
HEAD &
HEART
TOGETHER

Head & Heart Together

Essays on the Buddhist Path

by

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The Lessons of Gratitude

> *"These two people are hard to find in the world. Which two? The one who is first to do a kindness, and the one who is grateful and thankful for a kindness done."* — *AN 2:118*

In saying that kind and grateful people are rare, the Buddha isn't simply stating a harsh truth about the human race. He's advising you to treasure these people when you find them, and—more importantly—showing how you can become a rare person yourself.

Kindness and gratitude are virtues you can cultivate, but they have to be cultivated together. Each needs the other to be genuine—a point that becomes obvious when you think about the three things most likely to make gratitude heartfelt:

1) You've actually benefited from another person's actions.
2) You trust the motives behind those actions.
3) You sense that the other person had to go out of his or her way to provide that benefit.

Points one and two are lessons that gratitude teaches kindness: If you want to be genuinely kind, you have to be of actual benefit—nobody wants to be the recipient of "help" that isn't really helpful—and you have to provide that benefit in a way that shows respect and empathy for the other person's needs. No one likes to receive a gift given with calculating motives, or in an offhand or disdainful way.

Points two and three are lessons that kindness teaches to gratitude. Only if you've been kind to another person will you accept the idea that others can be kind to you. At the same time, if you've been kind to another person, you know the effort involved. Kind impulses often have to do battle with unkind impulses in the heart, so it's not always easy to be helpful. Sometimes it involves great sacrifice—a sacrifice possible only when you trust the recipient to make good use of your help. So when you're on the receiving end of a sacrifice like that, you realize you've incurred a debt, an obligation to repay the other person's trust.

This is why the Buddha always discusses gratitude as a response to kindness, and doesn't equate it with appreciation in general. It's a special kind of appreciation, inspiring a more demanding response. The difference here is best illustrated by two passages in which the Buddha uses the image of carrying.

The first passage concerns appreciation of a general sort:

"Then the man, having gathered grass, twigs, branches, & leaves, having bound them together to make a raft, would cross over to safety on the far shore in dependence on the raft, making an effort with his hands & feet. Having crossed over to the far shore, he might think, 'How useful this raft has been to me! For it was in dependence on this raft that, making an effort with my hands & feet, I have crossed over to safety on the far shore. Why don't I, having hoisted it on my head or carrying on my back, go wherever I like?' What do you think, monks? Would the man, in doing that, be doing what should be done with the raft?"

"No, lord."

"And what should the man do in order to be doing what should be done with the raft? There is the case where the man, having crossed over to the far shore, would think, 'How useful this raft has been to me! For it was in dependence on this raft that, making an effort with my hands & feet, I have crossed over to safety on the far shore. Why don't I, having dragged it on dry land or sinking it in the water, go wherever I like?' In doing this, he would be doing what should be done with the raft." — MN 22

The second passage concerns gratitude in particular:

"I tell you, monks, there are two people who are not easy to repay. Which two? Your mother & father. Even if you were to carry your mother on one shoulder & your father on the other shoulder for 100 years, and were to look after them by anointing, massaging, bathing, & rubbing their limbs, and they were to defecate & urinate right there [on your shoulders], you would not in that way pay or repay your parents. If you were to establish your mother & father in absolute sovereignty over this great earth, abounding in the seven treasures, you would not in that way pay or repay your parents. Why is that? Mother & father do much for their children. They care for them, they nourish them, they introduce them to this world.

"But anyone who rouses his unbelieving mother & father, settles & establishes them in conviction; rouses his unvirtuous mother & father, settles & establishes them in virtue; rouses his stingy mother & father, settles & establishes them in generosity;

rouses his foolish mother & father, settles & establishes them in discernment: To this extent one pays & repays one's mother & father." — AN 2:32

In other words, as the first passage shows, it's perfectly fine to appreciate the benefits you've received from rafts and other conveniences without feeling any need to repay them. You take care of them simply because that enables you to benefit from them more. The same holds true for difficult people and situations that have forced you to develop strength of character. You can appreciate that you've learned persistence from dealing with crabgrass in your lawn, or equanimity from dealing with unreasonable neighbors, without owing the crabgrass or neighbors any debt of gratitude. After all, they didn't kindly go out of their way to help you. And if you were to take them as models, you'd learn all the wrong lessons about kindness: that simply following your natural impulses—or, even worse, behaving unreasonably—is the way to be kind.

Debts of gratitude apply only to parents, teachers, and other benefactors who have acted with your wellbeing in mind. They've gone out of their way to help you, and have taught you valuable lessons about kindness and empathy in the process. In the case of the raft, you'd do best to focus gratitude on the person who taught you how to make a raft. In the case of the crabgrass and the neighbors, focus gratitude on the people who taught you how not to be overcome by adversity. If there are benefits you've received from things or situations you can't trace to a conscious agent in this lifetime, feel gratitude to yourself for the good karma you did in the past that allowed those benefits to appear. And be grateful for the good karma that allows you to receive and benefit from other people's help in the first place. If you had no good to your credit, they wouldn't be able to reach you.

As the Buddha's second passage shows, the debt you owe to your benefactors needn't be tit for tat, and shouldn't be directed solely to them. Now, the debt you owe your parents for giving birth to you and enabling you to live is immense. In some passages the Buddha recommends expressing gratitude for their compassion with personal services.

Mother & father,
compassionate to their family,
are called
Brahma,
first teachers,
those worthy of gifts

from their children.
So the wise should pay them
homage,
honor
with food & drink
clothing & bedding
anointing & bathing
& washing their feet.
Performing these services to their parents,
the wise
are praised right here
and after death
rejoice in heaven. — *Iti 106*

However, AN 2:32 shows that the only true way to repay your parents is to strengthen them in four qualities: conviction, virtue, generosity, and discernment. To do so, of course, you have to develop these qualities in yourself, as well as learning how to employ great tact in being an example to your parents. As it happens, these four qualities are also those of an admirable friend (AN 8:54), which means that in repaying your parents in this way you become the sort of person who'd be an admirable friend to others as well. You become a person of integrity, who—as the Buddha points out—has learned from gratitude how to be harmless in all your dealings and to give help with an empathetic heart: respectfully, in a timely way, and with the sense that something good will come of it (MN 110; AN 5:148). In this way, you repay your parents' goodness many times over by allowing its influence to spread beyond the small circle of the family into the world at large. In so doing, you enlarge the circle of their goodness as well.

This principle also applies to your teachers, as the Buddha told his disciples:

> *"So this is what you think of me: 'The Blessed One, sympathetic, seeking our well-being, teaches the Dhamma out of sympathy.' Then you should train yourselves—harmoniously, cordially, and without dispute—in the qualities I have pointed out, having known them directly: the four frames of reference, the four right exertions, the four bases of power, the five faculties, the five strengths, the seven factors of Awakening, the noble eightfold path."* — MN 103

In other words, the way to repay a teacher's compassion and sympathy in teaching you is to apply yourself to learning your lessons well. Only then can you

spread the good influence of those lessons to others.

As for the debts you owe yourself for your past good karma, the best way to repay them is to use your benefits as opportunities to create further good karma, and not simply enjoy the pleasure they offer. Here again it's important to remember the hardships that can be involved in acting skillfully, and to honor your past skillful intentions by not allowing them to go to waste in the present. For example, as Ajaan Lee once said, it's not easy to attain a human mouth, so bow down to your mouth every day. In other words, respect your ability to communicate, and use it to say only what's timely, beneficial, and true.

These are some of the lessons about kindness and empathy that well-focused gratitude can teach—lessons that teach you how to deal maturely and responsibly in the give and take of social life. Small wonder, then, that the Buddha cited gratitude as *the* quality defining what it means to be civilized (AN 2:31).

But well-focused gratitude can also teach lessons that apply further to the training of the mind.

First are the lessons touching on the nature of human action itself. The sense that you've benefited from another person's action underscores the point that action does give results; the importance you give to the other person's motives in helping you underscores the point that the quality of the action lies in the intention behind it; and the sense that the other person went out of his or her way to help you underscores the sense that action isn't totally determined: You feel indebted to the people who helped you because you sense how easily they might have denied that help, and how difficult your life might have been if that's what they had chosen to do. Your parents, for instance, didn't *have* to raise you, or arrange for someone else to raise you; they could have aborted you or left you to die. So the fact that you're alive to read this means that somebody chose, again and again, to help you when you were helpless. Sensing that element of choice is what creates your sense of debt.

All three of these points—the efficacy of action, the importance of intention, and the existence of choice—were distinctive elements in the Buddha's teaching on action. And the emotional resonance that gratitude and empathy give to these points may be the reason why, when the Buddha introduced the basic outline of this teaching, he cited topics connected with these emotions: the value of giving, and the debt owed to one's parents (MN 117). He couldn't offer his listeners proof for his three points—that would come only with their experience of Awakening—but by showing how his teaching on action allowed for generosity to be a meaningful

action, and gratitude a meaningful emotion, he offered his listeners an emotionally satisfying reason for accepting his words.

Gratitude also gives practice in developing qualities needed in meditation. As the Buddha noted, the practice of concentration centers on the power of perception. Training in gratitude shows how powerful perception can be, for it requires developing a particular set of perceptions about life and the world. If you perceive help as demeaning, then gratitude itself feels demeaning; but if you perceive help as an expression of trust—the other person wouldn't want to help you unless he or she felt you would use the help well—then gratitude feels ennobling, an aid to self-esteem. Similarly, if you perceive life as a competition, it's hard to trust the motives of those who help you, and you resent the need to repay their help as a gratuitous burden. If, however, you perceive that the goodness in life is the result of cooperation, then the give and take of kindness and gratitude become a much more pleasant exchange.

Similarly, gratitude requires mindfulness, in the Buddha's original sense of the word as keeping something in mind. In fact, the connection between these two qualities extends to language itself. In Pāli, the word for gratitude—*kataññū*—literally means to have a sense of what was done. In SN 48:10, the Buddha defines mindfulness as "remembering & able to call to mind even things that were done & said long ago." Our parents' instructions to us when we were children—to remember the kindnesses of others—are among our first lessons in mindfulness. As we develop our sense of gratitude, we get practice in strengthening this quality of mind.

However, not all the lessons taught by gratitude and empathy are of a heartwarming sort. Instead, they give rise to a sense of *saṁvega*—which can be translated as dismay or even terror—over how risky and precarious the goodness of the world can be. To begin with, there's the fact that you can't choose beforehand whose kindness you'll be indebted to. There's no telling what kind of parents you'll get. As the Buddha rightly notes, some parents are stingy, immoral, and foolish. Not only are they abusive to their children, but they also might not be content or even pleased with the type of repayment the Buddha says is best for them. They may demand an unreasonable level of repayment, involving actions that are downright harmful for you, themselves, and others. And yet this doesn't cancel the debt you owe them for the simple fact that they've enabled you to live.

You've probably heard of the passage in which the Buddha says,

"A being who has not been your mother at one time in the past is not easy to find.... A being who has not been your father ... your brother.... your sister.... your son.... your daughter at one time in the past is not easy to find. Why is that? From an inconceivable beginning comes transmigration."

When you think about how difficult each of these relationships can be, it's no surprise that the Buddha didn't say this to make you feel warmhearted to all the beings you meet. He said it to induce *saṁvega:*

"Long have you thus experienced stress, experienced pain, experienced loss, swelling the cemeteries—enough to become disenchanted with all fabricated things, enough to become dispassionate, enough to be released." — *SN 15:14-19*

Even the debts of gratitude you owe to yourself for the good actions you've done are enough to induce a sense of dis-ease. You know that not all your past intentions have been skillful, and yet these are the things that will shape the conditions of your life now and into the future. You're in a precarious position—enough to make you want to find a way out even of the network of kindness and gratitude that sustains whatever goodness there is in the world.

This desire grows even stronger when you allow your empathy to spread to those who have had to make unwilling sacrifices to keep you alive. Every day, the Buddha advised, you should reflect on the fact that life depends on the requisites of food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. Many are the beings who have had to die and suffer other hardships because of your need for these things. Contrary to the song that concludes Mahler's Fourth Symphony, lambs don't gleefully jump into the stewpot to feed you. And even if—when you're in the fortunate position to be able to decide what kind of food you eat—you adhere to a vegetarian diet, you still owe an enormous debt to the farmers and workers who have had to slave under harsh conditions to provide the requisites you need.

The sense of indebtedness that these reflections induce goes far beyond gratitude, and is certainly not pleasant to think about. This may be why so many people try to deny that they owe anyone a debt of gratitude at all. Or why those who *do* encourage the contemplation of gratitude as a source of happiness tend to reduce it to a generic sense of appreciation and contentment—in the words of one writer, "wanting what you have," "knowing that you have, and are, enough"—devoid of any sense of debt. Gratitude of this sort tends to focus on things, because gratitude to things is so much easier than gratitude to benefactors. Things don't make demands. They don't suffer, and they don't mix their kindness with abuse.

Yet there's no getting around the fact that our very lives depend on the kindness and hardships of others, and that we can't get out of the resulting debts by callously denying them or blithely wishing them away. If we don't repay them now, we'll have to repay them—sometimes at high interest—later, for even death doesn't erase our debts or free us from coming back to incur more.

So to avoid these entanglements, we need another way out—a way the Buddha found through training his mind to reach a happiness that no longer needs to depend on the kindness and sacrifices of others. And although this happiness provides an escape, it isn't escapist. It settles your debts in a responsible and generous way.

This is because unconditional happiness allows you to abandon the cravings and attachments through which you repeatedly take on the identity of a being. To identify yourself as a being means having to find food—both physical and mental—to keep that identity going. This is why, when you're a being, you need to depend on a network of kindness, gratitude, and sacrifice. But when you can abandon the need for that identity, the mind no longer has to feed. It's no longer a burden to anyone. As for the body, as long as you're still alive, those who provide for its needs reap merit many times over for the gifts they provide. This, in fact, is one of the motivations for gaining awakening:

> *"We will undertake & practice those qualities that make one a contemplative... so that the services of those whose robes, alms-food, lodging, and medicinal requisites we use will bring them great fruit & great reward."* — MN 39

At the same time, the example of your behavior and freedom of mind is a gift to others, in that it shows how they, too, can free themselves from their debts. This is why the Buddha said that only those who have attained full awakening eat the alms food of the country without incurring debt. They've even paid off their debt to the Buddha for having taught the way to release. As he said, the only homage he requested was that people practice the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma—i.e., to develop the disenchantment and dispassion that lead to release (DN 16; SN 22:39-42)—so that the world will not be empty of awakened people. In this way, attaining full release is not a selfish act; instead, it's the highest expression of kindness and gratitude.

Of course, it's a rare person who will take this route to freedom, but that doesn't lessen its value or relevance. As with gratitude and benefaction, it's an opportunity

to become rare and distinctive that's open to anyone with the discernment to appreciate it and the determination to become truly kind and debt-free.

No Strings Attached

The Buddha's Culture of Generosity

"How can I ever repay you for your teaching?"

Good meditation teachers often hear this question from their students, and the best answer I know for it is one that my teacher, Ajaan Fuang, gave every time:

"By being intent on practicing."

Each time he gave this answer, I was struck by how noble and gracious it was. And it wasn't just a formality. He never tried to find opportunities to pressure his students for donations. Even when our monastery was poor, he never acted poor, never tried to take advantage of their gratitude and trust. This was a refreshing change from some of my previous experiences with run-of-the-mill village and city monks who were quick to drop hints about their need for donations from even stray or casual visitors.

Eventually I learned that Ajaan Fuang's behavior is common throughout the Forest Tradition. It's based on a passage in the Pāli Canon where the Buddha on his deathbed states that the highest homage to him is not material homage, but the homage of practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. In other words, the best way to repay a teacher is to take the Dhamma to heart and to practice it in a way that fulfills his or her compassionate purpose in teaching it. I was proud to be part of a tradition where the inner wealth of this noble idea was actually lived—where, as Ajaan Fuang often put it, we weren't reduced to hirelings, and the act of teaching the Dhamma was purely a gift.

So I was saddened when, on my return to America, I had my first encounters with the *dāna* talk: the talk on giving and generosity that often comes at the end of a retreat. The context of the talk—and often the content—makes clear that it's not a disinterested exercise. It's aimed at generating gifts for the teacher or the organization sponsoring the retreat, and it places the burden of responsibility on the retreatants to ensure that future retreats can occur. The language of the talk is often smooth and encouraging, but when contrasted with Ajaan Fuang's answer, I found the sheer fact of the talk ill-mannered and demeaning. If the organizers and

teachers really trusted the retreatants' good-heartedness, they wouldn't be giving the talk at all. To make matters worse, the typical dāna talk—along with its companion, the meditation-center fundraising letter—often cites the example of how monks and nuns are supported in Asia as justification for how dāna is treated here in the West. But they're taking as their example the worst of the monks, and not the best.

I understand the reasoning behind the talk. Lay teachers here aspire to the ideal of teaching for free, but they still need to eat. And, unlike the monastics of Asia, they don't have a long-standing tradition of dāna to fall back on. So the dāna talk was devised as a means for establishing a culture of dāna in a Western context. But as so often is the case when new customs are devised for Western Buddhism, the question is whether the dāna talk skillfully translates Buddhist principles into the Western context or seriously distorts them. The best way to answer this question is to take a close look at those principles in their original context.

It's well known that dāna lies at the beginning of Buddhist practice. Dāna, quite literally, has kept the Dhamma alive. If it weren't for the Indian tradition of giving to mendicants, the Buddha would never have had the opportunity to explore and find the path to Awakening. The monastic Saṅgha wouldn't have had the time and opportunity to follow his way. Dāna is the first teaching in the graduated discourse: the list of topics the Buddha used to lead listeners step-by-step to an appreciation of the four noble truths, and often from there to their own first taste of Awakening. When stating the basic principles of karma, he would begin with the statement, "There is what is given."

What's less well known is that in making this statement, the Buddha was not dealing in obvious truths or generic platitudes, for the topic of giving was actually controversial in his time. For centuries, the brahmans of India had been extolling the virtue of giving—as long as the gifts were given to them. Not only that, gifts to brahmans were obligatory. People of other castes, if they didn't concede to the brahmans' demands for gifts, were neglecting their most essential social duty. By ignoring their duties in the present life, such people and their relatives would suffer hardship both now and after death.

As might be expected, this attitude produced a backlash. Several of the *samaṇa,* or contemplative, movements of the Buddha's time countered the brahmans' claims by asserting that there was no virtue in giving at all. Their arguments fell into two camps. One camp claimed that giving carried no virtue because there was no afterlife. A person was nothing more than physical elements that, at death,

returned to their respective spheres. That was it. Giving thus provided no long-term results. The other camp stated that there was no such thing as giving, for everything in the universe has been determined by fate. If a donor gives something to another person, it's not really a gift, for the donor has no choice or free will in the matter. Fate was simply working itself out.

So when the Buddha, in his introduction to the teaching on karma, began by saying that there is what is given, he was repudiating both camps. Giving *does* give results both now and on into the future, and it *is* the result of the donor's free choice. However, in contrast to the brahmans, the Buddha took the principle of freedom one step further. When asked where a gift should be given, he stated simply, "Wherever the mind feels inspired." In other words—aside from repaying one's debt to one's parents—he imposed no obligation to give. This means that the choice to give is an act of true freedom, and thus the perfect place to start the path to total release.

This is why the Buddha adopted dāna as the context for practicing and teaching the Dhamma. But—to maintain the twin principles of freedom and fruitfulness in giving—he created a culture of dāna that embodied particularly Buddhist ideals. To begin with, he defined dāna not simply as material gifts. The practice of the precepts, he said, was also a type of dāna—the gift of universal safety, protecting all beings from the harm of one's unskillful actions—as was the act of teaching the Dhamma. This meant that lavish giving was not just the prerogative of the rich. Secondly, he formulated a code of conduct to produce an attitude toward giving that would benefit both the donors and the recipients, keeping the practice of giving both fruitful and free.

We tend not to associate codes of conduct with the word "freedom," but that's because we forget that freedom, too, needs protection, especially from the attitude that wants to be free in its choices but feels insecure when others are free in theirs. The Buddha's codes of conduct are voluntary—he never coerced anyone into practicing his teachings—but once they are adopted, they require the cooperation of both sides to keep them effective and strong.

These codes are best understood in terms of the six factors that the Buddha said exemplified the ideal gift:

> *"The donor, before giving, is glad; while giving, his/her mind is inspired; and after giving, is gratified. These are the three factors of the donor....*

> *"The recipients are free of passion or are practicing for the subduing of passion; free of aversion or practicing for the subduing of aversion; and free of delusion or practicing for the subduing of delusion. These are the three factors of the recipients."*
> — *AN 6:37*

Although this passage seems to suggest that each side is responsible only for the factors on its side, the Buddha's larger etiquette for generosity shows that the responsibility for all six factors—and in particular, the three factors of the donor—is shared. And this shared responsibility flourishes best in an atmosphere of mutual trust.

For the donors, this means that if they want to feel glad, inspired, and gratified at their gift, they should not see the gift as payment for personal services rendered by individual monks or nuns. That would turn the gift into wages, and deprive it of its emotional power. Instead, they'd be wise to look for trustworthy recipients: people who are training—or have trained—their minds to be cleaned and undefiled. They should also give their gift in a respectful way so that the act of giving will reinforce the gladness that inspired it, and will inspire the recipient to value their gift.

The responsibilities of the recipients, however, are even more stringent. To ensure that the donor feels glad before giving, monks and nuns are forbidden from pressuring the donor in any way. Except when ill or in situations where the donor has invited them to ask, they cannot ask for anything beyond the barest emergency necessities. They are not even allowed to give hints about what they'd like to receive. When asked where a prospective gift should be given, they are told to follow the Buddha's example and say, "Give wherever your gift would be used, or would be well-cared for, or would last long, or wherever your mind feels inspired." This conveys a sense of trust in the donor's discernment—which in itself is a gift that gladdens the donor's mind.

To ensure that a donor feels inspired while giving a gift, the monks and nuns are enjoined to receive gifts attentively and with an attitude of respect. To ensure that the donor feels gratified afterward, they should live frugally, care for the gift, and make sure it is used in an appropriate way. In other words, they should show that the donor's trust in them is well placed. And of course they must work on subduing their greed, anger, and delusion. In fact, this is a primary motivation for trying to attain arahantship: so that the gifts given to one will bear the donors great fruit.

By sharing these responsibilities in an atmosphere of trust, both sides protect the freedom of the donor. They also foster the conditions that will enable not only

the practice of generosity but also the entire practice of Dhamma to flourish and grow.

The principles of freedom and fruitfulness also govern the code the Buddha formulated specifically for protecting the gift of Dhamma. Here again, the responsibilities are shared. To ensure that the teacher is glad, inspired, and gratified in teaching, the listeners are advised to listen with respect, to try to understand the teaching, and—once they're convinced that it's genuinely wise—to sincerely put it into practice so as to gain the desired results. Like a monk or nun receiving a material gift, the recipient of the gift of Dhamma has the simple responsibility of treating the gift well.

The teacher, meanwhile, must make sure not to regard the act of teaching as a repayment of a debt. After all, monks and nuns repay their debt to their lay donors by trying to rid their minds of greed, aversion, and delusion. They are in no way obligated to teach, which means that the act of teaching is a gift free and clear. In addition, the Buddha insisted that the Dhamma be taught without expectation of material reward. When he was once offered a "teacher's fee" for his teaching, he refused to accept it and told the donor to throw it away. He also established the precedent that when a monastic teaches the rewards of generosity, the teaching is given after a gift has been given, not before, so that the stain of hinting won't sully what's said.

All of these principles assume a high level of nobility and restraint on both sides of the equation, which is why people tried to find ways around them even while the Buddha was alive. The origin stories to the monastic discipline—the tales portraying the misbehavior that led the Buddha to formulate rules for the monks and nuns—often tell of monastics whose gift of Dhamma came with strings attached, and of lay people who gladly pulled those strings to get what they wanted out of the monastics: personal favors served with an ingratiating smile. The Buddha's steady persistence in formulating rules to cut these strings shows how determined he was that the principle of Dhamma as a genuinely free gift not be an idle ideal. He wanted it to influence the way people actually behaved.

He never gave an extended explanation of why the act of teaching should always be a gift, but he did state in general terms that when his code of conduct became corrupt over time, that would corrupt the Dhamma as well. And in the case of the etiquette of generosity, this principle has been borne out frequently throughout Buddhist history.

A primary example is recorded in the Apadānas, which scholars believe were added to the Canon after King Asoka's time. The Apadānas discuss the rewards of giving in a way that shows how eager the monks composing them were to receive lavish gifts. They promise that even a small gift will bear fruit as guaranteed arahantship many eons in the future, and that the path from now to then will always be filled with pleasure and prestige. Attainments of special distinction, though, require special donations. Some of these donations bear a symbolic resemblance to the desired distinction—a gift of lighted lamps, for instance, presages clairvoyance—but the preferred gift of distinction was a week's worth of lavish meals for an entire monastery, or at least for the monks who teach.

It's obvious that the monks who composed the Apadānas were giving free rein to their greed, and were eager to tell their listeners what their listeners wanted to hear. The fact that these texts were recorded for posterity shows that the listeners, in fact, were pleased. Thus the teachers and their students, acting in collusion, skewed the culture of dāna in the direction of their defilements. In so doing they distorted the Dhamma as well. If gift-giving guarantees Awakening, it supplants the noble eightfold path with the one-fold path of the gift. If the road to Awakening is always prestigious and joyful, the concept of right effort disappears. Yet once these ideas were introduced into the Buddhist tradition, they gained the stamp of authority and have affected Buddhist practice ever since. Throughout Buddhist Asia, people tend to give gifts with an eye to their symbolic promise of future reward; and the list of gifts extolled in the Apadānas reads like a catalog of the gifts placed on altars throughout Buddhist Asia even today.

Which goes to show that once the culture of dāna gets distorted, it can distort the practice of Dhamma as a whole for many centuries. So if we're serious about bringing the culture of dāna to the West, we should be very careful to ensure that our efforts honor the principles that make dāna a genuinely Buddhist practice. This means no longer using the tactics of modern fundraising to encourage generosity among retreatants or Buddhists in general. It also means rethinking the dāna talk, for on many counts it fails the test. In pressuring retreatants to give to teachers, it doesn't lead to gladness before giving, and instead sounds like a plea for a tip at the end of a meal. The frequent efforts to pull on the retreatants' heartstrings as a path to their purse strings betray a lack of trust in their thoughtfulness and leave a bad taste. And the entire way dāna is handled for teachers doesn't escape the fact that it's payment for services rendered. Whether teachers think about this consciously

or not, it pressures them subtly to tell their listeners what they think their listeners want to hear. The Dhamma can't help but suffer as a result.

The ideal solution would be to provide a framework whereby serious Dhamma practitioners could be supported whether or not they taught. That way, the act of teaching would be a genuine gift. In the meantime, though, a step in the direction of a genuine culture of dāna would be to declare a moratorium on all dāna talks at the end of retreats, and on references to the Buddhist tradition of dāna in fundraising appeals, so as to give the word time to recover its dignity.

On retreats, dāna could be discussed in a general way, in the context of the many Dhamma talks given on how best to integrate Dhamma practice in daily life. At the end of the retreat, a basket could be left out for donations, with a note that the teacher hasn't been paid to teach the retreat. That's all. No appeals for mercy. No flashcards. Sensitive retreatants will be able to put two and two together, and will feel glad, inspired, and gratified that they were trusted to do the math for themselves.

The Power of Judgment

When the Buddha told Ānanda that the entirety of the practice lies in having an admirable friend, he wasn't saying something warm and reassuring about the compassion of others. He was pointing out three uncomfortable truths—about delusion and trust—that call for clear powers of judgment.

The first truth is that *you can't really trust yourself to see through your delusion on your own.* When you're deluded, you don't *know* you're deluded. You need some trustworthy outside help to point it out to you. This is why, when the Buddha advised the Kālāmas to know for themselves, one of the things he told them to know for themselves was how wise people would judge their behavior. When he advised his son, Rāhula, to examine his own actions as he would his face in a mirror, he said that if Rāhula saw that his actions had caused any harm, he should talk it over with a knowledgeable friend on the path. That way he could learn how to be open with others—and himself—about his mistakes, and at the same time tap into the knowledge that his friend had gained. He wouldn't have to keep reinventing the dharma wheel on his own.

So if you really want to become skillful in your thoughts, words, and deeds, you need a trustworthy friend or teacher to point out your blind spots. And because those spots are blindest around your unskillful habits, the primary duty of a trustworthy friend is to point out your faults—for only when you see your faults can you correct them; only when you correct them are you benefiting from your friend's compassion in pointing them out.

Regard him as one who
points out
treasure,
the wise one who
seeing your faults
rebukes you.

Stay with this sort of sage.

For the one who stays
with a sage of this sort,
things get better,
not worse. — *Dhp 76*

In passing judgment on your faults, an admirable friend is like a trainer. Once, when a horse trainer came to see the Buddha, the Buddha asked him how he trained his horses. The trainer said that some horses responded to gentle training, others to harsh training, others required both harsh and gentle training, but if a horse didn't respond to either type of training, he'd kill the horse to maintain the reputation of his teachers' lineage. Then the trainer asked the Buddha how he trained his students, and the Buddha replied, "In the same way." Some students responded to gentle criticism, others to harsh criticism, others to a mixture of the two, but if a student didn't respond to either type of criticism, he'd kill the student. This shocked the horse trainer, but then the Buddha explained what he meant by "killing": He wouldn't train the student any further, which essentially killed the student's opportunity to grow in the practice.

So the first prerequisite in maintaining an admirable friend is being willing to take criticism, both gentle and harsh. This is why the Buddha told his disciples not to teach for money, for the person paying is the one who determines what's taught, and people rarely pay for the criticism they need to hear. But even if the teacher is teaching for free, you run into the Buddha's second uncomfortable truth: *You can't open your heart to just anyone.* Our powers of judgment really do have power, and because that power can cause long-term help or harm, you have to take care in choosing your friend. Don't fall into the easy trap of being judgmental or non-judgmental—judgmental in trusting your knee-jerk likes or dislikes, non-judgmental in trusting that every dharma teacher would be equally beneficial as a guide. Instead, be judicious in choosing the person whose judgments you're going to take on as your own.

This, of course, sounds like a Catch-22: You need a good teacher to help develop your powers of judgment, but well-developed powers of judgment to recognize who a good teacher might be. And even though there's no foolproof way out of the catch —after all, you can master a foolproof way and still be a fool—there *is* a way if you're willing to learn from experience. And fortunately the Buddha advised on how to develop your powers of judgment so that you know what to look for along the way. In fact, his recommendations for how to choose an admirable friend are a preliminary exercise in discernment: learning how to develop judicious powers of

judgment so that you, too, can become an admirable friend, first to yourself and then to the people around you.

The first step in being judicious is understanding what it means to judge in a helpful way. Think, not of a Supreme Court justice sitting on her bench, passing a final verdict of guilt or innocence, but of a piano teacher listening to you play. She's not passing a final verdict on your potential as a pianist. Instead, she's judging a work in progress: listening to your intention for the performance, listening to your execution of that intention, and then deciding whether it works. If it doesn't, she has to figure out if the problem is with the intention or the execution, make helpful suggestions, and then let you try again. She keeps this up until she's satisfied with your performance. The important principle is that she never direct her judgments at you as a person. Instead she has to stay focused on your actions, to keep looking for better ways to raise them to higher and higher standards.

At the same time, you're learning from her how to judge your own playing: thinking more carefully about your intention, listening more carefully to your execution, developing higher standards for what works, and learning to think outside of the box for ways to improve. Most important of all, you're learning to focus your judgment on your performance, and not on yourself. This way—when there's less *you* invested in your habits—you're more willing to recognize unskillful habits and to drop them in favor of more skillful ones.

Of course, when you and your teacher are judging your improvement on a particular piece, it's part of a longer process of judging how well the relationship is working. She has to judge, over time, if you're benefiting from her guidance, and so do you. But again, neither of you is judging the worth of the other person. She's simply deciding—based on your progress—whether it's worth her while to continue taking you on as a student. You're judging the extent to which her recommendations are actually helping you perform more effectively. If either of you decides to terminate the relationship, it shouldn't be because she's a bad teacher or you're a bad student, but simply that she's not the teacher for you, or you're not the student for her.

In the same way, when you're evaluating a potential dharma teacher, remember that there's no Final Judgment in Buddhism. You want someone who will evaluate your actions as a work in progress, and you have to apply the same standard to him or her. And you're not trying to take on the superhuman role of evaluating that person's essential worth. You're simply judging whether his or her actions embody the kinds of skills you'd like to develop, and the types of mental qualities—which

are also a kind of action—that you'd trust in a trainer or guide. After all, the only way we know anything about other people is through their actions, so that's as far as our judgments can fairly extend.

At the same time, though, because we're judging whether we want to internalize another person's standards, it's not unfair to pass judgment on what they're doing. It's for our own protection. And it's for the sake of our protection that the Buddha recommended looking for two qualities in a teacher: wisdom and integrity. To gauge these qualities, though, takes time and sensitivity, which is why the Buddha also advised that you be willing to spend time with the person, and try to be really observant of how that person acts.

Once, when King Pasenadi came to see the Buddha, a group of naked ascetics passed nearby. The king went over, got down on one knee, and offered them homage. Then he returned to the Buddha and asked, "Are those ascetics worthy of homage?" The Buddha replied that you could fairly answer that question only after having spent time with them, and only if you were really observant. The king praised the Buddha's caution, and added, "Those men are actually my spies. They're on the way back from having scouted out the enemy, and soon—after bathing and clothing themselves—they'll be back enjoying themselves with their wives." So you can't judge people just by first impressions. The appearance of wisdom is easy to fake. In the past, people were impressed by extreme austerities; at present, the ads for dharma books and retreats show that we're attracted to other surface criteria, but the principle is the same.

To save time and needless pain in the search, however, the Buddha noted four early warning signs indicating that potential teachers don't have the wisdom or integrity to merit your trust. The warning signs for untrustworthy wisdom are two. The first is when people show no gratitude for the help they've received—and this applies especially to help from their parents and teachers. People with no gratitude don't appreciate goodness, don't value the effort that goes into being helpful, and so will probably not put out that effort themselves. The second warning sign is that they don't hold to the principle of karma. They either deny that we have freedom of choice, or else teach that one person can clear away another person's bad karma from the past. People of this sort are unlikely to put forth the effort to be genuinely skillful, and so are untrustworthy guides.

Lack of integrity also has two warning signs. The first is when people feel no shame in telling a deliberate lie. As the Buddha once said, "There's no evil that such a person might not do." The second warning sign is when they don't conduct

arguments in a fair and aboveboard manner: misrepresenting their opponents, pouncing on the other side's minor lapses, not acknowledging the valid points the other side has made. People of this sort, the Buddha said, aren't even worth talking to, much less taking on as teachers.

As for people who don't display these early warning signs, the Buddha gave advice on how to gauge wisdom and integrity in their actions over time. One question he'd have you ask yourself is whether a teacher's actions betray any of the greed, anger, or delusion that would inspire him to claim knowledge of something he didn't know, or to tell another person to do something that was not in that person's best interests. To test for a teacher's wisdom, the Buddha advised noticing how a potential teacher responds to questions about what's skillful and not, and how well he or she handles adversity. To test for integrity, you look for virtue in day-to-day activities, and purity in the teacher's dealings with others. Does this person make excuses for breaking the precepts, bringing them down to his level of behavior rather than lifting his behavior to theirs? Does he take unfair advantage of other people? If so, you'd better find another teacher.

This, however, is where the Buddha's third uncomfortable truth comes in: *You can't be a fair judge of another person's integrity until you've developed some of your own.* This is probably the most uncomfortable truth of all, for it requires that you accept responsibility for your judgments. If you want to test other people's potential for good guidance, you have to pass a few tests yourself. Again, it's like listening to a pianist. The better you are as a pianist, the better your ability to judge the other person's playing.

Fortunately, the Buddha also gave guidance on how to develop integrity, and it doesn't require that you start out innately good. All it requires is a measure of truthfulness and maturity: the realization that your actions make all the difference in your life, so you have to take care in how you act; the willingness to admit your mistakes, both to yourself and to others; and the willingness to learn from your mistakes so you don't keep repeating them. As the Buddha taught Rāhula, before you act in thought, word, or deed, look at the results you expect from your action. If it's going to harm you or anyone else, don't do it. If you don't foresee any harm, go ahead and act. While you're acting, check to see if you're causing any unforeseen harm. If you are, stop. If not, continue until you're done. After you're done, look at the long-term results of your action. If it caused any harm, talk it over with someone else on the path, develop a sense of shame around the mistake, and

resolve not to repeat it. If it caused no harm, take joy in the fact and keep on training.

As you train yourself in this way, you learn four important principles about exercising judgment in a healthy way. First, you're judging your actions, not yourself. If you can learn to separate your sense of self from your actions, you tend to be more willing to admit your mistakes to yourself, and less defensive when other people point them out to you. This principle also applies to the sense of shame the Buddha recommends you feel toward your mistakes. It's directed not at you, but at the action—the sort of shame felt by a person of high self-esteem who's realized she's done something beneath her and doesn't want to do it again. Shame of this sort is not debilitating. It simply helps you remember the lesson you've learned.

This relates to the second important principle about healthy judgment, that it requires mindfulness in the original meaning of the term: keeping something in mind. Mindfulness of this sort is essential in developing your judgment, for it helps you remember the lessons you've learned over time as to what works and what doesn't. Because we often try our best to forget our mistakes, we have to train our mindfulness repeatedly to remember the lessons we learned from those mistakes so that we don't have to keep learning them over and over again.

Sometimes you hear mindfulness defined as a non-judging state of mind, but that's not how the Buddha understood it. He often compared mindfulness to a gatekeeper in the way it helps you judge what should and shouldn't be done:

> *"Just as the royal frontier fortress has a gatekeeper—wise, experienced, intelligent—to keep out those he doesn't know and to let in those he does, for the protection of those within and to ward off those without; in the same way a disciple of the noble ones is mindful, highly meticulous, remembering & able to call to mind even things that were done & said long ago. With mindfulness as his gatekeeper, the disciple of the noble ones abandons what is unskillful, develops what is skillful, abandons what is blameworthy, develops what is blameless, and looks after himself with purity."* — *AN 7:63*

So mindfulness actually plays an essential role in developing your powers of judgment.

As you keep trying to apply the lessons you've learned, you discover the third principle about healthy judgment: that the lessons you learn from your mistakes, if you act on them, really do make a difference. The present moment is not so arbitrarily new that lessons from yesterday are useless today. You may keep finding

new subtleties in how to apply past lessons, but the general outlines of how suffering is caused and how it can be ended always remain the same.

The fourth principle is that you learn how to benefit from the judgments of others. When you've chosen a person to confide in, you want to be open to that person's criticisms, but you also want to put his or her suggestions for improvement to the test. As the Buddha told his aunt, Gotamī, you can test genuine dharma by seeing the results it gives when you put it into action. If it leads to such admirable qualities as being dispassionate, modest, content, energetic, and unburdensome, it's the genuine thing. The person who teaches you this dharma has passed at least that test for being a genuine friend. And you're learning more and more how to judge for yourself.

Some people might object that it's selfish to focus on finding friends you can benefit from, and inhumane to keep testing people to see if they fit the bill. But that's missing the point. The benefits that come from this sort of friendship don't end with you; and in testing your friend you're also testing yourself. As you assimilate the qualities of an admirable friend, you become the sort of person who can offer admirable friendship to others. Again, it's like practicing under a good piano teacher. As you improve as a pianist, you're not the only one who can enjoy your playing. The better you get, the more joy you bring to others. The better you understand the process of playing, the more effectively you can teach anyone who sincerely wants to learn from you. This is how teaching lineages of high caliber get established for the benefit of the world.

So when you look for an admirable friend, you're tapping into a long lineage of admirable friends, stretching back to the Buddha, and helping it to extend into the future. Joining this lineage may require accepting some uncomfortable truths, such as the need to learn from criticism and to take responsibility for your actions. But if you're up for the challenge, you learn to take this human power of judgment—which, when untrained, can so easily cause harm—and train it for the greater good.

Think Like a Thief

In Theravāda, the relationship between teacher and student is like that between a master craftsman and his apprentice. The Dharma is a skill, like carpentry, archery, or cooking. The duty of the teacher is to pass on the skill not only by word and example, but also by creating situations to foster the ingenuity and powers of observation the student will need to become skillful. The duty of the student is to choose a reliable master—someone whose skills are solid and whose intentions can be trusted—and to be as observant as possible. After all, there's no way you can become a skilled craftsman by passively watching the master or merely obeying his words. You can't abdicate responsibility for your own actions. You have to pay attention both to your actions and to their results, at the same time using your ingenuity and discernment to correct mistakes and overcome obstacles as they arise. This requires that you combine respect for your teacher with respect for the principle of cause and effect as it plays out in your own thoughts, words, and deeds.

Shortly before my ordination, my teacher—Ajaan Fuang Jotiko—told me: "If you want to learn, you'll have to think like a thief and figure out how to steal your knowledge." And soon I learned what he meant. During my first years with him, he had no one to attend to his needs: cleaning his hut, boiling the water for his bath, looking after him when he was sick, etc. So, even though I was a foreigner—barely fluent in Thai and probably the most uncouth barbarian he had ever met—I quickly took on the role of his attendant. Instead of explaining where things should be placed or when certain duties should be done, he left it up to me to observe for myself. If I caught on, he wouldn't say anything. If I didn't, he'd point out my mistake—but still wouldn't fully explain what was wrong. I had to observe for myself: Where did *he* place things when he straightened out his hut? And I had to do this out of the corner of my eye, for if I was too obvious in watching him, he would chase me away. As he said, "If I have to explain everything, you'll get used to having things handed to you on a platter. And then what will you do when problems come up in your meditation and you don't have any experience in figuring things out and experimenting on your own?"

So I swallowed my pride and learned to take my mistakes as my teachers. Before, I could never tolerate being in the wrong. But when I could finally admit to being wrong, I started finding the inner resources I needed to start setting things right.

Still, the issue of balancing respect was a problem. Ajaan Fuang was amazingly principled, wise, and compassionate, and I could always trust his intentions toward me. As a result I felt enormous respect for him. Nevertheless, he was a human being with human foibles. Because my Christian upbringing had taught me to reserve my ultimate respect for a supposedly infallible being, I was awkward in handling the occasions when Ajaan Fuang was a little less than perfect. At the same time, I didn't know quite what to do with my strongly ingrained streak of independence. So one day, out of the blue, Ajaan Fuang told me a story about a time when he had had a disagreement with his own teacher, Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo.

Toward the end of his life, Ajaan Lee had built a monastery in a mangrove swamp on the outskirts of Bangkok. The lay supporters wanted an ordination hall, so that was the first permanent building erected in the monastery. When laying the foundations, they placed a concrete vault under the spot where the Buddha image was to be situated, and filled it with sacred objects: Buddha relics, Buddha images, amulets, pieces of scripture, and so forth. Then they sealed it up for posterity. Traditionally in Thailand, Buddha images always face east—the direction the Buddha was facing on the day of his Awakening—so the vault was placed under the western side of the building, under the spot where the main Buddha image would be placed. Halfway through the construction, though, Ajaan Lee changed his mind and decided to place the Buddha image on the eastern side of the building, facing west. Although he never offered an explanation for this unusual move, his students are generally unanimous in their interpretation of what he wanted it to represent: the Dharma was going West.

Not until the building was finished, though, did anyone realize that the vault was no longer in line with the image. This meant that people entering the building through the western door would be stepping right over the sacred objects in the vault, violating a strong Thai taboo. So one evening Ajaan Lee said to Ajaan Fuang, "Get the monks together and move the vault to the other side of the building." Ajaan Fuang thought to himself, "That vault is firmly planted in the ground, and the area beneath the ordination hall is nothing but mud." However, he knew if he said that it couldn't be moved, Ajaan Lee would say, "If you don't have the conviction to do it, I'll find someone else who does." So the next morning, after the meal, Ajaan Fuang got all the able-bodied monks and novices in the monastery

down under the building, with ropes to pull the vault over to the eastern side. They worked all day but couldn't budge it an inch.

So now was the time to express an opinion—and to suggest an alternative solution to the problem. Ajaan Fuang went to Ajaan Lee that evening and said, "How about if we build another vault under the image, open the original vault, take all the sacred objects out of the old vault, and seal them up in the new one?" Ajaan Lee gave him a brief nod, and thus the problem was solved.

"And that," Ajaan Fuang concluded, "is how you show respect for your teacher."

Strength Training for the Mind

Meditation is the most useful skill you can master. It can bring the mind to the end of suffering, something no other skill can do. But it's also the most subtle and demanding skill there is. It requires all the mental qualities ordinarily involved in mastering a physical skill—mindfulness and alertness, persistence and patience, discipline and ingenuity—but to an extraordinary degree. This is why, when you come to meditation, it's good to reflect on any skills, crafts, or disciplines you've already mastered so that you can apply the lessons they've taught you to the training of the mind.

In teaching meditation, I've often found it helpful to illustrate my points with analogies drawn from physical skills. And, given the particular range of skills and disciplines currently popular in America, I've found that one useful source of analogies is strength training. Meditation is more like a good workout than you might have thought.

The Buddha himself noticed the parallels here. He defined the practice as a path of five strengths: conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. He likened the mind's ability to beat down its most stubborn thoughts to that of a strong man beating down a weaker man. The agility of a well-trained mind, he said, is like that of a strong man who can easily flex his arm when it's extended, or extend it when it's flexed. And he often compared the higher skills of concentration and discernment to the skills of archery, which—given the massive bows of ancient India—was strength training for the noble warriors of his day. These skills included the ability to shoot great distances, to fire arrows in rapid succession, and to pierce great masses—the great mass, here, standing for the mass of ignorance that envelops the untrained mind.

So even if you've been pumping great masses instead of piercing them, you've been learning some important lessons that will stand you in good stead as a meditator. A few of the more important lessons are these:

- **Read up on anatomy.** If you want to strengthen a muscle, you need to know where it is and what it moves if you're going to understand the exercises that target it. Only then can you perform them efficiently. In the same way, you have to

understand the anatomy of the mind's suffering if you want to understand how meditation is supposed to work. Read up on what the Buddha had to say on the topic, and don't settle for books that put you at the far end of a game of telephone. Go straight to the source. You'll find, for instance, that the Buddha explained how ignorance shapes the way you breathe, and how that in turn can add to your suffering. This is why most meditation regimens start with the breath, and why the Buddha's own regimen takes the breath all the way to nibbāna. So read up to understand how and why.

• **Start where you are.** Too many meditators get discouraged at the outset because their minds won't settle down. But just as you can't wait until you're big and strong before you start strength training, you can't wait until your concentration is strong before you start sitting. Only by exercising what little concentration you have will you make it solid and steady. So even though you feel scrawny when everyone around you seems big, or fat when everyone else seems fit, remember that you're not here to compete with them or with the perfect meditators you see in magazines. You're here to work on yourself. So establish that as your focus, and keep it strong.

• **Establish a regular routine.** You're in this for the long haul. We all like the stories of sudden enlightenment, but even the most lightning-like insights have to be primed by a long, steady discipline of day-to-day practice. That's because the consistency of your discipline allows you to observe subtle changes, and being observant is what enables insight to see. So don't get taken in by promises of quick and easy shortcuts. Set aside a time to meditate every day and then stick to your schedule whether you feel like meditating or not. The mind grows by overcoming resistance to repetition, just like a muscle. Sometimes the best insights come on the days you least feel like meditating. Even when they don't, you're establishing a strength of discipline, patience, and resilience that will see you through the even greater difficulties of aging, illness, and death. That's why it's called practice.

• **Aim for balance.** The "muscle groups" of the path are three: virtue, concentration, and discernment. If any one of these gets overdeveloped at the expense of the others, it throws you out of alignment, and your extra strength turns into a liability.

• **Set interim goals.** You can't fix a deadline for your enlightenment, but you can keep aiming for a little more sitting or walking time, a little more consistency in your mindfulness, a little more speed in recovering from distraction, a little more understanding of what you're doing. The type of meditation taught on retreats

where they tell you not to have goals is aimed at (1) people who get neurotic around goals in general and (2) the weekend warriors who need to be cautioned so that they don't push themselves past the breaking point. If you're approaching meditation as a lifetime activity, you've got to have goals. You've got to want results. Otherwise the whole thing loses focus, and you start wondering why you're sitting here when you could be sitting out on the beach.

• **Focus on proper form.** Get your desire for results to work *for* you and not against you. Once you've set your goals, focus directly not on the results but on the means that will get you there. It's like building muscle mass. You don't blow air or stuff protein into the muscle to make it larger. You focus on performing your reps properly, and the muscle grows on its own. If, as you meditate, you want the mind to develop more concentration, don't focus on the idea of concentration. Focus on allowing this breath to be more comfortable, and then this breath, this breath, one breath at a time. Concentration will then grow without your having to think about it.

• **Pace yourself.** Learn how to read your pain. When you meditate, some pains in the body are simply a sign that it's adapting to the meditation posture; others, that you're pushing yourself too hard. Some pains are telling the truth, some are lying. Learn how to tell the difference. The same principle applies to the mind. When the mind can't seem to settle down, sometimes it needs to be pushed even harder, sometimes you need to pull back. Your ability to read the difference is what exercises your powers of wisdom and discernment.

Learn, too, how to read your progress. The meditation won't really be a skill, won't really be your own, until you learn to judge what works for you and what doesn't. You may have heard that meditation is non-judgmental, but that's simply meant to counteract the tendency to prejudge things before they've had a chance to show their results. Once the results are in, you need to learn how to gauge them, to see how they connect with their causes, so that you can adjust the causes in the direction of the outcome you really want.

• **Vary your routine.** Just as a muscle can stop responding to a particular exercise, your mind can hit a plateau if it's strapped to only one meditation technique. So don't let your regular routine get into a rut. Sometimes the only change you need is a different way of breathing, a different way of visualizing the breath energy in the body. But then there are days when the mind won't stay with the breath no matter how many different ways of breathing you try. This is why the Buddha taught supplementary meditations to deal with specific problems as they

arise. For starters, there's goodwill for when you're feeling down on yourself or the human race—the people you dislike would be much more tolerable if they could find genuine happiness inside, so wish them that happiness. There's contemplation of the parts of the body for when you're overcome with lust—it's hard to maintain a sexual fantasy when you keep thinking about what lies just underneath the skin. And there's contemplation of death for when you're feeling lazy—you don't know how much time you've got left, so you'd better meditate *now* if you want to be ready when the time comes to go.

When these supplementary contemplations have done their work, you can get back to the breath, refreshed and revived. So keep expanding your repertoire. That way your skill becomes all-around.

▪ **Take your ups and downs in stride.** The rhythms of the mind are even more complex than those of the body, so a few radical ups and downs are par for the course. Just make sure that they don't knock you off balance. When things are going so well that the mind grows still without any effort on your part, don't get careless or overly confident. When your mood is so bad that even the supplementary meditations don't work, view it as an opportunity to learn how to be patient and observant of bad moods. Either way, you learn a valuable lesson: how to keep your inner observer separate from whatever else is going on. So do your best to maintain proper form regardless, and you'll come out the other side.

▪ **Watch your eating habits.** As the Buddha once said, we survive both on mental food and physical food. Mental food consists of the external stimuli you focus on, as well as the intentions that motivate the mind. If you feed your mind junk food, it's going to stay weak and sickly no matter how much you meditate. So show some restraint in your eating. If you know that looking at things in certain ways, with certain intentions, gives rise to greed, anger, or delusion, look at them in the opposite way. As Ajaan Lee, my teacher's teacher, once said, look for the bad side of the things you're infatuated with, and the good side of the things you hate. That way you become a discriminating eater, and the mind gets the healthy, nourishing food it needs to grow strong.

As for your physical eating habits, this is one of the areas where inner strength training and outer strength training part ways. As a meditator, you have to be concerned less with *what* physical food you eat than with *why* you eat. If you're bulking up for no real purpose, it's actually harmful for the mind. You have to realize that in eating—even if it's vegetarian food—you're placing a burden on the world around you, so you want to give some thought to the purposes served by the

strength you gain from your food. Don't take more from the world than you're willing to give back. Don't bulk up just for the fun of it, because the beings—human and animal—who provided the food didn't provide it in fun. Make sure the energy gets put to good use.

- **Don't leave your strength in the gym.** If you don't use your strength in other activities, strength training becomes largely an exercise in vanity. The same principle applies to your meditative skills. If you leave them on the cushion and don't apply them in everyday life, meditation turns into a fetish, something you do to escape the problems of life while their causes continue to fester.

The ability to maintain your center and to breathe comfortably in any situation can be a genuine lifesaver, keeping the mind in a position where you can more easily think of the right thing to do, say, or think when your surroundings get tough. As a result, the people around you are no longer subjected to your greed, anger, and delusion. And as you maintain your inner balance in this way, it helps them maintain theirs. So make the whole world your meditation seat, and you'll find that meditation both on the big seat and the little seat will get a lot stronger. At the same time, it'll become a gift both to yourself and to the world around you.

- **Never lose sight of your ultimate goal.** Mental strength has at least one major advantage over physical strength in that it doesn't inevitably decline with age. It can always keep growing to and through the experience of death. The Buddha promises that it leads to the Deathless, and he wasn't a man to make vain, empty promises. So when you establish your priorities, make sure that you give more time and energy to strengthening your meditation than you do to strengthening your body. After all, someday you'll be forced to lay down this body, no matter how fit or strong you've made it, but you'll never be forced to lay down the strengths you've built into the mind.

Mindfulness Defined

In recent years, the world has been awash in a flood of books, articles, teachings, and courses that promote two theories about the practice of mindfulness *(sati).* The first theory is that the Buddha employed the term mindfulness to mean bare attention: a state of pure receptivity—nonreactive, nonjudging, noninterfering—toward physical and mental phenomena as they make contact with the six senses (counting the mind as the sixth). The second theory is that the cultivation of bare attention can, on its own, bring about the goal of Buddhist practice: freedom from suffering and stress. Even in non-Buddhist circles, these theories have become the standard interpretation of what mindfulness is and how it's best developed.

Viewed in the light of the Buddha's teachings in the Pāli Canon, though, these two theories are seriously misleading. At best, they present a small part of the path as the whole of the practice; at worst, they discredit many of the skills you need on the path and misrepresent what it actually means to taste awakening.

The practice of mindfulness is most fruitful when informed by the Buddha's own definition of right mindfulness and his explanations of its role on the path. As he described the term, right mindfulness *(sammā-sati)* is not bare attention. Instead, it's a faculty of active memory, adept at calling to mind—and keeping in mind—instructions and intentions that apply to your present actions. Its role is to draw on right view about the nature of suffering and its end, and to work proactively in supervising the other factors of the path—such as right resolve, right speech, right action, and right livelihood—to give rise to right concentration *(MN 117).* Then it builds on right concentration to bring about total release.

In the following passage, the Buddha defines sati as the ability to remember, at the same time illustrating its function in meditation practice with the four *satipaṭṭhānas,* or establishings of mindfulness:

> *"And what is the faculty of mindfulness? There is the case where a monk, a disciple of the noble ones, is mindful, highly meticulous, remembering & able to call to mind even things that were done & said long ago. [And here begins the satipaṭṭhāna formula:] He remains focused on the body in & of itself—ardent, alert, and mindful*

—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on feelings in and of themselves... the mind in and of itself... mental qualities in and of themselves—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world." — *SN 48:10*

The most extensive discussion of the satipaṭṭhānas *(DN 22)* starts with instructions to be ever mindful of the breath. But, as the satipaṭṭhāna formula shows, mindfulness isn't the only quality you need to bring to the breath. You must also be alert and ardent.

The Pāli word for alertness, *sampajañña,* is another term that's often misunderstood. It doesn't mean comprehending or being choicelessly aware of the present, as it's sometimes defined. Examples in the Canon shows that sampajañña means being aware of what you're doing, as you're doing it, in the activities of the body and mind. After all, if you're going to gain insight into how you're causing suffering, your awareness of the present has to be focused on what you're actually doing. If you're just mindful of lessons from the past or broadly receptive to everything happening in the present, you won't see cause and effect in action. This is why mindfulness always has to be paired with alertness as you meditate.

Ardency—*ātappa*—means being intent on what you're doing, trying your best to do it skillfully. This doesn't mean that you have to keep straining and sweating all the time, just that you're persistent in developing skillful habits and abandoning unskillful ones. That, in fact, is the role of right effort, the factor in the path that immediately precedes right mindfulness. Mindfulness fosters that effort by remembering what's skillful and not, and recalling your need to keep trying to be skillful.

Mindfulness, alertness, and ardency get their guidance from what the Buddha called *yoniso manasikāra,* appropriate attention. Notice: That's *appropriate* attention, not *bare* attention. No act of attention is ever bare. The Buddha discovered that the way you attend to sensory contact is determined by your views about what's important: the questions you bring to each experience, the problems you want to solve. If there were no problems in life, you could open yourself up choicelessly to whatever came along. But the fact is there *is* a big problem smack dab in the middle of everything you do: the suffering that comes from misunderstanding what suffering is, how it's caused, and how it can be ended. This is why the Buddha doesn't tell you to view each moment with a beginner's eyes. You've got to give

priority to the problem of suffering, and keep an informed understanding of the problem and its correct solution always in mind.

Otherwise inappropriate attention will get in the way, focusing on questions like "Who am I?" "Do I have a self?"—questions that deal in terms of being and identity. Those questions, the Buddha said, lead you into a thicket of views and leave you stuck on the thorns *(MN 2)*. The questions that lead to freedom focus on comprehending suffering, letting go of the cause of suffering, and developing the path to the end of suffering. Your desire for answers to these questions is what makes you alert to your actions—your thoughts, words, and deeds—and ardent to perform them skillfully.

Mindfulness, then, is what keeps the perspective of appropriate attention in mind. Modern psychological research has shown that attention comes in discrete moments. You can be attentive to something for only a very short period of time and then you have to remind yourself, moment after moment, to return to it if you want to keep on being attentive. In other words, continuous attention—the type that can see connections between cause and effect over time—has to be stitched together from short intervals. This is what mindfulness is for. It keeps the object of your attention and the purpose of your attention in mind.

This is why an accurate understanding of mindfulness and its role on the path is not just a nitpicking matter for scholars to argue over. It has a genuine impact on how you practice. If you can't identify the differences among the qualities you bring to your meditation, they glom together, making it hard for real insight to arise.

For example, one popular definition of mindfulness is that it *is* awakening, and that each moment of mindfulness is a momentary taste of awakening. But mindfulness is conditioned and *nibbāna* is not. Mistaking one of the factors on the path to awakening for awakening itself is like reaching the middle of a road and then falling asleep right there. You never get to the end of the road, and in the meantime you'll get run over by aging, illness, and death.

Other contemporary definitions of mindfulness may avoid the mistake of confusing mindfulness with awakening, but they still confuse it with qualities that sometimes are and sometimes aren't useful on the path. For instance, mindfulness is sometimes portrayed as affectionate attention or compassionate attention, but affection and compassion are not synonymous with mindfulness. They're separate things. If you bring them to your meditation, understand that they're acting in addition to mindfulness, because skill in meditation requires seeing when qualities like compassion are helpful and when they're not. As the Buddha says—and as

most of us have experienced in our own lives—affection can sometimes be a cause for suffering, so you have to watch out.

Mindfulness has also been equated with appreciating the moment for all the little pleasures it can offer: the taste of a raisin, the feel of a cup of tea in your hands. In the Buddha's vocabulary, this appreciation is called contentment. Contentment is useful when you're experiencing physical hardship, but it's not always useful in the area of the mind. In fact, the Buddha once said that the secret to his awakening was that he *didn't* allow himself to rest content with whatever attainment he had reached (AN 2:5). He kept reaching for something higher until there was nowhere higher to reach. So contentment has to know its time and place. Mindfulness, if it's not confused with contentment, can help keep that fact in mind.

Other popular definitions describe mindfulness as a type of non-reactivity or total acceptance. If you look for these terms in the Buddha's vocabulary, the closest you'll find are equanimity and patience. Equanimity means putting aside your preferences and accepting what you can't change. Patience is the ability not to get worked up over the things you don't like, to stick with difficult situations even when they don't resolve as quickly as you want them to. But in establishing mindfulness you stay with unpleasant things not simply to accept them but also to observe and understand them. Once you've clearly seen that a particular quality, such as aversion or lust, is harmful for the mind, it doesn't pay to keep developing patience or equanimity around it. You have to make whatever effort is needed to get rid of it and to nourish skillful qualities in its place by bringing in other factors of the path: right resolve and right effort.

Mindfulness, after all, is part of a larger path mapped out by appropriate attention. You have to keep remembering to bring the larger map to bear on everything you do. For instance, you try to keep the breath in mind because you see that concentration, as a factor of the path, is something you need to develop, and mindfulness of the breath is a good way to do it. The breath is also a good standpoint from which you can directly observe what's happening in the mind, to see which mental qualities are giving good results and which ones aren't.

Meditation employs lots of mental qualities, and you have to be clear about what they are, where they're separate, and what each one of them can do. That way, when things are out of balance, you can identify what's missing and can foster whatever is needed to make up the lack. If you're feeling flustered and irritated, try to bring in a little gentleness and contentment. When you're lazy, rev up your sense

of the dangers of being unskillful and complacent. It's not just a matter of piling on more and more mindfulness. You've got to add other qualities as well. First you're mindful enough to stitch things together, to keep the basic issues of your meditation in mind and to observe things over time. Then you try to be alert to see whatever else your ardency should stir into the pot.

This process is a lot like cooking. When you don't like the taste of the soup you're making, you're not stuck with the single option of adding more and more salt. You can add onion, garlic, oregano—whatever you sense is needed. Remember that you've got a whole spice shelf to work with, and that the spices should be clearly labeled. If they're all labeled "salt," you won't know which "salt" to use.

And remember that your cooking has a purpose. Right mindfulness is supposed to lead to right concentration. We're often told that mindfulness and concentration are two separate forms of meditation, or even two separate paths to awakening, but the Buddha never made a clear division between the two. In his teachings, mindfulness and concentration are interwoven: mindfulness shades into concentration; concentration, in turn, forms the basis for even better mindfulness. The four establishings of mindfulness are also the themes of concentration, and the highest level of concentration is where mindfulness becomes pure.

As Ajaan Lee, my teacher's teacher, once noted, mindfulness combined with ardency turns into the concentration factor called *vitakka*, or directed thought, where you keep your thoughts consistently focused on one object, such as the breath. Alertness combined with ardency turns into another concentration factor: *vicāra,* or evaluation. In this case, you evaluate what's going on with the breath. Is it comfortable? If it is, stick with it. If it's not, what can you do to make it more comfortable? Try making it a little bit longer, a little bit shorter, deeper, shallower, faster, slower. See what happens. When you've found a way of breathing that nourishes a sense of fullness and refreshment, you can spread that fullness throughout the body. Learn how to relate to the breath in a way that nourishes a good energy flow throughout the body. When your sense of the body is refreshed, the mind can easily settle down in the present.

You may have picked up the idea that you should never fiddle with the breath, that you should just take it as it comes. Yet meditation isn't a passive process of being nonjudgmentally present with whatever arises and not adjusting it at all. Mindfulness keeps reminding you to stick with the breath in the present, but it also reminds you that there's a path to develop for good results in the future, and that adjusting the breath to help settle the mind is a skillful part of that path.

This is why evaluation—judging the best way to maximize the pleasure of the breath—is essential to the practice. In other words, you don't abandon your powers of judgment as you develop mindfulness. Rather, you train them to be less *judgmental* and more *judicious,* so that they yield tangible results.

When the breath becomes really full and refreshing throughout the body, you can drop the evaluation and simply be one with the breath. This sense of oneness is also sometimes called mindfulness, in a literal sense: *mind-fullness,* a sense of oneness pervading the entire range of your awareness. You're at one with whatever you focus on, at one with whatever you do. There's no separate "you" at all. This is a type of mindfulness that's easy to confuse with awakening because it can seem so liberating, but in the Buddha's vocabulary it's neither mindfulness nor awakening. He calls it by a technical name: *cetaso ekodibhāva,* unification of awareness. In the nine levels of concentration attainments, this is a factor that's present from the second level, the second jhāna, up to the sixth, the infinitude of consciousness. It's abandoned on the seventh level, when the mind needs to drop the oneness to reach the dimension of nothingness. So oneness isn't even the ultimate in concentration, much less awakening.

Which means that there's still more work for your mindfulness, alertness, and ardency to do. Mindfulness reminds you that no matter how wonderful this sense of oneness is, you still haven't solved the problem of suffering. Alertness tries to focus on what the mind is still doing in that state of oneness—what subterranean choices you're making to keep that sense of oneness going and what subtle levels of stress those choices are causing—while ardency tries to find a way to drop even those subtle choices to be rid of that stress.

So even this sense of oneness is a means to a higher end. You bring the mind to a solid state of oneness in order to drop your habitual ways of dividing up experience into me *vs.* not-me, but you don't stop there. You then take that oneness and keep subjecting it to all the factors of the path. That's when the activities underlying the oneness become clearly distinct. Ajaan Lee uses the image of ore in a rock. Staying with the sense of oneness is like resting content with the knowledge that there's tin, silver, and gold in your rock: if that's all you do, you'll never get any use from those metals. But if you heat the rock to their different melting points, they'll separate out on their own. Only then will you benefit from them.

Liberating insight comes from testing and experimenting. This is how we learn about the world to begin with. If we weren't active creatures, we'd have no understanding of the world at all. Things would pass by, pass by, and we wouldn't

know how they were connected because we'd have no way of influencing them to see which effects came from changing which causes. It's because we act in the world that we can understand it.

The same holds true with the mind. You can't just sit there hoping that a single mental quality—mindfulness, acceptance, contentment, oneness—will do all the work. If you want to learn about the potentials of the mind, you have to be willing to play with sensations in the body, with qualities in the mind. That's when you come to understand cause and effect.

But apprehending cause and effect requires all your powers of intelligence. This doesn't mean book intelligence. It means your ability to notice what you're doing, to read the results of what you've done, and to figure out ingenious ways of doing things that cause less and less suffering and stress: call it street smarts for the noble path. Mindfulness allows you to see these connections because it keeps reminding you to stay with these issues, to stay with the causes until you see their effects. But mindfulness alone can't do all the work. You can't improve the soup simply by dumping more pepper into it. You add other ingredients, as they're needed.

This is why it's best not to load the word mindfulness with too many meanings or to assign it too many functions. Otherwise, you can't clearly discern when a quality like contentment is useful and when it's not, when you need to bring things to oneness and when you need to take things apart.

So keep the spices on your shelf clearly labeled, and learn through practice which spice is good for which purpose. Only then can you develop your full potential as a cook.

The Joy of Effort

When explaining meditation, the Buddha often drew analogies with the skills of artists, carpenters, musicians, archers, and cooks. Finding the right level of effort, he said, is like a musician's tuning of a lute. Reading the mind's needs in the moment—to be gladdened, steadied, or inspired—is like a palace cook's ability to read and please the tastes of a prince.

Collectively, these analogies make an important point: Meditation is a skill, and mastering it should be enjoyable in the same way that mastering any other rewarding skill can be. The Buddha said as much to his son, Rāhula: "When you see that you've acted, spoken, or thought in a skillful way—conducive to happiness while causing no harm to yourself or others—take joy in that fact, and keep on training."

Of course, saying that meditation should be enjoyable doesn't mean that it will always be easy or pleasant. Every meditator knows it requires serious discipline to sit with long unpleasant stretches and to untangle all the mind's difficult issues. But if you can approach difficulties with the enthusiasm that an artist approaches challenges in her work, the discipline becomes enjoyable: Problems are solved through your own ingenuity, and the mind is energized for even greater challenges.

This joyful attitude is a useful antidote to the more pessimistic attitudes that people often bring to meditation, which tend to fall into two extremes. On the one hand, there's the belief that meditation is a series of dull and dreary exercises allowing no room for imagination and inquiry: Simply grit your teeth, and, at the end of the long haul, your mind will be processed into an awakened state. On the other hand there's the belief that effort is counterproductive to happiness, so meditation should involve no exertion at all: Simply accept things as they are—it's foolish to demand that they get any better—and relax into the moment.

While it's true that both repetition and relaxation can bring results in meditation, when either is pursued to the exclusion of the other, it leads to a dead end. If, however, you can integrate them both into the larger skill of learning how to apply whatever level of effort the practice requires at any given moment, they can take you far. This larger skill requires strong powers of mindfulness, concentration,

and discernment, but if you stick with it, it can lead you all the way to the Buddha's ultimate aim in teaching meditation: nibbāna, a happiness totally unconditioned, free from the constraints of space and time.

That's an inspiring aim, but it requires work. And the key to maintaining your inspiration in the day-to-day work of meditation practice is to approach it as play: a happy opportunity to master practical skills, to raise questions, experiment, and explore. This is precisely how the Buddha himself taught meditation. Instead of formulating a cut-and-dried method, he first trained his students in the personal qualities—such as honesty and patience—needed to make trustworthy observations. Only then did he teach meditation techniques, and even then he didn't spell everything out. He raised questions and suggested areas for exploration, in hopes that his questions would capture his students' imagination so they'd develop discernment and gain insights on their own.

We can see this in the way the Buddha taught Rāhula how to meditate. He started with the issue of patience. Meditate, he said, so that your mind is like the earth. Disgusting things get thrown on the earth, but the earth isn't horrified by them. When you make your mind like the earth, neither agreeable nor disagreeable sensory impressions will take charge of it.

Now, the Buddha wasn't telling Rāhula to become a passive clod of dirt. He was teaching Rāhula to be grounded, to develop his powers of endurance, so that he'd be able to observe both pleasant and painful events in his body and mind without becoming engrossed in the pleasure or blown away by the pain. This is what patience is for. It helps you sit with things until you understand them well enough to respond to them skillfully.

To develop honesty in meditation, the Buddha taught Rāhula a further exercise. Look at the inconstancy of events in body and mind, he said, so that you don't develop a sense of "I am" around them. Here the Buddha was building on a lesson that he had taught Rāhula when the latter was seven years old. Learn to look at your actions, he had said, before you do them, while you're doing them, and after they're done. If you see that you've acted unskillfully and caused harm, resolve not to repeat the mistake. Then talk it over with someone you respect.

In these lessons, the Buddha was training Rāhula to be honest with himself and with others. And the key to this honesty is to treat your actions as experiments. Then, if you see the results aren't good, you are free to change your ways.

This attitude is essential for developing honesty in your meditation as well. If you regard every thing—good or bad—that arises in the meditation as a sign of the

sort of person you are, it will be hard to observe anything honestly at all. If an unskillful intention arises, you're likely either to come down on yourself as a miserable meditator or to smother the intention under a cloak of denial. If a skillful intention arises, you're likely to become proud and complacent, reading it as a sign of your innate good nature. As a result, you never get to see if these intentions are actually as skillful as they seemed at first glance.

To avoid these pitfalls, you can learn to see events simply as events, and not as signs of the innate Buddha-ness or badness of who you are. Then you can observe these events honestly, to see where they come from and where they lead. Honesty, together with patience, puts you in a better position to use the techniques of meditation to explore your own mind.

The primary technique the Buddha taught Rāhula was breath meditation. The Buddha recommended sixteen steps in dealing with the breath. The first two involve straightforward instructions. The rest raise questions to be explored. In this way, the breath becomes a vehicle for exercising your ingenuity in solving the problems of the mind, and exercising your sensitivity in gauging the results.

To begin, simply notice when the breath is long and when it's short. In the remaining steps, though, you train yourself. In other words, you have to figure out for yourself how to do what the Buddha recommends. The first two trainings are to breathe in and out sensitive to the entire body, then to calm the effect that the breath has on the body. How do you do that? You experiment. What rhythm of breathing, what way of conceiving the breath calms its effect on the body? Try thinking of the breath not as the air coming in and out of the lungs but as the energy flow throughout the body that draws the air in and out. Where do you feel that energy flow? Think of it as flowing in and out the back of your neck, in your feet and hands, along the nerves and blood vessels, in your bones. Think of it coming in and out every pore of your skin. Where is it blocked? How do you dissolve the blockages? By breathing through them? Around them? Straight into them? See what works.

As you play around with the breath in this way, you'll make some mistakes—I've sometimes given myself headaches by forcing the breath too much—but with the right attitude the mistakes become lessons in learning how the impact of your perceptions shapes the way you breathe. You'll also catch yourself getting impatient or frustrated, but then you'll see that when you breathe through these emotions, they go away. You're beginning to see the impact of the breath on the mind.

The next step is to breathe in and out with a sense of refreshing fullness and a sense of ease. Here, too, you'll need to experiment both with the way you breathe and with the way you conceive of the breath. Notice how these feelings and conceptions have an impact on the mind, and how you can calm that impact so that the mind feels most at ease.

Then, when the breath is calm and you've been refreshed by feelings of ease and stillness, you're ready to look at the mind itself. You don't leave the breath, though. You adjust your attention slightly so that you're watching the mind as it stays with the breath. Here the Buddha recommends three areas for experimentation: Notice how to gladden the mind when it needs gladdening, how to steady it when it needs steadying, and how to release it from its attachments and burdens when it's ready for release.

Sometimes the gladdening and steadying will require bringing in other topics for contemplation. For instance, to gladden the mind you can develop an attitude of infinite good will, or recollect the times in the past when you've been virtuous or generous. To steady the mind when it's been knocked over by lust, you can contemplate the unattractive side of the human body. To reestablish your focus when you're drowsy or complacent, contemplation of death—realizing that death could come at any time, and you need to prepare your mind if you're going to face it with any finesse—can transfix you. At other times, you can gladden or steady the mind simply by the way you focus on the breath itself. For instance, breathing down into your hands and feet can really anchor the mind when its concentration has become shaky. When one spot in the body isn't enough to hold your interest, try focusing on the breath in two spots at once.

The important point is that you've now put yourself in a position where you can experiment with the mind and read the results of your experiments with greater and greater accuracy. You can try exploring these skills off the cushion as well: How do you gladden the mind when you're sick? How do you steady the mind when dealing with a difficult person?

As for releasing the mind from its burdens, you prepare for the ultimate freedom of nibbāna first by releasing the mind from any awkwardness in its concentration. Once the mind has settled down, check to see if there are any ways you can refine the stillness. For instance, in the beginning stages of concentration you need to keep directing your thoughts to the breath, evaluating and adjusting it to make it more agreeable. But eventually the mind grows so still that evaluating the breath is no longer necessary. So you figure out how to make the mind one with the

breath, and in that way you release the mind into a more intense and refreshing state of ease.

As you expand your skills in this way, the intentions that you've been using to shape your experience of body and mind become more and more transparent. At this point the Buddha suggests revisiting the theme of inconstancy, learning to look for it in the effects of every intention. You see that even the best states produced by skillful intentions—the most solid and refined states of concentration—waver and change. Realizing this induces a sense of disenchantment with and dispassion for all intentions. You see that the only way to get beyond this changeability is to allow all intentions to cease. You watch as everything is relinquished, including the path. What's left is unconditioned: the deathless. Your desire to explore the breath has taken you beyond desiring, beyond the breath, all the way to nibbāna.

But the path doesn't save all its pleasures for the end. It takes the daunting prospect of reaching full Awakening and breaks it down into manageable interim goals—a series of intriguing challenges that, as you meet them, allow you to see progress in your practice. This in and of itself makes the practice interesting and a source of joy.

At the same time, you're not engaged in busywork. You're developing a sensitivity to cause and effect that helps make body and mind transparent. Only when they're fully transparent can you let them go. In experiencing the full body of the breath in meditation, you're sensitizing yourself to the area of your awareness where the deathless—when you're acute enough to see it—will appear.

So even though the path requires effort, it's an effort that keeps opening up new possibilities for happiness and wellbeing in the present moment. And even though the steps of breath meditation eventually lead to a sense of disenchantment and dispassion, they don't do so in a joyless way. The Buddha never asks anyone to adopt a world-negating—or world-affirming, for that matter—frame of mind. Instead, he asks for a "world-exploring" attitude, in which you use the inner world of full-body breathing as a laboratory for exploring the harmless and clear-minded pleasures the world as a whole can provide. You learn skills to calm the body, to develop feelings of refreshment, fullness, and ease. You learn how to calm the mind, to steady it, gladden it, and release it from its burdens.

Only when you run up against the limits of these skills are you ready to drop them, to explore what greater potential for happiness there may be. In this way, disenchantment develops not from a narrow or pessimistic attitude but from an attitude of hope that there must be something better. This is like the

disenchantment a child senses when he has mastered a simple game and feels ready for something more challenging. It's the attitude of a person who has matured. And as we all know, you don't mature by shrinking from the world, watching it passively, or demanding that it entertain you. You mature by exploring it, by expanding your range of usable skills through play.

Head & Heart Together

Bringing Wisdom to the Brahmavihāras

The *brahmavihāra*s, or "sublime attitudes," are the Buddha's primary heart teachings—the ones that connect most directly with our desire for true happiness. The term *brahmavihāra* literally means "dwelling place of *brahmā*s." *Brahmā*s are gods who live in the higher heavens, dwelling in an attitude of unlimited goodwill, unlimited compassion, unlimited empathetic joy, and unlimited equanimity. These unlimited attitudes can be developed from the more limited versions of these emotions that we experience in the human heart.

Of these four emotions, goodwill *(mettā)* is the most fundamental. It's the wish for true happiness, a wish you can direct to yourself or to others. Goodwill was the underlying motivation that led the Buddha to search for awakening and to teach the path to awakening to others after he had found it.

The next two emotions in the list are essentially applications of goodwill. Compassion *(karuṇā)* is what goodwill feels when it encounters suffering: It wants the suffering to stop. Empathetic joy *(muditā)* is what goodwill feels when it encounters happiness: It wants the happiness to continue. Equanimity *(upekkhā)* is a different emotion, in that it acts as an aid to and a check on the other three. When you encounter suffering that you can't stop no matter how hard you try, you need equanimity to avoid creating additional suffering and to channel your energies to areas where you *can* be of help. In this way, equanimity isn't cold hearted or indifferent. It simply makes your goodwill more focused and effective.

Making these attitudes limitless requires work. It's easy to feel goodwill, compassion, and empathetic joy for people you like and love, but there are bound to be people you dislike—often for very good reasons. Similarly, there are many people for whom it's easy to feel equanimity: people you don't know or don't really care about. But it's hard to feel equanimity when people you love are suffering. Yet if you want to develop the brahmavihāras, you have to include all of these people within the scope of your awareness so that you can apply the proper attitude no matter where or when. This is where your heart needs the help of your head.

All too often, meditators believe that if they can simply add a little more heart juice, a little more emotional oomph, to their brahmavihāra practice, their attitudes can become limitless. But if something inside you keeps churning up reasons for liking this person or hating that one, your practice starts feeling hypocritical. You wonder who you're trying to fool. Or, after a month devoted to the practice, you still find yourself thinking black thoughts about people who cut you off in traffic—to say nothing of people who've done the world serious harm.

This is where the head comes in. If we think of the heart as the side of the mind that wants happiness, the head is the side that understands how cause and effect actually work. If your head and heart can learn to cooperate—that is, if your head can give priority to finding the causes for true happiness, and your heart can learn to embrace those causes—then the training of the mind can go far.

This is why the Buddha taught the brahmavihāras in a context of head teachings: the principle of causality as it plays out in (1) karma and (2) the process of fabrication that shapes emotions within the body and mind. The more we can get our heads around these teachings, the easier it will be to put our whole heart into developing attitudes that truly are sublime. An understanding of karma helps to explain *what* we're doing as we develop the brahmavihāras and *why* we might want to do so in the first place. An understanding of fabrication helps to explain *how* we can take our human heart and convert it into a place where brahmas could dwell.

The teaching on karma starts with the principle that people experience happiness and sorrow based on a combination of their past and present intentions. If we act with unskillful intentions either for ourselves or for others, we're going to suffer. If we act with skillful intentions, we'll experience happiness. So if we want to be happy, we have to train our intentions to always be skillful. This is the first reason for developing the brahmavihāras: so that we can make our intentions more trustworthy.

Some people say that unlimited goodwill comes naturally to us, that our Buddha- nature is intrinsically compassionate. But the Buddha never said anything about Buddha-nature. What he *did* say is that the mind is even more variegated than the animal world. We're capable of anything. So what are we going to do with this capability?

We could do—and have done—almost anything, but the one thing the Buddha *does* assume across the board is that deep down inside we want to take this capability and devote it to happiness. So the first lesson of karma is that if you

really want to be happy, you can't trust that deep down you know the right thing to do, because that would simply foster complacency. Unskillful intentions would take over and you wouldn't even know it. Instead, you have to be heedful to recognize unskillful intentions for what they are, and to act only on skillful ones. The way to ensure that you'll stay heedful is to take your desire for happiness and spread it around.

The second lesson of karma is that just as you're the primary architect of your own happiness and suffering, other people are the primary architects of theirs. If you really want them to be happy, you don't just treat them nicely. You also want them to learn how to create the causes for happiness. If you can, you want to show them how to do that. This is why the gift of dharma—lessons in how to give rise to true happiness—is the greatest gift.

In the Buddha's most famous example of how to express an attitude of unlimited good will, he doesn't just express the following wish for universal happiness:

> *"Happy, at rest,*
> *may all beings be happy at heart.*
> *Whatever beings there may be,*
> *weak or strong, without exception,*
> *long, large,*
> *middling, short,*
> *subtle, blatant,*
> *seen & unseen,*
> *near & far,*
> *born & seeking birth:*
> *May all beings be happy at heart."*

He immediately adds a wish that all beings avoid the causes that would lead them to unhappiness:

> *"Let no one deceive another*
> *or despise anyone anywhere,*
> *or through anger or resistance*
> *wish for another to suffer."* — *Sn 1:8*

So if you're using visualization as part of your goodwill practice, don't visualize people simply as smiling, surrounded willy-nilly by wealth and sensual pleasures. Visualize them acting, speaking, and thinking skillfully. If they're currently acting on unskillful intentions, visualize them changing their ways. Then act to realize those visualizations if you can.

A similar principle applies to compassion and empathetic joy. Learn to feel compassion not only for people who are already suffering, but also for those who are engaging in unskillful actions that will lead to future suffering. This means, if possible, trying to stop them from doing those things. And learn to feel empathetic joy not only for those who are already happy, but also for those whose actions will lead to future happiness. If you have the opportunity, give them encouragement.

But you also have to realize that no matter how unlimited the scope of these positive emotions, their effect is going to run into limits. In other words, regardless of how strong your goodwill or compassion may be, there are bound to be people whose past actions are unskillful and who cannot or will not change their ways in the present. This is why you need equanimity as your reality check. When you encounter areas where you can't be of help, you learn not to get upset. Think about the universality of the principle of karma: it applies to everyone regardless of whether you like them or not. That puts you in a position where you can see more clearly what *can* be changed, where you *can* be of help. In other words, equanimity isn't a blanket acceptance of things as they are. It's a tool for helping you to develop discernment as to which kinds of suffering you have to accept and which ones you don't.

For example, someone in your family may be suffering from Alzheimer's. If you get upset about the fact of the disease, you're limiting your ability to be genuinely helpful. To be more effective, you have to use equanimity as a means of letting go of what you *want* to change and focusing more on what *can* be changed in the present.

A third lesson from the principle of karma is that developing the brahmavihāras can also help mitigate the results of your past bad actions. The Buddha explains this point with an analogy: If you put a lump of salt into a glass of water, you can't drink the water in the glass. But if you put that lump of salt into a river, you could then drink the water in the river, because the river contains so much more water than salt. When you develop the four brahmavihāras, your mind is like the river. The skillful karma of developing these attitudes in the present is so expansive that whatever results of past bad actions may arise, you hardly notice them.

A proper understanding of karma also helps to correct the false idea that if people are suffering they deserve to suffer, so you might as well just leave them alone. When you catch yourself thinking in those terms, you have to keep four principles in mind.

First, remember that when you look at people, you can't see all the karmic seeds from their past actions. They may be experiencing the results of past bad actions, but you don't know when those seeds will stop sprouting. Also, you have no idea what other seeds, whatever wonderful latent potentials, will sprout in their place.

There's a saying in some Buddhist circles that if you want to see a person's past actions, you look at his present condition; if you want to see his future condition, you look at his present actions. This principle, however, is based on a basic misperception: that we each have a single karmic account, and what we see in the present is the current running balance in each person's account. Actually, no one's karmic history is a single account. It's composed of the many different seeds planted in many places through the many different actions we've done in the past, each seed maturing at its own rate. Some of these seeds have already sprouted and disappeared; some are sprouting now; some will sprout in the future. This means that a person's present condition reflects only a small portion of his or her past actions. As for the other seeds, you can't see them at all.

This reflection helps you when developing compassion, for it reminds you that you never know when the possibility to help somebody can have an effect. The seeds of the other person's past bad actions may be flowering right now, but they could die at any time. You may happen to be the person who's there to help when that person is ready to receive help.

The same pattern applies to empathetic joy. Suppose that your neighbor is wealthier than you are. You may resist feeling empathetic joy for him because you think, "He's already well-off, while I'm still struggling. Why should I wish him to be even happier than he is?" If you find yourself thinking in those terms, remind yourself that you don't know what your karmic seeds are; you don't know what his karmic seeds are. Maybe his good karmic seeds are about to die. Do you want them to die any faster? Does his happiness diminish yours? What kind of attitude is that? It's useful to think in these ways.

The second principle to keep in mind is that, in the Buddha's teaching, there's no question of a person's "deserving" happiness or "deserving" pain. The Buddha simply says that there are actions leading to pleasure and actions leading to pain. Karma is not a respecter of persons; it's simply an issue of actions and results. Good

people may have some bad actions squirreled away in their past. People who seem horrible may have done some wonderful things. You never know. So there's no question of a person's deserving or not deserving pleasure or pain. There's simply the principle that actions have results and that your present experience of pleasure or pain is the combined result of past and present actions. You may have some very unskillful actions in your past, but if you learn to think skillfully when those actions bear fruit in the present, you don't have to suffer.

A third principle applies to the question of whether the person who's suffering "deserves" your compassion. You sometimes hear that everyone deserves your compassion because they all have Buddha-nature. But this ignores the primary reason for developing compassion as a brahmavihāra in the first place: You need to make your compassion universal so that you can trust your intentions. If you regard your compassion as so precious that only Buddhas deserve it, you won't be able to trust yourself when encountering people whose actions are consistently evil.

At the same time, you have to remember that no human being has a totally pure karmic past, so you can't make a person's purity the basis for your compassion. Some people resist the idea that, say, children born into a warzone, suffering from brutality and starvation, are there for a karmic reason. It seems heartless, they say, to attribute these sufferings to karma from past lives. The only heartlessness here, though, is the insistence that people are worthy of compassion only if they are innocent of any wrongdoing. Remember that you don't have to like or admire someone to feel compassion for that person. All you have to do is wish for that person to be happy. The more you can develop this attitude toward people you *know* have misbehaved, the more you'll be able to trust your intentions in any situation.

The Buddha illustrates this point with a graphic analogy: Even if bandits attack you and saw off your limbs with a two-handled saw, you have to feel goodwill starting with them and then spreading to include the entire world. If you keep this analogy in mind, it helps to protect you from acting in unskillful ways, no matter how badly provoked.

The fourth principle to remember concerns the karma you're creating right now in reaction to other people's pleasure and pain. If you're resentful of somebody else's happiness, someday when you get happy there's going to be somebody resentful of yours. Do you want that? Or if you're hard-hearted toward somebody who's suffering right now, someday you may face the same sort of suffering. Do you want people to be hard-hearted toward you? Always remember that your reactions

are a form of karma, so be mindful to create the kind of karma that gives the results you'd like to see.

When you think in these ways you see that it really is in your interest to develop the brahmavihāras in all situations. So the question is, how do you do that? This is where another aspect of the Buddha's teachings on causality plays a role: his teaching on fabrication, or the way you shape your experience.

Fabrication is of three kinds: bodily, verbal, and mental. Bodily fabrication is the way you breathe. Verbal fabrications are thoughts and mental comments on things—your internal speech. In Pāli, these thoughts and comments are called *vitakka*—directed thought, and *vicāra,* evaluation. Mental fabrications are perceptions and feelings: the mental labels you apply to things, and the feelings of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain you feel about them.

Any desire or emotion is made up of these three types of fabrication. It starts with thoughts and perceptions, and then it gets into your body through the way you breathe. This is why emotions seem so real, so insistent, so genuinely "you." But as the Buddha points out, you identify with these things because you fabricate them in ignorance: you don't know what you're doing, and you suffer as a result. But if you can fabricate your emotions with knowledge, they can form a path to the end of suffering. And the breath is a good place to start.

If, for example, you're feeling anger toward someone, ask yourself, "How am I breathing right now? How can I change the way I breathe so that my body can feel more comfortable?" Anger often engenders a sense of discomfort in the body, and you feel you've got to get rid of it. The common ways of getting rid of it are two, and they're both unskillful: either you bottle it up, or you try to get it out of your system by letting it out in your words and deeds.

So the Buddha provides a third, more skillful alternative: Breathe through your discomfort and dissolve it away. Let the breath create physical feelings of ease and fullness, and allow those feelings to saturate your whole body. This physical ease helps put the mind at ease as well. When you're operating from a sense of ease, it's easier to fabricate skillful perceptions as you evaluate your response to the issue with which you're faced.

Here the analogy of the lump of salt is an important perception to keep in mind, as it reminds you to perceive the situation in terms of your need for your own goodwill to protect yourself from bad karma. Part of this protection is to look for the good points of the person you're angry at. And to help with this perception, the Buddha provides an even more graphic analogy to remind you of why this approach

is not mere sentimentality: If you see someone who's been really nasty to you in his words and deeds but has moments of honesty and goodwill, it's as if you're walking through a desert—hot, trembling, thirsty—and you come across a cow footprint with a little bit of water in it. Now what do you do? You can't scoop the water up with your hand because that would muddy it. Instead you get down on your hands and knees, and very carefully slurp it up.

Notice your position in this image. It may seem demeaning to have your mouth to the ground like this, but remember: You're trembling with thirst. You need water. If you focus just on the bad points of other people, you're going to feel even more oppressed with the heat and the thirst. You'll get bitter about the human race and see no need to treat it well. But if you can see the good in other people, you'll find it easier to treat them skillfully. Their good points are like water for your heart. You need to focus on them to nourish your own goodness now and in the future.

If, however, the person you're angry about has no good qualities at all, then the Buddha recommends another perception: Think of that person as a sick stranger you've found on the side of the road, far away from any help. You have to feel compassion for him and do whatever you can to get him to the safety of skillful thoughts, words, and deeds.

What you've done here is to use skillful verbal fabrication—thinking about and evaluating the breath—to turn the breath into a skillful bodily fabrication. This in turn creates a healthy mental fabrication—the feeling of ease—that makes it easier to mentally fabricate perceptions that can deconstruct your unskillful reaction and construct a skillful emotion in its place.

This is how we use our knowledge of karma and fabrication to shape our emotions in the direction we want—which is why head teachings are needed even in matters of the heart. At the same time, because we've sensitized ourselves to the role that the breath plays in shaping emotion, we can make a genuine change in how we physically feel about these matters. We're not playing make believe. Our change of heart becomes fully embodied, genuinely felt.

This helps undercut the feeling of hypocrisy that can sometimes envelop the practice of the brahmavihāras. Instead of denying our original feelings of anger or distress in any given situation, smothering them with a mass of cotton candy or marshmallow cream, we actually get more closely in touch with them and learn to skillfully reshape them.

All too often we think that getting in touch with our emotions is a means of tapping into who we really are—that we've been divorced from our true nature, and

that by getting back in touch with our emotions we'll reconnect with our true identity. But your emotions are not your true nature; they're just as fabricated as anything else. Because they're fabricated, the real issue is to learn how to fabricate them skillfully, so they don't lead to trouble and can instead lead to a trustworthy happiness.

Remember that emotions cause you to act. They're paths leading to good or bad karma. When you see them as paths, you can transform them into a path you can trust. As you learn how to deconstruct emotions of ill will, hard-heartedness, resentment, and distress, and reconstruct the brahmavihāras in their place, you don't simply attain an unlimited heart. You gain practice in mastering the processes of fabrication. As the Buddha says, that mastery leads first to strong and blissful states of concentration. From there it can fabricate all the factors of the path leading to the goal of all the Buddha's teachings, whether for head or for heart: the total happiness of nibbāna, unconditionally true.

Which simply goes to show that if you get your head and your heart to respect each other, they can take each other far. Your heart needs the help of your head to generate and act on more skillful emotions. Your head needs your heart to remind you that what's really important in life is putting an end to suffering. When they learn how to work together, they can make your human mind into an unlimited brahma-mind. And more: They can master the causes of happiness to the point where they transcend themselves, touching an uncaused dimension that the head can't encompass, and a happiness so true that the heart has no further need for desire.

The Wisdom of the Ego

Years back, many Buddhist teachers in the West began using the term "egolessness" to explain the Buddha's teaching on not-self. Since then, egolessness has come to mean many things to many people. Sometimes egolessness is used to mean a lack of conceit or self-importance; sometimes, a pure mode of acting without thought of personal reward. In its most extended form, though, the teaching on egolessness posits a fundamental error of perception: that despite our sense of a lasting, separate self, no such self really exists. By trying to provide for the happiness of this illusory self, we not only place our hopes on an impossible goal but also harm ourselves and everyone around us. If we could simply see the fallacy of the ego and understand its harmful effects, we would let it go and find true happiness in the interconnectedness that is our true nature.

At least that's what we're told, and often with a fair amount of vehemence. Buddhist writers, often so gentle and nonjudgmental, can quickly turn vicious when treating the ego. Some portray it as a tyrannical bureaucracy deserving violent overthrow; others, as a rat-like creature—nervous, scheming, and devious—that deserves to be squashed. Whatever the portrait, the message is always that the ego is so pernicious and tenacious that any mental or verbal abuse directed against it is fair play in getting it to loosen its foul grip on the mind.

But when people trained in classical Western psychotherapy read these attacks on the ego, they shake their heads in disbelief. For them the ego is not something evil. It's not even a singular thing you can attack. It's a cluster of activities, a set of functions in the mind—and necessary functions at that. Any mental act by which you mediate between your raw desires for immediate pleasure and your super-ego —the *oughts* and *shoulds* you've learned from family and society—is an ego function. Ego functions are our mental strategies for gaining lasting happiness in the midst of the conflicting demands whispering and shouting in the mind. They enable you to say No to the desire to have sex with your neighbor's spouse, in the interest of a happiness that would have less disastrous consequences for the things you truly value in life. They also enable you to say No to the demands of your

parents, your teachers, or government when those demands would jeopardize your own best interest.

But ego functions don't just say No. They also have a mediator's sense of when to say Yes. If they're skillful, they negotiate among your desires and your super-ego so that you can gain the pleasure you want in a way that causes no harm and can actually do a great deal of good. If your ego functions are healthy and well-coordinated, they give you a consistent sense of priorities as to which forms of happiness are more worthwhile than others; a clear sense of where your responsibilities do and don't lie; a strong sense of your ability to judge right and wrong for yourself; and an honest sense of how to learn from your past mistakes for the sake of greater happiness in the future.

From this perspective, egolessness would be a disaster. A person devoid of ego functions would be self-destructive: either a beast with uncontrolled impulses, or a neurotic, repressed automaton with no mind of his or her own, or an infantile monster thrashing erratically between these two extremes. Anyone who tried to abandon ego functioning would arrest his psychological growth and lose all hope of becoming a mature, responsible, trustworthy adult. And as we know, self-destructive people don't destroy only themselves. They can pull down many of the people and places around them.

This is not only the view of trained Western psychologists. Buddhist communities in the West have also begun to recognize this problem and have coined the term "spiritual bypassing" to describe it: the way people try to avoid dealing with the problems of an unintegrated personality by spending all their time in meditation retreats, using the mantra of egolessness to short-circuit the hard work of mastering healthy ego functioning in the daily give and take of their lives.

Then there's the problem of self-hatred. The Dalai Lama isn't the only Asian Buddhist teacher surprised at the amount of self-hatred found in the West. Unfortunately, a lot of people with toxic super-egos have embraced the teaching on egolessness as the Buddha's stamp of approval on the hatred they feel toward themselves.

These problems have inspired many Western psychologists to assume a major gap in the Buddha's teachings: that in promoting egolessness, the Buddha overlooked the importance of healthy ego functioning in finding true happiness. This assumption has led to a corollary: that Buddhism needs the insights of Western psychotherapy to fill the gap; that to be truly effective, a healthy spiritual path needs to give equal weight to both traditions. Otherwise you come out

lopsided and warped, an idiot savant who can thrive in the seclusion of a three-year, three-month, three-day retreat, but can't handle three hours caught in heavy traffic with three whining children.

This corollary assumes, though, that for the past twenty-six hundred years Buddhism hasn't produced any healthy functioning individuals: that the collective consciousness of Asian society has suppressed individualism, and that the handful of dysfunctional meditation teachers coming to the West—the ones who mastered the subtleties of formal meditation but tripped over the blatant pitfalls of American money and sex—are typical of the Buddhist tradition. But I wonder if this is so.

My own experience in Asia certainly doesn't confirm this. During my sixteen years in Thailand I met, per capita, more people with a genuinely individual outlook on life and far fewer neurotics than I did on returning to the mass-media-produced minds of America. My teacher, Ajaan Fuang, had the healthiest functioning ego of anyone I had ever met—and he knew nothing of Western psychology. This observation doesn't apply just to the Thai tradition. Psychologists have studied ordinary Tibetan monks and nuns who have survived years of torture —the severest test of healthy ego functioning—and found that they bear no psychological scars.

So there are many Asian Buddhists who clearly know the secret of how to develop a healthy ego. Some psychologists would have us believe that this was despite, rather than due to, their Buddhist training, but that belief could easily be based on a superficial reading of the Buddhist tradition. So we need to put this belief to the test.

One way would be to read the ancient texts with new eyes. Instead of assuming that the not-self teaching is counseling egolessness, how about assuming that it's part of a regimen for developing a healthy ego? This idea may seem counterintuitive, but that's no measure of its usefulness. The measure lies in testing it as a hypothesis. So as a thought experiment, let's look at the earliest record of the Buddha's teachings, the Pāli Canon, from the perspective of Western psychology and pose a question: is there any evidence that the Buddha was advocating a healthy ego?

Actually, tips on healthy ego functioning fill the texts. To begin with, the Buddha defines a wise person as one who knows the difference between what are and are not his personal responsibilities, who takes on only his own responsibilities and not those of others. This is the first principle in any ego functioning. Then there's the famous verse at *Dhammapada* 290:

If, by forsaking a limited ease,
he would see an abundance of ease,
the enlightened person
would forsake the limited ease
for the sake of the abundant.

This is practically a definition of how ego functions function well.

These insights aren't random. They're based on another assumption necessary for a healthy ego: the teaching on karma, that we're responsible for our actions and that we're going to experience their results. This assumption in turn is framed by the larger psychology of the noble eightfold path. As any therapist will tell you, a healthy ego is strengthened by developing a healthy super-ego whose *shoulds* are humane and realistic. It's also strengthened by the ability to safely satisfy your raw demands for immediate happiness so that the ego's long-term strategies don't get derailed by sudden overwhelming desires. These two functions are filled, respectively, by the path factors of right view and right concentration.

Right view contains the Buddha's *shoulds,* which are in service to the desire to find true happiness. You divide your experience into four categories: suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. Then you take to heart the imperatives proper to each: comprehending suffering, abandoning its cause, realizing its cessation, and developing the path. That's the Buddhist recipe for a healthy super-ego—a series of *shoulds* that are on your side, that never ask you to sacrifice your own true well-being for the sake of anyone or anything else.

As for right concentration, one of its crucial factors is a sense of bliss independent of sensual objects and drives. When you've gained some skill in meditation and can tap into that bliss whenever you want, you can satisfy your desire for immediate pleasure, at the same time weakening any demand that the pleasure be sensual. As the Buddha once noted, people pursue sensual pleasure, with all of its inherent limitations, simply because they see no other alternative to physical and mental pain. But once you've mastered this more refined alternative, you've found a new way to feed the demand for pleasure right now, freeing the ego to function more effectively.

You have also learned the key to the Buddha's strategy for true happiness: it is possible to taste an immediate gratification that causes no harm to yourself or anyone else. Genuine happiness doesn't require that you take anything away from

anyone—which means that it in no way conflicts with the genuine happiness of others.

This understanding is revolutionary. For people dependent on sensual pleasures, happiness is a zero-sum affair. There are only so many things, only so many people, to go around. When you gain something, someone else has lost it; when they've gained, you've lost. In a zero-sum world, the pursuit of your own happiness constantly has to be negotiated and compromised with that of others. But when people access the bliss of right concentration, they've found a way to satisfy their own desire for happiness in a way that can actively augment the happiness of those around them. When they're more content and at peace within, they radiate a healthy influence in all directions. This is how healthy ego functioning, from the Buddhist perspective, benefits others as well as yourself.

The classic image illustrating this point is of two acrobats, the first standing on the end of a vertical bamboo pole, the second standing on the shoulders of the first. To perform their tricks and come down safely, each has to look after his or her own sense of balance. In other words, life is a balancing act. In maintaining your balance you make it easier for others to maintain theirs. This is why, in the Buddhist equation, the wise pursuit of happiness is not a selfish thing. In fact, it underlies all the qualities traditionally associated not only with the path the Buddha taught to his disciples, but also with the Buddha himself: wisdom, compassion, and purity.

Wisdom, the Buddha says, starts with a simple question: What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? The wisdom here lies in realizing that your happiness depends on what you do, and that the pursuit of happiness is worthwhile only if it's long-term. The test of how far your wisdom has matured lies in the strategic skill with which you can keep yourself from doing things that you like to do but that would cause long-term harm, and can talk yourself into doing things that you don't like to do but that would lead to long-term well-being and happiness. In other words, mature wisdom requires a mature ego.

The ego basis for *compassion* is depicted in one of the most delightful stories in the Canon. King Pasenadi, in a tender moment with his favorite consort, Queen Mallikā, asks her, "Is there anyone you love more than yourself?" He's anticipating, of course, that she'll answer, "Yes, your majesty. You." And it's easy to see where a B-movie script would go from there. But this is the Pāli Canon, and Queen Mallikā is no ordinary queen. She answers, "No, your majesty, there isn't. And how about you? Is there anyone you love more than yourself?" The king, forced into an honest

answer, has to admit, "No, there's not." Later he reports this conversation to the Buddha, who responds in an interesting way:

> *Searching all directions*
> *with one's awareness,*
> *one finds no one dearer*
> *than oneself.*
> *In the same way, others*
> *are fiercely dear to themselves.*
> *So one should not hurt others*
> *if one loves oneself.* — *Ud 5:1*

In other words, true self-love requires an appreciation that others feel self-love, too. This principle works in two ways: First, you recognize that if your happiness depends on the misery of others it won't last, for they'll do whatever they can to destroy that happiness. Your long-term happiness thus has to take into account the long-term happiness of others. Second, in a less calculating way, you recognize what we all have in common. If you take your own self-love seriously, you have to respect the self-love of others. In this way, compassion is based not on a sense of your superiority to those who are suffering but on a sense of mutual respect—a respect solidly based in your own self-interest.

Purity grows from providing your ego-based wisdom and compassion with a reality check. The Buddha once taught his son, Rāhula, that purity is developed by examining your actions and their results to make sure that they actually cause no harm to yourself or to those around you. If you anticipate harm from an intended action, you don't do it. If you see unanticipated harm coming from something you've done, you freely admit your mistake and learn how not to repeat it. You don't cling childishly to the need to always be in the right. But if you see that you aren't causing harm, you can take joy in the fact that you're on the path to true happiness.

Because the Buddha saw how these enlightened qualities of wisdom, compassion, and purity could be developed through the pursuit of happiness, he never told his followers to practice his teachings without expecting any gain in return. He understood that such a demand would create an unhealthy dynamic in the mind. In terms of Western psychology, expecting no gain in return would give license for the super-ego to run amok. Instead, the Buddha taught that even the principle of renunciation is a trade. You exchange candy for gold, trading lesser

pleasures for greater happiness. So he encouraged people to be generous with their time and belongings because of the inner rewards they would receive in return. He taught moral virtue as a gift: when you observe the precepts without ifs, ands, or buts, you give unconditional safety to all other beings, and in return you receive a share of that safety as well.

Even when advocating that his disciples abandon their sense of self, the Buddha justified this teaching on the basis of the rewards it would bring. He once asked his monks, "If anyone were to burn the trees in this monastery, would you suffer with the sense that they were burning you?" "No," the monks replied, "because we're not the trees." "In the same way," the Buddha continued, "let go of what's not you or yours: the senses and their objects. That will be for your long-term well-being and happiness."

Notice that he didn't say to abandon the sense of self as a form of self-sacrifice. He said to abandon it for the sake of true well-being and happiness.

This point highlights one of the special features of the Buddha's instructions for healthy ego-development. In Western psychology, ego-development is impossible without assuming a clear sense of self. But in Buddhism, with its realization that there is no clear dividing line between your own true happiness and that of others, the underlying assumption of ego-development is a clear sense of cause and effect, seeing which actions lead to suffering, which ones lead to short-term happiness, which ones lead to a happiness that lasts.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha never used terms like "ego-development" or "a well-integrated self." The types of functioning we associate with a well-developed ego he would have described as a well-integrated sense of cause and effect focused on insights into the results of your actions. Buddhist practice is aimed at refining these insights to ever greater levels of sensitivity and skill. In this way he was able to teach healthy ego functioning while avoiding the twin pitfalls of ego-obsession: narcissism and self-hatred.

Because the Buddha's basic terms of analysis were actions understood under the framework of cause and effect, we have to understand his use of "self" and "not-self" under that framework. For him, "self" and "not-self" aren't metaphysical principles. They're mental actions that can be mastered as skills. This is why he was able to use both concepts freely in his teaching. When the concept of self was conducive to skillful action, he would talk in terms of self—not only on the level of generosity and virtue, but also on the level of meditation. If you think that meditation is an exercise in not-self from the very beginning, read the discourses on

mindfulness and you'll be surprised at how often they describe the meditator's internal dialogue in terms of "I," "me," and "mine."

As for the concept of not-self, the Buddha would advise using it whenever unskillful attachment to things or patterns of behavior got in the way of your happiness. In effect, he would have you drop unhealthy and unskillful ways of self-identification in favor of ways that were more skillful and refined. Only on the highest levels of practice, where even the most skillful concepts of self get in the way of the ultimate happiness, did the Buddha advocate totally abandoning them. But even then he didn't advocate abandoning the basic principle of ego functioning. You drop the best happiness that can come from a sense of self because an even greater happiness—nibbāna, totally timeless, limitless, and unconditioned—appears when you do.

So this is where our thought experiment has led. If you open your mind to the idea that the Buddha was actually advocating ego development instead of egolessness, you see that there's nothing lopsided or lacking in his understanding of healthy ego functioning. In fact, he mastered some ego skills that Western psychology has yet to explore, such as how to use right concentration to satisfy the desire for immediate pleasure; how to develop an integrated sense of causality that ultimately makes a sense of self superfluous; how to harness the ego's drive for lasting happiness so that it leads to a happiness transcending space and time.

These principles have taught many Asian Buddhists how to develop healthy egos over the centuries—so healthy that they can ultimately drop the need to create "self." All that remains is for us to put these principles to the test, to see if they work for us as well.

Ignorance

Ignorance, the Buddha said, is the ultimate cause of stress and suffering. By "ignorance" he meant not a general ignorance of the way things are — what we usually call delusion, or *moha*—but something more specific: ignorance of the four noble truths. And the Pāli word he chose for ignorance—*avijjā*—is the opposite of *vijjā,* which means not only "knowledge" but also "skill," as in the skills of a doctor or animal-trainer. So in stating that people suffer from not knowing the four noble truths, he wasn't just saying that they lack information or direct knowledge of those truths. He was also saying that they lack skill in handling them. They suffer because they don't know what they're doing.

The four truths are (1) stress—which covers everything from the slightest tension to out-and-out agony; (2) the cause of stress; (3) the cessation of stress; and (4) the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress. When the Buddha first taught these truths, he also taught that his full Awakening came from knowing them on three levels: identifying them, knowing the skill appropriate to each, and knowing finally that he had fully mastered the skills.

The Buddha identified these truths in precise, fairly technical terms. When identifying stress he started with examples like birth, aging, illness, and death; sorrow, distress, and despair. Then he summarized all varieties of stress under five categories, which he called five clinging-aggregates: clinging to physical form; to feelings of pleasure, pain, and neither pleasure nor pain; to perceptions or mental labels; to thought-constructs; and to sensory consciousness. The cause of stress he identified as three kinds of craving: craving for sensuality, craving to take on an identity in a world of experience, and craving for one's identity and world of experience to be destroyed. The cessation of stress he identified as renunciation of and release from those three kinds of craving. And the path to the cessation of stress he identified as right concentration together with its supporting factors in the noble eightfold path: right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, and right mindfulness.

These four truths are not simply facts about stress. They are categories for framing your experience so that you can diagnose and cure the problem of stress.

Instead of looking at experience in terms of self or other, for instance, or in terms of what you like and dislike, you look at it in terms of where there's stress, what's causing it, and how to put an end to the cause. Once you can divide the territory of experience in this way, you realize that each of these categories is an activity. The word "stress" may be a noun, but the experience of stress is shaped by your intentions. It's something you *do.* The same holds true with other truths, too. Seeing this, you can work on perfecting the skill appropriate for each activity. The skill with regard to stress is to comprehend it to the point where you have no more passion, aversion, or delusion toward doing it. To perfect this skill, you also have to abandon the cause of stress, to realize its cessation, and to develop the path to its cessation.

Each of these skills assists the others. For example, when states of concentration arise in the mind, you don't just watch them arise and pass away. Concentration is part of the path, so the appropriate skill is to try to develop it: to understand what will make it grow steadier, subtler, more solid. In doing this, you develop the other factors of the path as well, until the doing of your concentration is more like simply being: being a luminous awareness, being present, being nothing, being one with emptiness.

From that perspective, you begin to comprehend levels of stress you never noticed before. As you abandon the cravings causing the grosser levels, you become sensitive to subtler ones, so you can abandon them, too. In doing this, your ignorance gets pealed away, layer by layer. You see more and more clearly why you've suffered from stress: You didn't grasp the connection between the cravings you enjoyed and the stress that burdened you, and didn't detect the stress in the activities you enjoyed. Ultimately, when you've abandoned the causes for other forms of stress, you begin to see that the *being* of your concentration contains many layers of *doing* as well—more layers of stress. That's when you can abandon any craving for these activities, and full Awakening occurs.

The path to this Awakening is necessarily gradual, both because the sensitivity it requires takes time to develop, and because it involves developing skills that you abandon only when they've done their job. If you abandoned craving for concentration before developing it, you'd never get the mind into a position where it could genuinely and fully let go of the subtlest forms of doing.

But as your skills converge, the Awakening they foster is sudden. The Buddha's image is of the continental shelf off the coast of India: a gradual slope, followed by a sudden drop-off. After the drop-off, no trace of mental stress remains. That's when

you know you've mastered your skills. And that's when you really know the four noble truths.

Craving, for instance, is something you experience every day, but until you totally abandon it, you don't really know it. You can experience stress for years on end, but you don't really know stress until you've comprehended it to the point where passion, aversion, and delusion are gone. And even though all four skills, as you're developing them, bring a greater sense of awareness and ease, you don't really know why they're so important until you've tasted where their full mastery can lead.

For even full knowledge of the four noble truths is not an end in and of itself. It's a means to something much greater: Nibbāna is found at the end of stress, but it's much more than that. It's total liberation from all constraints of time or place, existence or non-existence—beyond all activity, even the activity of the cessation of stress. As the Buddha once said, the knowledge he gained in Awakening was like all the leaves in the forest; the knowledge he imparted about the four noble truths was like a handful of leaves. He restricted himself to teaching the handful because that's all he needed to lead his students to their own knowledge of the whole forest. If he were to discuss other aspects of his Awakening, it would have served no purpose and actually gotten in the way.

So even though full knowledge of the four noble truths—to use another analogy—is just the raft across the river, you need to focus full attention on the raft while you're making your way across. Not only does this knowledge get you to full Awakening, but it also helps you judge any realizations along the way. It does this in two ways. First, it provides a standard for judging those realizations: Is there any stress remaining in the mind? At all? If there is, then they're not genuine Awakening. Second, the skills you've developed have sensitized you to all the doings in simply being, which ensures that the subtlest levels of ignorance and stress won't escape your gaze. Without this sensitivity, you could easily mistake an infinitely luminous state of concentration for something more. The luminosity would blind you. But when you really know what you're doing, you'll recognize freedom from doing when you finally encounter it. And when you know that freedom, you'll know something further: that the greatest gift you can give to others is to teach them the skills to encounter it for themselves.

Food for Awakening

The Role of Appropriate Attention

The Buddha never used the word for "bare attention" in his meditation instructions. That's because he realized that attention never occurs in a bare, pure, or unconditioned form. It's always colored by views and perceptions—the labels you tend to give to events—and by intentions: your choice of what to attend to and your purpose in being attentive. If you don't understand the conditioned nature of even simple acts of attention, you might assume that a moment of nonreactive attention is a moment of Awakening. And in that way you miss one of the most crucial insights in Buddhist meditation: how even the simplest events in the mind can form a condition for clinging and suffering. If you assume a conditioned event to be unconditioned, you close the door to the unconditioned. So it's important to understand the conditioned nature of attention and the Buddha's recommendations for how to train it—as *appropriate* attention—to be a factor in the path leading beyond attention to total Awakening.

The Pāli term for attention is *manasikāra.* You may have heard that the term for mindfulness—*sati*—means attention, but that's not how the Buddha used the term. Mindfulness, in his usage, means keeping something in mind. It's a function of memory. When you practice the establishings of mindfulness *(satipaṭṭhāna),* you remain focused on observing the object you've chosen as your frame of reference: the body, feelings, mind, or mental qualities in and of themselves. This is called *anupassanā.* Mindfulness is one of three qualities you bring to anupassanā. Its function is to keep your frame of reference in mind, to keep remembering it. At the same time, you have to be alert *(sampajāna),* clearly aware of what you're doing, to make sure that you're actually doing what you're trying to remember to do; and ardent *(ātapin)* to do it skillfully. The act of establishing mindfulness in this way—by being mindful, alert, and ardent—then forms the topic or theme *(nimitta)* of right concentration.

For instance, if you focus on the breath in and of itself as your frame of reference, anupassanā means keeping continual watch over the breath. Mindfulness

means simply remembering to stick with it, keeping it in mind at all times, while alertness means knowing what the breath is doing and how well you're staying with it. Ardency is the effort to do all of this skillfully. When all these activities stay fully coordinated, they form the theme of your concentration.

To understand how appropriate attention functions in the context of this training, though, you first have to understand how attention ordinarily functions in an untrained mind.

In the teaching on dependent co-arising—the Buddha's explanation of how events interact to create the conditions for suffering—attention appears early in the sequence, in the factor for mental events called "name," where it comes even prior to the sense media and sensory contact. But it's not the first item in the list. It follows on ignorance, fabrication, and consciousness.

"Ignorance" here doesn't mean a general lack of knowledge. It means not viewing experience in terms of the four noble truths: stress, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. Any other framework for viewing experience, no matter how sophisticated, would qualify as ignorance. Typical examples given in the Canon include seeing things through the framework of self and other, or of existence and non-existence: What am I? What am I not? Do I exist? Do I not exist? Do things outside me exist? Do they not?

These ignorant ways of seeing then condition the way we intentionally fabricate or manipulate bodily, verbal, and mental states. The breath is the primary means for fabricating bodily states, and practical experience shows that—in giving rise to feelings of comfort or discomfort—it has an impact on mental states as well. When colored by ignorance, even your breathing can act as a cause of suffering. As for verbal states, directed thought and evaluation are the means for fabricating words and sentences; while mental states are fabricated by feelings—pleasure, pain, neither-pleasure-nor-pain—and perceptions—the labels we apply to things.

Sensory consciousness is colored by these fabrications. And then—based on the conditions of ignorance, fabrication, and sensory consciousness—the act of attention arises as one of a cluster of mental and physical events called name and form.

As if the preconditions for attention weren't already complex enough, the co-conditions in name and form add another level of complexity. "Form" means of the form of the body—as experienced from within as properties of earth (solidity), water (liquidity), wind (energy), and fire (heat), and as shaped by the activity of breathing. "Name" includes not only attention, but also intention, again (as a

repetition of fabrication in general); feeling and perception, again (as a repetition of mental fabrication); and contact, which here apparently means contact among all the factors already listed.

All of these conditions, acting together under the influence of ignorance, are what ordinarily color every act of attention to any of the six senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste, the tactile sense, and the sense of the mind that knows mental qualities and ideas. Even before we are aware of contact at the senses, conditions in the mind are primed to create suffering and stress from that contact.

So from this—and a great deal more could be said about these conditions—it should be obvious that the simple act of attention is anything but bare. It's ordinarily shaped by ignorant views and the intentional actions influenced by those views. As a result, it's usually inappropriate: applied to the wrong things and for the wrong reasons, thus aggravating the problem of stress and suffering, rather than alleviating it.

So how can attention be trained in the other direction? Obviously, it should be freed from the conditions of ignorance, but that doesn't mean that it should—or even can—be freed from conditions entirely. After all, that would require an act of will, and that act of will would have to be formed by a correct and pragmatic understanding of suffering and its causes. Also, that act of will and that understanding would have to be borne in mind continually so that attention could be effectively retrained.

So instead of being stripped from all conditions, attention requires this new set of conditions to make it appropriate. This is why the Buddha said that the factors of the path corresponding to understanding, will, and memory—right view, right effort, and right mindfulness—hover around every step of the path. Right view provides the ability to see things in terms of the four noble truths; right effort activates the desire and intent to act skillfully on those views; while right mindfulness provides a solid basis for keeping that view and that effort in mind.

Of these three factors of the path, right view comes first, for it's the direct antidote for the primary condition of ignorance. Right view is not simply knowledge *about* the four noble truths; it sees things *in terms of* those truths. In other words, for a person aiming at the end of suffering and stress, it points out the four salient factors to look for in any given moment. At the same time, it sees the tasks or duties appropriate to each factor: Stress is to be comprehended, its cause abandoned, its cessation realized, and the path to its cessation developed. As the Buddha noted in his first sermon, this knowledge of the appropriate tasks for each

truth comes in two stages. The first stage identifies the task. The second realizes that it has been completed. This second stage is the knowledge of Awakening. Between the first and the second lies the practice—which, because it involves mastering the skills of each task, has to be gradual. That's why it's called a path.

As with the development of any skill, the path has its inevitable ups and downs. In other words, the practice is marked by alternating periods of ignorance and knowledge, with the knowledge gradually growing stronger and more refined. During these periods of knowledge, the act of attention is informed by an understanding of suffering and its causes. It is also motivated by intentions—expressed through the way you relate to your breath, your mental activity of directed thought and evaluation, and your perceptions and feelings—that aim at bringing suffering to an end. This combination of wise understanding and compassionate intention is what turns the act of attention from a cause of suffering into a strategy for health: a healing attention. This healing attention is called appropriate because it looks at things in ways appropriate for advancing the tasks of the noble truths, focusing on whichever task needs to be advanced at any particular moment.

For instance, when attention needs to be focused on comprehending suffering, the role of appropriate attention is to view the aggregates—the components of our sense of self—in such a way as to induce dispassion for them.

> *"A virtuous monk should attend in an appropriate way to the five clinging-aggregates as inconstant, stressful, a disease, a cancer, an arrow, painful, an affliction, alien, a dissolution, an emptiness, not-self. Which five? Form as a clinging-aggregate, feeling... perception... fabrications... consciousness as a clinging-aggregate.... For it is possible that a virtuous monk, attending in an appropriate way to these five clinging-aggregates as inconstant... not-self, would realize the fruit of stream-entry (the first stage of Awakening)."* — *SN 22.122*

To attend to the aggregates in this way helps to advance the task of abandoning any craving for the aggregates that causes suffering.

When attention needs to be focused on developing the path, the role of appropriate attention is to feed the factors for Awakening and to starve the five hindrances that stand in their way. Here is where appropriate attention applies to the practice of establishing mindfulness, in that mindfulness solidly established is the first factor for Awakening. Thus one of the first roles of appropriate attention is to feed the development of mindfulness.

The image of feeding and starving here is directly related to the insight into conditionality that formed the essential message of the Buddha's Awakening. In fact, when he introduced the topic of conditionality to young novices, he illustrated it with the act of feeding: All beings, he said, subsist on food. If their existence depends on eating, then it ends when they are deprived of food. Applying this analogy to the problem of suffering leads to the conclusion that if suffering depends on conditions, it can be brought to an end by starving it of its conditions.

In its most sophisticated expression, though, the Buddha's insight into causality implies that each moment is composed of three types of factors: results of past intentions, present intentions, and the results of present intentions. Because many past intentions can have an impact on any given moment, this means that there can be many potential influences from the past—helpful or harmful—appearing in the body or mind at any given time. The role of appropriate attention is to focus on whichever influence is potentially most helpful and to look at it in such a way as to promote skillful intentions in the present.

The Food Discourse *(Āhāra Sutta,* SN 46.51*)* indicates how appropriate attention can be applied to the potentials of the present to starve the hindrances and feed the factors for Awakening. With regard to the hindrances, it notes that:

1) Sensual desire is fed by inappropriate attention to the theme of beauty and starved by appropriate attention to the theme of unattractiveness. In other words, to starve sensual desire you turn your attention from the beautiful aspects of the desired object and focus instead on its unattractive side.

2) Ill will is fed by inappropriate attention to the theme of irritation and starved by appropriate attention to the mental release through good will, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. In other words, you turn your attention from the irritating features that spark ill will and focus instead on how much more freedom the mind experiences when it can cultivate these sublime attitudes as its inner home.

3) Sloth and torpor are fed by inappropriate attention to feelings of boredom, drowsiness, and sluggishness. It's starved by appropriate attention to any present potential for energy or effort.

4) Restlessness and anxiety are fed by inappropriate attention to any lack of stillness in the mind, and starved by appropriate attention to any mental stillness that is present. In other words, both potentials can be present at any time. It's simply a matter of how to ferret out, appreciate, and encourage the moments or areas of stillness.

5) Uncertainty is fed by inappropriate attention to topics that are abstract and conjectural, and starved by appropriate attention to skillful and unskillful qualities in the mind. In other words, instead of focusing on issues that can't be resolved by observing the present, you focus on an issue that can: which mental qualities result in harm for the mind, and which ones don't.

In short, each hindrance is starved by shifting both the focus and the quality of your attention.

However, with the factors for Awakening—mindfulness, analysis of qualities, persistence, rapture, serenity, concentration (the four *jhānas),* and equanimity—the process of feeding consists primarily of changing the quality of your attention. The discourse lists each factor with its potential basis, saying that the factor is starved by inappropriate attention to that basis and fed by appropriate attention to the basis. With one exception, the discourse doesn't say what each basis is. Apparently, the purpose of this is to challenge the meditator. Once you've received instructions in mindfulness and concentration, you should try to identify in your own experience what the potential basis for each factor of Awakening is.

The one exception, however, is illuminating. The basis for the second factor for Awakening—analysis of mental qualities—is the presence of skillful and unskillful qualities in the mind. To pay appropriate attention to these qualities not only feeds the factor of analysis of mental qualities but also starves the hindrance of uncertainty, at the same time providing the framework for identifying for yourself the bases for each of the remaining factors for Awakening.

Of these factors, equanimity is the closest to what is sometimes described as bare attention or non-reactive awareness. But even equanimity is conditioned by views and intentions. For instance, the Buddha points out in MN 101 that when encountering unskillful qualities in the mind, you'll observe that some of them go away only through concerted effort; in other cases, nothing more is required than on-looking equanimity. But even this equanimity is conditioned by an understanding of skillful and unskillful, and is motivated to make the unskillful go away.

In fact, equanimity has many levels, and a crucial insight on the higher level of practice is to see that even the equanimity of refined jhānic states—in which awareness and its object seem totally "one"—is a fabrication: conditioned and willed. On gaining this insight, the mind inclines toward what is called "non-fashioning" *(attammayatā*—literally, "not-made-of-that-ness"), in which you add nothing at all to the data of sensory experience.

The move from equanimity to non-fashioning is briefly described in a famous passage:

> *"Then, Bāhiya, you should train yourself thus: In reference to the seen, there will be only the seen. In reference to the heard, only the heard. In reference to the sensed, only the sensed. In reference to the cognized, only the cognized. That is how you should train yourself. When for you there will be only the seen in reference to the seen, only the heard in reference to the heard, only the sensed in reference to the sensed, only the cognized in reference to the cognized, then, Bāhiya, there's no you in that. When there's no you in that, there's no you there. When there's no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This, just this, is the end of stress."* — *Ud 1:10*

On the surface, these instructions might seem to be describing bare attention, but a closer look shows that something more is going on. To begin with, the instructions come in two parts: advice on how to train attention, and a promise of the results that will come from training attention in that way. In other words, the training is still operating on the conditioned level of cause and effect. It's something to be done. This means it's shaped by an intention, which in turn is shaped by a view. The intention and view are informed by the "result" part of the passage: The meditator wants to attain the end of stress and suffering, and so is willing to follow the path to that end. Thus, as with every other level of appropriate attention, the attention developed here is conditioned by right view—the knowledge that your present intentions are ultimately the source of stress—and motivated by the desire to put an end to that stress. This is why you make the effort not to add anything at all to the potentials coming from the past.

The need for right view would seem to be belied by the circumstances surrounding these instructions. After all, these are the first instructions Bāhiya receives from the Buddha, and he attains Awakening immediately afterward, so they would appear to be complete in and of themselves. However, in the lead-up to this passage, Bāhiya is portrayed as unusually heedful and motivated to practice. He already knows that Awakening is attained by doing, and the instructions come in response to his request for a teaching that will show him what to do *now* for his long-term welfare and happiness—a question that MN 135 identifies as the foundation for wisdom and discernment. So his attitude contains all the seeds for right view and right intention. Because he was wise—the Buddha later praised him as the foremost of his disciples in terms of the quickness of his discernment—he was able to bring those seeds to fruition immediately.

A verse from SN 35.95—which the Buddha says expresses the meaning of the instructions to Bāhiya—throws light on how Bāhiya may have developed those seeds.

> *Not impassioned with forms*
> *— seeing a form with mindfulness firm —*
> *dispassioned in mind,*
> *one knows*
> *and doesn't remain fastened there.*
> *While one is seeing a form*
> *v2v2— and even experiencing feeling —*
> *it falls away and doesn't accumulate.*
> *Thus one fares mindfully.*
> *Thus not amassing stress,*
> *one is said to be*
> *in the presence of Unbinding.*
> *(Similarly with sounds, aromas, flavors, tactile sensations, and mental qualities or ideas.)* — SN 35:95

Notice two words in this verse: *mindfulness* and *dispassioned*. The reference to mindfulness underlines the need to continually remind oneself of the intention not to add anything to any potentials from the past. This again points to the willed nature of the attention being developed here.

MN 106 offers an alternative way of expressing this intention, at the same time offering further analysis of the stages the mind goes through when it is kept in mind. The intention is this: *'It should not be, it should not occur to me; it will not be, it will not occur to me. What is, what has come to be, that I abandon.'* As the Buddha says in that discourse, a person who pursues this intention will abandon passion for sights, sounds, etc., and arrive at the equanimity of the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception. But if discernment isn't yet sharp enough, he or she will simply move the focus of passion from sensory and mental input to the equanimity itself, and thus stay fixated on that level. Thus the importance of the second word noted above—dispassion—which highlights the fact that passion is the crucial factor normally added to the seen, heard, sensed, and cognized, and thus the factor most needing to be undercut in every way possible.

Some interpretations of the instructions to Bāhiya identify the added factor as a metaphysical view about there being something behind the data of experience, but

this sort of metaphysical view—even though it can form a basis for passion—is only one of many such bases. The belief that there is something out there that can be grasped and possessed can obviously form a condition for passion, but so can the belief that there's nothing there: When there's nothing, there's nothing to be harmed by giving in to desire, an idea that can excuse all kinds of harmful passions. So the meditator has to be careful not to add any assumptions to the data of experience that would foster passion in any way, shape, or form. And this involves more than bare attention. It requires right view about how passion works and what's necessary to thwart it.

As SN 22:36 and SN 23:2 indicate, our sense of who we are is defined by our passions. Even when we don't consciously think of "self"—as when we're totally immersed in an activity, at one with the action—there can be a passion for that oneness with a strong sense of "being here," "being the doing," or "being the knowing," which is identity in a subtle form.

But when discernment is sharp enough to see that even this equanimity is fabricated and conditioned, something that's *done* (see MN 137 and 140), any passion for it can be undercut as well. When passion is consistently offered no place to land, there's no nucleus for a "place" of any sort: no "here," no "there," no nucleus for a sense of identity to be constructed around anything anywhere at all. This explains why the state of non-fashioning is expressed in terms devoid of place: "When there's no you in that, there's no you there. When there's no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two."

With the total fading of passion, the final intention to undercut passion can thus be dropped. When it's dropped—with no need to replace it with any other—nothing more is constructed. This brings a true opening to the Deathless, which lies beyond all conditions—even the conditions of right view, mindfulness, and appropriate attention.

The extraordinary nature of this experience is indicated by the verse that concludes the discourse on Bāhiya:

> *Where water, earth, fire, & wind have no footing:*
> *There the stars do not shine,*
> *the sun is not visible,*
> *the moon does not appear,*
> *darkness is not found.*
> *And when a sage,*

a brahman through sagacity,
has known [this] for himself,
then from form & formless,
from bliss & pain,
he is freed.

When the awakened person emerges from this experience and resumes dealing with the conditions of time and space, it's with a totally new perspective. But even then, he/she still has use for appropriate attention. As Ven. Sāriputta notes in SN 22:122:

> *"An arahant should attend in an appropriate way to these five clinging-aggregates as inconstant, stressful, a disease, a cancer, an arrow, painful, an affliction, alien, a dissolution, an emptiness, not-self. Although, for an arahant, there is nothing further to do, and nothing to add to what has been done, still these things—when developed & pursued—lead both to a pleasant abiding in the here-&-now and to mindfulness & alertness."*

So it's important to understand that there's no such thing as bare attention in the practice of the Buddha's teachings. Instead of trying to create an unconditioned form of attention, the practice tries to create a set of skillful conditions to shape and direct the act of attention to make it appropriate: truly healing, truly leading to the end of suffering and stress. Once these conditions are well developed, the Buddha promises that they will serve you well—even past the moment of Awakening, all the way to your very last death.

The Buddha via the Bible

How Western Buddhists Read the Pāli Canon

Western culture learned how to read spiritual texts by reading the Bible. Not that we all read it the same way—quite the contrary. We've fought long, bloody wars over the issue. But most of the differences in our readings lie within a fairly tight constellation of ideas about authority and obligation, meaning and mystery, and the purpose of history and time. And even though those ideas grew from the peculiarities of the Bible and of Western history, we regard them as perfectly natural, and in some cases, even better than natural: modern. They're so implicit in our mindset that when people rebel against the Bible's authority, their notions of rebellion and authority often derive from the tradition they're trying to reject.

So it's only to be expected that when we encounter spiritual texts from other traditions, we approach them as we would the Bible. And because this tendency is so ingrained, we rarely realize what we've done.

For example, the way we read the Pāli Canon has largely been influenced by modern attitudes toward the Bible that date back to the German Romantics and American Transcendentalists—primarily Ralph Waldo Emerson. Even though we seldom read these thinkers outside of literature or history classes, their ideas permeate our culture through their influence on humanistic psychology, liberal spirituality, and the study of comparative religion: portals through which many of us first encounter the religions of other cultures. The question is, Do these ideas do justice to the Pāli Canon? Are we getting the most out of the Canon if we read it this way? We rarely ask these questions because our reading habits are invisible to us. We need fresh eyes to see how odd those habits are. And a good way to freshen our eyes is to look historically at the particulars of where these habits come from, and the unspoken assumptions behind them.

The Romantics and Transcendentalists formulated their ideas about reading the Bible in response to developments in linguistics, psychology, and historical scholarship in the 17th to 19th centuries. This is what makes them modern. They were addressing a culture that had grown skeptical toward organized religion and

had embraced intellectual principles capable of challenging the Bible's authority. Thus, to be taken seriously, they had to speak the language of universal historical and psychological laws. However, the actual content of those laws drew on ideas dating back through the Middle Ages to the Church Fathers—and even further, to the Bible itself: doctrines such as Paul's dictum that the invisible things of God are clearly seen through the visible things He made; Augustine's teaching on Christ the Inner Teacher, illuminating the mind; and John Cassian's instructions on how to read the Bible metaphorically. So even though the Romantic/Transcendentalist view is modern and universal in its form, its actual substance is largely ancient and specific to the West.

In the complete version of this article—available at www.dhammatalks.org—I've traced how these ideas were shaped by developments in Western history. Here, however, I want to focus on the parallels between the psychological laws the Transcendentalists formulated for reading the Bible, and the assumptions that modern Dharma teachers bring to reading the Pāli Canon. My purpose is to show that, while these assumptions seem natural and universal to us, they are culturally limited and limiting: ill-suited for getting the most out of what the Canon provides.

The Transcendentalist approach to the Bible boils down to eight principles. The first principle concerns the nature of the universe; the second, the means by which the human mind can best connect with that nature; and the remaining six, the implications of the first two concerning how the Bible should be read. In the following discussion, the quotations illustrating each principle are from Emerson.

1. The universe is an organic whole composed of vital forces. (The technical term for this view is "monistic vitalism.") This whole is essentially good because it is continuously impelled forward by the over-arching force of a benevolent creator—which Emerson called the Over-soul—operating both in external nature and in the inner recesses of the soul. People suffer because their social conditioning estranges them from the inner and outer influences of the Over-soul, depriving them of its sustaining, creative power. Thus the spiritual life is essentially a search for reconnection and oneness with the whole.

> *The simplest person, who in his integrity worships God, becomes God... the heart in thee is the heart of all; not a valve, not a wall, not an intersection is there anywhere in nature, but one blood rolls uninterruptedly in endless circulation through all men, as the water of the globe is all one sea, and, truly seen, its tide is one.*

2. Reconnection and oneness are best found by adopting a receptive, open attitude toward the influences of nature on a sensory, pre-verbal level.

> *Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.*

3. The Bible can comfort the soul estranged from nature, but it should not be granted absolute authority because the inspiration it records is only second-hand, interfering with the soul's direct contact with the One.

> *The relations of the soul to the divine spirit are so pure that it is profane to seek to interpose helps.*
>
> *The saints and demigods whom history worships we are constrained to accept with a grain of allowance. Though in our lonely hours we draw a new strength out of their memory, yet, pressed on our attention, as they are by the thoughtless and customary, they fatigue and invade. The soul gives itself, alone, original, and pure, to the Lonely, Original, and Pure, who, on that condition, gladly inhabits, leads, and speaks through it.*

4. The Bible's message is also limited in that it was composed for a less enlightened stage in human history.

> *If, therefore, a man claims to know and speak of God, and carries you backward to the phraseology of some old mouldered nation in another country, in another world, believe him not. Is the acorn better than the oak which is its fullness and completion? Is the parent better than the child into whom he has cast his ripened being? Whence, then, this worship of the past? The centuries are conspirators against the sanity and authority of the soul.*
>
> *The idealism of Jesus... is a crude statement of the fact that all nature is the rapid efflux of goodness executing and organizing itself.*

5. The Bible's authority is actually dangerous in that it stifles the soul's creative impulses, the most direct experience of the Over-soul's vital force within.

> *The one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul... The soul active sees absolute truth and utters truth, or creates.*

When we have broken our god of tradition, and ceased from our god of rhetoric, then may God fire the heart with his presence.

What is that abridgement and selection we observe in all spiritual activity, but itself the creative impulse?

Yet see what strong intellects dare not yet hear God himself, unless he speak the phraseology of I know not what David, or Jeremiah, or Paul... When we have new perception, we shall gladly disburden the memory of its hoarded treasures as old rubbish.

6. Another limitation on the language of the Bible is that it is expressive rather than descriptive. In other words, unlike the meta-cultural laws of psychology, it does not describe universal human truths. Instead, it expresses through metaphor how the force of the Over-soul felt to particular people at particular times. Thus, to be relevant to the present, it is best read, not as a scholar would—trying to find what actually happened in the past, or what it meant to its authors—but as a poet might read the poetry of others, judging for him or herself what metaphors will be most useful for inspiring his or her own creative genius.

[One] must attain and maintain that lofty sight where poetry and annals are alike.

The Garden of Eden, the sun standing still in Gibeon, is poetry thenceforward to all nations. Who cares what the fact was, when we have made a constellation of it to hang in heaven as an immortal sign.

In the book I read, the good thought returns to me, as every truth will, the image of the whole soul. To the bad thought which I find in it, the same soul becomes a discerning, separating sword, and lops it away.

7. By reading the Bible creatively in this way, one is assisting in the progress of God's will in the world.

Because the soul is progressive, it never quite repeats itself, but in every act attempts the production of a new and fairer whole.... We need not fear that we can lose any thing by the progress of the soul. The soul may be trusted to the end.

8. The Transcendentalists all agreed with the Romantics that the soul's most trustworthy sense of morality came from a sense of interconnectedness within oneself and with others. They differed among themselves, though, in how this interconnectedness was best embodied. Emerson advocated focusing on the

present-moment particulars of one's ordinary activities. In his words, *"The invariable mark of wisdom is to see the miraculous in the common."*

Other Transcendentalists, however—such as Orestes Brownson, Margaret Fuller, and Theodore Parker—insisted that true inner oneness was impossible in a society rent by injustice and inequality. Thus, they advocated reading the Bible prophetically, as God's call to engage in progressive social work. Emerson, in turn, retorted that unless change came first from within, even the ideal social structure would be corrupted by the lack of inner contact with God. Thus the two camps reached a standoff.

Still, even the socially engaged Transcendentalists read the Bible creatively and metaphorically, seeking not its original message but a new message appropriate for modern needs. Brownson, for instance, followed the French socialist, Pierre Leroux, in interpreting the Last Supper as Jesus' call to all Christians to drop artificial social divisions caused by wage labor, capitalist exploitation, external signs of status, etc., and to construct a new social system that would allow all humanity to celebrate their mutual interconnectedness.

Historians have traced how these eight principles—including the split in the eighth—have shaped American liberal spirituality in Christian, Reform Jewish, and New Age circles up to the present. Emerson's way of phrasing these points may sound quaint, but the underlying principles are still familiar even to those who've never read him. Thus it's only natural that Americans raised in these traditions, on coming to Buddhism, would bring these principles along. Emerson himself, in his later years, led the way in this direction through his selective appreciation of Hindu and Buddhist teachings—which he tended to conflate—and modern Western Buddhist teachers still apply all eight principles to the Pāli Canon even today.

In the following discussion I've illustrated these principles, as applied to the Canon, with quotations from both lay and monastic teachers. The teachers are left unnamed because I want to focus, not on individuals, but on what historians call a cultural syndrome, in which both the teachers and their audiences share responsibility for influencing one another: the teachers, by how they try to explain and persuade; the audiences, by what they're inclined to accept or reject. Some of the teachers quoted here embrace Romantic/Transcendentalist ideas more fully than others, but the tendency is present, at least to some extent, in them all.

1. The first principle is that the Canon, like all spiritual texts, takes interconnectedness—the experience of unity within and without—as its basic

theme. On attaining this unity, one drops the identity of one's small self and embraces a new identity with the universe at large.

> *The goal [of Dhamma practice] is integration, through love and acceptance, openness and receptivity, leading to a unified wholeness of experience without the artificial boundaries of separate selfhood.*
>
> *It is the goal of spiritual life to open to the reality that exists beyond our small sense of self. Through the gate of oneness we awaken to the ocean within us, we come to know in yet another way that the seas we swim in are not separate from all that lives. When our identity expands to include everything, we find a peace with the dance of the world. It is all ours, and our heart is full and empty, large enough to embrace it all.*

2. The Canon's prime contribution to human spirituality is its insight into how interconnectedness can be cultivated through systematic training in mindfulness, defined as an open, receptive, pre-verbal awareness. This provides a practical technique for fostering the sort of transparent religious consciousness that Emerson extolled. One teacher, in fact, describes mindfulness as "sacred awareness."

> *Mindfulness is presence of mind, attentiveness or awareness. Yet the kind of awareness involved in mindfulness differs profoundly from the kind of awareness at work in our usual mode of consciousness... The mind is deliberately kept at the level of bare attention, a detached observation of what is happening within us and around us in the present moment. In the practice of right mindfulness the mind is trained to remain in the present, open, quiet, and alert, contemplating the present event. All judgements and interpretations have to be suspended, or if they occur, just registered and dropped. The task is simply to note whatever comes up just as it is occurring, riding the changes of events in the way a surfer rides the waves on the sea.*

3. However, the Canon does not speak with final authority on how this receptive state should be used or how life should be led. This is because the nature of spiritual inspiration is purely individual and mysterious. Where the Transcendentalists spoke of following the soul, Western Buddhists speak of following the heart. As one teacher, who has stated that following one's heart might mean taking the path of psychotropic drugs, has said:

> *No one can define for us exactly what our path should be.*

[A]ll the teachings of books, maps, and beliefs have little to do with wisdom or compassion. At best they are a signpost, a finger pointing at the moon, or the leftover dialogue from a time when someone received some true spiritual nourishment.... We must discover within ourselves our own way to become conscious, to live a life of the spirit.

Religion and philosophy have their value, but in the end all we can do is open to mystery.

4. The Canon's authority is also limited by the cultural circumstances in which it was composed. Several teachers, for example, have recommended dropping the Canon's teachings on kamma because they were simply borrowed from the cultural presuppositions of the Buddha's time:

Even the most creative, world-transforming individuals cannot stand on their own shoulders. They too remain dependent upon their cultural context, whether intellectual or spiritual—which is precisely what Buddhism's emphasis on impermanence and causal interdependence implies. The Buddha also expressed his new, liberating insight in the only way he could, using the religious categories that his culture could understand. Inevitably, then, his way of expressing the dharma was a blend of the truly new... and the conventional religious thought of his time. Although the new transcends the conventional... the new cannot immediately and completely escape the conventional wisdom it surpasses.

5. Another reason to restrict the Canon's authority is that its teachings can harm the sensitive psyche. Where Emerson warned against allowing the Bible to stifle individual creativity, Western Buddhists warn that the Canon's talk of eliminating greed, aversion, and delusion ignores, in an unhealthy way, the realities of the human dimension.

If you go into ancient Indian philosophy, there is a great emphasis on perfection as the absolute, as the ideal. [But] is that archetype, is that ideal, what we actually experience?

The images we have been taught about perfection can be destructive to us. Instead of clinging to an inflated, superhuman view of perfection, we learn to allow ourselves the space of kindness.

6. Because the language of the Canon is archetypal, it should be read, not as descriptive, but as expressive and poetic. And that expression is best absorbed

intuitively.

> *It's never a matter of trying to figure it all out, rather we pick up these phrases and chew them over, taste them, digest them and let them energize us by virtue of their own nature.*
>
> *Even these ostensibly literal maps may be better read as if they were a kind of poem, rich in possible meanings.*

7. To read the Canon as poetry may yield new meanings unintended by the compilers, but that simply advances a process at work throughout Buddhist history. Some thinkers have explained this process as a form of vitalism, with Buddhism or the Dharma identified as the vital force. Sometimes the vitalism is explicit—as when one thinker defined Buddhism as "an inexpressible living force." At other times, it is no less present for being implied:

> *The great strength of Buddhism throughout its history is that it has succeeded many times in reinventing itself according to the needs of its new host culture. What is happening today in the West is no different.*
>
> *In each historical period, the Dharma finds new means to unfold its potential in ways precisely linked to that era's distinctive conditions. Our own era provides the appropriate stage for the transcendent truth of the Dharma to bend back upon the world and engage human suffering at multiple levels, not in mere contemplation but in effective, relief-granting action.*

8. As this last quotation shows, some thinkers recommend reading the Canon not only poetically but also prophetically as a source of moral imperatives for social action in our times. Because the Canon says little on the topic of social action, this requires a creative approach to the text.

> *We can root out thematically relevant Buddhist themes, texts, and archetypes and clarify them as core teachings for Buddhist based social change work.*

Of the various themes found in the Pāli Canon, dependent co-arising—interpreted as interconnectedness—is most commonly cited as a source for social obligation, paralleling the way the Transcendentalists saw interconnectedness as the source of all moral feeling.

Numerous thinkers have hailed this prophetic reading of the Canon as a new turning of the Dhamma wheel, in which the Dhamma grows by absorbing advances in modern Western culture. Many are the lessons, they say, that the Dhamma must

learn from the West, among them: democracy, equality, Gandhian nonviolence, humanistic psychology, ecofeminism, sustainable economics, systems theory, deep ecology, new paradigm science, and the Christian and Jewish examples of religious social action. We are assured that these developments are positive because the deepest forces of reality—within and without—can be trusted to the end.

> *We must be open to a variety of responses toward social change that come from no particular "authority" but are grounded in the radical creativity that comes when concepts fall away.*
>
> *There is an underlying unity to all things, and a wise heart knows this as it knows the in-and-out of the breath. They are all part of a sacred whole in which we exist, and in the deepest way they are completely trustworthy. We need not fear the energies of this world or any other.*

Often the trustworthiness of the mind is justified with a teaching drawn from the Mahāyāna: the principle of Buddha-nature present in all. This principle has no basis in the Pāli Canon, and so its adoption in Western Theravāda is frequently attributed to the popularity of Mahāyāna in Western Buddhism at large. Only rarely is the question asked, Why do Westerners find the Mahāyāna attractive? Is it because the Mahāyāna teaches doctrines we're already predisposed to accept? Probably so—especially when you consider that although the principle of Buddha-nature is interpreted in many ways within the Mahāyāna itself, here in the West it's primarily understood in the form closest to the Transcendentalist idea of innate goodness.

> *Compassion is our deepest nature. It arises from our interconnection with all things.*

These eight principles for interpreting the Pāli Canon are often presented as meta-cultural truths but, as we have seen, they developed in the specific context of the Western engagement with the Bible. In other words, they're historically conditioned. When we compare them to the Canon itself, we find that they directly contradict the Dhamma. At the same time, when teachers try to justify these principles on the basis of the Canon, we find that they're invariably misreading the text.

1. The idea that spiritual life is a search for unity depends on the assumption that the universe is an organic whole, and that the whole is essentially good. The Canon, however, consistently portrays the goal of the spiritual life as transcendence: The world—which is synonymous with the All (SN 35:23)—is a

dangerous river over which one has to cross to safety on the other side. The state of oneness or non-duality is conditioned (AN 10:29): still immersed in the river, unsafe. In reaching nibbāna, one is not returning to the source of things (MN 1), but reaching something never reached before (AN 5:77): a dimension beyond all space and time. And in attaining this dimension, one is not establishing a new identity, for all identities—even infinite ones (DN 15)—ultimately prevent that attainment, and so have to be dropped.

2. The Canon never defines mindfulness as an open, receptive, pre-verbal state. In fact, its standard definition for the faculty of mindfulness is the ability to keep things in mind. Thus, in the practice of right mindfulness, one is keeping one of four frames of reference in mind: body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities, remembering to stay with these things in and of themselves. And some of the more vivid analogies for the practice of mindfulness suggest anything but an open, receptive, non-judging state.

> "Just as when a person whose turban or head was on fire would put forth extra desire, effort, diligence, endeavor, earnestness, mindfulness, and alertness to put out the fire on his turban or head; in the same way, the monk should put forth extra desire... mindfulness, and alertness for the abandoning of those evil, unskillful mental qualities." — AN 10:51

> "Suppose, monks, that a large crowd of people comes thronging together, saying, 'The beauty queen! The beauty queen!' And suppose that the beauty queen is highly accomplished at singing and dancing, so that an even greater crowd comes thronging, saying, 'The beauty queen is singing! The beauty queen is dancing!' Then a man comes along, desiring life and shrinking from death, desiring pleasure and abhorring pain. They say to him, 'Now look here, mister. You must take this bowl filled to the brim with oil and carry it on your head in between the great crowd and the beauty queen. A man with a raised sword will follow right behind you, and wherever you spill even a drop of oil, right there will he cut off your head.' Now what do you think, monks? Will that man, not paying attention to the bowl of oil, let himself get distracted outside?"
>
> "No, lord."
>
> "I have given you this parable to convey a meaning. The meaning is this: The bowl filled to the brim with oil stands for mindfulness immersed in the body." — SN 47:20

There's a tendency, even among serious scholars, to mine in the Canon for passages presenting a more spacious, receptive picture of mindfulness. But this tendency, in addition to ignoring the basic definition of mindfulness, denies the essential unity among the factors of the path—one such scholar, to make his case, had to define right mindfulness and right effort as two mutually exclusive forms of practice. This suggests that the tendency to define mindfulness as an open, receptive, non-judging state comes from a source other than the Canon. It's possible to find Asian roots for this tendency, in the schools of meditation that define mindfulness as bare awareness or mere noting. But the way the West has morphed these concepts in the direction of acceptance and affirmation has less to do with Asian tradition, and more to do with our cultural tendency to exalt a pre-verbal receptivity as the source for spiritual inspiration.

3. The Canon states clearly that there is only one path to nibbāna (DN 16). Trying to find awakening in ways apart from the noble eightfold path is like trying to squeeze oil from gravel, or milking a cow by twisting its horn (MN 126). The Buddha's knowledge of the way to awakening is like that of an expert gatekeeper who knows, after encircling the walls of a city, that there's only one way into the city: the gate he guards (AN 10:95).

One of the tests for determining whether one has reached the first level of awakening is if, on reflection, one realizes that no one outside the Buddha's teaching teaches the true, accurate, way to the goal (SN 48:53). Although individual people may have to focus on issues particular to their temperament, the basic outline of the path is the same for all.

4. Obviously the Buddha's language and metaphors were culturally conditioned, but it's hard to identify any of his essential teachings as limited in that way. He claimed a knowledge of the past that far outstrips ours (DN 29; DN 1), and he'd often claim direct knowledge when stating that he was speaking for the past, present, and future when describing, for instance, how physical, verbal, and mental actions are to be purified (MN 61) and the highest emptiness that can be attained (MN 121). This is why the Dhamma is said to be timeless, and why the first level of awakening verifies that this is so.

At the same time, when people speak of essential Buddhist teachings that are limited by the cultural conventions of the Buddha's time, they're usually misinformed as to what those conventions were. For instance, with the doctrine of kamma: Even though the Buddha used the word *kamma* like his contemporaries, his

conception of what kamma was and how it worked differed radically from theirs (AN 3:62; MN 101).

5. Similarly, people who describe the dangers of following a particular Buddhist teaching usually deal in caricatures. For instance, one teacher who warns of the dangers of the linear path to attainment describes that path as follows:

> *The linear path holds up an idealistic vision of the perfected human, a Buddha or saint or sage. In this vision, all greed, anger, fear, judgment, delusion, personal ego, and desire are uprooted forever, completely eliminated. What is left is an absolutely unwavering, radiant, pure human being who never experiences any difficulties, an illuminated sage who follows only the Tao or God's will and never his or her own.*

Although this may be a possible vision of the linear path, it differs in many crucial details from the vision offered in the Canon. The Buddha certainly passed judgment on people and taught clear criteria for what are and are not valid grounds for judgment (AN 7:64; AN 4:192; MN 110). He experienced difficulties in setting up the monastic Saṅgha. But that does not invalidate the fact that his greed, aversion, and delusion were gone.

As MN 22 states, there are dangers in grasping the Dhamma wrongly. In the context of that discourse, the Buddha is referring to people who grasp the Dhamma for the sake of argument; at present we might point out the dangers in grasping the teachings neurotically. But there are even greater dangers in misrepresenting the teachings, or in dragging them down to our own level, rather than using them to lift ourselves up. As the Buddha said, people who claim that he said what he didn't say, or didn't say what he did, are slandering him (AN 2:23). In doing so, they blind themselves to the Dhamma.

6. Although the Canon contains a few passages where the Buddha and his awakened disciples speak poetically and expressively of their attainment, those passages are rare. Far more common are the descriptive passages, in which the Buddha tells explicitly how to get to awakening. As he said in a famous simile, the knowledge gained in his awakening was like the leaves in the forest; the knowledge he taught, like the leaves in his hand (SN 56:31). And he chose those particular leaves because they served a purpose, helping others develop the skills needed for release. This point is supported by the imagery and analogies employed throughout the Canon. Although some of the more poetic passages draw images from nature, they are greatly outnumbered by analogies drawn from physical skills—cooking,

farming, archery, carpentry—making the point that Dhamma practice is a skill that can be understood and mastered in ways similar to more ordinary skills.

The Buddha's descriptions of the path are phrased primarily in psychological terms—just like the meta-cultural principles of the Transcendentalists and Romantics. Obviously, the Canon's maps of mental processes differ from those proposed by Western psychology, but that doesn't invalidate them. They were drawn for a particular purpose—to help attain the end of suffering—and they have to be tested fairly, not against our preferences, but against their ability to perform their intended function.

The poetic approach to the Canon overlooks the care with which the Buddha tried to make his instructions specific and clear. As he once commented (AN 2:46), there are two types of assemblies: those trained in bombast, and those trained in cross-questioning. In the former, the students are taught "literary works—the works of poets, artful in sound, artful in expression, the work of outsiders" and are not encouraged to pin down what the meaning of those beautiful words might be. In the latter—and here the Buddha was describing his own method of teaching—the students are taught the Dhamma and "when they have mastered that Dhamma, they cross-question one another about it and dissect it: 'How is this? What is the meaning of this?' They make open what isn't open, make plain what isn't plain, dispel doubt on its various doubtful points." To treat such teachings as poetry distorts how and why they were taught.

7. A vitalist interpretation of Buddhist history does a disservice both to the Buddha's teachings and to historical truth. To begin with, the Canon does not portray history as purposeful. Time moves in cycles, but those movements mean nothing. This is why the Buddha used the term *saṁsāra*—"wandering-on"—to describe the course of beings through time. Only if we decide to end this wandering will our lives develop purpose and direction. Otherwise, our course is aimless:

> "Just as a stick thrown up in the air lands sometimes on its base, sometimes on its side, sometimes on its tip; in the same way, beings hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving, transmigrating and wandering on, sometimes go from this world to another world, sometimes come from another world to this." — SN 15:9

Second, Buddhism does not have a will. It does not adapt; people adapt Buddhism to their various ends. And because the adapters are not always wise, there's no guarantee that the adaptations are skillful. Just because other people have

made changes in the Dhamma doesn't automatically justify the changes we want to make. Think, for instance, of how some Mahāyāna traditions dropped the Vinaya's procedures for dealing with teacher-student sexual abuse: Was this the Dhamma wisely adapting itself to their needs?

The Buddha foresaw that people would introduce what he called "synthetic Dhamma"—and when that happened, he said, the true Dhamma would disappear (SN 16:13). He compared the process to what happens when a wooden drum develops a crack, into which a peg is inserted, and then another crack, into which another peg is inserted, and so on until nothing is left of the original drum-body. All that remains is a mass of pegs, which cannot come near to producing the sound of the original drum (SN 20:7).

Some scholars have found the Canon's warnings about the decay of the Dhamma ironic.

> *This strongly held view [that Buddhism should not change] seems a bit odd in a religion that also teaches that resistance to all-pervasive change is a root cause of misery.*

The Buddha, however, didn't embrace change, didn't encourage change for the sake of change, and certainly didn't define resistance to change as the cause of suffering. Suffering is caused by *identifying* with change or with things that change. Many are the discourses describing the perils of "going along with the flow" in terms of a river that can carry one to whirlpools, monsters, and demons (Iti 109). And as we noted above, a pervasive theme in the Canon is that true happiness is found only when one crosses over the river to the other side.

8. The Buddha was not a prophet, and he did not pretend to speak for God. Thus he was careful never to present his teachings as moral obligations. His *shoulds* were all conditional. As the first line of the Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta (Khp 9) states,

> This is to be done by one skilled in aims
> who wants to break through to the state of peace:

In other words, *if* you want to break through to a state of peace, *then* this is what you have to do. And although generosity is one of the things one must do to attain that goal, when the Buddha was asked where a gift should be given (SN 3:24), he responded, "Wherever the mind feels confidence." This means that if we regard social action as a gift, there is no need to seek the Buddha's sanction for feeling inspired to give in that way; we can just go ahead and do it—as long as our actions

conform with the precepts. But it also means that we cannot use his words to impose a sense of obligation on others that they should give in the same way.

This is especially true in a teaching like the Buddha's, which is strongly pragmatic, with each teaching focused on a particular end. To take those teachings out of context, applying them to other ends, distorts them. The teaching on dependent co-arising, which is often interpreted as the Canon's version of interconnectedness, is a case in point. The factors in dependent co-arising are primarily internal, dealing with the psychology of suffering, and are aimed at showing how knowledge of the four noble truths can be applied to bring suffering to an end. There is nothing to celebrate in the way the ordinary interaction of these factors leads to suffering. To turn this teaching into a celebration of the interconnectedness of the universe, or as a guide to the moral imperative of social action, is to thwart its purpose and to open it to ridicule from people disinclined to accept its moral authority over their lives.

At the same time, the Canon questions the underlying assumption—which we've inherited not only from the Transcendentalists and Romantics, but also from their Enlightenment forebears—that human culture is evolving ever upwards. The early discourses present the opposite picture, that human life is getting worse as a sphere for Dhamma practice, and it's easy to point out features of modern life that confirm this picture. To begin with, Dhamma practice is a skill, requiring the attitudes and mental abilities developed by physical skills, and yet we are a society whose physical skills are fast eroding away. Thus the mental virtues nurtured by physical skills have atrophied. At the same time, the social hierarchy required by skills—in which students apprentice themselves to a master—has mostly disappeared, so we've unlearned the attitudes needed to live in hierarchy in a healthy and productive way. We like to think that we're shaping the Dhamma with our highest cultural ideals, but some of our lower ways are actually dominating the shape of Western Dhamma: The sense of neurotic entitlement produced by the culture of consumerism is a case in point, as are the hype of the mass media and the demands of the mass-market for a Dhamma that sells.

As for trusting the impulses of the mind: Try a thought experiment and take the above quote—that we must be open to the radical creativity that comes when concepts fall away—and imagine how it would sound in different contexts. Coming from a socially concerned Buddhist activist, it might not seem disconcerting. But coming from a rebel leader teaching child-soldiers in a civil-war torn country, or a

greedy financier contemplating new financial instruments, it would be a cause for alarm.

The Buddha probably would have agreed with the Romantics and Transcendentalists that the human mind is essentially active in making sense of its surroundings. But he would have differed with their estimation that this activity is, at its root, divinely inspired. In his analysis of dependent co-arising, mental fabrication comes from ignorance (SN 12:2); the way to end suffering is to end that fabrication; and this requires an attitude, not of trust, but of heedful vigilance (DN 16). Thus heedfulness must extend both to one's attitude toward one's intuitions and to the ways with which one reads the Canon.

This point touches on what is probably the most central issue in why the Transcendentalist approach to reading the Bible is inappropriate for reading the Pāli Canon: the issue of authority. In the Bible, God's authority is absolute because He is the creator of all. We, having been created for His inscrutable ends, must trust His authority absolutely. Although the Transcendentalists denied that the Bible carried God's absolute authority, they did not deny the concept of absolute authority in and of itself; they simply moved it from the Bible and, bypassing other alternatives, placed it with the spontaneous intuitions of the heart. Following their lead, we as a culture tend to see the issue of authority as a simple either/or: either absolutely in the Bible or absolutely in our intuitions. As a result, when we read in the Kalama Sutta (AN 3:66), "Don't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture... or by the thought, 'This contemplative is our teacher," we skip over the words in the ellipsis and assume that there is only one other alternative, as stated in a message rubber-stamped on the back of an envelope I once received: *"Follow your own sense of right and wrong—The Buddha."*

However, the words in the ellipsis are equally important: "Don't go by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, or by probability." In other words, you can't go simply by what seems reasonable or agreeable to you. You can't go simply by your intuitions. Instead, the Buddha recommends that you test a particular teaching from a variety of angles: Is it skillful? Is it blameless? Is it praised or criticized by the wise? When put into practice does it lead to harm and suffering, or to wellbeing and happiness?

This requires approaching the practice as a skill to be mastered, one that has already been mastered by the wise. Although a part of mastery is learning to gauge the results of your actions, that's not the whole story. You must learn how to tap into the wisdom and experience of experts, and learn to gauge the results of your

actions—at the very least—against standards they have set. This is why we read and study the Canon: to gain a clear understanding of what the wise have discovered, to open our minds to the questions they found fruitful, so that we can apply the wisdom of their expertise as we try to develop our own.

It's in this context that we can understand the nature of the Buddha's authority as presented in the Pāli discourses. He speaks, not with the authority of a creator, but with the authority of an expert. Only in the Vinaya does he assume the added authority of a lawgiver. In the discourses, he calls himself a doctor; a trainer; an admirable, experienced friend who has mastered a specific skill: putting an end to suffering. He provides explicit recommendations on how to act, speak, and think to bring about that result; instructions on how to develop qualities of mind that allow you to assess your actions accurately; and questions to ask yourself in measuring your progress along the way.

It's up to us whether we want to accept or reject his expertise, but if we accept it he asks for our respect. This means, in the context of an apprentice culture—the culture set up in the Vinaya (Cv.VIII.11-12)—that you take at face value his instructions on how to end suffering and give them a serious try. Where the instructions are ambiguous, you use your ingenuity to fill in the blanks, but then you test the results against the standards the Buddha has set, making every effort to be heedful in reading accurately and fairly what you have done. This sort of test requires a serious commitment—for a sense of how serious, it's instructive to read the biographies of the Thai forest masters. And because the commitment is so serious, the Buddha advises exercising careful judgment in choosing the person to whom you apprentice yourself (AN 4:192) and tells you what to look for before growing close to a teacher (MN 95). You can't trust every teacher to be a genuinely admirable friend.

This is all very straightforward, but it requires stepping outside the limitations of our culturally conditioned ways. And again, it's up to us whether we want to read the Pāli Canon on its own terms. If we don't, we're free to continue reading it poetically and prophetically, taking the Buddha's instructions as grist for our own creative intuitions. But if that's our approach, we'll never be in a position to judge adequately whether his instructions for putting an end to suffering actually work.

Freedom from Buddha Nature

"What is the mind? The mind isn't 'is' anything." — Ajaan Chah

"The mind is neither good nor evil, but it's what knows good and knows evil. It's what does good and does evil. And it's what lets go of good and lets go of evil." — Ajaan Lee

A brahman once asked the Buddha, "Will all the world reach release [Awakening], or half the world, or a third?" But the Buddha didn't answer. Ven. Ānanda, concerned that the wanderer might misconstrue the Buddha's silence, took the man aside and gave him an analogy: Imagine a fortress with a single gate. A wise gatekeeper would walk around the fortress and not see an opening in the wall big enough for even a cat to slip through. Because he's wise, he would realize that his knowledge didn't tell him how many people would come into the fortress, but it did tell him that whoever came into the fortress would have to come in through the gate. In the same way, the Buddha didn't focus on how many people would reach Awakening but he did know that anyone who reached Awakening would have to follow the path he had found: abandoning the five hindrances, establishing the four frames of reference, and developing the seven factors for Awakening.

What's striking about the Buddha's knowledge is the implied "if": *If* people want to gain Awakening they will have to follow this path, but the choice as to whether they want Awakening is theirs. The Buddha's knowledge of the future didn't mean that the future was preordained, for people are free to choose. They can take up a particular course of action and stick with it, or not, as they see fit.

The Buddha thus based all his teaching on freedom of choice. As he said, if everything were predetermined by the past, there would be no point in teaching a path to Awakening. The number of people who would reach Awakening would already have been set a long time ago, and they would have no need for a path or a teacher. Those preordained to awaken would get there inevitably as a result of a long-past action or an essential nature already built into the mind. Those preordained not to awaken wouldn't stand a chance.

But these things are not preordained. No one is doomed never to awaken, but—until you've had your first sight of the deathless at stream-entry—neither is Awakening assured. It's contingent on intentional actions chosen in each present moment. And even after stream-entry, you're constantly faced with choices that will speed up final Awakening or slow it down. Nibbāna, of course, is independent and unconditioned; but the act of awakening to nibbāna depends on a path of practice that has to be willed. It happens only if you choose to give rise to its causes. This, as the Buddha noted, involves determining to do four things: not to neglect discernment, to preserve truth, to develop relinquishment, and to train for peace.

Assumptions about the Mind

To stick with these four determinations, the mind has to make some assumptions about itself: its power to do the necessary work and to receive the anticipated benefits. But one of the central features of the Buddha's strategy as a teacher was that even though his primary focus was on the mind, he nowhere defined what the mind is. As he said, if you define yourself, you limit yourself. So instead he focused his assumptions on what the mind can *do.*

To begin with, the mind can change quickly. Normally a master of the apt simile, even the Buddha had to admit that he could find no adequate analogy for how quickly the mind can change. We might say that it can change in the twinkling of an eye, but it's actually faster than that.

And it's capable of all sorts of things. Neither inherently good nor inherently bad, it can do a huge variety of good and bad actions. As the Buddha said, the mind is more variegated than the animal kingdom. Think of the many species of fish in the sea, birds in the sky, animals on the land and under the ground, whether extant or extinct: All of these species are products of minds, and the mind can take on a wider variety of forms than even that.

This variety comes from the many different choices the mind makes under the influence of ignorance and defilement. But the mind doesn't always have to be defiled. Past kamma is not entirely deterministic. Even though past kamma shapes the range of options open to the mind in the present, it doesn't have to determine present kamma—the intentions by which the mind chooses to fabricate actual experiences from among those options. Thus present kamma can choose to continue creating the conditions for more ignorance, or not, because present choices are what keep ignorance alive. Although no one—not even a Buddha—can trace back to when the defilement of ignorance first began, the continued existence

of ignorance depends on conditions continually provided by unskillful kamma. If these conditions are removed, ignorance will disband.

This is why the Buddha said that the mind is luminous, stained with defilements that come and go. Taken out of context, this statement might be construed as implying that the mind is inherently awakened. But in context the Buddha is simply saying that the mind, once stained, is not permanently stained. When the conditions for the stains are gone, the mind becomes luminous again. But this luminosity is not an awakened nature. As the Buddha states, this luminous mind can be developed. In the scheme of the four noble truths, if something is to be developed it's not the goal; it's part of the path to the goal. After this luminosity has been developed in the advanced stages of concentration, it's abandoned once it has completed its work in helping to pierce through ignorance.

The fact that the mind's own choices can pierce its own ignorance underlies the Buddha's most important assumption about the mind: It can be trained to awaken, to see the causes of ignorance and to bring them to an end. The primary step in this training is the first determination: not to neglect discernment. This phrase may sound strange—to what extent do we consciously neglect discernment?—but it points to an important truth. Discernment is insight into how the mind fabricates its experiences. This process of fabrication is going on all the time right before our eyes—even nearer than our eyes—and yet part of the mind chooses to ignore it. We tend to be more interested in the experiences that result from the fabrication: the physical, mental, and emotional states we want to savor and enjoy. It's like watching a play. We enjoy entering into the make-believe world on the stage, and prefer to ignore the noises made by the back-stage crew that would call the reality of that world into question.

This ignorance is willed, which is why we need an act of the will to see through it, to discern the back-stage machinations of the mind. Discernment thus has two sides: understanding and motivation. You have to understand the mind's fabrications as fabrications, looking less for the *what*—i.e., what they are—than for the *how*—how they happen as part of a causal process. And you have to be motivated to develop this discernment, to see why you want it to influence the mind. Otherwise it won't have the conditions to grow.

The understanding comes down to the basic insight of the Buddha's Awakening, seeing things as actions and events in a pattern of cause and effect. It also involves seeing how some actions are unskillful, leading to stress and suffering, while others are skillful, bringing stress to an end; and that we have the freedom to choose

skillful actions or not. This understanding—which forms the basic framework of the four noble truths—is called appropriate attention.

The motivation to develop appropriate attention grows from combining good will with this understanding. You set your sights on a happiness totally harmless. You see that if you make unskillful choices, you're going to cause suffering; if you make skillful ones, you won't. This motivation thus combines good will with heedfulness, the quality that underlies every step on the path. In fact, heedfulness lies at the root of all skillful qualities in the mind. Thus, in encouraging people to awaken, the Buddha never assumed that their Awakening would come from the innate goodness of their nature. He simply assumed something very blatant and ordinary: that people like pleasure and hate pain, and that they care about whether they can gain that pleasure and avoid that pain. It was a mark of his genius that he could see the potential for Awakening in this very common desire.

Building on Discernment

When you stick with the understanding and motivation provided by this first determination, it sets in motion the other three. For instance, the determination to preserve the truth grows from seeing the mind's capacity to lie to itself about whether its actions are causing suffering. You want to be honest and vigilant in looking for and admitting suffering, even when you're attached to the actions that cause it. This truthfulness relates to the path in two stages: first, when looking for unskillful actions that keep you off the path; and then, as the path nears fruition, looking for the subtle levels of stress caused even by skillful elements of the path—such as right concentration—once they have done their work and need to be let go for the sake of full liberation.

The determination to develop relinquishment can then build on this truthful assessment of what needs to be done. Relinquishment requires discernment as well, for not only do you need to see what's skillful and what's not; you also need to keep reminding yourself that you have the freedom to choose, and to be adept at talking yourself into doing skillful things you're afraid of, and abandoning unskillful actions you like.

The determination to train for peace helps maintain your sense of direction in this process, for it reminds you that the only true happiness is peace of mind, and that you want to look for ever-increasing levels of peace as they become possible through the practice. This determination emulates the trait that the Buddha said was essential to his Awakening: the unwillingness to rest content with lesser levels

of stillness when higher levels could be attained. In this way, the stages of concentration, instead of becoming obstacles or dangers on the path, serve as stepping-stones to greater sensitivity and, through that sensitivity, to the ultimate peace where all passion, aversion, and delusion grow still.

This peace thus grows from the simple choice to keep looking at the mind's fabrications as processes, as actions and results. But to fully achieve this peace, your discernment has to be directed not only at the mind's fabrication of the objects of its awareness, but also at its fabrications about itself and about the path it's creating. Your sense of who you are is a fabrication, regardless of whether you see the mind as separate or interconnected, finite or infinite, good or bad. The path is also a fabrication: very subtle and sometimes seemingly effortless, but fabricated nonetheless. If these layers of inner fabrication aren't seen for what they are—if you regard them as innate or inevitable—they can't be deconstructed, and full Awakening can't occur.

No Innate Nature

This is why the Buddha never advocated attributing an innate nature of any kind to the mind—good, bad, or Buddha. The idea of innate natures slipped into the Buddhist tradition in later centuries, when the principle of freedom was forgotten. Past bad kamma was seen as so totally deterministic that there seemed no way around it unless you assumed either an innate Buddha in the mind that could overpower it, or an external Buddha who would save you from it. But when you understand the principle of freedom—that past kamma doesn't totally shape the present, and that present kamma can always be free to choose the skillful alternative—you realize that the idea of innate natures is unnecessary: excess baggage on the path.

And it bogs you down. If you assume that the mind is basically bad, you won't feel capable of following the path, and will tend to look for outside help to do the work for you. If you assume that the mind is basically good, you'll feel capable but will easily get complacent. This stands in the way of the heedfulness needed to get you on the path, and to keep you there when the path creates states of relative peace and ease that seem so trustworthy and real. If you assume a Buddha nature, you not only risk complacency but you also entangle yourself in metaphysical thorn patches: If something with an awakened nature can suffer, what good is it? How could something innately awakened become defiled? If your original Buddha nature became deluded, what's to prevent it from becoming deluded after it's re-awakened?

These points become especially important as you reach the subtle levels of fabrication on the more advanced stages of the path. If you're primed to look for innate natures, you'll tend to see innate natures, especially when you reach the luminous, non-dual stages of concentration called themeless, emptiness, and undirected. You'll get stuck on whichever stage matches your assumptions about what your awakened nature is. But if you're primed to look for the process of fabrication, you'll see these stages as forms of fabrication, and this will enable you to deconstruct them, to pacify them, until you encounter the peace that's not fabricated at all.

Exploring Freedom

So instead of making assumptions about innate natures or inevitable outcomes, the Buddha advised exploring the possibility of freedom as it's immediately present each time you make a choice. Freedom is not a nature, and you don't find it by looking for your hidden innate nature. You find freedom by looking at where it's constantly showing itself: in the fact that your present intentions are not totally conditioned by the past. You catch your first glimmer of it as a range of possibilities from which you can choose and as your ability to act more skillfully—causing more pleasure and less pain—than you ordinarily might. Your sense of this freedom grows as you explore and exercise it, each time you choose the most skillful course of action heading in the direction of discernment, truthfulness, relinquishment, and peace. The choice to keep making skillful choices may require assumptions, but to keep the mind focused on the issue of fabrication the Buddha saw that these assumptions are best kept to a bare minimum: that the mind wants happiness, that it can choose courses of actions that promote happiness or thwart it, that it can change its ways, and that it can train itself to achieve the ultimate happiness where all fabrications fall away.

These assumptions are the Buddha's starter kit of skillful means to get you on the path of good will, heedfulness, and appropriate attention. As with any journey, you do best to take along only the bare essentials so that you don't weigh yourself down. This is especially true as you test the limits of freedom, for the closer you come to ultimate freedom, the more you find that things fall away. First the nouns of natures and identities fall away, as you focus on the verbs of action and choice. Then the verbs fall away, too. When the Buddha was asked who or what he was, he didn't answer with a *who* or *what.* He said simply, "Awakened": a past participle, a verb that has done its work. Similarly, when the suttas describe the Awakening of an arahant, they say that his or her mind is released from fermentations. But when

they describe how this release is experienced, they simply say, “With release, there is the knowledge, ‘Released.’” No comment on what is released. Not even, as it’s sometimes translated, “It is released.” There’s no noun, no pronoun, just a past participle: “released.” That’s all, but it’s enough.

Glossary

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

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

Brahmā: An inhabitant of the highest heavenly realms, of form and formlessness.

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

Deva: Literally, "shining one." An inhabitant of the heavenly realms.

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.*

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. Sanskrit form: *Dhyāna.*

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

Nibbāna: Literally, the "unbinding" of the mind from passion, aversion, and delusion, and from the entire round of death and rebirth. As this term also denotes the extinguishing of a fire, it carries connotations of stilling, cooling, and peace. "Total nibbāna" in some contexts denotes the experience of Awakening; in others, the final passing away of an arahant. Sanskrit form: *Nirvāṇa.*

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

Samaṇa: Contemplative. Literally, a person who abandons the conventional obligations of social life in order to find a way of life more "in tune" *(sama)* with the ways of nature. The samaṇa movements of the Buddha's time—of which the Buddha's was one—taught doctrines that, rejecting many of the conventions of brahmanical practice and beliefs, looked to nature for their inspiration.

Saṁsāra: Transmigration; the process of wandering through repeated states of becoming, with their attendant death and rebirth.

Saṁvega: A sense of overwhelming terror or dismay over the pointlessness of life as it is normally lived.

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.

Sutta: Discourse. Sanskrit form: *Sutra.*

Theravāda: The school of Buddhism that takes the Pāli Canon as the most reliable record of the Buddha's words.

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

Abbreviations

AN	*Aṅguttara Nikāya*
Cv	*Cullavagga*
Dhp	*Dhammapada*
DN	*Dīgha Nikāya*
Iti	*Itivuttaka*
Khp	*Khuddakapāṭha*
MN	*Majjhima Nikāya*
SN	*Saṁyutta Nikāya*
Sn	*Sutta Nipāta*
Ud	*Udāna*

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

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