words, he had a very high opinion of himself, he followed his whims, and was unwilling to listen to others. Then, one time he was staying alone in the forest. He was having his meal when something grabbed him by the back of the neck, pulled his head up, and said, "Look!" It was if, on the wall in front of him, a movie started to show. And basically, the message was, "This is what you did in your previous lifetimes." He saw that he'd done a lot of really bad things. He ran out of the

hut and threw up. After that, he became a changed person. So if you're very full of yourself, maybe you could use something like that.

Q: Dear Ajaan, I thought I was joining a retreat that was silent. Maybe I was wrong. The group here brings me a lot of support most of the time. What to do when sometimes I feel a twinge of annoyance that just passes through?

A: It's good to write a note like this every now and then so that I can remind everybody, "Please be quiet." Silence is so hard to come by and it's so easy to break. The Buddha said that one of the conditions for the maintaining of the Dhamma is that you have respect for concentration, which means respecting both your concentration and the concentration of others. At the same time, though, if there are people who are breaking silence, think of your mind as being like a screen on a window. The wind can go through the screen because the screen doesn't catch the wind. In other words, don't catch the sounds. And have lots of goodwill for everybody.

Q: Through my experience with my grandparents and parents, it seems that in old age, the boredom, the inactivity, the solitude, and the emptiness of the days that pass by happen more than any really horrible pains. How do we apply the Buddha's teachings when the societal structures of the Buddha's time do not exist today?

A: The practice here basically depends on conviction. If you're convinced that life doesn't end with death and that there is more that follows after it, then whether the social structures support you or not, you can decide to give your energy to things that will be useful as you get older. So if you believe that there's good still to be done, think about that teaching of Ajaan Maha Boowa: that you squeeze as much goodness out of your body as you can before you have to throw it away. Even though society may not have much use for you when you get old, you can still get a lot of use out of your own life. Even when you're alone, you can meditate on your breath to strengthen your mind and spread thoughts of goodwill, and that's a positive contribution to the world.

Q: Concerning the four forms of clinging—for sensual pleasures, for habits and practices, for views, and for doctrines of self—certain teachers say

that they all come down to one form or another of identity, in other words, the idea of me, mine, identification. Is this the case?

A: Every clinging involves a sense of "me." However, there is a problem when people think, "Why don't I just go to the root of clinging and bypass dealing with all of those other forms of clinging? I don't want to bother getting rid of sensual attachments because I can just get rid of my sense of self first." But the mind doesn't work that way. You have to work with sensual desire first because otherwise, it'll undermine your efforts to get rid of more subtle forms of clinging.

Q: I understand that I fabricate my feelings and my perceptions, however, I do not have the impression that I fabricate my thoughts that just arrive in grand number. Where do they come from?

A: They come from your past kamma: past actions you've done, past habits you've had, all kinds of things related to your past actions. Thoughts that seem to come out of nowhere actually come from your past kamma.

Q: In the committee of my breath, there are many members sitting in, but not many are in charge. The mind is the arbitrator for the long-term. Can a person be defined by all the different sub-selves that he has or can he be defined by one self that ends up dominating the others? If so, what is that called? Can one call that the tendency of a person?

A: The Buddha never wanted us to define what we are. He basically said just to look at what you're doing. Now, if you do have a sense that there are many different members of the committee in your mind, try first to identify with the ones that are most skillful and put the other members out to pasture. The image is that you have some horses that you can't use anymore, so you just put them out in a meadow, where you don't have to feed them. You find that you pare down the members of the committee more and more and more until you don't need anybody in the committee. That's when you're done. The different senses of self just don't play a role anymore.

Q: My friends ask me why it matters which being I will reincarnate as, because it, she, or he will not remember that it, she, or he was me in the former life? Indeed, I have no memories of my former lives. Maybe they were

much better, but I do not suffer from it as I do not know. This system sounds like you work really hard all your life for someone else to get the results from all your good actions. What should I tell them? P.S. Personally, I meditate and practice virtue for the benefits it brings me in this very life.

A: Are you the same person that you were when you were a child? Yes and no. However, many things that you did when you were a child, like going to school, are definitely benefiting you now. At the time you were a child you felt that "I am me." Now you feel, "I am me," even though you now look and act and think like a very different person.

The same sort of principle applies whether it's in the same lifetime or going over to another lifetime. You will still feel like you. You don't feel like you're somebody else. So it's not as if you're doing good for somebody else. You're doing it for what you become. If you're practicing for the good that it leads you to do in this lifetime, all well and good. But also be prepared for the fact that it will actually carry over to what you become in the next lifetime around.

Q: Questions about inconstancy and impermanence. First question: Could inconstancy be defined as impermanence over a short time?

A: Inconstancy is the fact that things are simply unreliable and they could change at any time.

Q: Second question: Does inconstancy characterize one particular lifetime, whereas impermanence is applied to the succession of our rebirths?

A: We use the word *inconstancy* because it keeps reminding us that what we have as a basis for happiness is unreliable. The Buddha asks you to take his concepts and use them for the purpose for which they are meant. That way, you get the most use out of them. Here the purpose is to develop a sense of dispassion for the activities you've been doing that are causing suffering.

Q: In the course of the meditations during this retreat, I've seen myself return to my childhood or other times in my life: my adolescence, etc. Is this a habit that is awaiting me at the moment when I leave this body and should I cultivate it and let it appear at that time?

A: This is very common when people begin a retreat. When there's less happening in the present moment, things from the past tend to well up in the mind. You have to learn how to have the right attitude toward such things, because it is true that at the end of life, events in this lifetime will often start appearing to you. It's good to prepare yourself and say, "This was just in the past, and I don't have to try to go back to the past." Otherwise, you get attached there, and that will lead you to be reborn in a similar place, which is not necessarily a good thing. If it's a good memory, that place or the people involved may not be so good any more, so don't dwell on those thoughts. If it's a bad memory, learn how to have lots of goodwill for everybody who was involved so that you're not born under the influence of thoughts of regret or revenge.

Q: Can one in Theravada Buddhism believe in something that is transcendent, that works in invisible realms to provoke events in our life that has as its purpose to make us progress spiritually, something that is more grand than that, to which one can attain or submit oneself with confidence? The will and their efforts, don't they have their limits? Is there not another aspect of devotion in this tradition?

A: Well, there is an aspect of devotion. We feel devotion for the Buddha for having shown us the way, for the Dhamma he taught, and for the Sangha who have kept the Dhamma alive. But the main emphasis of the Dhamma is that you do have the possibility within you that you can put an end to suffering, so learn how to have more confidence in your own efforts.

Also, it is true that within the tradition that they talk about the help that sometimes comes from devas. There may be some devas who were your relatives in a past lifetime who are concerned about you—and there are cases where they can really help you. And then there are the ajaans who are believed to be non-returners who can also help you. I know in my own life, as soon as I got to Thailand it seemed as if events were arranged so that eventually I went to meet Ajaan Fuang. It almost felt preordained. However, you have to remember that devas are not totally dependable. Some are not really wise, and even the wise ones can be a little fickle.

There's a story in the Canon of a monk going down to bathe in a pool of water. There's a lotus in the water, so he leans over to smell the lotus. Immediately a deva appears and says, "That's an offense." The monk says, "Oh, come on, it's a minor thing." And the deva says, "If you're really serious about the practice, even minor things are very large." So he comes to his senses and says, "Well, thank you very much." And he adds, "If you ever see me do anything like this again, please let me know." The deva responds, "Look, I'm not your servant. Look after yourself!" She then disappears.

Q: When I think about practicing mettā—goodwill and compassion—I have fewer thoughts, but isn't this the tree that hides the forest? Aren't the thoughts just being suppressed? How to skillfully use goodwill?

A: When you're developing thoughts of goodwill, there are many, many ways of using them. At the same time, when you're trying to get the mind into concentration, the first order of business is simply to get thoughts out of the way so that the mind can develop the solidity it needs to eventually deal wisely with its thoughts. There will come a time when you'll want to look into those thoughts to see what defilements lie behind them. But in the meantime, as you're trying to get the mind to calm down, whatever works to get thoughts out of the way is a necessary part of the practice so that the mind can become solid enough to deal skillfully with its defilements and not get pushed around by them.

As for using thoughts of goodwill, there are many, many ways of using them. Just basically remember what goodwill means: "May all beings understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them." In any circumstances where you find that's a useful thought, go ahead and use it.

There was a question about visions that one of you had during meditation. The question to ask yourself about visions is always: Can I can get a Dhamma lesson out of this vision? If there is such a lesson, then you take it and test it to see if it's reliable. After all, not everything that appears in the quiet mind can be trusted. If, however, it's not the kind of message that you can test—as when it's about something outside of you—then just let it go. Or if there doesn't seem to be any practical lesson, let the whole thing go.

A second question concerned praying for others, asking, “If you pray for others, does it have an impact on them, and if so, how does this fit in with the doctrine of kamma?”

In Buddhism, we don’t talk about praying, but we do send thoughts of goodwill, which is basically having a good wish for that other person. When the mind has a thought, it’s actually sending out currents of energy, and sometimes a current of energy can have an impact on other people, especially if you have kamma with that person and if that person’s kamma is such that, at that moment, he or she can receive a good influence from outside.

As for your kamma: It’s like having a radio station. The more concentrated your mind, the stronger the signal you’re sending out.

And as for the people receiving it, if their radio is turned off, they can’t receive anything. If it’s turned on but tuned to another station, then they’re not going to get it, either. But if your kamma is in alignment so that actually you’re sending out a good signal and they’re in a position to receive it, it’ll have an impact—particularly on the state of their mind.

April 21, 2023, 1900

Mindfulness of Death (1)

Tonight we begin a series of three talks on mindfulness of death.

We'll start by continuing the story of Ven. Raṭṭhapāla and King Koravya. Raṭṭhapāla told the king his third Dhamma summary, "The world has nothing of its own. One has to pass on, leaving everything behind."

The king responded, "How can you say I have nothing of my own? I have plenty of storehouses filled with gold and silver." But then Raṭṭhapāla asked him, "Can you take that with you when you die?" And the king said, "Oh, no, I'll have to leave it behind as I go on in line with my kamma."

This is a lesson both in death and in not-self. Ultimately, your material wealth doesn't really belong to you. However, you do have the qualities of your mind, and those you'll be able to take with you. In Ajaan Lee's image, death is like a forced immigration: You have to go right now, and you can't take any bags with you. So what *will* you be able to take with you? Only your skill set—in other words, the qualities of your mind, good or bad.

The Canon says that your good and bad deeds will be waiting for you on the other side. Your good deeds will be like relatives who will welcome you and be glad to see you. Your bad deeds will be like a heavy cart that you'll have to drag behind you.

The Buddha gives another image for rebirth: It's like a fire swept from one house to another as it clings to the wind. The fire stands for you as a being, the wind stands for craving, and the other house stands for your next lifetime.

Now notice, the Buddha doesn't say that there is no such thing as a being. He basically says that you, as a being, are a process. His definition of a being is any desire, passion, delight or craving for any of the aggregates. If you're caught up there, tied up there, then you're said to be a being. In other words, a being is a process or an activity that's part of the process of becoming.

So at death, there are three important factors. There's the fire, which stands for the being, the wind that sustains the fire is craving, and then the house nearby stands for your next life. So you have three options:

1. Make sure there's a good house nearby.
2. Get some control over the direction of the wind.
3. Put out the fire.

The first two options are basically aimed at a good rebirth. The third option aims at going to freedom from rebirth. Our talks for tonight and for the next two nights will deal with these three options.

Tonight's option is ensuring the possibility of a good house next door, while at the same time beginning to get some control over the direction of the wind of craving so it'll be more likely to take you to that house. In other words, we'll focus on how to prepare for death ahead of time, living life in a way that increases the odds for a good death and a good rebirth.

There was a question that came up that I didn't address earlier, and it was based on the thought that a bad death would be an accidental death, whereas a good death would be a natural death. From the Buddha's point of view, though, that's not the definition of a good or bad death. What makes a death good or bad is where the mind goes.

So, to start preparing for a good death, he recommends the practice of mindfulness of death. There are two points on this topic that we have to make clear right at the beginning.

One is that mindfulness of death doesn't mean thinking, "Death, death, death, I'm going to die." Instead you realize that death is something you have to prepare for and that it could come at any time, so you should work now while you have the chance to foster qualities of mind that will minimize your suffering at death. You remind yourself that even in the span of one in-breath and out-breath, you can accomplish a lot, so don't throw the present moment away.

Two, mindfulness of death doesn't just contemplate the fact of death, for that can have all sorts of implications depending on what you think happens at death. If you think that death is annihilation, you might think, "Eat, drink, and

be merry, for tomorrow we may die" as in the old drinking song. Skillful mindfulness of death requires taking into consideration the Buddha's teachings on what happens at death and what you'll need to do to be well-prepared in line with those teachings. So the proper way to develop the strength of your mindfulness around death starts with strength of conviction, being convinced of the lessons from the Buddha's awakening concerning the truth of rebirth and of the principle of causality that your past kamma does create options that will be available to you at death.

Now, there's a common complaint. A lot of people say, "Why do we have to think about death? Can't we just enjoy life?" The response is that the Buddha is not against enjoyment. He teaches lay people that they should enjoy their wealth and not be miserly, otherwise they'll develop an unhealthy attitude toward pleasure: their own and that of other beings. But you have to remember that the way you enjoy pleasure has long-term consequences into the future.

Sometimes it seems as if saṁsāra is a sick joke. You work hard at developing good qualities through generosity and virtue, which lead to pleasant rebirths, but if you simply enjoy the pleasures there, they erode the good qualities of your mind. That will cause you to fall back down, and you can fall lower than you were before. It's because of this tendency that the Buddha developed saṁvega when he gained his second knowledge about the whole process of rebirth.

The attitude he recommends toward pleasure is that you don't weigh yourself down unnecessarily with pain. You enjoy pleasures that accord with the Dhamma, i.e., that don't give rise to unskillful states of mind. What pleasures these are will vary from person to person. Some general examples he gives of skillful pleasures include the pleasure of wild nature, and the pleasures of living in a harmonious and moral community of people.

There's also pleasure in the skillful act of preparing for the conditions of a future life. In other words, you're not just working, working, working, and hoping that some day you'll get a reward in the future. It is possible to find joy right now in being generous, being virtuous, and meditating. In this way, you

provide yourself with comforts in the house you're currently living in at the same time as you prepare comfortable houses next door.

So, what kind of house would you like to build? You might ask a building developer, "What different models do you offer?" In same way, you might want to look into the possible levels of being in the cosmos as the Buddha saw them.

The first point to notice is that the Buddhist cosmos is bigger, both spatially and temporally, than the cosmos of modern physicists and astronomers. We can start with the lower realms. There are lots of Buddhist hells. The big difference from the hells taught by Christianity is that the hells in the Buddhist cosmos are not permanent. When you've used up your bad kamma, you leave them and return to the higher realms. Still, they can be pretty fiendish.

My favorite hell is the one that's an iron box with glowing hot iron walls on all six sides. Is this a house you would want? There are flames going from the left side to the right, from the right to the left, from the bottom to the top, and from the top to the bottom. Hell beings run around inside this cube. Their flesh gets burned away by the flames but then keeps getting replenished so that it can get burned away again. Every now and then, a door opens in one of the walls, so the beings all go rushing to the door, but as soon as they get there, the door slams shut. Then another door opens on the other side. They run to that door, and then it slams shut just as they get there. This keeps up for a long while. Finally, they get to one of the doors and it doesn't shut, so they go running through it and then they fall into the hell of excrement. So, that's one possibility.

Higher than the hell realms are the animal realms, which we see around us: the realms of cats and dogs and wild animals of all sorts, big and small. Higher than the animal realms are the realms of the hungry ghosts, who can live in various conditions. Some of them are constantly poor; some of them have good places to live in during the day, but they have to wander around at night. Higher than the hungry ghosts are human beings. You can look around you and see all kinds of human beings in this world, living in widely varying conditions of poverty and wealth, illness and health.

Higher than the human beings are the devas, and here again there's lots of variety. Their pleasures are more refined than human pleasures. For some, their pleasures are a little better than those of kings; for others, the sensual pleasures are far more continuous and extreme. Higher than the sensual devas are the brahmās. These are the beings whose pleasures are like the pleasures of concentration.

The lower realms in this cosmos start with human births in which there's a lot of suffering, and go all the way down to the various hells. The path to the lower realms is to break the precepts—killing, stealing, having illicit sex, lying, and taking intoxicants—or to engage in types of wrong speech, which would include divisive speech, harsh speech, and idle chatter.

The path to the safety—starting with fortunate human rebirths and going up to the brahmā realms—is to learn how not to delight in doing any of these unskillful activities. The path to the higher realms starts with observing the precepts, practicing generosity, and practicing meditation. Your safest resolve, if you're going to be reborn, is to aim at a place where you can continue practicing the Dhamma, as I said this afternoon.

The basic strengths you need in aiming at the higher realms, in addition to the strengths of conviction and mindfulness that we've already mentioned, are the strengths of persistence, shame, and compunction. The need for persistence is obvious: You have to motivate yourself to make the effort to abandon unskillful behavior and to develop skillful behavior.

As for shame, I'll give you a story that shows how shame can be helpful when thinking about rebirth.

There's a story in the Canon of two monks and a laywoman. The laywoman provided the two monks with food throughout their lives. Then they all died. She went to one of the higher deva realms, and then looked around and asked, "Where did the monks go?" It turns out they were reborn as gandhabbas. Now, gandhabbas are a low-level deva. They're like the teenagers of the deva world: obsessed with music, sex, and fast cars. (They actually have paintings on the walls of temples in Thailand of gandhabbas flying around in fast deva vehicles.) So she was upset. She went to them and scolded them: "I fed you all your lives and this is what you do with the practice?" One of the gandhabbas

became very embarrassed, so he went off and meditated for a while and then was reborn as a higher-level deva. But the other one didn't care. He stayed as a gandhabba. So, shame can actually be a useful motivation in getting you to go to a higher level.

Another helpful strength is the strength of compunction. Remember what this means: It's the fear of doing something unskillful, because unskillful behavior leads to harmful consequences. This is the type of fear that the Buddha actually recommends, in contrast with what he calls the four fears of death. We'll go into detail about the four fears tomorrow, but for now, just listen to the list:

fear of being deprived of sensual pleasures,
fear of losing your body,
fear of being punished for any misdeeds you've done in this life, and finally
the fear that comes from not knowing what's going to happen at death.

These four fears come from ignorance and powerlessness. Compunction, however, is a fear that comes from having a sense of power. You realize that you have the power, through your actions, to shape your life and rebirth, but you're afraid of abusing or misusing that power. The Buddha actually recommends this as a skillful form of fear.

Now, to go back to the strength of persistence: Persistence with regard to good rebirth in general means focusing on developing four qualities:

conviction,
virtue,
generosity, and
discernment.

Conviction we've already covered in some detail. It basically means belief in the Buddha's awakening and how it applies to your life, motivating you to work on good deeds that will lead to happiness now and on into the future. Simply having this conviction makes you happy because it puts power into your hands.

I was reading a while back about a psychologist who was studying babies, and he noticed that what makes babies happiest is when they discover that they can repeat the same action and get the same results again and again. You've probably noticed how they make a sound and then keep repeating it again and again. It can drive you crazy, but for them it's an exertion of power. They know that "If I do this, I'll get these results. I can make a difference in my life." This is a principle that keeps us happy as we go through life: having a sense of agency, that we can make a difference in our lives. Hopefully, though, we do it in more skillful ways as we mature.

This is why it's so important that you not listen to people who say that causes and conditions simply have to be accepted as they play themselves out, without any interference from you. That belief is actually a recipe for depression. The Buddha's message is that you can learn to understand the principles behind causes and conditions so that you can direct them in a skillful way. When you're following the path, you're basically taking the raw joy of agency and learning how to direct it toward the best possible aim.

The second quality you develop through persistence is **virtue,** and this, too, makes you happy in the present moment because it gives you a sense of self-esteem. You have high values and you can hold yourself to them even when society around you doesn't. You lift the level of your heart and character. A healthy, confident sense of your self is a necessary part of the path. It's also necessary for confidence when you're dying. It's one way of counteracting that fear of being punished after death.

The third quality you develop through persistence is **generosity,** which also can make you happy in the present moment. It's happy in the sense that acts of generosity create an expanded state of mind. If your mind is stingy, it's like living in a tiny, narrow hovel, but when you're generous, as Ajaan Lee says, the whole world is your home. Everywhere you go, you're at home because the people you've helped are like your relatives, and people are always happy to welcome a generous relative. This brings a sense of self-worth and makes your life with other people easier. Looking back on your acts of generosity, you feel good about yourself. This is a pleasure that never grows stale.

This is where it differs from sensual pleasures. Sometimes you look back at your sensual pleasures and there's a strong sense of regret that they're gone. Or you can feel remorse for some of the unskillful things you did in order to get those sensual pleasures.

To make sure that generosity never grows stale, the Buddha emphasized that it has to be voluntary. The monks have a rule that if someone asks us, "Where should I give this gift?" we should say, "Give wherever you feel inspired or you feel your gift would be well used."

Generosity also exercises your imagination. Of the different parts of the Buddha's path, this gives you the most room for creativity: Who would you like to give to? What would you like to give? How would you like to give it? Use your imagination. It's fun, and it develops your sense of agency in a way that spreads your happiness around.

The fourth quality you develop through persistence is **discernment.** In this context, the Buddha defines discernment as "penetrative knowledge of arising and passing away, leading to the right ending of suffering and stress." The emphasis here is on the word *penetrative.* It means understanding that things don't just arise and pass away on their own. They have their causes and they can vary in their effects. Some of the effects are good and some of them are bad, so you want to do only the actions that lead to good effects. For your discernment to be penetrative and to lead to the end of suffering, you can't just watch things coming and going. You have to develop, through experimentation, a sense of which activities are skillful and lead to happiness, and which actions are unskillful and lead to suffering.

This is going to depend on your own honesty and powers of observation to know this. These, in fact, are the two qualities that the Buddha said he looked for in his students: honesty and powers of observation.

Learning the Dhamma is not just a matter of following instructions. You take an active role in employing the two qualities that the Buddha said nourish the Dhamma: commitment and reflection. These two activities connect with the qualities he looks for in a student, in that ideally you're honest in your commitment, and try to be honest and observant as you reflect.

Commitment means that you do the practice to the best of your ability because that's the only way to learn. After all, if you know that you didn't do your best, what would you learn from your actions?

When I was a layman, I taught English in Chiang Mai University. My second year there they asked me to teach some courses in English literature. One of the books I had the students read was *The Good Soldier* by Ford Madox Ford. It's a difficult book, even for a native speaker of English, because the narrator doesn't tell the story in straightforward way: He keeps jumping back and forth among events that don't seem connected. What makes the book interesting is figuring out that the narrator is trying to hide his less-than-honorable role in some of the events he's narrating. For students of literature, it's a good case study in the unreliable narrator.

I tried to explain the story to the kids beforehand, laying out the timeline of what actually happened, and explaining how the narrator can often be the most interesting character in a story. The interest lies in figuring out his psychology. But even with all the help I gave them, the students complained. One day, one of the students asked, "Ajaan, why do you give us such difficult books to read?" And I told her, "If I gave you easy books, what would you learn?" It was as if a little light bulb went off over her head. From that point on, she turned from a C student into an A student.

That's how you learn: by doing your best. When you think of doing something, ask yourself, "What do I expect to happen from this intention?" Act only on the intentions that you think will be skillful. If it turns out that you were wrong, still you've learned something.

All of these qualities—the strengths of conviction, mindfulness, persistence, shame, and compunction, plus the helpful qualities of honesty, your powers of observation, commitment and reflection—become treasures that are built into your mind. They not only provide a good house to live in now, but also a good house for the fire to go to when it gets blown from this house. At the same time, they create good attachments for the fire so that it clings skillfully. That gives you a better chance that it'll cling to a wind going in a good direction.

Now, in addition to the four basic qualities for a good rebirth—conviction, generosity, virtue, and discernment—the Buddha adds two qualities specifically associated with going to a rebirth in a heavenly realm. These are learning the Dhamma and practicing the brahmavihāras or the sublime attitudes.

Learning the Dhamma means reading it, listening to it often, and memorizing passages that you find especially meaningful. The Canon adds that you should discuss them with other people who are trying to penetrate their meaning. When the Buddha compares Dhamma practice to the ways in which a fortress is protected, learning is the cache of weapons used by the soldiers of right effort.

Now, it's not hard to see why this sort of learning would be a useful preparation for death. When craving comes whispering its deceptive ideas into your mind, knowledge of the Dhamma gives you a fund of resources to use to counteract it. This type of learning is especially needed in the modern world where people's minds exposed to mass culture have so many thoughtless jingles, songs, and narratives sloshing around inside. I'm sure you can think of some examples yourself. When you're dying, do you want that stupid stuff taking over your mind? Your best defense against that is to learn passages of the Dhamma. Let *them* slosh around in your mind.

The Canon says that this sort of learning is also useful for when you arrive in the deva world, because when you're surrounded by heavenly pleasures, it's really easy to forget the Dhamma. But if you've memorized the Dhamma on the human plane, it can act as a reminder in the heavenly world and so encourage you to stay heedful and to keep on practicing.

As for as the **brahmavihāras** or the sublime attitudes, these include universal goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. These are good attitudes to develop throughout life. They inspire skillful actions in all situations, especially with difficult people. They help to ensure that you don't let the unskillful actions of difficult people infect you with the desire to harm them in response.

Now, these sublime attitudes have to be developed. You have to deliberately give rise to them and maintain them. After all, they're considered brahmā

attitudes and not human attitudes, because on the level of human attitudes, you naturally tend to have goodwill, compassion, etc. for some people but not for others, which also means you can't trust yourself in all situations. You need to lift the status of your mind. The Buddha also calls these brahmavihāras "determinations" that you have to be mindful of at all times. This shows that universal goodwill, etc., are not innate, because if they *were* your innate qualities, you wouldn't have to keep them in mind.

These are also good attitudes to develop in anticipation of death. They protect your mind from being seized by memories of times when you were wronged in the past, and they can also lift your mind above your personal concerns around death, as you see that death is universal. You have to develop equanimity at the time of death for the things you can't change at that point.

The Buddha gives the image of bandits cutting you up with a two-handled saw—I've always liked the detail that the saw has two handles. The bandits have pinned you down so that you can't move, and two of them are working at the same time, cutting you into little pieces. The Buddha says that even then, you need to have goodwill for them, and then for the whole universe—to take your mind off of them—because you're dying and you don't want to die with ill will in your mind. So when you're suffering from other indignities and problems in life, tell yourself, "Well, at least they're not cutting me up in little pieces with a two-handled saw." That helps keep things in perspective.

There's also a story concerning the Buddha's cousin, Mahānāma. The Buddha is leaving the place where he's been staying for the Rains retreat, and Mahānāma, who is his cousin, has been staying nearby. He comes to see the Buddha and asks, "Suppose one of your followers is dying while you're away. What should I tell him?" And the Buddha says, "Tell him, 'If you're worried about your family or anything else you're leaving behind, there's nothing you can do about those things now because you're dying, so put those worries aside.'"

You have to develop equanimity for the things you're leaving behind so that you can focus your mind on keeping your mind on track.

It's important to remember that when the Buddha teaches equanimity, he's not teaching that you be defeatist or that you simply resign yourself to

accepting things. The equanimity he advises is the ability to put your mind in a good place where pains and suffering don't touch it.

The way he advises developing equanimity is that you start by trying to create a sense of joy inside. At the very least, it would be the joy in agency, because there are things you *can* do in the present moment even when you're dying. Even better, you try to develop equanimity based on the pleasure of concentration or the pleasure that comes from seeing through your defilements with insight and being able to let them go.

So if you can develop this kind of equanimity as part of your discernment, it's one of the treasures you can take with you. In fact, all of these qualities we've been talking about—conviction, virtue, generosity, discernment, learning, the brahmavihāras—are treasures that you can take with you at the moment of death, unlike the treasures in King Koravya's storerooms. And with these treasures in your mind, you can do something about your situation so that you'll at the very least have a good house to go to after death, one where you can keep on practicing the Dhamma.

April 22, 2023, 0600

Yesterday evening, there were two very basic questions about meditation. I didn't want to wait until this afternoon to answer them.

The first one is: What is the difference between mindfulness and concentration?

Mindfulness is the ability to keep something in mind. Concentration is steadiness of mind. Now, the Buddha's descriptions of right mindfulness are basically the instructions on how to get the mind into right concentration. You keep track of the body in and of itself—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.

For example, you remember to stay with the breath: That's the duty of mindfulness.

Then you're alert to what the breath is doing and also to how well the mind is staying with the breath.

Ardency is the whole-hearted desire to do this well. If you see that the mind is wandering away from the breath, you bring it back right away. While you're with the breath, you try to be as sensitive as possible to how it feels and you try to keep it as comfortable as possible.

As you do that persistently, you get the mind into right concentration. You give rise to a sense of pleasure and refreshment as you talk to yourself about how to make the breath as comfortable as possible. Once it's comfortable, then you try to maintain that sense of comfort and then think of spreading it throughout the entire body. You continue to be ardent, alert, and mindful to maintain that state of ease and refreshment. It's in this way that right mindfulness and right concentration converge.

The second question is: What visual image are you trying to gain as you get the mind into concentration?

There's no need to give rise to any sort of visual image. The focus of the concentration is basically on the sensation of the breath and whatever sense of well-being you can maintain in the body. There's no need to have any visual image of light or forms. Now, some people will have images of that sort appearing in the mind as it settles down, but even if you have a vision like that, you don't pay attention to it. You keep on paying attention to the breath. For people who do have images like that, it's a sign that the mind is beginning to settle down. It's like a sign on the side of a road saying that you're now entering Auriol. If you see the sign, you stay on the road, right? Don't drive on the sign. But if you don't have any signs like that, that's still okay. The road is still there; you can follow it and get into Auriol. The mind can still settle down because the breath can provide it with a steady point of focus and a sense of well-being. Just try to keep maintaining that if you get it.

April 22, 2023, 0900

Mindfulness of Breathing: Mental Qualities (2)

Yesterday, we talked about the first two steps in the fourth tetrad of breath meditation, the tetrad dealing with dhammas, or mental qualities. We discussed how this tetrad deals with ways of putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. In other words, this tetrad explores in more detail the last step in the third tetrad of breath meditation: releasing the mind.

The first step in this tetrad is breathing in and out contemplating inconstancy. We discussed how this step led to the next step—contemplating dispassion—by describing the Buddha's five intermediary steps for getting to dispassion: focusing on the origination of whatever the mind is clinging to, focusing on its passing away, focusing on its allure, focusing on its drawbacks, and then finally coming to a value judgment: that the allure is not worth the drawbacks. That judgment then leads to dispassion, which is the escape from whatever it was that you were clinging to. Remember, in the Buddha's analysis, we're trapped by the things we cling to, but it's not the case that they're trapping us. Our own act of clinging is what traps us. So when we let go, we're freed.

In fact, it turns out that you were actually fabricating the things you were clinging to, and you were fabricating them because you had passion—either for the things you were creating, or for the act of fashioning. It's because of this fact that contemplating dispassion then leads to the next step in this fourth tetrad, contemplating cessation.

How does dispassion lead to cessation? To make a comparison with watching TV, you thought you were just watching a particular show, but now you realize that you've actually been creating the show yourself. You've been backstage, directing the actors, playing all the different roles, and doing all the camera work and stage work behind the scenes. On top of that, you now realize, "This is a lousy show. The lines are bad; the acting is bad. Why do I

continue creating this show?" If you were just watching the show, the fact that you lose interest and turn off the TV wouldn't stop the show. It would keep running without you. But because you're creating the show and you lose interest, the show will have to stop when you see no reason to continue with it.

Or it's like fixing food. You've been eating horrible American food, and for a long time you've been complaining about it. But now you realize, "I've been the one fixing the food all along, and I've been putting energy into this that I wasn't aware of. There must be something better." That's when you let go. You stop fixing the food; the food ceases.

It's at this point that you realize that what the Buddha taught about the power of the mind is true: It really is responsible for your experience of the senses. When it stops fabricating in the present moment, all experience of the senses falls away. What remains is an experience of the deathless, something totally unfabricated. You know that it isn't originated, because you did nothing to shape it or make it happen. It's outside of time and space, so no change can touch it. Even your first glimpse of this, at the moment of stream-entry, is really amazing.

Then, the Buddha says, after the cessation, the final step in the fourth tetrad is to train yourself to breathe in and out focused on relinquishment or letting go. You let go not only of the defilements you've been analyzing, but also of all the effort you've been putting into analyzing them. In other words, you let go of your attachment both to the defilements and to the path of practice—the concentration and discernment—that put an end to those defilements.

On an everyday level, as you're trying to gain release from ordinary defilements in the early stages of the meditation, this is what happens: You've been using your tools—your mindfulness and your powers of analysis—to deal with a particular problem. Once that problem is solved, you put down your tools and get back to the topic of your concentration. When you move on to another problem, you have to pick the tools up again.

But when you've cleared away all the obstacles to concentration, you can start focusing on your attachment even to concentration and discernment, seeing that that attachment, too, is a problem, because concentration and

discernment are fabrications. Once you can take that attachment apart, then you put all the tools of the path down for good. You let go even of your acts of discernment.

Take, for instance, the phrase, "All phenomena are not-self." As you've been developing dispassion, you use that phrase to see the drawbacks of whatever you've been clinging to. When you use it to let go of everything else. But when it has completed its work, then you realize that the view that all phenomena are not-self is a phenomenon, too. When you gain this sort of reflective insight at this stage in the practice, that's when you let go of all the factors of the path. That's the ultimate letting go.

The word the Buddha uses for this step, *paṭinissago*, means not only letting go, but also giving back. You've been holding on to these things all along as your tools, but now you're giving them back to nature with the thought, "Okay, nature, you can have them, I don't need them anymore." Because at that point, you've found something better. As the Buddha said, you've found the clear knowing that sees that there is something deathless. When you let go of everything, you're released into that deathless dimension.

That briefly covers the fourth tetrad in the Buddha's breath meditation instructions.

To summarize the sixteen steps in the Buddha's instructions: Their purpose is to develop insight and tranquility at the same time. You develop insight by looking at things in terms of fabrication, and tranquility by calming fabrication. The Buddha mentions calming bodily fabrication and calming mental fabrication. He doesn't mention verbal fabrication, but still, all the instructions in the breath meditation, where you say to yourself, "I will now breathe in doing this, I will now breathe in doing that": That's verbal fabrication. The Buddha talks in terms of fabrication because he wants you to understand how much the mind is actually participating in fashioning your experience, even with things as basic as the breath. That's the insight part. Then the calming of fabrications is the aspect of the practice related to tranquility. The reason he doesn't tell you to calm verbal fabrications is because there are times when you can calm them, and other times when you

have to start using them again, talking to yourself as you reflect on your practice and make adjustments in it all along the way.

As you practice these steps, you're also fulfilling the instructions for the establishing of mindfulness and developing all seven factors for awakening.

It's in this way that the sixteen steps are a complete practice. As you practice them all together, as Ajaan Lee expresses it, you're practicing four in one. As he points out, when you're focused on the breath properly, you've got the tetrad related to the breath, you've got the tetrad related to feelings, the tetrad related to the mind, and the tetrad related to dhammas, all right there.

And it's not just Ajaan Lee who says this. When the Buddha himself recommends focusing on the different frames of reference for the establishing of mindfulness as they relate to mindfulness of breathing, he always says that you're focused on the breath even as you're engaged with the feelings associated with the breath and the mind states associated with the breath. As for the activity of putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world —which is the function of establishing mindfulness in terms of dhammas in and of themselves—that's what keeps you from leaving your focus on the breath.

These activities are all centered right here. When everything is focused here, you get to see clearly what the mind is doing right here. That's when you can begin to see its power. You can train it to become more skillful and, eventually, to stop creating suffering. And because the mind acting in the present was the source of the suffering to begin with, when you've taken care of the mind right here and now, there will be no more suffering coming from anywhere to weigh it down.

Even when death comes—especially when death comes—the insights you've gained into the mind's three types of fabrication will allow you to dismantle any unskillful fabrications that would cause you to suffer at that point—such as the mind's narratives about your life and fear of death. These insights can also put you into a position where you can detect and let go of all fabrications at that point. This is why, even though the breath will leave you at death, the fact that you've been doing breath meditation will give you solid support throughout.

And just because you're a layperson doesn't mean that you can't attain full unbinding at the moment of death. There's a passage in the Canon where the Buddha tells Mahānāma, one of his cousins who was a layperson, that a layperson can attain a level release at the moment of death that is in no way inferior to the release of a monk who's fully released.

So take heart.

April 22, 2023, 1515

Q&A

Q: Is it the case that all postures for meditation are favorable for the establishment of mindfulness? Are there some that are ideal or those that you should not adopt?

A: Actually, sitting, standing, walking, and lying down are all good. Each of them has their weaknesses, though. Lying down is probably the most dangerous because it's so easy to fall asleep when you're lying down. The way to counteract that is to lie on your side and be very conscious to place one foot on top of the other and to keep it there. The intention to keep it there helps to counteract the tendency to drift off.

With walking meditation, your concentration won't be as strong as with sitting meditation or meditation lying down, but some people find that walking is especially good for inducing insights to arise.

Q: Sometimes I see a place or I visit an image of something precise during the meditation, and these views will reveal themselves to be true later. Is it the mind or the mental quality that circulates and is always peaceful?

A: Just make note of the fact that these things can happen and otherwise simply let them be.

Q: Many of the dogs that used to come have disappeared now that I don't nourish them. Thank you for that metaphor. But sometimes there's an important thought that comes, such as fear, which I want to explore, to identify what's behind the fear: the fear of abandonment, lack or loss. But the breath comes and makes it disappear and something stops my exploration, as if someone had closed a door so that I can't go any further. Is this my ego? What is it that stops my exploratory path? What to do?

A: In a case like this, try to follow the thought as far as you can. If something seems to close the door, see if you can open it up again. Ask the

member of the committee that may have closed the door, "What are you afraid that I might see?" If the thought doesn't come up for you again, then let it go for the time being. Rest assured that the opportunity to explore it again will come back again, and the next time you may be more ready for it.

Q: There's a lot of chatter going on in the mind. How can I suspend it? Can you give me some details for dealing with verbal discourses in the mind?

A: Basically, this is what directed thought and evaluation are for. In other words, to stop yourself from thinking about other things, keep your mental conversation focused on the breath and on keeping the mind with the breath. Now if, while you're talking to yourself about the breath, there seem to be other thoughts nibbling away at the edges of your awareness, keep focusing on the breath and what you're telling yourself about the breath. Simply let the other thoughts be. They may chatter in the background, but just don't pay them any attention.

Q: For the past few days and more vividly today, I have a song in a loop in my head, and I've tried many things to stop it: I focus on my breath, concentrate on a new center in my head, repeat goodwill mantras, focus on the birds singing, but it all seems to keep going on. What can I do? It's like an obsessive thought, like a loop in the brain. How can I shake it off, this restless mind that's like a radio in the background of my head. Even when I don't pay any attention to it, it's still there. Thank you for your teachings.

A: Basically, there are two ways of dealing with this. One is to think of a chant and repeat that chant in your head to block out the song. The other is just to think, "Well, this is just something in the background that I don't have to pay attention to" However long it goes on, just tell yourself, "I'm not disturbed by it. The breath is still here for me to focus on."

Q: I sense a contradiction between meditation on the breath and meditation on goodwill. The first seems to lead to a state in which the sense of "I" evaporates, whereas the second one leads us back to a happiness for me and for you and for others. Are they compatible and if so, how?

A: It's like getting two different scientists to talk about a rock. One scientist is a geologist; the other is a quantum physicist. When the geologist talks

about the rock, he'll talk about whether it's a sedimentary rock or an igneous rock or a metamorphic rock. The quantum physicist won't talk about those types of rock, he'll talk about the atoms and the quarks. Now, their two different ways of describing the rock are compatible because they're talking about the rock for different purposes.

In the same way, you spread thoughts of goodwill because you're trying to motivate yourself to practice and also to motivate yourself to act well in the context of other people, so it's natural that you think in terms of "you" and "them." Whereas you use breath meditation to start taking apart the processes of your mind, one of which is to see how your sense of self develops. You're not saying that there is no such thing as a "me" or an "I" when you're doing breath meditation. You're trying to understand the steps in how you create your sense of "me" and "I" to see how and where it's causing suffering and how you can stop.

Q: Can you give some more re-explanations of the concept of becoming?

A: Becoming is a process that starts with a desire. You focus on an object that you want, and then there comes a sense of the world in which the object is located. Then the next question is: What powers do you have within that world in order to get the object you want? And what obstacles do those powers face in that world? That's how a sense of your identity and agency in that world begins to form. That world and that sense of you within that world is a state of becoming.

Now as you put together this state of becoming, there will be certain steps in the process, such as the factors of dependent co-arising called fabrication, name-and-form, and sensory input. For instance, your acts of attention focus on the desired object, your perceptions identify it as desirable, and your intentions want to attain it by exercising agency. It's through those steps that you create, even within your mind, a world in which that object exists, and then you go into that world. You stay in that world, with that identity, until you lose interest in that particular object. Then you drop it and then you go for another object, setting in motion the steps leading to another state of becoming. If you've ever observed yourself as you fall asleep, you see that this is the process by which a dream world appears and then you go into the

dream. The same process also happens at the end of life, and that will actually take you out of this body and into another body.

Q: Please talk about the practice of intentional discernment as opposed to spontaneous moments of clear understanding.

A: Basically, the steps for giving rise to discernment intentionally are the same five that I talked about yesterday. If there's something in the mind that you want to understand, first you want to see how it originates and then, two, how it passes away. If you pick it up again, you then want to see what's the allure or the appeal of that particular thought. That's the third step. The fourth step is to look for the drawbacks. In other words, what suffering comes from going with that thought? When you see that the drawbacks are much heavier than the allure, then as a fifth step you feel dispassion for whatever it was and you let go. That's how you escape from it.

For example, suppose anger arises in the mind. You want to see what in the mind sparks the anger. Then, how long does the anger actually last? At what point does it pass away? If you pick it up again, then the question is, what do you like about the anger? You might feel that anger gives you a sense of power. You might have the feeling that "When I'm angry, I don't have to worry about the consequences of my actions; I can just do and say what I want." Or you feel that if you let go of your anger, you're going to be seen as a weakling.

Then you look to see: "What are the drawbacks if I actually follow through with that anger? What's going to happen?" You can see all the damage that anger does in your life. The allure has led you to do things you regret, and then it disappears, leaving you with the consequences. Then you compare the allure with the drawbacks, and when you can see that the drawbacks are heavier, you let it go.

Those are the steps in intentionally giving rise to discernment. Sometimes, though, you spontaneously have an insight into any one of these steps without having planned to. What makes the insight a genuine insight is that it gives you reason to let go, and you actually experience a reduction in suffering that comes when you let go.

Q: In this flow of life after life, there is nothing about me, but how can I contribute to all of this, in the context of meaning and doing and the purpose of life as life?

A: Basically, this is the process of becoming-again. There is a purpose for each becoming—each state of becoming has a sense of "me" with a purpose—but the problem is, you might have many different becomings with different purposes working at cross-purposes. What the Buddha's recommending is that you can decide on a higher purpose for yourself, which is to put an end to suffering and to make that your highest priority. Then you judge your other temptations for becoming as to whether they contribute to that purpose or not, and accept only those that work in that direction. Otherwise, we tend to wander around pretty aimlessly. What the Buddha's telling you is that you have the power to decide what is the purpose of your life, and you owe it to yourself to choose the best purpose possible. When that purpose is attained, you have no more need for your sense of me, because that happiness is totally sufficient.

Q: Can one say that the Buddhist notions of the deathless, the unborn, the uncreated, and the unconditioned connect with the notions in other spiritual traditions, like eternity, absolute, infinite, or God?

A: On the level of abstraction, there are many similarities. The question is, on the level of practice, is there a difference? The Buddha said that nibbāna can be obtained only through the noble eightfold path. In any tradition that has the noble eightfold path, it is possible to attain nibbāna. In any tradition that does not have that path, it's not possible.

Q: I still have the belief that I can think about the worries of my son or the sufferings of a close relative while I'm meditating and it can help me to be a little more efficacious in developing the right attitude toward them or the right word to say to them. If I don't create any scenarios with all of this and I come back to the calm and concentration, is there any problem here?

A: No

Q: Second part: How do you live a life of dispassion of the deathless once the meditation is finished? I have a sense that part of me is afraid to renounce

attachment because I have children and I would have fear that I would become indifferent to them.

A: You will never become indifferent to your children.

Q: Third part: Should I just send them thoughts of goodwill when they are having their worries? In brief, how does one practice non-attachment when one is a layperson?

A: You learn how to pick up your attachments and put them down, realizing that if you carry them around all the time, they become a heavy burden. You know that when your children have problems, you'll be there always for them, but you can't constantly be thinking about your children. Even if you're not a meditator, you're not thinking about your children all the time, right? So while you're meditating, you say, "While I'm meditating, I'm going to clear out my mind so I can have some practice in learning how to let go when I really have to. I'll also become stronger, so that I can be more helpful to my children when I have to."

Q: Back to the second part: What's it like to live when there is dispassion, when your meditation is done and you're in the deathless?

A: There's dispassion, but there's still goodwill, and goodwill is shown not only by an attitude of thinking, "Goodwill, goodwill, goodwill," but actually helping people when you see they need help. It's a lot easier to be helpful when you're not weighing yourself down with unnecessary sufferings. But you always have to keep in mind the fact that some day you'll have to let go of your attachments to your family. Otherwise, when you die, you may come back as their child or as their dog.

Basically, the Buddha's not saying not to have affection for the people you love. Remember that the word for *clinging* in Pāli, *upādāna*, also means to feed on something. As long as you're feeding on a relationship, it's bad for you and it's also bad for the other person. So it's good to learn how to have affection but without having your whole happiness depend on that person.

Q: We have two questions about Buddhist funeral rites. One is: In the Catholic Church you have priests who will occupy themselves with how to

conduct a funeral ceremony. But without any Buddhist monks here, what do I tell those who are close to me so that they know how to organize my funeral rites when the moment has come?

The other question is: What *are* the funeral rites for a Buddhist meditator?

A: We're going to be doing a section on grief in a couple of days, but one of the basic principles for a Buddhist funeral is that, on the one hand, you say good things about the person who has passed away, and about what that person meant to you. This is basically for your sake so that you can express your appreciation for that person. On the other hand, you want to do meritorious things, such as giving gifts of generosity or taking on the precepts and then dedicating the merit to the person who has passed away. This is for the sake of that person. Otherwise, a Buddhist funeral can be designed any way you want as long as you have those two aspects in mind.

For example, you can do anything you want to the body of the deceased, such as cremation or burial. It won't affect that person's rebirth. You don't have to have Buddhist monks chant, but it is good to read a few Buddhist texts. You get to choose the texts you want for your own funeral.

Q: What do you think about people who meditate for their well-being and not out of conviction?

A: Go ahead. There are no demands.

Q: There's a question about getting involved in political activities.

A: Basically, regard your political activity as a gift to society. That may be one of the ways in which you practice generosity. Now, there are a couple of principles about being generous in a wise way. One is that you don't harm yourself or harm others in the process of giving your gift, which basically means that you don't break the precepts and you don't get anybody else to break the precepts. Another is that you have to look at the state of your mind. If you find that it's getting harder and harder to meditate because of your political activities, you might want to stop them for a while.

Q: Does Buddhism allow the gift of organs?

A: Yes.

Finally, we have a number of complaints about hell. I'd just like to make a few comments in response.

There's no demand that you believe what the Buddha said on this topic. However, it is a belief that's part of the Buddhist tradition, so we can't pretend it's not there. Some people think that the Buddha said to believe only the things that you can experience for yourself. However, that's not quite what he said. He recognized that there are certain aspects of life where you have to make commitments without full knowledge. For instance, whenever you do an action, you have to figure out: "Is the effort I put into this action going to be worthwhile? Will the results be worth the trouble?" To make that calculation, you have to decide, "Do I believe in rebirth or not?" You can't say, "This issue is irrelevant to me," because how you calculate the results of the action will depend on whether you believe that the results will extend into future lifetimes. So you have to make a commitment based on some working hypotheses that you live by. The Buddha's standard for issues like this is, "If I take on a particular belief, what kind of actions will it cause me to do and what will the results of those actions be?" If you see it has a good impact on your actions, you take it on as a working hypothesis.

The question comes up: What about the fear that comes with the belief in lower realms? Remember the Buddha said there are two kinds of fear associated with death. There's ordinary fear, which is based on a sense of powerlessness, and then there's the fear of compunction, which is based on the sense that you do have power through your actions, and you're afraid of using it unwisely. This is an adult form of fear and it's something that the Buddha recommends. Given that there is the possibility of rebirth, he says, how can you live your life in such a way that you don't have to go to a bad destination?

Many people think the fear of hell is an unhealthy fear because they feel powerlessness in its face, but the Buddha's talking about this issue precisely because there are things you have the power do. Even at the moment of death, when it looks like the doors of hell are opening up in front of you, you can remind yourself of all the good things you did in this lifetime, and as long as you maintain right view, then it's possible to escape that fate.

And the Buddha's teaching you this not because he wants anything out of you. It's basically because he wants to be helpful. If it so happens, when you die, that you see the doors of hell open in front of you, remember, the Buddha's giving you help, so take advantage of it. Otherwise, you don't have to think about the issue of hell that much. We're trying to take you in the other direction.

Q: What happens if we get mental diseases like Alzheimer's or Parkinson's dementia? Can we meditate? Can we prepare for death?

A: If you see that Alzheimer's or Parkinson's is coming on, meditate as much as you can. At the same time, leave instructions for the people who are taking care of you to play Dhamma talks for you to listen to. If there's any calming music that you like, make some playlists of calming pieces so that they can play those, too. My father had Parkinson's, and toward the end he had his lucid moments, and he had his moments when he was not lucid at all. So when he was lucid, I would talk to him about Dhamma topics, even though he didn't like Buddhism. I didn't mention "Buddha" or "Dhamma," but what I said was Dhamma and it put his mind at peace. For the moments when he was not lucid, we had some slow movements from classical music on a playlist for him. Before we had done that, he was often quite agitated, but the music calmed him down and he had a peaceful death.

April 22, 2023, 1900

Mindfulness of Death (2)

Tonight, we'll continue the discussion of mindfulness of death. We'll start with the conclusion of the story of Raṭṭhapāla and King Koravya. You may remember that there were four Dhamma summaries that Raṭṭhapāla said inspired his ordination, and the fourth summary was, "The world is lacking, insatiable, a slave to craving."

The king didn't like being called a slave, so he asked Raṭṭhapāla, "What do you mean?" Raṭṭhapāla asked him, "Do you already rule over a prosperous country?" The king said, "Yes." Raṭṭhapāla asked him, "Suppose a trustworthy person were to come from the east and say there's a kingdom to the east with lots of wealth for the taking, and with your army, you could conquer it. Would you try to conquer it?" The king replied, "Sure."

Here he is, 80 years old, he can't put his foot in the right place, he's been talking about how he can't share out his pain of his illness with others and that he can't take anything material with him when he goes, and yet he says, "Sure, I'd try to conquer another country."

Raṭṭhapāla pushed him further: "Suppose another man were to come from the south with the same news. Would you try to conquer that country, too?" The king said, "Yes." "How about a man from the west?" "Yes." "How about someone from the north?" "Of course." "How about someone from the other side of the ocean?" "Of course." That's where Raṭṭhapāla concluded, "This is what I mean when I say, 'You're a slave to craving.'"

This is what we have to watch out for. Even though we can think about inconstancy, stress, and not-self, there are times when we still crave to conquer something more, even on the basis of hearsay. This shows the power of craving, and also its blindness. Remember the Buddha's image of the fire going from one house to another as it clings to the wind. The new house stands for the new destination, the fire stands for being defined by your

attachments, and the wind stands for craving. Wind is blind. It tends to go wherever it's pushed or pulled.

Last night we talked about building a good house next door. Tonight we'll talk about getting some control over the wind. Going with your craving may sound good—you go where you want to go—but as we noted on the second night of the retreat, it's still pretty risky.

First of all, there's the desperation at the moment of death as you're forced to leave the body: You're willing to go anywhere. Sometimes because of your past bad kamma, there are no good options available, and you're forced to take one of the bad options available. Remember also that craving can be very deluded. Your mind can change directions so quickly that even the Buddha couldn't give an analogy for how fast it changes. You could be overcome with lust, anger, or any of the other mental hindrances at that point, which would lead you to a bad destination.

Now, people are usually not very lucid or alert at death, and you don't want to drug the mind while passing on. Remember that wind and fire are blind. They don't know where they're going. Remember also the complexity of kamma. You may design a nice house with your actions throughout life, but a change of heart at death could delay the good results that should come from those good actions. Unskillful desires could take over, like a tornado coming between you and the good house, sucking you away someplace else. So you need to train your mind to remember not to abandon right view. This is one of the reasons why you train mindfulness: to keep right view in mind. This is also why the Buddha advises the monks to be mindful and alert at the moment of death.

You also need to train discernment so as not to fall for voices in the mind that would lead you astray. The main cause of craving is ignorance. There's no discernible point in time when ignorance began, but we can discern what keeps it going here in the present moment: the five hindrances. This means that when you're practicing overcoming the hindrances as you practice mindfulness and concentration, you're not only learning how to have a better meditation now, but you're also preparing yourself to deal with the hindrances that, at the time of death, could influence craving and get in the way of your

earlier determination to go to a place where you can continue practicing the Dhamma. Also, in overcoming the hindrances, you're getting practice in the three types of fabrication, so that you can be more skilled in talking to yourself in a helpful way and holding beneficial perceptions in mind at the moment of death.

So tonight, we're going to talk about the hindrances. There are five of them in all: sensual desire, ill will, sloth and drowsiness, restlessness and anxiety, and doubt.

- Sensual desire is any desire focused on attractive objects at the five senses along with your fascination with fantasizing about the sensual pleasures they offer.
- Ill will is the desire to see other beings suffer or get their just desserts.
- Sloth and drowsiness cover laziness and sleepiness in all their forms.
- Restlessness and anxiety is remorse over past actions along with the fear of future dangers.
- Doubt covers any uncertainty as to whether there really is a path of action that can lead to true happiness or, even if there is, whether you're capable of following it.

The Buddha gives two sets of similes to describe these five hindrances, similes that aid in visualizing these hindrances to yourself as genuine obstacles to the mind.

The first set connects with the recurring image in the Buddha's teachings that Dhamma practice is like looking at yourself in a mirror to find blemishes so that you can remove them. In this case, you're trying to see your reflection in a bowl of water, but the reflection is distorted and difficult to see for one of five reasons.

- With sensual desire, the water is colored with dye.
- With ill will, the water is boiling.
- With sloth and drowsiness, the water is covered with algae and slime.

- With restlessness and anxiety, wind is blowing over the water, creating ripples and waves.
- With doubt, the water is turbid and placed in the dark.

The second set of similes compares the hindrances to hardships.

- Sensual desire is like being in debt.
- Ill will is like being sick.
- Sloth and drowsiness is like being imprisoned.
- Restlessness and anxiety is like being enslaved.
- Doubt is like carrying money and goods through a desolate territory where there could be bandits, and you're not really sure that you're going to get safely across.

These perceptions are helpful in reminding you to recognize the hindrances as hindrances, for all too often we side with them. For instance, when there's sensual desire for something, you tend to agree that it really is nice. If you have ill will for somebody, you tend to agree that that person really deserves to suffer. If you side with the hindrances, they've won. But if you realize that they are actually getting in the way of your own progress, that's half the battle right there.

The Buddha mentions four of these five hindrances explicitly in his discussion of what to guard against at the moment of death. The one he doesn't mention explicitly, sloth and drowsiness, is implicit. To be drowsy gets in the way of being mindful.

Let's look at what he has to say, taking in order what has to be cleared away first.

- We start with doubt. If you're going to see the value of overcoming the hindrances and not just give into them, you have to have some conviction in the Buddha's teachings on kamma and rebirth. Doubt is ended only at stream entry, but you can work on weakening it beforehand. After all, to practice all the way to stream entry, you have to take these teachings as working hypotheses. The Buddha can't provide empirical proof for these teachings, but he does offer what can be called pragmatic proofs. One such proof is that you're likely to behave skillfully if you accept the fact that skillful actions give

positive results. Another is that the teachings open the possibility for higher attainments, such as the deathless, based on skillful actions, and this possibility would be closed off if you didn't accept the teachings as possibly true. Because you don't really know one way or the other whether there really is a deathless, it would be foolish to chose a view that closes off the possibility of attaining it.

The Buddha also presented these hypotheses as wise wagers. If there is rebirth and it is influenced by your actions, you will have kept yourself safe if you've acted on these teachings. If there is no rebirth or if there is rebirth but it's not affected by your actions, you will at least have behaved honorably in a way that frees you from fear, hostility, and ill will in the present life.

To strengthen your conviction that his teachings on skillful action are true, the Buddha advises that you carefully observe skillful and unskillful mental states as they arise in your mind and influence your actions, noting the results that come from acting on them. In particular, he recommends developing thoughts of unlimited goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity —the four brahmavihāras—to observe how they have a good impact on your actions and on your life as a whole. As we'll see, the Buddha also recommends these four brahmavihāras as antidotes to two other hindrances: anxiety over your past mistreatment of others, and any ill will you have toward people who have been or are mistreating you.

When you follow these instructions heedfully, the Buddha notes that there's no reason to fear what will happen after death. This doesn't totally overcome doubts about the true Dhamma, but you can gain a measure of reassurance if you pursue the brahmavihāras to the point where they give rise to strong states of concentration. That concentration can be the basis for the development of insight leading to dispassion, and dispassion is what can lead to the arising of the Dhamma eye—the attainment of stream entry. That would put an end to doubt about the true Dhamma once and for all.

• As for drowsiness, the Canon lists several antidotes for drowsiness when you're doing concentration. The first one is, if you're focusing on one topic and it's putting you to sleep, change the topic to something more energizing. For example, you're sitting here and the breath is so refined that you lose track

of it and you fall asleep. In a case like that, if subtle breathing is putting you to sleep, breathe more heavily. I've personally found that if you're focused on one spot and that's putting you to sleep, focus on many different spots sequentially: three breaths here, three breaths here, three breaths there. Keep moving around. Or you can make the effort to focus on two or three spots at the same time—say, the middle of the head and the base of the spine—with a line connecting them. See if the extra effort wakes you up.

Or if the breath is putting you to sleep no matter how you breathe, you can change to a topic that involves more thinking. Some people like thinking about the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha as a means of gaining inspiration. You can think about where all the bones are in your body: We'll do that for the guided meditation tomorrow morning. Also, you can repeat Dhamma phrases to yourself, out loud if you want to, as long as you're not disturbing somebody else. One of the recommendations I like is that you rub your limbs and you pull on your ears. If you're not sick, you can get up and do walking meditation. Ajaan Chah recommends doing walking meditation backwards. If that doesn't wake you up, then it's a sign you really need to sleep.

The point is that you have to test the drowsiness to make sure the mind is not just playing games with you. You've probably had this experience: You're sitting and meditating but you keep dozing off, so you tell yourself, "Okay, the meditation isn't accomplishing anything tonight, I'm too sleepy." Then you turn on the TV and you watch it until midnight. The mind has tricked you. You have to guard against that.

One problem if you have a long-term illness is that pain medication tends to make you drowsy. So it's good to practice ahead of time on learning how not to be overcome by pain, so that you won't need so much pain medication. What this means is that you do accept medication so that the pain doesn't overcome your mind or deflect your focus, but if you can practice separating the pain from your awareness, you find that you can do without the pain medication. My teacher had a couple of students who had cancer and who were able to deal with the cancer without taking pain medication at all.

In one case, an old woman had cancer of the liver. The doctors did exploratory surgery and saw how far it had advanced. They knew that they could do nothing for her, so they sewed her up and offered her a lot of pain medication because they knew that cancer that far advanced would be very painful. But she said she didn't want the medication. As it turned out, every morning, doctors and nurses would come into her room, and she would give a little Dhamma talk. She kept this up every day until she died. So, take heart that there are people who can do this. But, if the pain does overcome your mind so that you lose focus, go ahead and take the medicine.

• The next hindrance is restlessness and anxiety. The Canon says that this is the most important hindrance to overcome at death. It cites two cases. In one, the husband of a woman named Nakulamātār appears to be dying. She goes to teach him, saying, "Please put aside your worries about me and about the family. We can take care of ourselves and will continue to practice the Dhamma when you're gone. Focus on what you have to do to take care of your mind." It turns out that he doesn't die—at least not then—so he goes to see the Buddha and tells him what his wife said to him. The Buddha responds, "You're lucky that you have a wise wife like this who can be your counselor and teacher."

In the second case, Mahānāma, who we've talked about before, asked the Buddha, "If someone is dying when you're away, what kind of advice should I give him?" The Buddha said the first order of business is to get the person to put aside any worries he may have about his family, any worries about anything that would get in the way of his dying now. First you ask the person, "Are you worried about your family?" If the person says, "Yes," then you tell him, "Look, you're dying. There's nothing you can do about your family right now. Focus on dying well, because no one else can do that for you."

As for worries about what will happen after death, remember the Buddha says remorse is useless at this point. Recognize your past mistakes as mistakes, resolve not to repeat them, and then practice the brahmavihāras.

• The next hindrance is ill will. The Buddha gives the example of a soldier in battle. As he's in the midst of trying to kill other beings, thinking, "May these beings die, may they come to a bad end," and if he happens to get killed

at that point, he's not going to go to a good place. That's a useful perception to keep in mind. Remember also the image that we gave you of the bandits cutting you up into little pieces with a two-handled saw. You maintain your goodwill toward them first and foremost, and that goodwill will act as your protection. This, too, is a good perception to call to mind when thoughts of ill will come into the mind.

• As for sensual desire, focus on the drawbacks of sensuality. The Buddha gives lots of different perceptions that you could use here. Sensuality, he says, is like a dog chewing on bones that have no meat. Here Ajaan Lee would add, the only taste it gets is the taste of its own saliva. Another image is of a hawk carrying off a piece of meat, and other hawks and raptors come up and fight it for the meat. As the Buddha says, "If it doesn't let go of the meat, they're going to kill it." A third image is a bead of honey on the blade of a knife: Sensuality is sweet, but it has lots of dangers. The whole purpose of these images is to counteract the images we tend to have of sensual desire as being really cool and attractive. It puts you in a very dangerous position but doesn't really offer you any nourishment.

The most extensive image that the Buddha gives of the drawbacks of sensuality concerns all the different conflicts that can happen because of sensual desire. He starts out with the family. He says sensuality is the reason why husbands fight with wives, wives fight with husbands, why parents fight with children, children fight with parents, why siblings fight with siblings. Then the conflict spreads out into society. This is why we have wars with all the attendant bloodshed, destruction, and loss of life: It's all because of sensuality.

The Buddha also talks about thinking about the drawbacks of the human body. Every part of your body has illnesses associated with it. Your eyes have eye diseases; your ears have ear diseases; your stomach has stomach diseases. These contemplations help keep you from resenting whichever parts of your own body are subject to illness and causing you pain. It's the nature of all bodies and of all body parts to be prone to illness. These thoughts also help to prevent you from aspiring to take on another body after death in hopes of continuing to enjoy the sensual pleasures to which having a body would give you access.

Now, there is something ironic in the Buddha's recommendations about how to think about sensuality at death. Let's continue with his advice to Mahānāma about how to talk to someone who's dying. Remember he's gotten this person to put aside any worries about the family. Then you ask the person, "Do you regret leaving human sensual pleasures?" and the person says, "Yes." You remind the person that the first level of heaven has even more refined pleasures, so set your mind there. Once you've got him focused there, then tell him that the next level up has even better pleasures. In this way, you go up, up, up, up, up the heavenly hierarchy.

Finally you get to the Brahmās. On their level, the Brahmās are not engaged in sensuality, because they're hooked on the pleasures of concentration. So let the person get his mind focused there. Then you remind him that even Brahmās suffer from self-identification and the trouble it entails. You get all these pleasures, but then you have to let go of them. When you fall from a high level of heaven, you fall hard. So you tell the person who's dying to work on overcoming self-identification now.

This is where you focus on the perception of not-self with regard to the body and all aspects of the mind. In this way, the Buddha said, it's possible even for lay people to gain full release even at death. We'll have more to say on this topic tomorrow night.

You'll notice how overcoming the hindrances also helps you overcome the four fears of death that we talked about yesterday. If you overcome doubt, that helps you overcome the fear from not knowing the true Dhamma. If you can overcome restlessness and anxiety, that helps overcome fear of punishment after death. If you can overcome sensual desire, that helps you overcome fear of losing sensuality and the human body.

Also notice the prominent role of the brahmavihāra practice in overcoming the hindrances. This is a good reason to practice the brahmavihāras, the sublime attitudes, on a daily basis.

Above all, notice that there are things you can do so that you can minimize suffering as death approaches and that you can make skillful choices that will have long-term benefits. This is why it's not wise simply to accept death and go with the flow. Remember the flow is blindly carrying your fire to an

unpredetermined house. This thought should give rise to compunction, and this provides the basis for the further strengths of persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment, seeing them as well worth your while to develop.

You'll also notice the role of all three fabrications in helping with these strengths, particularly using verbal fabrications and mental fabrications. You use perceptions to see that these hindrances are really not your friends. You can talk yourself out of letting yourself follow along with the hindrances and talk yourself into concentration, which is why you want to keep saying to yourself every night, "When death comes, there is something I can do about it. And I can practice mastering the necessary skills now."

April 23, 2023, 0900

Forgiveness & Mindfulness

There were two questions yesterday that require long answers.

The first had to do with forgiveness. Remember that we define forgiveness in the Buddhist context as the desire not to take revenge. In English, we have the expression, "to carry a grudge." I like the expression because it gives a strong sense that the person carrying it is the one who's being weighed down. So when you're giving forgiveness, you're basically saying, "I'm going to put down that baggage."

Now, this doesn't mean that you don't judge the person. As the Buddha said, the beginning sign of wisdom is that you use good judgment in deciding who's beneficial for you to associate with and who's not. If you decide that you don't want to be with someone or continue that relationship, you're not making a final judgment on the value of that person. You're basically judging, "Do I want to continue having a relationship?" and that's all. You have the right to say Yes or No.

Now, there is a difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. If you decide that you *do* want to continue having a relationship with the person, you need to sit down and have a reconciliation so that the friendship can resume on a solid footing. The Buddha set down several standards for judging a good reconciliation.

One is that each side shows respect for the other side. If the person who has been wronged shows disrespect for the person who did the wrong, the second person won't see any reason to continue the relationship.

Another standard is that the person who has been wronged should be able to speak freely about what he or she feels is wrong about the other person's behavior. And the other person has to freely admit that he or she did something wrong. It's in this way that you can establish the fact that you have

values in common. Only when you have values in common can you can trust the other person and continue with the relationship.

Now, if the person who did wrong doesn't admit doing wrong, then there cannot be a reconciliation, but you can still forgive that person. In fact, you should, for your own sake. You don't want to be weighed down by carrying a grudge around.

As for people that you have to live with, you may decide that you can forgive them, but you can't have a real reconciliation. Here's where you don't bear a grudge, but you do have to be wise in deciding how open and frank and close you want to be to the other person, and of how much of your feelings you can safely share with the other person. You don't want to share too much. You need to establish boundaries. When the relationship ends, as it inevitably will, you just leave it at that. There's no need to try to continue it.

You have to remember the Buddha's teachings on rebirth: Think about how huge the cosmos is and how long it's been going on. You look around you and you won't see anybody who hasn't been your father or your mother or your child in a previous lifetime. So, it's the nature of relationships to end. And it's perfectly fine to decide, "Whatever bad kamma I have with this person, I'll live through it, but then after that, I don't want to have anything more to do with this person." You may have to put up with a lot in the meantime, but don't make that a reason for creating any more bad kamma with that person.

Meanwhile, you extend lots of goodwill for everybody: yourself, the other person, all living beings. This is one of the reasons why when we translate *mettā*, I prefer translating it as goodwill and not as loving-kindness, because the Buddha's not asking you to love other beings, but you can wish them well.

Ajaan Fuang tells the story of a time when a snake came into his room. Every time he entered the room, the snake would slip behind a chest of drawers. So he told himself, "This is a good test for my goodwill." For three days he put up with having a snake in his room. Every time he meditated: lots of goodwill for the snake—until the third night. That's when he told himself, "Enough is enough." So in his mind he said to the snake, "It's not that I have ill will for you, but we're different species, and it's very easy for us to have misunderstandings. There are plenty of nice places for snakes out in the

woods. May you go there and be happy." So he left the door open, and the snake left.

It wasn't the case that he loved the snake, but he did have goodwill for it. He wished it well. So it's perfectly all right to have goodwill for someone else but to wish to live separately. In fact, there's a passage in the Canon where a snake falls on a monk, bites him, and kills him. The snake was in a tree, and the monk was sitting meditating under the tree. The monks took this news to the Buddha, and the Buddha said, "Obviously, this monk never spread goodwill to snakes." So the Buddha taught a chant for the monks to recite for spreading goodwill to snakes and all other living beings. At the end of it, it says, "I have goodwill for all beings, those with no feet, those with two feet, those with four, those with many. Now, may they go away." Think about it: If Ajaan Fuang had tried to show affection for the snake by petting it, the snake would have bitten him out of fear.

There are plenty of relationships like that among human beings. So, in cases like that, for the happiness of both sides, it's best to live apart.

That's the first topic.

The second topic has to do with breath meditation. The question was actually a complaint. I've talked about the fact that, as you follow the Buddha's instructions, you're basically focusing on all four tetrads at once. One of you complained, "That's too much." But it's not, really. I'll explain why.

You start by focusing on the breath and trying to breathe comfortably. As long as the mind stays with the comfortable breath, you're fine. Now, even without thinking about three frames of reference, you've got the first three tetrads right there: You've got the breath, the comfortable feeling coming from the breath, and the state of the mind focused on the comfortable feeling and the breath: body, feelings, mind.

Then role of the fourth frame of reference is basically to guard those other three in doing their work: You use skillful mental qualities to put aside any thought that would distract you from the breath. So all four frames of reference are working together even though you're thinking of only one.

Now, if you have trouble keeping the mind with the breath, that's when you ask yourself, "What's the problem?" Then you can look at the problem from

the perspective of the four frames of reference.

First, the body: “Is the problem with the breath?” Try breathing in different ways.

Second, feeling: “Is the problem with how the breath feels?” In other words, is the feeling not really comfortable? Is it not that absorbing, not that interesting, not that satisfying? The feeling can be neutral, “okay,” and as a result, you get bored with it. You’re not satisfied with it. So you ask yourself, “What could I do to make this sensation more comfortable and satisfying?”

You can ask yourself, “What would the body really like right now? What would the mind like?” Then allow your imagination to expand as to what would feel satisfying and what you can do to make the feeling of the breath more satisfying.

Or the problem may be with uncomfortable bodily feelings that you bring to the meditation. Can you focus your attention and breath in such a way that those feelings can grow lighter, or at least not weigh so heavily on the mind?

The third possibility is: “Is the problem with the mind?” In other words, is the mind too sleepy? Does it have too much energy? Or are you just going through the motions without really having any enthusiasm for this? If any of those is the problem, what can you do if the mind is too energetic? What can you do to calm it down? Try to get the mind in the right state to get back to the breath with a sense of joy in being here.

The fourth potential problem is that there are extraneous thoughts and concerns that are invading your mind. For example, you’ve just had an argument with someone before you sat down to meditate. There are thoughts of anger still ricocheting around in the air. So you have to figure out, “How can I let go of that thought?” Figure out whatever way you can remind yourself of the drawbacks of allowing that thought to stay in your mind.

This is where the different contemplations are useful. You can think about the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. You can think about the Buddha’s view of the universe as a whole in the second watch on the night of his awakening: all those beings dying and being reborn in line with their skillful and unskillful kamma. That larger perspective can help make the issue you

have with that other person seem very small. This is one of the reasons why we start meditation with thoughts of goodwill for the entire universe.

In fact, you can think about the Buddha's whole series of knowledges on the night of his awakening. Remember the first knowledge was remembering his previous lifetimes. You think you have lots of stories in your mind when you sit down to meditate: The Buddha had eons and eons of stories going through his head. But he didn't get entangled in them.

And he didn't go straight from the first knowledge to the third. He went through the second knowledge first, which was seeing all the beings of the entire universe dying and being reborn. That knowledge put his own lifetimes into perspective. It enabled him to let go of all of his histories, and to appreciate the principle of kamma: the power of intentions acting in the here and now. That's when he was ready to focus on the present moment in the third knowledge.

That's one of the ways in which you use that fourth frame of reference, contemplating things that are disturbing the mind, seeing them simply as unskillful mental qualities, and then using skillful mental qualities to gain dispassion for them.

It's in this way that your basic practice is to focus on one frame of reference, the breath. That's for when you have no problems settling down. When you *do* have problems settling down, though, you can go through all four tetrads and figure out what the problem is and then how to solve it.

It's like going into the kitchen: You have lots of tools and utensils to use to cook in your kitchen, right? But you don't carry all of them in your hands all at once. You put them down on the counter, you pick them up when you need them, and you put them down when you don't.

That's how you practice four in one.

April 23, 2023, 1515

Q&A

Q: In the Mahasatipaṭṭhāna Sutta, there's the expression, "Thus he remains contemplating the body in the body, internally, externally, and both internally and externally." How do we understand this phrase, "both internally and externally"?

A: You have to remember mindfulness doesn't mean being directly aware of something. It means keeping something in mind. In this case, you keep in mind the fact that whatever you experience in your body is also what other people experience in their bodies. So, if you feel pain in your body, reflect on the fact that other people feel pain, too. If your mind is changeable, other people's minds are changeable, too. This is one of the reflections that help you make up your mind that "Maybe I don't want to be reborn as something else, because I'll be subject to all the same sorts of sufferings over things that are inconstant, stressful, and not-self."

Q: Beginner's question again. My heart beats strongly, loudly, and this can make it difficult to concentrate on the breath. What can I do? The heart beating loudly means agitation, doesn't it?

A: The fact that the heart is beating loudly doesn't necessarily mean agitation. Sometimes it means a lack of oxygen in the blood. So you might want to breathe more strongly in order to get more oxygen into your lungs and into your bloodstream. If the heart doesn't stop beating strongly even then, and you find it distracting, try to focus your attention on areas in the body that are as far away from the heart as possible, such as your feet and your hands.

Q: Thank you for the instructions on the bone meditation. I can see that it gives results within my mind, but I have difficulty visualizing different bones in my body. Do you recommend studying pictures of skeletons to help me?

A: Yes, it's a good idea to learn about the bones you have. You're carrying them around all the time, so it's good to get to know them. This is one of the reasons why, in the meditation monasteries in Thailand, they have a real skeleton hanging in one corner of the hall. They had one at Wat Asokaram, where I was ordained, and before the group meditation, I would sit and look at the skeleton and say to myself, "Okay, it has that bone. Where is that bone in my body?" It helped to concentrate the mind.

Q: What are the differences between the contemplations of the 32 parts of the body and the meditation on the bones?

A: The meditation on the bones is one aspect of meditating on the 32 parts of the body. You have the list of the 32 parts here in the chanting book, right? You can just go down the list and visualize each of those parts in your own body. One of the teachings that Ajaan Mun left behind was that if you find that one part of the body seems to transfix your attention, focus on that one.

Q: What are the differences between practicing this or that other meditation?

A: Each meditation topic has its advantages, but you have to figure out which ones work for you. You can try out different techniques to see what impact they have on your mind, with the realization that you may want to master several forms of meditation, to deal with different problems in the mind, but Ajaan Lee recommends that you keep breath meditation as your home base. The Buddha himself says that if you're doing a particular technique and you find that it's giving rise to unskillful qualities in your mind —such as doing body contemplation and developing a sense of unhealthy disgust for the body—then you should go back to breath meditation. He also notes that when you focus on feelings and mind states, it's useful to view these aspects of your experience in connection with the breath, as we've been discussing in the morning talks.

Q: I find there are certain repetitive stages in my meditation: 1) quite unpleasant paralysis of the body, 2) the breath regularly turns into a pleasant, even a beautiful breath, 3) at the same time, in the forehead and around the heart is a light that changes texture, intensity, and tone: sometimes bright

white with tones of gold, blue or pink. Then at the end of the meditation, the whole is fine, joyful—but it becomes boring, even though it's refreshing. What to do? Sometimes there's a fourth stage: The light turns off and there's great peace and calm. The impression of time for these first four steps is 5 to 10 minutes.

A: The problem here is when you get bored. Remind yourself that you're not meditating to be entertained. You want to learn a skill, and the skill is "How long can I keep my mind in a comfortable and still state?" In the case of maintaining that state, you'll find other defilements coming up, and as you learn to maintain concentration in the face of those defilements, you begin to get some insight into what your defilements are and the tricks they play on the mind. And of course, the first defilement that comes up is usually the one that says, "This is boring." Learn how not to identify with that voice. Once you can get past that, then you gain some really interesting skills.

Q: When you say to ask questions of yourself, do you pose the question mentally once or twice in the mind, or do you repeat the question repeatedly throughout the meditation?

A: You pose the question just once or twice, and then drop the question and bring the mind to the breath, observing to see how the mind and the breath behave in light of that question.

Q: When we're in a creative process, artistic or not, and the mind is focused on what we're doing, can you consider that as a training in concentration and meditation?

A: Well, it *is* training in concentration, but it's not necessarily right concentration. I once had a student who was a professional dancer, and when she was on stage you could see that she was very, very focused. But she said she couldn't transfer that focus into meditation. The awareness that she was being watched by an audience was what gave her focus its power. Without an audience, she couldn't focus her mind.

One of the features of right concentration is that you're not engaged in anything that has anything to do with sensuality. So if you can translate your

concentration from one activity to another, then it's fine, but remember, it's a different skill.

Q: Can you develop the concept of *citta?*

A: *Citta* basically corresponds to what, in Western languages, we call heart and mind. It's what's aware, what thinks, and what has emotions. All of those things together are *citta.*

Q: Can we assume a universal, transcendent consciousness that actualizes itself in each living being and gives human beings this feeling of imminence?

A: The Buddha never talks about a universal consciousness. He basically talks about being very careful to observe the consciousness that you're experiencing right here, right now, and to see how you're fabricating it.

Q: Among the clingings are views about the world. Would you go over concretely what counts as views about the world? Would they include prejudice against other persons? Would they include judgments about political things? Other things?

A: Basically, any view you have about the nature of the reality would count as a view of the world. This would include political activities and prejudice against other people, but also any view you have about reality out there in the world, such as the nature and origin of the cosmos, how your actions are shaped by the world, or how the world is shaped by your actions. You'll notice that the Buddha teaches what he calls right views—about how your actions shape the world you experience—and those are the views you hold on to as part of the path, much like holding on to a raft going across the river. Once you get to the other side, you can leave all views aside.

Q: Are all rites clingings? If not, what are those that one can continue to follow?

A: Not all rites in themselves are clinging. It's our attitude toward them that's the clinging.

Q: Continuation of the same question: For example, celebrating a birthday, Christmas with one's relatives: Is it a tradition to be abandoned?

A: No, as long as it helps you get along with your friends and family in a skillful way, you can continue to celebrate birthdays and Christmas.

Q: Continuation of the same question: Can one continue celebrating national holidays?

A: Of course, if you want to—although the best thing to do with a national holiday is to take advantage of the time to meditate.

Q: What you said about the similarities between falling asleep and entering a dream, on the one hand, and dying and being reborn on the other worries me. I regularly suffer from nightmares or even night terrors. They sometimes get so intense that I wake up with a bruised feeling or a pain in my lower back. They worsen during times when I practice meditation more frequently. Does this mean that my mind, upon death, will be more prone to enter a lower state? What to make of the increasing nightmares when meditating more often? Is it just tension relief or should I persevere? Thank you.

A: In cases like this, the first thing you should do every time you go to bed is to spread thoughts of goodwill to all beings. If, while you're asleep, you become conscious of the fact that you're having a nightmare, start spreading thoughts of goodwill even in the dream. If you wake up, again: thoughts of goodwill for everyone in the dream. Develop that as a habit so that when something scary comes along, your first thought is mettā. The fact that this happens more frequently the more you meditate is normal because there's less going on in your daily experience, which means that things inside the mind have more opportunity to come bubbling up to the surface. In any event, if you know that the mind has this habit, learn how to counteract it with thoughts of goodwill as much as you can.

We had another question about someone who had a near-death experience, and the scariest part of it was the person finding him or herself in a huge, dark void, with the impression that either they were going to stay there or would have to be reborn.

Actually that void is one possibility for being reborn.

Then in the course of this person's experience, they realized they didn't want to stay there in that void, so they thought of the Buddha, the Dhamma,

and the Sangha, and eventually that helped get them out of the void. Then they went to other various levels, quite a few of which were unpleasant.

Holding on to that sense of faith in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha will get you through. You hold on to the intention, "I want to come back in a situation where I can practice the true Dhamma." Now, this may take a lot of mental strength and concentration, but it's worth it. As for the dark void, it's important to realize that it's not nibbāna. It's basically a state of non-perception. It's not what you want.

Q: In the West, there's a commonly shared view that at the moment of death or near death, one sees moments of one's life running in front of the eyes like a movie. What is the meaning of this from the Buddhist point of view?

A: It happens quite a lot, and what it means is basically that, as your dying, you're entering unfamiliar territory, and your mind casts around in its memory bank to try to understand what's happening. You start remembering either your own past actions or the things that other people did to you. This is where it's important to extend lots of goodwill to yourself for your own misdeeds, and to others for theirs. It's also why we said not to fall for thoughts of nostalgia. But in particular, learn not to focus on the bad things you've done, because that can have an influence on where you're going to go.

Q: Does stream-entry happen only at the time of death?

A: No. In fact if you can do it during this retreat, all the better. We've got three more days. Of course, if anybody reports stream entry, I'll have to question them very seriously first.

No, stream entry can happen any time in life. As I said earlier, both Ajaan Fuang and Ajaan Suwat reported that what I understand to be their stream-entry experiences happened during an illness.

Q: Could you detail the notion of debt and its consequences? Should one avoid asking for a service from someone even if they accept it happily and voluntarily, and if you're offering them an occasion to be generous?

A: No, you don't entirely avoid debts of that sort. If people are willing to help you in various ways and are happy to help you, accepting their help is a sign of your own generosity of spirit.

Q: Continuation of the same question: For example, asking the aid of your parents in order to look after your children.

A: If the parents are happy to do it, of course.

Q: Continuation of the same question: However, more pragmatically, should one avoid taking on a mortgage?

A: That kind of debt I would recommend staying away from, especially given the way the world is right now.

I'll tell you a short story from my time in Asia. There was a policeman in Singapore who was part of the group that would invite me down to Singapore to teach. He had retired from the police force because he wanted to look after his ailing mother, even though it meant that he took a big cut in his pension.

There was one time when the group had prepared a meal for me, and one of the women fixed extra food, with the intention that she would offer the left-over food to this policeman at the end of the event, and he could accept the food without losing face. However, he refused the food. I have never in my life seen anyone so angry as that woman. In fact, she literally said to the policeman, "I curse you! I curse you! I curse you!" So if someone is happy to offer help, one of your ways of being generous is to be happy to accept it.

Q: Can you explain how we can give our lives some meaning, as we are born and reborn until we reach higher and higher, so, in fact, the meaning is to disappear at the end into nirvāṇa?

A: Nibbāna is not just disappearing. A necessary part of the path of practice is that you develop a noble mind by looking for an undying happiness while learning at the same time how to behave in a way that causes no harm to anyone, yourself or anyone else. This is why we titled the book from the last retreat, *Bonté et Bonheur:* goodness in the sense of not harming anybody, and happiness, of course, in the happiness of total freedom. That's a pretty good meaning for life.

Q: As far as the fear of death, it doesn't worry me too much, especially when viewed in the light of the Dhamma. But I do have a fear of dying, and it poses more questions: where, when, and how. And especially, I feel something of a bit of a modest embarrassment and shame about letting those near me be involved with what to do with my corpse. What to do with my meditation so that I am more calm about this and can get beyond this obsession?

A: As part of your meditation you have to keep reminding yourself that the body is not really you or yours. This is why it's good to do body contemplation in terms of the 32 parts, so that when you leave the body, you leave it totally, with no sense of attachment. As long as there's a sense that "This body is mine," there will be an embarrassment about leaving behind a corpse. So try to dis-identify with the body as much as you can while you're still here. And as far as when, where, and how you're going to die, the more you train the mind, the more you see it doesn't really matter. You keep focusing on the state of your mind, and the details of how the body dies will become less and less important.

Q: Does following the way of the Buddha mean not eating meat or dead animals at all?

A: The answer is No. The precept against killing means basically that you don't kill the animal yourself and you don't give the order to kill, which means staying away from fresh seafood. Do they have those Chinese restaurants here in France where there are tanks of live fish from which you can choose the fish you want to eat? Stay away from those. And if you want to go further than the precept and avoid eating meat of any kind, that's your choice.

Q: Is it that an arahant at the moment of death is automatically in nibbāna? Do they not have the choice of getting reborn to continue to diffuse and teach the Dhamma? If so, it's a shame.

A: When someone has entered nibbāna, it comes together with a sense of enough. So, the idea of wanting them to continue on is asking a little bit too much of them. They've helped people as much as they can, and they owe no debts to anyone. Think about what's involved in coming back, and you realize

all the pain it gives to your new parents: carrying a kid around in your womb for nine months, then having to nourish and raise the child, and then having your child take your car keys and run the car into somebody. So, by the time you get around to teaching the Dhamma again, you've built up lots of kammic debts.

Q: Since we're here sitting in meditation and listening to Dhamma talks, couldn't we reasonably think that we did quite well at the time of our previous death? Can this give us confidence in our ability to do well again for the next one? Thanks for your answer.

A: You never know: Maybe you just got lucky the last time. The real question is having the right mixture of confidence and heedfulness: in other words, being confident because you did handle it well the last time, but at the same time being heedful because you might have some bad kamma that you didn't take care of last time that might come roaring through at any moment.

In other words, you approach death in the same way as you would approach meditation. If you had a good meditation last time, you should have the confidence, "I may be able to do that again." But you also have to be heedful and remember, "Well, maybe it won't happen well this time." So, stay heedful.

April 23, 2023, 1900

Neither Here nor There

For the past two days, we've been discussing mindfulness of death in light of the Buddha's analogy of the fire going from one house to another as it clings to the wind. The new house stands for a new destination, the fire stands for the being defined by attachments, and the wind stands for craving. Two nights ago we discussed ways of conducting your life to be make it more likely that the house next door is a good place to go. Last night we discussed ways of gaining some control over the wind so that it blows the fire in a good direction.

Tonight we'll be discussing the Buddha's advice for the best way to die, which is to put out the fire. This means learning how to let go of attachments by which you've been defining yourself as a being, so that you don't have to be reborn at all.

This sounds scary. So, to allay the fears of his listeners, the Buddha—even though he said that total freedom can't properly be described—did offer many positive perceptions to help convince you that total non-attachment really is the ultimate happiness.

Conversely, he also provided many other perceptions to show the dangers of being reborn. As Ajaan Maha Boowa once said, people who feel comfortable with the idea of rebirth don't understand rebirth. If you really take the Buddha seriously, then you realize that death will keep on happening as long as there's craving. That craving is unreliable, and the whole process is ultimately pointless. That's a scary prospect. The best course is to find a way to put an end to birth once and for all. To stop rebirth, you have to stop the craving that leads to further becoming.

We've already discussed the Buddha's approach for how to stop further becoming: Examine the processes in the mind that lead to new becomings to see clearly that they can't provide lasting or reliable happiness. This

realization is what leads to dispassion for those processes. When there's dispassion, the processes lose their fuel, which was passion and desire. Old becomings will be allowed to fall away; new becomings won't have a chance to arise.

Remember what we mean by *becoming:* a sense of identity or a sense of self in a world of experience. Your sense of the world boils down to the six senses and the five aggregates. Your sense of your self—you as a being—is built out of the same raw material. This is the being that, if it's not deconstructed, will ride the winds of craving at the moment of death and set fire to the next house. The act of creating and identifying with this being was what the Buddha was referring to when he advised that a dying person should ideally abandon self-identity. That person was to look at the aggregates of form, feeling, perception, thought-fabrication, and sensory consciousness in such a way that he or she would have no sense of "I am this" hovering around any of them.

The Buddha describes four different ways that you can identify a sense of self around any of the aggregates. One is thinking that you're identical with the aggregate, the second is that you possess the aggregate, the third is that you exist inside the aggregate, and the fourth is that the aggregate exists inside you. Five aggregates times four ways of identifying yourself around each aggregate—5 x 4—gives twenty types of self-identity views.

Now, taking apart all of these ways of identifying yourself sounds disconcertingly like self-annihilation. But the Buddha assures us that there's still a consciousness independent of the aggregates and the six senses that can be found only when attachment to the aggregates and senses falls away. It's outside of space, outside of time. He calls it consciousness without surface—*viññāṇaṁ anidassanaṁ*—and describes it as endless and radiant all around.

The image he gives for it is of a beam of light coming from the sun. There's a house with a window in the east wall and a solid wall on the west. He asks the monks, "When the sun rises and the beam goes through the east window, where does it land?" "It lands on the western wall." "What if there's no western wall? Where does it land?" "It lands on the ground." "What if there's no ground?" "It lands on the water." There was a belief at that time that there was water under the earth. "And what if there's no water?" "It doesn't land."

In other words, this light beam doesn't reflect off of anything else, and so can't be detected. In the same way consciousness, without surface, independent of the six senses, is bright in and of itself, but it doesn't reflect off of anything else, so no one else can detect it. It's not located anywhere, so it has no end.

However, it's not a self of any kind. As the Buddha pointed out, when the six senses drop away, there can't be the thought of "I am."

Now, because your awareness of this consciousness doesn't depend on the six senses, it won't end even with the death of the body, the fading of the senses, or the ending of attachment.

Now, to an unawakened mind, this consciousness may sound alien and uninviting, which is why we need a lot of reassurance and encouragement in this direction so that you feel confident that it really is the ultimate happiness, and that the Buddha's instructions for how to find it are worth following all the way. Otherwise, you'll try to find something to hold on to as the aggregates and the senses slip away from your grasp. And, of course, what you'll latch on to will be the craving that clings to more aggregates as you ride the wind and set fire to another house. This is why, in all of his instructions—to those who are alive and well, as well as to those who are sick and on the verge of dying—the Buddha recommends ways to prepare the mind to look favorably on the idea of abandoning the aggregates and the senses wherever they might be.

Ironically, these ways involve using some of the aggregates as tools for this purpose. In particular, you use perceptions and feelings, which are mental fabrications, as the raft that will lead you to the other side of the river. These will help you to focus on the drawbacks of all fabrications. Then, when you've arrived at the other shore, you can let the raft go.

Now, to follow these instructions requires strength, starting with the strength of conviction, even more so than with the instructions advising a skillful rebirth. As I mentioned, conviction makes heavy use of mental fabrications. For instance with feelings, as you learn not to be overcome by pain and to disjoin your mind from pain, you realize that you don't really want to come back to be deluded and overcome by pain again. You also use

perceptions to develop three other strengths in particular: compunction, shame, and discernment.

For example, with *compunction:* The Buddha has you hold in mind the perceptions of saṁsāra that show that it leads to no places you would want to come back to. One perception is that it's like fish in a dwindling stream, fighting one another over the little water that's left—but they're all going to end up dying anyhow.

I saw this vividly once in British Columbia. There was a stream that flowed through a forest, then through a beach, and emptied into a bay. Salmon from the bay were swimming up the stream to spawn. As they swam the part of the stream the led through the beach, there were birds waiting on either side of the stream to peck out their eyes. The salmon that made it into the forest came to a shallow spot where there were dead salmon all over the creek bed, so they had to jump over the dead bodies to get to the water. Then there were two bears waiting by the side of the stream to scoop them up. And I thought to myself, "Saṁsāra."

Another perception the Buddha recommends is that if you look around through all the world, you'll see that any place you might look for happiness already has someone else laying claim to it. If you're going to find happiness there, you'll have to fight somebody else off.

So those are some perceptions that give rise to compunction.

As for perceptions that give rise to a healthy sense of *shame*, think of the story of King Koravya. He's been talking to the monk about aging, illness, and death, yet when the monk then asks him, "If you had the opportunity to fight for another kingdom, would you go for it?" the king is so blind that he says, "Yes." Think about that: Wouldn't you be ashamed to be as blind as he is? And yet are you behaving like he does?

There's another story that shows how to use a sense of shame to get people more serious about the practice. The Buddha had a half-brother whose name was Nanda. For some reason, Nanda got ordained even though he had left a very beautiful woman behind. After he ordained, all he could think about as he was meditating was how she glanced at him as he was leaving and said,

"Come back." So he wanted to disrobe. Other monks found out about this, so they reported the matter to the Buddha.

The Buddha asked to see Nanda. When Nanda came to him and admitted that, Yes, he wanted to disrobe, the Buddha took him by the arm and transported him up to heaven. There Nanda saw the king deva being waited on by 500 dove-footed nymphs.

As an aside, I always wondered what "dove-footed" meant. It turns out that doves that have red feet, right? In India, the women paint their hands red with henna. For some reason, the men find it really attractive. So the nymphs had feet that looked like they had been painted with henna.

At any rate, the Buddha said to Nanda, "Look at these nymphs. How does that women you left behind compare to them?" And Nanda said, "Compared to these nymphs, she looks like a cauterized monkey with its nose and ears cut off." So the Buddha told him, "If you stay on as a monk, I promise you 500 nymphs in your next lifetime."

So Nanda returns to Earth and starts meditating very seriously. The other monks find out why he's meditating seriously, so they start taunting him, calling him a hireling and a wage-earner: He's hoping for a wage of nymphs. Nanda gets really embarrassed. You can imagine someone from the noble warrior class suddenly being called a hireling or a wage-earner. So he starts meditating *really* seriously and he becomes an arahant. He then goes to see the Buddha and says, "About those 500 nymphs: You don't have to provide them for me anymore."

That's a skillful use of shame in getting someone to practice.

As for using perceptions to develop the strength of *discernment*, you see that craving starts the process of becoming by focusing on a location, and that location can be either physical or mental, so you try to put the mind in a position where it sees that no location is worth going for. Now, this goes against a long-time habit of desire, because our tendency has long been to locate something to desire and then to settle right in there.

Remember that craving actually creates locations in worlds of becoming around which your sense of self can form. It can be focused on any number of places, even on craving itself—in other words, we can crave to crave. The

Buddha's definition of these locations is: whatever in the world is alluring and endearing. Therefore, you need to put the mind in a position where no location at all seems alluring or endearing, and every potential desire is stymied. You see that all alternative locations entail stress, and you learn to view dispassion toward all locations as a good thing. As the Buddha says, nibbāna is neither here nor there nor between the two, and yet it's the ultimate happiness and the ultimate object of interest.

The texts call this strategy, "finding an opening in a confining place." In other words, you get the mind cornered so that it has to see that it has to abandon passion for any location, here or there, in order to find genuine happiness. And it won't settle for anything less.

The Buddha employs two approaches for developing discernment in this way. Both of them make use of perceptions. He uses these approaches to get people to examine their minds both when they're healthy and strong and when they're dying.

The moment of death is when the issue of location becomes especially urgent. Normally, you see that you can't stay here, so you search for another location someplace else—"there"—to settle in to. What the Buddha does in a case like that is to get you to see that there's nowhere here or there worth going to.

Of the two approaches, the first is to set your mind on the higher pleasures of the heavenly realms so that your desires are no longer focused here on the human realm. Then you reflect on the drawbacks of those higher pleasures, until you see that even those locations aren't worthy of desire. We've already seen this approach in the cases of Mahānāma and Ven. Nanda.

This approach especially works for those with strong sensual desires. In other words, the Buddha says, in effect, that you don't really want to come back here because the pleasures up in heaven are a lot better. Then, when you set your mind on heaven, he asks, "Do you really want to go there?" You reflect until you see that those pleasures will ultimately disappoint you. So neither here nor there looks good. Then the mind is in a position where it might be open to an option that's not a location, that's neither here nor there.

The Buddha's second approach is to start out focusing on the drawbacks of each of the aggregates right here in the present moment until it really goes to your heart that these things really entail suffering if you go for them. Then you reflect: All the aggregates anywhere you might go are the same sorts of things. Anywhere in the cosmos, in any future place that you could go. So no location looks alluring or endearing. That's when you see that dispassion and letting go of desire is a good thing.

I'll give you two examples of this second approach. The first is the famous questionnaire the Buddha gave many times on not-self. The first time he gave it was in his second sermon. In his first sermon, he had taught the monks that clinging to the aggregates was suffering, and that the duty with regard to that suffering was to comprehend it. This means contemplating the aggregates and the act of clinging until you end passion, aversion, and delusion for both.

Then he built on this teaching in his second sermon, and did it in three stages. In the first stage, he posed the questionnaire. He asked the monks, "Is form constant or inconstant?" They said, "Inconstant." Then he asked, "If something is inconstant, is it easeful or stressful?" This is where using the word *inconstant* for *anicca* is important. It's possible to see impermanent things as pleasant, but inconstant things are obviously stressful. So the monks said, "It's stressful." Then the Buddha said, "If something is inconstant and stressful, is it worth calling it yourself?"

Notice that this is a value judgment. And the answer is "No." Then he goes through all of the other aggregates in the same way. That's the first stage.

In the second stage, he has the monks reflect on how that value judgment —that the aggregates are not worth clinging to as self—applies to all possible aggregates: past, present, future, near, far, gross, refined. In other words, on any possible level of rebirth in the cosmos.

In the third stage in this approach, he recommends that disenchantment with all of these aggregates would be a good thing: both with regard to current aggregates and with regard to the idea of taking them up again in any future rebirth. Disenchantment with these things leads to dispassion. Dispassion then leads to total freedom.

It was by following the Buddha through these three stages that all of his listeners became fully awakened.

That's one example of how the Buddha would start with pointing out the drawbacks in the present moment, right *here*, and then the drawbacks of any possible *there* where you might focus your craving. Then you open your heart to the positive results of disenchantment and dispassion, so that you can incline the mind to see the freedom of the deathless, neither here nor there, as a positive thing.

The second example comes from a time when a monk, Ven. Girimānanda, was very sick. Ven. Ānanda comes to the Buddha with news that Girimānanda is sick, and asks the Buddha to go teach him. The Buddha says, "I'll teach you ten perceptions, and you can go teach them to Girimānanda."

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

2) The second perception is the perception of not-self, which means perceiving the six senses, along with their objects, as not-self.

3) The third perception is the perception of unattractiveness, which analyzes the body into its 32 parts and asks: Which part of the body, if you took it out on its own, would be attractive? The skin? If you peeled the skin off and just put it in a pile on the floor, would it be attractive? Not at all. That's the perception of unattractiveness.

4) The fourth perception is the perception of drawbacks, which is a list of the many diseases to which the body is prey. In other words, each part of the body has its diseases. And yes, even your eyebrows: There are mites that live there.

5) The fifth perception is the perception of abandoning, seeing that you should not allow any unskillful mind states such as sensuality, ill will, or harmfulness to invade the mind or remain there—and that it's possible to wipe them out of existence.

6) The sixth perception is the perception of dispassion. This is the perception that dispassion would be a refined and exquisite pleasure.

7) The seventh perception, the perception of cessation, is to perceive the cessation of aggregates, leading to unbinding, as something exquisite.

8) The eighth perception is the perception of distaste for any world. You abandon any attachments to or obsessions with any world at all. In other words, you think about going to heaven and you reflect, "No, I wouldn't want to go there, because its pleasures aren't secure." You think about going to the Brahmā worlds, and you've probably heard stories about Brahmās who were totally deluded into thinking that they'd finished their work in training the mind, so: "I don't want to go there, either." That's the eighth perception.

9) The ninth perception is the perception of the undesirability of all fabrications. Here, the Buddha says, you develop a sense of horror and disgust toward all fabrications, in other words, all the processes that would lead to becoming of any kind.

10) The tenth perception is really interesting. It's the practice of mindfulness of in-and-out breathing, training yourself in all 16 steps. It counts as a perception because it involves perceptions that keep you focused on the breath in the present moment, and also perceptions of the processes of fabrication that surround the breath.

Now, look at these different perceptions. The first four perceptions—the perceptions of not-self, inconstancy, drawbacks, and unattractiveness—like the second sermon, focus on the drawbacks of fabrications in the present moment, both in the body and in the mind. The fifth perception, the perception of abandoning, reminds you that you can get rid of unskillful mind states that would cause you to be attached to the aggregates. The perceptions of dispassion and cessation, the sixth and seventh, help you develop a positive attitude toward dispassion for any fabrications, seeing dispassion as a good thing. The eighth and the ninth perceptions—the perception of distaste for any world and the undesirability of fabrications—are like the conclusions in the Buddha's second sermon—in other words, the conclusions that he would have you draw from reflecting how the aggregates in the future, no matter how refined, would be just like the aggregates whose drawbacks you've been contemplating right now.

Now, the perception of distaste for any world helps you to cut through any narratives going through your mind about what's happening to you as a person as you're dying: nostalgia for stories about where you've been, stories

of resentment about people who have mistreated you during this lifetime, or stories you might concoct about where you might like to go in your next lifetime. The perception of the undesirability of all fabrications looks directly at the process of fabrication in the mind: You realize that the source of all the trouble entailed in becoming, your sense of you in a world, comes from these fabrications. As a result, this perception induces a sense of disgust for fabrications of every sort.

This is where this line of inquiry becomes self-reflective, because all of the perceptions in this list, up to and including this one, are fabrications, too. As for mindfulness of breathing: As you'll remember, this gets you sensitive to the processes of fabrication, to the point where you can abandon them in all their forms. Then, after the path has done its work, you let go of the path, too.

These are some examples of how the Buddha would have you use verbal fabrications and mental fabrications, perceptions and feelings, to induce the mind to let go of present, past, and future aggregates. Seeing the drawbacks of present aggregates and reflecting on the drawbacks of future aggregates, you feel dispassion for both sides, wanting neither to stay where you are nor to go anyplace else to any future states of being.

So the question is: What to do?

This dilemma is similar to the Buddha's paradoxical comment to a deva in Samyutta 1:1. The deva comes to the Buddha and asks, "How did you cross over the river?" And the Buddha says, "I crossed over the river neither staying in place nor moving forward." The deva is taken aback.

The Buddha's not being smart-alecky here. He's actually talking about how this is what's involved in awakening: neither staying nor going. Remember, space and time are defined by the two alternatives of either staying in place or moving someplace else. In space and time, these are the only alternatives at any given moment. When you find another alternative, that gets you out of space and time, even out of present moments, and the mind is freed.

Now, this may sound daunting and not a little disorienting, but when you get used to dropping your personal narratives in concentration practice and focusing just on the events that would normally lead to states of becoming simply as events, you're getting some practice with stepping out of worlds by

developing dispassion for the raw material that goes into the construction of worlds in the mind.

Remember what those processes are: the three types of fabrication. As you get used to seeing these fabrications simply as processes—inconstant, stressful, and not worthy of claiming as your self—you begin to become more and more inclined to see that the Buddha was right: that the unfabricated would be the highest possible happiness.

This is how the practice of developing mindfulness and concentration helps support discernment as a strength. So even though total freedom may sound daunting, remember: The Buddha never let himself get daunted by aging, illness, and death, or by whatever was needed to go beyond these things. He was willing to make sacrifices for whatever would be better. And he teaches us so that we can become undaunted in the same way, too.

April 24, 2023, 0900

The Vocabulary of Meditation

Today we'll have a vocabulary lesson and a history lesson.

In the Canon, the Buddha talks about developing two qualities while you meditate. One is tranquility or *samatha*, and the other is insight or *vipassanā.* He says that you develop both of these qualities while you're doing jhāna.

As you'll remember, jhāna is right concentration, and the instructions for right concentration are contained in the description for right mindfulness. For example, for the body, the instruction is to keep track of the body in and of itself—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.

So there are three qualities that you bring to the practice: mindfulness, ardency, and alertness.

- Mindfulness means keeping something in mind, as when you keep the breath in mind.
- Alertness means watching what you're doing while you're doing it, along with the results that you're getting from what you're doing.
- Ardency is basically right effort, in other words, trying to give rise to the desire to abandon unskillful qualities and to develop skillful qualities.

As you practice right mindfulness and can keep the mind on its object—you're aware of what you're doing, getting rid of any distractions and developing the qualities that help you stay more stably there—that's when you get the mind into right concentration.

Now, the Buddha says that when you get the mind into jhāna, it requires tranquility and insight to get it there. Then, as the mind grows still in jhāna, the result is that the jhāna provides a basis for your insight and tranquility to get even stronger.

At that point, it's a matter of which quality you need to develop at any particular time. Sometimes you notice that you need to get the mind more tranquil, and the questions you ask in that case are, "What do I do to get the mind to settle down?" and "What can I do to get it to be more unified?" First, of course, you have to deal with any distractions that might pull you away.

If you've been to any of our past retreats, you may remember that there are five techniques that the Buddha recommends for dealing with distractions.

The first is that you simply notice that you've lost track of your object and you bring your mind right back.

The second, if the mind keeps going to a particular thought, is that you have to talk to yourself about the drawbacks of that kind of thinking. The Buddha says that you want to get to the point where you feel really disgusted with it. The image he gives is of a young man or woman fond of ornament, looking into a mirror and seeing that a dead snake or a dead dog is tied around his or her neck.

Sometimes you don't have to get that disgusted. You just want to convince yourself that that kind of thinking has no appeal. My favorite way of using this type of approach to distractions is to ask myself, "If this were a movie, would I pay to see it? The acting is horrible, the script is miserable, and I've seen this many times before." That's often enough to say, "I've had enough of this."

A third approach for getting the mind to drop its distractions is basically to tell yourself, "I don't have to pay attention to this." It's as if a crazy person has come up to talk to you when you're walking along the street. If you try to drive the crazy person away, he's got you. So the best approach is simply to ignore him and keep on walking. He may yell at you for a while and say outrageous things, but eventually he'll give up.

A fourth approach is to relax around the tension that arises in the body along with the distraction. When there's tension around that thought, you allow that tension to relax, and then the thought doesn't have the place to stand.

The fifth approach is to just tell yourself, "I will not think that thought," clench your teeth, put your tongue on the roof of the mouth. I've found with

this approach that it's often effective to repeat a meditation word really, really fast.

Those are the five techniques given in the Canon.

But even when you find yourself settling down with your object, sometimes there still will be commentary going on in the mind about what you're doing. Now, in the beginning, that commentary is part of the first jhāna. It's called directed thought and evaluation, and it's a necessary part of the concentration. It allows you to adjust the breath and the mind so that they can settle in and feel snug with each other.

But there comes a point where you don't need that commentary any more. Ajaan Fuang compares this to having a big jar of water: You pour water into the jar, and there comes a point where the jug is full. No matter how much water you add, you can't get the jar any more full than that. In other words, there are times when the mind has a compulsion to keep on talking to itself. It keeps on pouring the water in. What I've found works here is to try to locate where in the body this talking part seems to be located. Then, wherever you're talking to yourself, just think of the breath going right into that spot and dispersing the thought. You'll find, however, that there can be many levels of conversation going on in the mind, so wherever you locate any words, breathe right into them, disperse them, explode them away.

Now, those are ways of getting the mind to settle down and be one with itself and unified with its object as well. They count as ways of getting the mind into tranquility, but they also involve a little bit of insight because you're beginning to see the process of fabrication in your mind.

That's the topic of vipassanā or insight: the processes of fabrication, what to do with them, and also how to get rid of unskillful ones.

Now, the questions you ask for getting the mind to gain more insight go back to the five steps that we've been talking several times about already: to see how these fabrications originate, how they pass away, what their allure is, what their drawbacks are and—when you compare the drawbacks with the allure and see that the drawbacks outweigh the allure—how you develop dispassion for them.

Often the hardest steps of those five will be seeing the allure, because we tend to find ourselves attracted to things we know we shouldn't be attracted to —for example, lust for someone we shouldn't feel lust for. So, if you're ashamed of why you like this particular defilement, you tend to hide the reasons from yourself. This is why you have to be extra honest with yourself. It requires a lot of tranquility and stillness in the mind to see these things and to admit them to yourself.

So you can see that tranquility and insight have to work together to get the mind into concentration and to develop discernment. This is why, when the Buddha told the monks to meditate, he didn't say, "Go do vipassanā" or "Go do samatha." He said, "Go do jhāna." That covers both.

Sometimes vipassanā will lead the way before tranquility, and sometimes tranquility will lead the way. Ideally, you want to get them both to work together. You'll also find that you may be more talented in one side or another, in which case you have to really work the side where you're *not* talented, so as to bring things into balance.

This is why Ajaan Fuang described his students as being of two sorts: those who think too much and those who don't think enough. The ones who don't think enough can get into concentration really easily, but the problem there is that they don't notice *how* they get into concentration. The mind seems to settle down naturally. If there ever happens to be a day where they can't get into concentration, they don't know what to do. As for those who think too much, it takes a long while for them to get into concentration. The problem there is that they may get discouraged and give up. But if they finally do get the mind to settle down, they'll understand all the obstacles to concentration. So when they have trouble getting into concentration the next time, they'll have some idea of what to do.

The Buddha said that, ideally, you want to get the two qualities of tranquility and insight to work together. His instructions for breath meditation are precisely instructions for how to do that. As you may remember, he talks about getting sensitive to bodily fabrication and mental fabrication: That's the insight side. Then he talks about calming bodily fabrication and calming mental fabrication: That's the tranquility side. As you

get more and more advanced, the emphasis gets more and more on the insight. When he talks about releasing the mind, contemplating inconstancy, contemplating dispassion, these steps are insight steps.

That's basically how the Buddha explains meditation in the Canon.

When we get to the commentaries, though, we find that the meanings of the words have shifted. For example, insight and tranquility now become not just qualities of the mind but actual meditation techniques. And they're quite distinct: You do one or the other, but not both together. As for the qualities of mindfulness, mindfulness as explained in the commentaries becomes something very separate from concentration and gets more and more aligned with just insight. As a result, the three activities of mindfulness, alertness, and ardency get redefined. Mindfulness becomes the act of being aware of things as they happen, identifying states of mind, good or bad, and just accepting when they're there, accepting when they're gone. *Sampajañña* or alertness becomes what they call clear comprehension, in which you see things in terms of the three characteristics. Ardency means basically continuing with those activities in all situations. In this way, the practice of right mindfulness becomes an insight technique.

As for the practice of jhāna, the commentaries interpret that as something totally separate. They describe the jhānas in terms of much stronger trance states than you would find in the Canon. For them, the trance in jhāna is so strong that you can't do any thinking at all. Unlike the Canon, where it's said that you can develop insight while in many of the levels of jhāna, in jhāna as described by the commentaries, no insight can happen. You have to leave jhāna in order to develop insight.

In the course of Buddhist history, the commentaries have had a large influence in Burma and Sri Lanka, which is why, when you see the vipassanā techniques coming from Burma, they make a clear distinction between samatha and vipassanā. Vipassanā in their explanation basically means seeing things as they happen, accepting them as they happen, being able to label them in line with how they are classified in Buddhist psychology. From their point of view, you have to leave jhāna before you can develop insight.

In Thailand, the commentaries have not had that much of an influence, which is why the teachings of the forest tradition are much closer to the Canon. That's why, when you ask a monk from the Thai tradition, "Okay, I've been doing samatha. When do I stop that and start doing vipassanā?" he will basically say, "Well, you do both. It's basically a matter of emphasis." As I said, you need some insight in order to develop tranquility, and some tranquility to develop insight.

Basically, the instructions will be: Do what you can to get the mind to settle down and try to get it really solid. There's no great hurry to have to start doing insight. Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about how he was basically doing concentration practice for eight years before Ajaan Mun started pushing him to develop insight. However, you can't help but develop some insight in the course of doing concentration.

Ideally, you want to have the foundation of your concentration strong enough before you start doing some of the questioning that goes into fabrications and insight. The problem is that we don't live in an ideal world. When an issue comes up, even though your concentration may not be very strong, if the issue is pressing enough, you have to start developing insight around it. So, you have a choice: If an issue is not pressing, you just put it aside for the time being to create space to work on your concentration. But if it really is urgent and pressing, then you use whatever discernment you can muster, either on your own, or from what lessons other people have taught you. It's by exercising your discernment in this way that it becomes stronger.

It's like going into a kitchen and finding that the ingredients in the kitchen are not especially good, but you're hungry. You don't wait to get the ideal ingredients. You get in touch with your inner chef and do your best.

April 24, 2023, 1515

Q&A

Q: When establishing the breath, comfortable and steady, at that moment can you allow thoughts to come in or questions to deal with? My steadiness is so fragile, I'm afraid of figuring out what the next step is. Can you help?

A: If you feel like your concentration is still fragile, don't try to bring in other questions. Just stay where you are. The time it takes to stabilize your concentration is time well spent, no matter how long it takes. As I said this morning, sometimes some questions will come in and they're pressing. You have to deal with them. It's like fixing a motor. Ideally, you want to wait until you have all the correct parts before you put them into the motor, but sometimes you're out in the middle of a forest and you don't have any parts, so you use wire and paper clips in order to get back home. In other words, deal with the problems that come up and are pressing, but otherwise put them aside. It's in this way that your discernment begins to develop. But when you're sitting here quietly and you have nothing else to do, focus on getting your mind really stable.

Q: What do you think about meditation with music? Could you tell us your own experience with this?

A: No, I don't meditate with music. Sometimes, though, as a layperson, when you're coming back from work, you're really tired and your mind is full of all the stories of the job, if you want to listen to a very calming piece of music before you meditate or at the beginning of a meditation, that's fine. But don't play music during the entire meditation.

Q: Here's a long question basically saying that when this person focuses on the breath and breath energies in the body, he or she finds that they go better in the opposite direction from what I've been describing. In other words, the energy feels best coming up the arms or legs instead of down.

A: That's perfectly okay. In fact, if you look at Ajaan Lee's Dhamma talks, you'll find that he, too, will sometimes talk about the breath energy coming up the legs and up the back, or up the front of the body. This is one of the ways you can play with the breath: See what ways of moving the breath energy are good for your body right now.

Q: Another question about breath energies: Ajaan Lee's instructions say that if you're a woman, you should start going down the left side of the body first, while a man should start going down the right side first. So the question is, "Is there any scientific evidence or physical proof for this?"

A: No modern scientific evidence, but it is a principle in traditional Thai physiology that women are more related to the left side of the body, and men to the right side. I've found, though, that there are some men who find that the energy goes more easily down the left, and some women find it goes more easily down the right. So this is an individual matter.

Q: Another long question: This person was working with the breath energies and suddenly found him- or herself in a state of great space where there were no sounds. At first it started out somewhat dark, but then it became lighter and lighter until it was very bright. The question is, "What is this?"

A: It sounds like that you stumbled into one of the formless states, the dimension of infinite space. See if it happens again. If not, let it go for the time being.

Q: In the teachings called *The Basics*, you talk about the possibility of comparing our attitudes to the breath to those of the brahmavihāras. The tensions that I feel in my body have developed so that in the course of my practice they now occupy principally only one part of the body. So in reciting the names of the brahmavihāras like a mantra, I find that I can address myself a bit to both sides. That permits me to better stay in contact with this difference between the two sides of the body. Is it possible that a chant that you recite internally is one of the tools you can use in meditation? And is it wise to choose a tool specifically for the difficulty you're encountering? If so, could you please give me some examples?

A: There are times when chanting a particular word will help, and this will vary from person to person. But when I talked about using the brahmavihāras or comparing them to your approach to the breath, I was thinking not only of the names of the brahmavihāras, but also of the actual attitudes. For example, goodwill for the breath means that you wish your breath well. For the parts of the body where the breath doesn't flow well or where there are pains, you try to have compassion. For the areas that are going well, you have empathetic joy. And if you find that there are some parts of the body that don't respond to your efforts, you should have some equanimity for them.

For example, when I started out meditating, I found out that there was a very hard area around my heart. The more I tried to penetrate it with the breath, the more it resisted. So I worked around it and left it alone for the time being. It was almost as if it was testing me and it didn't trust me to treat it well. I showed that I had lots of compassion for the other parts around it, and then one day it suddenly opened up. It was very tender inside. So equanimity doesn't mean that you accept the fact that a part of the body will be unresponsive forever. The proper attitude is: "Save that for the time being. I can't do anything about this right now. Meanwhile, I can focus on other areas of the body or other areas of the practice that are more responsive."

Q: In meditation, when I reach a concentration that seems to be profound, I have this sensation that my eyes turn upwards. I attribute this to a mental fabrication, but I lose my concentration partially or totally. What should I do?

A: Let your eyes do whatever they want. If it happens that they do turn upwards, allow them go up. Don't worry about it.

Q: In my current life, I have a recurrent tendency to judge other people whom I don't even know by their appearance, rather in a manner that's mocking or sometimes even with ill will. As I grow older, I see this tick is becoming more and more of a burden. What do I do to cut this reflex? Should I use mettā in a systematic way?

A: One, use mettā. And two, remind yourself of all your many lifetimes in which you probably were born uglier and sillier-looking than those people. Really. You didn't want people to mock you when you looked like that, right?

And if it so happens that you're reborn and you're ugly again, you'd like people to be kind to you, too, right? So be kind to these people now.

There's a passage in the Canon where the Buddha says that if you see someone who's wealthy, beautiful, or powerful, remind yourself that you've been there in the past. And if you see somebody who's sick, ugly, or poor, remind yourself, you've been there, too. So if you can learn to see yourself in the people you look down on, you're much less likely to mock them.

Q: Vipassanā is sometimes presented as an intuitive comprehension of things in terms of the three characteristics. Is what you're teaching here different?

A: Somewhat different. The Buddha recommends that you develop discernment in the context of the four noble truths—and remember, one of the duties with regard to the four noble truths is to develop dispassion for suffering and dispassion for the causes of suffering. We do that by comparing their allure with their drawbacks. In this context, the three characteristics—or, more correctly, the three perceptions—are one of the ways of focusing on the drawbacks of things. But there are also other ways in which you might look at the drawbacks of the defilements you find attractive. You want to be able to use whatever ways of contemplating the drawbacks that work for you in developing dispassion.

In particular, focus on the defilements that attract you. Noting how things that don't attract you are inconstant, stressful, and not-self doesn't really have much of an impact on the mind. You can think about this hall: It's inconstant, stressful, and not-self, but as long as it doesn't fall on us, we're okay. But if it's your own house, and you realize, "I have to work on this house, I have to paint it, I have to pay for it, I have to do all of these other things to keep it from falling apart," then if anything happens to it, it's as if something has happened to your own body. That's where you have to focus on the drawbacks of being attached to the things you cling to and crave.

Q: In one of the biographies of the grand masters of the forest, it says that after a great deal of practice, responses to his questions came on their own. Is this vipassanā?

A: It's more an intuitive knowledge, which they call *ñāṇa*. Sometimes this sort of knowledge may be related to insight, and other times it's related to other random questions that might pop up in the mind.

Q: I don't quite understand the aim of this meditation. Are we preparing for the jhānas or does it lead to inquiry in vipassanā-style? Once my mind is stable in the breath and a refreshing sensation is established and it spreads to the whole body with awareness in the whole body, what next? Should I inquire? I can savor for a long time this nice feeling and stable mind, but what do I learn? Usually the body dissolves rather quickly with just sensations at the windpipe remaining. Then they dissolve, too. Awareness spreads to the whole space around with no center anymore. Usually consciousness is filled with a soothing light and is very peaceful, and in the same way, I can stay very long like that. It's nice, but what am I learning? What do I do next?

A: You're learning the skill of getting the mind very quiet so that it can see mental events clearly. This requires patience. And as the Buddha said, you need some insight and tranquility to get the mind into jhāna—you have to understand it to at least some extent to get it to settle down; and then you need the stillness and pleasure of jhāna to gain insight into even more subtle things. So we're working on jhāna, insight, and tranquility all at once.

As for what to do next, there are three things you might want to try: One is look to see what thoughts are coming to destroy the concentration and then use the Buddha's five-step analysis to deal with them. Or you can sit for very long periods of time until there's pain in the body, and then when the pain appears, learn how to analyze the pain and your relationship to the pain as we described the other day. A third possibility is when you leave meditation, see what defilement your mind goes to first, and then analyze that, looking for its allure and its drawbacks.

Q: Dear Ajaan, could you please explain equanimity again? What is meditation on equanimity and how to practice it?

A: Basically, equanimity is maintaining a stable emotional state with regard to things that are either very good or very bad. As a meditation practice, you can think of situations in your life where things are not going the way you

want them to and you can't do anything about them. You have to learn how to be equanimous toward them by reminding yourself that if you allow yourself to get upset by things of that sort, your mind won't be clear enough to deal with the areas where you *could* make a difference.

The traditional way of developing equanimity is to think of situations in the world that are beyond your control. Then remind yourself that the situations depend on the kamma of the people involved. In many cases, the nature of kamma is such that you cannot help them right now. This could be attributed either to their kamma or to your kamma or to both.

A psychotherapist I know once told me that one of the most difficult parts of being a therapist is realizing that you're not the best therapist for a particular patient, and you have to pass the patient on to somebody else. It's a humbling experience, realizing the limitations to your powers and abilities. That's one of the ways you develop equanimity.

Q: What is the Pāli term for the consciousness you talked about the other day? Is there a notion of the bardo in the Theravada?

A: The Pāli name of the consciousness I mentioned yesterday is *viññāṇaṁ anidassanaṁ*, which means consciousness without surface. The image is of a ray of light coming through a window, like the beam of sunlight shining on me right now. Now, imagine I'm not here, the floor is not here, the earth underneath it is not here. The light beam comes through the window and doesn't land anywhere. That's the image they give in the Canon: a light beam that lands on no surface at all. That's why it's called consciousness without surface.

You might think about all the light going through outer space right now. You look up at night, and outer space appears black, right? Actually, though, it's full of light that's not being reflected off of anything. The reason we see the Moon is because it's reflecting the light from the Sun. If the Moon were not there, we wouldn't see anything at all, even though the light beams were still shining through that spot. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha said you cannot locate a person who's attained full awakening. The consciousness of such a person is landing on no surface.

And, no, we don't have the concept of the bardo in Theravada. However, there is a belief that beings, after death, may go through intermediate states in search of a place to be reborn, but this depends on each person's individual kamma, and there's no set order in which a being might go through these states.

Q: Yesterday you mentioned an essential consciousness using the image of the rays going through the house and are not blocked by the wall, the earth, or the water on the west. Can you elaborate on what this essential consciousness is? Is it our soul, our true self? Does each person have his own ray of essential consciousness? Doesn't essential consciousness contradict *anattā* or not-self?

A: To begin with, it's not our soul, it's not our true self. Each person has the ability to get in touch with this consciousness, but the only way to do that is by putting away all fabrication. It doesn't contradict the teaching on not-self because there is no sense of self within that experience. Any and all sense of self-identification has to be abandoned before you can contact it.

Q: How to talk to someone who is grieving deeply over the loss of his wife? This person is very realistic and pragmatic and rejects all spiritual ideas. What can I say to him about this sense of loss?

A: Point out to this person that if he allows himself to be overcome by grief, he's not going to be able to do anything useful for himself or for the world. I think in this case that the Buddha would also recommend that this person reflect on the fact that everybody has lost a loved one at one point or another. When you contemplate this fact, you can expand your sense of humanity to uncover the realization we all have been through grief like this. Tell your friend that it would be best to develop compassion for everybody else who has also suffered this kind of loss. In that way, he can find some meaning in life by thinking, "Maybe I can help other people who are also suffering in this way."

Q: Aging: Isn't it also a natural process that makes us aware of unavoidable loss so that we can let go of our superficial desires? Doesn't the function of our sense of our diminished hearing, sight, touch, taste, and our lack of our mobility and energy lead us back to the essential?

A: Ideally, Yes, but there are a lot of people who don't want to be brought back to the essential, which is one of the reasons why we have a retreat like this, so that people can focus on what really is important in life.

In America, they have clubs that get together for the space of a year and say, "Okay, imagine that we're going to die at the end of the year. How would we change the way we live our lives in the meantime?" They help one another adjust to the idea of what really is of essential importance in their lives and what is not. I've suggested to the members of one of these clubs, "How about trying this: Imagine that you really believe in rebirth and kamma, and that you have one year left to live. What changes would you make in the way you live your life?" A number of people have told me that they don't like the idea, and one person said that he finally figured out why: He would have to live his life in a much better way. That, of course, is the whole point of accepting the Buddha's teachings on kamma and rebirth as working hypotheses: You live a much better life.

Q: Dear Ajaan, Dying, we face three possibilities: annihilation, rebirth, and the end of becoming. Could it be that annihilation is closer to the absolute state of letting go of it all? What do you think would happen with people if the whole system of reward and punishment of kamma would fall away?

A: To begin with, there are only two ways of dying: either being reborn or putting an end to becoming. The Buddha said that one of his important discoveries was that what you think is annihilation is actually another state of becoming or rebirth. As with every other state of rebirth, it'll come to an end and then you'll take on another state of becoming.

And if the whole system of kamma fell away, we would be helpless. Our actions wouldn't be our responsibility and wouldn't yield any results.

When the Buddha taught kamma, he didn't teach it as a system of reward and punishment. He taught it to explain how the power of our choices is what gives our lives meaning: We're responsible for what we choose to do, and these choices really do make a difference.

He focused primarily on two types of activities, generosity and gratitude. Generosity has meaning because of the principles of kamma. It's genuinely good because people choose to be generous. If they had no choice, or if

actions had no results, generosity would be meaningless. Gratitude, too, has meaning because of kamma. We have to realize that the people who have helped us didn't have to, but they chose to do so, and they chose to go through difficulties involved in helping us. This is why they deserve our gratitude, and why gratitude has meaning.

Q: You mentioned that the Buddha does not speak about a universal or common consciousness, yet the feeling of oneness is a strong experience. What is the difference between universal consciousness and the sense of oneness? After such unification via oneness, one feels generosity and altruism, and works for others as a natural way. Is it possible that in a previous life, one could have taken on the bodhisattva vows and these express themselves naturally through altruism, but one has some difficulties on the path to arahantship? Please comment on this. There's not a lot of info on bodhisattvas in the Theravadan texts.

A: Scientists have found that if they stimulate a part of the brain, it creates a great sense of oneness. In other words, you can break down any sense of boundary between you and other people or between you and the rest of nature simply by stimulating some nerves. Because perceptions and feelings of oneness can be stimulated in this way shows that they don't prove that we have a universal consciousness in common with one another. They're simply part of a fabricated mind state where we don't perceive any boundaries.

In the course of concentration practice, this sense of oneness becomes especially prominent in the level called the dimension of infinite consciousness. But as the Buddha said, this sense of non-duality is fabricated, so it doesn't escape from being inconstant and stressful. There's still more work to be done.

As for descriptions of the bodhisattva path, it's true that in Theravada they don't talk about it much. But they do mention the ten perfections and talk about how if you want to become a future Buddha, you have to work on developing those ten qualities to a heightened degree.

It's also possible to have a strong sense of altruism without having to feel a sense of oneness with others.

Q: How to deal with exemplarity? For example, you know that someone you used to admire broke the rules or precepts that he or she is supposed to follow. How do I deal with that? It makes me angry.

A: Be very careful about who you take as your examples. The Buddha says it takes time and strong powers of observation to decide if a person really is someone you can trust, someone whose example you really should follow. As for the precepts that these people might break, if it's something really minor, you might say to yourself, "I'll just chalk that up to this person's lack of manners." But if it's something serious, like breaking any of the five precepts, you can tell yourself, "I chose the wrong person." Find another teacher.

Q: You said this morning that sexual desire for a person outside of the couple is not good. The notions of "good" and "evil" in Buddhism: Are they similar to those of Christian morality?

A: In Buddhism, we talk more in terms of skillful and unskillful, rather than good and evil. *Unskillful* means something that will cause long-term harm; *skillful* means not causing any harm. You have to realize that certain desires really will cause long-term harm. As the Buddha says, if any of them come up in your mind, you should try to get rid of them as quickly as you can for the sake of your own well-being.

Many of the ideas of what is good, right and wrong are similar in the two religions, but the psychology of the Buddhist morality is very different. From the Buddha's perspective, morality is not simply an attitude of having to obey somebody's rules. You're the one making the decisions that will shape your life. You take the knowledge of the Buddha seriously, and when he points out that you would suffer from encouraging certain thoughts, take that into consideration and tell yourself, "I'm going to try to abandon those thoughts" for your own good.

The Buddha didn't set himself up as a god, but he did set himself up as an expert, saying, in effect, "From my experience, these are the things that lead to happiness; these are the things that lead to suffering." It's up to you to decide whether you want to take his advice.

April 24, 2023, 1900

Giving Care

Tonight we'll talk about caring for people who are sick and maybe dying.

In the Canon there's the story of a sick monk who had dysentery, and no one was caring for him. The Buddha and Ven. Ānanda were taking a tour of the monks' dwellings and found the monk lying in his own filth. So the Buddha asked him, "Is there no one to look after you?" And the monk said, "No." "Why is that?" The monk replied, "I don't do anything for the other monks, so nobody's looking after me." So the Buddha got Ānanda to fetch some water, he poured the water over the monk, and Ānanda washed him off. Then they put him up on the bed and got him some clean robes.

The Buddha then went out, called the monks together, and asked them, "Do you know about the monk who's sick over there?" The monks said, "Yes, yes." "Why aren't you caring for him?" The monks said, "He doesn't do anything for us." So the Buddha said, "Look, you have no mother, you have no father to care for you. If you don't care for one another, who's going to care for you?" Then he added, "If you'd like the merit that comes from attending to me, tend to the sick."

This principle, of course, applies directly to the monks, but also indirectly to lay people. The implication is that when you belong to a family, you're duty-bound to look after those who are aging, ill, and dying in your family. After all, the phrase "tending to one another" implies that someday you'll need someone to attend to you as well. We're all in this together.

The Buddha went on to define the five qualities of a good caregiver.

- You're competent at mixing medicine.
- You know what's compatible or incompatible with the patient's cure —and this includes taking away things that are incompatible and bringing in things that are compatible.
- You're motivated by thoughts of goodwill and not by material gain.

- You don't get disgusted at cleaning up excrement, urine, saliva, or vomit.
- And you're competent at instructing, urging, rousing, and encouraging the sick person at the proper occasions with a talk on the Dhamma.

Those are the five qualities.

The Buddha's comments about caring for a sick person are designed for situations where both the patient and the caregiver are Buddhist, but they can be adapted to other situations, too. For example, giving Dhamma advice on dealing with pain, teaching about the brahmavihāras, breath meditation: These themes are universal.

Now, an important piece of advice is that as a caregiver, you have to stick to the precepts. What this means, on the one hand, is that you can't lie to the patient. For example, you can't lie about what the doctor's diagnosis is. And secondly, you can't speed up a patient's death even if the patient requests it. This means from the Buddhist point of view you can't engage in euthanasia or assisted suicide. We'll talk about this a bit more later.

Here I'd like to expand on two of the points in the Buddha's recommendations for being a good caregiver. One is: What does it mean to have goodwill for the patient? And two, what does it mean to teach the patient the Dhamma?

In terms of **goodwill,** there tend to be two extremes as to how people interpret the best way to express goodwill for a patient. One extreme is the idea that you have to extend life as long as possible. The other extreme is terminating life when the quality of life goes down.

The Buddha's instructions avoid these two extremes and follow a middle course whose outside parameters are provided by the precepts. On the one hand, the Buddha didn't follow the idea that life should be extended at all costs. In the Vinaya, there's only a minor penalty for abandoning a sick monk —i.e., you stop treating the patient—and there's no penalty at all for withholding treatment.

Here we need to provide some context: Our training as monks is governed both by the Dhamma and by the Vinaya. Instructions in the Vinaya are expressed as rules; instructions in the Dhamma are expressed as general principles.

Now, the rules of the Vinaya cannot cover everything, because there are some sensitive areas that don't lend themselves to clear-cut rules. This is where you bring in the teachings of the Dhamma: what it means to have compassion, for instance; what it means to have goodwill; what it means for you to follow what you think will be the most skillful course of action. When it comes to caring for a patient, the Buddha seems to have realized that this is an area too sensitive to be expressed in rules, aside from establishing some outside parameters. On the one hand, there's the rule against killing, which is interpreted as cutting short the patient's natural life span. On the other, there's the rule that imposes only a slight penalty on abandoning a patient, and no rule at all against withholding treatment.

What this means in practice is that there's nothing wrong with the decision to discontinue life support and to allow the patient's life to run out on its own.

However, you cannot do anything to speed up the death faster than that, even if the patient asks for it. After all, you don't really know where the patient is going to go after death. So there's no excuse for "putting the person out of his misery." The person could go someplace worse where there's even more misery, so you don't cut his or her life short. Here you have to watch out for the danger of following your own desire not to see the misery of others. You have to ask yourself, "Is your desire to speed up that person's death for his or her sake, or for yours?"

Within these parameters, compassion and goodwill mean easing the patient's physical and mental pain. This requires balancing two considerations: the patient's ability to handle physical pain and the patient's ability to stay mindful and alert. You have to balance these two considerations to figure out exactly how much painkiller the patient needs.

And don't be surprised if the patient becomes difficult. This is where it's important that you strengthen your own goodwill to make it resilient and enduring. The Buddha's image is that you should make it like the great earth

or like space: vast and deep. At the same time, you should adopt a daily practice of developing an attitude of goodwill for all, together with all of the other brahmavihāras.

Another way of showing goodwill is not giving in to displays of grief in the patient's presence, because that would simply add to the patient's burden. One of our monks went back home when his father was dying, and the problem was that the grandmother was still alive, and she would go every day to the hospital and cry and cry and cry. The monk said, "I wished I could have thrown her out of the room" because it was simply making the father more upset.

As for **teaching the Dhamma,** this will depend on the patient's past beliefs. The primary consideration is helping to do away with the patient's worries and anxieties. The traditional practice in Theravada countries is to get the patient to remember the past times when he or she was generous or virtuous. This can help lift the patient's state of mind. Now, if you're dealing with a patient with other views, try to figure out what, within the context of those views, the patient would find uplifting.

Once, when I was in Thailand, I was part of a group of monks who were invited to visit a man in a hospital who was dying of liver cancer. The man's main concern was embarrassment about how ugly his body looked with the abdomen all swollen. He had lived most of his life being very proud of the fact that he kept himself fit and in good shape. Even when his friends were getting fat, he was staying slim and trim. So we told him, "At this point, it doesn't really matter what you look like. Nobody leaves behind a beautiful corpse. Focus instead on the state of your mind."

You may find that there will be cases where the patient doesn't want to hear the Dhamma from you. The Canon talks about children teaching the Dhamma to their parents, but I've found this to be very difficult. So, if the person doesn't want to listen to you, think of who the sick person *would* be willing to listen to, either in person or through recordings.

If the patient does listen to you, your primary role is to aid the patient's mindfulness. In other words, keep reminding the person what was good in his or her practice and good in the virtuous qualities of his or her mind. Even

people with dementia or who are in a coma can benefit from hearing the Dhamma in this way.

For example, you can give the patient advice on goodwill. Remind the patient that it's good to have goodwill even for people you don't like. This lifts your mind above their level so that you don't have to descend to theirs. Start with having the patient extend thoughts of goodwill for him or herself. If the patient feels that he or she doesn't deserve to be happy, remind him or her that the question of "deserving" doesn't count. Is this a problem in France? It certainly is in America, at least in my generation. This is something we suffer from because of our Christian upbringing. You have to remember, in the Buddha's teaching the question of deserving doesn't come in at all. What counts is that you aspire to do good—in this case, taming your mind, both for your own sake and for the sake of others. If the patient asks, "What can I do for other people in my state now?" you say, "If you can tame your mind, then you'll be more likely to be able to withstand pain, and that will make life a lot easier for the people looking after you. Then you can extend thoughts of goodwill to others." This doesn't mean, "May they be happy doing whatever they want, good or bad." Instead, it means, "May they understand the causes of true happiness and be willing and able to act on them."

There are two ways of spreading goodwill. The first is what we've been doing in the morning meditations, starting with those who are dear to you and then going out step by step to those who are less dear. You start with yourself, then people you love, people you like, neutral people, people you don't like, people you don't know, all living beings, out to infinity.

The other way is to spread goodwill direction by direction: all beings to the east, all beings to the south, to the west, north, northeast, southeast, southwest, northwest, below, above. You can also spread goodwill classifying different types of beings if you want. There's a very long goodwill chant that Ajaan Mun used to recite. First he would chant it, extending goodwill for all beings in the ten directions and then get more specific: all human beings to the east, human beings to the south, to the west, etc.; all devas in the ten directions, all the hungry ghosts, all the animals, all the hell beings, all the noble beings, all the non-noble beings, all the males, all the females. Breaking

it down like that gives you something to do for quite a long time as you dwell with thoughts of mettā.

Another practice that's universally good regardless of the patient's background would be breath meditation. Another would be instructions in how to deal with pain.

Now, the style of talks that you give to this person should follow the style that the Buddha himself would have used. They say the Buddha would give talks using four styles: instructing, urging, rousing, and encouraging. You'll notice that of these four verbs, only one is giving information; the other three are basically giving energy to the listener. Among the Thai ajaans, this is very common. Back when I was translating Dhamma from Thai to English, I noticed that about 80% of the Thai ajaans' Dhamma talks would be what we would call pep talks. So, try to give those kinds of talks to your patients, with the emphasis on giving them strength.

In effect, you're focusing on developing the patient's strength of conviction, and then based on that, the cluster of strengths that come under mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. Now, in terms of discernment, note that you have to do your best to train the patient in the direction of right view at death. I've known some people who feel that it's kinder to simply let the dying person die in peace, but that's because they believe that there's nothing more for the patient to do, so you should simply let the patient rest with no responsibilities. But from the Buddha's point of view, the patient will be making some important decisions at the moment of death, so you want to encourage the patient to have the strength to make the right decisions.

Even people who have been meditating a long time, if they haven't really succeeded in perceiving pains as something separate from their awareness, can get discouraged as they find themselves unequal to the task of facing pains with discernment. Like King Koravya, they're alone with the pains, with no one to share the pains to make them less. On top of that, the body is beginning to escape whatever measure of control they used to have, and they face the prospect of leaving everything in this life behind. Like the king, they may revert to their enslavement to craving, rather than recognizing that the cravings are something they should master.

One of the worst things their cravings might tell them is that Dhamma practice doesn't work after all. This may lead them to revert to the condition that the Buddha identified as our most primal reaction to pain: bewilderment on the one hand, and a search for someone, anyone, who will know how to put an end to the pain on the other. Pain, fear, and weakness are bad enough, but add bewilderment to the mix, and the mind can search for and grasp at anything. If people have to leave the body at that moment, the wind of craving can carry them anywhere at all. So it's essential that you help your patient maintain right view in the midst of these challenges. This means believing that it's really important to do what's skillful and abandon whatever is unskillful. When you view your pains and weaknesses from a Dhamma perspective, that's half the battle right there. In other words, right view in this case means that even though there may be bad things coming in from your past kamma, you can still do something skillful now.

The other half of the battle depends on rousing and encouraging your patient's defiant fighting spirit in the face of pain, physical weakness, and fear. After all, as you remember, the bodhisatta's own fighting spirit, his audacious desire to come out victorious over death, was what enabled him to find the Dhamma of the deathless and teach it to other people to begin with. It's only through inspiring that same undaunted attitude in one another that we can help one another find the Dhamma within ourselves in spite of the hardships of aging, illness, and death.

You may remember that story I told of the woman who went to practice the Dhamma with Ajaan Maha Boowa before she died. Even after she left the monastery, he continued to write letters to her. He kept saying: You can do it; you can do it.

I'll end with a few stories. The first has to do with maintaining the patient's right view. I have a student who's a monk from Singapore. He was given an ecclesiastical title by the King of Thailand several years back. More recently, his father was on his deathbed, and it turns out that his sister is a Christian. I don't know about France, but in Singapore, the Christians are very aggressive with dying people, trying to get them to convert. So the sister brought a minister to her father, but the mother stood in the way. She said, "My son has been recognized by the King of Thailand. Who's recognized you?" In the end,

the monk was with the father all the way to the end, helping him to meditate to his last breath.

Another story more directly involves me. When I was in Thailand, a very elderly man together with his daughter once came to spend a three-month Rains Retreat at our monastery. Toward the end of the Retreat, he developed pains in his jaw, which he dismissed as nothing more than a toothache. At the end of the Retreat, he went to the dentist, only to find out that he had a very advanced case of cancer. He returned to the monastery to bid farewell to Ajaan Fuang, saying that he planned to go home and die. Ajaan Fuang told him that if he went home, he would hear nothing but his nieces and nephews arguing over the inheritance. It wasn't much, but it was enough to argue over.

So he told the old man, "Come, stay and die here." We arranged a place for him to stay in the chedi, which is the spired monument we had built on the top of the hill. His daughter was his primary caregiver, but the monks helped as well. As the disease advanced, he got to the point where he couldn't talk. We could see that he was in pain, but we had trouble getting adequate painkillers for him. He would plow his head back and forth on his pillow whenever the pain was getting to him. So I told the daughter that when that happened, she should whisper his meditation word, *Buddho*, into his ear. She did, and then the plowing would stop for about two hours. Then it would start up again. She would whisper the word into his ear again, and then he would stop.

This kept up for about seven days until late one night, when the daughter sensed that the end was coming. She chanted the Mahā Samaya Sutta to him and then put his hands together, saying, "May you please go to nibbāna." He lifted his hands to touch his forehead and then he died, peacefully and alert.

The next morning, I helped build his coffin. We held funeral services for him for several days, and then the nieces and nephews came to pick up the body and take it back to the old man's hometown for the cremation. Sure enough, as they were loading the coffin onto the truck, they were arguing among themselves about the inheritance.

Now, when you teach the Dhamma to a patient, there are going to be cases where the patient is too weak or delirious to understand what you're saying. In cases like that, one of the best things you can do is to provide a quiet presence.

But as I said before, speaking of good things that the person has done, telling him or her that he or she is loved, reading soothing Dhamma talks, chanting, etc., can help calm even an unconscious person, because there are a lot of things that come into the mind subconsciously.

There's a lay Dhamma teacher I know in America whose mother was dying. As he was holding her hand, he said, "Let go, let go, let go," but the more he said, "Let go," the tighter she held on. Obviously, that was not the message she wanted to hear. He realized this was not working, so he said, "Mom, I love you," and she relaxed her grip. The lesson: Give lessons that are appropriate to the patient. Be sensitive to his or her needs.

Remember: Eventually you as a caregiver will become a patient, too. So, use this opportunity as a caregiver to develop your own strengths of mind. The stronger you are in mind, the less of a burden you'll be to others, and you'll be able to face aging, illness, and death undaunted and unafraid.

April 25, 2023, 0900

Passion for Dispassion

The question came up yesterday as to why we meditate. The answer is: because we want happiness. In fact, all of our actions are for the sake of happiness, but most of our actions lead in the opposite direction, bringing us suffering and pain. We want to know why. The Buddha's answer to that question is that it's not the case that our quest for happiness is the problem, it's simply that we're going about it the wrong way. So he proposes a new way.

Now, we may have read a lot of his teachings. We've learned that he teaches a lot about dispassion and letting go. There's that famous story where the monks are going to a foreign country, so they take leave of the Buddha. He tells them, "Go pay your respects to Sāriputta before you go." They go pay their respects to Sāriputta, and he asks them, "That country where you're going has many intelligent people. They're going to ask you, 'What does your teacher teach?' How are you going to answer them?"

They respond, "Sāriputta, we would like to hear your answer." So he tells them first to say, "Our teacher teaches the ending of passion and desire." Then he adds, "Because they're intelligent, their next question will be, 'The ending of passion and desire for what?'" And the answer is: "The five aggregates"—although I would note here that this shows one of the differences between intelligent people back then and people now. You tell people now that the Buddha teaches the ending of passion and desire, and they change the channel.

But suppose we were to take Sāriputta seriously. We look elsewhere in the Canon, and it becomes obvious that there's so much emphasis on dispassion. When the Buddha teaches his stepmother the eight principles for deciding what is and is not Dhamma, the first principle is that if something leads to dispassion, then it's true Dhamma; if it leads to passion, it's not. And of

course, the third noble truth tells us that dispassion for craving equals the end of suffering.

So we can come away with the impression that the Buddha's simply teaching us to let go. Sometimes we interpret dispassion as letting go of the quest for happiness: Just accept whatever is happening, and you'll be okay. That's the best you can do. But as I said, the Buddha said that the problem is not with the quest for happiness. It lies in how we go about it.

He gives an analogy. Suppose a person is trying to get milk out of a cow, so he squeezes the cow's horn. He squeezes a little bit and doesn't get any milk. He squeezes it harder, and he still doesn't get any milk. Then he gives up and stops squeezing the horn, and he realizes it's so much more relaxing not to be squeezing the cow's horn. So he just relaxes and he tells himself, "I don't need any milk."

But that's not what the Buddha recommends. He affirms that it's all right to want milk. After all, the cow has milk to offer. The proper course of action is to find the udder, squeeze that, and you get the milk.

Basically what this means is that the path to the end of suffering is going to require right effort. You can't just relax and say, "I understand that those who are awakened are totally relaxed, so I'll relax ahead of time." The reason they're relaxed is because they've completed their work. And the Buddha actually says that the work involves passion. He recommends passion for the Dhamma, passion for learning how to develop skillful qualities, passion for abandoning unskillful qualities, passion for seclusion, passion for a goal that is totally unafflicted, and passion for a goal that doesn't involve any conflict.

So we have to develop right passion, which means that we have to look back into our own mind to see how we can make our passions right. This is an important part of right effort: generating desire to abandon what's unskillful and to develop what's skillful. And the best way to generate this sort of desire is to see that our current actions are unskillful and are causing us to suffer. As the Buddha said, this means that we have to find what there is in the mind that causes us to act in unskillful ways. Only then will we be able to stop creating suffering because we've understood *why* we do it. Only when we understand why will we be able to stop.

This is why we practice meditation. And this is why we should be passionate about doing the meditation: It helps us to understand the powerful hidden corners of our own minds.

When I was staying with Ajaan Fuang, I translated some of Ajaan Lee's books into English and we sent them to various Dhamma centers around Thailand and other parts of Asia. There was one person in Singapore who had received a copy. He sent a letter to Ajaan Fuang, describing his meditation practice, saying that whatever he was doing, he always saw things in terms of the three characteristics. When he was watching TV, when he was driving the car, he looked at things in terms of the three characteristics: inconstant, stressful, and not-self.

I read the letter to Ajaan Fuang, and he said, "Okay, write back to him and say, 'Look at what's saying that things are inconstant, stressful, not-self. That's the troublemaker. The problem is not with your television or the things you see while driving around. The problem is within the mind.'"

This is one of the reasons why we practice concentration: We want to understand what's going on in the mind. We do that by getting the mind as quiet as we can, both because we learn a lot about the mind in the process of getting it to settle down, and also because once the mind has become quiet, then when there's the slightest disturbance in the mind, the slightest movement in the mind, we can see it clearly.

That's where you begin to see how and when the mind lies to itself. This is a message that you hear throughout the forest tradition, which is that your mind is lying to you. Ajaan Chah once said that when you're keeping track of your mind, the first thing you learn is how much it lies to you. All the other ajaans say similar things.

So, you have to figure out: Why is it lying and why do you fall for the lies? You'll find that a lot of it has to do with the fact that you're both lazy and stupid, especially when you think that you're being smart. So, you have to bring a slight skepticism to the movements of your mind: "Where is my mind lying to me?"

One of the first lessons you learn when you're doing concentration, if you really stick with it, is that you get to a state where you say to yourself, "My

mind is totally quiet." But if you stay with it longer, you begin to see that there's still a little bit of disturbance in there. So you let go of what you're doing that's causing that disturbance, and then it gets a lot quieter. Then you say, "Ah! This is it. Totally quiet." But if you stay with it for a while, you find that there's a disturbance there as well. You see the level of stress in the mind go up and down very subtly, and you can detect what you're doing to make it go up and down. You're developing your sensitivity. This is why one of the emphases in the forest tradition is that you try to get the mind as quiet as possible.

There's a map in the Canon as to what the different stages can be. We've been working basically on the first two.

The first stage of jhāna is when you're focused on talking to yourself about the breath and trying to adjust it so that it feels just right for the body, just right for the mind. Basically, you're trying to get the mind and the object to fit snugly together, as when you're putting two pieces of wood together and they fit together perfectly. Then, when they settle down like that, you can stop the internal dialogue and can just be One with the breath. There will be a sense of fullness and pleasure. That's the second jhāna.

Now, sometimes that sense of refreshment or rapture comes to be too much. It's as if you're tuning your radio. You've been listening to heavy rock, but now you want to listen to something more calming. You find that there's a more subtle level of energy in the body, so you focus there. This gets you into the third jhāna.

As you continue there, you'll find that even breathing seems to be too much of an effort. The breath energy in the body is full, so you can simply stop breathing. You realize the breath energy comes from within, so you really don't have to worry about the need to pull anything in from outside.

Then, as everything gets very still, you begin to realize that your sense of the body begins to lose its outline, so that it's made up of little sensation points, like little droplets of water in a cloud. You can focus on the space between the spots. You realize that that space connects with the space outside of the body, and then it goes through the walls, so there's nothing that is not entirely surrounded or penetrated by space. You hold that perception of space

in mind. Then you ask yourself, "Well, what is it that knows the space?" and then you focus directly on that consciousness.

Now, we're not talking about going through these stages in the course of five minutes. It takes a while, sometimes a long while. But with time and practice, as you get more solidly with this sense of just "knowing," you begin to sense that it would be even more relaxing to just drop the perception of Oneness in the knowing. That leaves you with a sense of nothing, and you stay with that perception.

Now, some people find this really fascinating, figuring how you can take apart your perceptions of your body and of your mind. You learn a lot about the process of fabrication, and you can actually get very passionate about learning these stages of concentration.

Other people find this very easy, so they don't find much interest in the process of getting the mind to settle down. However, they do find it interesting to figure out what happens when they leave concentration. In other words, what is it that the mind latches on to when it lets go of the concentration? How does it go back to creating more stress for itself as it engages with the world?

Here you can apply the five steps that we've been talking about in the course of the retreat: looking for the origination of whatever you find yourself holding on to, how it passes away, how you pick it up again, what the allure is that makes you *want* to pick it up again. Then you look at the drawbacks of holding on to that thing, and when it hits you that the drawbacks outweigh the allure, and that you have the alternative *not* to hold on, you let it go.

As for the people who find concentration fascinating, they eventually get to the point where they see that even that state of nothingness is fabricated and has to be maintained, so then they apply the same five steps to that.

Basically what it comes down to is that you get really passionate either about concentration or about discernment because of how they help you to understand and unravel the mind's unskillful habits. But you need both. It's only when you've been passionate for these two things that you begin to understand why the mind has been creating suffering. Then, when they've done their work, you can let them both go.

So, to get to the ultimate dispassion, you have to be passionate about the path. Don't think you can just relax and glide into nibbāna. It requires understanding the activities of the mind, because you don't really understand suffering until you understand why you're doing it, why you're clinging to things. If you simply force yourself to let go for a while, it's very likely you'll pick things up again because you don't really understand the allure of clinging. As one of Ajaan Lee's students once said to him, "It's very easy to let go of this bowl, but I still have my hand on top of it, ready to pick it up again." It's when you really understand why would you want to grip it to begin with: That's when you can totally let it go.

The path does require work, but as the Buddha says, you can learn how to be passionate for it, you can learn how to really like doing it. This is why his Dhamma talks are so full of encouragement and rousing and urging, helping you to realize that even though the path is a challenge, you're more than up for the challenge.

(Meditation)

In America, there was a psychologist who specialized in what's called positive psychology, which is basically the study of what makes people happy. When he interviewed people, he asked them to describe what made them happy, and then he would have them make notes when they were actually experiencing those activities, to see exactly how happy they were. Most people reported that they weren't really as happy as they thought they would be. "Why is it," he thought, "that people are so ignorant about their happiness?"

Then he reflected on himself. He liked to do mountain climbing, and he noticed that before going up the mountain, he was happy about the fact that he was going to go up the mountain. When he had come down from the mountain, he was happy that he had been up there. But while he was on the mountain, he was miserable. The conclusion he came to was that people shouldn't look too carefully at the ways they find happiness. Happiness thrives in ignorance.

But the Buddha would have you look at the issue in another way: Why is it that we talk ourselves into thinking that something makes us happy? There's so much embroidery that goes into anticipating happiness and then talking to

ourselves about it afterwards. If our experiences really were that good, we wouldn't have to embroider them so much. We should come to the conclusion that sensory pleasures don't provide us with as much happiness as we think they do. We're ignorant of what we're doing, which is why we suffer.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha would say, "Look someplace else for happiness." The whole point of the third noble truth is that there is a much better happiness, a happiness that requires no embroidery, the happiness that comes from abandoning craving. That's why he recommends the path of virtue, concentration, and discernment. But that path, too, requires some elaboration, because it takes work to hold to the precepts, to get the mind to settle down, and to try to figure out how the mind is deceiving itself. This is why he said we should try to develop delight in the path: Delight is basically our mental embroidery on our pleasures. The Buddha often mentions delight together with passion. We need both in order to give ourselves the energy to stick with the path even when it's difficult.

And it should be something we should find easy to find delight in. You're finding out about your own mind. You're trying to figure out how it is that the mind can lie to itself and why the mind *likes* to be lied to. This should be one of the most fascinating things in the world.

Of course, part of us doesn't like revealing this because we don't like to admit to ourselves that we've been lying and been willingly accepting our own lies. But when you can identify with the part of the mind that likes to figure things out, and you give the mind the sense of well-being that comes with the practice of concentration so that you put yourself in a good mood to do this work, then it's easier to admit to yourself, "Yeah, I have been kind of foolish, but I'm foolish no more."

When you get to the goal, there's no more need for passion or delight. The happiness that comes there doesn't require any elaboration. In other words, it's so happy that you don't need to elaborate, which is why they say that the awakened ones are beyond delight. To us, it sounds a little bit dry, but the actual experience is just the opposite. You don't have to keep talking to yourself about how great nibbāna is; you don't need to add herbs and spices. It's totally satisfying in and of itself.

April 25, 2023, 1515

Q&A

Q: Is it possible to send thoughts of goodwill to dead people?

A: Please do. After all, they've been reborn—either that or they're looking for a place to be reborn—and either way, they can benefit from your kind thoughts of goodwill for them.

Q: It seems as if there's no discussion of affection in the suttas. It's a beautiful sentiment. Is it associated with too much attachment?

A: Not necessarily. In the Vinaya, the new monk is told to regard his teacher with the same affection that he would regard his father, and the teacher is supposed to have the same affection for the new student as he would for a son. In Pāli there is a word, *anukampa*, that means kindness or sympathy, and it's used many times in the Canon. It's especially associated with situations where you develop the proper caring relationships with other people. That's when you have to develop affection for one another.

Q: Those who attain the first jhāna: Are they able to attain it whenever they like afterwards? I have trouble imagining that one can get past the five hindrances definitively. How can one know if a person has entered into the stream?

A: Just because you get into the first jhāna once doesn't mean that you're going to enter it again. You have observe your mind to notice what actually helps it to settle down, and this can often involve a fair amount of trial and error. As for getting past the five hindrances, you have to get to at least one of the noble stages before you can say that you've definitely gone past any of those five. With sensual desire, not even stream-enterers are past that particular hindrance. You have to get to the third level of awakening, which is called non-returning, to go definitively beyond sensual desire. As for stream entry, I'll save that for later.

Q: During walking meditation, is it possible to be very attentive to the sensations of the breath in different parts of the body—for example, the back of the neck, imagining that the energy circulates there to open it up if it seems to be closed and to cool it down if it seems to be inflamed?

A: Yes, it is possible. In fact, this is one of the activities that make walking meditation interesting and fruitful.

Q: Often the thought of focusing my attention on a particular part of the body generates tensions in that particular spot. It's the opposite of what I'm looking for. How to avoid this?

A: When they teach you how to go hunting for mushrooms in a forest, they teach something called "scatter vision," in which you try to give equal weight to all areas of your visual field. That's because you don't know exactly where the mushrooms are going to be. They could be anywhere in your visual field. If you get used to developing that kind of scatter vision, then when you sit down to meditate, it's easier to focus on one spot and disperse the tension at that spot at the same time. You look at the body as a whole first, and allow the energies to be diffuse, open, and relaxed. Then you focus on one spot while trying to keep that same open and relaxed gaze on that spot. That helps to counteract a tendency that most of us do have, which is to tense up where we're focused.

Q: I'm worried about my father who is 78 years old and whose health is declining. I've seen him act in ways that are more and more unskillful. He's become an alcoholic, he often makes disagreeable remarks to my mother, and he seems interested in things that are more and more pointless. When he was young, he was a Catholic, but he hasn't believed in anything for decades. He almost never poses any questions to me about Buddhism. What can I do to help him? Can I help him remember the things that he did in the past that were good? Any other ideas?

A: Yes, help him to think about the good deeds he did in the past. You could also take some books on Buddhism and casually leave them around the house in case he gets interested. I would recommend *Les Cinq Facultés* and *Bonté et Bonheur*. It would also be good to talk to him in ways that get him inclined to

want to be generous right now. If he's soured on religion, maybe he could give to a secular charity.

Q: Certain people cannot stand the idea that they would no longer exist when other people continue to live. What kind of fear is this?

A: It's largely egoism. They have a sense that they should have some control over what's going on in the world and they don't like the idea that the world would continue after they've gone. Under the four fears associated with death that the Buddha listed, this would come under the fear that comes from not knowing the true Dhamma. You feel that you have some control over the world right now, but you actually have less control than you think. Remember our definition of becoming: your sense of yourself in a world of experience. We tend to identify a lot of that world as part of ourselves, so there can be the feeling that when you die, you'll have no world at all left to yourself—without realizing that you're actually in the process of creating another world of becoming to go to. But you'll probably be very attached to that one, too.

Q: From your teachings, it seems that fear of death actually is useful so that you can do what is necessary in order to make this passage properly. If you don't have fear of your next lifetime, is this a lack of compassion for the being that's going to be reborn or is this foolishness?

A: Think about your being reborn. What kind of world would this being to return to? Go down to an old folks' home and see the old people who haven't practiced any Dhamma at all and ask yourself, "Do I want to be like that next time around?" That should give you some fear of rebirth so that you should determine, "I want to come back to a place where I can practice."

Q: A friend of mine is suffering and is going to die and asks my advice, knowing that I am Buddhist, "Do I have to accept all the way to the end the sufferings that are getting more and more intolerable? Or can I speed up my rebirth with the aid of assisted suicide?" What should I tell that person without at the same time taking the easy way out of not responding in the name of certain praiseworthy motivations?

A: One thing to tell that person would be to say that, from the Buddhist point of view, we really don't know where we're going to go after death. We

don't know if where we'll go next time will be better or worse. So we should take advantage of this opportunity to get to learn how to understand pain and not be overcome by it, because as a human being this is a skill you can develop that will hold you in good stead wherever you go. Whether that person accepts your advice or not is another matter, but that would still be the best advice to give the person.

Q: A relative who does not believe in rebirth has told me that she wants to die with dignity, so she plans to sign up for an assisted suicide program. What can I tell her to dissuade her from going ahead with this plan?

A: Appeal to her compassion and her sense of social responsibility. Ask her what kind of society she would want to leave behind as a gift for following generations. If assisted suicide becomes more and more the norm, there will be sick and old poor people who are inconvenient to society who will get pushed, willingly or not, into agreeing to sign on to assisted suicide. Is that the kind of society we would want leave behind as a gift to others? It would be a nobler thing to learn how to deal skillfully with pain, and leave that as an example to those she is leaving behind.

Q: I'd like to have a couple more detailed explanations of *buddho:* what it is that knows, consciousness, wisdom. I have a sense that some of these mental functions are contained in one another.

A: Let's start out with consciousness. Consciousness, within the five aggregates, is the receptivity of the mind to sensory contact. In the Thai forest tradition, the "one that knows" is basically this consciousness. A common concentration exercise is to stay at this level of simple receptivity, and not to add any further elaboration to the plain awareness of sensory contact.

Wisdom is the understanding with which you begin to see into how you're creating suffering and how you can put an end to it. That requires a lot more activity than mere consciousness.

Then *buddho*, within the Thai forest tradition, is the name for consciousness without surface, the consciousness that lies outside of the aggregates and is known apart from the six senses.

There's some confusion in Thailand about this matter, especially the relationship between ordinary consciousness, which is called the one that knows, and awakened consciousness: in other words, between regular consciousness in the five aggregates on the one hand, and consciousness without surface on the other. There's a problem in the Thai forest tradition in that Thai people in general, including the Thai junior monks, are often afraid to ask questions of the teacher. There's a tendency in the Thai education system to discourage the students from asking questions because the implication is that if you have to ask questions, it means the teacher didn't explain things properly. So, for a long time among Ajaan Chah's students, there was confusion as to whether the one that knows is the same thing as awakened consciousness. It took a French monk to ask him the question: "Is what knows" the same thing as awakened consciousness, i.e., is it the same thing as *buddho?*" And Ajaan Chah said, "No, of course not." If you want to read the transcript of this conversation, I don't think it's been translated into French, but it is available in English in the book, *Still, Flowing Water*, available on dhammatalks.org. It's the very last talk in that collection.

Q: My question has to do with how to stop anger. If I've correctly understood what you've said, anger is incited by something that takes its roots in our attachment to a sense of me or to a frustrated desire. Once initiated, it becomes more or less independent of its point of departure and becomes more focused on the object upon which it is projected. A sort of attraction keeps reviving it and entertaining it without remembering its point of departure. How can one proceed in order to stop it? To attack it at the roots, which is the desire or the attachment to me? Or to study it as a process? Or to spread thoughts of goodwill for myself and the objects of my anger?

A: All of the above, in the proper order. To deconstruct anger, the first thing you've got to do is have goodwill for yourself and goodwill for the object of your anger. Then you basically do your best to see that the object is not really worth the anger. That turns your attention in to the anger as a process inside the mind. This is where you use those five steps of analysis, focusing your attention most precisely on what is the allure of the anger, why part of you likes it. Then, when you see that the drawbacks outweigh the allure, you

can drop it. As this analysis goes deeper and deeper, it ultimately gets you to drop any sense of "me" or "mine" around the processes that would lead to further bouts of anger.

Q: In the chant on true friends, it says those who rest calm in the presence of nibbāna are particularly praised.

A: That's a chant that I don't know. There is, however, a chant that says that if you show proper respect for the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, you respect concentration, you respect the training, and you have respect for welcoming guests, then you are in the presence of nibbāna.

Q: Continuation of the same question: Does this mean that agitation is what obstructs the perception of the entry into nibbāna, and that nibbāna is simply everywhere and at all times?

A: There's a lot more than simple agitation that gets in the way of realizing nibbāna. All of our ignorance about how we're causing suffering and how we can put an end to suffering gets in the way, so that's what you have to learn how to overcome before you can find the opening to nibbāna. You sometimes hear the idea that nibbāna is just waiting for us to just open up to it, but the actual realization of nibbāna is a lot more difficult than that.

Q: I'll try to give a summary of what I think the next question is.

Sometimes I see in myself a tiny little impulse who becomes Darth Vader, nasty and immoral, without any scruples. By the time I realize it, the unskillful action has already been done. So what to do when you discover something like this?

A: You call on the entire Force. In other words, remember that you have other members of the committee as well. And knowing that you do have Darth Vader in your committee, you have to be extra vigilant. The fact that you can give him a name is a good thing. It allows you to separate yourself from him. And don't be surprised when he shows up again. Just remember that Darth Vader doesn't come on to the scene full-blown and all at once. He first sends his little spies and minions to find which other members of the committee are in agreement with him. They try to do all of this activity underground, but

actually, it's not totally underground. You see it, but then you pretend that you don't, which is one of the reasons I said that seeing the allure of something is often very difficult. The mind has this tendency to lie to itself.

You can see this while you're meditating. There will be parts of the mind that want to go someplace else besides the breath and they'll actually come to an agreement, saying, "When there's a lapse mindfulness, we'll go." Then they pretend that this didn't happen, but actually, the decision has already been made. Then, sure enough, when there's a lapse in mindfulness, they go. So instead of pretending that you didn't see all this happening, you have to learn how to admit to yourself, "Yes, Darth Vader is there with his spies and minions, but I'm not going to give in to them."

Q: Two questions on dependent co-arising. First question: In the twelve links of dependent co-origination, can you explain how the link of suffering aging, illness, and death leads to ignorance?

A: Dependent co-origination is not a circle. It comes in the form of many circles with many feedback loops. Now, underlying the whole thing is ignorance. As long as there's ignorance, then the feedback loops can continue going around creating more suffering. But when you can apply knowledge of the four noble truths to any of the links in this series of feedback loops, that's what begins to unravel the process. There's a sutta saying that when you bring knowledge to the experience of aging, illness, and death, it leads, not to more ignorance, but to conviction that there must be a way out. That conviction then becomes the basis for the development of the rest of the path, all the way to release.

There's a book in English called *The Shape of Suffering*, and one of the reasons it's called that is to make the point that dependent co-arising is not just a simple cycle.

Q: Second question: Is kamma created or equivalent to 1) saṅkhāra, 2) viññāṇa or 3) nāma-rūpa?

A: In dependent co-arising, you find kamma in two places: 1) Under nāma-rūpa or name-and-form, it's there as intention. 2) As for saṅkhāra or fabrication, fabrication is defined often as intention.

Q: Why do those who are awakened continue to meditate? We meditate to advance along the path, but those who have gained awakening are at the end of the path and they have let go of the raft.

A: They keep the raft around because it's fun to go up and down the river every now and then. In the Canon, they say that those who are awakened practice concentration it because it's a pleasant thing to do, and also because it's good for mindfulness and alertness. Something else you see again and again in the Canon is that if someone like the Buddha is teaching, it takes a lot of energy, and practicing concentration is a really good way of getting your energy level up. There's a passage right before the end of the Buddha's life where Ven. Ānanda is commenting on how old the Buddha looks—his skin is wrinkled, his back is bent over—and the Buddha says, "My body is like a cart that's being kept going by straps"—a cart that's falling apart, so you have to strap it up—and the straps are his practice of concentration.

Q: In practice, what does it mean to be in karmic debt to someone else, for example to one's parents? Do we have to pay back the debt, and if so, how?

A: Yes, the Buddha said the best way to repay your debt to your parents is to get them to be generous and virtuous and to practice the Dhamma. He said that if you could carry your parents around on your shoulders, feeding them and wiping off their urine and excrement, that still wouldn't repay your debt to them, because after all, they were the ones who gave you life. Even if they weren't the best parents, at least you have this body because they gave you life. I mentioned this one time to the mother of one of my monks, and she said, "Okay, I like the idea of my son teaching me the Dhamma, but can I have at least a little time of him carrying me on his shoulder?"

Q: Thank you for your presence. I'm happy to be here, thank you. My practice has become more stable since we've had this retreat. As far as sensations in the body, I do the body scan from top to bottom and then bottom to top, and I discover each part of the body. This happens sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. What I've discovered is that when I do the scan of the body, there's always a moment when my body just relaxes. I thought it was sleepiness, but then I realized that wasn't it, because if I visualized my body

from another angle, this feeling of sleepiness didn't overpower the mind. I don't work with the breath energies, but I feel my body almost in its entirety. The first question is, do you have to feel this breath energy?

A: As long as the body is comfortable, you don't have to think about the breath energy.

Q: Continuation of the same question: Then today, at the end of the body scan, it was my mind that was taking over, and I had the feeling in my mind, and so I meditated on the mind in the mind. I wasn't feeling my body except for the hands, feet, shoulders, and the pains in my buttocks just from sitting. Sometimes it felt as if the fact that I was meditating on the mind itself made me rock my head back and forth, left and right, with movements that were more or less pronounced. There were sensations sometimes of opening, sometimes of confinement, closing off, sometimes headaches, sometimes the body was more or less present. What should I do with this presence?

A: What's happening is that, as you focus on the mind, you're unconsciously releasing tensions in parts of the body, and when these patterns of tension get released, they ripple through the body. This is what's causing your head to move back and forth. It can also cause other parts of the body to move as well. As you allow these patterns of tension to disperse in this way, you're actually subconsciously working with breath energies. After a while, the effects of these waves propagating through the body will die down. So, focus not on the movement of the body, but just on the sense of relaxation throughout the body, and things will calm down.

Okay, we're getting past time. I apologize for the questions we didn't get to. Come to the next retreat.

April 25, 2023, 1900

Grief

Just a quick question before we get started.

Q: What are the suttas dealing with hell? How do we get out?

A: The suttas are Majjhima 129 and Majjhima 130. As for how to get out, think of all the good things you've done in the past. There's a story in the Tibetan tradition. Two hell beings are being forced to draw a heavy cart, and a hell warden is beating one of the hell beings very severely with a whip. The other hell being feels compassion for the one who is being whipped and pleads with the hell warden to stop. It was the first time that hell being felt compassion since he'd arrived in hell, and he immediately got out of hell. So, there's hope.

Tonight's topic is grief over the loss of a loved one. We'll start with a story of another king. His name is King Pasenadi, and among his queens was Mallikā, who introduced him to the Buddha and was very dear to him.

Once in Sāvatthī, which was Pasenadi's capital city, a man lost his only son. Day after day, he would go to the charnel ground and cry, "Where are you, my only son? Where are you, my only son?" One day, on the way back home, he stopped off to pay respects to the Buddha. The Buddha asked him, "What have you been doing? You look as if you're out of your mind." And the man said, "Well, yes, I just lost my only son, and day after day I go to the charnel ground and cry out, 'Where are you, my only son? Where are you, my only son?'" Then the Buddha said, "Yes, there's a lot of pain and suffering that comes from loved ones." The man said, "How can that be? There's only happiness and joy that comes from one's loved ones." See how deluded he was.

So he leaves the Buddha and goes and talks to a group of gamblers. The gamblers say, "Yeah, the Buddha's wrong and you're right. You get only happiness and joy from loved ones." He agrees with the gamblers and goes home.

This story gets to the ear of the king, so he calls Mallikā in and he says, "This Buddha of yours says that pain and suffering come from loved ones. What does he mean by that? You get only happiness and joy from loved ones." Mallikā says, "Well, if he says that, it must be true." Pasenadi replies, "What kind of person are you? Everything the Buddha says, you say it must be true, true, true. Get out of my sight."

So Mallikā calls in one of their counselors and tells him, “Go ask the Buddha what he meant by saying that.” So the counselor goes to see the Buddha, and the Buddha explains by telling stories of various people in Sāvatthī who lost their loved ones and, as a result, went out of their minds. One, for example, was a man who lost his wife and went crazy. He went from street to street, saying, “Have you seen my wife? Have you seen my wife?” Then there was the story of a woman who lost her husband and went from street to street asking, “Have you seen my husband? Have you seen my husband?” Many stories of this sort.

He ends with a story where a young woman who’s been married to a young man gets taken back by her relatives so that they can marry her off to somebody else. She gets in touch with her original husband and says, “My relatives are trying to take me away from you.” So he finds her, kills her, and then kills himself, with the idea that they would be together when they’re dead. The Buddha concluded, “This is what I mean when I say that there’s a lot of pain and suffering that comes from loved ones.”

So the counselor comes back to the palace and tells all this to Mallikā. Then Mallikā goes to see the king. But instead of repeating the Buddha’s stories, she comes up with a strategy of her own. She says to the king, “Do you love your son?” And he says, “Of course.” Then she says, “What if your son died, what would that do to you?” He says, “That would change my life.” “Do you love me?” “Of course, I love you.” “What would it do to you if I died?” He says, “It would change my life.” She says, “That’s what the Buddha meant.” So the king gets up, figures out which direction the Buddha is, and then, for the first time, pays homage to the Buddha in that direction.

It actually happened that, as they got older, Mallikā did die before the king did. And it so happened that Pasenadi was talking with the Buddha at the time. A courtier came up and whispered the news in Pasenadi’s ear that Mallikā had died. The king was totally dejected. His shoulders drooped and he was at a loss for words.

So the Buddha recommended three steps for how to deal with grief.

The first step is to reflect on the universality of grief: “To the extent that beings are born, they suffer aging, illness, and death. There are no

exceptions." Not even for kings.

The second step is learning how to express your grief in skillful ways. The Buddha said this includes giving eulogies, dedicating gifts, and listening to the Dhamma. This is to show appreciation for those who have passed away.

The third is to realize that there's still good work to be done in the world. In other words, the loss of someone you've loved doesn't mean that the world no longer has meaning. Your enemies would be pleased if they found out that you were giving yourself over self-indulgently to grief, and your loved ones would be sad to see this happen. You yourself wouldn't be able to accomplish your worthwhile aims. So the Buddha recommends that you should ask yourself, "What important work am I doing now?"

Here, I'd like to stop to note the fact that when the Canon talks about the drawbacks or sufferings of human life, it often focuses on the sufferings of kings. In effect, the message is that this is as good as human life gets, and even then there's suffering. It also focuses on the dangers of kingship. In your quest for power, you do many unskillful things that make it harder and harder to hear and understand the Dhamma. Pasenadi is a case in point. He's often shown as being somewhat scatter-brained in his questions to the Buddha. Even his Pāli grammar is bad. And when he announces his Dhamma realizations to the Buddha, they're often very rudimentary.

So, not only do kings suffer, but their power and status also put them in positions where they're likely to do unskillful things and, as a result, they fall deeper than ordinary people.

The point that the Canon is making here is that the good things in the world are not really good. The way Ajaan Lee puts this point is that the truth of the world isn't good, and the goodness of the world isn't true. If you want something true and good, you have look to the Dhamma.

To get back to the topic of grief: The general pattern for traditional funeral observances around the world is to allow those who are grieving to give expression to their love for the lost one, but also to remind them that there are still good reasons to live. This is what you see everywhere, from the most primitive societies to the most advanced. What's distinctive about the

Buddhist approach is which expressions of love the Buddhist texts encourage and how they define the reasons for living.

The Dhamma approaches the problem of grief in two ways. On the one hand, it offers advice in what we would call symptom management, and on the other hand it prescribes a cure. Both approaches follow the same three steps of the Buddha's advice to Pasenadi, but obviously, the cure goes deeper into each step. This two-pronged approach is similar to what doctors and psychotherapists do when they're treating their patients: First they try to manage the patients' symptoms to calm the patient down, and then they focus on the causes of the patient's illness to effect a genuine cure.

• So let's start with symptom management. You start with a reflection on the general nature of aging, illness, and death—that all beings suffer loss in this way—and this is meant to change the focus of your attention from your own loss to the fact of loss all over the world. This is meant transform your grief over your own loss into compassion for others.

This connects with the aesthetic theory they had in ancient India on how a dramatic presentation gives artistic pleasure. The people who gave plays in India noticed a paradox. They found that audiences would often enjoy seeing somebody suffer on stage, and this was not out of maliciousness, but out of sympathy. So the question was, how do you explain this? The person on stage is supposed to be portraying real sadness and suffering, but can you say that the audience is feeling the same emotion as the character on the stage? Well, no. After all, they're enjoying the spectacle.

So, the theory they came up with is that the audience doesn't experience the same emotion. They *taste* the emotion, and the taste is related to but different from the emotion itself. In other words, they experienced it at one remove. And so the theorists devised a list of the emotions that could be portrayed on stage, and the corresponding taste that came from each emotion. When grief was being portrayed on the stage, the audience, at one remove, would taste compassion. That's what they would enjoy.

The same principle applies in real life. If you can step back from your grief and reflect on the fact that all people suffer loss, you feel compassion for everybody. That then becomes compassion for yourself because you're

stepping back from your loss a bit. Your own grief becomes more bearable at the same time that you're not denying it. This compassion thus turns grief into a more healing, expansive, uplifting emotion. It's an emotion that nourishes the heart and enables you to interact with others with more understanding.

So, that's the first step in symptom management: stepping back from your own grief and seeing it in the context of everybody else's grief. The resulting sense of compassion helps you connect with other people.

The second step deals with expressing feelings of appreciation. You hold funeral observances for giving skillful expression to your appreciation for loved ones. Among the observances that the Buddha mentioned as potentially useful were eulogies, donations, and the recital of wise sayings. These three activities have since formed the core of funeral observances in many Buddhist traditions. If you actually want to help the person who has passed on, you make gifts and do good in other ways, and then dedicate the merit to your loved one. To heal the wound in your own heart and to encourage goodness in the people who are still alive, you express your appreciation for the loved one's goodness. To remind you of the continued value of Dhamma practice, you listen to passages of Dhamma. Weeping and wailing, the Buddha notes, accomplish none of this. They destroy your health, cause distress to those who love you, and please those who hate or despise you.

The Buddha mentioned this last point as motivation for gathering your energy for the third step, which is to remind yourself that there are still good things to accomplish in your life. Once you've broadened your heart with compassion and you've expressed your appreciation for your loved one's goodness, it puts you in a good position to provide a wise answer for that question, "What important work am I doing now?" The wise response is not to define *important* in terms of the pressing responsibilities of the daily grind. Instead, you should think about what's important in terms of the future course of your life as a whole.

This means developing good qualities like conviction, virtue, generosity, learning, and discernment, and the sublime attitudes, as we discussed the other day. These are the qualities that can help guarantee good opportunities for rebirth when you approach your own death. If you want to meet your loved

one again in a future life, these qualities guarantee that you will have the opportunity to meet in positive circumstances. As the Canon says, the vows made by people who are virtuous tend to come true.

When we take these three steps in grief management—seeing the universality of loss, expressing appreciation for the lost one, and then determining what you should do with your life now—and view them in terms of the seven strengths, it's easy to see how they employ and foster the first four.

Conviction reminds you that you can't just wallow in your sorrow. Given your conviction in the need to continue creating new kamma for the sake of your own long-term happiness, you have to get to work to manage at least the symptoms of your grief.

The reflection on how excessive grief distresses your loved ones and pleases your enemies should appeal to your sense of shame.

The reflection on how grief destroys your health and interferes with the work that needs to be done to keep yourself from falling into even greater suffering should appeal to your sense of compunction.

And finally, persistence is what actually allows you to think in these terms and to pull you out of your grieving thoughts into a more ennobling compassion for all, and then to act on that compassion for your own good and for the good of others.

Now, as we noted, these steps are simply basic instructions in symptom management. They're designed to assuage the pangs of grief, to make sure that the grief doesn't become self-indulgent and ruin your life. But they can't tell you how to remove the arrow of grief from your heart. For those instructions, you have to go to the Buddha's more advanced instructions for going entirely beyond grief.

• His total cure, as we said, follows the same three steps: accepting the universality of loss, expressing your appreciation for what has been lost, and then directing your focus to the good things that still need to be done. But now we pursue these steps on a deeper level based on understanding the psychology of grief.

There's a story in the Canon. Ven. Sāriputta's been meditating one afternoon and then, at the end of his meditation, he comes out and talks to some of the other monks. He says, "I was reflecting, 'Is there any change that could happen in the world that would cause me grief?' And I realized there was nothing." Now, this gets Ānanda upset. He says, "Wait a minute. What if the Buddha passed away?"

And these are Sāriputta's words: "Even if there were a change or alteration in the Teacher"—that's their way of talking about the Buddha, and that's the polite way of saying that the Buddha dies—"there would arise within me no sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, or despair. Still, I would have this thought, 'What a great being of great might, great power, has disappeared. For if the Blessed One were to remain for a long time, that would be for the benefit of many people, for the happiness of many people, out of sympathy for the world, for the welfare, benefit, and happiness of devas and human beings.'"

Now, notice that Sāriputta makes no mention of "my loss" or "what I've lost" in the Buddha's passing away. Ānanda notices this, too, and he comments that this is a sign that Sāriputta has no conceit, which means no sense of "I am."

This is an astute comment. Grief hurts because we feel that we've lost a part of ourselves. Our sense of "I am" needs to feed, and we feed on the people around us. We internalize them and make them part of ourselves. But if we can remove that sense of "I am," then we don't feel that a part of ourselves has been taken away when people near and dear to us have died. So, to gain total release from grief, we have to stop laying claim to things as "me" and "mine."

This is where the three steps come in. First we reflect on the universality of loss, to develop not only compassion but also a sense of saṁvega, which means a sense of terror and dismay over the cycle of birth and death. You see that it just keeps going on and on and on, arriving nowhere, causing a lot of suffering in the process, and you say, "There must be a way out." You think about what the Buddha said about the tears that you've shed over the loss of your loved ones: They're more than the water in all the oceans of the Earth. There's a highway in California that we use often that goes right next to the

ocean, and every time I go past, I think, “Oh my gosh, that’s an awful lot of water.”

Thinking about this leads to what the Buddha calls renunciation distress: the realization that there is a deathless goal that people have attained, but you haven’t attained there yet. Actually, this kind of distress offers you some hope because it assumes there is a way out. It’s distressing because you haven’t gotten there yet, but still it’s better than what he calls household distress, which he defines as not getting the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, etc., that you want. That kind of distress is hopeless, because even though you may eventually get the things you want, they’re going to leave you again. Renunciation distress, though, contains an element of hope because it assumes that there is a way out to total freedom.

As for the step of appreciation, this goes in two ways. First you think about your loved ones and say, “If I followed the path of practice, I could dedicate the merit of that to them.” There’s a passage where the Buddha says that when you attain the stages of awakening, then the amount of merit that goes to those who have helped you now and in the past grows greater and greater. He recommends this line of thinking as one of the motivations for practicing. So you practice as a way of paying your debt of gratitude for those who have helped you.

The other direction in which your appreciation goes is to the Buddha himself. You think of all the difficulties he went through to find the way out. You also have appreciation for the Sangha that has kept the memory of the Buddha’s accomplishment alive. Appreciation here is expressed by practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma, and not in accordance with your own likes and dislikes. This means that you become a new “you.” You’re defined not by your grief, but by the noble desire to do what’s required to follow the path.

As for the third step, which is about the work that needs to be done: The irony is that Sāriputta actually died before the Buddha. Ānanda brings the news to the Buddha, telling the Buddha that he himself lost his bearings on hearing the news of Sāriputta’s death. So the Buddha chides him, and these are the words he uses, “When Sāriputta passed away, did he take virtue along

with him?" "No." "Concentration?" "No." "Discernment?" "No." "Release?" "No." "Knowledge and vision of release?" "No." In other words, the good work of the world, the best work of the world, which is the path to total release of suffering, is still there to be done. So you give yourself to the work of the noble eightfold path.

Now, when that work is done, the mind no longer creates a sense of "me" and "mine" that has to feed on things that change. That's because it's found a happiness that doesn't change and doesn't have the slightest need to feed. In that sense, the mind no longer turns itself into a being. Remember that beings are defined by their attachment to how they feed. When the mind no longer takes on the identity of a being anywhere at all, it's said to be everywhere released. In this way you realize that the Buddha's words to King Pasenadi —"to the extent there are beings"—turn out to have a limit. Going beyond that limit, the mind no longer stabs itself with the arrows of grief. From that point on, as long as it continues to live in the world, it will know loss but not suffer from it. When it's gone beyond the world, it will enter a dimension beyond space and time where there's no possibility of loss at all.

That's where the three steps in the Buddha's total cure for grief can take you: to freedom from having to experience grief over sorrow ever again.

Here, too, it's easy to see how this cure employs and fosters all seven of the strengths that have formed the framework for the discussion throughout this retreat. You start with conviction in the Buddha's awakening, which is what motivates you to take on the difficult work of dismantling your sense of "I." Your appreciation of the Buddha's accomplishment, the hard work and compassion that went into it, gives you a sense of shame around the idea of not following the path all the way to the end. Your sense of compunction, when fully developed, is what sparks you to go beyond mere grief management to settling for nothing less than the total cure. Your persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment do the actual work of abandoning the last traces of conceit. This allows you to go beyond the birth, aging, illness, death, and sorrow that being a "being" entails.

It was through these strengths that the bodhisatta, the Buddha-to-be, became the Buddha. They helped him develop the undaunted heart that

allowed him to attempt and complete the work of the path of the deathless. When you develop these strengths, you can develop the same undaunted heart as well.

As a poem in the Canon says,

> “With arrow pulled out,
> independent,
> attaining peace of awareness,
> all grief transcended,
> free of grief,
> you’re unbound.” — Sn 3:8

April 26, 2023, 0900

Conclusion

We've begun many of our talks with stories about kings, so here's another one with King Pasenadi. One day he came to see the Buddha in the middle of the day, and the Buddha asked him, "What have you been doing today, great king?"

Let me read you his answer:

"Just now, lord, I was engaged in the sort of royal affairs typical of head-anointed warrior kings intoxicated with the intoxication of sovereignty, obsessed by greed for sensuality, who have obtained stable control in their country and who rule having conquered a great sphere of territory on Earth."

Can you image asking one of our present-day politicians this question and getting that same answer? "Mr. President, what have you been doing today?" "Oh, the typical things done by someone who's intoxicated with power and obsessed with greed for sensuality." You have to admire the king for being frank.

So the Buddha asked him, "Suppose a trustworthy man were to come from the east, saying that there's a huge mountain moving in, crushing all living beings in its path. Another man would come from the south, again trustworthy, saying that there's a mountain moving in from the south, crushing all living beings in its path." Similarly the west and the north: altogether four mountains moving in from four directions.

Then the Buddha asked this question, "If, your majesty, such a great peril should arise, such a terrible destruction of human life—the human state being so hard to obtain—what should be done?" The king replied, "If, Lord, such a great peril should arise, such a terrible destruction of human life—the human state being so hard to obtain—what else should be done but Dhamma-conduct, right conduct, skillful deeds, meritorious deeds?"

Then the Buddha said, “I inform you, great king, I announce to you, great king: Aging and death are rolling in on you. When aging and death are rolling in on you, what should be done?” So the king replied, “When aging and death are rolling in on me, what else should be done but Dhamma-conduct, right conduct, skillful deeds, meritorious deeds?”

That, in a nutshell, is the Buddhist attitude toward death. And this is why it’s important to reflect on death often. We focus on what we can do in the present moment, not for its own sake, and not to escape thinking about the future. We focus on the present moment because we see danger in the future, and we must do what we can in the present moment to prepare for that danger so that we won’t have to suffer when aging, illness, and death come rolling in.

This attitude is based on two of the principles that the Buddha taught. One is the general principle of causality, which is that what we do now will have an impact now and on into the future. This means that what we experience now comes from a combination of past actions and present actions. We can prepare for the future now by doing things that will shape future circumstances, and also by developing skills that we will need to use when aging, illness, and death appear in the present moment.

The second principle is the Buddha’s analysis of what happens at death. Just as a fire burning one house moves to set fire to another house by clinging to the wind, a being moves from one body to another by clinging to craving. In line with this image, we prepare for future death by building good houses and by trying to gain some control over the wind. In other words, we do good actions that will create good conditions for a future birth, a birth where we can continue practicing the Dhamma, and we learn to gain some control over the hindrances so that they won’t slip in and hijack our cravings, taking us to places where the Dhamma practice will be hard.

Ideally, we want to develop the discernment that will enable us to put out the fire—in other words, overcome the attachments that make us into a being with narratives, traveling from one state of becoming to another, and instead, find total release from suffering. The image that the Buddha gives for total release is the ocean. Just as the ocean cannot be measured, there is no limit, no measure, for a being who’s been totally released. Beings, you may

remember, are defined by their attachments, but an arahant, having no attachments, cannot be defined.

The first of the Buddha's two principles—the principle of causality—is illustrated in the chant on the five reflections that we've been reciting every morning. This is repeated the whole world over in Theravada Buddhist communities. One: "I am subject to aging. Aging is unavoidable." Two: "I am subject to illness. Illness is unavoidable." Three: "I am subject to death. Death is unavoidable." Four: "I will grow different, separate from all that is dear and appealing to me." Five: "I'm the owner of my actions, heir to my actions, born of my actions, related through my actions, and live dependent on my actions. Whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir."

The first four reflections remind us of the dangers facing us. If the chant stopped there, it would simply be telling us to accept these events as a fact of life. But the chant doesn't stop there. It goes on to affirm the power of our actions. There is something we can do about these things. Remember the attitude of the young prince who became the Buddha. He didn't just accept the facts of aging, illness, and death. His actual response was audacious and defiant. The story goes that his relatives kept saying, "Don't try to go for the deathless. There is no such thing." His reply was, "If there's a possibility that it exists, I've got to find it." His attitude was there must be a way not to suffer from these things.

The solution he found, after enormous effort and self-honesty, was two-fold. The first is how to experience aging, illness, and death without suffering from them. The second is how to find a dimension of experience where aging, illness, and death can no longer occur.

All Dhamma teachings can be seen as detailed instructions on how to accomplish this two-fold solution ourselves. It's because of the Buddha's defiance that we have the Dhamma. This is why his message has lasted to the present day: We're not helpless in the face of aging, illness, and death, so we should adopt his defiant attitude ourselves.

This combination—the realization of the dangers but confidence that something can be done to avoid those dangers—is what makes heedfulness central to all of the skillful qualities the Buddha taught. If there were no

dangers, there would be no need to be heedful. If nothing could be done to avoid those dangers, heedfulness would be useless. So the message is: There are dangers but here's what can be done to avoid them.

In terms of the second principle, the Buddha's analysis of what happens at death and his image of the fire moving from house to house, clinging to the wind: You can see that his two-fold solution requires understanding craving so that we can control it and ultimately let it go. This requires strength, the seven strengths we've been talking about during this retreat: conviction, shame, compunction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. All seven of these strengths help us with the preliminary lessons in two of the big issues that will face us at death: physical weakness and pain. We get preliminary lessons in these areas from aging and illness. Aging gives us lessons in weakness; illness gives us lessons in dealing with pain. We learn how not to identify with the weakness or the pain, and instead use our mental strengths to escape their power by understanding how we've been clinging to them and don't have to.

To put this in terms of the Buddha's image: We develop good houses ahead of time by developing four qualities of mind: conviction, virtue, generosity, and discernment.

As for getting some control over the wind and putting out the fire—the skills that need to be used at the time of death—we develop them by using mindfulness, concentration, and discernment to overcome the hindrances and to understand the processes that lead up to craving. We see these processes described in dependent co-arising and in the principle of this/that conditionality. The primary factor of dependent co-arising after ignorance, you may remember, is the three fabrications: bodily, verbal, and mental. Bodily fabrication is the in-and-out breath; verbal fabrication is the way you talk to yourself, which the Buddha calls directed thought and evaluation; and mental fabrications are perceptions and feelings. In our practice, we try to overcome the ignorance that causes these fabrications to lead to suffering by bringing knowledge to them instead: for example, by dealing with pain, by overcoming the hindrances, and by bringing the mind to concentration through the practice of mindfulness of breathing. In particular, we exercise

discernment by using verbal and mental fabrications to overcome any attachments that would create obstacles at the time of death.

We do this in line with the five-step program that we've talked about many times in the course of the retreat. We look for the origination, in other words, what causes these attachments to arise, and particularly any causes coming from within the mind. We look for the passing away of these attachments. We look for their allure. We look for their drawbacks. And then when we see that the drawbacks outweigh the allure, that's how we escape from the attachments through dispassion.

As you apply this program to more and more subtle attachments, it can take you far toward not suffering from aging, illness, and death. If you can use this program to clear away all attachments and then turn it in on itself to let go of attachment to discernment, it can lead you to total release.

The Buddha once said that the duty of a teacher to a student is to provide protection to the student. Now, this doesn't mean he would go around with his shield and sword to fight off your enemies. Instead, he gives you the knowledge you can use to defend yourself, and particularly, to protect yourself from yourself. He finds us all in a situation where we're bewildered by pain and we're looking for a way to put an end to it. In our bewilderment, we often do things that make the suffering worse. His teaching protects us from our own bewilderment and also from people who might try to take advantage of our bewilderment and our desire to put an end to pain. And he shows us how we can protect ourselves ultimately from suffering from aging, illness, and death.

This is the highest form of protection that anyone can give. It puts us in a position where, no matter what happens in the world—even if the Alps start moving down from the east and the north, and the Pyrenees from the south and the west—we can make ourselves absolutely safe.

April 26, 2023, 1100

Closing

We began the retreat with thoughts of goodwill, and it would be good to end the retreat with thoughts of goodwill, too.

Ajaan Suwat, who was one of my teachers, once said that it's good to begin and end your meditation with goodwill for two reasons. When you begin with goodwill, it's basically for yourself. You're coming home from the outside world where you've had issues in the course of the day. To clear those issues out of your mind so that you can meditate, it's good to develop goodwill for all beings. That way, the mind has a good place to settle down. If any other thoughts come up in the course of the meditation that would disturb you, you can remember, "I've extended goodwill to that person; I've extended goodwill to myself. I can let that thought go."

When you end the meditation session, the mind should be at least somewhat more concentrated and more powerful. That's a good time to spread thoughts to other people for their sake, both because the power of a concentrated mind that gets devoted to goodwill has more influence on the world around you, and because you want this to be the attitude you take out of your meditation into daily life.

All too often it happens that you're thinking thoughts of goodwill as you meditate, "May all living beings be happy; may all living beings be happy." Then you leave meditation and go driving down the road. Somebody cuts in front of you, and you think to yourself, "May this living being go to hell." You want to avoid that. Remember what goodwill means: "May all beings understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them." You realize, when you meet up with people who are difficult, that it's not too hard to have that thought for anyone, even those who are hard to deal with. So, for the next half hour, you can spend the session thinking thoughts

of goodwill or you can use part of the time thinking thoughts of goodwill and then return to your breath. It's up to you.

Also at the end of the retreat, it's good to dedicate the merit of what you've done to those who have passed away. As we said during the retreat, mettā or goodwill can be for anybody, but dedication of merit is specifically for those who have passed away. Basically what you're thinking is, "I've done all this goodness. I'll be happy to share this goodness with anyone else who approves of what I've done." You can't simply take the merit out of your own heart and put it in someone else's heart. But if someone else who's passed away knows what you've done and appreciates what you've done, that act of appreciation then becomes that person's merit.

The third thing we'll do this morning at the end of this meditation session is to have a formal ceremony for taking the five precepts for anyone who would like to do so. Years back when Ajaan Suwat was teaching a retreat in America, at the end of the retreat someone asked him, "How do we carry the practice into daily life?" And he said, "Observe the five precepts."

Some of the people in the group were offended. They thought he was implying that laypeople can't practice meditation in daily life. But that's not what he meant. Basically he was saying that observing the five precepts is a type of meditation in action, and it also provides a good foundation for more formal meditation. It gives you exercise in the three basic qualities that go into mindfulness practice: mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. You have to be mindful to keep the precepts in mind, you have to be alert to see what you're actually doing to ensure that it's in line with the precepts, and when you find it difficult to follow a particular precept, you can figure out ways that you can actually do it: That's where the ardency plays a role.

(Meditation)

I'd like to thank you for your attention and your dedication. I hope the retreat has been helpful for you and will be helpful long into the future.

Readings

Basic Principles

§1. [Ven. Raṭṭhapāla:] "'The world is swept away. It does not endure'...

"'The world is without shelter, without protector'...

"'The world has nothing of its own. One has to pass on, leaving everything behind'...

"'The world is lacking, insatiable, a slave to craving.'" — MN 82

§2. "When the mind was thus concentrated, purified, bright, unblemished, rid of defilement, pliant, malleable, steady, & attained to imperturbability, I directed it to the knowledge of the passing away & reappearance of beings. I saw—by means of the divine eye, purified & surpassing the human—beings passing away & re-appearing, and I discerned how they are inferior & superior, beautiful & ugly, fortunate & unfortunate in accordance with their kamma: 'These beings—who were endowed with bad conduct of body, speech, & mind, who reviled the noble ones, held wrong views and undertook actions under the influence of wrong views—with the breakup of the body, after death, have re-appeared in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell. But these beings—who were endowed with good conduct of body, speech & mind, who did not revile the noble ones, who held right views and undertook actions under the influence of right views—with the breakup of the body, after death, have re-appeared in a good destination, a heavenly world.' Thus—by means of the divine eye, purified & surpassing the human—I saw beings passing away & re-appearing, and I discerned how they are inferior & superior, beautiful & ugly, fortunate & unfortunate in accordance with their kamma.

"This was the second knowledge I attained in the second watch of the night. Ignorance was destroyed; knowledge arose; darkness was destroyed; light arose—as happens in one who is heedful, ardent, & resolute." — MN 36

§3. "Now, Ānanda, in the case of the person who takes life, takes what is not given [steals], engages in illicit sex, lies, speaks divisively, speaks abusively, engages in idle chatter; is covetous, malevolent, & holds wrong view, and, with the breakup of the body, after death, reappears in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell: Either earlier he performed evil action that is to be felt as painful, or later he performed evil action that is to be felt as painful, or at the time of death he adopted & carried out wrong view. Because of that, with the breakup of the body, after death, he reappears in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell. And as for the results of taking life... holding wrong view, he will feel them either right here & now, or in the next (lifetime), or following that.

"In the case of the person who takes life... & holds wrong view (yet), with the breakup of the body, after death, reappears in a good destination, a heavenly world: Either earlier he performed fine action that is to be felt as pleasant, or later he performed fine action that is to be felt as pleasant, or at the time of death he adopted & carried out right view. Because of that, with the breakup of the body, after death, he reappears in a good destination, a heavenly world. But as for the results of taking life... holding wrong view, he will feel them either right here & now, or in the next (lifetime), or following that.

"In the case of the person who abstains from taking life, abstains from taking what is not given, abstains from illicit sex, abstains from lying, abstains from speaking divisively, abstains from speaking abusively, abstains from idle chatter, is not covetous, not malevolent, & holds right view, and, with the breakup of the body, after death, reappears in a good destination, a heavenly world: Either earlier he performed fine action that is to be felt as pleasant, or later he performed fine action that is to be felt as pleasant, or at the time of death he adopted & carried out right view. Because of that, with the breakup of the body, after death, he reappears in a good destination, a heavenly world. And as for the results of abstaining from taking life... holding right view, he

will feel them either right here & now, or in the next (lifetime), or following that."

"In the case of the person who abstains from taking life... & holds right view (yet) with the breakup of the body, after death, reappears in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell: Either earlier he performed evil action that is to be felt as painful, or later he performed evil action that is to be felt as painful, or at the time of death he adopted & carried out wrong view. Because of that, with the breakup of the body, after death, he reappears in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell. But as for the results of abstaining from taking life... holding right view, he will feel them either right here & now, or in the next (lifetime), or following that.

"Thus, Ānanda, there is action that is ineffectual and apparently ineffectual. There is action that is ineffectual but apparently effectual. There is action that is both effectual and apparently effectual. There is action that is effectual but apparently ineffectual."

That is what the Blessed One said. Gratified, Ven. Ānanda delighted in the Blessed One's words. — MN 136

§4. Then King Pasenadi Kosala went to the Blessed One in the middle of the day and, on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As he was sitting there, the Blessed One said to him: "Well now, great king, where are you coming from in the middle of the day?"

"Just now, lord, I was engaged in the sort of royal affairs typical of head-anointed noble-warrior kings intoxicated with the intoxication of sovereignty, obsessed by greed for sensuality, who have attained stable control in their country, and who rule having conquered a great sphere of territory on Earth."

"What do you think, great king? Suppose a man, trustworthy & reliable, were to come to you from the east. On arrival he would say to you, 'May it please your majesty to know, I have come from the east. There I saw a great mountain, as high as the clouds, coming this way, crushing all living beings (in its path). Do whatever you think should be done.' Then a second man, trustworthy & reliable, were to come to you from the west... Then a third man, trustworthy & reliable, were to come to you from the north... Then a fourth

man, trustworthy & reliable, were to come to you from the south. On arrival he would say to you, 'May it please your majesty to know, I have come from the south. There I saw a great mountain, as high as the clouds, coming this way, crushing all living beings. Do whatever you think should be done.' If, your majesty, such a great peril should arise, such a terrible destruction of human life—the human state being so hard to obtain—what should be done?"

"If, lord, such a great peril should arise, such a terrible destruction of human life—the human state being so hard to obtain—what else should be done but Dhamma-conduct, right conduct, skillful deeds, meritorious deeds?"

"I inform you, great king, I announce to you, great king: Aging & death are rolling in on you. When aging & death are rolling in on you, what should be done?"

"As aging & death are rolling in on me, lord, what else should be done but Dhamma-conduct, right conduct, skillful deeds, meritorious deeds?" — SN 3:25

§5. *Phenomena are* *preceded by the heart,*
ruled by the heart,
made of the heart.
If you speak or act
with a corrupted heart,
then suffering follows you—
as the wheel of the cart,
the track of the ox
that pulls it.

Phenomena are preceded by the heart,
ruled by the heart,
made of the heart.
If you speak or act
with a calm, bright heart,
then happiness follows you,
like a shadow

that never leaves. — Dhp 1–2

§6. [1] "When this is, that is.

[2] "From the arising of this, that arises.

[3] "When this isn't, that isn't.

[4] "From the cessation of this, that ceases." — *Ud 1:1*

§7. "From ignorance as a requisite condition come fabrications.

"From fabrications as a requisite condition comes consciousness.

"From consciousness as a requisite condition comes name-&-form.

"From name-&-form as a requisite condition come the six sense media.

"From the six sense media as a requisite condition comes contact.

"From contact as a requisite condition comes feeling.

"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, & despair come into play. Such is the origination of this entire mass of stress & suffering." — AN 10:92

§8. "Monks, there are these five strengths. Which five? The strength of conviction, the strength of persistence, the strength of mindfulness, the strength of concentration, the strength of discernment." — SN 50:1 [*These five strengths = the five faculties*]

§9. "Now what is the faculty of conviction? There is the case where a monk, a disciple of the noble ones, has conviction, is convinced of the Tathāgata's awakening: 'Indeed, the Blessed One is worthy & rightly self-awakened, consummate in clear-knowing & conduct, well-gone, an expert with regard to

the cosmos, unexcelled trainer of people fit to be tamed, teacher of devas & human beings, awakened, blessed.' This is called the faculty of conviction.

"And what is the faculty of persistence? There is the case where a monk, a disciple of the noble ones, keeps his persistence aroused for abandoning unskillful mental qualities and taking on skillful mental qualities. He is steadfast, solid in his effort, not shirking his duties with regard to skillful mental qualities. He generates desire, endeavors, arouses persistence, upholds & exerts his intent for the sake of the non-arising of evil, unskillful qualities that have not yet arisen... for the sake of the abandoning of evil, unskillful qualities that have arisen... for the sake of the arising of skillful qualities that have not yet arisen... (and) for the maintenance, non-confusion, increase, plenitude, development, & culmination of skillful qualities that have arisen. This is called the faculty of persistence.

"And what is the faculty of mindfulness? There is the case where a monk, a disciple of the noble ones, is mindful, is endowed with excellent proficiency in mindfulness, remembering & able to call to mind even things that were done & said long ago. He 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... the mind in & of itself... mental qualities in & of themselves—ardent, alert, & mindful—subduing greed & distress with reference to the world. This is called the faculty of mindfulness.

"And what is the faculty of concentration? There is the case where a monk, a disciple of the noble ones, making it his object to let go, attains concentration, attains singleness of mind. Quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities—he enters & remains in the first jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation. With the stilling of directed thoughts & evaluations, he enters & remains in the second jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of concentration, unification of awareness free from directed thought & evaluation—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. This is called the faculty of concentration.

"And what is the faculty of discernment? There is the case where a monk, a disciple of the noble ones, is discerning, endowed with discernment of arising & passing away—noble, penetrating, leading to the right ending of stress. He discerns, as it has come to be: 'This is stress...This is the origination of stress...This is the cessation of stress...This is the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress.' This is called the faculty of discernment." — SN 48:10

§10. "Monks, there are these five strengths for one in training. Which five? Strength of conviction, strength of a sense of shame, strength of a sense of compunction, strength of persistence, & strength of discernment.

"And what is strength of conviction? There is the case where a monk, a disciple of the noble ones, has conviction, is convinced of the Tathāgata's awakening: 'Indeed, the Blessed One is worthy & rightly self-awakened, consummate in clear-knowing & conduct, well-gone, an expert with regard to the cosmos, unexcelled trainer of people fit to be tamed, teacher of devas & human beings, awakened, blessed.' This, monks, is called the strength of conviction.

"And what is the strength of a sense of shame? There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones feels shame at (the thought of engaging in) bodily misconduct, verbal misconduct, mental misconduct. He feels shame at falling into evil, unskillful actions. This is called the strength of a sense of shame.

"And what is the strength of a sense of compunction? There is the case where a monk, a disciple of the noble ones feels compunction at (the suffering that would result from) bodily misconduct, verbal misconduct, mental misconduct. He feels compunction at falling into evil, unskillful actions. This is called the strength of a sense of compunction.

"And what is the strength of persistence? There is the case where a monk, a disciple of the noble ones, keeps his persistence aroused for abandoning unskillful qualities and taking on skillful qualities. He is steadfast, solid in his

effort, not shirking his duties with regard to skillful qualities. This is called the strength of persistence.

"And what is the strength of discernment? There is the case where a monk, a disciple of the noble ones, is discerning, endowed with discernment of arising & passing away—noble, penetrating, leading to the right ending of stress. This is called the strength of discernment.

"These, monks, are the five strengths of one in training. Thus you should train yourselves, 'We will be endowed with the strength of conviction that is the strength of one in training; with the strength of a sense of shame... the strength of a sense of compunction... the strength of persistence... the strength of discernment that is the strength of one in training.' That's how you should train yourselves." — AN 5:2

§11. "And what is mindfulness of in-&-out breathing? There is 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 setting mindfulness to the fore. Always mindful, he breathes in; mindful he breathes out.

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

"He trains himself, 'I will breathe in sensitive to rapture.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out sensitive to rapture.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe in sensitive to pleasure.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out sensitive to pleasure.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe in sensitive to mental fabrication.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out sensitive to mental fabrication.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe in calming mental fabrication.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out calming mental fabrication.'

"He trains himself, 'I will breathe in sensitive to the mind.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out sensitive to the mind.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe in gladdening the mind.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out gladdening the mind.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe in concentrating the mind.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out concentrating the mind. He trains himself, 'I will breathe in releasing the mind.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out releasing the mind.'

"He trains himself, 'I will breathe in focusing on inconstancy.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out focusing on inconstancy.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe in focusing on dispassion [lit: fading].' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out focusing on dispassion.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe in focusing on cessation.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out focusing on cessation.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe in focusing on relinquishment.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out focusing on relinquishment.'

"This, Ānanda, is called mindfulness of in-&-out breathing." — AN 10:60

Aging

§12. *Ven. Kimbila:*
As if sent by a curse,
it drops on us—
aging.
The body seems other,
though it's still the same one.
I'm still here
& have never been absent from it,
but I remember myself
as if somebody else's. — Thag 1:118

§13. King Koravya: "Yes, Master Raṭṭhapāla, when I was twenty or twenty-five years old—an expert elephant rider, an expert horseman, an expert charioteer, an expert archer, an expert swordsman—I was strong in arm &

strong in thigh, fit, & seasoned in warfare. It was as if I had supernormal power. I can't imagine anyone who could equal me in strength."

"And what do you think, great king? Are you even now as strong in arm & strong in thigh, as fit, & as seasoned in warfare?"

"Not at all, Master Raṭṭhapāla. I'm now aged, old, elderly, advanced in years, having come to the last stage of life, eighty years old. Sometimes, thinking, 'I'll place my foot here,' I place it somewhere else." — MN 82

§14. *Ambapālī the courtesan:*
Black was my hair
—the color of bees—
& curled at the tips.
    With age, it looked like coarse hemp.
The Truth-speaker's word
        doesn't change....

Adorned with gold & delicate pins,
it was splendid, ornamented with braids.
    Now, with age,
    that head has gone bald.
The Truth-speaker's word
        doesn't change....

Like a delicate peak, my nose
was splendid in the prime of my youth.
    With age, it's like a long pepper.
The Truth-speaker's word
        doesn't change....

Adorned with gold & delicate rings,
my hands were once splendid.
    With age, they're like onions & tubers.
The Truth-speaker's word

doesn't change....

As if they were stuffed with soft cotton,
both my feet were once splendid.
With age, they're shriveled & cracked.
The Truth-speaker's word
doesn't change.

Such was this physical heap.
Now: decrepit, the home of pains, many pains,
a house with its plaster all fallen off.
The Truth-speaker's word
doesn't change. — Thig 13:1

Illness

§15. King Koravya: "Now, Master Raṭṭhapāla, in this royal court there are elephant troops & cavalry & chariot troops & infantry that will serve to defend us from dangers. And yet you say, 'The world is without shelter, without protector.' How is the meaning of this statement to be understood?"

"What do you think, great king? Do you have any recurring illness?"

"Yes, Master Raṭṭhapāla, I have a recurring wind-illness (sharp pains running through the body). Sometimes my friends & advisors, relatives & blood-kinsmen, stand around me saying, 'This time King Koravya will die. This time King Koravya will die.'"

"And what do you think, great king? Can you say to your friends & advisors, relatives & blood-kinsmen, 'My friends & advisors, relatives & blood-kinsmen are commanded: All of you who are present, share out this pain so that I may feel less pain'? Or do you have to feel that pain all alone?"

"Oh, no, Master Raṭṭhapāla, I can't say to my friends & advisors, relatives & blood-kinsmen, 'All of you who are present, share out this pain so that I may feel less pain.' I have to feel that pain all alone." — MN 82

§16. "A sick person endowed with five qualities is easy to tend to: He does what is amenable to his cure; he knows the proper amount in things amenable to his cure; he takes his medicine; he tells his symptoms, as they have come to be, to the nurse desiring his welfare, saying that they are worse when they are worse, improving when they are improving, or remaining the same when they are remaining the same; and he is the type who can endure bodily feelings that are painful, fierce, sharp, wracking, repellent, disagreeable, life-threatening. A sick person endowed with these five qualities is easy to tend to." — *Mv VIII.26.6*

§17. "'Even though I may be afflicted in body, my mind will be unafflicted.' That is how you should train yourself." — *SN 22:1*

Death

§18. King Koravya: "Now, in this royal court, Master Raṭṭhapāla, there is a great deal of gold & silver stashed away underground & in attic vaults. And yet you say, 'The world has nothing of its own. One has to pass on, leaving everything behind.' How is the meaning of this statement to be understood?"

"What do you think, great king? As you now enjoy yourself endowed & replete with the pleasures of the five senses, can you say, 'Even in the afterlife I will enjoy myself in the same way, endowed & replete with the very same pleasures of the five senses'? Or will this wealth fall to others, while you pass on in accordance with your kamma?"

"Oh, no, Master Raṭṭhapāla, I can't say, 'Even in the afterlife I will enjoy myself in the same way, endowed & replete with the very same pleasures of the five senses.' This wealth will fall to others, while I pass on in accordance with my kamma."

"It was in reference to this, great king, that the Blessed One who knows & sees, worthy & rightly self-awakened, said: 'The world has nothing of its own. One has to pass on, leaving everything behind.' Having known & seen & heard this, I went forth from the home life into homelessness." ...

“Now, Master Raṭṭhapāla, you say, ‘The world is lacking, insatiable, a slave to craving.’ How is the meaning of this statement to be understood?”

“What do you think, great king? Do you now rule over the prosperous country of Kuru?”

“That is so, Master Raṭṭhapāla. I rule over the prosperous country of Kuru.”

“What do you think, great king? Suppose a trustworthy, reliable man were to come to you from the east. On arrival he would say to you, ‘May it please your majesty to know, I have come from the east. There I saw a great country, powerful & prosperous, populous & crowded with people. Plenty are the elephant troops there, plenty the cavalry troops, chariot troops, & infantry troops. Plenty is the ivory-work there, plenty the gold & silver, both worked & unworked. Plenty are the women for the taking. It is possible, with the forces you now have, to conquer it. Conquer it, great king!’ What would you do?”

“Having conquered it, Master Raṭṭhapāla, I would rule over it.”

“Now what do you think, great king? Suppose a trustworthy, reliable man were to come to you from the west… the north… the south… the other side of the ocean. On arrival he would say to you, ‘May it please your majesty to know, I have come from the other side of the ocean. There I saw a great country, powerful & prosperous, populous & crowded with people. Plenty are the elephant troops there, plenty the cavalry troops, chariot troops, & infantry troops. Plenty is the ivory-work there, plenty the gold & silver, both worked & unworked. Plenty are the women for the taking. It is possible, with the forces you now have, to conquer it. Conquer it, great king!’ What would you do?”

“Having conquered it, Master Raṭṭhapāla, I would rule over it, too.”

“It was in reference to this, great king, that the Blessed One who knows & sees, worthy & rightly self-awakened, said: ‘The world is lacking, insatiable, a slave to craving.’” — MN 82

§19. The Buddha: “Vaccha, I designate the rebirth of one who has sustenance, and not of one without sustenance. Just as a fire burns with sustenance and not without sustenance, even so I designate the rebirth of one who has sustenance and not of one without sustenance.”

"But, Master Gotama, at the moment a flame is being swept on by the wind and goes a far distance, what do you designate as its sustenance then?"

"Vaccha, when a flame is being swept on by the wind and goes a far distance, I designate it as wind-sustained, for the wind is its sustenance at that time."

"And at the moment when a being sets this body aside and is not yet reborn in another body, Master Gotama, what do you designate as its sustenance then?"

"Vaccha, when a being sets this body aside and is not yet reborn in another body, I designate it as craving-sustained, for craving is its sustenance at that time." — SN 44:9

Care-giving

§20. "A caregiver endowed with five qualities is fit to tend to the sick: He is competent at mixing medicine; he knows what is compatible or incompatible with the patient's cure, taking away things that are incompatible and bringing things that are compatible; he is motivated by thoughts of goodwill, not by material gain; he does not get disgusted at cleaning up excrement, urine, saliva, or vomit; and he is competent at instructing, urging, rousing, & encouraging the sick person at the proper occasions with a talk on Dhamma. A caregiver endowed with these five qualities is fit to tend to the sick." — Mv VIII.26.1–3 ,8

Grief

§21. *[The Buddha counsels King Pasenadi:]*
Not by sorrowing,
not by lamenting,
is any aim accomplished here,
    not even a bit.
Knowing you're sorrowing & in pain,

your enemies are gratified.

But when a sage
with a sense for determining what is his aim
doesn't waver in the face of misfortune,
his enemies are pained,
seeing his face unchanged, as of old.

Where & however an aim is accomplished
through eulogies, chants, good sayings,
donations, & family customs,
follow them diligently there & that way.
But if you discern that your own aim
or that of others
is not gained in this way,
acquiesce (to the nature of things)
unsorrowing, with the thought:

'What important work
am I doing now?' — AN 5:49

Glossary

Ajaan (Thai): Mentor; teacher. 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.

Bodhisatta: "A being (striving) for awakening;" the term used to describe the Buddha before he actually became Buddha, from his first aspiration to Buddhahood until the time of his full awakening. The Sanskrit form, *bodhisattva*, refers to anyone who has taken a vow to become a Buddha in a future lifetime.

Brahmā: An inhabitant of the heavenly realms of form or formlessness. The highest level of deva.

Brahmavihāra: Sublime attitude of unlimited goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, or equanimity.

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

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

Gandhabba: Celestial musician, the lowest level of the celestial devas, often portrayed as tricksters who are obsessed with music and sex.

Jhāna: Mental absorption. A state of strong concentration focused on a single sensation or mental notion. This term is derived from the verb *jhāyati*, which means to burn with a steady, still flame.

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

Khandha: Aggregate; physical and mental phenomena as they are directly experienced; the raw material for a sense of self: *rūpa*—physical form; *vedanā*—feelings of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain; *saññā*—perception, mental label; *saṅkhāra*—fabrication, thought construct; and *viññāṇa*—sensory consciousness, the act of taking note of sense data and ideas as they occur. Sanskrit form: *Skandha.*

Kilesa: Mental defilement. The three major ones are passion, aversion, and delusion.

Mahāyāna: The Great Vehicle. The name of a group of later schools of Buddhism which taught that all beings should aspire to become Buddhas.

Majjhima Nikāya: One of the five major collections of suttas in the Pāli Canon, containing suttas of middle *(majjhima)* length.

Mettā: Goodwill; benevolence. One of the four brahmavihāras.

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. Sanskrit form: *Nirvāṇa.*

Pāli: The name of the earliest extant collection of the Buddha's teachings and, by extension, of the language in which it was recorded.

Samatha: Tranquility.

Saṁsāra: Transmigration; the process of creating and wandering through repeated states of becoming, with their attendant death and rebirth.

Saṁvega: A sense of dismay or terror over the meaninglessness and futility of life as it is ordinarily lived, combined with a strong sense of urgency in looking for a way out.

Saṁyutta Nikāya: One of the five major collections of suttas in the Pāli Canon, containing suttas organized by a topic or other theme by which they are connected *(saṁyutta)*.

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

Saṅkhāra: Fabrication; thought construct. Sometimes this term is used to indicate anything constructed or influenced by the mind. Listed as the fourth of the five aggregates, it is also involved in the production of all five.

Sutta: Discourse.

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

Vinaya: The monastic discipline.

Vipassanā: Clear-seeing insight.

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