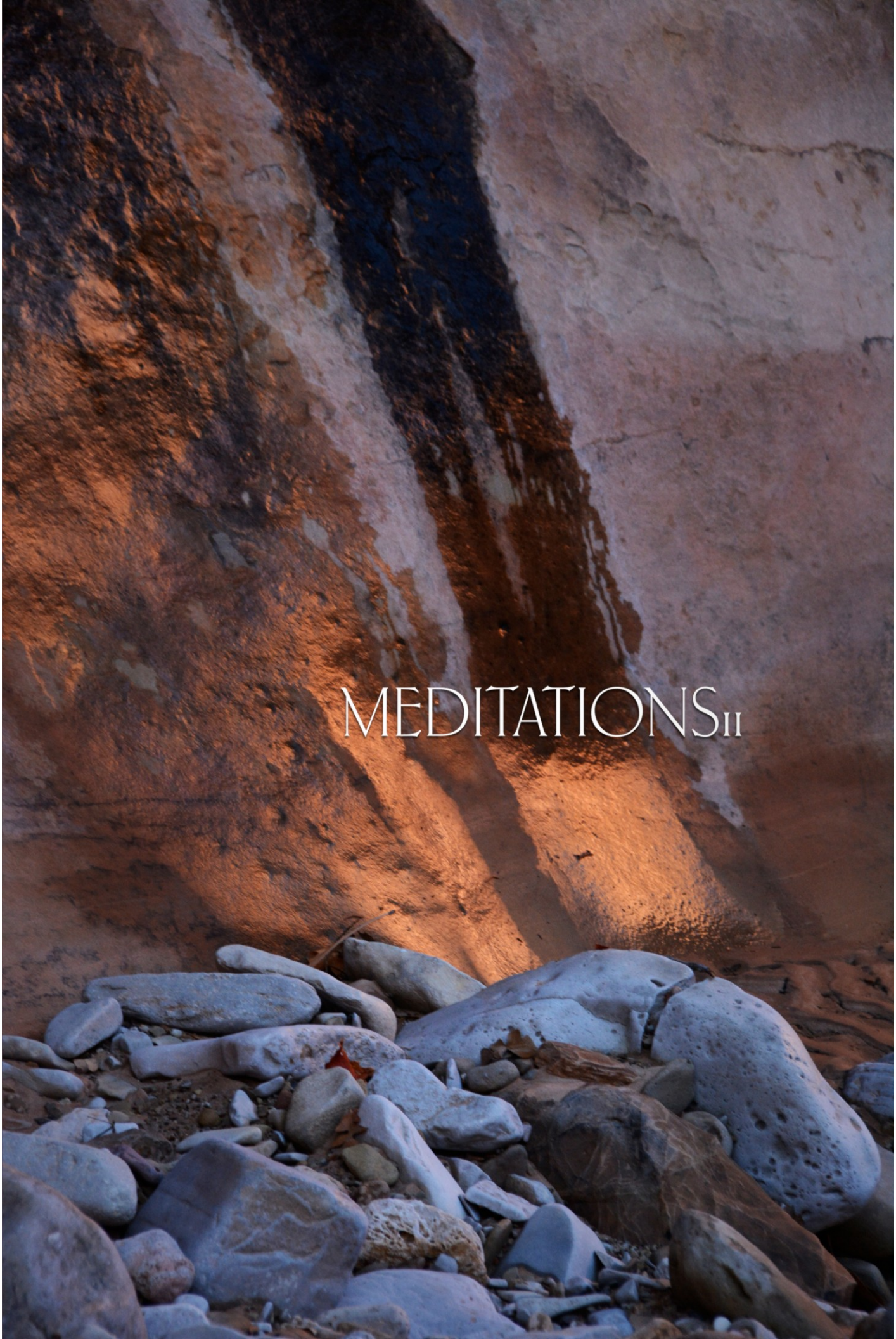
MEDITATIONS II

Meditations 11

Dhamma Talks

by

Thanissaro Bhikkhu
(Geoffrey DeGraff)

questions about this book may be addressed to

Metta Forest Monastery
Valley Center, CA 92082-1409
U.S.A.

additional resources

More Dhamma talks, books and translations by Thanissaro Bhikkhu are available to download in digital audio and various ebook formats at dhammatalks.org.

printed copy

A paperback copy of this book is available free of charge. To request one, write to: Book Request, Metta Forest Monastery, PO Box 1409, Valley Center, CA 92082 USA.

Introduction

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

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

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

* * *

As with the previous volumes in this series, I would like to thank Bok Lim Kim for making the recording of these talks possible. She, more than anyone else, is responsible for overcoming my initial reluctance to have the talks recorded. I would also like to thank the following people for transcribing the talks and/or helping to edit the transcriptions: Vijjakaro Bhikkhu, Deane Cameron, Jeff Colonel, James Dai, Joe Davies, Amala Ghosh, Katie Hoody, Mariam Jazayeri, Andrea Kessler, Virginia Lawrence,

Carol McDonald, Addie Onsanit, Harman Singh, Elaine Thompson, and Antony Woods. May they all be happy.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

Metta Forest Monastery
June, 2022

The Primacy of the Mind (1)

June 21, 2021

Mano-pubbangama dhamma, the mind is the forerunner of all phenomena: the first line in the Dhammapada. It's well known, yet all too often when we come to meditation we forget it. We think that meditation is about simply accepting what comes in through the senses and going with the flow—in other words, putting the mind in a passive state, where phenomena are the forerunners of the mind. But for the Buddha, the mind is primarily active. That's one of the principles we have to hold to. That's why it was put at the beginning of the Dhammapada.

Always keep it in mind: We're not just going with the flow, because most of the flows described in the Pali Canon go down: to whirlpools, places where there are monsters, alligators, rapids, waterfalls—dangerous places. To follow the path is to take a stance *against* that flow so that we can avoid those dangers and get across the flow, to the safety of the other shore.

Look at the Buddha himself: He didn't simply go with the flow. If he had gone with the flow, he would have lived his life as a prince, maybe have become a king—and then been forgotten, like all the other kings, princes, queens, and other quote-unquote *"important"* people in the world. But he took the quotes off: He really did become important by taking a stance. Think of it: someone who wants to find the deathless and will do anything he can to find it. That's the kind of person he was, the kind of teacher we have.

So, when we look at our own practice, we should cultivate a willingness to go for something more than the ordinary, instead of simply going with the flow.

You see this from the very beginning. In the practice of generosity, you place yourself in the position of a creator. You create generosity; you create

a gift. You can spend your time thinking about what would be a good gift to give to whom, and find some joy in exercising your imagination in acts of generosity—and then even more joy in carrying through.

As for the precepts, you're strict about them. They're a promise you make to yourself that, no matter what, you're not going to lie, you're not going to steal, you're not going to have illicit sex, you're not going to kill or take intoxicants. You draw that line and then you begin to notice: What are the things that would push you over the line? In noticing those things, you begin to see your own mind in action. Those impulses that would push you over the line also create phenomena—they, too, are forerunners of phenomena. What kind of phenomena are they creating? What kind of phenomena are they going to push you toward?

If you hadn't drawn the line, you wouldn't have noticed. This is why the precepts are *clear-cut*. When this is put in negative terms, they're described as *hard-and-fast*. People are against *hard-and-fast* rules. But look at the precepts from another point of view, and you realize they're *clear-cut*. They're easy to follow, easy to remember.

Now, they may create some difficulties as you find yourself wanting to go with contrary impulses. But this is your sorting-out. After all, this is what right mindfulness is all about: noticing what's skillful and what's unskillful, and *remembering* what's skillful and unskillful, so that you can use your memories to direct your right efforts. You learn how to say No to the voices in the mind that say, "Well, just this once," or "It doesn't matter," or "This should be okay, other people do it." Other people do all kinds of things; even ordinarily good people let themselves get pushed around.

But here again, think about the Buddha: He was not the sort of person to be pushed around. Think of the time he had to give up his austerities. The five monks who'd been attending to him gave up on him in disgust, but he didn't let that influence him at all. He realized that what he'd been doing was wrong, so he would have to stop. As for their opinion, he decided he couldn't let himself be pushed around by that.

So, always think about the Buddha, what kind of person he was, because he's the person who lies behind the instructions, behind the training we follow. He was a truthful person, which is why his mind was able to find the truth. He was the sort of person who, once he'd seen something was unskillful, would give it up. As he said, once he'd given something up, he wouldn't take it back. His image was of someone who vomits something out. You don't eat the vomit. You let it go.

As for things that are skillful, the mind has free range. This is what generosity is all about: There's a lot of freedom in generosity. There's room for creativity, and if you can't be generous with material things, there's always generosity with your time. Other people can give things, but it takes time to keep them in good shape, so see that as a gift, a good gift, as well.

I noticed when I was in Thailand there were some monasteries that seemed pretty rundown, but they could have been fixed up fairly easily. I asked the local people about that, and they said, "Well, that building was built by so-and-so, and if we fix it up, it becomes their merit. The merit doesn't come to us." I don't know where they got that idea, because the Commentary is full of talk about how when you clean up the monastery, you gain in wisdom. The place becomes new because of you. That becomes your merit.

So, we look around and see opportunities for giving of ourselves. At the same time, we see opportunities where we have to draw the line and say No to unskillful things. It's in this way that your mind is not just reactive. This is how we know that the mind is not just a material thing, or the byproduct of material processes, because if it were, we wouldn't be able to choose what we reacted to and what we didn't react to. We wouldn't be able to organize or choose our responses—we wouldn't have meaning in our lives. But when we take in the various events of the day and choose to organize a response—the more organized, the better: That's when we assert the primacy of the mind, which is what the Buddha's teachings are all about.

As the Buddha saw, everyone has to go through aging, illness, and death. Nobody wants to, but most people just put up with it. It takes something more than just a material process to say, "No. There must be something better." So here's where you assert the primacy of your mind: by laying down some rules for yourself; by giving yourself worthwhile goals. As long as you see that they're skillful, you stick with them. If you see that you've made a mistake, you can make changes and choose better goals. That, too, is part of the primacy of the mind.

We're not a wind-up toy that has to do whatever the winder tells it to do. We have our sensitivity, so we can *read* our actions. This is why the Buddha said that you need both commitment and reflection to nourish the Dhamma. You commit yourself to something really good, and then you reflect as you follow through. If you begin to see it wasn't as good as you thought, you can change. If you see there are areas where you can be even stricter with yourself, well, you can make changes there as well.

This then becomes the mind-state you bring into the meditation—committed to staying with one object. If you already have practice in drawing lines for the mind in terms of your behavior outside, it'll be a lot easier to stay with your one object of concentration. At the same time, you've been training the mind to be active in thinking about generosity, thinking about virtue—and as you're watching the processes of the mind, those thoughts are good processes to watch.

All too many people go through life letting their minds wander all over the place. When they come to meditate, all they see is that all-over-the-place mind. It's not very inspiring and it's not very easy to watch. So, as you practice generosity and are strict in your virtue, you create the external circumstances that are good for meditation. You also create an inner mind-state that conduces to meditation as well—conduces to concentration, conduces to discernment. It's all of a piece.

This is how you organize your response to the facts of aging, illness, and death—how you organize your response to the realization that you are responsible for the suffering that weighs down the mind, which means that

you *can* make a difference. You can choose to stop causing that suffering. So instead of going with the flow, you go against the flow. You take your stance to resist the flow. That's how you find something really solid, because you've put your mind first and made it, from the inside, as solid as you can.

The Primacy of the Mind (2)

June 22, 2021

All phenomena are preceded by the mind or the heart: the first verse in the Dhammapada. Last night I talked about how people tend to forget this verse when they come to meditation—forgetting the active role of the mind. Tonight I'd like to talk a little bit more about the topic because the principle is there not only in that first verse, it's throughout the Buddha's teachings. After all, with the four noble truths, when the Buddha searches out the causes of suffering, they don't come from outside—they come from within. It's because of craving and ignorance that the mind creates suffering for itself.

When you look at dependent co-arising, you find the same thing: Almost half of the factors are prior to sensory contact, our knowledge of the world outside. Among those prior factors are fabrications—your intentional acts—and acts of attention: the things you pay attention to and the way you pay attention. These will shape what you see as you make contact with the world, what you hear, what you smell, what you taste, what you touch, and what you think. These things are all shaped by factors inside the mind acting prior to your experience of the outside world.

Which is why we meditate by focusing inward. If the causes of suffering were outside, we'd be sending you outside to search them down. But they're here, inside. We have to keep that point in mind. The Buddha's teachings on breath meditation underline this. We're not watching just the breath, we're watching the process of *fabrication*, the processes of *attention*, as we watch the breath.

I know people who say, "Why watch the breath? When you die there won't be any breath to watch, so what will you hold on to then?" But in the way the Buddha teaches breath meditation in the four tetrads of the sixteen steps, the big issue is fabrication—the mind's contribution. As you

dig a little deeper, you find one of the big issues is also attention. The Buddha wants you to see how intentions and acts of attention shape your experience even of something as basic as the breath. Based on that, they shape your general experience of well-being or not-well-being. He wants you to see this so that you can alert yourself to exactly how much suffering you're bringing to the situation.

All too often we look outside, thinking that we're suffering because of this person or that person, this group of people, that group of people. But you can try to straighten out the world as much as you like, and there will still be suffering—because the mind is still churning it out.

As we sit here watching the breath, we're getting close to the real problem. Just learn how to look inside: That's when you find where the problem really is. Then, when you see the real problem, you can solve it.

In the first tetrad of the instructions for breath meditation, the Buddha has you start out by discerning short breathing and long breathing. That should alert you to the fact that the way you breathe will have an impact on how you experience the body. Of course, short and long can be extended to include deep, shallow, heavy, light, fast, slow. Get a sense of the variations in the breath. Then the Buddha has you train yourself to be aware of the breath in the whole body: Be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, aware of the whole body as you breathe out. The fourth step is to calm bodily fabrication. Bodily fabrication is basically the in-and-out breath.

You may want to know: Why does the Buddha bring in a technical term here? It's because he wants you to see the extent to which the mind's intentions play a role in how you breathe. We learn from other places that when you get sensitive to fabrication, you first use it to energize the body, energize your sense of the body, and then you calm it down.

So, you're basically asking yourself to be careful about the intentional element that shapes the way you breathe. After you've used it to energize yourself, then use it to be as gentle as possible, as *calming* as possible.

At the same time, you're going to be dealing with feelings, in the second tetrad. When we see the four tetrads laid out on the page, it looks as if you have to go through the first tetrad, and then the second tetrad, then the third, then the fourth—but the Buddha explains them differently.

When you look more carefully at them, you realize you're doing them in parallel: While you're dealing with the body, you're also dealing with feelings, so you try to breathe in and out in a way that gives rise to a sense of refreshment, breathe in and out in a way that gives rise to pleasure. How do you do that? The Buddha says that your careful attention to the breath is what will give rise to the sense of pleasure. Here again, the mind's contribution is what's going to make the difference.

We're working here not with feelings willy-nilly. We're working with what the Buddha calls feelings not-of-the-flesh: *niramisa vedana*. Those are feelings that are consciously, deliberately created. So again, we're working *from* the mind *into* the breath.

Then you're sensitive to how that sense of pleasure has an impact on the mind: You breathe in and out sensitive to mental fabrication—in other words, feelings and perceptions.

So, what perceptions do you apply to the breath? How do you visualize the breath to yourself, how do you depict it to yourself as you breathe in, as you breathe out, where it's coming in, where it's going out, how it comes in, how it goes out?

You may think of breath as something from the outside that you have to pull in. You can breathe in a way that's comfortable with that perception, as long as you think of the whole body as being open to the breath coming in, going out from all directions, through every pore. After a while, though, you begin to realize that an even more calming perception is of the breath originating from inside. After all, it's the energy in the body that pulls the air in through the nose. The air can't force its way in on its own.

Where does that energy originate? Ajaan Lee lists a couple of what he calls "resting spots" of the breath: above the navel, at the tip of the sternum, the base of the throat, the palate, the middle of the head, the top

of the head. Experiment to see which of these centers is most congenial for you to place your attention on, and then think of the breath radiating out from there without any interference. If any sense of tension gets in the way, think of it dissolving away. So again, it's the way you pay attention to these feelings along with your intention to calm the mind: This is what shapes your experience right now.

Then you can find an even more calming perception: Think of all the cells of the body breathing together at the same time. No one cell is more predominant than any other, no one spot in the body is more predominant than any other. That's even more calming, both for the body and for the mind.

Then you get to the third tetrad, which you're actually doing at the same time—being sensitive to the state of the mind and then noticing: When does it need to be gladdened and energized? When does it need to be steadied and made more concentrated? How do you release the mind from any of its burdens? You're doing all of this at the same time that you're dealing with body and feelings.

These are all issues that'll be determined by attention and fabrication —attention and intention. It's what the mind *brings* to the practice that's going to make a difference. As you learn these lessons from the breath, you learn them in a very immediate and visceral way—and then you can apply them wherever you go. After all, the breath goes with you wherever you go, and you can take your sensitivity to what you're doing wherever you go as well. This way, you keep your focus at the right spot.

Of course, you're aware of what other people are doing, aware of what's going on outside, but you don't let that awareness obscure your knowledge of what you're doing inside—because that's where the real problem is. As long as you allow this inside area to be obscured, you're going to suffer—no matter how perfect things may be outside.

But if we can be knowledgeable about what we're bringing—honest with ourselves, open with ourselves—there's a chance for us to see what we're doing and to stop creating the suffering. This is why when the

Buddha was teaching Rahula, the very beginning of the lesson was about honesty and, from there, being self-observant: What are you doing? What do you expect to gain from your intentions? Which ones should you act on? When you act only on skillful intentions, what happens? If something bad comes up as a result, you have to ask yourself: "Maybe my intention was good, but it wasn't skillful." Go back to the drawing board.

So you reflect. Remember the Buddha's image to Rahula: Your actions are like a mirror. It's through your actions that you can see your own mind. And it's because the mind is the forerunner of all things, it's also the forerunner of suffering—and you can see where it's coming from in the mind. It's also the forerunner of creating the path—you want to be able to get it to develop the needed skills, and observe it as it's doing that as well.

The breath is a good mirror for the mind: Whatever intentions come up, whatever acts of attention come up, they're reflected in how you experience your breath. But we tend to look past this mirror and, as a result, we don't see ourselves.

So keep the mirror polished and keep your eye on the mirror—because all the things you need to know will be seen right here.

All Four Tetrads at Once

July 19, 2021

When we read the suttas, we should remember that they were never meant to be read on their own. They were part of a community—the inherited knowledge of the community. In the early days, you would hear a sutta and then you could ask the person reciting it, "What does this mean? What does that mean?" He could fill in the blanks. This personal interaction would play a necessary role because often there are quite a few blanks.

You see this especially in the Buddha's instructions on breath meditation. They're his most complete set of meditation instructions, sixteen steps in all, and yet they leave a lot of questions unanswered. So we have to look around: Read some passages in the context of other suttas, try to make sense out of them, and talk them over with people who have practiced, to gain a sense of what the passages might be getting at.

The first big question is: Are the sixteen steps meant to be read and practiced in line, in other words—one through sixteen? And the indication seems to be: no.

They fall into four sets of four, called tetrads. The first tetrad has to do directly with the breath. The second tetrad has to do with feelings; the third with the mind; and the fourth with dhammas. It's not the case that you're going to focus on the body, and only when the body is all taken care of will you focus on feelings, and then wait until the feelings are all taken care before you focus on the mind and then the dhammas. Actually, all four tetrads are present right from the start.

The sutta itself, where the Buddha gives the most detailed explanation of these steps, indicates as much. It says that when you pay attention to the breath, the act of paying attention generates a feeling—or *is* a feeling, the text says—but basically the act of attention helps to fabricate a feeling,

what's called a feeling not-of-the-flesh. As for the mind, it says that there's no mindfulness of breathing without mindfulness and alertness. And as for dhammas, qualities, you have to develop a quality of equanimity to put aside all your worldly concerns right from the beginning. So even as you're first settling in with the breath, you've got all four aspects right there.

You can read the different tetrads as alternative instructions as to what to do as you get started. First you analyze the problem: You're trying to settle down and the mind's not settling down. Is it a problem with the breath? Is it a problem with the feelings, the mind, or outside things coming in? Once you've identified the problem, then you can look at the appropriate tetrad to see what you might be doing wrong and what you can change.

For example, with the first tetrad: The first two steps are to breathe in long and out long, breathe in short and out short. The next two steps are trainings. You train yourself to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in and out, and then you train yourself to breathe in and out calming bodily fabrication—in other words, the intentional element of the breath, or the in-and-out breath itself. This last step can take you all the way to the fourth jhana. Another sutta confirms this, saying that when the bodily fabrication is fully calmed, that's where you're going to be: fourth jhana.

That's a very brief outline in how you deal with the breath. Actually, though, a lot more is going on. Ajaan Lee fills in quite a few more details. When the Buddha says to be aware of long breathing and short breathing, you can expand that. You can include deep or shallow, heavy or light, fast or slow. And because you know from the second tetrad that you'll be trying to develop a sense of fullness or refreshment and pleasure with the breath, you can use the variations of the breath to help induce that sense of pleasure.

Then you're aware of the whole body as you breathe in. You train yourself at this point. This is something you have to get good at. A lot of people have trouble with this. They're focused on one spot, then they try to be aware of the whole body, and very quickly find themselves back at

one spot again. It takes a while to back into the sense of awareness that's filling the body all the time. Actually, you've already got a spotlight awareness and a background awareness. What you're trying to do is bring your background awareness up to the fore.

As for calming bodily fabrication, we learn elsewhere that before you calm things down, you should energize them. Otherwise, you can put yourself to sleep. So first breathe in a way that's energizing and then allow things to relax. As your focus gets stronger and more consistent, you can stay with calmer breathing and not lose focus. If you find, though, that the breath gets so gentle that you can't keep track of it, you have to breathe a little bit more heavily again. That's the breath side of things.

Then there's the feeling side. You breathe in and out training yourself to be sensitive to rapture. In other words, there are potentials for rapture or refreshment in the body. Wherever there's a sense of fullness in the body, allow that sense of fullness to stay. This can just be the sense that it's full of blood or full of energy. There's a nice buzz, say, in your hands, or in the middle of the chest. Allow that nice feeling to be unaffected by the in-and-out breathing. Don't squeeze it. That way it gets a chance to grow stronger. Even as you breathe out, allow this feeling to stay full. As it grows stronger, let it spread. It's usually accompanied by pleasure. Sometimes, though, the pleasure and the refreshment are two different things. After a while, the sense of refreshment or energy spreading gets to be a little bit too much. So you figure out how to tune in to a subtler level of energy that's just pleasant and you let the excess go out your eyes, out the palms of your hands and the soles of your feet.

The next step is to be sensitive to mental fabrications, which are feelings and perceptions. The step after that is to calm mental fabrications. This is where perceptions play a big role. You want to find perceptions that will create calmer feelings, because you're going to go from rapture down to pleasure and then ultimately to equanimity. What kind of perceptions help with that? Ajaan Lee recommends perceiving the whole body as saturated with breath energy flowing in different parts of the body. In some

cases, it flows up; in some cases, it flows down or circles around. So what way of perceiving the breathing would be most helpful right now to get things to calm down? When mental fabrication is totally calm, that can take you all the way through the formless jhanas.

Here again, we see how the different tetrads are not lined up in a row. The first tetrad delivers you to the fourth jhana but then the second tetrad starts way back with the first jhana, trying to develop a sense of rapture, before taking you up to the fourth jhana and into the formless ones. So the two tetrads are best developed in parallel.

The third tetrad follows a similar principle. It starts with being sensitive to the mind. If you haven't been sensitive to the mind up to this point, you're not going to get anywhere. As the Buddha said, the mind is right there all along: It has to be mindful and alert for you to stay with the breath from the very beginning. But sometimes the mind is the problem. So you look at it. You get sensitive to the state of the mind and then you notice: Does it need to be gladdened and energized? Okay, breathe in a way that gives it more energy. Breathe in a way that gives it a greater sense of rapture and well-being. Sometimes to gladden the mind you have to drop the breath and go to another theme that you find inspiring.

Does the mind need to be more concentrated? Do what you can to get things really focused. Does it need to be released from its burdens? These are the different steps you follow in the third tetrad. In other words, you read your mind and then you energize it, then you steady and concentrate it, and then you release it. Those steps do follow in a logical order, but sometimes you have to jump around a little bit. You might have to steady things before you energize them.

So this tetrad, too, starts at the very beginning and delivers you up through the jhanas and on through the various levels of release. The release here starts with what's called awareness-release: the act of letting go of sensuality or sensual thoughts for the time being; letting go of any other unskillful qualities for the time being; or letting go of the factors of a lower state of concentration as you're trying to get into a higher one. It can also,

though, go on to total release, which is what you want in the area of the mind. You want bodily fabrication to be calmed. You want mental fabrication to be calmed. But you especially want the mind to be released.

The fourth tetrad gives you some idea of how to do that. First you start with inconstancy. You notice how things arise and pass away. In the Buddha's descriptions of arising and passing away, he always notes that your knowledge has to be penetrative. In other words, you don't just see things coming and going, you also want to look into the mind to see *why* they come, *why* they go. And when they come, are they good? Are they the kind of things you want to encourage or not? That's what it means for knowledge to be penetrative.

In the very beginning, the main focus is on the inconstancy of the things that are distracting you. The Buddha himself relates this particular tetrad to the task of putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. And when he taught Rahula breath meditation, even before he started with the first step he had him contemplate various themes, one of which was inconstancy. This is where you use it.

Suppose you suddenly think of something that happened years back. You have to remind yourself: That's gone. Or if you think of something you're anticipating in the future, remind yourself that even if it comes, it's going to go, too. We've been searching for happiness in things that change, change, change all the time. Isn't it time to look for something more reliable? Thinking in this way, you develop a sense of dispassion for the distraction. And it stops. When it stops, you put everything down. In other words, you don't have to keep thinking about how great it was that you were able to put that down. You put it down and then you get back to work. So those are the steps in the last tetrad: Focus on inconstancy, then on dispassion, then on cessation, then on letting go.

As the concentration gets deeper, as you're going from one level of concentration to another, you want to see the factors that you're dropping as inconstant, not worthy of passion, so that you can put them down. Then, when the concentration is solid, you begin to notice that even it has

its inconstancy. There are risings and fallings in the level of stress. So you look into them. What in the mind is causing them? Why does the stress go up? Why does it go down? You see what's causing it to go up and you realize you don't need that. You develop dispassion for it. And because your passion was driving it, dispassion makes it stop. Then you put everything down, including the insights that made things stop. This is the kind of analysis that ultimately can set you free.

So the four tetrads are not to be lined up in a row, one after the other. They're to be lined up side by side. They're like a map with four pages. You unfold it and there are four sections. And it's good to have the map—in the back of your mind. Don't put it in the front of your mind while you're meditating. That would be like trying to go through a forest looking at nothing but the map as you follow along the trail. You're going to run into trees, you're going to run into stumps, you're going to get bitten by a snake. Ideally, you first look at the map to get a sense of the general direction. Then you put it down and focus on the trail itself. In other words, you have the map of breath meditation in the back of your mind but you've got the breath in the forefront. And you realize that there are feelings right here, there are mind-states right here, there are dhammas right here. You're trying to get them together in a way that's calm and clear.

Use this map to figure out what's lacking, what needs to be added. This presence of mind with the breath right here: That's what it's all about. The map is there to give you an idea of how many facets there are to what you're doing right here, right now, because that's an important part of meditation. You commit to the meditation but you also reflect on what you're doing. You realize that you're here not just to be with the object, but also to look at the mind as it relates to the object—because that's even more fascinating than the object. The breath does have lots of interesting details, especially in the workings of breath energy in the body. But the way the mind relates to objects is even more fascinating. The way it falls for its feelings and perceptions is even more interesting. The way it relates to

itself is interesting. You want to be aware of all these facets, because only then does your vision becomes all-round.

We're students of the Buddha, who was said to have an all-around eye. He saw things from all angles, reflected on things from all sides. That was what enabled him to find a release that was total: release all-around. As he said, his mind was released everywhere. That's our teacher. So as we try to follow him, let's see if we can make our own awareness all-around and released everywhere, too.

Savor Your Breath

July 20, 2021

To really enjoy the breath meditation, you have to learn how to savor your breath. There are different ways you can do that, as there are with savoring a sensual pleasure, such as fine food or beautiful music. Part of the skill of savoring is putting yourself in a receptive mood, part of it is how you talk to yourself, and part of it is opening yourself up physically, especially if it's listening to music—opening yourself up to the effect it can have on you.

The same principles apply with the breath. First remind yourself that this is the force of life that you're watching. It only stands to reason that if it feels good inside, it's going to be good for you. It'll give you energy, soothe the nerves, nourish the muscles that have been overworked. It can do a lot of good.

Then try to make yourself receptive. Try to notice which parts of the body are most sensitive to how an in-breath feels or how an out-breath feels, but particularly the in-breath. If you're not sure, hold the breath for a bit until you feel you've got to breathe. Then as the breath comes in, you'll notice certain parts of the body feel greatly relieved.

Those are the parts you should focus on. Those are your sensitive parts. For some people, the most sensitive spot is in the chest, in the area around the heart. Or it could be behind your eyes, in the middle of the head, or in the throat. So explore for a while where your spots are.

Pay special attention to the in-breath, because that's the energizing breath. The in-breath is something you do. The out-breath is something you should learn how not to squeeze out. You do the in-breathing; the body will allow the breath back out again at its own pace. Then when you feel the need to breathe in again, then breathe in.

Sometimes it's good to try to regulate the rhythm. They've done research showing that a rhythm in which you take five or six seconds for the in-breath, five or six seconds for the out-breath, and try to keep it regular like that for a while, can be extremely calming.

When you have trouble maintaining a full five-second breath, ask yourself: Which parts of the body are tight or tensing up, preventing the breath from coming in that long? Try to relax them.

Also try to get out of your head and into your body. Remind yourself that consciousness is there in all the parts of the body.

Ajaan Suwat made the comment one time that you could take an iron stake and stick it into any part of the body, and you'd know that there's pain. Suppose the spike is in the leg: It's not as if the awareness up in the middle of the head has to go running down to the leg to let you know there's pain. Your awareness in the leg lets you know right away.

Have a sense that you inhabit the whole body and you're right there with the different parts of the body that are sensitive to the breath. Especially if it's the area around the eyes, or behind the eyes: This is an area where, when we think a lot in the course of the day, the blood gets pushed around quite a bit. So if you allow it to just stay still around that area, the blood can flow in, with a sense of fullness, comfortable fullness. It doesn't feel tight or overstuffed. Then, as it's full, the breath comes in and nourishes that part of the body. It feels good, feels gratifying.

So you learn how to talk to yourself about the breath. You also learn how to tune in to the parts of the body that are sensitive to the breath and open yourself up to them. This way, the meditation becomes something that's not just in your head. It's down there in your body, the whole body, and it provides you with a place you can settle in. From then on, it's just a matter of modulating things so that they feel just right.

Sometimes a rhythm feels good for a while, and then not so good. Well, you can change. It's entirely up to you. This is one of the areas of meditation where your preferences actually play a large role.

What kind of breathing do you like? Do you like long breathing, short breathing, fast, slow, heavy, light, deep, shallow? There are lots of variations. And you can think of the breath energy doing different things in the body: coming up from the soles of the feet, up through the legs, giving support to the spine, or going down from the top of the head. The Zen master Hakuin recommended having an image of a big ball of butter on top of your head. As you breathe in, think of the butter melting, and going down, down, down the body.

So play with the breath, play with your perceptions around the breath. Play with all the different kinds of fabrication that go into making up your sense of the present right here, right now. It's in playing with them that you get to know them.

It's like learning how to play a guitar. You take the guitar into your room, you close the door, and you pluck at it. You discover a few things that sound nice, and you play around, and find some things that don't sound so nice. You drop those. You go back to the things that sound nice. But then you start experimenting, exploring, bringing in some ingenuity, but also learning how to be sensitive. With a guitar, what sounds good to you? What harmonies hit a soft spot in your body or mind?

With the breath, what feels good to you as you breathe in? You want to get sensitive to this, because you're going to be getting sensitive to what the Buddha calls name and form.

"Name" covers all the different activities of the mind. "Form," of course, is the form of the body, as composed of the properties of earth, water, wind, and fire. You want to learn to be sensitive to these things on those terms, because those are the very basic terms of discernment: things as they're directly experienced.

Discernment is not a matter of imposing somebody else's ideas on your mind, telling yourself, "They say you have to see things as inconstant, stressful, not-self. Okay, where's the inconstancy?" Then you make yourself come to the conclusion, "Oh yeah, it's true what they say." Coming to that kind of conclusion is not what the Buddha wants.

He uses those terms, but he uses other terms, as well, for getting a sense of what's going on, and how you're building things out of the raw materials of name and form. And how it's just not good enough.

You find things that are good for a while. In fact, you're encouraged to do this. As Ajaan Lee says, you take what's inconstant and you try to make it constant. You take what's stressful and you try to make it pleasurable. You take what's not-self and you try to get it under your control as much as possible. See how far you can go in that direction.

It's only when you push up against the three perceptions like this that you find the point where they push back. And where will you find that? In your own sensitivity. Your value judgment, the choice to hold on or to let go, is also made in your own sensitivity. No one's forcing you. But as you get more sensitive, you begin to see that there are certain things you've done, or are doing, that you used to like, but now you don't like them anymore. It's not satisfying anymore. You've found something better.

This is why an important part of meditation is that it gives you something to rely on, something to fall back on. You're not simply asked to learn to get detached from everything and then let go. The Buddha gives you good things to hold on to first, so that you can let go with a sense of safety—and also a sense of being rewarded by letting go. As he says, letting go is for your long-term welfare and happiness.

We're not here simply to see things as they are. One—because we're here to see things as they *work*. How cause and effect work. And two—we're seeing these things so that we can be more discerning in knowing which forms of happiness and pleasure really are satisfying.

After all, nibbana is the ultimate pleasure—the ultimate happiness, the ultimate *sukha:* bliss, happiness, well-being. You get to appreciate it first by learning how to appreciate what feels good right here, right now, in the body.

So try to develop your sensitivity here. Learn how to savor what's pleasurable here, because that sensitivity will reorient you, give you new

ideas about what happiness is, what well-being is—and what's needed to find it. It also opens you up to the potentials you have right here.

Think about all the skills the Buddha found in his meditation, leading at last to the ultimate skill, which is the ending of the effluents. How are you going to know what an effluent is unless you get really sensitive to how things flow around in the heart and mind right here?

So try to get sensitive right here in the heart, right here in the body. Explore your sensitivity. Savor what you find is good. That's how you develop your palate; that's how your discernment gets strong, strong enough to overcome a lot of the preconceived notions you bring to the breath, bring to the body, bring to your own mind, bring to life.

It's only when you find something you thoroughly like right here that you can change the way you rank pleasures in your life. Because this is a blameless happiness, it has a lot more potential than sensual pleasures. Learn how to savor the potential of well-being simply here in name and form as you've got them right here, right now.

Potentials

August 27, 2020

Direct your thoughts to the breath and evaluate it. You'll notice when you're evaluating it that you're not simply saying that this is the way it is, passing judgment and leaving it there. You're also evaluating what can be done with it. If it's not comfortable, what can you do to make it comfortable? How can you maintain that sense of comfort and spread it around? There is a potential for comfort here in the breath. There's a potential for rapture and fullness. It may be hidden, but it's there. And just because it doesn't show itself right now doesn't mean it's not there.

One of the knowledges attributed to the Buddha was his knowledge of properties. The word for "property"—*dhatu* in Pali—can also mean "potential." He could see the potentials in the world, everything from physical potentials such as the potentials for fire, water, earth, wind, and space, all the way to mental potentials, such as the potential for consciousness. There are potentials in the mind, like the potential for sensuality. It may lie latent, but it doesn't take much to provoke it. And the fact that we have these potentials, both good and bad, is what allows us to practice.

You probably know the passage where the Buddha says that you look at form, feeling, perception, fabrication and consciousness, and you ask yourself: "Are they under your control? Can you have them be the way you want them to be?" The answer is "partially." Most people tend to think that there's nothing you can do about them at all. You've just got to accept the way they are and leave them there. But the Buddha's acceptance was not that kind of acceptance. You accept them, including their potentials. That means you can do something with them. It's simply a matter of figuring out what and how.

After all, even though the aggregates are not fully under your control, still as the Buddha said, if people couldn't develop skillful qualities and abandon unskillful qualities, there would have been no point to his teaching. So we *can* do something with our body. We *can* do something with our feelings, with our perceptions, with thought fabrications, and with consciousness. That's how we create the path: looking for the potentials we have here and developing them.

Wisdom isn't simply a matter of accepting things. It's seeing potentials and learning how to develop them in the proper way. There are some unskillful potentials, like the potential for sensuality: That's something you've got to learn how to weaken. But there are also good potentials in the mind. Those are the things you want to develop. There's a good potential here in the body. As I said, you can breathe in a way that gives rise to rapture. How do you do that? Well, look at the way you breathe.

When you breathe out, are you squeezing the breath out? If so, you're stepping all over the potential for fullness. You can breathe in with a sense of fullness, so try to maintain the sense of fullness even as you breathe out. You begin to realize that the fullness is not so much the fullness of the lungs; it's the fullness of the blood vessels and the fullness in the energy of the nerves. Make sure you don't squeeze that. Allow that to stay full from one breath to the next to the next, and it will build up. It's as if a second system of breathing kicks in, the breathing of the nerves and the breathing of the blood vessels. As you learn how to tap into that, you create a sense of fullness very quickly.

That should teach you other lessons: There are other potentials in the mind and other potentials in the body, too. You want to look for them. When we're meditating, on the one hand we're looking at what we've already got, but we're also trying to make something out of it. What we've got here has potential, so learn to look at it in that way.

Someone contacted me recently and wanted me to do a Zoom meeting with some people in Singapore. The person sending the email complained that with the other ajaans they'd had on these Zoom meetings, all they

could talk about was the three characteristics and how you simply have to accept things and just take the world as it is. *"Please* say something that shows we can do something about the world, that we can do something about our minds," the person said. And I thought, "It's come to that." The Buddha teaches a path that's all about what you can do—the potentials you have within you—yet nowadays, saying that goes against a lot of what's being taught as Dhamma.

Remember: We do have potentials. We're here to look for them and to develop them. It's in this sense that conviction in the Buddha's awakening is helpful. He shows the potential of what a human being can do. Of course, he was a very special human being, but the qualities he had developed to make himself special are qualities we all have in potential form. Resolution, ardency, heedfulness: These are things that we already have to some extent and that we can learn how to develop—to make them more consistent, more all-around.

At the same time, we have to watch out for other potentials, what the Buddha calls latent tendencies in the mind. Once he asked the monks what they knew about the five lower fetters. One monk listed the five lower fetters: uncertainty, grasping at habits and practices, identity view, sensual passion, and ill will. The Buddha asked him, "Can you say that babies have those?" They don't have the full-blown fetters. After all, they don't even have the concept of identity, so how could they have an identity view? They don't have the concept of Dhamma, so how could they have uncertainty about the Dhamma? They don't even have a concept of habit, so how can they grasp at habits and practices? But, the Buddha said, they do have the potential in that direction; they have a latent tendency.

What that means is that when the child gets old enough to develop these concepts, the fetters will show themselves—which means that when you cut the fetters, you can't just rest content with having them not appear. You have to dig down inside to see what they come from—where the potential comes from. You've got to cut that. That's the whole message of the four noble truths. If you're going to get rid of something unskillful,

you've got to find the cause—the potential that gives rise to it—and put a stop to the cause. Only then can you be safe from it.

But there are also good potentials. We read about the Buddha seeing that certain people had developed their minds to the point where they were ready for just one Dhamma talk, and that's all they needed. The potential was there. The Buddha could see those potentials, too—as when he taught Rahula, and Rahula gained awakening. So the Buddha saw the world as potentials, which is why he was able to make something good out of the world. He established the religion, established the Dhamma and the Vinaya to make it available to people so that they, too, could put an end to suffering.

So as you sit here and meditate, ask yourself: What are the potentials here? There'll be some bad ones, but there will also be some good ones. Why stew around in the bad ones? Why encourage them? The word they use in Pali is "provoke." Why provoke them? Provoke the good ones, starting with something as simple as the breath. The way you breathe can have a huge impact on how you experience the body.

Evaluate what you've got, but also evaluate what you can do with it. Then go ahead and experiment and explore until you've found what those potentials are and what they can do. You will have developed a skill that allows you to take advantage of the potentials all around you. As Ajaan Lee once said, "This is the shame with the human race. We have so many potentials in the body and the mind, yet we hardly scratch them at the surface."

There is the potential for awakening. There's the potential for unbinding. That's to be found in here, too. So learn how to look at what you've already got in such a way that you can take advantage of the potentials it has. Don't rest content with saying, "Well, that's just the way it was. Causes and conditions made it that way." The fact that there are causes and conditions means they can be manipulated; they can be nurtured in a good direction.

That's why the Buddha taught about causes and conditions. He wasn't interested in just talking about the way the world is. He was more interested in showing: This is what can be done with the world so that you can go beyond it.

Name & Form

January 24, 2020

When you close your eyes and focus on the breath as you feel it, you're moving from the level of sensuality to the level of form. It's a step up. The pleasures that can come from the level of form are much more refined and much less likely to lead to unskillful behavior than the pleasures of sensuality. So try to familiarize yourself with this level.

The word for form, *rupa* in Pali, has many different meanings, but this is one of them: the body as you feel it from within. It's composed of four properties, or elements. There's the flow of energy: That's the breath, or wind element. There's the warmth: That's the fire element. There's the coolness: That's the water element. And there's a sense of solidity: That's the earth element.

We focus on the breath first because it's the element most responsive to the mind. You could say to yourself, "short breathing," and the breath will get shorter. Or you could say, "longer," and it'll get longer. Deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter: You can play with it.

It's also your first experience of the body. This is something we tend to miss. We think of the body as being basically solid because that's our perception of it. But one of the important things you're going to learn as you familiarize yourself with these various properties or elements is the role that perception plays in emphasizing one or another.

The body's not just plain sensation. There's a perception behind every sensation. So here we're emphasizing the perception of "breath," holding in mind the image that the breath can be an energy. It's not the air coming in and out of the lungs. It's an energy in the body itself. There's a feeling of flow that comes in and goes out, but there's also the movement of energy inside the body itself. It emanates from the body—one spot in the body or sometimes several spots in the body—as you breathe in, and can spread

throughout the body. It starts in the body, but it can go everywhere throughout the body if you let it. And your perception of it is going to help. So if you have trouble feeling the breath in any part of the body, just tell yourself it's there. Whatever you're sensing is breath. See if you can perceive it from that angle.

As for the other elements or properties, you'll be experiencing them to some extent as you're focusing on the breath. There will be parts that feel very solid, others that feel warm, others that feel cool. When Ajaan Fuang was teaching meditation, he'd say you can play with those a little bit, but you really get serious about them when the breath has been taken care of. In other words, you've filled the body with breath energy. All the breath channels in the body are well connected, and the energy level is full so that you feel less and less need to breathe in and breathe out. The energy feels balanced and suffuses everywhere. It's so well connected that if there's a lack of breath energy in one part of the body, an excess from another part will come right in to make up the lack. That's when Ajaan Fuang would have you think about the fire element.

It's the same sort of principle. When working with the breath, you start with one spot in the body. Make that comfortable, then let that comfortable breath spread. With fire, you find whatever spot in the body seems warmest. You focus your attention there. Hold in mind the perception of warmth at the same time. You may find that you're turning up the heat a little bit, which on a cool night like this is pleasant. Then think of it spreading. You can do the same with water. There's a sensation of coolness in the body. Then there's solidity, earth. You could think of the bones and, from there, think of the whole body being solid.

When you were familiar with each of these elements, Ajaan Fuang would then have you think of bringing them into balance: not too heavy, not too light—like Goldilocks' porridge, not too warm, not too cold—and then try to maintain that sense of balance. It's from there that he would have you go into the formless states. But before going to formlessness, you've got to get yourself really familiar with form.

So we work with these elements, one, to give a sense of well-being, but also, two, to familiarize ourselves with the body as we feel it from within, and to see the connection it has with what's called "name": in Pali, *nama.* In some cases, the word "name" covers just the other four aggregates: feeling, perception, mental fabrication, and consciousness. In other cases, mental fabrication gets divided up into attention, intention, and mental contact.

This gets us into dependent co-arising. All this is dependent on consciousness, consciousness is dependent on this, and the two of them together are dependent on fabrication, which is another word for intention. Insight lies in seeing that: the extent to which your experience of the body, as you feel it from within, is shaped by your intentions, the way you pay attention to things, and your perceptions. It's not simply a given. You want to be able to bring that fact to the foreground, because all too often the perceptions are subconscious.

There was a period when I was away from Ajaan Fuang for a couple of months. Toward the end of the period, I was finding it harder and harder to breathe during the meditation. It just seemed like everything in the body was way too solid, way too unresponsive. The more I tried to breathe, the less the body seemed willing to breathe. I finally had a chance to visit Ajaan Fuang. He said, "Well, you're focusing on earth." It hadn't occurred to me at all. He added, "Focus on space instead." That cleared up the problem right then and there. The lesson I learned, of course, is the power of subconscious perceptions, which is why it's good to bring them out into the open.

There are some meditation methods that tell you that the way you experience the body from within directly is just pure sensation, raw data. But if you believe that, you're hiding the fact that it's actually been processed. It's like listening to a news story, thinking that what you're getting are bare facts when actually they've been chosen and massaged so that you don't know the real events behind the story. If you're told, "This is raw sensation," you're not going to look behind it to ask, "Well, what

shapes the raw sensation?" But when you're alert to the fact that it's already shaped by your perceptions, you start looking for them. And one way to look for them is to challenge them.

Try other perceptions and see the mind's tendency to want to go back to the old ones, and the effect that the new perceptions will have on how you experience the body, how you experience the breath, how you experience the other elements. This relates to the Buddha's choice of the word "element," or *dhatu,* "property." In the physics of that time, these properties or elements were latent. When they showed themselves, stronger and active, it was because they had been provoked. For example, on the external level, if you used a fire starter, you were said to be provoking the fire property, and a fire would appear out of the latent potential that was already there.

In the same way, the properties inside the body get provoked by your perceptions, by what you pay attention to. The two of them feed each other. When you think of warmth, you look around to see, "Where are the sensations that are warm?" You pay attention to those. The attention and the perception will then magnify each other, and you've learned an important lesson: a lesson in cause and effect, a lesson in kamma.

Those are the two principles that you always have to keep in mind when you're listening to any of the Buddha's teachings. When you read about mindfulness, how does mindfulness relate to kamma? How does it relate to causality? When you read about goodwill, how does it relate to kamma and causality? It's only when you see these things in the light of kamma and causality that you'll understand the proper uses of these teachings.

And it's the same with name and form. Name is the active side. Form is the more passive side. You want to see how they relate to kamma, how your mental activities—your perceptions, your acts of attention, your acts of intention—shape the way you experience the body. It is possible to have name without form, but it's not possible to have an experience of form without name. There are formless beings, and although there is form

without mental activities—say, the form of dead people—there's no experience of that form from within because the naming activities have gone.

So we're here focusing on the breath because we want to learn about the mind. We're focusing on form because we want to learn about the activities of name, because it's the mental side that's causing suffering. But it's also the mental side where the solution to the problem of suffering is going to be found. Your experience of the body is a good place to learn a lot of these principles.

Try to sensitize yourself to the way the breath feels, and to what you can do with your different perceptions of the breath to give rise to a sense of well-being, because this is the purpose of the concentration practice: to give you a sense of well-being at the same time sensitizing you to what you're doing in the present moment so that you can be mindful and alert to see where craving and clinging are coming into the whole process, and how you can let them go.

This is why the Buddha said that those who practice mindfulness immersed in the body will see the deathless: As they look into their experience of the body, they begin to see more and more of the mind in action in the present moment. And through taking apart the activities of the mind, that's when you open up to something that's beyond name, beyond form.

So pay a lot of attention right here.

The Cool Fire of Jhana

December 22, 2020

When the Buddha told the monks to go meditate, he used the verb *jhayati,* which means to do jhana. But the same verb also means to burn. Pali has lots of verbs for burning, and this is a verb that means to burn with a steady flame. Ordinarily, our minds burn like bonfires. The flames lick here, flicker there, flame up, and then die down, flame up again. If you tried to read by a bonfire, it would be really hard because the light's flickering too much, which is why you have to change the way it burns. You want the fire to still be burning, but steadily. *Jhayati* is the verb they use for a steady flame, like the flame of an oil lamp. That's something you can read by.

When you think about meditating, think about what's involved in starting a fire: getting it going and putting it to use. Remember those three stages that Ajaan Fuang talked about in the meditation. First, you have to get the mind to settle down. Once it's there, you have to maintain it. And then you have to put it to use. These are three separate skills.

When you're getting it to settle down, you have to really protect it because it's like a fire that's weak. Think about a person trying to start a fire on a windy day. You have a tiny, little match. Of course, back in the time of the Buddha, they didn't even have matches. They had fire sticks, which required even more work. You had a block of wood with a little hole, and you had a fire stick, which acted like a drill. You put a little piece of kindling—say, a few bits of sawdust—inside the hole. Then you just kept drilling away at the hole with the fire stick, applying a lot of pressure. If you let up to look at how things were going, the warmth would die down. So you had to keep at it, keep at it, keep at it.

Once the little pieces of kindling caught, then you had to take them over to the fuel you were trying to get to burn. You had to protect the little flame, cupping your hands around it to protect it from the wind, and then

very gradually add the fuel. If you added too much all at once, you'd snuff out the fire. But if you worked at it properly, eventually it would catch. Then, when it caught, you wouldn't have to put so much energy into it. But you'd still have to look after it, making sure that it didn't run out of fuel. If a sudden gust came, you'd have to protect it again. That's the maintaining.

Then there's the question of getting use out of it. Having a fire sometimes is nice simply for its warmth. But there are other things that can be done with the fire, too. Food has to be cooked. Your house has to be heated. If you're working on a project that requires something be melted or heated up, you'd need the fire for that, too.

All of this applies to meditating.

When you're trying to get the mind to settle down, you have to be very, very intent on what you're doing. You just keep at it, keep at it, keep at it. You can't let yourself get discouraged. If you get discouraged and say, "This is not working," you have to start over again. So if any thoughts come in at all, you have to protect your object from them. It's good to find a nice quiet place so that the only wind that you're dealing with is the wind of your own mind. That's plenty right there. You have to keep all the defilements away, keep all your hindrances away until finally the meditation catches.

Ultimately there's a sense that it really does feel good to be with the breath. It really does feel good just to sit here breathing in, breathing out, and you're able to create a sense of fullness, making sure that you don't squeeze the breath out or force it too much in. That way, the body feels balanced. There's no sense that you're trying to push the breath into a solid.

Try to think of the body as energy already. As the breath comes in, it's simply new energy pooling into the energies you've already got. There's no clear line between the breath energy already there and the new breath coming in. They mingle together. Think of it that way. When the breath goes out, you don't have to squeeze it all out. Let the breath do the out-breath on its own, and learn how to read the point that tells you, "Now's

the time to breathe in again." Keep at it, and a sense of fullness will develop because you're not squeezing things as you're breathing out.

All too often, when we have that cartoon idea of the breath going out that you have to squeeze everything to get it out, we start squeezing things that we don't need to squeeze at all. That prevents any sense of fullness from having a chance to develop in the body. So you try to allow that sense of fullness to grow even as the breath goes out, to the point where the mind feels that its center of gravity has settled in. It's not constantly ready to run away.

Once it's settled in, you don't have to be quite so attentive to it. You still have to tend to it. But you can actually allow other thoughts to come in—not that you're going to go with them, but you're beginning to see the process of how a thought forms. There's room for that.

At the same time, while you're maintaining it, you find that you can actually get into deeper states. Ajaan Fuang gives the analogy of setting something in concrete. First you make the forms; then you pour the concrete into the forms. As long as the concrete hasn't yet set, you can't take the forms away. But as soon as it's set, you can take them away. No problem. The concrete won't spill out because now it's solid.

The same way with the directed thought and the evaluation: In the beginning, your mind is tempted to think about and evaluate things outside, so you have to turn your thinking to the breath and keep it there. If you stop thinking about the breath, the mind will start going back to its old outside preoccupations. But once things have settled in, and there's a sense of really belonging here, you can drop the directed thought and evaluation, and instead of going back to your ordinary state, you go into a deeper state of concentration where you're just *there.* The breath is one with the body; the mind is one with the breath. You don't have to do a lot of thinking to protect it. The sense of well-being is enough to keep you glued here. And so on into the higher stages of concentration.

Now, as you protect them, you find that the big issue is going to be boredom. Nothing's happening. Everything's very still. It feels good, but

the mind has this strange tendency: Once you've given it something really pleasant like this, it decides, "Okay, now I want something else." This is where you have to deal with the thoughts that would pull you away by saying, "Enough of this." You say, "No, it's not enough. I really want to master this skill. I want to see how deep it can go."

As for the thoughts that are bored, you have to question them: "Are you really bored, or is there something that's going to come up in the meditation that you're afraid to see?"—because that can happen, too, sometimes. The mind has its subterfuges. You have to watch out for them. It's here that you really get to know your mind really well—the different arguments it'll bring for thinking about something else, saying, "Enough of this." And you say, "No, not enough. I'm going to stay here," because the longer you stay, the more you're going to see.

Now, in simply getting the mind to stay here, you're getting some benefit from the concentration already. That's one of the uses—the sense of well-being—and there's also the opportunity to observe your defilements, to see more deeply into them. You see more and more clearly where their allure is: why there's that part of the mind that, even though you've got a state of concentration going, would like to do something else. Why? Sometimes, with things you've thought through many, many times, you want to go back to them again. Why? What else is there? What else is it that you haven't seen yet?

This is when you put the concentration to use: getting the mind still enough so that it can see things clearly, and with enough of a sense of well-being so that if something comes up that it's ordinarily embarrassed to admit to itself, it's feeling a little bit more good-natured, a little bit less threatened, and it's willing to admit, "Oh yeah. I do go for that."

This is what Ajaan Lee would call the cool fire of jhana. As he says, unlike the hot fires of your greed, aversion, and delusion, or passion, aversion, and delusion, it doesn't wear out your nerves. It's actually good for the body, good for the mind, and it brings light into areas of the mind

that have long been dark. You can read your mind because the flame is steady.

Of course, it's still burning. This is where the image of nibbana comes in. That's where there's no fire, no burning at all, even the cool fire of jhana. But it's through the cool fire that you get to the place where the fire goes out. So learn how to light this fire, tend to it, and put it to use.

Where Perceptions Can Take You

May 17, 2020

One of the basic teachings of the Forest tradition is that if you want to understand the aggregates, it's not necessary to go following all five. All you have to do is focus on one of them. If you really get to know that one very thoroughly, then the other four will come running in right there: The insights you gain into the one will then apply to the other four.

Very often the ajaans focus on perception as the big culprit that's creating trouble in the mind. You read Ajaan Maha Boowa talking about his analysis of contemplation of the body, and you'll find that it took him a while to realize that the problem isn't with the body—it's with the perceptions around the body. There are times when you *want* to perceive it as attractive, and other times you want to perceive it as unattractive. The wants in either case have very little to do with the actual body. It's more your desire, and the desire shows up in the perception.

Ajaan Chah talks about how he got started on really understanding what discernment was all about when he began to realize how arbitrary perceptions can be, and how useful it was to call them into question.

There's a passage in the Canon where Ven. Ananda comes to see Ven. Sariputta and asks him, "Why is it that some people gain liberation, and others don't?" Sariputta replies it's because they don't understand perception. There are four kinds, and they don't see their perceptions in light of these four. So it's useful to know what the four kinds are and how we should deal with them.

Sariputta said basically that there are perceptions that lead to decline, perceptions that lead to stability, perceptions that lead to distinction, and perceptions that lead to penetration. This list aims at getting you to look at perceptions not just in terms of what they tell you about things around you, saying, "Well, this is just the way I perceive things" or "This means

this." Instead, you ask yourself, "If I perceive things in this way, where's it going to take me?" You realize: If the way you perceive things is pulling you down, causing you to behave in unskillful ways, you've got to abandon it. As for the more skillful perceptions, you learn how to develop them, and then you realize that there are levels of skill you have to master.

So you start by looking out for the perceptions that lead to decline. These basically have to do with the perceptions around wrong resolve: perceptions of sensuality—in other words seeing something as really worthy of sensual desire; perceptions of ill will—seeing a person as really deserving to suffer; and perceptions of harmfulness—basically saying, "I don't have to be responsible for this person. I don't have to be careful around this person. This person doesn't matter. I can mistreat him as I want."

Those perceptions pull you down because you're going to act in unskillful ways based on them, so you have to do your best to counteract them. You counteract the perception of sensuality, of course, with contemplation of the body. Or if you have sensual desire for an object, contemplate the drawbacks of trying to acquire that object and holding on to it, and how much you're a slave to things if you let greed take charge of your mind.

The perception of ill will you counteract with the perception of goodwill, but also with perceptions of gratitude: realizing that we're in debt to one another. Or at the very least, use the perception that other people love themselves just as much as you do. If your happiness depends on their suffering, they're not going to stand for it. And remember, even in line with the principle of kamma, the Buddha never said that anyone *deserved* to suffer. If they could develop the proper skills, they could learn how not to suffer from past bad actions. The act of developing those skills makes the world a better place—as the Buddha said, they brighten the world like the moon when released from a cloud. So counteract thoughts of ill will with thoughts like these.

As for the perception of harmfulness, that's counteracted by the principle of kamma. If you harm others, the harm is going to come back at you. Do you want that? If not, you can't tell yourself that other people don't matter. You have to take their well-being into consideration.

Those are perceptions that lead you down. You want to abandon them.

The perceptions that lead to stability are those that get the mind into concentration. Once you've abandoned thoughts of sensuality, ill will, and harmfulness, then the mind can settle down. But when it settles down, it's going to need a perception to hold it there. This is why we hold on to perceptions of the breath in the body—and why it's very useful to have perceptions of the breath as not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, but also as the flow of energy through the body. Because, as the Buddha says, if you want to get the mind into right concentration, first you want to develop a sense of ease and fullness, and then you want that ease and fullness to spread through the body.

His analogy is of a bathman working water through a pile of soap dough. Back in those days they didn't have bars of soap. They had a soap powder, which was like flour. You mixed it with water and it gave you a ball of dough that you would then rub over your body. The bathman making this soap dough wants to make sure that all the powder is moistened, so that none of the parts are dry.

In the same way, the Buddha sets up a goal for what to do as you're getting the mind into right concentration: You want to spread the pleasure and rapture throughout the body so that none of the parts are dry. But he doesn't say how. Ajaan Lee is very helpful when he talks about perceiving the breath-energy channels flowing through the body and the different centers of the breath, allowing the breath to flow from those centers out through the entire body via the breath channels.

Some people find that if they can focus on the center right around the breastbone, breath seems to fill the body. It's connected to everything else in the body. It's as if there's a system of roads, and the breath center at the breastbone is the main intersection. When something makes it to the

intersection, and the intersection is open and unclogged, then the results will spread out quickly through the whole road system. That's one perception you can keep in mind.

Or when Ajaan Lee talks about the breath going down the back, down the legs, you can hold that perception in mind. Then there are levels of breath energy: gross, refined, and subtle. You can hold those perceptions in mind as well, because those will help move you beyond just being stabilized to what the Buddha calls *distinction:* in other words, getting the mind into higher levels of concentration.

One perception helpful here is seeing that as soon as you start breathing in, there's a level of breath energy that already has flowed all the way through the body. Some people make the mistake of thinking that if you're going to get the breath to go all the way down to the toes, you have to breathe really long, to get it down the back, and then down the legs. Actually, one level of the breath is very quick: As soon as you start breathing in, the whole body has already been nourished. So you can hold that perception in mind, and it makes it easier to settle down.

Then you can start perceiving the directed thought and evaluation that you're doing as gross—gross in the sense that they're burdensome, and that as the breath is moving around, it's moving perfectly fine, so it doesn't need all this thinking to help it along. Just hold that perception in mind: that the breath will flow on its own without your having to help. It's basically because you've opened the channels, you've done the work.

Now, what remains is the perception that as you breathe, energy comes welling up from within the body, and you hold that perception in mind. Then you start seeing the perceptions of pleasure and the perception of rapture as being kind of gross. So you focus more and more on the breath, and the breath gets more and more refined.

Finally, you bring the mind to equanimity, a sense of balance, to the point where it doesn't seem like the in-and-out breath is moving at all. The breath energy has saturated the body. Now, if you're afraid of not breathing, you won't be able to maintain that state. So you need another

perception: that you don't need to pull the air in. Tell yourself that any oxygen needs you have are being met, perhaps at the skin, perhaps who knows where, but they're being met. You can hold in mind the perception the breath energy begins inside the body anyhow, so there's nothing lacking. Nothing needs to be pulled in.

What you've done is that you've focused on one object, i.e., the breath, but you've changed your relationship to it by the way you perceive it, the way you perceive the body, and the way you perceive the mind in relation to the breath and the body.

From there you can go to even higher levels of concentration based on more and more refined perceptions. You begin to notice, as everything gets very still in the body, that the motion of the breath energy was what gave you your sense of the shape of the body. Now that it's begun to calm down, the sense of the boundary between what's inside and outside the body begins to dissolve.

You're left with little sensation dots, like a cloud, and you realize there's space between the dots. You can focus in on the space. You can hold in mind the perception of atoms: Atoms have lots of space between them, and there's lots of space inside them, so think of all that space connecting up without any artificial boundaries placed on it. That perception can get you into the infinitude of space, and you can hold that. You begin to perceive that the space that you're focused on extends through everything; it extends through the altar table, extends through the Buddha image, extends through the walls of the sala, the floor and the ceiling of the sala, the roof, the ground beneath you, out beyond to… you can't even see where the boundary is. You can hold that perception in mind.

Then there's the question of what it is that's knowing these things: There's an awareness. You can focus on the awareness encompassing the space. Hold that perception in mind. You begin to realize there's a oneness to that perception. Well, drop the perception of the oneness.

That's followed by another perception: nothingness. You can work your way up through the different levels of concentration to the dimension

of nothingness by changing the perception. In this case, you're changing the object of the perception—space, awareness, nothingness—but the relationship is the same: just holding on to the perception with a sense of equanimity, along with steady alertness and mindfulness. Those are the perceptions that lead to distinction.

The perceptions that lead to penetration, of course, are the perceptions having to do with seeing all things as fabricated and unworthy of attachment. You see that there's an intentional element that goes into everything you've experienced. You also realize that everything fabricated through that intentional element is going to end.

To induce dispassion toward fabrications, the Buddha sometimes talks in terms of the three perceptions of inconstancy, stress, not-self. Sometimes he gives lists of ten or eleven perceptions. "The undesirability of any world" is one of them. "The desirability of cessation," "the desirability of dispassion": These can all get the mind to the point where it realizes that it's been able to fabricate things based on perception, even its states of concentration, but these things are going to fall apart, so they can't be the ultimate goal. After all, we're conducting the noble search here. We're looking for something that doesn't die. Our perceptions die; fabrications die; the pleasure they create is going to die.

One of the images in the Canon is of a tree: If the tree falls down and decays, can you say that its shadow is going to stay the same that it was originally? Well, no, of course not. The shadow follows the tree. In the same way, whatever pleasure you get out of these perceptions is eventually going to follow the perceptions in falling away. That's when the mind gets inclined to what might be unfabricated.

Those are the perceptions that lead to penetration: that lead you finally to release. With release, you let them go, too. After all, they are aggregates. You've used them, you've taken the aggregates and turned them into a path, but the important thing to realize about all aggregates is that they're made for a purpose. That's what the Buddha means when he says they're fabricated: Everything fabricated has a purpose.

Our problem is that our purposes run at cross-purposes. They're all pretty chaotic. We just sit there with these conflicting fabrications we've made and we think, "Well, that's just the way I am." We forget we created them to begin with, and we had a purpose at some point.

So now we learn how to fabricate these things with a clear, coherent purpose, and a clear sense of where these different aggregates are going to take us—because the present moment doesn't just sit in the present moment, it leans into the future. It, too, is for the sake of something. Only when we get outside of space and time entirely will you be free from the need to think about *for the sake of anything* anymore.

When something comes up in the mind—perception, feeling, thought construct—ask yourself, "What is this for? Where does this lead?" Have a clear idea that it can lead in these different directions: Either it can pull you down, or it can stabilize the mind, or it can lead the mind to even more distinctive levels of being stable, or it can take you to penetration, and on through penetration to release.

These are the potentials of these mental labels and images that we hold in mind. So learn how to appreciate that they really do make a difference, that they really do take you someplace—and do your best to fashion them in a way that takes you where you really want to go.

A Diffuse Light

June 13, 2021

We have a book in our library with pictures of the peaks in California that are over 14,000 feet tall. It's a lovely book. At the back of the book is the photographer's note. He talks about how when he was younger, he used to travel the Sierras with a famous photographer who was known for his dramatic photos with sharp contrasts and intense colors. So when this photographer decided to set out and photograph all the peaks in California over 14,000 feet, he wanted the same effect.

He took pictures right at dawn or right at sunset with the mountains picking up the colors of the rising or the setting sun, with intense oranges and pinks. But as he took rolls and rolls of film, he began to notice that he actually preferred the pictures he had taken before sunrise and after sunset, when the light was softened and diffuse. All the details of the peaks stood out; each detail stood out and was given equal prominence. In the end, the photographs in that diffuse light were the ones he chose for the book.

The book reminds me of a perception that's very useful in the meditation. We usually think of the breathing being done by certain parts of the body and not by other parts. Some of your muscles are the workers, and the others are the freeloaders. When we focus on the breath, we tend to focus on the workers and leave the freeloaders in the background. So we get an unbalanced picture of the breath in the body.

In the beginning of the meditation, though, this picture is useful. You need a place to keep your focus anchored. And the conception of the breath goes to either: "That's the one spot where you're inhaling," or "That's the one spot that's doing the work of sucking in the air, sucking in a breath."

Then, as the mind settles down, you can move from that—the perception of the breath coming from the outside—to the perception of

the breath originating inside.

Here again, there are centers of the breath, where the breathing sensations stand out. Ajaan Lee talks about them: the top of the head, the middle of the head, the palate, the base of the throat, the tip of the sternum, the point just above the navel. And those are just a few. You can think of the breath radiating from those spots. If you sense any spot where there's a blockage as that breath energy radiates from the centers, you allow the blockage to dissolve. This perception gets you closer to a state where you can breathe more and more calmly. You don't feel the need to pull breath energy in from outside because you realize it's already there inside.

But you can move that perception even further. You can think of every cell in the body as being a little breath center, expanding and contracting. Every cell has the same weight, every cell pulls the same weight, and you try to expand your awareness to be in touch with all of those parts of the breath energy without giving prominence to any one.

As you do this, you begin to see a lot of details of the breath energy in the body that you would otherwise miss. At the same time, there's a very strong sense that there's never any moment when the body doesn't have breath. It's all there all the time. So you can stay with these breath sensations all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-, and all the way in between. In this way, your focus doesn't have pauses.

Often when we meditate, our attention is present in phrases, like phrases of music. A few notes are connected, and there's a pause. The next few notes are connected. Then there's a pause. Or like a movie where there are many different takes. There's a short take here, then the camera angle shifts, and there's a short take there. It's very rare that you have one long, single take where the camera doesn't move and you don't leave that particular camera angle. But when you can stay with the one camera angle and have a long take, it's a lot calmer. You notice this with TV nowadays. The little bits and pieces of which the shows are composed are a lot shorter. It's very frazzling for the nerves. One long take is much more calming.

And here, your long take can be that every cell in the body is breathing in, breathing out. The in-breath shades into the out-breath, and the out-breath shades into the in-breath in all your cells. They're all right there all the time. It's as if the body were filled with a diffuse light, and all the details stand out. This is probably *the* best perception you can have to get the mind into strong states of concentration where the breath is minimal and yet you don't feel starved of breath. You actually feel full.

It may take a while to work up to this. You start out with a sense that you're going to spotlight some parts of the body rather than others, as you get going with the breath at the beginning of each meditation session. But there will come a time when you want to switch, first to the perception that the breath originates inside, and then to the perception that the breath originates with every cell equally throughout the body.

See what that does to help the mind settle down. You're calming mental fabrication. In other words, the perception of the breath originating in every cell is much calmer than the perception of the breath originating in any one spot to the detriment of others. And both are calmer than the perception that the breath has to come from outside. As the perceptions get the mind calmer, they get the breath calmer as well.

This is one of the ways in which the Buddha's four tetrads in breath meditation are all happening at the same time. You're calming bodily fabrication by calming mental fabrication. It's in this way that you can begin to see how all four tetrads—the tetrad related to the body, the tetrad related to feelings, the tetrad related to the mind, and the tetrad related to dhammas—help one another along.

As you get more sensitive to the process of fabrication, energize it in the beginning and then calm it down. You're following the same pattern of the factors for awakening. You energize with analysis, which builds on mindfulness, followed by effort and rapture. Then you calm things down with calm, concentration, and equanimity. It's that active analysis of qualities that helps you see fabrication, while the more passive ones help

you to calm fabrication down. You see the body and the mind working together in this way for the sake of a very stable, solid awareness.

That allows you to pick up insights in areas that used to be hidden by the fact that the spotlight was someplace else. After all, wherever there's a spotlight, there's going to be a lot of darkness around it. But where there's a diffuse light, everything is allowed to glow with its own inner light. Everything can show itself for what it is.

Recollection of the Buddha

June 5, 2021

As the Buddha said, everywhere we go, we go with craving as our companion. We think it's our friend, but it's a non-friend, as in the chant we chanted just now. It cheats us, it flatters and cajoles, it's good only in word, and it's our companion in ruinous fun. The question is, how much longer do we want to associate with that kind of friend?

The Buddha offers himself as an alternative friend: an admirable friend, a person of conviction, generosity, virtue, and discernment. That's the kind of friend we want to develop outside, and the kind of friend we want to develop inside, too, so that we can be our own best friend.

As we sit here and meditate, we can make it a pleasant pastime—doing it every now and then—or we can be more serious about it, realizing that it's not just a relaxation technique or a quiet way to spend an hour. It's a way to understand what's going on deep down inside the mind, and why the mind is so often fooled by its cravings.

After all, we all want happiness, and yet cravings get us to do a lot of things that make us suffer. Why are we so bamboozled? What in us likes the craving? Why do we listen to it?

Meditation allows you to find this out, but you have to stick with it. And to stick with it, you have to go against the craving. It'll tell you all kinds of reasons why you can delay the practice to some later time. One of its favorite arguments, of course, is the middle way: "Don't put too much effort in. Don't push yourself too much." But as Ajaan Maha Boowa said, the middle way of craving is right in the middle of a pillow. And it just keeps taking us back to the same old places we've been to before—whereas if we take the Buddha as our admirable friend, he's going to take us someplace new. But to take him as our friend requires dedication. It requires commitment, equanimity, patience, endurance: all those tough

virtues. We have to find some way to generate desire inside, so that the tough virtues don't seem quite so tough and so forbidding.

It's here that the guardian meditations are useful. This is a list of meditation topics that doesn't come in the Canon. It comes someplace later. I don't know exactly where it originated. King Rama IV wrote a Pali poem based on the four guardian meditations in the nineteenth century, and that may be based on an earlier tradition. The topics are all found in the Canon, though, and it's a useful set of topics to master.

The first guardian meditation is recollection of the Buddha. You take seriously the fact that the Buddha is not just a mythic figure or an archetype. He was a real human being who decided that he wasn't going to be satisfied until he could find something deathless. What would it be like to meet somebody like that, or at the very least, to take that as an option—that this is what human beings can do? Human beings can be this dedicated, and they come out happy.

Our society tends to think of people who take on a very serious religious vocation as warped or miserable, but here the Buddha's given the example of someone who was so dedicated that he was willing to torture himself to see if that was one of the options for finding true happiness. Fortunately, it was not. He found true happiness in another way.

You can imagine how he would keep himself going: A lot of it had to do with how he talked to himself—how he kept the goal in mind—and with developing a great deal of truthfulness. He tried different paths and, as he said, he wouldn't rest satisfied until he knew that he had tried that path in a genuine way, so that he could say yes or no, that it really did or did not lead to the goal.

So he offered himself up as an experimental subject: his body and his mind. They were the things that were going to be experimented on. And he had to feel his way.

We have the advantage of having his example, so we should think about how fortunate we are to have that example, and what it says about us, that

this is a potential that we have: We can be that true. We can be that dedicated. And happy.

You say, "I look at myself, and the Buddha's example seems to be very far away." But if you dedicate yourself to the next step and the next step and the next step in the path, you will find that you'll change as a person. The person you are right now is not the same person who's going to be finding awakening. You'll develop new qualities along the way.

How do you develop them? Gradually. This is why the path is gradual. It takes a while to develop these qualities. That's why the path requires endurance as you stick with it. The ajaans in Thailand found that Westerners coming to study with them tended to lack two qualities: endurance on one hand, and equanimity on the other. But these are qualities in which we can train ourselves.

I remember when I was there, some people would say, "Westerners can do a good impersonation of a practitioner, but they don't have the stick-to-it-tivedness that's really needed." I took that as a challenge.

So find whatever way you can to challenge yourself, and to see it as a challenge you're up for. The practice is not going to leave you strung-out. After all, it *is* a middle way. It's just that your idea of the middle way—what's just right—is going to change as you practice.

It's like exercising the body. The amount of exercise you do at the very beginning won't be adequate for the exercise regime as a whole, but as you work on it, work on it, work on it, whether it's in the number of miles you run, the weights you lift, or whatever, your idea of what's just right will grow as the exercise makes you stronger.

Think about the Buddha: He started out as a prince, living a very luxurious and easeful lifestyle. Then he decided to go out and live in the wilderness, to live on alms. One version of his story—it's not in the Canon, it's in one of the later versions—says that his reaction to his very first alms meal was disgust. He asked himself, "Am I going to have to live off this?" But he stopped to reflect: "This is food that's been offered freely," so he learned to look at the food in a positive way. Food that's offered

freely comes with no strings attached. There's nothing unskillful in the way it's obtained.

So bit by bit by bit, he was able to get his mind around a totally different style of living, until ultimately he was even able to torture himself. When, after six years, he realized that that was not the way, he was able to give up the pride that went along with that self-torture.

Just think about it: What keeps a person going, when you're giving things up, giving things up? Usually there's a lot of pride. But when he realized that this was not the path, he was willing to swallow his pride and allow the five brethren to look down on him and to withdraw their respect. He didn't let that deter him. He was still looking for an alternative way. He kept at it to that extent.

One of the lessons he learned was that you're not practicing to make yourself better than other people, or to exalt oneself or disparage others. As he said when he reflected on the six years of torture, he realized, when he compared himself to all the others in the past who had followed that route, that nobody else had ever gone this far. There was a comparing mind there. Which is why, in the customs of the noble ones, he says to be very careful about your practice of contentment. Make sure you're not disparaging other people or exalting yourself over the fact that you're more content than they are. So he learned from his own mistakes.

That, too, should be part of our motivation: He was willing to recognize a mistake and learn from it. He didn't try to cover it up. So when we make our own mistakes, we shouldn't try to cover them up, either. He didn't let the fact that he'd spent six years in a blind alley deter him. As he said, there must be another way. That, too, is a good example. When you find yourself up against a brick wall, remind yourself there's got to be a way around it.

Years back when I was in Thailand, I was translating Ajaan Maha Boowa, and I had just translated his talk on how the radiant mind is ignorance. Just at that point we had a monk from another tradition come to stay with us. We tended to have this pattern: Western monks from other

monasteries came to our monastery usually when they were about to disrobe. This was their last straw: to try out one last place they had never been to before.

This particular monk read the piece and got very disheartened. He said, "I've been trying to get to the radiant mind, thinking that that was the goal. Now I'm being told that even that is ignorance."

Well, that attitude is the mind-set that gets defeated, saying, "I've tried so hard, so hard, so hard and I'm still not there. I'm going to give up." That mind-set is not one of your friends. The inner friend who has compassion for you—as the chant says, "the one *sympathetic* to friends"—is the one that reminds you, "Okay, what's past is past, but there's still energy. There's still the possibility of something new." So when you come to an impasse, remind yourself: There has to be a way around it.

If there were no way around it, then the Buddha wouldn't have gained awakening. We already have his example. We have the example of the noble Sangha. There's got to be a way around it. It may take time, and this is where patience and endurance come in.

Not that you just sit there and endure, but you watch. And you try to watch from a firm foundation, so that what you see is likely to be a lot more accurate. Think of the Buddha teaching Rahula to make his mind like earth: not so that he would just sit there like a clod of dirt, but so that his mind would be solid, so that he could observe.

When you do any scientific experiment, you want to make sure that the equipment is set on a solid table, and the solid table is based on a solid floor. Then the equipment can measure subtle things with a lot of precision and accuracy, and you can trust the results. In the same way, if you want to see subtle things in the mind, you've got to make your mind as solid as possible.

That way, when the mind has its subtle movements, you can detect them. Otherwise, they're just there in the background. They seem to be part of the wake of your own movements. Or if everything seems to be unstable, you can't see anything at all. You're not sure which part is

moving, which is staying still, because everything seems to be fluid and uncertain. So you've got to make your mind certain. That way, you'll have something that's certain to measure everything else by.

This is one of the things we admire in the Buddha, probably the most solid person who ever lived. And as he kept saying, his qualities of ardency, resolution, and heedfulness were not his alone. As he put it, when he gained this or that level of jhana, this or that level of knowledge, it was "as happens in one who is ardent, heedful, and resolute."

In other words, *anybody* who develops these qualities is going to see these things—which opens the way for everybody. That should be *the big message* of trying to recollect the Buddha: that he showed what's possible, what potentials we have as human beings.

Ajaan Lee made the comment one time that we human beings have lots of potentials within us that we don't take advantage of—potentials in the body in terms of the breath and the other elements, potentials in the mind in terms of the skills we can learn. We've got all these potentials, but what do we use them for? To make money, to gain fame, to get status, to get pleasures—things that just wash away, wash away.

Whereas there's the example of the Buddha: It is possible to develop our potentials so that we can find something deathless inside—something outside space and time. That's a potential within us.

When we think of the Buddha as our admirable friend, this is the lesson he gives: that we have a lot more potential than we think we do, and we shouldn't sell ourselves short.

The part of the mind that takes this seriously is your friend, not the craving that wants to take things easy. Remember, the easy path is the one that leads to endless suffering. Whereas, the path that the Buddha laid out, even though it's hard at times, is not always hard. After all, a major part of the path, a central factor of the path, is right concentration: rapture, pleasure. And it leads to an end: a happiness that more than repays the effort put into the path.

So when you think of the Buddha, make sure your thoughts then come back to your practice, and have them energize your practice. That's the whole purpose of his teaching, which is to help us see that we have these potentials within us, and that we can develop them.

If you have any gratitude to the Buddha at all—which is the proper response—then you should want to develop those potentials as far as you can.

Goodwill as a Guardian

June 7, 2021

The Buddha teaches three governing principles, three ways of thinking to keep yourself on the path, and two of them have to do with goodwill, or *metta.* The first one involves your goodwill for yourself. You remind yourself that you entered on this path because you wanted to put an end to your suffering. Basically, you loved yourself. But now what? If you're planning to leave the path, does it mean you no longer want to put an end to the suffering? What happened to your goodwill for yourself?

That's one way of thinking that involves goodwill. The other way has to do with other people's goodwill for you. The Buddha calls it: "taking the world as a governing principle." You remind yourself that there are beings in the world who can read your mind. Suppose the Buddha were reading your mind and he saw that you were planning to give up on the path. What would he think? He'd be concerned. If you're thinking this way, you should feel embarrassed, because here's someone else who has goodwill for you, who wants to see you put an end to suffering—and you're going to let someone else have more goodwill for you than you have for yourself?

Thinking in these ways shows how goodwill is one of the guardian meditations. It's one of the ways of keeping yourself on the path. You start out: "May I be happy, may I be free from stress and pain." Well, where are you going to find happiness? It's not going to come floating by. It's going to come because you've done something that's conducive to happiness. Think about the Buddha's ways of expressing what it means to extend goodwill to yourself and goodwill to others. It's not simply: "May you be happy, happy, happy." He also includes thoughts along the lines of: "May you not behave in an unskillful way." In one of the suttas where the Buddha expresses that, he says, "May no one despise anyone, or wish ill to anyone anywhere." In other words, not only may these people be happy, but may they also not

engage in unskillful behavior, which would then lead to results of unskillful behavior: pain and suffering. May they develop thoughts of universal goodwill, too.

Which means when you think of goodwill for yourself, it should include not only, "May I be happy," but also, "May I understand the causes for happiness and be willing and able to act on them." Then you spread the same thought to others, hoping that they will behave in a skillful way, too. You place no limits on your goodwill.

Ask yourself: "Is there anybody out there for whom it's hard to feel goodwill of this sort?" Some people will probably come to mind. But, then you have to ask yourself further: "What do I gain from their suffering? What would the world gain from their suffering?" You might say, "Well, maybe they'll come to their senses." But a lot of people, when they suffer, don't come to their senses at all. They just get more and more entrenched in their old ways. The world would be a much better place if people could *understand* how to find genuine happiness and then act on their understanding. If there's any way you can help them toward that understanding, you'll be happy to help.

Thinking like this protects you in lots of ways, guards you in lots of ways, in that it helps to keep you on the path. After all, remind yourself: If you really want to be happy, this is what you've got to do. Goodwill is a universal good human quality, but it becomes specifically Buddhist when you start thinking about what the Buddha had to say about what leads to happiness. You think about his goodwill in teaching us to begin with. He taught what? How to put an end to suffering. That was motivated by goodwill. It's the best way to find happiness.

The Buddha's greatest gift, when people came to see him, would be to teach them. He'd start with a graduated discourse, talking about the virtues of giving, the virtues of observing the precepts, the sensual rewards of giving, the sensual rewards of the precepts, but then the drawback of sensuality. In other words, the rewards would be either happiness in the human realm or in the higher realms. But even those higher realms have

their drawbacks, because the kind of pleasure that comes in this way is not going to last forever. If you get used to having nothing but good things happening to you as a result of your past good kamma, it begins to spoil you. Then you get complacent and you start misbehaving, you fall again, and then you have to start all over again.

When the Buddha saw that his listeners could acknowledge these drawbacks, then he'd teach them the four noble truths. Those truths are counterintuitive in a lot of ways. But once he had prepared you to accept these truths, you'd be inclined to follow the duties with regard to them. Many times, as he would teach people these truths, they would have their first experience of awakening, called gaining the Dhamma eye. That was his gift to them. There were even people who went to see the Buddha to argue with him—there were even cases where people were sent to *kill* him—and yet this is how he responded. He talked to them in a way that made them open their eyes and gain awakening.

A sign of the great compassion and the great goodwill that he had for all beings.

So as I said earlier, think about the goodwill the Buddha had for you. What goodwill do you have for yourself? If you content yourself with anything less than awakening, you can't really say that you have goodwill—at least not in the Buddha's eyes, not in the framework provided by the Dhamma. So goodwill is a guardian in that it keeps you motivated to practice.

Now, there are other passages in the Canon that talk about how goodwill also protects you from the bad influences of past bad actions. If your goodwill is large and expansive, it lessens the impact of the bad things you did in the past. There's even a passage where he says that someone who is extending thoughts of goodwill is not going to die from fire or weapons. But the real protection is what genuine goodwill gets you to do *now:* It motivates you to keep on practicing because it forces you to think about what happiness is. It's pleasant enough to think, "May all beings be

happy, happy, happy," But then you should start thinking more about, well, what would real happiness be?

I knew of a woman one time who was having difficulties with her landlord and she told me that she was trying to have goodwill for him. She was imagining him with a nice house, a swimming pool, lots of girlfriends, fancy cars. I said: "Wait a minute, no. You can have those things and still be miserable. Real goodwill has to do with 'May you be deeply happy at heart.'" That kind of happiness has to come from developing skillful qualities in the mind.

Real happiness, of course, comes from seeing that what the Buddha taught is true: There is a deathless element; there is a dimension where the mind doesn't have to suffer from aging, illness, and death. When that becomes your standard for happiness, then goodwill really does protect you and guard you, because you won't be willing to settle for anything less than a happiness that's absolutely safe: safe from heedlessness, safe from making you behave in unskillful ways. You develop the qualities that the Buddha said were key to his awakening: persistence and an unwillingness to settle for second best.

So thoughts of goodwill protect you not only from ill will, but also from laziness and complacency—if you think those thoughts in the right way. This is where a generic good human quality becomes heightened as it's practiced in the context of the Dhamma. It's good for you to think of it in that context, too—and to act on it as well. That's when goodwill genuinely becomes a guardian meditation.

Body Contemplation

June 9, 2021

The passage we chanted just now talks about having goodwill for beings that are born and those seeking birth. The Buddha was a good example of someone who had goodwill for both kinds of beings. Think about the way he taught body contemplation. It's good for you while you're alive, and it's good to keep in mind when you die. It's a good practice to have done when the mind is trying to figure out where to go. While you're alive, it's good for dealing with lust or with any sense of pride around your body.

In the Forest tradition, they teach two kinds of body contemplation. One is taking the body apart into its component parts, visualizing the different parts one by one by one—although they also recommend remembering that the body, as you take it apart like this, is not made out of neat organs like you see in an anatomical diagram. Everything is all covered with blood, even the bones. It's good to think about the fact that here is this human body—which the Buddha said is the most captivating sensual object in the world; if you're looking for happiness in the human plane, this is the central place—yet what is it made out of? Its beauty goes only as deep as the skin. And even the skin itself, if you were to take it off, would be nothing to look at, just a slimy pile. Yet people are so infatuated with this.

The Buddha taught body contemplation as a way of getting out of that infatuation, protecting yourself not only from your own defilements but from other people's as well. A lot of defilements are built around your possessiveness around the body, your identification with the body, the idea that it's beautiful, the idea that it's better than other people's bodies. We can do a lot of stupid, foolish, and harmful things based on the defilements that come out of those beliefs. At the same time, if you're attached to how

you look, there's always the question: Do you still look good? That question makes you an easy mark for other people. You want to look good in their eyes, and they'll be happy to tell you what you want to hear because they have designs on you.

Think of the case of the nun going through the forest. A libertine comes up and talks to her about how lovely she is. He invites her to leave her life as a nun. She says, "What is there in this body that you can even look at?" "Your eyes," he says. "Your eyes." He goes on and on and on about her eyes. Fortunately, she'd contemplated her body so that she wasn't infatuated with her eyes or with any part of it at all, which meant that she was immune to his designs. She finally says, "Well, if you like my eyes, here, here, have one." She plucks one out and offers it to him. Of course that scares him: a woman that bold, a woman that brave. He backs off.

The fact that she had done this contemplation was what saved her. The story ends with her going to see the Buddha. Just looking at him, the eye that she had plucked out grew back: symbolic of course, of the fact that her inner eyes were very clear. And because she was clear about the nature of the body, that's what saved her.

The other contemplation that's popular in the Forest tradition is imagining your body as it ages and then decomposes at death. Ajaan Fuang would often have students who, as they were meditating, would get a vision of themselves sitting in front of themselves. He'd say, "Okay, imagine that body in one year from now, two years, three, four, five, ten, twenty, thirty. Watch it decay. And then when it dies, one day after it's dead, two days, three, four, five, as it swells up, gets livid, breaks open, and then dries up to the point where there's nothing left but bones."

He would then have them burn the bones so that there would be nothing but dust and ashes. Then he'd have them go from the dust back through the bones, reversing the various stages of decomposition back to the body as it is in the present moment, to remind them that this is the fate of this body they were sitting in right there. That's what it's going to become. Again, that's to get rid of any sense of attachment around it.

This is how the teaching helps when you're passing away as well. Ajaan Fuang noted this when he was teaching meditation in Bangkok. He taught at a funeral monastery and sometimes on a Saturday evening, when there were very few people coming to see him—on Saturdays most people would come in the middle of the day—he'd walk around the monastery a bit to stretch his legs. One day he came back and said, "You know, the number of people who die and don't leave their bodies is really large." You wonder what he saw. You can imagine people identifying themselves with their bodies, then being pushed out, but not imagining anything else, and not knowing where to go: What would it be like to hang around the body as it decomposes?

The purpose of this is to realize that once you've left this body, you don't want to hang around. There's nothing of any value here. It also reminds you if you go to any other body, the same thing is going to happen: the same 32 parts of the body and then death again, decay, death, more decay. When will we have had enough? If you come back to the human realm, this is it: This is the most riveting sensual object in the human realm, the one that excites the most fantasizing. But when you look at it objectively, this is all you get: The parts that you like are right next to parts that are disgusting. You can't have one without the other, so why take either?

The purpose of this contemplation is to lift your sights, to realize that there must be a better way to find happiness. Think of the Buddha's graduated or step-by-step discourse, talking about the virtue of generosity, the virtue of observing the precepts, the rewards of generosity and virtue in terms of sensual pleasures in the human realm and heavenly realms, but then the drawbacks of sensuality. The text even calls it the *degradation* of sensuality.

Think of all the degrading things you do for sensual pleasures, but then even if you get the best sensual pleasures, you're going to have to lose them. When you lose them, you fall down again, and you have to start

being good again. It just goes around and around and around and it goes *nowhere.*

What's the allure? Your perceptions of beauty around the body. The body is not the problem. The problem is with your perceptions. You want to perceive the body as beautiful to feed your fantasies, and this is the way we deal with sensual pleasures of all kinds. The real pleasure is in the fantasizing: the embroidery, the fabrication around the actual feeling of pleasure—our thoughts of the kind of sensual pleasures we'd like and the sensual pleasures we've had.

The free play of our imagination is what keeps pulling us back—because, in that free play, you're free to lie to yourself, and the mind *likes* to lie to itself. After all, what are the actual objects of sensual pleasure? They all have their drawbacks, but in the mental image you create around them you can erase the drawbacks. You can have all the fun you want, but then when you try to live out your fantasies, they keep pulling you back to these same old things, the same old disappointments.

Here again we see the Buddha's compassion, his goodwill for us in setting these teachings out, so that we begin to see how the mind has been lying to itself. You can ask yourself: "How much longer do you want to be taken in by your own lies?"

Ajaan Maha Boowa talked about doing body contemplation to the point where he'd just look at a human body and immediately take it apart. In fact, it got so in his imagination that it would fall apart on its own. He began to wonder: Was he done with sensual desire? There had been no moment of insight, though, that had told him, "Okay, this is the point where it's done." So he started imagining a beautiful body to test his mind. It took several days, but finally, on the third or fourth day, there was just a little bit of a stirring of liking for that body. So he realized that his sensual desire was not gone. What to do now? He came to see that the issue was with the perception of attractive and the perception of unattractive, and the desires behind those perceptions: the fact that we *want* to lie to ourselves.

Look into that desire, right there, because that's the key to why we keep on suffering. We cling to the things that make us suffer, and this is why we like to lie to ourselves: so that we can keep on clinging, thinking that's the only way to find happiness. So look at that, try to figure that one out, and you will have gone far in unlocking a lot of the secrets of the mind, the secrets of its ignorance and its craving.

That's what the Buddha tells us, out of his compassion. He's giving us this meditation as a protection. It's listed as one of the guardian meditations. So it's up to us to actually do the meditation, to get that protection, even though it's listed as a painful meditation topic.

As he said, contemplation of the body leads to the deathless. Look into it to see how that's so.

Mindfulness of Death

June 18, 2021

Of the four guardian meditations, two are special. Contemplation of the foulness of the body and mindfulness of death, the Buddha said, can both lead to the deathless. He doesn't say that about recollection of the Buddha, doesn't say that about the development of goodwill, but if you follow the contemplation of the body and mindfulness of death in the proper way, they can take you beyond the body and beyond death.

How mindfulness of death does this can be seen in those five recollections that we chant so often. The last three are especially relevant here. First, you simply remind yourself of the fact of death. It could come at any time. You haven't gone beyond it. You can see other people dying, and it's so easy to forget: They die; well, we're going to die, too. We're remarkably blind in that way. We're like the penguins in the story Charcot told of his sailors down in Antarctica. They were staying next to a penguin colony, and the sailors found that they could kill a penguin right in the middle of the colony, take it back, and make penguin pâté, as long as they were quiet about it. The other penguins didn't notice. The men could walk through the colony, and the penguins felt no fear even though their numbers were going down one by one by one. That's the way it is with a lot of us. So the Buddha has you reflect: You haven't gone beyond death. It can come at any time.

There's a famous passage where he's talking to some monks and saying, "Cultivate mindfulness of death." Different monks say, "Well, I already do that." The Buddha asks them how often they do it. One monk says he does it once a day. Another monk says twice a day. The monks get down to shorter and shorter intervals, until finally one monk says, "In the amount of time that it takes to chew a morsel of food, I tell myself I could die, but I can do a lot in the meantime." Another monk says, "In the amount of time

it takes to breathe in and breathe out, I tell myself I have enough time in this one breath to do a lot of good in the practice." The Buddha says, of the various monks, only those last two are really heedful. The rest are heedless. In other words, you have to be right on top of the present moment, realizing that you have no time to waste. There's work to be done here.

What kind of work to be done is something that comes not only with reflecting on the *fact* of death, but also the Buddha's analysis of *what happens* at death.

That falls in with the next two reflections. You're going to be separated from all that is dear and appealing to you. Often our first reaction to the thought of death is, "If I die, I'll be missing this person, that person." If the reflection were to stop there, you'd be left without any real guidance. You'd simply start getting sentimental, very attached, very clingy. But then the Buddha goes on to have you reflect about kamma: that you're the owner of your actions; the other person is the owner of his or her actions. How you die, and where you're going to go after you die, is going to depend a great deal on your actions both present and past. It's not going to depend on any other person at all.

This is where the Buddha gives specific guidance, saying that at the moment of death, the mind will latch on to craving and be swept from one body to another, in the same way that a fire can latch on to the wind and be swept from one burning house to a house next door, setting that second house on fire. The problem with wind is that it's blind. Craving tends to be blind, too, so you want to make sure that your kamma is not blind.

At the moment of death, you're going to be offered choices. Which houses happen to be next door will depend on what you've been doing throughout your life. If you've been doing good things, there will be good houses. Things not so good, they'll be houses you might not want to go to, but that's where the wind will blow you.

So as the Buddha said, there are four qualities you want to develop to help ensure that you'll at least have a good house to be blown to.

There's conviction—conviction in the Buddha's awakening.

Virtue—making sure that you follow the precepts.

Generosity—you're generous with your wealth, with your time. As the Buddha said in another reference to a burning house, when a house is about to burn down, you don't leave valuables in the house. You get them out of the house—and the ones you get out are the ones that you'll be able to save. In the same way, the things you've given away are saved. The things you hold on to are the ones that you'll have to leave behind in the burning house.

Finally, there's discernment—seeing what's skillful in the mind, what's unskillful in the mind, and knowing how to talk yourself into doing what's skillful and out of doing what's unskillful, regardless of your likes or dislikes.

When you reflect on the fact of your own death, remind yourself, "These are the qualities I've got to develop in myself." When you reflect on the fact that the people you love are going to die, your best gift to them before you part would be to encourage them to develop these qualities as well. In this way, you're a true good friend to them, because after all, these four qualities are the attributes of a *kalyana-mitta,* an admirable friend.

We tend to think of a *kalyana-mitta* as being a friend in the Dhamma, but being a *kalyana-mitta* can also mean simply that you're a friend to other members of your family, those who are close to you. If you really love them, you remind yourself that they're agents, too. They're subject to their kamma. Then you want to do your best to make sure, to whatever extent you can influence them, that they're established in these qualities as well.

There are also other qualities that the Buddha recommends developing in preparation for death. There's a list of the qualities of devas. It's basically those four qualities—conviction, virtue, generosity, discernment—plus learning. This, of course, refers to the Dhamma you've learned, and most particularly, I think, the Dhamma you've memorized. This is why it's good to memorize passages in Pali, passages in Pali and English, so that you have some skillful thoughts sloshing around in the mind. After all, as death

comes, the mind can latch on to all kinds of things, and if you've been impregnating your mind with good Dhamma, then that can have an influence on you at times like that. That's some of the past kamma you'll be bringing with you.

As for the beings that go to the level of the Brahmas, they develop the brahmaviharas. This is another good way of preparing for death.

At the same time, you want to develop the qualities that you'll need right at the moment of the death, the present kamma that you'll be engaged in at that time. There's a sutta where the Buddha comes to a sick ward and tells the monks to approach death mindful and alert. These are the two main qualities you're going to need at that time, and of course they're the qualities you develop as you meditate. The Buddha then gives the standard definition for establishing mindfulness: keeping focused on the body in and of itself—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. The same with feelings in and of themselves, mind-states in and of themselves, dhammas in and of themselves.

As for alertness, you're alert to the postures of the body, the movements of the body as they're happening, so you're focused on what you're doing, and you want to make sure that craving doesn't sweep in and distract you at that point.

This is where the other guardian meditations are helpful. When you're feeling abandoned, alone, facing the fact that you could be dying, you recollect the Buddha and all the noble ones who've been practicing. You're following in their footsteps. They were able to approach the moment of death as victors—and, in many cases, alone. One of the purposes of the recollection of the Buddha and Sangha is that if they can do it, you can, too.

When memories come up of people who have wronged you or people whom you've wronged, develop thoughts of goodwill. When you start getting attached to the body, it's good to recollect that the body is made out of what? It's made out of those 32 parts, plus other parts, none of

which is endowed with any special inherent goodness. The goodness of the body is what you did with it. Now that it's a tool no longer functioning, it's time to put the tool aside. It's not good for anything anymore, except as an object of contemplation.

If you can maintain your focus, then the Buddha has you focus particularly on the issue of feelings in the body, because those are the things that'll stand out most at that point. If there's a feeling of pain, he has you reflect on the fact that this feeling of pain is dependent on what? It's dependent on the body. Is the body constant? No, it's inconstant. If the condition is inconstant, how can the pain be constant?

There's another passage that says pain is like the shadow of a stump. The stump is inconstant. It's not going to last forever, so how can its shadow last forever? So look at pains as shadows. And as the Buddha said, when you reflect on this, from inconstant you go to stressful, from stressful you go to not-self. That's how you engage in the last four steps of breath meditation at that point: focused on inconstancy, focused on dispassion, cessation, and then letting go.

So whatever pains come up, approach them this way, not with the thought that "This is my pain" or "I am in pain," but simply seeing that the body is one thing, the pain is something else. The body as a cause is inconstant, so the pain's got to be inconstant, too. Look for its inconstancy. That helps to pull you out.

Then the Buddha has you go on and do the same thing with feelings of pleasure and feelings of equanimity. In other words, if you're able to get the mind into deep concentration at that point, you realize that these states, too, are dependent on the body. The pleasure of jhana, the equanimity of jhana: They, too, are things you have to let go. If you can do this, the Buddha says, then you can be free of any aversion-obsession with regard to pain, any passion-obsession with regard to pleasure, and any ignorance-obsession with regard to equanimity. You sense these things disjoined from them, realizing that as the body ends, they're going to end, too, and what remains is the deathless.

That's how mindfulness of death prepares you to find the deathless. It depends on remembering that we're not simply aware of the fact that death is going to happen, but we also have a particular take on *how* it's going to happen: the Buddha's instructions on how to anticipate what's going to happen. The mind will be swept along by its cravings depending on its kamma, the kamma you do as you go through the day and the kamma you're doing as you approach the moment of death. Your daily habits, your meditative skills—these are the things that will determine whether you suffer or not. This way, you're prepared emotionally, but you're also prepared in terms of the skills you'll have to bring to bear. When you approach mindfulness of death from this perspective, then you're going to get the most out of it.

So as the Buddha says, when you see the sun set, remind yourself that this could be your last sunset. You could go tonight. Are you ready to go? Look at what needs to be done, both in terms of preparing yourself and in terms of leaving a good gift behind for the people you'll have to leave. Remember those four qualities: conviction, virtue, generosity, discernment. To whatever extent you can develop them, to whatever extent you can help others develop them, that's your gift. But your true gift to yourself, though, comes in the form of the skills you develop as you meditate, learning how not to get distracted, how to stay mindful, alert—and in particular, alert not only to the postures of the body, but also to what you're doing in the mind, how you're relating to your feelings and to your sense of the body.

The work that needs to be done is not far away. It's all right here, which is good because there will come a time when death will be right here and you'll have your skills right here, too. You'll be prepared.

To Escape the Prison of Time

September 28, 2020

My background in school was in intellectual history—what's sometimes called the history of ideas. And one of the basic premises of intellectual history is that if you want to understand a person's thought, you have to know when he or she lived, and what the other people of the time were thinking.

The underlying premise there, of course, is that each person is a prisoner of his or her own time. It was a rare individual who could think outside the box. Sometimes the box would change just a little bit, and then the new box would become the prison for the people of the next generation.

But somehow the practice of intellectual history itself seemed to be standing outside of time. In other words, they'd figured out all the other times, but somehow it was more objective, and wasn't subject to its own rules.

When I met Ajaan Fuang, that got all overturned. I began to realize that I was a prisoner of my own time. It took a while, though.

When I first went to Thailand and learned about Buddhism, people were telling me that the Buddha taught the truth about this, the truth about that, but my background kept telling me, "Well, he saw the truth through the lens of his own time. He might have some useful insights for us now, but we'd have to bring him up to date."

But as I said, meeting Ajaan Fuang overturned that. I realized that I was a prisoner of my own time, and that the Buddha was the one who'd stepped out of time. After all, in his awakening, he did step outside of space and time. He saw that there was a happiness that existed outside of space and time, but it could be attained by the actions we do in space and time.

The event of his awakening was *the* primary event in world history, and the insights he gained are always valid. As he said at one point, the knowledge he gained in his awakening was like the leaves in a forest, but what he taught was a handful of leaves. He taught that handful of leaves because it would be of use to people to put an end to their own suffering. The parts he didn't teach wouldn't have been useful for that purpose.

There's one passage where he talks about the many powers he gained through his awakening, but there are three in particular that he kept repeating over and over again in his autobiographical accounts of his awakening. One was knowledge of previous lifetimes. The second was knowledge of how beings, after their death, are reborn in line with their kamma. And the third was the knowledge of how to put an end to the effluents, in other words, the currents of defilement that come flowing out of the mind and that lead to more becoming and more suffering. Those are the three knowledges that he found most useful to talk about. Then, of course after gaining those knowledges, he gained awakening to nibbana, which is something deathless.

Those are all the premises we need. You might think of them as premises for skillful action.

This is why faith in the Buddha's awakening, or conviction in the Buddha's awakening is so important. We don't like the word *faith*—it's become the F-word in modern Buddhism—but there are certain things we have to believe if we want to find true happiness.

One is that our course through life doesn't begin with this particular birth or end with the death of this body; it's been ongoing for a long time, and it's going to continue to be ongoing unless we put a stop to it. This means that when we plan an action, we have to consider the very long-term consequences, not only in this lifetime, but also into future ones. From the second knowledge, we have the principle that how we are reborn is going to be determined by our actions, which are intentions—which in turn are determined by our views. And our views, of course, are going to be determined by the extent to which we have respect for the noble ones.

We give them trust because the basic principle they teach is that actions based on greed, aversion, and delusion will lead to suffering. Actions based on an absence of those mental qualities will lead in the direction of happiness. So we have to look at the intentions in our minds, and the motivations for why we're acting. That's where we'll find what makes a difference between a course of action that leads to suffering and a course of action that leads away from suffering.

Finally, from the third knowledge, there's the principle that if we focus on the problem of suffering and its cause, and if we learn the path of action that can put an end to its cause, we'll find true happiness. And a large part of that path of action is right view. When the Buddha gave the most succinct statement of his awakening, it was the principle of causality: *When this is that is, from the arising of this, comes the arising of that. When this isn't that isn't, from the passing away of this comes the passing away of that.* That's the principle of causality underlying right view.

Actually, it's two principles of causation interacting: one in which causes and their effects arise at the same time and disappear at the same time; and another in which there's causality over time—something you do now will lead to a result later on.

The experience of the present moment is a combination of those two. If you think about those principles, you realize that they open the way for freedom of choice. If everything were determined by your past actions, you'd have no freedom, but there is something in the present moment that allows you to come up with something *now*, that will have an effect *now* and on into the future.

Now, because there's a pattern to what is skillful and unskillful, but there's also room to adjust the forces of cause and effect, you have principle that provides the possibility for learning skills. After all, if there were no pattern, then what you learned today wouldn't help you at all tomorrow. If the pattern were ironclad—in other words, totally predetermined—you'd have no choice to even try to develop a skill. But here there's a pattern with

room for choice, which opens the possibility for developing the path as a skill—it's something we can *choose* to do.

These are all basic premises we need for having trust in the principle that our actions will make a difference, and that we can learn skills that will give better and better results.

This is what the Buddha brought back from stepping outside of time. And the best results of acting on his premises are that your actions take you to a threshold, beyond which you're outside of time, too. So you can use actions within time to get out of time, which is where the best happiness is—because any happiness that's in time is going to disappear as time changes.

After all, where's the body you had twenty years ago, ten years ago? Where are your feelings? You may have memories of the past, but they're very much subject to change, and can often be unreliable. You look within time and you can find very little solidity, very little opportunity to settle in and say, "Okay, this is a good safe place." If you're really serious about happiness, the only happiness that's really going to be satisfactory will have to be a happiness that's outside of space and time.

So these are the Buddha's premises on the nature and the power of action. Now, he never said he could prove them to you, aside from getting you to follow his teachings and proving them for yourself. In the very beginning, he said, it's like a gamble, but it's a good bet. A safe bet. He listed a whole series of practices about which he said that if you take them on and it turns out that he was wrong, at the very least, you still lead a blameless life.

Like developing the four brahmaviharas: You develop goodwill for all, compassion for all, empathetic joy, equanimity—all around. When you do, your actions are bound to be more skillful, less harmful. If it turns out there is no rebirth, or actions don't have consequences, then at the very least you can be honorable in your intentions.

For instance, say you believe in the principle of the power of action, that you have choices: You reflect that if you believed that you *didn't* have

any choices, that belief would close the door to the possibility of any path of practice. If you accept as a working hypothesis that your actions will make a difference, that opens possibilities. So if your basic premises for your actions require that you place bets as to what would be the most fruitful premises, it's good to gamble on the ones that open more possibilities—because you don't want to close honorable opportunities off simply because you don't know.

So the possibility of stepping outside of becoming, putting an end to becoming and going beyond it: That's something you take on as a working hypothesis. In other words, you place your bets on the idea that a deathless happiness is possible. That's a safer hypothesis than saying it's not possible. If you believe it's not possible, you're never going to do the actions that might possibly take you there. Now, if it turns out that it's not true that the deathless is attainable, still you've lived an honorable life. So even at the very beginning, it's a good bet.

But it doesn't stay just a bet. Some people say, "Well, here the Buddha himself is saying he doesn't really know." He's not saying that at all. He's saying that people who approach the path are coming in ignorance, and they have to decide whether they're going to gamble on the path or not—because action is a gamble. There's so much we don't know. But the Buddha is offering a possibility that your thoughts, your words, and your deeds have the potential to lead to something beyond them. Then you follow the path and, as he said, the point at which you step outside of time yourself: That's when you've proven for yourself that what the Buddha said was true.

From that point on you have what he calls *verified confidence* in his awakening. You have a witness—your own experience. And you realize that what he said about suffering coming from within was true. This knowledge is implicit in the principle of the Dhamma eye: "Whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation." Now, notice this statement is not saying, "Everything that arises is going to cease or pass away." "Subject to origination" means *caused,* and when the Buddha uses

the word "origination," it's almost always in the context of things caused from within the mind.

What's radical about the experience of the deathless is that you begin to see how even your experience of the six senses is originated. In other words, there are conditions that flow from within that determine how you're going to see and hear and smell and taste and touch and think about things. When those internal causes are ended, your connection with the world of the senses ends as well. At least it stops for the time being, and that's what opens the possibility for an experience of the deathless.

It's from that experience that even that thought, *all that is subject to origination,* would naturally occur as a valid realization. In other words, you're not just making a vague generalization about things in general. You've seen something that's *not* subject to origination and is also not subject to cessation. You realize that it's radically different from everything else you've ever experienced. Everything else you've experienced prior to that falls into *whatever is subject to origination*.

As for your verified confidence in the Buddha, you realize that your experience of time didn't start with the date of your birth, but that it stretches for a long time before then. You may not have specific memories of previous lifetimes, but you get a new perspective on time by stepping out of it. And then you realize that, yes, it was your actions, the choices you've made, that allowed you to step out in this way. Which is why your virtues now become virtues pleasing to the noble ones. They're solid, they're sure, but at the same time you don't create a sense of pride around them. As the Buddha says, you don't "make yourself" out of the virtues. You use them as tools to reach full awakening.

Then there's the fact that there is an awareness that's there even as the aggregates fall away. After all, the aggregates are, as the Buddha said, "near and far, past, present, and future." In other words, they're in the coordinates of space and time, but there's still an awareness even after those coordinates fade away. So there's no reason why you'd ever want to identify with the aggregates, or build an identity around them ever again.

It's in this way that you're freed from certain fetters, even with just the first taste of the deathless.

What's especially good is that you're freed of your doubt. You've seen for yourself that what the Buddha said is true. You realize that his awakening really was *the* main event in world history, and that the knowledge he shared based on his awakening is knowledge worth taking to heart, worth having faith in, worth testing to see if what he said was really true. If you're still at the very beginning where you don't know, at the very least you look at the path and can see that it's an honorable path. It allows you to hold yourself pure at least in terms of your intentions—and that's a lot to begin with right there.

This is why he said the path is "admirable in the beginning, admirable in the middle, admirable in the end." It starts by your dedicating yourself to the purity of your intentions, and it leads to something that goes beyond intentions—something really worth experiencing for yourself.

So. Faith in the Buddha, conviction in the Buddha's awakening, is a really good investment: It pays off in more ways than you can imagine.

Determined Goodwill

August 20, 2021

The Buddha speaks of goodwill as a form of mindfulness—something you have to keep in mind—which means that it's not an innate quality of the mind. If it were innate, you wouldn't have to be mindful. It would just be there, constantly expressing itself. But the fact is that the mind has both goodwill and ill will. We have to keep in mind that we want to hold by goodwill all the time. Even when we go through all the brahmaviharas and get to equanimity, the reason we use equanimity is for the sake of mature goodwill, realizing that there are areas where we would like to see people do what's skillful and to experience the results of skillful actions, but for one reason or another, it's not going to happen. If you have genuine goodwill for yourself and for the people you could be helping otherwise, you have to treat other things, beyond the range of your influence, with equanimity.

So goodwill is something always to keep in mind. The Buddha also speaks of it as a determination. You have to make up your mind you're going to stick with it.

Here it's good to reflect on his teaching about determination. What's involved in a good determination? Four qualities.

First there's discernment. You have to think about what goodwill means. In a cosmos where pleasure and pain are shaped by action, it means: "May all beings act on skillful intentions. May they not harm one another. May they understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them." In other words, you think of other beings not simply as the recipients of your goodwill. They're also agents. The fact that you're spreading thoughts of goodwill doesn't mean that you have a magic power to make them happy. You have to reflect on how the principles of kamma work, which means you have to focus on the causes: For them to

be happy, they'll have to act skillfully. They'll have to develop goodwill for others.

At the same time, you have to reflect on how to maintain a good state of goodwill in your own mind.

This is where you have to think about the different kinds of fabrication. When you find yourself overwhelmed with thoughts of ill will, stop and ask yourself: "How am I breathing? How am I talking to myself about the issue? What's wrong with what I'm saying? How can I change what I'm saying to myself?" And finally, "How can I change my perception of the situation? The feelings that I'm focusing on?" In other words, you gain discernment into how to fabricate a state of goodwill not only when it's easy but also, and especially, when it's hard. You realize—and this is another aspect of discernment—that your motivation for developing goodwill is not based on the idea that we're all one. Also, there's no question of who deserves or doesn't deserve your goodwill. It's just that if you harbor ill will for anybody, you're going to do unskillful things and then suffer the consequences. So for your own protection, you have to think thoughts of goodwill in all situations.

That's the first aspect of a good determination: using discernment in choosing your motivation, your means, and the goal you're aiming at. You want to learn to find a happiness that's totally harmless. You keep reminding yourself that this is a good goal to keep in mind.

The second aspect of determination is truth. You stick with it. This is where goodwill differs from dedicating merit. With dedicating merit, you're not responsible after the act of dedication. In other words, you do something good and you say, "May all beings who want to, rejoice in the merit I've made. I'm happy to give it to them." It's in their rejoicing, their approval of what you've done, that they gain merit. But that's totally up to them. You don't have any responsibilities after your original dedication.

Ajaan Fuang had a student who could see hungry ghosts. It unnerved her the first time it happened, because they tended to hide out in unexpected places—under stairways, in doorways. She asked Ajaan Fuang

how she could turn off her visions of them. He said, "Here you're in a position where you can actually help them. Most people can't see them, and when you can't see them, there's no way you can engage with them at all. But here you can see them and help them."

He told her that the next time she met with a hungry ghost, one, ask the hungry ghost what it had done to get in that situation. And then two, she should dedicate the merit of her practice to it. So she did. She found that one by one by one, she was able to get them out of the situation of being a hungry ghost.

But then there were some cases where it didn't work. They just stayed right there. She got upset about that, so she went and reported that to Ajaan Fuang. He told her, "Look, your duty goes only as far as dedicating your merit. Whether they have the merit to appreciate or rejoice in it is their business, not yours."

That's the dedication of merit. When it's done, it's done. But the spreading of thoughts of goodwill carries further responsibilities. If you have genuine goodwill for other people, you should act on it. That's where the quality of truth comes in. You follow through. When you wish for someone to understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them, what can you do in that direction? What can you do to help influence that person to act in ways that are skillful? Very rarely do we think about that. We think, "Well, maybe I'll do a favor for so-and-so and be nice to them." But goodwill is not just niceness. Goodwill goes into thinking about: How is this person going to fare? How is this person going to be truly happy?

Of course, one way of influencing people to pick up skillful activities is to be skillful yourself. In fact, that's probably the best way. You don't go around preaching to people, but if they can see that you're a good example and they think about what it means to be a human being—here's a human being who's kind, generous, virtuous—it might inspire them to act that way as well. Your truthfulness is what takes the thought of goodwill and helps to carry it out in your thoughts, words, and deeds.

Then there's relinquishment. Here it's a matter of thinking about situations where there's someone you think deserves to suffer. They've acted in unskillful ways, and it seems wrong that they're not meeting up with some sort of punishment. It seems that justice hasn't been done.

You have to relinquish that kind of thinking. The ideal way for people who have been misbehaving to change their ways is for them to have a change of heart. Now, it may happen that they will meet up with the results of their bad kamma, but ideally they would be in a position where they had developed thoughts of goodwill themselves, learning to be virtuous and discerning. They would have developed their minds to the point where they're neither overcome by pleasure nor overcome by pain.

That would be the ideal situation—as in the case of Angulimala. The Buddha didn't say to Angulimala, "Okay, come back after you've reaped the results of having killed so many people, then we'll talk." He saw that Angulimala had the potential, so he taught him and got results. There were a lot of people who were upset by the fact that Angulimala became a monk and was not going to be punished for those murders. They would throw things at him when he went out for alms.

When we hear the story, we usually identify with Angulimala, but often in our daily life, we're actually playing the role of the people who throw things: the ones who would like to see so-and-so get his just desserts, finding some satisfaction in that. That's an attitude you've got to relinquish if you're going to have goodwill all around. Otherwise, how are you going to help that person?

So relinquishment is the third quality of a good determination.

The fourth is calm. Goodwill is often a calming thought on its own, but in cases where you have to give up your ideas of wanting to see justice done, you actively have to calm your mind down to protect your goodwill. This is where all the factors of a skillful determination come in. You have to use your discernment to remind yourself that if kamma plays out, you don't have to be an agent in its playing out. You don't have to be the avenging angel, because avenging angels easily turn into avenging demons.

If it so happens that that person does change his or her ways, then you should be happy for them. So you have to calm the mind down. Think in a much larger perspective, that it's good for the world that people change their ways without necessarily having to suffer.

When you think of goodwill as something you have to be mindful of, and that mindfulness is something you have to be determined to stick with, it changes your relationship to developing goodwill. It's not a matter of digging down and looking for your innately good nature. As the Buddha said, goodwill is also a form of restraint. You can have lots of impulses that go against goodwill, and you can have lots of good reasons, you think, for having ill will for a person. In fact, you can dress it up so that it's not ill will in your eyes. It's your idea of justice. But it runs counter to goodwill.

There's a lot in the mind that has to be fought and requires a lot of determination if you want to develop universal goodwill. But it's worth it in the long run. You think about those people who threw things at Angulimala: That became pretty heavy kamma on their part. Their desire for justice was going to backfire on them. You don't want to be in that position. You want to get out of every back-and-forth entirely. You can think of goodwill as an escape in that way. It helps you get out of the back-and-forth of samsara. That thought makes it easier to stick with it.

So bring some discernment to your practice of goodwill, some truth, some relinquishment, some calm. You'll find that these qualities change your relationship to your understanding of what's a good way to live in the world. And you develop an attitude toward happiness that's a lot more mature.

The Equanimity of a Winner

June 12, 2020

There are some ideas about equanimity going around that give it a bad name. One is the idea that if you fight your negative emotions, fight your defilements, it's going to be stressful—and the Buddha taught us not to cause stress, right?—so we shouldn't put up a fight. That's what they say. They tell you to develop equanimity around the fact that you've got greed, aversion, and delusion. These emotions come and go, and you learn to be okay with that, and learn to let go of any desire for anything better than this.

As Ajaan Lee would say, that's letting go like a pauper. You don't have anything and you tell yourself, "Well, I'll just let go of all that wealth that somebody else has." You don't gain anything from that, and you stay poor. You could also call it the equanimity of a loser, except that when you don't even put up a fight, it's hard to say that you've lost.

The Buddha never taught that kind of equanimity. On the one hand, he never said that the path to the end of suffering was going to be unstressful. He admits that the practice of abandoning unskillful qualities and developing skillful qualities will cause stress. It'll be painful sometimes. But he says that even if it involves having tears running down your cheeks, you still want to stick with the practice. There is stress that's just useless, that serves no purpose, but then there's also the stress that leads to the end of stress. We have to strengthen ourselves so that we can put up with that stress and comprehend it. After all, as he said, stress is clinging to the aggregates, and clinging to the aggregates is how we define ourselves. When we uproot that clinging by abandoning our craving, it's as if we have to uproot our very sense of who we are. It's going to be painful.

But the Buddha gives us the tools so that we can face that pain. The first tool is the sense of ease that comes with the concentration, the

strength that comes with the concentration, and then also the determination: his teaching that it *is* possible to totally put an end to stress and suffering. Determination is a value that's highly esteemed in the practice.

So how does equanimity function in the context of determination? We know that the Buddha never taught equanimity on its own. It's always in the context of other good qualities. There's the equanimity of a doctor, which would be equanimity in the context of the brahmaviharas, the sublime attitudes. You have goodwill for the patient, compassion for the patient's suffering. You're happy for the patient when he or she recovers, but you have to be equanimous when you see there are certain patients you *can't* cure. So instead of focusing on trying to change things that can't be changed, you try to develop the insight that sees which is which—which things can and which cannot be changed—and then you focus on the things that *can* be changed. In other words, you choose your battles. Even a doctor has to act like a warrior.

The equanimity of a warrior comes in the context of the five strengths. You have conviction in the power of your actions, and conviction that the Buddha has shown us a good path. It's a warrior's path and it's a victorious path. You have conviction in what he taught and its implications for your actions, that *you can do this, too*. You, too, can put an end to suffering. From that conviction, you develop your persistence. You're mindful. Mindfulness doesn't just mean accepting what comes up. It means keeping things in mind, remembering to be alert and ardent in putting aside whatever's unskillful and developing what's skillful.

Concentration builds on that. In other words, when your efforts at being mindful get successful, the mind can finally settle down. When it settles down fully, it reaches a state called purity of mindfulness and equanimity. That's useful for seeing that even in good things, like the concentration, there's still more to be done. There are still subtle levels of stress in the state of concentration. Now, you don't solve that problem by *not* doing concentration, because that would just take you back to the

greater stress of having to deal with what the Buddha calls "household equanimity," just trying to be okay with whatever comes up. Instead, you try to see more clearly what remains to be done, where the letting go has to go deeper.

This is the equanimity you need to develop when things are going well, but you realize that *"going well"* in the world is still not good enough. There's got to be something better. So the equanimity here is not lazy, for that would be unskillful equanimity. The Buddha does make the distinction: There are types of equanimity that are skillful and types of equanimity that are not—and lazy equanimity is certainly not part of the path.

What you want is equanimity that allows you to see clearly what needs to be done, which battles are worth fighting, which battles are winnable. And don't underestimate your powers. What may seem impossible right now you may have to put aside for the time being, but put it aside *just for the time being*. Work on what *is* possible right now and keep at it, keep at it, keep at it. Because you want the equanimity that develops the resilience, develops the endurance that allows you to stick with things.

Recently I received a poem from a friend of a student in which he said he was tired of being equanimity's lapdog. Well, that's the equanimity of complacency, which again is not what the Buddha taught. The lapdog is complacent, thinking that as long as there's a lap, it's fine. But laps disappear. The Buddha wants you to be heedful in your equanimity, realizing that you have to focus on things that *really* are important, because your time is limited, your resources and energy are limited, and there's a lot of serious work that needs to be done, so you don't want to waste your time on extraneous matters.

Even when things are going well, you have to be heedful. Develop the equanimity of right concentration so that you can see more deeply where there is still work to be done. The work may be subtle, but that doesn't mean it requires less effort. When the Buddha talks about right effort, it's not so much the effort that makes you sweat or work really hard physically.

It's effort in the mind, the effort to go against certain thought patterns, certain desires, certain old ways of doing things. Even though they may be subtle, dealing with them requires a consistency and a *per*sistency, a stick-to-it-tividness that you can manage only when you have equanimity to help you see clearly.

So we're trying to develop here the equanimity of a winner—someone who can focus on the right battles and, even when things are going well in the battle, doesn't get carried away: someone who can stick with it heedfully, all the way through, and come out victorious in the end.

The Energy You Broadcast

November 2, 2020

One of the distinctive teachings of the Forest tradition is its emphasis on how proactive the mind is in its engagement with the senses and with the world. We're not just on the receiving end of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations coming in. We don't simply respond to the stimulus of other people's actions. We're proactive. We go out looking for things. This is in line with the Buddha's teachings on intention.

Our experience of the present moment is made up of the results of past actions, but also our current intentions and the results of our current intentions. When you look at the way the Buddha lines things up in dependent co-arising, our intentions actually come before our engagement with the senses. We *intend* to engage the senses, and that's how we meet up with the sensory material that's coming in. What this means is that our intentions don't have to be shaped by what's coming in. They don't have to be pushed around by what's coming in. We can be more skillfully proactive.

Now, a lot of people don't take advantage of this fact. They simply let themselves get pushed around by the world. When the events in the world are good, they're good. When the events in the world are not good, their minds get upset. But when you're practicing the Dhamma, you don't let yourself get pushed around. You set your mind on a goal: true happiness. You want that intention, that resolve, to stay in place. And you want it to inform the way in which you engage with the senses.

Like what you're doing right now when you're meditating: You set up the intention that you're going to stay with the breath. Other thoughts will come in, the result of past kamma, but if you spend all your time getting engaged with those, you've thrown away your original intention.

So you've got to hold to your original intention regardless, and use the energy of that intention to repel any thoughts that might come in. This is related to the Thai word for what they call currents of the mind: *krasae cit.* These currents come out of the mind. Ajaan Lee has a long explanation in *Frames of Reference* of how these are related to the effluents. But they're also related to the path. That's what we try to take advantage of.

Now, these currents can be experienced two ways. One is how *you* experience the currents of your mind. The mind flows out to its objects, and you have to ask yourself, "What kind of energy is flowing out?" You can determine the energy. It could be greed flowing out, or anger flowing out, delusion flowing out. Or it could be mindfulness and discernment flowing out. That's the choice you can make. It can be compassion flowing out, goodwill flowing out, or equanimity. Again, that's your choice.

The Buddha gives an extreme example. You're pinned down by bandits who've taken a two-handled saw and are sawing you into little pieces. You could simply react to that event and get upset, give rise to anger, ill will, frustration: all the unpleasant emotions that would come from reacting to that fact. Or you could make up your mind, "I'm not going to react that way. I'm going to have goodwill, starting with the bandits, and then for all the universe, because I have to protect my mind. If I die now, I want to make sure that my mind doesn't get fixated on the bandits. I want to lift the level of my mind."

And in lifting the level of your mind, you're improving the quality of the current that comes out of the mind. If it so happens that that improved current leaves the body and goes to another body, you're going with good energy. You're protecting yourself.

This relates to the other meaning of *krasae* in Thai. They use it both for the current in a stream of water, and also for a signal sent out by a radio station. That's also called a *krasae*. And it has an electromagnetic field.

Other people will pick up on that—that current, that signal—if their radios are tuned in. This is the other context in which the ajaans talk about this current of the mind—the influence it has on the world, how the

currents of your mind are experienced by others. As you're sitting here meditating, if you find yourself involved in thoughts of anger, you could ask yourself, "What kind of message, what kind of signal, am I sending out into the world?" We look all around us, and we can sense that the signals being sent out right now are pretty extreme, pretty negative. Do you want to add to that negativity, or do you want to send out something positive? You may say, "I can't help myself. The negativity out there is so overwhelming." But that's no reason for letting it invade your mind, or for thinking that the positive nature of the current of your mind doesn't accomplish anything.

At the very least, it gives you protection. Think of that electromagnetic field. The more goodwill you radiate, the more protected you are. Think about the Buddha when those hired killers tried to kill him. They felt the current of his goodwill, the field of his goodwill, and they just couldn't bring themselves to do it.

There's that instruction that Ajaan Fuang gave to the woman who was seeing visions of spirits harassing other people. She tried to stop the spirits from doing that, and the spirits turned on her. She got so sick that she had to run outside and throw up. He later told her, "You've got to protect yourself. One, fill your body with light if you can experience light, fill it with breath energy if you can experience the breath energy, and then send thoughts of goodwill." That's your protection, because there's a field that goes around goodwill. Some people are very sensitive to this. They can tell what kind of thoughts you're sending out. Others are not conscious of the fact, but they can pick up on the fact that something positive is coming from your direction.

There are many tales from the ajaans dealing with animals out in the forest: of the way in which dangerous animals can pick up on the goodwill that meditators are spreading in their direction, and they change their behavior. Even if they don't change their behavior, the fact that you're sending out good energy still is a protection because it goes along with your good intentions. And your intentions are what shape your life.

So you have to ask yourself, "What kind of energy am I sending out?" This is one of the reasons why, as meditators, we don't take in that much information from the world outside. We're going to spend more time focusing on what we're generating from within and sending out.

We develop this ability not to simply be reactive. We can respond. The Romantics used to talk about this, of how the way the nervous system works. It's not simply atoms coming in hitting your nerves, and then your nerves sending atoms bounding back out, like billiard balls hitting other billiard balls. You organize a response. There's something inside you that's taking in this information and organizing a response. You're not just acting as a material thing.

This is what the mind does. It organizes a response based on what it wants. So you have to ask yourself, "What do I want? Do I want happiness? True happiness? How consistently do I want it?" If you really have goodwill for yourself, you want the happiness to be true and consistent, so you have to be truly and consistently aware of what kind of energy you're sending out, how you engage with the world. That first current, the current that you experience as you engage the senses, is directly related to the current that other people are picking up. The quality of the current is what makes all the difference.

So you want a current that's motivated by renunciation; non-ill will, i.e., goodwill; and non-harming, i.e., compassion. Keep generating that as much as you can. As you're focusing on the breath, that's a current of renunciation. In other words, you're basically saying, "I don't want to get involved in sensual thoughts. I want to get involved with the happiness of form, the body as I feel it from within." Try to keep that particular current as consistent as you can, and the mind can't help but get into concentration.

So keep your determination strong. Keep the quality of your determination as consistently wise, discerning, compassionate, and benevolent as you can. That way, you protect yourself; you protect others. You realize that you have the resources within you not simply to be

reactive, but also to generate a good energy inside that you can spread around. It can be your gift to the world. Don't focus so much on what other people are doing and how that's hitting you. Instead, your focus can be, "What can I generate inside? What's the best thing I can generate inside?" Then send that good current out in all directions.

One Thing Clear Through

August 4, 2020

There's a series of questions called the Novice's Questions. It's like a catechism for young monks and young nuns. It starts with, "What is One?" and goes through, "What is Two? … Three? … Four?" up to Ten.

The most interesting question and answer is, "What is One?" "All beings subsist on food." The fact that we're beings means that we have to eat, both physical food and mental food. We're taking things in, in order to sustain our identity as a being that we've created through our attachments.

Now, the purpose of the practice is to go beyond being a being. Unbinding, nibbana, is a state where there's no feeding, no attachment at all. As the Buddha said, feeding, attachment, clinging: It's all suffering.

For a lot of us, that's our pleasure in life: taking things in. But the practice of the Dhamma is going to be turning us around, so that we start finding pleasure in giving things away, radiating goodness out instead of trying to suck it in. After all, when you're feeding, you take in what you hope will be good things from the world. You're looking for pleasure, and then you excrete—what? Greed, aversion, delusion. We're trying to change that exchange here as we practice.

Look at the Buddha's graduated discourse, his analysis of the steps of the path leading up to being ready for the four noble truths. They start with giving. The Buddha talks about the pleasures that come from giving, the happiness, the sense of inner worth that comes from giving. He describes the joy, the sense of self-worth that come when you're able to give, when you can be generous. Instead of trying to find happiness by taking things in, you try to find happiness by giving good things out.

The same with virtue: As the Buddha said, virtue is a gift. You're giving the gift of safety. You decide that you're not going to harm *anybody:* You're

not going to kill anybody or steal anything from anyone, have illicit sex with anyone, lie to anyone, take intoxicants in any cases. He said that when you give this gift of universal safety—what he means by that is that everybody in the world has nothing to fear from you, at least—you'll have a share in that universal safety, too.

So you begin to see that by putting good things out into the world, you're also getting good things in return. As the Buddha found, even though suffering comes down to clinging and feeding, you can't simply stop feeding. The path requires that you feed, but feed in a skillful way. You're feeding off the goodness that comes reflecting back when you're radiating goodness out.

From there he goes on to the rewards of generosity and virtue, not only in this life but also, as he says, in heaven: lots of sensual pleasures, good things that come from good qualities of the mind. But those good things are not nearly as good as the qualities of the mind. If you focus on feeding on things outside, even the good things of the heavenly world, the mind deteriorates. You can imagine what it's like living in a land where there's nothing but pleasure all the time: Everything you can think of, everything you would want, keeps coming back, right there when you want it. You get spoiled. But then when the goodness of that good kamma you've developed finally wears out, you fall. When you fall, it hurts.

This is where the Buddha said you start thinking about the drawbacks, even the degradation, in sensuality. If you're generous and virtuous simply because of the rewards you're going to expect to get back in terms of sensual pleasures, those rewards will just pull you down. It's as if samsara were a sick joke: You work hard to develop good qualities of mind, but the rewards of those good qualities, on the sensual plane, can make those qualities deteriorate.

When you see this, you're ready to think that maybe there's happiness in renunciation, in really giving up sensual thinking. And at that point, the Buddha says, you're ready for the four noble truths. But even here there's feeding. You look into the fourth noble truth, the factor of right

concentration: That becomes your new food on the path. It's the food of the middle way. As the Buddha said in his first sermon, the middle way is a middle way between indulgence in sensual pleasures and indulgence in self-torture. But that doesn't mean it's a middling feeling, halfway between sensual pleasure and sensual pain. It's a pleasure of a different sort—the pleasure of form, the body as you feel it from within—which doesn't have the drawbacks of the pleasures of sensuality.

You focus on the breath. You become aware of the breath energy throughout the body as you breathe in, as you breathe out. As you develop a sense of ease in the breathing, you allow that to spread so that it fills the body as well. That becomes your food on the path. But as you do this, you're also radiating good energy out into the world.

One of the ways of developing right concentration is not just focusing on the breath, but also focusing on goodwill for all beings. This is something we need, especially now. You look at the difficulties the world is going through. A lot of people are desperate. We've had a healthy economy and it's crashed. People have been used to feeding well. They're like the devas: When they don't feed well anymore, they get frustrated and turn into common animals. So a lot of the turmoil we're seeing right now, from the top on down, is basically frustrated feeding. The question is, do you want to join in that feeding frenzy or do you want to step out?

Think of the Buddha's vision before he gained awakening. The world was like a dwindling stream. There were fish in the stream fighting one another over the water. Of course, the water is going to run out and they're all going to die. But in the meantime, they create a lot of bad kamma for themselves and a lot of suffering in their struggles to get that last little bit of water. As the Buddha said, he looked everywhere and there was nothing that wasn't already laid claim to.

The solution was to not look for happiness outside, not to look to feed outside, not to be taking things in, but to radiate goodness out instead. And goodwill is one way of doing that. You want to make your goodwill universal, for everybody. What does that mean? As the Buddha said,

people find happiness through their actions, so you're wishing that they will all act in a skillful way. You're not saying, "May they be happy simply as they are." There are a lot of people doing a lot of unskillful things. Your wish is that they learn how to change their ways.

The question is, "Is there anyone out there that you can't wish that for?" And you might think of some people, people who've done a *lot* of unskillful things, and it doesn't seem right that they not suffer some, at least, before they find the way to true happiness. But why have ill will for them? Why ask for them to have even more suffering? They're going to be suffering from their past actions anyhow. And it's not the case that when people suffer, they begin to realize the error of their ways. All too often, they dish out more suffering, excrete more greed, aversion, and delusion into the world. It would be much better if they learned how to handle even their bad kamma from the past in a skillful way.

As in the Buddha's image: He says that when you have universal goodwill—when your mind is unlimited, you've trained yourself in virtue and discernment, you've trained it so that it's not overcome by pain, not overcome by pleasure—then whatever past bad actions you've done won't have an impact on the mind. It's like someone who has a lot of wealth: If he faces a fine for some misbehavior, he can pay it back easily because he's got wealth to spare. If, however, your mind is narrow—you have goodwill only for a few people; no training in virtue, no training in discernment; your mind is easily overcome by pain, easily overcome by pleasure—then you're like a poor person who suddenly faces a fine. You have nothing with which to pay the fine, so you get thrown in jail.

So when people who *have* been behaving in an unskillful way, if they could learn how to behave skillfully and develop good qualities of the mind, they would suffer a lot less. And when they suffer less, they'd be less likely to pour more suffering, excrete more suffering out into the world. So the wise policy is to have goodwill for everybody regardless—to keep radiating goodness out.

Now that you've got the mind in concentration, you've got a more solid basis for your goodness. When you're radiating goodness from generosity and virtue, you've got to go on conviction, you've got to go on a lot of internal conversation where you tell yourself that this is a good thing. But when you have the sense of ease and well-being, even the sense of rapture and fullness that can come from the concentration, then it's a lot easier to be radiating goodness out, because you're producing nourishment that's immediately apparent inside.

You develop the five strengths: conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment. These are a food for the mind that's special in the sense that it can make the mind so strong that it ultimately doesn't need to feed. It can see where its greed and aversion and delusion are coming from, and it can abandon them.

So you can see that the path is, all along the way, one of giving rather than taking in. It's in line with Luang Pu Dune's comment, "Everything in the world comes in pairs, but the Dhamma is one thing clear through." Instead of taking in, taking in, taking in, you're giving out, giving out.

Then you find that you're wealthier, stronger, more nourished as a result. You're no longer in the position where you're trying to take good things and end up like a vacuum cleaner: You turn it on and start sucking things in and, well, anything can come in. When the mind is in that in-taking mode, good things come in, bad things come in: dust, dirt, you name it. You're totally dependent on the world outside being just a certain way if you want to get some pleasure out of that process. But the world's not going to stay that way. It keeps changing. You could create an ideal society where everybody was wonderful, and it still would fall apart. If you're still on the in-take mode, you'd have nothing but bad things to take in again.

The mind is in a much better position when it's finding its happiness, one, through radiating goodness rather than through trying to take it in, and two, finally getting to the point where it doesn't need to feed or take anything in from any direction at all. It's totally self-sufficient.

That's the point, as the Buddha said, where you're no longer a being, because there's no longer any attachment. You can't be described. When the Buddha was asked, "When an arahant passes away, does he or she still exist? Or not exist? Or both? Or neither?" he refused to answer. After all, to answer a question like that, you'd have to define the terms. What is an arahant? *An arahant's not defined*. We're all defined by our clingings and cravings and attachments. With an arahant, though, there are none of those things. This is hard to imagine, because we're constantly taking things in, in, in. But when we learn instead to find the pleasure that comes from radiating goodness out, out, out, we get some inkling of how that would be a much better way to live, where you didn't have to take things in at all.

This becomes especially apparent as we begin to see society breaking down. The things that we used to depend on are not necessarily going to be there. So try to put yourself in the mode where you don't need to take things in. Then you can radiate goodness out. And even before you get to solid states of concentration, there's the goodness of generosity, there's the goodness of virtue. You can radiate *that* out. Even if your goodwill isn't yet a solidly based universal goodwill founded on concentration, radiate whatever goodwill you can manage—or compassion, empathetic joy, or equanimity when it's appropriate. But always think about what you can give out, rather than what you can take in.

That puts your relationship to the world on a much better footing, a much more solid footing. Because the goodness then is something *you* can create. You don't have to wait for the world to create it for you. And it *is* something you can do.

Self-Bypassing

November 3, 2021

People have noted how ironic it is that in a teaching that emphasizes not-self we have some of the earliest spiritual autobiographies of the world. The Buddha, when talking about his quest for awakening spoke very much in terms of: *This is what I did, and looking at what I had done and seeing that it hadn't given the results I wanted, I tried something else.* That's the pattern.

When you think of the issue in other terms, though, this way of speaking is not ironic at all because the Buddha's main teaching was kamma: We suffer because of our actions, but we can find the end of suffering by understanding our actions—the actions that lead to suffering, and then the actions of the path to the end of suffering. That understanding is what opens the way. The Buddha's autobiography shows the lessons he learned about action in the course of his awakening, and he tells his story to show how we can follow his example and learn from our actions, too.

Now, in doing an action and learning from it, you have to take responsibility for it. After all, the Buddha said, if you felt simply that things were happening on their own without any input from you, that would make a path impossible. Whether it came from a creator god or past actions or random fate, if you chalked all your experience of pleasure and pain up to something totally apart from what you're doing right now, you would be left defenseless, and there would be no path to the end of suffering.

That goes against a teaching you hear every now and then, that if you come to the path with the attitude, "I'm going to do the path," you're coming from wrong view, and that wrong view will taint everything you're trying to accomplish. You have to have the attitude that there's nobody here doing anything; the path is just developing out of causes and

conditions. There's simply awareness, seeing things arising and passing away. That's all there is there.

That's the enlightened way to approach the path, we're often told, but what happens with that sort of attitude is that any sense of self you might have goes underground. You start identifying with the awareness. You start identifying with what you think is an awakened awareness. In that way, you can let go of what may have been a neurotic self, but it turns into a vague and overblown self.

One of purposes of the practice is to see exactly where your sense of self as an action comes in—when it's skillful, when it's not—and how to train your unskillful self to be more skillful. Of course, the emphasis is not focused on the self, it's on the action, but self is always there in the background.

Sometimes it's explicit. Think of the Buddha's instructions to Rahula, when he told him to reflect on his actions before, during, and after doing them. In each case, Rahula was to take responsibility for his actions.

"This action that I want to do": That's how you think beforehand. "This action that I'm doing": That's how you think when you look at the action as you're doing it. "This action that I have done": That's your reflection afterward. The "I" is there in every case because you're taking responsibility. And this way of thinking is not just a sop for a small child's mind.

When the Buddha says that discernment begins with the question: "What having been done by me will lead to my long term harm and suffering? What having been done by me will lead to my long term welfare and happiness?" there's still an agent there, there's still a "me" and an "I." The whole point of this line of questioning is to get this agent to take responsibility, to see how to improve his or her actions.

When people deny that there's an agent there from the very beginning, you might call it *"self-bypassing,"* like "spiritual bypassing." An important element is being missed, skipped over. The actual path is one of taking responsibility for your actions, reflecting on them, and taking

responsibility for improving them. As you develop the skills needed to do that, you cultivate a more skillful sense of self. You don't let go of your sense of self until it has no more use. But it has many uses on the path, and you don't let go of it until it's been trained to serve those uses.

If you try to let go of it first, before it has been trained, then this untrained self will still lurk around random places in your awareness, showing its ugly head here and there. It's still neurotic and immature because it's been abandoned—not in the sense of letting it go through discernment, but abandoned in the sense of a child abandoned by its parents. If you try to let go of it out of fear or loathing: "I don't like my self. It's selfish, shortsighted, conceited. I want to replace it with an enlightened self," well, your enlightened self is basically created out of your preconceptions about what enlightenment might be. Those preconceptions are based on ignorance. You don't get the genuine article until you've taken your unskillful self and developed it into something more skillful.

It's like developing the body. Your body is weak. "I don't like my weak body. I want to throw it away and find a strong body." That attitude doesn't work. You're still going to have that weak body, no matter how much you may imagine yourself with a strong body. You have to take your weak body and exercise it, feed it properly, look after it, care for it. That's how it gets strong.

Here, of course, the analogy breaks down, because there does come a point in meditation where you don't need the self anymore. You let go of the self when it's most developed—in other words, when it's very precise, very meticulous, very mature in its ability to reflect on its own actions, so mature that it can see the activity of creating a self as an unskillful action. To get to that point requires patience, requires honesty, requires powers of observation, because your sense of self can hide.

When things are going the way you like, when everything is going smoothly, your sense of self doesn't seem to appear at all. It's when you meet up with conflict, meet up with challenges: That's when the sense of

self will have to come out. This is why a lot of people who say they have no sense of self as they practice, try to practice in a way that's stress-free, confrontation-free. They don't press themselves too hard. They say, "This is the middle path." But remember the Buddha's analogy for the path is victory: The practice is a battle, or the practice is a long course of mastering a skill.

It's going to be challenging, and you're going to have to rely on a sense of self that's reliable to face and overcome those challenges. If it's immature, it gives up and retreats, and then justifies having retreated. But if it has a strong sense that this is the one way for true happiness, it'll be willing to fight whatever gets in the way, and stick with the path regardless. As the Buddha said, "Let go of whatever is not yours, and that will be for your long-term welfare and happiness." Notice the word "your" there, in front of "welfare and happiness." You can use that sense of self as part of your motivation for practicing.

Then, as the path matures, you mature. That's when you can start letting go in a very radical way. At that point, you're not really thinking about self or not-self, you're simply thinking about the fact that there's stress, and there's something you're doing that's causing the stress.

You get to the point where there's the path of staying or the path of going, and in space and time those are the only two alternatives. You look for another alternative, an alternative that doesn't recognize space or time, an alternative that doesn't involve your doing in any way. And because you've been very sensitive to what you're doing, when you find the alternative, you know it for sure: This is something different, radically different.

That's the experience that cuts away at the fetter of self-view. As the Buddha said, there's still some conceit left—the idea that "I am" is still lingering around the aggregates. But the sense that "I am *this"* with regard to any of the aggregates—either, "I am one of the aggregates; or "I'm a combination of the aggregates"; "the aggregates belong to me"; "I am in the aggregates"; or "The aggregates are in me": That's cut through, because

the experience outside of space and time has shown you that there is an awareness, there is a dimension that has no aggregates at all, and it can be directly experienced.

So you cut through self-view not by willing it away, or by trying to think in a new, cloned paradigm where there is no agent. You cut through self-view because the experience has forced it on you. It's a realization of a truth in a way that allows for no denial.

Up until that point, make a skillful use of your self as you master the craft.

There's a book called *The Craftsman* that talks about how people develop a certain maturity as they develop a craft. You want to take that same attitude toward your practice, so that your self becomes more mature —mature enough so that when the time comes to let go, it *can* let go, and there's nothing left lurking around, hiding behind denial. You haven't bypassed anything. You've followed the path consistently all the way to your first taste of awakening. You don't get there by bypassing anything. You get there by staying on the path *through* all its challenges and coming out on the other side.

How to Be Self-Centered

February 24, 2021

Back in the 1980s, a logo appeared in Thailand, *yaa hen kae tua*, which can be translated as "Don't be self-centered." It was in the shape of a Buddha. "Don't" was the head; "be" was the neck; "self" the torso and arms; and "centered" the legs. Ajaan Suwat took exception to that. He said, "This is not a Buddhist message. The Buddha wants us to be self-centered."

Of course, what he meant by that was not self-centered in a selfish or unfeeling way. It was more to be centered on the fact that the big problem lies within us, it has to be solved within us, and we're the ones who have to solve it. After all, that's the Buddha's analysis in the four noble truths. We suffer not because of what other people do, and the path to the end of suffering doesn't lie in straightening other people out. We suffer from what we're doing, and the path lies in straightening out ourselves. So that's where our focus has to be. That's where we have to be centered.

This means we shouldn't try not to be self-centered. We have to be self-centered in a wise way, a skillful way. And that deals with two big problems. One is when you're irritated by other people's behavior. You should center your attention not so much on what's irritating about their behavior. Center on your own irritation. Why do you let yourself get worked up about it? What's the problem? Why are you feeling offended by that other person? That's what you've got to look into.

Now, this doesn't mean you don't care about other people. It's just that you've got to develop the *brahmaviharas*, all four of them, both toward other people and toward yourself. You have goodwill for them. You have compassion and empathetic joy, but you realize that there are times when their behavior is their behavior, and you can't do much about it. Or even if you could do something about it, you'd lose your focus. It might be misdirected, especially if you still have that same problem within yourself.

Remember the Buddha's instructions to monks who are going to make an accusation to another monk. First, you have to make sure that you don't have the same problem in your own behavior. You also have to make sure that you're making the accusation not to inflict an offense on the other monk but actually to get him out of the offense. And you have to do it with an attitude of goodwill. I've seen some cases where it's taken years for an accuser to get around to developing the right attitude before making an accusation. But it was worth it. The accuser learned a lot of lessons about himself, and when the issue came up, it was a lot easier to resolve.

So your focus has to be not on what people are doing wrong but on what *you're* doing wrong. If you're going to look at their behavior, look at it as a mirror. What does it tell you about you and your behavior? That's bringing everything back inside—self-centered in a wise way.

That relates to the second problem: the voice of your inner critic that focuses on judging your behavior. This has to be trained. For all too many of us, our inner critic is not very helpful. We've been criticized in harsh, unfeeling, dismissive ways in the past, and we've tended to pick up those voices and internalize them. As I've said before, the Buddha said that our practice is one of looking for the Dhamma through committing ourselves to the practice and reflecting on what we're doing as we practice. The voice of that reflection has to be trained just as the committed side has to be trained.

One of the first lessons is to learn how to approach this as an experiment, or as you would approach playing a sport. There has to be a certain lightheartedness to what you're doing. It *is* serious, but you can't make it grim, because if the criticism comes at you too heavily, you're not going to pick it up and carry it with you. You're either going to leave it there or let it oppress you. But if the criticism is light, you can pick it up, carry it around, and use it to remind yourself the next time. "Okay, the last time I was in this situation, I made that mistake. I don't want to make it again."

Think of mastering a sport, as when you're trying to make shots in basketball. You stand there and you miss. You try it again, miss again, and try again. You keep at it until you finally get it, and then you get it again. And you get it again. What's the attitude you have? How do you talk to yourself? That's the way you've got to talk to yourself as a meditator, as a practitioner in general.

The other critical voice is dismissive—the one who tells you that you're no good, that you can't do the practice. That puts an end to the practice session. You have to have an encouraging voice as well. Here, too, you bring in the *brahmaviharas.* The critical voice has to have compassion, but you also have to have empathetic joy for the times when you do things right, because you need encouragement. Remember that the Buddha talked about knowing the time to say pleasing things and knowing the time to say displeasing things. Well, that's how your critic has to be trained.

What you learn through this is that you've got lots of critics in there. Here, too, you can think of the committee of the mind. You've got to ferret out which voices are the ones really worth listening to. Just because one voice is loud and repetitive doesn't mean that you have to take it seriously. Try listening to the voices that are compassionate, that do want you to do the practice well, and are happy when you do it well.

The equanimity is for realizing that this will take time, so you're willing to put in time and not get discouraged by the first couple of times you stumble, or when things are going well and all of a sudden there's a dry patch and they're not going well at all.

As Ajaan Fuang would say, learn how to play at the meditation in the same way that a sportsman would play at a sport. Have a lighthearted attitude toward it. Not that you don't realize that it's serious; it is. You seriously want to win. But you're working on something cheerful, the attempt to put an end to suffering. And although it requires determination, persistence, and endurance, it should also be done with joy. Here again, Ajaan Suwat: "Have a sense of how fortunate you are to do this practice. Take joy in the fact that you can."

When you can develop that attitude, then you're self-centered in the right way. As long as you need a self—and you will all the way up through the level of non-return—train it to be a friendly self, a self on your side, a self that gets you properly centered. That is, you're centered in right concentration where you're coming from a position of strength and well-being, with a happiness that doesn't take anything away from anyone else at all.

When the time comes to let go of that self, you're not letting go out of hatred or neurotic fear. You let go simply because you realize you don't need it anymore. Think of the image of the raft. You get to the other side of the river and put the raft aside, but you still have appreciation for the raft. "This raft has been very helpful. I'll leave it here for somebody else." Then you can go on your way.

So as long as you need that sense of self on the path, learn how to be self-centered wisely. When the time comes to let go, just as you held this self lightly, you can let it go with a sense of lightness as well.

Remembering Ajaan Fuang

May 14, 2020

Tonight's the 34th anniversary of Ajaan Fuang's passing. He was a person who, like the poet has said, contained multitudes. I had a dream about him once, very early on in my time with him. He was wearing a cowboy hat. Then he went into a room and he came out wearing another hat. He went back into the room and came back out with another hat. I peeked into the room. It was a closet full of all kinds of hats.

The dream seemed to have to do with the fact that he could play many roles. This was at a time when the monastery was preparing for a Kathina, and he was in charge of constructing the booths. They didn't have tents the way we have here. They would make booths out of bamboo and palm fronds. He was skilled in all kinds of ways. But he was also a person of many personalities. He could be harsh. He could be gentle. There were times when he would explain things in great detail, and other times he wouldn't explain things at all.

There's that passage in Ajaan Lee's autobiography where he talks about being Ajaan Mun's attendant. His duty was to arrange things in Ajaan Mun's room after the meal. Ajaan Mun would complain to Ajaan Lee that things were not put in the right places, but he would never tell him where the right places were. Ajaan Lee solved the problem in an ingenious way. Ajaan Mun lived in a hut that had banana leaf walls, so he poked a hole in one of the walls.

After he'd arranged the room, he went out and peeked through the hole. Ajaan Mun went into the room, looked left, looked right, rearranged this, rearranged that. So Ajaan Lee made a mental note of where everything was supposed to be.

The next day, he went in and arranged things as he'd remembered, went back, and peeked through the hole again. Ajaan Mun went into the room.

He probably knew Ajaan Lee was looking. He looked left, right. Nothing was out of place, so he sat down and did his chants.

Well, this was the way Ajaan Fuang was with me. I was in charge of arranging things in his hut. He would never tell me where the right places were. If something was in the wrong place, he'd just pick it up and throw it —not at me, but just throw it. I had to notice, when he placed things himself: Where did he place them?

There were other times, though, when he would explain things in great detail.

Part of the Forest tradition is an old Thai tradition in general: that you train people to be observant by not explaining things all the time. Some things are explained, some things you leave up to the student to figure out, on the basic assumption that when the ajaan does something, he has a reason.

I know a lot of Western monks who studied in Thailand and came back. Their conclusion was, "The ajaans did things a certain way simply because they were Thai, because that's the way Thais do things," which meant, of course, that as a Westerner, you weren't bound to do things that way. But I discovered that if I assumed that Ajaan Fuang had reasons for doing things, I could find lots of good reasons. It made me think back on my own actions, and his way of doing things then became lessons.

He was loyal, extremely loyal to Ajaan Lee. He had one ajaan in his life. He did study at one point with Ajaan Mun, but he never felt quite comfortable with Ajaan Mun. He stuck with Ajaan Lee until the end of Ajaan Lee's life, stayed on, made sure everything was arranged for the funeral, and then went off. He was very independent—loyal, but independent at the same time. As he liked to say, "We're nobody's servant. Nobody hired us to be born. Nobody hired us to practice. So don't let people order us around."

There's one time when I came across some of his old papers. I was sorting through his things and throwing out whatever needed to be thrown out. I came across some papers where he'd been practicing signing his

name. Several years earlier, he'd been given an ecclesiastical rank, Phra Khru, which is just below that of Chao Khun. When you get a rank like that, you get a new name. So he'd been practicing signing his new name. I asked him, "Than Paw, when are you going to become a Chao Khun?" He said, "That kind of stuff is no good at all. You become a Chao Khun, and rich and famous people come to the monastery to check you out. Then they start ordering you around." He then told the story of what had happened in Bangkok just a few weeks earlier.

There was a woman who was famous for raising support for the Forest tradition. She was head of a Buddhist organization at one of the large government monopolies in Bangkok. The organization would print books, hold meetings, and raise money for different monasteries. Some of Ajaan Fuang's students kept hoping that she would find out about us and raise money for our monastery, too. Then someone had finally prevailed upon her to visit Ajaan Fuang in Bangkok.

She told him that she was interested in printing some English Dhamma books, and she'd heard he had some English translations of Ajaan Lee. At that point, we had *Keeping the Breath in Mind, Frames of Reference,* and *The Craft of the Heart.* So he gave her a copy of each and said, "You can print whichever one you like." She took them and then, a week later, she came back, saying, "That's not what I want. I want his autobiography." Now, I had already translated the autobiography, but it hadn't been printed. Ajaan Fuang's policy was that you lead with the Dhamma, not with biographies or autobiographies. So he told her, "Sorry, I can't help you." She never came back. And that was his purpose. He didn't want people ordering us around in the monastery.

As I said, he was extremely independent, but he also was very loyal, and had a very strong sense of duty. He was very strict about the Vinaya, with very clear standards about what was proper and what was not proper, which made it very easy to live with him. Once you got a sense of what his standards were, you could stick by them. There were times when I would be criticized by some of the lay people for holding to Ajaan Fuang's

standards. They went and complained to him, but I knew I could always depend on him. If I was holding by his standards, he wasn't going to criticize me, no matter how influential or how large a role the lay people might have played in the monastery.

I came to take that for granted. But after he passed away, and I had to deal with the monk who was appointed as acting abbot, I began to realize how special Ajaan Fuang was, because with that monk, if any wealthy lay person came in with some project for the monastery, he would just go along, go along, go along, no matter how good or bad it was for the monastery to do that.

So it's good to think about the standards of the ajaans of the past, the real ajaans. In this way, Ajaan Fuang was typical of the really great ajaans in that he had, as I said, a strong sense of duty, strong loyalty to his teacher, but a very strong independent streak. An interesting combination, but a combination that works well as you practice, because you will have to be independent. What he was teaching me, by not telling me where things were supposed to be, was to be independent, to use my own powers of observation.

His policy also was never to praise his students, except in cases where he felt a particular student wouldn't be making any further progress than that. I began to take it as a sign if I heard him praise somebody, that that was as far as that person was going to go. If he felt there was room for improvement, he'd keep finding ways to criticize you. When I was his attendant, I was always trying to please him, but I never got any indication from him, any direct verbal indication at least, that I was doing okay. His attitude was that as a student you should want to study. You shouldn't want to have things handed to you. You should take the initiative to figure things out and learn how to take criticism in the spirit in which it was given, which is: Here's an area where you need improvement. If you improve, you're going to be better off.

You're not practicing to please somebody else. You're practicing because you have suffering in your heart. The teacher's there to offer you

advice on how to get rid of that suffering. That should be your motivation. Someone once came to the monastery and noticed that there was a Western monk there. So he asked Ajaan Fuang, "How is it that Westerners can ordain?" And his response was, "Don't Westerners have hearts? Can't they suffer too?"

I think that was what pulled me to Ajaan Fuang to begin with: a strong sense that he cared about my training. He saw that I was suffering and he sympathized. But his sympathy was not the sympathy of soft words. It was the sympathy of, "This is what you need to do, and if you're motivated, okay, you'll do it."

After he died, they created a museum of his effects. I was in charge of arranging things for it, and one of the things we arranged there was his robe. I found one of his robes that he had darned. I wanted to show that he took good care of his things, so I folded it up and placed it in the cabinet, showing the spot where it was darned. A week or two after we placed it in there, someone came running down to the bottom of the hill where I was staying. "There's something on the robe," they said. So I went up and looked in the cabinet and it looked like a kind of diamond dust on the robe. My first reaction was it was mold. I said, "How did mold get on it? After all, we ironed the robe properly and everything." Everybody else, though, was assuming that his sweat had turned into relics.

Word got out. Every now and then we'd have people come and visit the monastery to see the robe. One group in particular stands out. They were from the Education Ministry in Bangkok. They came in a large van. I was staying in the hut at the foot of the hill, and they came up and said, "We understand that Ajaan Fuang's robe shows his relics. Can we see it?" I said, "Well, it's up on the top of the hill in his mausoleum."

So they went up. They came back down again, and asked, "Since he passed away, have any other amazing things happened around Ajaan Fuang?" I replied, "I think it's pretty amazing there are people who drive all the way from Bangkok to look at a piece of cloth." They said, "No, no, no.

That's not what we meant. How about when he was alive, anything amazing then?"

I said, "What I thought was amazing was that even though he was Thai and I was a Westerner, during my time with him I never had the feeling that that was a barrier between us. The communication was heart to heart. Even though I had to learn Thai ways of doing things, still I had a strong sense that he didn't treat me simply as a Westerner. He treated me as a human being. And I tried to reciprocate." That, I thought, was amazing. It's very hard to find that kind of communication. "No, no, that's not what we meant," they said. So I took pity on them, handed out some amulets, and they went home.

But there was that quality about Ajaan Fuang. He always seemed to stand outside of Thai culture a little bit. As I said, he was very independent. And because he was something of an outsider, and I was something of an outsider, I think that was where we connected.

As always, when we think about the good qualities of people who've passed away, the question always is: How can we develop some of their good qualities—such as a strong sense of duty, and that kind of independence that's willing to figure things out—to make sure they don't disappear from the world?

After all, this is a practice where we're not just sitting here accepting, accepting, accepting things as they come. We've got to figure things out. The mind is suffering. It's creating its own suffering, even though it wants happiness. Why? How? What can we do to stop? We're happy to accept help from those who've found a reliable way to the end of suffering. But, as they all point out, the work is up to us.

So you end up having to do what I did, even if it was something as simple as learning where the right places were. You try things out and then you look. See what the reaction is. You try something else. You're not so afraid to make a mistake that you don't try. You've *got* to try. The mistake comes. As Ajaan Fuang always said, "Mistakes can always be rectified if

you're willing to look, willing to admit that they're mistakes, and look inside yourself for what went wrong."

So you become responsible. You become accountable. That's how an independent streak becomes not just willfulness and stubbornness, but an asset in doing your duty of trying to comprehend suffering, abandon its cause, develop the path so you can realize the end of suffering. That's what we're here for. That should be your motivating force. So whether things get explained or don't get explained, you try to figure them out. That way, that riddle of the heart—Why does the heart create suffering even though it wants happiness?—has a chance of getting solved.

How to Change

November 30, 2021

When the Buddha describes the steps in dependent co-arising, on the one hand he's describing how suffering happens, the psychology that goes into how we shape the present moment in a way that leads to suffering. But he's also describing the psychology of his listeners as they're listening to him, the rhetorical situation he finds himself in as he tries to teach them how to train themselves. You get an idea of what he's trying to accomplish by seeing how he understands what his listeners are doing right then and there—and the primary thing they're doing is that they're fabricating their experience in ignorance.

There are three kinds of fabrication: bodily, verbal, and mental. On the large scale, that refers to bodily kamma, verbal kamma, and mental kamma as they give results in this lifetime and on into the next. But in the present moment, the three fabrications get boiled down to what *leads to* bodily, verbal, mental kamma on the large scale, and here the Buddha gives different definitions. Bodily fabrication is the in-and-out breathing. If you weren't breathing, you couldn't do anything physically. Verbal fabrication is directed thought and evaluation, how you talk to yourself: You direct your thoughts to a topic and you make comments about it. You may ask questions about it, and when you've thought in those ways, that's when you open your mouth to speak. Finally, mental fabrications are perceptions and feelings: the labels you put on things, the feeling tones you have. These are the building blocks for all mental kamma.

So as the Buddha's teaching you, he's noticing that the way you talk to yourself, the way you breathe, the way you hold different feelings and perceptions in the mind is causing you to suffer, and he wants you to change. He's trying to teach you how to fabricate in a new way right then and there. That's why the primary meditation exercise he taught was breath

meditation, telling you to tell yourself to breathe like this, to breathe like that. When you tell yourself these things, what's that? That's verbal fabrication.

You may say, "I've been breathing this old way, it's perfectly good." Well, it's good enough, but just good enough to keep you alive. You can breathe in a new way that does more than just keep you alive. It can help you develop qualities of mind that would be useful, at the very least so that you can fabricate with knowledge and can see all the various layers in the mind where it sides with the defilements that are out to destroy your true happiness.

He's also teaching new ways to talk to yourself. This is why we have all those suttas: You get the Buddha discussing the Dhamma with people, and often you see them display their defilements. The Buddha argues with them, cajoles them, brings them to their senses. He's showing you: This is how you can use your verbal fabrication, how to talk to yourself to get past your defilements. He doesn't give in easily to the defilements of his listeners. In fact, he doesn't give in at all.

If you find yourself talking in ways that seem to side with your defilements—the traits of the mind that would pull you down—realize that you're engaged in an unskillful conversation inside, and the Buddha's giving you some inner conversation tips: This is how you can talk to yourself in new ways, more skillful ways. You may say, "That's not the way I usually talk to myself." But again, do you want to keep on talking to yourself in your old ways, or do you want to try something better?

Think of the ajaans in Thailand. They liked to focus on the tendency for a lot of people to say, "I don't have the *vasana,* I don't have the character traits, I don't have the *parami,* I don't have the perfections from the past in order to practice."

We here in the West don't tend to think in those terms, but we think the same kind of thought in other terms. We tend to think about our childhood issues, psychological scars from the past. We say, "This emotional scar is going to make it impossible for me to practice."

The ajaans would always tell their listeners, "It's not the scars, it's not the past that's getting in the way. It's your attitude right now—what you're telling yourself. You're placing limitations on yourself, and you don't have to."

This is where it's good to look at the issue of allure and drawbacks. What's the allure of your old way of talking to yourself? For one, it lets you off the hook. "The fact that I can't practice is not my fault." You can pin it on something in the past, but there are better ways of thinking, because that way of thinking gives you no future.

You can think in ways that have a future. They may not be the sort of things you're used to saying to yourself, and part of you may say, "I don't believe this because it seems so artificial." But it's artificial simply because you're not accustomed to it. Your unskillful ways are equally artificial. It's just that they've been around for such a long time that you're used to them, like an old shoe. Your foot has gotten used to the shoe even though the shoe may twist your foot or be too tight. The Buddha's saying, "Here, here's a shoe that will help you walk straight, help you walk in a healthy way, help your posture. Try it on."

At first it feels weird, but then you realize after a while that if you train yourself in the new way, it does have its benefits. As the Buddha said, if it weren't possible to change your habits, he wouldn't have taught. If it weren't good for you to develop skillful habits, he wouldn't have taught that, either. So he has faith in you. The question is, when are you going to pick up some of that faith and apply it to yourself?

You hear it again and again: "I can't do this. It's not working." Well, if it's not working right now that's because you haven't got the hang of it yet. The past doesn't necessarily have to predict the future. After all, we do have this ability to change, and this area of change is a good thing. You simply need some patience and persistence in sticking with the new habit.

So look at how the Buddha talks to defilements. That's what a lot of his companions in conversation in the suttas are: They're representing a defilement. If it's not delusional, sometimes it's anger, sometimes it's greed,

sometimes it's unskillful desires of other kinds. As you watch the conversation, you come to see: This is how the Buddha handles these people, this is how he handles these defilements. It gives some idea of how you can apply that same approach yourself.

This is one of the reasons why, in addition to the suttas, we also read the teachings of the ajaans. They've had to argue with their own defilements. You read Ajaan Fuang, and he gives you a lot of quick karate chops to use with your defilements, karate chops he had used with his own. So it's good to adopt them, to see if they work for you. If they don't work for you, you have every right to think, "Well, what *would* work?" But these examples are showing that it can be done, and it's important that you have trust in the principle that this can be done. You don't have any problems in your mind that have never been solved before.

When you read the verses of the elder monks and nuns, you see people who were desperate, people who were suicidal, people who were proud, people who didn't believe in themselves: people with all kinds of issues. And you see how they were able to overcome them.

A lot of it has to do with having trust in learning how to talk to yourself in new ways.

The same with mental fabrication: All those analogies that the Buddha uses throughout the texts to describe things are teaching you new ways to perceive things.

The piece of cloth that's dirty in one spot, but clean in another: That's the perception for someone who's got some good habits and some bad habits— someone who's been good to you in some ways, and not good to you in others. The image is showing you that you can take the clean part of the cloth and leave the dirty part behind.

The ajaans, too: Many of them are masters of the analogies, and we listen to them, we read them, because they're giving us new ways of applying perceptions to our problems. Here again you may say, "Well, that's not the way I do it." But okay, are you satisfied with the way you do things? Are you happy with the way you do things? Where's your fighting

spirit? Habits can be changed. Old habits can be dropped; new habits can be developed. It takes time, it takes effort, but it's time and effort well spent.

Think of the image that Ajaan Mun gave in his last Dhamma talk: The soldier in your mind is the desire not to come back and be the laughingstock of the defilements ever again. Your discernment is the soldier's weapon. Concentration, mindfulness: These are the food and other supporting factors for the soldier.

Learn to think of yourself in those terms. If you've been victimized in the past, you don't have to stay in the role of victim. You can show yourself and others that you can rise above that. Think in those terms. That, too, is a perception you can use. At the same time, based on the fact that you've been breathing in a new way, you have new feelings. After all, the Buddha doesn't say just to stick with whatever feeling comes up. You replace unskillful feelings with more skillful ones.

There's household grief and there's household joy. There's renunciate grief and renunciate joy. These aren't things that simply arise willy-nilly. There are potentials for them to arise, and what you do with those potentials will determine what feeling you're going to feel. The Buddha's telling you to replace one kind of feeling with another feeling. Replace household grief with renunciate grief: the realization that there is a goal, other people have attained it, you haven't attained it. There's a grief that goes along with that, because you realize, gosh, it's a lot of work. But that's better than just going back and forth, back and forth between household grief and household joy, and household grief again. At least this new kind of grief offers hope. It offers a way out, so that you can arrive at renunciate joy: the joy that comes with discerning the goal.

So again, feelings are things you can create. You're already creating them, it's just that your habitual ways of creating them are causing suffering. But you can change.

As you look at the Buddha's teachings, see that he's teaching in a way that's just right for people who are fabricating in unskillful ways, and who

need directions in how to fabricate in new ways, with the realization that it is possible to change. Then you can apply the lessons to yourself.

We're not stuck in our old ways unless we keep ourselves stuck. We have the choice. The Buddha's giving you some instructions on how to take advantage of that power of choice to fabricate your experience skillfully. And there's nothing to keep you from trying those recommendations out.

Get Out of Yourself

December 28, 2021

There's that famous line at the beginning of *Anna Karenina* where Tolstoy says that happy families are all alike, whereas every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. He then proceeds to write a novel of hundreds of pages about some very, very unhappy families, focused on the particulars of why they were unhappy. The implication seems to be that the things people have in common when they're happy or unhappy are of no interest. What's of interest is the particulars of our own suffering, or other people's suffering. But from the Buddha's point of view, Tolstoy's got it backwards.

Think about the Buddha on the night of his awakening. His first knowledge was of his previous lifetimes—a lot of particulars: where he was born, what he looked like, what kind of being he was, what he ate, his pleasures and pains, and how he died. But he realized that that knowledge, getting into the particulars, was not the solution to his problem. He was curious about why he had changed so much over time. Was there a pattern to the changes?

On the second watch of the night, he expanded his mind. He got out of himself and started looking at all beings. He found that what we had in common was that we all have kamma, our intentional actions.

Now, the workings of kamma can be very complex, but they determine where we go, what we are, and what we become. He realized that the big issue was action, and the general pattern of action was something we all have in common.

Then, in the third watch of the night, he expressed the knowledge he gained, not in terms of "I did this," or "I did that," but simply: "This is suffering, this is the origination of suffering, this is the cessation of

suffering, this is the path leading to the cessation of suffering. These are the duties that have to be done with regard to those four noble truths."

He'd been able to get out of himself and then came back, seeing himself in terms of what we have in common. That was what enabled him to gain awakening. He depersonalized the issue of suffering, and in that way he was able to get a handle on it.

This is a theme we see throughout the practice. Here you are, focusing on your own breath, but stop and think about it: Everybody else has a breath just like yours. There may be slight variations, but the Buddha said that when you're practicing mindfulness, you should practice being aware of the body internally and also externally; being aware of feelings internally and externally; being aware of the mind, mental qualities internally and externally.

Now, if you interpret mindfulness simply as being aware, that sounds very strange: You're supposed to sit next to someone else and hear them breathe? How are you going to feel their feelings or be aware of their mind-states? But when you remember that mindfulness is a faculty of the memory, something you keep in mind, then you can see what the Buddha's getting at. You focus on issues in your own feelings, issues in your own mind, issues in your own body, and you stop to remember, "This is the way it is with everybody." Everybody has a breath, everybody has feelings of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain. And all the various mind-states that you can be mindful of, skillful and unskillful: Everybody else has those, too.

This is a good way of getting yourself out of yourself, because when things go down—particularly when the mind turns into a whirlpool and keeps spinning around and around and around on certain themes—as it goes around, it just gets pulled down. That's because you've restricted your awareness just to what's in your mind. But if you can lasso out, grab hold of something outside, you begin to realize that what you're experiencing is not just you. You're not the only one who suffers in the world. Lots of other people are suffering, sometimes a lot worse than you are.

The proper response to this is, first, compassion. You realize that it really does hurt, so other people really hurt, too. The next response is *samvega:* Is this all there is to life? In response to that, the Buddha offers *pasada*, confidence that there is a way out, through learning how to look at events in your mind *as* events. This is why we practice concentration, focusing on the level of intentions and attention, the raw material we use to put together states of becoming in the mind.

You can look at these events from a more impersonal standpoint, a much larger standpoint, and that gets you out of them. As the Buddha said, the essence of discernment is seeing things as separate. An important part of seeing them as separate is seeing them as separate from you. In other words, there are these events in the mind, but you don't have to identify with them. You can study them from an outside perspective.

So it's important as we meditate that we don't just think about ourselves. We also have to think about others. You see this pattern again and again in the Buddha's teachings. Think of the five reflections that we have as a common chant: "I am subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, subject to separation from all that is dear and appealing to me. I am the owner of my actions."

The Buddha says that as you reflect in that way, it gives you motivation to become more and more skillful in what you do in thought, word, and deed. But he doesn't leave the reflection there. He has you reflect not only on "me," but also on the fact that *all beings everywhere,* on every level of the cosmos, are subject to aging, illness, death, and separation. They, too, all have their kamma. Think about that: everybody, no matter what they are, from hell-beings all the way up through the highest levels of heaven. There's nobody in charge, nobody in the universe who lies above the laws of kamma. The only ones who are free are the arahants. Everyone else is trapped.

When you think about the particulars of your situation, realize that they're not that much different from anyone else's. This is why the emphasis on what makes us different from one another is so opposed to

the principles of the Dhamma. The principles of the Dhamma concern what we have in common: the fact that we're all suffering, that suffering comes from the same sorts of things, and that the path to the end of suffering comes from the same sorts of things.

For this reason, we don't focus so much on the particulars of our own sufferings, but look instead for the common pattern. That way, when we get out of ourselves, we can get a better perspective on what really needs to be done, what *can* be done. And it takes a lot of the sting out of our own suffering, too. After all, one of the hardest parts about suffering is the sense of, "Why is this happening to *me*? It's not happening to anybody else. Why am I the one that the universe seems to be picking out and dumping on?" But then you stop and reflect: You're not the only one.

There was the case where King Pasenadi was having an audience with the Buddha, and one of his courtiers came up and whispered into his ear that his favorite queen, Mallika, had died. The king broke down and cried. The Buddha said to him, "When has it ever been the case that someone who has been born doesn't age, doesn't grow ill, doesn't die?" This happens to everybody.

You would think the grief of one person dying would not be helped by thinking of all the other people who've been dying, that all that additional suffering would be even a heavier burden, but the mathematics of the mind don't work that way. The heaviest sufferings are the ones where you feel that you're the only one who's suffering in this fashion. You get yourself out of the line of fire when you realize that other people are suffering this way, too. Other beings are suffering, sometimes worse—in fact, many are suffering a lot worse. And that thought lightens things: The universe isn't dumping on you particularly. You're simply experiencing something we all have in common. That thought helps pull you out of the whirlpool.

Our thoughts, when they get into whirlpools like that, just go around and around and around. Thought *a* leads to *b* leads to *c* leads to *d,* which then leads back to *a,* and they just go around in circles like this, as the circle spirals downwards. But when you start thinking about other people

and get out of yourself, it cuts the cycle. The Buddha is throwing you a lifeline so that you can pull yourself out.

It's good to think in these terms, to get out of yourself every now and then. This is one of the reasons why we have thoughts of goodwill, thoughts of compassion, thoughts of empathetic joy, thoughts of equanimity for all beings as a daily practice. We can just chant the words to the point where it doesn't mean anything, but stop and think: There are a lot of beings out there who are suffering right now. In fact, everybody who's not an arahant is suffering in one way or another, and that calls for compassion.

This is a world of suffering people. Some people wear their suffering on their sleeves; other people hide it, but it's there. Some people are very much aware of how they're suffering, other people are not so much aware, but we all have this in common.

This was the genius of the Buddha, to see what we all have in common by looking into his own mind and then inferring from what he saw there that everybody else has the same sorts of things.

Think about his teaching on the five aggregates. It's not just your aggregates that are inconstant, stressful, and not-self. *Everybody's,* no matter where, are not worth holding on to as you or yours. You could go anywhere—you could be born as a deva, you could be born as a Brahma—but that's all you'd have: more of these same kinds of aggregates. The Brahmas get to stay around a little bit longer, quite a bit longer, but still, their position isn't stable. It's going to fall apart someday. And sometimes the beings that are very high will fall very low and very hard.

So, we're all in this together, and it's good to keep that in mind. This is why the Buddha says to be mindful of the body internally and externally, feelings internally and externally, mind internally and externally. It helps give you a perspective on your sufferings. That way, instead of focusing on the particulars, you can focus on what we all have in common. And that, the Buddha said, is where the work can be done.

That's how we get out. All those who finally gain release all go to the same thing: total release. It's not the case that the Buddha had a special release, and the arahants had a different release. The arahants had their particular talents, the Buddha of course had his talents, but when it came to release, everybody was equal. Everybody was the same.

That was because they saw the pattern in the mind that's the same for everybody: This is how suffering happens. This is what suffering is: It's clinging to the aggregates. The cause is the three kinds of craving. The cessation is gaining dispassion for those three kinds of craving, and you do that by developing the noble eightfold path. And it's the same path for everybody.

So when you start looking for what we have in common, that's how you find the way out. If you stay stuck on the particulars, it might make an interesting novel, but we're here for more than fiction. We're here for the truth, and the best truth is the truth that sets us free.

Learning from Sensual Desire

March 5, 2021

In Buddhist traditions, they tend not to make a sharp distinction between the heart and the mind—the heart being the part that wills and desires, has feelings, emotions; the mind being the part that thinks, calculates, and tries to reason things through. As they say, "The heart has its reasons." And the mind has its desires, its passions.

There was a book that appeared a while back called *Intellectual Passions*. It was about the thinkers of the eighteenth century, which was the century of rationalism. The author was trying to make the point that even though these people were rational, they were very passionate about it. They had very passionate ideas about the role that reason should play. They were looking for glory, they were looking for independence, they were looking for power through their ability to reason clearly.

Which falls in line with the principle that there's no such thing as a pure thought without desire. After all, the Buddha said, "All things—all dhammas—are rooted in desire." All dhammas: That would exclude nibbana—taking it as the end of dhammas—but everything else, skillful and unskillful, comes from desire.

We have this mass of desires and thoughts and intentions that we've got to train, so we use the whole *citta*—the whole mind, the whole heart—to train the heart and the mind. *Citta* is usually translated as "mind," but there are passages in Pali where it clearly means heart, as in *mettacittena*, "with a heart of goodwill." It's not just thoughts of goodwill; there's a heart that goes along with it. The verbs related to *citta* are verbs about thinking *and* willing. So you bring all of this together. All of this is what has to be trained, and all of this is what's needed to train itself.

You see this when you're dealing with the hindrances. I was listening a while back to someone saying that you shouldn't try to fight the

hindrances; you should try to learn from them—which is both right and wrong. You want to learn about them, but you can really learn about them only by fighting them. And in fighting them, you have to use a lot of skill.

This is where the mind part comes in. You have to strategize; you have to outwit them. As the Buddha said, when something like sensual desire comes along, first you have to watch for the origination. Why does it get sparked in the mind? What provokes it?

Sometimes it's hard to see, but watch it while it's there with the purpose of not feeding it, to see when it stops. As is the case with any mental phenomenon, it's going to last for a while and then, if it's not fed any more fuel, it's going to disband. So you try to starve it of the fuel.

You have to get yourself on the side *against* the hindrance. In fact, that's half the battle right there, because you'll find that, in the committee of the mind, there are lots of members who want to go for it. They think a thought of sensual desire would be really attractive, a lot of fun, nourishing, refreshing, entertaining.

You want to see their reasons, so you set yourself up against the hindrance: Say, "I'm not going to go there." It'll go away, but then it'll come back. That's when you have to watch: *Why* did it come back? And, when it came back, why did a part of the mind go along with it? Which part? Which mind-part, which heart-part, went along with it?

Sometimes it's a free association: There's just a random perception that you have, that you've associated with sensual desire. It feels as if it makes you attractive, makes you clever, makes you … whatever. That's on the side simply of perception, or the heart side, the emotion side. In other words, there's no clear reasoning there. There's just an association and a feeling that goes along with the association, and you like it.

You have to ask yourself, "Exactly what do you like there?" Do you like the thought itself? Do you like the object of the sensual desire? Do you like the role that you're playing in your fantasy? What are you attracted to? Where's the association that makes it attractive?

Other times, you find there's more reasoning going on, saying, "Well, this is natural. After all, I have a body, and the body wants this." I once tried that argument with Ajaan Fuang, saying, "But this is what the body wants, right?" And he said, "The body doesn't *want* anything. If the mind weren't here wanting, the body would just lie there dead. It doesn't care." So it's the mind that comes up with these reasonings and excuses.

It's like that image I heard one time, comparing the mind to a grab bag, with lots of Legos inside. Some of the Legos have been assembled into buildings or fragments of buildings or other objects, and some are just random Legos. You reach in and you pull something out. If it's assembled already, that tends to be more on the mind side, the thinking side, the reasoning side.

Other times, it's just random connections. That's the heart side. But you learn a lot about the heart and mind with them, because sometimes these random connections are really powerful. They go *way* back into your history. This is why, in psychoanalysis, they like to do free association, just to see where your random connections are.

So you set yourself up against the hindrance, saying, "I'm not going to go with it." Then, notice that part of the mind will go anyhow. Look for why.

Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about how, when he'd been doing body contemplation, he got to the point where he was very, very quick. He'd look at *anybody's* body and immediately see it as taken apart, with the skin stripped off, and blood all over the place. There had been no thoughts of lust at all for quite a while.

But then he asked himself, "Well, when did the lust go away? When was the moment? When was the insight that made it go away?" He realized, there was no moment. So he began to get suspicious. Maybe it was just hiding.

So he imagined a beautiful body right next to his, and everywhere he went, this beautiful body went along, right there, clinging to him. This went on for several days: no reaction inside the mind at all. But then after

the fourth day, he began to sense that part of his mind actually liked that body. So he realized that the problem hadn't been solved.

The next question was: "Why?" He began to realize, as he went back and forth between perceiving that body as attractive and perceiving it as unattractive, that there was a part of the mind that *wanted* to see it as attractive. No matter how much you looked at the reality of the body, there was another part that just *wanted* it to be attractive, wanted to have that perception of beauty.

Well, why? What was the allure of that? It was when he saw that allure: That was when he was able to see that it was totally worthless. And, compared with all the drawbacks that come with sensual desire, that was when he felt dispassion for the allure. That was when he totally let go of any kind of sensual desire.

So you learn about the hindrances—you learn about them both as a mind function and as a heart function—by bringing your whole heart and your whole mind to trying to figure them out for the sake of freeing yourself from them. You try to get your heart on the side of *wanting* to be free. You get your mind on the side of trying to outwit them; seeing: What do they do to fool you every time they appear and you go for them?

This will require good concentration. The irony is that you need to get the mind past these hindrances to really get into good concentration. But that's just an irony in theory. In practice, what it means is that you fight them off and work on your concentration at the same time, as best you can. This is why we have that chant about the 32 parts of the body so often: so that we can immediately think about a way of counteracting our desires.

They'll be quiet for a while. They haven't gone away—they're just lying there, quiet. But the fact that they're lying there, quiet, allows the mind to settle down. This is how we deal with all our defilements as we get the mind into concentration: Clear an area where the mind can settle down—knowing that it's not totally without danger, not totally without problems, but it's good enough to settle down for the time being.

As you get the mind more and more on the side of concentration, you're going to convert the heart. It begins to see that the concentration really is a good place to be, and you're better off *not* siding with the sensual desire, *not* siding with the other hindrances.

The reasoning part of the mind can then do its work to outwit the hindrance. That's what the Buddha means when he says that discernment is what sees through them: It outwits them.

So both the heart and the mind are needed to train both the heart and the mind. It's only when the training is total like this, dealing with all your mental functions—all of your thinking functions, all of your willing functions—that the whole heart and mind can be free.

When Your Will Is Ill

March 6, 2021

The Buddha gives two main sets of images for the hindrances. One set has to do with water. Ideally you want to be able to see your reflection in the water, but when it's disturbed by the hindrances you can't, for different reasons.

Sensual desire is like water that has been treated with dye. It's murky, the color is all wrong, it's not clear. Ill will is like boiling water; you can't see a reflection in it because it's bubbling too much. Sloth and torpor are like water covered with sludge and slime. Restlessness and anxiety are like water that has wind blowing over the surface, creating lots of ripples. Doubt is like stagnant water placed in a dark place. You're certainly not going to see your reflection there.

The Buddha also compares the hindrances to different kinds of hardships: Sensual desire is like being in debt, sloth and drowsiness are like being in prison, restlessness and anxiety are like being enslaved, doubt is like traveling across a desert with no assurance that you're going to make it to the end.

Ill will, he says, is like being sick. The name in English tells you that: Your will is ill. Something's wrong with your intention, and it's going to get in the way of your concentration.

That's what all these hindrances are: They're obstacles to your concentration, they obscure your discernment, they obscure your awareness. So you've got to get past them.

The first step in each case in trying to get past is to see that they're *worth* getting past.

I remember that when I first learned about the hindrances and how ill will doesn't mean negativity or dislike—it means actively wanting to see

somebody suffer—I couldn't see in my own case that I wanted to see anybody suffer. But then I reflected: During my first year in particular, when I was meditating on the top of the hill there at Wat Dhammasathit, the thoughts that would destroy my concentration more than anything else came from thinking back on some injustice, where somebody had done something wrong or was doing something wrong and getting away with it. I could get worked up about that for hours at a time, with a strong sense of righteous indignation—and that's a lot of what ill will is.

You don't like what's happened, and it seems wrong that there's no punishment, that people are getting away with things you can clearly see they shouldn't be getting away with.

But that, the Buddha says, is wrong view. Remember that the right attitude to have toward somebody who has no good qualities at all is to see that person as a sick person lying by the side of the road in the middle of the desert. Even if that person is a stranger, when you see him you have to think: "If only someone could help that person." That's the right attitude to have toward someone who's misbehaving, who has no good qualities: compassion. When you keep that image in mind, you have to ask yourself: Who's sick here? You have to see the other person as sick and you have to see yourself as sick if you're filled with righteous indignation. You may not be able to do anything about that other person's illness, but you *can* do something about your own.

You've got to change your views, that strong sense of offended justice. You've got to look into that. We've talked about this before, how justice requires that you know the beginning of the story. You can tabulate who did what to whom, whose actions can be justified, whose actions cannot, and then you tally up the score. But from the Buddhist point of view, there is no beginning point. You can't say who did what to whom in the beginning, who was the first mover in a particular story. It's like coming in on the tail end of a movie: You don't know who got their just desserts.

Kamma itself doesn't go around dishing out just desserts. Think of the case of Angulimala. He killed all those people but then he had a change of

heart. The Buddha saw that he had the potential for a change of heart, so he went right to him and taught him, and Angulimala became an arahant. He ended up not getting punished for all those murders. There were people who were upset and would throw things at him when he went on his alms round. But as the Buddha told Angulimala when he came back from his alms round with his head bleeding, his robe torn: "This is nothing compared with what the pain would have been if you hadn't gained that attainment."

This should be our attitude toward people who we think are getting away with murder, getting away with injustices. We should hope that they see the error of their ways, change their way of action, because that's how goodness gets established in the world—not by going around and punishing all the wrong doers, because often the punishment won't make them see the fact that they were wrong to begin with. You can pile up all kinds of evidence, but if they're unwilling to admit the evidence, they'll be more and more firmly entrenched in their wrongness, their harshness, and their cruelty. The ideal attitude is to wish for them to have a change of heart—and for that, *you* have to have a change of heart too.

Again, you can't necessarily treat that person's illness, but you can treat yours, by changing your views around it. "People who are getting away with wrongdoing: May they see the error of their ways." That's the proper attitude. If you're upset that they're not getting punished, that's the beginning of the ill will, and it's going to get in the way of your concentration. It's going to aggravate your own illness.

You have to remember—for the sake of training your mind, for clearing up your own discernment—that you need to focus on the areas where you're doing something wrong *right now* and you need to do something about it *right now*. Because it's in the actions themselves: Whether they're skillful or unskillful is what makes us happy or unhappy. We tend to think of happiness as a product of an action, something we receive. The same with pain: We think it's the product of the action. But there's a passage where the Buddha indicates that the action *itself* is either

the happiness or the pain. In the case of acts of merit, he says that the phrase, *act of merit,* is another name for happiness. The happiness is there in the action. Similarly with suffering: Suffering is the clinging. Clinging is an activity; it's something you do.

So when people are misbehaving, treating other people wrongly, they're already suffering. They may not admit it, but that's because their faculties are impaired. When you see that in someone else, you have to turn and look at yourself. Your desire to see them punished is a sign that your faculties are impaired, too. It's your desire that's creating suffering *right there*. When your will is ill like this and your views are wrong, you've got to treat the will, you've got to treat the views.

Remember one of the consequences of right view is that it develops right resolve, and one aspect of right resolve is non-ill will. If you allow ill will to take over, not only does it get in the way of your concentration, but it's also going to lead you to want to do things and say things, advocate courses of action that will simply bring more suffering into the world. If you can develop some goodwill for yourself, goodwill for the people who've been doing wrong, then there's some hope for the world.

After all, you probably haven't had all your wrong actions tallied up and punished. And you're probably glad that that's the case. Try to develop the same attitude toward other people and see what you can do to develop some health in your mind. When you know the way to make your mind healthy, then you're in a better position to be a good example to others, so that they can make their minds healthy as well. In that way, we all benefit.

Drowsiness

March 7, 2021

The Commentary describes three stages of concentration: momentary, neighborhood, and fixed penetration. The way it explains these has to do with *kasina* practice, but the terms have been adopted for other types of concentration as well. And because these terms are not explained in the Canon, different ajaans have come up with different ways of describing them.

One common explanation says that momentary concentration is your ordinary, everyday concentration where you listen to someone speak and can follow the meaning of that person's words. You can read a book and make sense out of what you're reading, as long as you stay with the topic. But this kind of concentration keeps on relapsing, and you have to keep on renewing it.

Neighborhood concentration is when you let go of your everyday concerns and are beginning to settle in with the object of meditation, but it's not fully secure. There's a drifting quality to it.

It's only when you can reach fixed penetration that you're really one with the object, and that's when you're safe in your concentration: You're alert, energized, still—the type of concentration that's ready for discernment.

It's in that intermediate, neighborhood stage that drowsiness can set in. This is where sloth and torpor as a hindrance can come in as well. And because it's an inevitable stage of the concentration, you have to prepare so that you don't drift off. That is why the ajaans say that this is the stage of concentration where you're able to put up with a little bit of pain, but you fall for pleasure. In other words, you lose your topic of concentration because you focus instead on the pleasure that's beginning to arise, and you zone out.

This is why Ajaan Lee would have you start the meditation with long deep in-and-out breaths to energize yourself. And why the Buddha describes steps in the concentration where you do work, because working with your concentration is what's going to get you through this stage. Evaluating the breath, spreading the breath around: These are Ajaan Lee's techniques. The Buddha would have you spread your awareness throughout the whole body, and the effort of spreading awareness and keeping it spread is one thing that can help keep you awake, keep you from drifting off.

So know that you have to go through this minefield before you settle down, and be prepared. Sometimes you find that staying with a breath is not enough to keep you awake, even if you're trying to keep your awareness filling the body. This is why the Buddha says that if you find yourself drifting off with a particular topic of concentration, don't make much of that topic. In other words, find something else: either change the way you breathe or change to another contemplation.

You can try imagining the bones in the body: Start with the tips of the fingers, all the bones in the first joints, then move up to the second joints and third joints. Try to have a sense of where those bones are in your awareness, and relax those parts of the body. Then work up through the hands, through the wrists, the arms, the shoulders. Then start down at the toes, the feet, working up through the legs and up the spine to the skull.

Or you can think about death. Death could come at any time, and you don't want it to come when you're nodding off. There's work to be done.

Or you can think about the Buddha—anything that helps keep the mind focused on a Dhamma topic that energizes you.

These are the things you do in preparation. There are also things you can do when you find yourself drifting off in spite of your first efforts. This is where you have to be firmly on the side of not drifting off and not falling asleep, because there's a part of the mind that will say, "These are signs I'm tired, I need my rest," and you just go for it. So remind yourself: No one has slept his or her way to awakening.

The mind has its tricks. It's not always the case that drowsiness is a sign that you really do need rest, so you've got to test it. Sometimes drowsiness comes on because an important insight is about to come to the surface, and there's a part of the mind that doesn't want to deal with it, doesn't want to see it, and it'll divert your attention by making you drift off. So as signs of sleepiness or drowsiness come on, remember that you can't always trust them. Don't be too quick to side with them.

The Buddha recommends chanting if you can chant. If you can't chant out loud because you're sitting in a group like this, then if there's any chant that you've memorized, run it through in your mind. Rub your limbs. If you need to get up and go do some walking meditation, go out and look at the stars if it's nighttime, to refresh yourself. If it turns out that even while you're walking you're falling asleep, it's a sign that you do need rest. But as you lie down and rest, make up your mind that you'll get up as soon as you wake up again. Don't just bury yourself in sleep.

There are other techniques mentioned in the texts as well, and often it's good to come up with your own. There was a period when Ajaan Fuang was really sick and I had to stay up with him many hours of the night. He made a comment one time: When he was younger, he had had really bad headaches; they had gotten so bad that he needed to have monks stay with him when he woke up in the middle of the night. They gave him compresses. But one night he happened to wake up, and all the monks who were there supposedly watching over him were asleep, and he found himself watching over them. The thought occurred to him: "Who's looking after whom here?"

He said that to me once, and I realized that it was a message: If I was going to be looking after him, he didn't want me lying there asleep when he needed someone at night. So there'd be nights when I sat up all night, just in case he needed me, or I'd make a vow: If I did lie down to rest, then if he needed me, I wanted to wake up five minutes before he did. And it worked.

One of the lessons I learned about drowsiness came once when I was responsible for looking after him for a large part of the day. Other monks there had times for looking after him, too, but one by one the different monks had found reasons for why they had to work on a construction project or on other projects around the monastery. So, I found myself taking on this monk's two hours and that monk's two hours, until I had the 2 a.m. to 8 p.m. shift. Just a few hours to rest and then it was 2 a.m. and I had to get up to look after him again.

After several weeks of this, I was really sleep deprived, and getting up at 2 a.m. did not guarantee that I was really going to be awake during the hours until dawn. I'd be sitting there nodding off, but I discovered that, while working with the breath, if I tried to stay at one spot, I was sure to go to sleep. So I decided to move around: three breaths at the tip of the nose, three breaths at the base of the throat, three breaths the middle of the chest, down through all the spots that Ajann Lee mentions in "Method Two," and then back up again: three breaths, three breaths. Simply the fact that I had to count the breaths in addition to focusing on the breath and having to move the focus of my attention was enough to wake me up.

So a large part of this is being on the side of wakefulness and not on the side of wanting to rest, and then trying to find the techniques that work ahead of time to prevent sleepiness from coming on. If it does come on while the mind is beginning to settle down, do what you can to make the mind active. That's the important principle. Give the mind work to do, here in the body or with some other Dhamma topic, and experiment to see what works for you. The fact that you're actually discovering something on your own makes it all the more interesting. After all, that's the real key to overcoming sleepiness: finding something that sparks your interest, something you can explore. Taking on sleepiness as an opponent instead of as your nightly friend gives you a lot to explore and a lot to discover.

This is the basic principle with all the hindrances, that you'll learn about them through resisting them, by trying to outwit them, by trying to get around them. In the course of learning about them in this way, you

learn a lot about your own mind. You reaffirm the original principle for why you're meditating to begin with, which is that you really do want to master this, the type of concentration that can lead to discernment. After all, we're not here to drift off. We're here to get the mind firmly established, and those are two very different things. Even though they're both quiet, they're quiet in radically different ways.

Restlessness & Anxiety

March 8, 2021

The Buddha didn't regard all the hindrances as equally dangerous. There's a passage where he says if you're obsessed with sensual thinking and you can't stop, go to sleep. Even though he doesn't praise sleeping, he says sleep is better than getting tied up in sensual thinking.

There's also a passage where he's talking about advice you give to someone who's dying. The number one priority is to make sure that the person isn't worried. Do everything you can to keep the person from being worried. Otherwise, those worries will pull the person down.

If the person is focused on the fact that they're leaving human sensuality, tell them not to miss human sensuality because there are better kinds of sensuality: the sensuality of the devas. Then he would have you take them up, up, up, visualizing the pleasures of the different deva realms as they go higher and higher. Ideally, he'd have you get past that, but still, if the person happened to die in the course of that contemplation, the fact that the person was focused on deva sensuality is better than being focused on worry.

So when you're meditating and find yourself overcome by restlessness and anxiety, you've really got to do something about them, because they're hindrances that can pull you way down.

Restlessness is basically a matter of having too much energy. You're antsy; you just can't settle down. A lot of it has to do with the quality of the energy in your body. This is where you can use the breath to calm things down, to soothe things in the body, so that you don't feel like you're sitting on ants.

Anxiety, however, involves more than just having too much energy. It can go in two directions: anxiety about the future, worry about what's

going to happen to you or to your loved ones, to the world as a whole; or anxiety about the past. You start thinking about unskillful things you've done in the past and that just digs up old issues about how stupid you've been, how thoughtless you've been, how destructive you've been sometimes. You suddenly find yourself totally overwhelmed by these thoughts.

In either case, the solution requires a lot more than just a calming breath. This is one of those cases where you have to exert all three of the fabrications the Buddha talks about, bodily, verbal, and mental: bodily being your in-and-out breath; verbal being the way you talk to yourself, how you direct your thoughts and what you tell yourself about what you're thinking about; and mental, the perceptions and feelings you hold on to.

With the breath, of course, you try to calm it down. Try to be aware of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out. Think of the breath as a medicine to soothe things inside.

Then you've got to give yourself a good talking to. If you're worried about things happening in the future, remind yourself that a certain amount of planning needs to be done, but when you go over the same topic again and again and again, it's not helping anything. It's wearing you out.

What you're going to need when the future comes is more alertness, more mindfulness, more concentration, more discernment. The future's going to bring a lot of unexpected things, and these are the qualities of the mind that can deal with the unexpected, that can be sensitive to what's going on and see opportunities that you wouldn't see if the mind is all frazzled. So when there's a voice in the mind that says, "You've *got* to worry about this, otherwise you won't be prepared," you can counter with another voice that says, "This is how you prepare, by developing qualities of mind like mindfulness and alertness that can deal with the unexpected."

As you're dealing with these thoughts, you'll find that certain perceptions come flashing into the mind. Look for those. Try to see what

exactly is the perception that's got you all worked up, and try to provide an alternative perception that will change it.

After all, what's the opposite of anxiety? Confidence. Have some confidence in the Buddha, when he said that you protect yourself through your virtue, you protect yourself through your generosity and meditation. The more you can do these things now, the more protected you'll be.

In other words, make sure you're living in a world where a Buddha is still remembered, the Dhamma is taught and practiced, and the Sangha has carried the true Dhamma down for many generations. When you have that context in the world of your mind, it's a lot easier to hold perceptions that will calm the mind down and give you more confidence.

As for thoughts of the past, when you realize how you've harmed people in the past or you've simply done things that were really foolish, remember the Buddha's teachings on remorse. Remorse can't go back and undo those things. The best you can do is to recognize that, yes, that was a mistake, and resolve not to repeat it: "I don't ever want to make that mistake ever again." Then, depending on the kamma involved, you've got to do something now that's going to be useful to counteract that past bad kamma. Worrying about it, being anxious about getting upset about it, is *not* the kind of kamma that will compensate.

The compensation comes from doing things that are good in the present: being generous, being virtuous, developing goodwill for all. Because that's the second part of the Buddha's recommendation: Once you've realized you've made that mistake and you've resolved not to repeat it, have lots of goodwill for yourself, so that you're not down on yourself. As for other people—for the people you've harmed and the people you *might* harm—remind yourself that by developing goodwill now for them, too, you'll be less likely to do any more harm to them in the future.

This practice also helps heal the wounds that come when you get down on yourself too much. Otherwise, there will be part of the mind that will rebel at some point and say, "Well, maybe it wasn't so bad after all." *That's*

the voice you've got to watch out for, because that's the voice that's going to get you to do those harmful things again.

So of all the hindrances, worry is one of the most dangerous, and it's going to require the most work. This is one of those cases where discernment fosters concentration. You have to *think* your way past this particular hindrance if you're going to get anywhere with it to the point where the mind can settle down.

Remember, you've got these tools. You're using them all the time anyhow. You're already fashioning things through the way you breathe, through the way you talk to yourself, through the perceptions you hold in mind. Simply learn how to refashion the way you do that. Take any unskillful thought apart in terms of these fabrications and fabricate new thoughts in a much more skillful way to take its place. That way, you can induce more concentration *and* more discernment in the mind.

These hindrances are obstacles not only to concentration but also to discernment. To deal with them, you've got to first borrow the Buddha's discernment. Then, as you follow his recommendations, you start developing discernment of your own. You get quicker and quicker at recognizing when the mind is going to get sucked down into a vortex of worry and anxiety, and you get quicker and quicker at pulling yourself out.

In this way, you not only protect yourself as you're sitting here meditating, but you also develop the skills you're going to need as you approach death. At that point, what you're facing in the future is going to be very worrisome: the fact that you're going to leave this body and you don't know where you're going to go. It's all too easy to start thinking about the unskillful things you've done in the past, which is precisely the wrong time to be thinking about those things. You may not have someone hovering around you to remind you of the good you've done, so you've got to learn how to hover around yourself, to remind yourself of how to pull out of this particular hindrance so that it has less and less power over the mind. Even as the body is weak, make sure that your habitual reaction to thoughts of worry is quick, skillful, and strong.

Doubt

March 9, 2021

Doubt, which is the last of the hindrances, is one of the more complex and tenacious. As you're setting out on the practice, you have to realize that doubt will not be overcome until stream-entry. So until that point, you're going to be dealing with it. Sometimes it'll be stronger, sometimes weaker. It'll come in different shapes and forms: doubt about different things.

Some forms of doubt are more insidious than others. There are a lot of issues, the Buddha said, that you don't have to think about. He's not asking you to have any particular view about whether the world is eternal or not, or finite or not. But you *do* have to develop right view about what's skillful and what's not skillful, and the best ways to develop what's skillful and to abandon what's not. You can have a lot of doubt about that, because the only way you're going to find out what's skillful and what's not is through the practice.

If you start having doubts about whether this practice is really worthwhile, that'll cut things off right there. That's probably the most serious of the doubts: "Is there such a thing as skillful and unskillful?"

There's a passage where the Buddha talks about how to feed and starve the hindrances, and how to feed and starve the factors for awakening. He makes an interesting pairing: that the cure for doubt is the same thing as food for the discernment factor for awakening, which is analysis of qualities.

In other words, to starve your doubt, you have to develop your discernment. It's not simply a matter of denying the doubt or wishing it away. The cure for doubt, he says, is to look into the mind and apply appropriate attention to the question of which events in the mind are skillful and which are not.

This means watching what's going on in the mind when you give rein to certain states of mind. Or if you think in terms of the committee of the mind, what happens when you follow certain voices? When you follow other voices, what happens? Look into the voices themselves, because you'll learn a lot by doing so.

The voice that says, "The path is impossible": That's a destructive voice. The voice that says, "You don't have any choices; you just have to go with the flow; everything is totally predetermined": What hope would there be if you believed that? None at all.

If you have any hope for happiness, you have to hold to certain views: that you do have choice in the present moment, and your choices will make the difference between whether you're happy or you suffer, and there's a pattern to all this that you can learn.

If you really care for happiness, these are some of the things you've got to take on faith at the beginning. The Buddha can't prove them for you. But they are assumptions that are directly concerned with your well-being. If there's any voice in the mind that starts calling them into question, you've got to recognize it as really unskillful. It's going to lead you to a lot of suffering—or in the Buddha's terms, it'll leave you bewildered and without protection.

Like a person I met one time: He'd been on many retreats doing vipassana practice. He was the sort of person who would work nine months out of the year so that he could attend a three-month retreat. He'd taken to heart the idea that, while meditating, you shouldn't do anything, you shouldn't respond when anything comes up in the mind: good, bad, whatever. You just note what's happening. You shouldn't try to stop things from arising and passing away.

He got into a bad depression, and some very dark states arose in his mind. The vipassana teachers told him, "Hey, step back. Don't go into those states." And he told them, "Well, you told me not to try to change anything." He got paranoid, afraid that they were deceiving him. By the

end of the three months he was so disoriented that they had to let him stay on there at the retreat center to recover.

This is what happens when you tell yourself, "There is no choice." What the Buddha said is right: If you believe that, you're bewildered. You're left without defenses. So recognize that voice as destructive. That doubt is a destructive doubt. It's not really doubt, it's more orneriness.

But there are other times when you actually have legitimate doubts as to what is skillful and what's not. So you have to remind yourself: Here as we meditate, we're putting things to a test. We're experimenting. The only way you're going to learn is through experimenting.

So if the doubt pulls you back from trying the meditation or continuing with the meditation, ask yourself, "What kind of experiments have you done? What other ways could you experiment with the meditation?" That way, you're not being told to deny your doubts. After all, if you deny your doubts, how are you going to learn?

There has to be some inquisitiveness in the mind that asks questions, that wants to know. That kind of doubt, curious doubt, is actually encouraged. The doubt that ranks as a hindrance is the doubt that's *not* curious, that just gives up, discouraged, defeated—the one that says either: "I can't do it," or "This is a bad path": That kind of doubt has to be dealt with.

Again, you have to look to see: Where is it coming from? What voice is saying that? What's its motivation? What is it looking for? If you find it alluring, what's the allure? When you start asking questions like this, you're actually engaging in *analysis of qualities*, which is precisely what you need in order to overcome doubt. If the answers are not coming very quickly, you might remind yourself, "Maybe the mind needs to rest."

Even though the doubt may be unresolved, you put it aside for the time being and try to find whatever rest you can, before returning to your investigation. It's in this way, in overcoming the hindrance of doubt, that you learn how to make distinctions as to which doubts are useful, which ones are not.

There's an interesting word in Thai—*songsai*—which means both to doubt and to wonder. The ajaans often say, "Try to make the distinction between the kind of doubt that's just uncertain and discouraged, and the doubt that's wondering."

The doubt that wonders can be trained. If it just wonders and wanders, it gets pretty useless. But if you get it focused and you start wondering, "What is concentration like? When they talk about the refreshment or rapture that comes from concentration, or the pleasure that comes from concentration: What is that like?" Then you know where to go.

As Ajaan Lee says, the pleasure and rapture come from directed thought and evaluation centered on one object. So you do that. As for doubts that are more abstract, you put them aside. In this way, your curiosity and inquisitiveness get more and more focused on issues that really will be helpful. They stay right there on that issue of: What's skillful? What are you doing in the mind right now that's skillful, and what are you doing that's unskillful? And if it's unskillful, how do you let it go?

You've got to develop dispassion for it. Remember how the Buddha said to develop dispassion: Look for when it comes—the item that you're trying to get dispassionate for—to see what's causing it; look for when it goes. Look for its allure: When it comes, why do you go for it? What's the little perception that the mind flashes that makes it attractive?

It's like looking for the subliminal messages they sometimes send on TV. They're there, and if you're quick, you see them. You begin to realize that often the reason we go for these things has very little substance, and yet they lead to a lot of suffering. They really are obstacles. That's called looking for the drawbacks. When you see that the allure, the pleasure, that comes from it is not worth the drawbacks, that's when you develop dispassion and let go. That's how you get past it.

This is how you focus on the doubt, to see which doubts are actually useful and peel away the doubts that are harmful. This is one of those hindrances that the Buddha takes really seriously. After all, if you die with doubt, you might get cynical: "All that good that I did doesn't seem to be

getting me anywhere." That's going to really pull you down. You don't want a mind-state that pulls you down while your body's really weak like that, and there's all the turmoil that goes on when the body is about to die.

You want to be able to peel that kind of thinking away and be done with it. Otherwise, you're going to approach death with a lot of fear. Remember, one of the reasons for fearing death that the Buddha cited was that you haven't seen the true Dhamma—in other words, you haven't gained stream-entry.

But at the very least, even if you don't get to stream-entry, you can minimize your doubts by being very observant about your own mind to see what in it is skillful and what's not. That's the only way you can get past doubt: by focusing on the issues that really matter.

The Buddha had a lay student one time who was asked by some sectarians, "What does he teach, this Buddha of yours? Does he teach that the world is eternal?" "No." "Does he teach that it's not eternal?" "Well, no." "Finite?" "No." "Infinite?" "No." Down the questionnaire of the big issues of the day: "No, no, no."

So the sectarians said, "This teacher of yours is a nihilist. He doesn't teach anything at all." The layperson responded, "No, that's not the case. He teaches what is skillful and what's unskillful—to develop what's skillful and to abandon what's not." That silenced the sectarians. The layperson went to see the Buddha, and the Buddha said, "Yes, that was a good answer."

There are a lot of questions where the Buddha says it's not worth your time getting involved in them. They just pull you astray. But this issue of what's skillful and what's not, how you can develop what's skillful and how you can abandon what's not: That's an issue where you have to work your hardest to answer the question.

You do it by committing yourself to the practice and being observant as you reflect on what you're doing. The laboratory is right here, in your mind, and this is where the answers are. If you don't look here, you're not

rising to the challenge that the Buddha set. And in Ajaan Lee's words, you're not going to find the truth because you're not true.

So be true in looking into the mind, trying to develop appropriate attention as to what's skillful and what's not. That'll help push aside vagrant doubts, and answer the questions that lie behind your genuine doubts, your useful doubts, your curious doubts, so that you can get to that point where everything opens up inside. Then you'll see for sure that the Buddha was right: There is such a thing as the deathless, and it can be attained through human effort. That's when *all* your doubts are resolved.

Strength of Conviction

December 5, 2020

As the pandemic wears on, you want to make sure you don't wear out. You look around and you see a lot of people misbehaving. It's because of a lack of strength. A lack of endurance.

It's when people feel weak and threatened that they misbehave. They create a lot of suffering for themselves and for other people. When we look at that, we should take it as a lesson. We want to make sure that *we* don't fall into that pattern.

So we've got to look for strength inside. But we look first outside for good examples of people who had inner strength. There's the example of the Buddha, the example of his noble disciples, all the way down to the ajaans.

We have to remember that they were human beings. The Buddha wasn't *born* the Buddha. The arahants weren't *born* arahants. They *became* that way—although they obviously had some merit from previous lifetimes from the good deeds they'd done. But there was still work they had to do. If they'd simply leaned on their past good actions or past good merit, they wouldn't have gotten very far.

So that's the first lesson: You're not stuck where you are. If you want to make progress, though, you've got to take what goodness you've got and learn how to develop it further. We look to the example of the noble ones to see exactly how they did that.

There are five strengths: strength of conviction, strength of persistence, strength of mindfulness, strength of concentration, and strength of discernment. These are the things that carried them through. Whatever the difficulties they had to face—and there were many—these were the

strengths they were able to fall back on, and able to develop, all the way to the point of the deathless.

There's that passage where the Buddha asked Ven. Sariputta, "Do you believe that the five faculties"—which are the same as the strengths—"lead to the deathless?" And Sariputta said "No, I don't believe, I *know.*"

This is something we can find for ourselves. The strengths begin with strength of conviction. Strength of discernment is the one that makes them all solid, but we have to remember: Discernment doesn't come simply from things you've read—it doesn't come from perceptions, or *saññā*. It comes from conviction: *saddha*, conviction that there's got to be a way out. There's got to be a way to survive hardships and come out not only surviving, but *thriving*.

And what do we base that conviction on? Conviction in the Buddha's awakening. Now, that's not simply a belief that the awakening happened. We try to think about: "What did the Buddha awaken to? *How* did he awaken? What lessons can we learn from that? And how can we apply them to our lives?"

After all, conviction isn't just about who you believe in or what you believe in. It's also about what you *do* based on what you believe. If it stops with believing somebody or believing something but you don't act on it, it's not really conviction. It's simply an opinion you hold to. But conviction means that you take those opinions as working hypotheses and you actually *work* on them. You base your actions on them.

So how did the Buddha awaken, and what did he awaken to? He awakened through his own actions. This is a principle that underlies everything else he taught: that action is real, that we do have choices, and that we're responsible for our choices, and our choices make a difference in the results we get. If you don't believe in that, then you're going to be careless in what you do. You say, "Well, I couldn't help myself. The stars made me do it." Or, "Some outside deity made me do it." Or, "Physical laws, simply working themselves out." You get irresponsible. But if you

really believe in your actions, the first priority is to realize you've got to be responsible.

But we believe in more than that. Think of the Buddha's first knowledge. Consciousness doesn't have to depend on the body. As he saw, his consciousness continued as a process that had gone on for eons and eons and eons. He once commented that if you have a limited understanding of how long this has been going on—and for him, "limited" meant 40 eons, and you know how long an eon is, it's *hugely* long: Even that much, he said, was limited. If you have a limited understanding of transmigration, you're not going to see how it's connected with kamma. Actually, the process of consciousness, as long as there's craving, can keep on going because consciousness and craving keep feeding each other. This was an insight into time: that time has gone on for a long time, and it can go on for a long time into the future, too.

Think about that. Like that character in *Through the Looking Glass* who liked to think about two or three impossible things every day before breakfast, it's good to think every day about the huge length of time that we've been around. That helps put things into perspective. As the Buddha said, the amount of tears you've shed is greater than the water in the oceans. The amount of *blood* you've shed, having had your head cut off—for having been a thief, for having been a highway robber, for having been an adulterer—in each case, is more than the water in the oceans.

It's good to think about that vast stretch of time, to give rise to a sense of *samvega* as motivation to want to get out. Because as the Buddha saw, we can go to many different kinds of rebirth, up and down, and there's no place where you can stay and say, "Okay, that's it." You rise and then you fall. You fall and then you rise.

Ajaan Maha Boowa once made a comment that people who like to plan their next life really don't believe in rebirth. They say, "Okay, I'll make merit here, and that'll take care of everything next time around." I saw this in Thailand. There's that story I've told you of the nun who was sponsoring a hut at Wat Asokaram. I stopped by at a construction site one day. She was

directing the workers, and the hut was coming out really nicely. I asked her if she was building her palace for the next lifetime. She said, "No, this is my vacation home. My palace is already built at a monastery in Bangkok."

You get it all planned out like that, thinking that once you've gotten there then everything is going to be solid and secure. But no, it's going to fall away, too. Even people born in palaces die. So think about this. Give rise to a sense of real *samvega*, which basically means terror. Think of how long this has been going on—and how much longer it could go on if you don't get your act together.

The Buddha's first knowledge was knowledge of time. His second knowledge was more a knowledge of space: seeing the whole universe, with all the beings in the universe dying and then being reborn in line with their kamma. This is when he was able to begin to see a pattern. He had trusted in the principle of kamma up to that point—after all, if he hadn't believed in the power of action, he wouldn't have tried to find a path of practice. But this is where he *saw:* Kamma comes from your intentions. Your intentions come from your views. And they have an impact on whether you're going to experience happiness or suffering.

So you've got to be very careful about your views: how you talk to yourself. This is one of the *huge* ways in which we make ourselves suffer. Our cravings, are basically our "selves" talking to our "selves." As the Buddha said, we go around with craving as our companion. And there's a constant conversation.

Craving, of course, is going to skew the way we view things. When we have a strong desire for something, we can convince ourselves that the desire must be right. Then we rearrange our views, or rearrange our ideas of what's right and wrong, to serve that desire. This is why, again, there's so much trouble in the world. People's views change very quickly in line with their cravings.

This is one of the reasons why, when the Buddha found the noble truths, he said that they really are *noble*. They don't change. They're unalterable. Your craving runs up against them and it smashes. Now, of

course, this doesn't prevent people from trying to change the noble truths. But then they're not going to get the advantage of believing in them, and of having faith in the Buddha's awakening.

So. The Buddha saw in the second knowledge that your views are what make the difference. Then the question is, "Is there a set of views that could inform the way out?" That's what the four noble truths are. Instead of looking at beings going through worlds, he turned around to look at his mind, and just saw events: Views. Intentions. Basically, instances of name-and-form.

When he looked at things in those terms, he was able to step back from a lot of his preconceived notions and see simply, "Okay, where's the stress? What's causing it? Is it possible to put an end to it by attacking the cause?" And the answer was: Yes. "Okay, what are the qualities you have to develop, what are the things you have to do in order to do that?" That's when the knowledge of the path came.

Of course, he had already been practicing part of the path in terms of virtue and concentration. What was left was the discernment. That was the last piece. When that piece fell into place, then there was an opening that went to the deathless. His question always had been, "Is there something that doesn't die?" And here was the answer: "This is it."

When you have faith in the Buddha's awakening, that's the highest thing you have faith in: that there *is* a deathless element that can be touched at the mind. It can be found through your own efforts, and it's more than worth whatever difficulties you may encounter in following the path that goes there.

So it's good to think of those huge dimensions of space and time that the Buddha awakened to in the first and second knowledge. No matter how big they were, there was something that was outside of them, which he found in the third. This could be taken as a destination, something that would not change. "The permanent" is one of the epithets for nibbana. "Nibbana" itself is an epithet—it means "unbinding." Others are "harbor,"

"refuge," "security," "the unaging," "the undying." That's what we have faith in.

As long as you haven't touched that, it's good to remind yourself: This is a possibility. Take it as your working hypothesis that this is going to be *the* worthwhile goal. Anything else you might take as a goal is worthwhile only in relationship to this. Anything you take as a goal that's going to get in the way of this, you have to remind yourself: This is just going to lengthen the amount of time you're hanging around in suffering—in this process of samsara. Wandering on.

So we take the Buddha's awakening as *the* major event in world history—and as an event that has immediate repercussions, immediate implications, for what we're doing, right here, right now. *Every* right here, *every* right now.

It provides us with a challenge, but it also provides us with hope. And whether that hope is going to be a live hope or an empty hope really depends on our own actions. The amount of faith we have in this possibility is going to be a huge contribution to the strength that allows us to muster whatever courage, whatever endurance, whatever persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment we're going to need. It all gets based on this.

Now this *is* faith. We call it "conviction" to avoid the fact that "faith" is the F-word in modern Buddhist circles. But it's good to remember that it's not the kind of faith that rewards believing in things *because* they're irrational—which you find in some versions of Christianity—the kind of faith we've been running away from. It's basically believing in something that *is* rational, but you can't prove it until you've actually acted on it. That's when we know. Like Ven. Sariputta that time—at that point he didn't need faith any more, he didn't need conviction any more. He'd found the deathless. He *knew*.

If you want to know if he was right or not, you know what you've got to do. It's good to contemplate the Buddha's awakening every day and the implications it has in terms of the picture you hold of space, the picture of

time, the picture of *possibilities* in space and time—and then going *beyond* space and time. That helps to keep the events of each day in perspective, in which case the difficulties of the pandemic don't seem so difficult after all.

Because we realize that the *real* difficulties are dealing with the parts of the mind that are recalcitrant, that resist, but they're no bigger than we are. Our only problem is that we tend to identify with them. But when you look to see things in terms of the four noble truths—where we don't think in terms of "beings" going through "worlds," but simply events in the mind—it makes it a lot easier to cut away your attachment to things that you've held on to for so long.

That's where you find the strength of your conviction will really help.

Persistence: Lift Your Heart

December 6, 2020

The Buddha noted that we tend to cling to views about the world, to ideas about what should and shouldn't be done, who we are, and the kind of pleasures that are worth going for. But it's very rare that any one person would have a consistent structured view around these things. Our views are more like a big grab bag full of Legos. We reach into the grab bag. We find some bits and pieces that, in some cases, have been put together. Sometimes they're just individual pieces. Sometimes there's half a house, sometimes half a building, sometimes a gun: all kinds of things. And we tend to pick our views at any one time out of the grab bag depending on what we want. That means our desires are in charge, and they can be pretty random.

When we come to the practice, though, the dynamic changes. We're given two sets of views that are categorical—one, that skillful actions should be developed and unskillful ones should be abandoned; and two, the four noble truths together with their duties. If we have conviction in the Buddha's awakening, we believe these really are categorical. The problem is that they're not truths that just sit there. They have duties associated with them. They tell us what to do, what to abandon, what to develop. And here our old habit of picking and choosing our views based on our likes and dislikes runs up against a wall.

Right effort is defined as abandoning what's unskillful. If an unskillful quality hasn't arisen yet, you make sure it doesn't arise. If it has arisen, you try to abandon it. As for skillful qualities, if they haven't arisen, you try to give rise to them. When they're there, you try to develop them as fully as possible. Sometimes we feel like doing that, and sometimes we don't. After all, our conviction, as long as it hasn't been verified or confirmed, will still have some holes.

You have parts of the mind that are on the side of the Buddha, and parts of the mind that are on the other side. A lot of right effort is learning how to convert the parts that are on the other side—either that or to abandon them, and to *want* to abandon them. This is an important element of having strong persistence, or persistence as a strength. You have to delight in abandoning unskillful qualities, and delight in developing skillful ones. That's one of the traditions of the noble ones. You don't just grit your teeth. You try to figure out ways of making it enjoyable. Find joy in the effort. It's part of the formula for right effort: "generating desire."

There's another part that's translated as uplifting your intent. Another word for "intent" there, *citta,* can also mean "heart" or "mind." You lift your heart up, saying, "Yes, I really do want to do this. I'm tired of all the suffering I've been through in the past. I'm tired of looking at my own actions and seeing that they've created suffering. I want something better."

Now, there's some discernment in that desire, and you want to foster it so as to lift up the mind. The Buddha gives the image of discernment as a person climbing up into a tower, with a much larger view of things than people on the ground—i.e., your ordinary petty concerns. The pettiness of your defilements begins to seem really small. You tell yourself, "I want something better than that." Then you want to carry through with that desire.

The first step, of course, is to learn how to side more and more consistently with the Buddha, and to see that it's something you really want to do, because ordinarily we tend to pal around with our defilements.

As the Buddha said, we go around with craving as our companion. It's been a long-term companion—who knows for how many lifetimes. But we have to realize that this is a companion who's done us wrong many, many times. The reason we hang around with it is simply because we're familiar with it. And it's given us some pleasure in the past. If it hadn't given any pleasure at all, we wouldn't go for it. But we tend not to associate the craving with the pain that comes from the craving. We have a very compartmentalized mind. The pain that comes is something separate:

something else, somebody else's fault. The craving takes credit for all the pleasure. It's like those theistic beliefs where the god who creates the world takes credit for all the good things in the world, but not for the bad things. That's what your craving is like.

So you have to realize that it's not your friend. Learn how to see the connection between the cravings and the pain that they create. That's why the Buddha has all those images for sensuality, like a dog gnawing on a set of bones. It has no meat at all. It's just bones, and the dog's not going to get any nourishment from them at all. And as Ajaan Lee says, the reason it keeps gnawing away is that it's got the taste of its own saliva on the bones. That's all. It thinks the bones are providing it with something, but no. It's the saliva that's adding flavor to the process. Our sensual fantasies are the saliva of the mind.

The same with our sensual desires: The objects of the desires are not that wonderful when you really look at them carefully, all around. But we don't look at them all around. We look at them on one side. And then the saliva of our desire, the saliva of our lust, and the saliva of our cravings give it some flavor. If you realize that's all it is, you begin to say, "I want to get out of that. I want to get out of that oppression."

Go down that list of the different images the Buddha gives: the person carrying a torch, and the wind is blowing the flame back at him. The hawk that's got a piece of meat, and all these other hawks and crows and other raptors come to fight it to get that piece of meat. A lot of sensual pleasures in the world are like that. They require that you fight other people off. So learn to look squarely at these things.

As the Buddha said, see the drawbacks of sensuality, see the degradation, anything that will help you change your mind about which side you're on. This will be an ongoing process, because the mind will keep switching sides, going back to its old friends. You've got to get quicker and quicker at recognizing what's happening, and which parts of the mind—they all have your voice—are the ones you can trust and which ones have

just learned how to imitate your voice. When you see this clearly, you can change your allegiance.

This is where the other part of the learning how to stick with the duties of right view comes in, and that's learning how to find some joy in doing the practice—as with generosity, trying to figure out new ways of being generous. If your mind likes to be creative, that's a good place to look. Of the various parts of the path, that's the one that allows the most leeway in terms of your creative ideas of what would be a good thing to give to whom at what time.

If your imagination wants an opportunity to run around, let it run around with that: learning how to think about new ways of being generous —or taking joy in the precepts, and learning how to hold by them even in difficult situations, taking it as a challenge, realizing it's not simply a matter of following rules.

You have to realize that virtue is a skill. There are times when you have some information. Someone else wants it, and you know they're going to abuse it. How do you not give them the information, and yet not lie? That's a good challenge. You've got some inconvenient animals in your hut. How do you get rid of them without killing them? Take that as a challenge. The part of the mind that's up for the challenge: That's the part that you want to lift up. You lift your heart, you lift your mind to really want to follow the duties of right view, because that's what right effort and the strength of persistence are all about.

Then when you come to the meditation, here's another area where you can learn how to play. You've got the breath, and you can do all kinds of things with the way you breathe. Think of it as like learning a musical instrument. You go into your room. You shut the door. Say it's a guitar: You play it. At first, it doesn't sound all that good. But then you listen, and then you change the way you play. Then you listen again. You change the way you play. You find you get better. Then you listen to other people who are really good at it to get an idea of what some of its possibilities are. You learn how to imitate that. Then you learn how to strike out on your own—

the important principle here being that you enjoy the challenges that come as you try to get better and better.

Think about Ajaan Lee working with his breath. Someone was commenting the other day on how Ajaan Lee was very unusual. He'd go to India and he would learn. Of course, his way of learning was to look into his meditation. How is it that these yogis can lie on beds of nails? How can they stand on one leg out under the hot sun for hours? What are they doing? He meditated for a while. The message came that they were working with their breath energy. He said, "Well, can we use the breath energy to help with the Buddha's path?" As I said, he wasn't above learning from anybody who had something good for him to learn. Then he played with it on his own.

When you read the steps in Method Two, those are ways of dealing with the breath energy that he had learned when he'd had a heart attack up in northern Thailand. As you read some of his other Dhamma talks from later years, you find that he had other ways of dealing with the breath—sometimes just the opposite. In Method Two, he says to get the breath energy going from the neck down the spine. In other places, he says to start with the breath energy in the soles of your feet and have it come up the spine—the point being that your breath needs are going to be different from one day to the next. So you learn how to play with them.

One of the images he uses—he probably borrowed it from the Canon—is the image of the cook who tries to please his or her master by finding different ways of fixing the food, and taking joy in that. You've got a picky mind that has trouble settling down? Okay, find something to please it. What can you figure out that the mind would like? And what kind of challenges does it find interesting or engaging?

Sometimes it's simply a question of which direction the breath should go, or where it enters the body. Other times it has more to do with the whole issue of perception. When you feel tension in some part of the body, is it really in that part of the body, or is your mind lying to you? Is your picture of your body all scrambled? Try thinking of it in other ways. Often

I've thought I had a pain or tightness in my chest, but it really wasn't in the chest. It was actually in the back. Or something that seemed to be in the back was actually in the stomach.

You're going to discover things like that only if you play with your perceptions. Turn them around. Turn them inside out, upside down. And find some joy in the challenge. It's in this way that you learn how to lift your heart instead of just rummaging through your bag, trying to find, "Which view will justify what I want to do?"

The Buddha's already thought out the right views we should take as our working hypotheses. In the case of the mind, what does that mean you have to do? Sometimes it means doing things you don't want to do, or not doing things you *do* want to do. But if you learn how to take that as a challenge, and find some joy in meeting the challenge, then it really does lift your heart.

So don't think of right effort or the strength of persistence as burdensome. Think of it as an opportunity to test your practical imagination, and to learn how to side with one consistent view that really is for your true best interest. That way, you'll get to lift the heart higher and higher to dimensions you can't even imagine. But it does take something of your imagination to figure out the path and how to enjoy the path to get there.

Mindfulness: Get with the Program

December 8, 2020

Mark Twain tells the story of when he was learning to be a steamboat captain on the Mississippi. They had taken off from New Orleans, heading up to Memphis, and after the first day, the captain asked him, "Okay, tell me each bend in the river that we went through: where the sandbars were, where I had to stay close to the shore, where I had to stay away from the shore." Mark Twain was taken aback. He hadn't been expecting that he'd have to memorize that much, in that much detail. But as the captain said, if you don't know each bend, you're going to get into trouble.

And it's the same with mindfulness. You have to remember each bend of the mind.

Because after all, you've got a program. And to get with the program, you have to notice which things work with the mind and which don't. The program, of course, is right effort, or the strength of persistence: preventing unskillful qualities from arising, or if they do arise, learning how to abandon them; trying to give rise to skillful qualities, and once they're there, trying to develop them as far as you can. We're not here simply to sit on the deck of the steamboat, watching the riverside go by. We're up behind the steering wheel, directing our minds.

And we're learning, as we go through this process of trying to get with the program, how to wrestle the mind down when it's unskillful; how to encourage the skillful qualities when they seem very small. When you've discovered something that works, it would be a shame to forget it. Otherwise, you have to keep on reinventing the Dhamma wheel every time you act, every time you meditate. And you don't get to turn the wheel very far.

So we have to strengthen our mindfulness, our ability to remember. We do that by giving the mind a few landmarks. The Buddha starts with

what he calls the body in and of itself. And in the context of the body, he starts with the breath, because it's your anchor in the present moment. You're going to be watching the mind in the present moment, so you need to have something to help keep you here.

The breath also acts as kind of a landmark, because it's right here at the breath that you begin to notice skillful or unskillful qualities arising. So you don't want to leave this frame of reference. The closer you stay to your frame of reference, the easier it's going to be to remember the things you need to remember.

So the breath is always in the present moment. Its other advantage is that it has no meaning at all. It's just in and out, and it can be comfortable or uncomfortable, but that's about it. You're going to need this meaningless marker in the present moment because you'll be dealing with other things that tend to have meanings, and it's very easy to slip into the meanings. A feeling comes up and you associate it with an event, something somebody did. Or a mind-state comes up and it's got an object. Instead of focusing on the mind-state, you tend to focus on the object.

But when you're with the body in and of itself, then it's a lot easier to see feelings in and of themselves—in other words, simply as events. Mind-states in and of themselves—simply as events. That way, you can get a handle on them. You can begin to see them from the perspective of the four noble truths. Where, in a particular mind-state, is there craving? Where is there clinging? Then you remember: What do you do with craving? What do you do with clinging? You try to abandon craving. You try to comprehend clinging.

You remember these things because you're close to your landmark. This is why, when the Buddha described breath meditation, it wasn't just a matter of being with the body in and of itself, and then leaving the body in and of itself to go to feelings in and of themselves. You stay with the breath and you begin to notice how feelings relate to the breath. You begin to notice how mind-states relate to the breath, how mental qualities relate to the breath. You've got an anchor.

Now, the Buddha does recommend other anchors as well. There's the contemplation of 32 parts of the body. That's really good for making the body meaningless. We want to make sure that we don't slip away from "the body in and of itself" to "the body in the world." And part of "the body in the world" is the question of whether it's attractive. But if you take it apart, piece by piece by piece, there's no question of its being attractive at all. The same with other people's bodies.

Or even more with corpse contemplation: thinking about what your body's going to look like one day after it dies, two days, three days, four. This is where it's going—unless it gets vaporized in a nuclear attack. But either way, there won't be anything there to hold on to—or to *want* to hold on to. Simply that now you've got a breath animating it. So learn how to look at the body in a way that makes it meaningless, so that you have this anchor in the present moment as your memory aid.

That way, you're close to the lessons you've learned, not only from what you've done in your own meditation, but also from what you've heard in Dhamma talks, what you've read. This is one of the reasons why, in the old days, they would have you memorize passages of Dhamma. There were monks who memorized the entire Canon or large sections of it as a way of strengthening their mindfulness.

Here again, it's important to remember that mindfulness is not just awareness of the present moment, it's mindfulness as a faculty of your memory: the memory you're applying to know what you need to *do* right now. Because you remember, as the Buddha analyzed the causes of suffering in dependent co-arising, even before there's contact at the senses, there's a lot of stuff going on in the mind. How you approach that contact because of that stuff is going to make the difference between whether you suffer from it or not. So you have to remember, what are the good ways of approaching it? When something arises, what do you do with it?

You've got to keep working at strengthening your mindfulness. Memorizing passages of Dhamma is a good way of building up your mindfulness so that you can have the solutions to problems at your

fingertips when you need them. A couple of years back, I was at the optometrist, to get some glasses. After we chose the frames for the glasses, the receptionist said, "There's going to be a 40% deposit." So I did the math in my head. And as the receptionist was reaching for her calculator, I told her what the amount was going to be. She said "Oh yeah, your generation is like that. You have that in your head."

Well, it's good to have things like that in your head, because you never know when you're not going to have other things to help you from outside. This is especially true with the meditation. If you have a meditation app that tells you, "Now you do this and now you do that," it's doing your mindfulness for you. You never get to do your own mindfulness to make it strong. There's always the question of whether you can trust the app, and what's going to happen to your own mind if you can't remember lessons you need to apply.

So work on strengthening your mindfulness. After all, the Buddha said that it's one of the five strengths. This is why it accompanies strength of persistence. If you're really engaged in developing skillful qualities and abandoning unskillful ones, there are a lot of things you've got to keep in mind: what's skillful, what's not; how you can recognize an unskillful quality hiding behind what seems to be a skillful one; and all the various duties you have—in other words, the things you can *do* to get the mind in a good place. That's the program.

Mindfulness is strengthened so that you can get with the program and be with the program all the time. So try to stay anchored right here. When something works in your meditation, stash it away right here. When something *doesn't* work, stash it away right here, so you know. And then as long as you're right here, everything will be right close by.

Concentration: A Balancing Act

December 9, 2020

Concentration is one of the five strengths. And of the strengths, it's the one most explicitly compared to food. It's food for your mind, food for the other factors the path. So how do you make it nourishing and strong? That depends both on what you bring to it and what you're doing as you try to get into concentration.

What you bring to it, of course, is conviction, that this is a good thing to do. There are two ways in which that conviction plays out.

One is to give you a sense of samvega. You think about what happens if you don't have concentration, if you don't make your path as strong as possible. Ajaan Lee talks about the various contemplations you can engage in to develop a sense of samvega that'll help the mind to settle down. Developing samvega is basically a way of preparing the ground so that when you're focused on the breath and anything else comes up, you will have already seen through it. You will have developed the attitude that it's no place you want to go back to.

This is one of the functions of the contemplation of the body. You go through the 32 parts and you realize how much of your life revolves around meeting the needs of the body, how much those needs run your life. And then what does the body do? It gets sick. One of the contemplations goes through all the different diseases you could develop. Every part of the body has a disease that it could develop into. As Ajaan Funn says, the disease is already there, the potential is already there, just waiting to come out. Right here we have this nest of diseases, yet we're so attached to it.

You have to ask yourself: Isn't there something better? That's one way of giving rise to a sense of samvega. You can just look at the world around you. There seem to be periods of light and then periods of darkness, then

periods of light and darkness. The light never establishes itself fully. After all, this is a mixed kamma bag that we've got here in the human realm. You can try to find a better realm than this, go up to the heavens, and you can stay there for a while, but then you come back down. When you get up there, you tend to get complacent, you tend to get lazy, and you develop bad habits.

As I've said many times before, samsara is like a sick joke. You work really hard to work your way up, then as you get higher up to enjoy the rewards of your hard work, you start developing habits that will pull you back down again. There's got to be something better.

So that's one way of inducing the mind to really want to focus here: to say, "There's got to be a way out."

The other way is to give rise to a sense of joy. The Buddha talks about seeing your mind as it develops. You begin to see that as you've been practicing, unskillful habits have fallen away. You are making progress. You look around you: You're associating with people who are observing the precepts. It's a conducive environment. The people around you are trying to be good people. That realization gives rise to a sense of joy. From the sense of joy or gladness, the mind begins to calm down. As it calms down, it can get into concentration.

Both of those approaches—the samvega route and the joy route—are based on conviction that your actions really do make a difference. We can see that, as we work on developing skillful actions, we do really become more skillful. That induces us to want to get the mind to settle down. So you focus on the breath. You try to get the mind in a state where it fills the body.

Concentration is sometimes defined as *cittass'ekaggata:* singleness of mind. That *ekaggata* is a term with a lot of controversy around it—as is the term *samadhi,* which we translate as "concentration." *Eka* means one. *Agga* is sometimes translated as point, which makes it sound like you're trying to get the mind to one point. But that doesn't fit in with the Buddha's descriptions of what he's trying to get you to do. He talks about a full-body

awareness. The word *agga* can also mean gathering place. You have one gathering place for the mind. That does fit in with the images. You gather your mind around the breath. All your thoughts, all your directed thoughts, your evaluation, your perceptions, your attention, your intentions: Bring them all right here. You might think of them as concentric circles all centered on one place.

Ajaan Lee does talk about focusing on one spot in the body first, on what he calls a resting spot of the breath. It can be just above the naval, at the tip of the sternum, the base of the throat, tip of the nose, the palette, the middle of the head—or wherever you feel that the breath, as you breathe in, seems to come from that spot. After all, the breath is not so much the air coming in and out of the lungs. The air on its own wouldn't be doing anything. No matter how strong the wind outside, the air can't push its way into your in-breath. It's because of the breath energy in the body that the air comes in and goes out.

So where does that energy seem to emanate from? Focus your attention there and then notice: As the energy spreads from that spot, does it spread evenly? Does it spread smoothly? Or is it squeezed here, contorted there, blocked there? Can you iron out those irregularities, so that the energy as it begins to flow through the body flows in a smooth way, a soothing way, but energizing at the same time? This is where you have to bring things into balance.

The Buddha's description of how you go from mindfulness to concentration is in the seven factors for awakening. You start with mindfulness, then you read your mind: Does the mind need gladdening? Or does it need concentrating? Does it need cheering up? Or does it need settling down? If it's too active, you go for the more calming factors: calm, concentration, and equanimity. If you get drowsy, and there is that tendency as things begin to calm down—you're focused on the breath, and it seems very natural to fall asleep—you've got to fight that tendency. That's when you develop the more active factors: analysis of qualities, persistence, and rapture.

Analysis of qualities means reading what's going on in the mind, trying to be as observant as possible. If you're feeling sleepy, you can ask yourself, "How do the manifestations of sleepiness play out in the body? Where do you feel them?" In other words, give yourself a question to pursue, to pique your interest. In this way, you're taking the route that Ajaan Maha Boowa describes as discernment fostering concentration, where your inquisitive mind takes the lead. As the Buddha himself said, if you don't ask questions, you're not going to give rise to discernment. An unwillingness to ask questions, he said, is *the* big obstacle to discernment.

So ask some questions about what's going on: where your mind is, how it relates to the body, how it relates to the breath. Look into the perceptions you're using to visualize the breath to yourself. You can play with those perceptions; you can play with the breath. See what happens. That way, in exploring, you're present here with the body and the breath in a way that's not going to put you to sleep.

If your problem is the other side—the mind is too active—you can still ask questions, but you ask questions in a different way. Try to work the breath energy through the body. Make it as smooth as possible, as whole as possible. Then very consciously spread your awareness to fill the whole body, and then keep watch over it to make sure that the range of your awareness doesn't shrink. As it fills the body, try to make sure that it fills every little part of the body. Each toe. Each finger. The spaces between the fingers. The spaces between the toes. The different vertebrae in your back. Here again, you're giving the mind work to do, but it's calming work.

As things feel really good inside, you can begin to settle down. But again you've got to monitor things carefully so that everything's just right, strong, still—not too active, not too relaxed. The people who complain about translating *samadhi* as "concentration" tend to favor the relaxed approach: You just relax yourself into concentration, develop a sense of ease, but don't try too hard. That approach is relaxing, it is easeful, but it's not strong. The strength of concentration is meant to give rise to

discernment. And the type of concentration that's strong, leading to discernment, has to have some questions inside it.

And it has to build on right effort. If everything's just easy and relaxed, then you'll develop an easy relaxed attitude toward your distractions. If they come in a little bit, "That's okay, I'll wander with them a little bit and then I'll come back." But that kind of concentration doesn't develop. The kind that develops is the concentration where you really are trying to keep to one focus, and you learn how to try in the right way. So, yes, we *are* concentrating the mind. We are trying to keep tabs on it, to ride herd on it, so that its quality of being centered, still, and settled-in is really solid. The more solid it is, the more you're going to see. If it's just a relaxed state, things easily blur out. We are creating a full-body awareness here, but there's a sharpness and strength to that awareness, too.

So it's a balancing act.

As I've said many times before, if we were just doing one thing and pursuing one extreme, it would be easy to figure out. Just do, do, do, do, do or relax, relax, relax. But neither extreme gives rise to much discernment. It's when you're trying to get things balanced: That's when you have to bring your discernment to bear. And as you bring your discernment to bear in the concentration, you're getting it ready to do further work, so that the concentration naturally develops into discernment, and the discernment can lead to release.

This is why the ajaans often like to talk about how you can't draw a clear line between concentration and discernment. You can emphasize one at one point in your practice, and the other at another, but they both have to be there. So work on bringing things into balance. It's when the concentration is balanced that it, together with discernment, becomes really nourishing and strong.

Discernment: Commit & Reflect

December 10, 2020

There's a sutta where the Buddha lists things that are desirable but hard to obtain. And it's an interesting list. Some of the things are worldly, like wealth, beauty, and friendship. Others have to do with the Dhamma: things like virtue, celibacy, discernment, and the Dhamma itself. Two of the most interesting explanations he has, as to the obstacles to these things, are the ones for discernment and for the Dhamma.

For discernment, he says the obstacles are an unwillingness to listen and a lack of questioning. Now, this can apply to discernment in its sense of the discernment that comes from listening —*sutamaya-paññā*—and the discernment that comes from thinking—*cintamaya-paññā*. If you don't listen, you're not going to learn. Or you can hear things, but if you have no questions, you don't really engage with how what you've heard relates to your mind.

As for the Dhamma: Here it's "Dhamma" in the sense that the Thai ajaans talk about "finding the Dhamma" or "reaching the Dhamma." It's not so much the teachings, it's more the quality of Dhamma within your own heart. And the two obstacles there, the Buddha said, are a lack of commitment and no reflection.

In other words, if you don't *do* the dhammas—that's one of the meanings of "dhamma," by the way, an action: If you don't do the actions the Buddha recommends, you're not going to know the Dhamma. You'll just know the names of the dhammas. But the Dhamma itself, the quality of the heart that comes from the practice: That's going to be beyond you.

But simply doing it, even committing yourself to the practice, is not enough. You have to reflect on what you're doing. Remember the Buddha's image to Rahula when he first taught him about the practice. "Look at your

actions as you'd look into a mirror." Because your actions reflect your mind. Of course, the mind is where we have to look anyhow.

So you need to have this quality of reflecting back: When you think of doing something, what's the intention? When you've done something, what were the results? Were they in line with your intention? What could be improved? It's this ability to reflect on your actions: That's where you're going to learn the Dhamma—especially the Dhamma that's really going to be useful.

After all, as the four noble truths point out, the cause of suffering isn't outside. It's not in sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations; it's not in what other people do or don't do. It's in what your own mind does or doesn't do. Yet the mind's constantly flowing out, paying attention to things outside, and paying very little attention to itself. So we've got to turn that around.

Of course, simply looking at the mind can get pretty depressing. This is why you also commit yourself to the practice. This is a quality of truthfulness. If you're going to know the truth—as Ajaan Lee used to say, "If you're going to know the truth, *you* have to be true." If you're unwilling to commit, it's like standing on the edge of a swimming pool. The water looks cold, and you think "Gee, that water looks awfully cold. I don't know if I can take it." You wonder about it, but you don't jump in. Yet as long as you don't jump in, you're not going to know anything about it. You've got to *give* yourself to the practice if you're really going to know it. The attitude that a lot of people have—"Well, prove it to me first, and then I'll practice": That gets you nowhere.

There are so many things in the practice that you have to take as working hypotheses that can't be proven, beginning with the fact that you can actually *do* an action. It's not some outside force acting through you. You don't really know that. There are so many things we think we know, but we don't.

But the Buddha says, take it as a hypothesis: that the quality of your intentions will determine the results of the actions. And these results will

come back to you. Take *that* as a working hypothesis, too. Commit yourself. Try these things out. The Buddha's argument, before you try things out, is to think about this: If you didn't believe in the power of your actions, would you be careful in what you did? No. And if you do? Yes. Okay, that's a pragmatic test.

But then again, the real proof comes when you actually do it. Ajaan Fuang made this point in one of his Dhamma talks, one of the few that were actually recorded and transcribed. He said that if you suffer from uncertainty, it's because of a lack of truth in yourself. After all, the things that the Buddha says you should be certain about are not far off. They deal with: What's skillful in the mind? What's unskillful in the mind? If you don't actually try to develop some skill, you're not going to know. You won't have a basis for comparison.

So you've got to *do* these things if you're going to understand, if you're going to gain some discernment. You have to do the path in order to understand the path. And reflect on what you're doing as you do it. You see this with the precepts; you see this with the practice of generosity: really basic stuff. Consciously be more generous, consciously be stricter with yourself about the precepts, and notice what happens. If you're going to be stricter about the precepts, you find you're more careful. If you're more generous, you find there's a good quality—a spacious, wide-open quality —that develops in the mind.

The lessons you've learned there then give you a bit more confidence, as you meditate, that you know how to observe your mind. I don't know *how* many people come and say, "I can't tell what's a comfortable breath from an uncomfortable breath." Well, who's going to tell for you? You've got to try a certain rhythm of breathing for a while, and then you try another rhythm of breathing, and then compare the results.

You're not going to *know* until you *do*. Right view gives you some pointers as to what to do and what to look for, but the actual knowledge is something else. That comes from doing things and then reflecting on the actions, and then changing them, and then reflecting on your actions and

their results again. After a while, you begin to gain a sense of the difference: which is more skillful, which is more useful, which has a better impact on the mind.

That's the kind of discernment that allows you to see the Dhamma as a quality in the heart. And it's the kind of discernment that's really worthwhile. That's what we're aiming at. It is possible to understand the books—what's in the books, what's in the suttas, what's in the teachings of the ajaans—on one level, but if you're going to make a value judgment as to the worth of those teachings, you have to put them into practice.

And you remember that discernment *is* a value judgment as to what's worth doing, what's not worth doing—because everything the Buddha teaches is focused on action: which actions are better than others. After all, as you see your actions, you begin to see the mind in action. And you catch yourself: "Oh, I'm doing *this*. I'm clinging here. Craving there. Here in the midst of things I *want* to do, I can find some stress. And I can detect the causes for stress. Do I still want to do them?"

If you don't see an alternative, you'll stick with what you're doing, regardless. But when you start seeing that there are alternatives, then your discernment develops. You see distinctions. This is why "trying to see everything as one" is *not* how you develop discernment. As the Buddha said, to gain discernment, you have to see things as *separate*. "This is one thing; that's something else. Doing this gives these results; doing that gives those results. Which is better? Which is more worthwhile?"

Or as Luang Pu Dune used to say, you develop your discernment by trying to see things in pairs. Have something to compare. I have a student who teaches software design. He said one of his most effective lessons one time was when he had a student who wrote what he called "ugly code." He had to give the student a sense of how ugly it was, so he pulled out a piece of code that was designed to do basically what the student's code was designed to do, but in a much more elegant way. And it was because the student could see, "Okay, these two things were aiming at the same

purpose, but they went about it in a very different way, and one was obviously superior," the student really began to improve his skills.

It's when you see things in pairs, when you have something to compare in your actions, that you learn. You commit yourself to doing one thing, you commit to doing something slightly different, and you reflect: That's how you get the kind of discernment that comes from developing—*bhavanamaya-paññā*, which is the discernment that's going to make a difference in your mind.

This is the strength of discernment that develops on the strength of conviction. Without conviction, you're not going to commit. When you have conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, all these things come together to make your discernment strong. Then the discernment turns around and solidifies those other qualities, because you begin to see things for yourself. You're taking them not just on faith or because you believe in them. It's because you've seen them. You move from right view to right knowledge.

And the knowledge is what makes the difference in the mind. Some people talk about how they're going to cut the fetters and get to stream-entry. But it doesn't work that way. The fetters are not something you can *cut* through an act of will, because there'll be something hiding behind that act of will. But when you've had your first glimpse of the deathless, when you know it's for real, then you come back and everything else looks different. It's that glimpse—the *seeing*—that cuts the fetters. It's the seeing that makes a lasting difference.

And where does that ability to see come from? From committing yourself and reflecting, asking questions about what you've done. So keep these two principles in mind. They're the nutriment for your discernment that makes it strong.

The Five Faculties Confirmed

July 21, 2020

For the past couple of nights, we've been going over the sets of the Wings to Awakening. We've done three sets so far: the four establishings of mindfulness, the four right exertions, the four bases for power. Those are sets that deal with effort, mindfulness, and concentration. The next two sets, which are basically identical—the five faculties and the five strengths—contain effort, mindfulness, and concentration, and they add two more faculties: conviction and discernment. These two faculties provide the framework for our practice.

It's because of conviction that we're practicing, and it's for the sake of discernment that we're practicing concentration. The two qualities help each other along. In a general sense, conviction is focused on the fact that there is a path to awakening. It's like being lost in the forest but convinced that there's a way out. When you're convinced that there's a way, you're more likely to find it.

Discernment is what actually finds the way. So the discernment comes from the fact that you're convinced. If you don't have that conviction, discernment doesn't have the energy it needs to figure out what that way is, or to even see that it's worthwhile to try.

In a more specific sense, conviction focuses on our belief that the Buddha was awakened. He really did, through his own efforts, find an end to suffering, and his awakening included three knowledges: knowledge of past lives, knowledge of how beings are reborn through their kamma, and then finally the liberation of the mind through the four noble truths.

Based on that, we see that the Dhamma is well taught. Those who have followed the Dhamma have found awakening as well. That's part of our conviction, too, which gives us the energy to say, "Well, if they can do it, so can we."

The fourth aspect of conviction is virtues pleasing to the noble ones: pleasing both in the sense that you follow them strictly, and in the sense that you don't exalt yourself and disparage others over the fact that you follow the precepts and they don't. This virtue, as the Buddha says in other places, is what underlies our practice of the right exertions, the practice of right mindfulness, the practice of concentration, and the bases for power. But it also gives focus to our discernment.

To begin with, we focus on our actions because, as the Buddha says, our actions will make all the difference on the path. And where do our actions come from? From the mind. So we realize we've got to train the mind. Training the mind will require seeing things in terms of the four noble truths.

Now, the four noble truths are not intuitive. As the Buddha says, we suffer because of our clinging. Our knee-jerk reaction is usually that we're suffering because of things other people have done or because of situations outside. Or we may say that we're suffering because we ourselves are bad people: Our nature is inherently bad, so we deserve to suffer. Those ideas the Buddha says to put aside.

We suffer because of an activity we do, and it's an activity that we can learn how not to do, regardless of how long we've been doing it. We're willing to give the four noble truths a serious try because the Buddha says that they were the truths that got him out of suffering.

This conviction is what impels us to want to look at where we're clinging and craving. What qualities of mind can we develop so that we can abandon that craving and put an end to the clinging? In this way, conviction is what motivates us to practice and to develop discernment into the four noble truths.

Then our discernment turns around and verifies our conviction. When, in applying the duties of the four noble truths, we finally have an experience of the deathless: That's when we realize that our conviction was well founded. The Buddha really did know what he was talking about.

Anyone who has really followed the path will have attained the same results.

This confirms our conviction in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha,

but it does it in an interesting way. There's a sutta where the Buddha says that at stream-entry you've seen the five faculties in terms of their origination, their passing away, their allure, their drawbacks, and the escape from them. Now, that fivefold analysis is something the Buddha usually reserves for dealing with unskillful things, or objects of attachment, objects of clinging, but here he's applying it to the path. It's interesting that the Commentary, which likes to explain everything down to the last little word in the suttas, doesn't explain *anything* in that particular sutta at all.

What the sutta is getting at is that even the path is fabricated, and you have to go beyond it. To do that, you apply that fivefold analysis.

As the Buddha says elsewhere, the five faculties originate in heedfulness. You realize that it is possible for your actions to make a difference between whether you're happy or not. And you realize that the heedful path is to assume that, yes, your actions do make a difference, because otherwise your actions just get thrown away. If you don't see your choices as important or even real, you're going to get careless. But if you realize that it is in your best interest to adopt the principle of conviction so that you'll be more careful in your choices, then, based on the conviction, the heedful path is to work on developing skillful qualities of the mind and abandoning unskillful ones, to develop mindfulness, to develop concentration, to develop discernment. Heedfulness underlies all of these things. It provides the connections between the different faculties.

So that's the origination of the five faculties. Their passing away comes when heedfulness lapses. Their allure, of course, is the happiness that comes from them, particularly the happiness coming from concentration. But there's also a happiness that comes from being convinced that you can become a noble human being. As you sense that nobility developing through your right efforts, you see that you're developing a fund of

knowledge that you can apply to develop skillful qualities to a greater and greater degree. You can remember the things you've learned from the past, and your discernment allows you to let go of things that have been weighing down the mind. This is all going to be part of the allure of the faculties as you're practicing them.

Of course, the drawbacks of the faculties lie in the fact that they're fabricated. They have to be maintained. So when you see their limitations, that's when you're ready to go beyond them—but you're not going to see their limitations until you've mastered them and seen how far they can take you.

Seeing that their limitations outweigh their allure, you gain dispassion for them. When you escape from conviction, from persistence, from mindfulness, from concentration, from the discernment through that dispassion, that's when you realize these qualities really do lead to the deathless. You have no more need for conviction, because your conviction has been confirmed.

So this is why we practice these faculties. They are means, not an end, and the Buddha's very clear about the fact that they're means. They show their true value partly as you practice, because they do have that allure as you're practicing. But they show their ultimate value when you go even beyond the allure. You get to the escape.

The Buddha illustrates this with the image of an elephant hunter looking for a bull elephant in the forest. He sees large elephant footprints but he doesn't come to the immediate conclusion that they must be the footprints of a bull elephant, because there are dwarf females with large feet. But the prints look promising, and the heedful path is to follow what looks promising. He follows them and sees scratch marks up in the trees. Again, he doesn't jump to the conclusion that these must be the scratch marks left by a big bull elephant, because there are tall females with tusks. Still, the marks look promising, and the heedful approach when something looks promising is to follow it through. The hunter finally gets to a clearing

where the big bull elephant is standing, and that's when he knows: "This is the elephant I've been looking for."

Now, in that analogy, the five faculties are the footprints, and the heedful thing to do is to follow them. They will be confirmed when you gain the escape from them—seeing the elephant in the clearing corresponds to stream-entry—because that's when the five faculties show how truly helpful they are.

There was one point where the Buddha asked Ven. Sariputta, who at that point had become an arahant, "Do you believe that the five faculties lead to the deathless?" And Sariputta said, "No." He said, "I don't believe. I know." That knowledge is what we want to attain, but in the meantime the heedful path is to believe in these faculties and to develop them as best we can.

No-Tech Meditation

November 1, 2021

Meditation is something you *do.* That should be obvious, but it's controversial. I was teaching in Malaysia once to a group of people who had seen many teachers coming through, and I talked about doing concentration, doing mindfulness practice. One of the questions after the talk was, "You talk about meditation as if it's something you do, but we've been told that you don't do anything. Mindfulness is just allowing things to arise and pass away. Concentration, jhana, has to happen on its own. There's nothing you can do to induce it." But the Buddha never taught that.

All of his instructions are things to do. You keep focused on the body in and of itself, the breath in and of itself, and you put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Those are the things you have to do.

In fact, it's important to realize that concentration is something you do. The whole path is something you do. As the Buddha said, it's the highest fabricated dhamma, which means it's the best thing you can do. And you're going to learn about the nature of action as you do it. That's the whole point of insight. If you don't understand fabrication, there's no way you're going to know when you've hit the unfabricated.

Just think about the Buddha's own account of his awakening. It focused on the principle of action: how causes and effects happen. He saw that certain actions led to good rebirths. Other actions led to bad ones. Then there was the path of action that led to the end of action: the noble eightfold path. You learn about action by watching the mind as it settles down, watching the mind as it maintains its concentration. As you go through the various levels, you begin to see different levels of fabrication fall away.

When you're settling down, first you have to bring a lot of things into harmony. You've got the breath and your awareness of the body, you've got

the awareness itself and the feelings that go along with the breath, and you're trying to bring them all together. You're creating a state of becoming right here, and that becomes your laboratory case.

You've got to talk to yourself as you're settling down. But there comes a point where you don't have to talk to yourself anymore. Just let that conversation go. That's letting go of verbal fabrication.

Then there's bodily fabrication, the in-and-breath. When you get to the fourth jhana, the breath energy gets more full in the body because of the steadiness of your focus, undisturbed by thoughts about the world. You get to the point where even the in-and-out breathing stops. You could pursue this through the formless jhanas, and get to the point where mental fabrications—perceptions and feelings— stop as well.

The important thing is to see all these levels of concentration as types of fabrication because you're looking for the origination of suffering. Now, the word *origination* means cause. Usually when the Buddha uses that word, he's talking about causes coming out of the mind. Craving comes out of the mind. Clinging comes out of the mind. That's what we've got to look out for. We're going to see these things in action as we fabricate craving and clinging, and ideally we get to the point where we don't have to do them anymore. You can't stop an action unless you actually see the action *as* an action: something you've chosen to do, and something you can choose not to do. Insight revolves around this very issue.

There are states of oneness and states of what they call neurotic breakthrough where there's suddenly a great relief as you put down the burden of an old worldview. But in cases like that, when you get there, you don't know how you got there. Things just suddenly open up. That's not insight. That's just a pleasant experience along the way. The reason it's not insight is because you don't see what you did to induce that change.

The whole purpose of the meditation is to watch yourself in action. As the Buddha said, you find the Dhamma by committing yourself to the practice of the Dhamma and then reflecting on it: watching what you're doing and perfecting it from there. That's the real work of the meditation,

and it's a large source of the insight. It's not something you simply get out of the way before you get to the great experiences. You look at yourself more and more as you're engaged with intention until you understand what it means to have an intention and how the intention to create a state of becoming creates a place in the mind. If you get attached to that place, you're trapped in the parameters of how space and time relate to that place. It's all because of your actions.

So, meditation is something you do and something you watch for yourself. The commitment in the doing and the sensitivity in the reflection will allow you to see the things that will open up new dimensions in the mind.

I was reading recently that they've been developing what they call "spirit tech": electronic devices that are supposed to help you in your meditation. They fall into two types that do the work for you.

There's one type that engages in bio-feedback. It can read your brain waves, telling you when the mind is focused and when it's not. It gives a little beep when you're not focused, warning you to get back in focus. In other words, it's doing the work of reflection and alertness.

There are other devices that can induce certain brainwave patterns so that you can have an experience of great oneness, peace, no separate ego, whatever. They claim that it allows you to gain enlightenment without doing all the work that people have been doing in the past. Well, it's not enlightenment at all. The machines are doing all the work for you, and particularly the work of watching your own mind and understanding cause and effect. If the machine induces the effect, where's your commitment? And if you're not committed, how are you going to see the cause? If you really want insight, you're the one who has to do the doing and watch what you're doing. You won't gain any insight, there won't be any real change in the mind, unless the insights come from your watching yourself in action. *You've* got to do the mental feedback of acting and then watching and then acting and watching again.

As for the realizations that come, maybe they can replicate the brainwaves of someone who has a sense of Oneness with the universe. They've actually found the spot in the brain where you can induce that feeling. But just because you have an intense feeling of Oneness doesn't mean that the universe is One. And it's certainly not enlightenment. As the Buddha said, the highest Oneness—the non-duality of consciousness—is a fabricated state. Only when you've seen yourself in action, seen the process of fabrication, and seen the opening where you don't have to fabricate things any more: That's when you know for sure that it's not fabricated because you're so familiar with your own fabrications. That knowledge cannot be gained through a machine.

So *we* have to do the work. One of the people promoting these machines said, "You can have the enlightenment without the discipline." But it's precisely the discipline that leads to the awakening.

The verb *vineyya,* which we translate as "putting aside"—as in "putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world"—can also be translated as "subduing." It's a verb related to the noun, Vinaya, discipline. You're disciplining your mind by subduing its unskillful habits. And it's in the discipline that you're going to gain the insight.

This is why the Buddha taught a Dhamma and a Vinaya. For laypeople, the Vinaya consists of the five and the eight precepts. For monks, of course, there's a much larger body of precepts in the canonical Vinaya. But in every case, the precepts are there to make you sensitive to what you're doing, to the consequences of what you're doing, and to make you very observant of your mind. Commitment and reflection. A major part of the monks' Vinaya consists of precepts or rules that can be broken only if they're broken intentionally and with an accurate perception of the situation. This keeps directing your attention back on your intentions and your perceptions. In other words, the focus is always on training the mind.

The rules are not extraneous. The training of discipline is not extraneous. There's nothing in the Dhamma and Vinaya that can be abandoned or bypassed. Everything's there to make you sensitive to your

actions. That sensitivity then goes inside, to even subtler actions of the mind. It's up to you to see them, and to judge which actions are worth doing, which ones are not. It's in the sensitivity and in the refinement of your powers of judgment: that's where the real insights are going to come.

So, you've got to do the work. Commit yourself to keep on doing the meditation. Simply get better and better at reflecting on your mind as you do it, and at learning from what you see. That's how the meditation will yield its best results.

The Wisdom of Dualities

February 2, 2020

When I was in Thailand this last time, I went to pay my respects to Ajaan Uthai. When I got there he was talking to a group of lay people, and he invited me to join the conversation. He started asking questions about the monastery here. One of his questions was, "When Westerners come to the monastery, what do they come for?" I said, "Most people come looking for peace of mind." One of the lay people commented, "It sounds like those Westerners are going straight for the top." Ajaan Uthai turned to them and said, "What do you mean, straight for the top? Even common animals want peace of mind. If you're a human being, you want something better than that. You want goodness as well." In other words, if you're a genuine human being looking for a happiness that puts your mind at rest, it has to be good, too. It has to be harmless. It has to be blameless.

That, of course, is a value judgment, but it's an important one. As the Buddha said, the beginning of wisdom is, among other things, asking, "What is blameworthy and what is blameless? What is skillful? What is unskillful? What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term harm and pain?"

Discernment starts with the realization that there are these dualities, these choices you have to make, and that one course of action is better because it gives better results than the other. Your discernment lies in seeing which is better. This is a theme that goes all the way through the practice. The fact that you're sitting here now, meditating: You've made the choice. This is better than going out and having a few drinks. Even though there's pleasure that could be had drinking, you realize that it causes a lot of harm to your health, to your safety, to the safety of others, and to the state of your mind.

Even with more innocent sensual pleasures, the Buddha said that it's better to get the mind in a state of concentration where you put aside sensuality—your fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures—and find a pleasure that comes from simply inhabiting the body: being here with the breath; noticing how the breath feels throughout the body; developing a sense of ease around the breath; and then allowing that ease to spread. Think of the breath as your first experience of the body, your primary experience of the body, so that when the breath is easeful, you can let that ease spread anywhere in the body. Give it priority so that even though there may be pains in some parts of the body, the pleasant breath has priority over them. When you can find a sense of well-being here, then the temptation to go out and do something unskillful gets a lot weaker.

So this is a better pleasure and it's harmless. You're not afflicting anyone. Remember the Buddha's first instruction to Rahula. When you're thinking about doing something, ask yourself: Do you expect that it will afflict anybody? And if you see that it will afflict other people, yourself, or both, you don't do it. There's a better course of action. That's the beginning of discernment.

The fact that you're sitting here meditating: It's a better course of action than a lot of other things you could be doing. But, of course, there are levels of concentration, levels of attainment, and some are better than others. This is why, when you settle down with the breath and work the breath through the body, there will come a point when you begin to realize that analyzing and trying to improve the breath doesn't make it any better than it is. At that point, you decide that the better course of action would be to settle down and just be with the breathing, trying to develop a sense of oneness with the breathing. That, too, is a better course of action.

So it's always important to realize that wisdom lies in seeing dualities and getting a sense of which course of action is better than another. This is one of the best ways that people can teach you things: They can show you two things and point out why one is better than the other. I have a photography book where, page after page, the photographer gives two

pictures of a site, along with a little discussion as to why one of the pictures is a better picture than the other. I've learned a lot about photography from that book. When you have something to compare, you see things you wouldn't have noticed if you had just looked at one picture. You could say, "Oh, yes, the color here is warmer. There's more variety to the color. The composition is better."

There's always something to notice when there are differences. This is how you develop your own discernment. You get the mind into a state of concentration, then you get it into another state of concentration, and you can compare the two. Or when you come out of concentration and you see the mind going for something, you can ask yourself, "Well, which is better? The mind when it was concentrated, or the mind when it's running around?" The fact that you have something to compare things with refines your sense of judgment, because an important aspect of discernment is developing sound judgment as to what's worth doing, what's not, what's better to do than what other thing.

Now, in the Buddha's descriptions of the factors for awakening, he points out that analysis of qualities is the discernment factor. He defines it as making distinctions, seeing the difference between, as he says, bright states of mind and darkened states of mind, skillful states and unskillful states. I remember reading a footnote given by a translator of that passage who was perplexed by it. He said, "This is supposed to be the discernment faculty, and yet it talks about skillful and unskillful actions." I myself was surprised at the translator's "and yet," because that's what discernment is: seeing what's skillful to do.

The translator was probably assuming that discernment meant seeing things as inconstant, stressful, and not-self. But that's only one aspect of discernment. There's also the question of when it's useful to see things as constant and when it's useful to see them as inconstant, because everything has both sides. When is it useful to emphasize the pleasant aspects of something and when is it useful to emphasize the stressful aspects? When is it useful to emphasize the fact that you have some

control over your actions, and when is it useful to focus on things being not-self? The whole purpose of these three perceptions—inconstancy, stress, and not-self—is to give you some guidance in how to choose what to do, and your discernment lies in knowing exactly when to apply which perception.

When you're focusing on your choices of what to do, that's not a time to say, "Well, my choices are not-self, so I'll just go with whatever." That's a time to have the assumption that you are responsible. You have the desire to do something well, so go with that desire: whatever seems to be the better option. If it turns out that it was a mistake, well, you've learned something you wouldn't have learned otherwise. Then you can use that knowledge the next time around.

When you're practicing concentration and the breath is uncomfortable, that's not the time to say, "Well, everything is stressful, inconstant, not-self," and just leave it there. The mind will have trouble settling down. So you do what you can to make the breath comfortable: Change the length, change the depth, the speed with which you breathe, the heaviness. There are lots of things you can work with. In fact, one of the best ways of developing your powers of evaluation is to try different ways of breathing to see what effect they have on the body, and then to decide which is best. This is something no one else can give you precise instructions on, because no one else can sense your breath as you're feeling it right now.

Your body as you feel it from the inside: That's your own exclusive territory, so you're the one who has to explore it. All a teacher can do is point out possibilities: that there are these different ways of breathing and different ways of experiencing the body. Can you detect them? It's like learning to be a professional taster. By giving you a vocabulary and pointing out the differences between different scents, different tastes, they help you begin to detect, "Oh, yeah, there really is a difference," which you wouldn't have noticed without the vocabulary. This is why teachers are useful on the path. They give you the mental apparatus for noticing

differences, so that you can then decide, "What should I do with these differences? What's the better thing to do with these differences?" And keep on learning.

Even as the mind gets into deeper and deeper states of oneness, you'll find that one state of oneness is better than another, just as some kinds of infinity are bigger than others. Some states of oneness are better for different purposes. So you refine your discernment that way as well. It is possible to get the mind into formless states, and they are much more refined and quiet than focusing on the body. But, as Ajaan Lee points out, it's like having worked and then living off your pension, whereas focusing on the body is working and getting a salary at the same time. As long as you're working, the salary doesn't run out. If you live off your pension, you never know. You might run out.

Even when you get to the ultimate state of oneness in the mind, the Buddha said that that, too, is fabricated, just like all the other parts of the path. So there's something better to do there, which is to learn how to let go, because underlying all of this activity of discernment is the realization that experience comes in two types: fabricated and unfabricated. The unfabricated is nibbana. It's so much better than everything else that it's the one and only goal. Everything else is done for the purpose of that, whereas it's not done, and it doesn't serve any other purpose at all.

Given that there's this basic duality in the potentials for human experience, it only makes sense that discernment be dual as well. This is why the Buddha's first teaching was the four noble truths. Right view teaches that there are desires leading to suffering and there are the desires that can, when implemented properly, lead to the end of suffering. One course is better than the other.

So have some appreciation for dualities. Have some appreciation for the fact that there really is a skillful way to go about judging things. Learn how to be wise in your judgments—judicious rather than judgmental—because practicing discernment this way really is better than not.

The Reflective Self

January 4, 2021

We've talked in the past about how the Buddha recommended using a sense of self as a strategy, just as he recommended using not-self as a strategy. The skillful sense of self starts with two main types: the self as the producer and the self as the consumer. The producer is what tries to give rise to happiness or the conditions of happiness. The consumer is what will enjoy them. Both of these senses of self are aimed at happiness. Each is a strategy for happiness. We use them as we go through the day, and the Buddha simply recommends that we make them more skillful before we put them aside.

Well, there's a third sense of self that he also recommends using, which is the reflective self: the one that watches the other two and gives feedback. In the passage where he says that the Dhamma requires both commitment and reflection, this reflective self provides the reflection and becomes the basis for discernment. When you use it as you meditate, it plays the role of evaluation: "How is the breath right now? Is it good enough? Is it good enough for the mind to settle down with? How's the mind? Is it willing to settle down or does it need some work? What kind of work?" You try different things, adjusting the breath in different ways, adjusting your mind in different ways. Then you evaluate again. You reflect again.

In fact, of the various senses of self, this reflective self is the one that needs the most training to become skillful. To begin with, it has to hold the other two to a high standard—higher than its normal standard—as to what counts as satisfactory happiness: in other words, setting satisfactory goals and then finding satisfactory ways of getting to them. The Buddha's recommending a really high standard—absolute happiness, unconditional. That really raises the bar.

But to get there requires more than just having high standards. It requires understanding your own mind, gaining a sense of where you are and what's needed to get you to where you want to go.

This, to begin with, requires that your reflective self be very perceptive, because the mind has lots of ways of lying to itself, and you want to be able to see through them. You can tell yourself you have the best of motives and that your practice is going great—and yet it's a lie. You can tell yourself that the practice is miserable, it's not getting anywhere—and that can also be a lie. The part of your mind that wants to sabotage the practice: You've got to watch out for that part, too.

So you've got to learn how to see through the mind's subterfuges. Then, when you can see what's really going on, you have to know when to apply the carrot, when to apply the stick. Otherwise, if you're not careful, this reflective self can turn into a harsh critic that's aimed solely at destruction, that uses its right to criticize to undermine everything you're trying to do. So it has to be taught some goodwill and some kindness.

It also has to be taught to be realistic about how to read the progress of your practice, realizing that there are going to be ups and downs, and times when you hit a plateau. Sometimes the mind needs to stay on a plateau for a while. It's like climbing a mountain. If you just climb the really steep passages and don't have a place to rest and gather your energy, you begin to wear out. It's also the case that you can make a lot of progress in one area of the mind and then you have to wait for the rest of the mind to catch up.

So you have to learn how to read the ups and downs of the mind, to know when it needs to be pushed a little bit, when it needs to be coddled a little bit. But above all, it needs the right standards for judging how things are going in your practice.

The Buddha gives a list of six qualities to look for, asking yourself: "How far have I come in these qualities?"

The first is conviction. Are you really convinced that this is a good path, and that you're up to the path? What more do you need to do? I received a letter recently from someone saying that she was trying her best

to believe in rebirth and kamma, but she wanted advice on how to strengthen her conviction. I reflected back on my own experience. It was my time with Ajaan Fuang that really sealed the deal, seeing that someone who lived by these principles lived a really good life and was much more skillful than anybody else I had ever met. If you lack the opportunity to live close to someone like that, you can always read the biographies of the ajaans. But do what you can to make sure that you have a strong sense of conviction if you find that that's lacking.

Another quality is learning. How much do you know about the Dhamma? It's not that you have to read the whole Pali Canon, but you need to get the basic principles down. One of the reasons why we memorize the Dhamma is so that we can have it in the back of our mind. In the old days, when the Buddha gave a Dhamma talk, it was designed to be memorized while it was being given. It exercised your mindfulness, your power of memory, and gave you a fund of things to draw on when you needed them. So it's always good to read a little bit every day to acquaint yourself with things you may not have heard or read before, and to clarify things that you have.

Then there's relinquishment, which can cover both generosity—being generous with your time, generous with your energy—and giving up unskillful mental states. Here at the monastery we have our chores, and it's good to think of them as an opportunity instead of seeing them simply as chores. Here's an opportunity to do something well. Do it with a sense of confidence that you're going to uncover some of your defilements as you do the work, and that it'll be good to see which parts of the mind resist taking on different jobs and to learn how to train yourself to be willing to give up those defilements.

The fourth quality is persistence. How much energy are you putting into the practice? Could you put in more? You find that out by putting in more and seeing how it goes. It's only when you realize that you're getting burned out, that you should back off somewhat. Otherwise, you never really know what you're capable of.

The fifth quality is discernment, which is basically what this reflective self is: looking back on your actions, figuring out what really is skillful and what's not, and what can be made more skillful. If there are parts of the mind that resist, learn how to psych them out so that you're happy to see your defilements go, happy to see that you're able to put more energy into the practice than you might have thought.

It's interesting: The Buddha lists six qualities here, and the first five are the qualities that can make you a deva. It's the sixth one that goes beyond that, and that's the quality of quick-wittedness—*patibhana* in Pali. It can also mean ingenuity. This ties in with one of Ajaan Fuang's comments: that you're going to have to be ingenious in applying the Dhamma to your own individual case, because what we've got in the Canon, what we've got in the teachings of the ajaans, are general principles. The Buddha taught the Dhamma so that it would last 2,600 years. He probably intended it for more. If you're going to teach something so that it'll last that long, you have to stick to the basic principles, which requires that people listening to the Dhamma or reading the Dhamma have to fill in the details: "How does this apply to me right now?"

That's where your active intelligence comes in. And how far has that gotten? How well developed are you in that area? It's basically a question of using your intelligence, using lessons you've learned from other skills and applying them to the practice of the Dhamma. After all, that ability to see parallels that haven't been pointed out to you is where your real intelligence lies. It lies in figuring out—when you find yourself face to face with a problem that you can't find in the books and you can't find in the teachings of the ajaans—how you take the principles that you've mastered and apply them to a new problem.

Ajaan Fuang once made the comment that when he was teaching meditation in Bangkok, there would be cases where his students came across problems that he had never had in his own meditation. He had been meditating for decades, but each person has his or her own personal quirks. He found, though, that he could take the basic principles that

Ajaan Lee taught, those seven steps in "Method Two," and see that every problem that came up in meditation was caused by a lack in one of the steps. So go back, look at those steps, and ask yourself, "Okay, if these were the only tools I had, how would I use these tools to overcome, say, bouts of delusion concentration or laziness or having to sit with pain?" The solutions are there, but it does require ingenuity to find them. It's through your ingenuity that you make the Dhamma your own.

So these are the areas to look for: conviction, learning, relinquishment, persistence, discernment, and ingenuity. These are the standards by which you should judge your practice, asking yourself, "How far have I come? Which areas do I need to strengthen?" It's in holding yourself to the right standards that this reflective self becomes more and more useful, because it's the one that gives instructions to the self as the producer and the self as the consumer, tells the producer when it's not acting up to snuff, tells the consumer when it's being too demanding or not demanding enough.

So focus on how you reflect on yourself and on this reflective self: How far has it come? It may sound like you're falling into a hall of mirrors, reflecting on the reflector, but you can get a sense of what's working, what's not working, and your willingness to engage in trial and error is what gets you to trial and success.

Keep these three roles of the self in mind, because they all need to be trained. They're all useful. They're all part of the path.

Between Right & Wrong

February 16, 2020

Ajaan Phut was one of the few Thai masters who studied directly with Ajaan Sao, Ajaan Mun's teacher. I heard him talk once about what it was like to hear Ajaan Sao teach. He was a novice at the time, Ajaan Sao's attendant. He got to listen in as lay people would come and ask Ajaan Sao how to meditate. Ajaan Sao would start by saying to repeat the word *Buddho,* sometimes along with breath meditation. People would ask, "What does *Buddho* mean?" and he would say, "Don't ask." They'd ask, "When I meditate, what are the results going to be?" He'd say, "Don't ask, just do it." If they went home and did it and came back to report the results, then if they were doing something obviously wrong, he would say, "No, this isn't right. Try this." If the results were going the right direction and they'd ask, "Is this right?" He'd say, "Whether it's right or not, just keep doing it."

He'd never come out and say that it was right—because after all, when you meditate, you're developing a skill. Even though you're heading in the right direction, it's not quite right yet because you're just getting started.

Think about it. We talk about the path having right view, right resolve, all the way down to right concentration. When they're all right, that's stream-entry. So if you haven't reached stream-entry, it means that the different factors of your path are not quite right yet. They might be headed in the right direction but they're not there yet. So you have to live with approximation, halfway between right and wrong, but hopefully heading in the right direction.

This is one of the reasons why the ajaans are very slow to praise their students. Ajaan Fuang's attitude was that if you praised a student, that usually meant that that was as far as the student would get. During my time with him, I never heard him praise me at all. It was always, "This isn't good

enough, that isn't good enough, keep trying, keep trying." But he was encouraging at the same time. That someone had arrived at "right" was something he would never say.

Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about how being a teacher is like teaching boxing. You see that your student has picked up some of the moves, but he's still leaving himself wide open for getting punched and kicked. So you punch him and kick him right there. Not with ill will, but just to point out to the student, "You're leaving yourself open here. There's still something not quite right yet."

So as you practice, this is the attitude you've got to have: You're approximating right. You're between right and wrong, heading in the right direction. And the correct attitude is that you're always willing to learn. So when criticism comes, you take it in the spirit with which it's offered, which is that the teacher cares. When the teacher doesn't criticize, it means the teacher's given up. So there will always be room for improvement, even as the mind settles down.

There are levels of jhana. And even when you're dealing with insight, even though the progress of insight may not follow the steps given in the commentaries, still your insights do have a way of developing, of getting deeper. As your concentration gets more solid, the things you can see get more refined. As you see more refined things and solve more refined problems, the concentration goes deeper still. The concentration and discernment help each other along. It's not the case that you wait until your concentration is perfect before developing discernment. To begin with, discernment doesn't develop that way. It's in the course of doing the concentration that you notice things you hadn't seen before. Something that was perfectly okay before becomes not okay as you get more skilled.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha uses people with skills as examples for the practice: cooks, soldiers, carpenters, archers. There's no single "right way" that you can master right away. As Ajaan Lee says, you start out, say, weaving a basket. You look at it and see that there's a lot to be improved. So you try weaving a new basket. As you make improvements,

you look at that next one, and the next, so that each next one gets better and better. You get to the point where it's good enough that you can sell it. Then it's up to you to decide, "I want to go further than that." Keep developing the skill. The baskets that are good enough to sell: Are they "right"? Well, there's a way of making them even righter. They're not wrong. But they're between right and wrong.

This is how skills develop as you get more and more sensitive to what you're doing and to the results. Your standards grow higher, get more refined. And it's in working on the skill that your discernment gets developed.

It's the same as when you're doing strength training: If your arms are weak, you don't say, "I'll wait until my arms are strong, then I'll start lifting the weights." You have to lift the weights your arms can manage, and that strengthens them. Then you're able to move on to heavier and heavier and heavier weights. In the same way, it's by exercising your discernment that it develops.

The second reason why you can't wait to develop discernment until after your concentration is perfect is because some of the big issues come up in life before then. You've got to make decisions, so you use the discernment you've got. You can't say, "I won't make a decision until I can make the absolute right decision," because sometimes decisions get forced on you. So you say, "Well, I'll do the best I can." Then, if turns out the best you can do is still not good enough, well, you've learned. You get another chance, and another, and another. If you've made some mistakes that you can't just drop and move on, then you go back and try your best to compensate for them. That, too, helps you to develop your discernment.

So as we're practicing, we're practicing between right and wrong. We're starting out with the discernment that comes from having read something or having heard something about the practice, and then we start practicing. When things get "right," that's when we have the attainment. In the meantime, you approximate right. You try to move in the right direction. You don't take it personally when someone points out that you're not quite

right yet. You take it as an opportunity to learn. You're the boxer who still exposes your ribs. Or you're the basket weaver who still hasn't quite mastered a particular weave. Okay, it's good to know.

You may have thought, "Well, this is good enough," but if someone, says, "No, it's not good enough," it's not because they have ill will. It's because they care. After all, this is a skill that really is life-and-death—the life and death of your goodness; the life and death of the well-being of the mind. So the more all-around and refined you can make your skill, the better it is for the sake of your long-term welfare and happiness.

As the mind settles down, give it a chance to rest. When it's rested, then you can ask it: What still is causing a sense of burdensomeness or of stress? Anything that weighs the mind down, or as one of the forest ajaans said, anything that puts a squeeze on the mind: Is there anything still there? Look for it. The more assiduous you are in looking, the more you'll benefit from the practice.

So look carefully. What you see may not quite be right yet. It may still be between right and wrong. But at the very least, make sure you're heading in the right direction.

The Carpenter's Adze

October 26, 2020

There's a passage where the Buddha compares the practice to a carpenter using an adze. It's a tool, somewhat like an axe, except that the blade is perpendicular to the handle rather than parallel. It was used for carving wood. As the Buddha said, the carpenter uses the adze every day, and he knows that by using it, he wears down the handle. But he can't measure from day to day how far down the handle's been worn. But he does know that someday it'll be worn through.

Recently I heard someone interpret that as meaning that we shouldn't try to evaluate our practice, that we should trust in the practice and just keep doing it and doing it and not stop to judge how well it's going, because judging it will get you all tied up in knots. But that goes against so much in the Canon where the Buddha talks about how it's important to reflect on what you're doing, to evaluate how well your actions are giving results, and to make adjustments. It starts with the passage with Rahula where the Buddha says, "Look at your actions in the same way you'd look in a mirror." First you look at your intentions. If there's anything unskillful in the intention, you don't act on it. Then you look at the results of your actions, while you're doing the action and afterwards. If you realize that you made a mistake and you did actually harm somebody, you go and talk it over with someone else more advanced on the path. Then you resolve not to repeat that mistake.

As you go through the day—the Buddha gives the example of going on alms, which is the time when monks are most exposed to sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations that they wouldn't experience in the monastery—you have to reflect afterwards: Were there any places, either on the way to the village or in the village or on the way back, where the mind was taken with desire, lust, anger, irritation, or delusion around any

sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations? If you detect any of these unskillful qualities, you should work to get rid of them.

Even when you meditate, you have to reflect when the mind's getting into concentration: "Where are there still disturbances? What am I doing to cause the disturbances? How do I drop those causes?"

Which means that there's constant reflection.

So, what about that carpenter with his adze? Well, the Buddha actually didn't say not to reflect or evaluate on your practice as a whole. He was more specific. He focused on the state of your fetters and effluents. Just as the carpenter knows that the handle's going to be worn down but can't measure how much it's been worn down one day, in the same you can't measure how many of your fetters have been worn down in a day. You can't measure how many of your effluents have been stopped. In other words, you can't gauge how close you are to awakening. Are you three inches closer today than you were yesterday? Two or three defilements closer? That kind of thing you can't measure. So in that sense, you do need a certain amount of faith that the path will lead to the goal.

You keep at it. But the steps on the path are things you *do* have to evaluate. In other words, if you're going on a long voyage, you may not know how many miles exactly it'll require. But you *do* want to make sure that you do each step properly. As you focus on the steps and make sure you're doing each step correctly, they'll lead you there. Just focus on doing them well. After all, that's how the Buddha himself gained awakening. He tried different paths. He looked carefully at what he was doing and he gave each path a fair amount of time. Then he stopped to reflect, "This path that I'm following: Is it taking me in the right direction?" When he realized it wasn't, he had to make changes. And what did he change? He changed his actions. He reflected on what he had been doing, and on what he could change.

As he said, he was looking for what was skillful, and that's how skills are developed. You focus on the particulars of the skill, and the larger picture will begin to become clear.

You can see this in his instructions on breath meditation.

There was that one time when he was telling the monks to be mindful of the breath, and one monk spoke up and said, "Oh, I already do that." The Buddha said, "Well, what kind of breath mindfulness do you practice?" And the monk said, "I put aside all thoughts of the past, all hankering after the future, and calming my mind in the present moment, I breathe in and breathe out." In other words, stifle thought and just breathe in and breathe out. The Buddha said, "Okay, there is that kind of breath mindfulness. I don't deny it, but it's not the kind that gives great fruit." He then listed all the sixteen steps.

What's distinctive about the sixteen steps is how much they talk about fabrication, starting with the breath. The Buddha could have said many times, "Calm the breath." But no, he says to calm bodily fabrication. He could have said to calm your perceptions and feelings. But no, he said to calm mental fabrication. He's focusing on the fact that you're fabricating the state of your body, and you're fabricating the state of your mind. And he wants *you* to see it in those terms, and to reflect on what you're fabricating.

He said to breathe in a way where you're sensitive to rapture, sensitive to pleasure. How do you do that? You have to calm bodily fabrication. You want to steady the mind—make it more concentrated—or gladden the mind. How do you do that? You deal with mental fabrication. You look at your perceptions, you look at your feelings, and ask yourself, "Which ones can I change so that the mind does become more and more glad to be here, more and more steady, more and more concentrated?"

So the practice is one of constant evaluation. But you learn how to focus your evaluation specifically on your actions and their immediate results. You can't ask yourself, "Am I closer to awakening today than I was yesterday?" That's nothing you can measure. But you can ask yourself, "Is my mind clearer today than it was yesterday? When I focus on the breath in this way, is it better than when I focus on it that way?"—immediate

things that you can detect, evaluate, adjust, immediate things you can learn from.

After all, evaluation is part of concentration, as in the first jhana. You have to evaluate: Is the mind settling down properly? If not, what are you going to do? The Buddha's image is of a cook. The cook fixes lots of different dishes and then notices: What kind of food does his master reach for? What kind of food does his master praise? Okay, make more of that. If it's something the master doesn't like, you can make less. In the same way, what does your mind go for? Does it like working with the breath? What kind of breath does it like?

In Ajaan Lee's version of that image, he warns you that the master will get bored with your cooking if you fix the same thing every day. So what changes will keep the mind interested in the breath? What breath exercises, what breath games can you play to get the mind engaged?

When it gets tired of the breath, there are other topics you can focus on. You can focus on contemplating the parts of the body. You can reflect on the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, on your own generosity or your own virtue when you're feeling down. Reflect on death when you're feeling lazy. Learn how to read your mind by watching what it does, how it reacts to different types of training. After all, the carpenter himself has to do that. He's not focusing on how much the handle's wearing down, but he *is* focusing on how well he's making the chair or table he's making. When he uses his adze, he tries to use it as skillfully as he can, reflecting on what he's done, looking at the results, trying to figure out what went wrong if something went wrong, and how he could correct it. As he's focused on his skill, the handle wears down on its own.

The difference, of course, is that focusing on the breath is not just make-work—in other words, something to give yourself to keep busy as you're working on awakening—because you're not just doing just any old thing. You're focusing on the processes of fabrication. You're learning about fabrication so that you can get beyond it.

I had a Zen student complain to me one time, "This Theravada emphasis on looking at your actions and judging them as to whether they're skillful or not," he said, "why focus on the minutiae when emptiness, the unconditioned is all around you?" Actually, the path doesn't get in the way of seeing the unconditioned. In fact, the little steps in the path are what enable you to see what fabrication is and how it's done —and how the mind fabricates parts of its experience that you wouldn't have expected otherwise.

It's only when you're really sensitive to fabrication that you're going to find the unfabricated. This process of being very careful on how you step on each step of the path doesn't get in the way of the goal. It's what guarantees that you're going to get there. What gets in the way of the goal is mistaking your preconceived notions for the actual thing, cloning what you think is awakening and just relaxing in what you've cloned.

So pay careful attention to what you're doing. Pay careful attention to what the mind needs right now. If it needs entertainment, how do you entertain it with the breath? If it needs soothing, how do you soothe it with the breath? When you pay careful attention like this, the mind does become more and more your friend, because you're listening to it carefully. It gets more and more willing to stick with the path so that you're not going on just faith alone.

You do have to have *some* faith. Your faith and conviction in the Buddha's path and the Buddha himself won't be confirmed until stream-entry. But there are milestones along the way. There are skills to develop along the way. As you see the results of developing those skills, you gain more and more encouragement: Yes, this is a promising path. And it's a good path to be on. It doesn't save all of its rewards for the end. You can see progress in certain areas as you're working along the way. And it's all to the good.

Non-Verbal Discernment

September 11, 2021

There's a passage where the Buddha says that if you want to master jhana and get really good at right concentration, you need both tranquility and insight. In other words, you don't just force the mind down. If you want the mind to be *willing* to settle down, you have to understand its causes and effects—what works, what doesn't work—remembering that the insights you use don't necessarily have to be verbalized. After all, think about it: Insight has to do with value judgments—what's worth doing, what's not worth doing; what gets good results, what doesn't get good results. Sometimes you know these things without having to verbalize too much.

When you're cooking food, you know when something is done. If something is not quite right with the sauce or with whatever you're making, you have an idea of what needs to be done—and some of that's not very verbalized. When you taste it and it's just right, that's all you need to know—just right. You're done. You're ready.

This is one of the reasons why Ajaan Lee often talks about meditation as being like a manual skill. The knowledge of a manual skill is often very un-verbalized. When you're planing some wood, for example, your sense of what's just right—the right amount of pressure to put on the plane as you run it along, how deeply to cut—is not necessarily verbalized. You have a sense of what *feels* right.

Well, it's the same with settling the mind: Get a sense of what kind of breath feels right for settling the mind, where you want it focused, how broad you want your focus to be. Some people will verbalize this more than others, but the important thing is the skill.

And remember, it took a Buddha to come up with the vocabulary that we use for our meditation. There have been a lot of people who gain full

awakening, like the private Buddhas, who couldn't formulate the Dhamma. They sensed their way into awakening, recognized it when it came, but couldn't put it into words. Or you can look at the different forest ajaans: Some of them are people of very few words who don't explain much; others are very articulate.

But just because someone is articulate doesn't mean that his or her knowledge is better than someone who's not articulate. After all, freedom is not a matter of words. It comes from seeing things that you're doing for the sake of happiness, realizing that they're not getting the results you want, and thinking of other things you might do instead. That kind of value judgment is not necessarily verbalized, but it is discernment.

As you work with the mind, try to get a sense of it: how much pressure you can put on it, how much pressure you put on the breath, so that you can stay with the breath but you don't force the breath too much. If the pressure isn't right, the mind won't settle down. If there's too much pressure on the breath, you feel confined. If there's too little, you float away. So, how can you stay with the breath consistently? And how can you keep the mind happy to be there consistently? The mind likes a lot of variety, and you have to train it to *like* being here in a very quiet place.

It's like being a watchman in a forest: You're up in the watchtower alone. Some people go for that job simply because they like being alone, but after a while they get hungry for human companionship. If someone comes to visit, though, you can't let your vigilance down. You have to keep an eye out on the horizon, all around, because if any fires get started, you want to see them right away. The more quickly you see them, the easier they are to put out.

So you have to develop a skill: the skill of being quiet and being happy to be quiet. You can play around with the breath, but then as the breath gets more and more subtle, there comes a point where if you really want to get the mind to settle down, you have to stop playing and just be with an all-around sense of the body, very much *one* with the breath. Fortunately, the breath gives you a reward when you do that. A strong sense of pleasure

goes along with that. Some people even sense it as rapture. At the very least, it's refreshment.

But then that, too, begins to seem gross and falls away. You have to keep training the mind: "This is a good place to stay. It's good to stay here. Why do you want to go anyplace else? Why are you looking for trouble?" Learn how to appreciate a concentrated mind. Have respect for concentration.

You tell yourself that you want well-being, yet when it comes, you get bored. Ask yourself, "What's wrong with the well-being?" It will, of course, have its drawbacks. After all, concentration is not perfect, but to get beyond it you have to know it well, to sense its slights ups and downs.

Here again, it's not so much an issue of verbalizing. Just notice: When does the stress go up, when does it go down? When it goes up, what did you do? What perception came, what feeling came in? When the stress level goes down, what perception did you let go of? Those are things that you *feel* your way into. As Ajaan Maha Boowa points out, when you see something that's not worth holding on to, it doesn't matter whether you tell yourself it's inconstant, stressful, or not-self, or don't say any of those things, you just have a sense: "This isn't worth it," and you let go. That's where the real discernment lies.

The terms, the perceptions, are simply aids to help convince you that this is something you really don't want to go with, no matter how much you've liked it in the past. But if for whatever other reason you notice that it's just not worth it and you let go, that counts as discernment, too.

Part of our problem is that we understand knowledge as having to be in words. This is reflected in the history of Western philosophy: Philosophers very quickly get into questions of what they call epistemology—the study of how we know things. And the basic paradigm for this approach is how we look at things, realizing that we formulate a lot of assumptions about them in order to deal with them.

After all, your visual field is your most active sensory field. There's a lot of verbalization that goes on simply in trying to figure out, if you see

something: Is it true or is it not true? Is it a mirage? How do you test?

Whereas in Indian thought, especially prior to the Buddha, the basic paradigm was not the act of looking at something, it was the act of eating. This, they said, was the basic function of a human being, of any being: eating. The Buddha himself said that this was what we all have in common: All beings need to feed.

When you're eating something, it's not a question of whether that thing exists or not. The fact that it's filling you up: That's fulfilling a function. The questions: "Is it healthy for you?" and "Will it be good for you in the long term?" Those are a different series of questions, and questions like that don't have to be verbalized so much.

Part of the issue revolves around whether the food tastes good or doesn't taste good. Even if you don't verbalize it beyond saying, "This is horrible," you spit it out.

With other things, you have to be more careful: Something may taste good, but it may not be good for you. That's a whole different set of questions. But remember, a lot of eating is non-verbal, and yet a great deal of discernment goes into what you should and should not eat.

What this gets down to is what the Romans called the difference between scribe knowledge and warrior knowledge. Scribe knowledge had to be expressed in words. It was a matter of definitions. Warrior knowledge was simply a matter of knowing your skills, knowing your weapon, knowing your enemy.

And as you know a weapon, know an enemy, or know your horse or your other aids as you fight, sometimes you have a sense that your horse needs to rest. Well, how do you say that to yourself? You just *know*. Sometimes you get a sense of how to use your weapons, you get a sense of what your opponent is like. Often this sense is not verbalized, but it counts as knowledge.

Even if the only war that you're engaged in is doing battle with food in the kitchen, it's the same sort of thing. You get a piece of food. What do

you do with it? How does it need to be prepared until it's done? When it's done, how do you *know* it's done? You have a sense.

It's the same with the mind. Have a sense of when it's ready to settle down. Have a sense of when it's beginning to get unsettled.

That kind of knowledge deals with cause and effect: which causes are worth going with, which ones are not—based on the effects. That's where the insight lies.

Therapy for the Mind

September 13, 2020

The practice of the Dhamma is therapy for the mind, one that treats some diseases that are not mentioned in the psychologists' handbooks. Greed, aversion, delusion: As far as psychologists are concerned, these things are normal. But the Buddha recognized that they're diseases, illnesses of the mind. And he prescribed a course of treatment. Now, this treatment does have some parallels with the way psychologists do therapy. They make a distinction between what's called symptom management and actual therapy. Symptom management is when you calm the patient down. For instance, if their heartbeat is high and their muscles tense, you teach them how to relax.

When we're working with the breath, a lot of what we're doing is symptom management. When greed, aversion, and delusion go through the mind, they leave their traces in the body: tightness here, tension there, blockage here. And because the body is so uncomfortable, it's very easy to go running back to the greed, aversion, and delusion again. You don't like being in the present moment, so you create worlds in the mind, little becomings. It's like blowing bubbles. You create a little world and then go inside, floating with it as long as it holds together. When it pops, you come back and you blow another one. As a result, things don't get cleared out in the body, and you can't stay with the body or the mind in the present moment. Yet the mind in the present moment is where the work has to be done. So when we work with the breath, we're reestablishing this space here in the present moment as our space, a space where it's good to be.

Think of the breath energy coming in all over the body. Wherever there are any patterns of tension, any tightness, any blockage, think of the breath working through. In Method Two, Ajaan Lee offers one map. You start with the breath energy at the back of the neck, going down the spine, out

the legs. Then the breath energy in the middle of the chest going down through the stomach, the intestines. Then the breath energy going down the shoulders and the arms.

That's just to get you started. If you look at some of Ajaan Lee's Dhamma talks from later years, after he had done his guide to breath meditation, you find that he also had other ways of dealing with the breath: thinking of the breath coming in the soles of the feet, going up the legs, up the spine. Breath coming in at the navel and going up the front of the body. There's a breath in the head, the breath going in and out the eyes, the ears. Ajaan Fuang would talk about the breath in the bones, the breath going out the base of the spine as you're sitting and into the ground. There are lots of different ways of conceiving the breath energy to work through whatever patterns of tension you may have. The general principle is to start with one spot in the body that you can make comfortable by the way you breathe and then gradually expanding both the breath and the range of your awareness. Over time, you'll have your own signature way of dealing with the breath.

But it's good to keep in mind the fact that there are many different ways, and sometimes even uncomfortable breathing can be useful for a little while. Back when I had migraines, I found that by breathing in and expanding my stomach to the point where it was uncomfortable helped break out of the cycle of breathing that had been exacerbating the migraine.

So you get to know the breath energy in the body and how to work with it. Learn how to think outside the box a little bit so that you don't get boxed in. This way, you manage the symptoms of your defilements as they're left in the body. It makes it easier to be here.

Then when you're here with a sense of well-being, you can look more carefully at the mind to see what's going on. Why do you play along with greed, aversion, and delusion to begin with?

Now, there are some cases when, working through the breath energy, this sense of well-being on its own weakens a lot of your desire to go with

these defilements: You ask yourself, "Why leave this to go create trouble?" That works for some of the weaker defilements. That's where symptom management contains a little therapy. But the stronger defilements will still be entrenched. This is where you actually have to focus on doing genuine therapy, and that requires some analysis. After all, the Buddha's talking about cause and effect. If you sit and watch, you can see things arising and passing away. But if you sit there passively, that's all you know: arising, passing away. That knowledge of arising and passing away doesn't count as what the Buddha calls penetrative. It's only when it's penetrative that it's really discernment.

To be penetrative, your knowledge has to see the varieties of different arisings. What arises and leads to skillful qualities? What arises and leads to unskillful qualities? That's penetrative. And for that, you need to start questioning things. Say that lust comes into the mind, and you have your ways of going with it. You have to block them, saying, "I'm not going to go with it this time." See how the mind reacts. You start with restraint. You start with mindfulness to hold that restraint in place. But then the discernment comes in when you begin to see, "Why go? What is the mind's attraction here?" Part of it will say, "Well, it's natural. It's obvious." Well, why? In a previous lifetime, you were probably attracted to other things, different from the ones this time around. So why this?

The mind will be quiet for a while, and then maybe it'll offer a little bit of a reason. You'll begin to see: Is it the attraction to the object? Or is it attraction to the lust itself? Or is it to all the stories you can create around lust, and the different roles you take on in those stories? You can ask yourself, "What's going on?" The fact that you're able to withstand the lust through your symptom management with the breath allows you not to fall in line with it. You're going to stay with the body, stay with the breath. Where there's any tension that comes up around the lust, you breathe through it. Don't let it hijack the breath. At the same time, you start seeing into the workings of the mind: where the allure really is. And then you can compare the allure with the drawbacks.

There's a conversation going on here. There's a certain kind of analysis, because you want to see not only arising and passing away. You also want to see what the Buddha calls origination. He tends to use the word *origination* to talk about things originating in the mind. What in the mind is causing us to cling to the aggregates? Well, there's delight. There's an attitude in the mind that welcomes them in. That's the origination—and that's what you're looking for, because you want to see what in the mind is causing all this. When you can take it apart and attack the problem at the causes, that's when the real therapy happens.

So you're dealing largely in verbal fabrication here, having a conversation with the mind—watching also, though, for mental fabrication: the little blips of perceptions or feelings that are used to justify going with a particular defilement—your lizard brain's contribution to the whole conversation. The lizard brain may not be articulate, but it is powerful.

Still, there will be a conversation going on in the mind. You have to learn how to run that conversation in such a way that you're in charge, and you have a very clear sense that the defilements are something else. They're not-self. You've sided with them and identified with them for who knows how long, but now you're drawing the battle lines in a different way, and it'll take a while to get used to the new lines.

And don't think that the thinking that's involved in this is a distraction. Yesterday I had a class where someone complained that the analysis of the topic of the class, which was the different kinds of clinging, was awfully intellectual—and that was when I was keeping the terms of the analysis as simple as possible. But it shows that a lot of people come to meditation hoping not to think, hoping that by not thinking, they will solve their problems.

But you look at all the Buddha's teachings: They're obviously not the result of a mind that didn't think. He thought, he questioned, he observed. His thinking wasn't abstract thinking. It was thinking around the issues of what's happening right here, right now. "What am I doing right here, right

now? What's originating in the mind right here, right now? And what's the process of running with a defilement? What are the steps?" If you don't think about these things, you're not going to see them. You have to ask those questions. And it's in the asking of the questions that the possibility of therapy comes up, that you can get the mind to be not so inclined to go with its diseases, that it can get closer and closer to what the Buddha would call genuine health.

After all, it *is* possible to find in the mind something that's not fabricated, where there's no bodily fabrication, no verbal fabrication, no mental fabrication. But to see that, you've got to clear the fabrications away. And what do you use to clear them away? You use fabrication, the fabrications of the path.

As you clear fabrications away, you find something of real value inside. This is what makes it all worth it. This is the state of health. The Buddha calls the first glimpse of this the arising of the Dhamma eye.

What does the Dhamma eye see? "All that is subject to origination is subject to passing away." Notice, it doesn't say, "all that arises." It says, "all that is originated"— in other words, originated from things coming out of the mind. You're watching: This is what's been coming out of the mind. That's one of the more striking things about that experience: realizing how much of your experience is generated in the mind, fabricated from the mind. And the state of mind that we're talking about, the one that sees all that is subject to origination, is one that has also seen something that's not subject to origination, and therefore is not subject to passing away.

When Sariputta had his first experience of the Dhamma eye, he went back to tell his friend, Moggallana. Moggallana saw him coming from afar, and he noticed that Sariputta looked different from how he looked before. So he asked him up front, "Have you seen the deathless?" And Sariputta said, "Yes." It's in the seeing of the deathless that you would then look back on all that is originated, realizing that you'd stepped out of all that is originated.

So we're looking at what originates in the mind. That's the focal point of our analysis. That's the focal point of the therapy, because the diseases originate in the mind. In the path of discernment, built on all the factors of the noble path, the discernment is what does the actual therapy. *That* originates in the mind, too. It needs to be nurtured, needs to be protected. You have to learn how to side with it more and more, with what the Buddha calls one of the customs of the noble ones, which is to delight in abandoning and to delight in developing.

You learn how to delight in abandoning your attachment to the mind's old familiar diseases—to recognize them as diseases and then to delight in developing the qualities that can outwit them. After all, the defilements have their reasons and their clever tricks. They have their strategies for making you fall for them. One of them is, of course, the idea, "Well, it's only natural that the mind has these things." But take that phrase and turn it around. You say, "That's all it is. It's just natural. But there's also something better than natural." The defilements may say, "Just a little bit of lust or anger, it's not going to hurt. This practice is so demanding. Can't I have a little bit of pleasure? I'll let you keep coming back that way, coming back." You have to say No.

So you have to learn how to fortify the healing voices in the mind, and recognize them as healing. The work of discernment is for the sake of your true well-being, even though it requires going against the grain. But then what is the grain? The grain is "only natural." Even though discernment may seem harsh at times, as it comes down hard on your greed, aversion, and delusion, it is compassionate. It is for your own benefit. It is therapeutic. It's for the sake of recognizing the diseases of the mind for what they are and actually curing them. We're not just managing the symptoms. We're finding the root cause of the disease and uprooting it. Then we put aside everything, including our tools for uprooting, so that we can enjoy true health.

Try to keep this perspective in mind.

To Comprehend Craving

August 2, 2021

When Westerners went over to Thailand to study with the great ajaans, they often found they had problems with the heat, the bugs, and the general hardships. The ajaans would teach them a lot about equanimity and patience—so much so that, in some cases, that seemed to be the only message that got through. This may be why we sometimes hear craving, the cause of suffering, defined as wanting things outside to be different from what they are—the implication being that if you accept things as they are, and are okay with things as they are, then you're not going to suffer. All you need is some contentment, some patience, some equanimity.

But when the Buddha explained craving, it was something much deeper than that.

The equanimity that comes from just accepting things in the senses the Buddha called worldly equanimity. It's the lowest stage of equanimity, and there are two stages higher than that. There's the equanimity that comes from getting the mind into good concentration and then the equanimity that comes as a result of finding the true happiness of unbinding. You look at the rest of the world, and you're perfectly fine with the fact that things are not the way you want them to be because you've found something deeper and more satisfying inside.

But the craving that has to be overcome in order to find that happiness goes a lot deeper than just craving for things to be different from what they are. The Buddha defined it as craving that leads to further becoming. Now, the term "further becoming," *punabbhavo,* basically refers to the processes that lead to rebirth. That seems to be the Buddha's main focus for wanting to understand craving. After all, as a young prince, that was the main reason he went off into the wilds to begin with: seeing that he was subject to aging, illness, and death. He didn't know if there was something that was

not subject to aging, illness, and death, but if there was, he wanted to find it so that he wouldn't have to suffer at the moment of death—he wouldn't have to suffer from death at all.

You can imagine the cravings that come at death. They're a lot stronger than simply wanting to be away from the heat or the bugs. The Buddha identified them as three. First there's craving for sensuality, which is the craving to fantasize about sensual pleasures. Of course, from that craving comes the desire to find those sensual pleasures. It's a craving that goes very deep. You can be perfectly okay for a while with things being the way they are outside as long as you get to fantasize about things being otherwise. But eventually your fantasies open a huge Pandora's box. At the moment of death, when the mind can't stay here in the body, when this being that you've created out of your attachment to the aggregates has to move on, if it hasn't uprooted craving for sensuality, it's going to go for sensual pleasures of almost any kind. People can be reborn as dogs—or even worse—through sensual craving.

Then there's craving for becoming itself: to be a being in a particular world. When you find that you can't be a being in this world anymore, you're going to feel strongly threatened. If you haven't overcome the raw craving to be a being, you're going to grasp at any identity that opens itself up to you. And, given that we're driven by craving at that time, this tendency can lead you anywhere.

Then there's the craving for non-becoming, which is basically the craving to annihilate what you are or the world you're in. Suicide would be a prime example of that, but there are other ways of trying to obliterate yourself as well: the people who drink themselves into oblivion, the people who want to destroy the world they find themselves in. They don't like what they've got, so they want to blow it all up. Of course, if you've indulged in that kind of craving, that too becomes a craving that will carry you on at the moment of death—usually to some pretty obliterated states.

These are very strong, deep-rooted cravings that we've got to work with here. We have to keep that perspective in mind, because all too often,

in recent times, Buddhism has become the religion of the present moment. As long as you're okay in the present moment, that's all that's asked. Don't worry about what happens after death: That's what they tell us. In fact, there are some versions of Buddhism now that say, "We have to leave what happens after death as a big mystery, honor its status as a mystery, and not try to resolve it."

But the whole point of the Buddha's teaching was to bring light to that mystery and clear it up. He didn't want to leave any stone unturned. After all, he was the Buddha—the one who knows. And one of the things he came to know in his awakening was how beings die and are reborn in line with their actions. Their actions, of course, are driven by their cravings.

We come to the present moment not because it's the goal of the practice, but because it's the place where we get to work on the skills we'll need at the moment of death, so that we can see and master our cravings clearly right here, right now.

This is one of the reasons why we create this state of becoming, this state of concentration. You inhabit the body, fully inhabit the body. Don't let there be any ectoplasms of your mind leaping out anyplace else. Be aware of your head in your head, your hands in your hands, your feet in your feet. In other words, try to give all your awareness of the body a sense of equality. No one spot has to take predominance over the others. Or if there is one central spot, it shares the spotlight with everybody else. You fully inhabit the body. It's good to create a sense of well-being here by the way you breathe and work with the breath energies throughout the body so that you feel good being here, and not want to slip away.

That way, you can watch as other potential becomings come up and not get pulled into them. You want to know them because the becomings on the large scale that take you from one life to the next start in the mind in these small-scale becomings as a thought-world appears. There's usually some drive to go into it. Watch out for that drive. Try to nip it in the bud. You'll find that the mind starts complaining, "Can't I have a little bit of pleasure? Can't I have a little bit of whatever?"

You have to regard it in the same way that Ven. Sundara Samudda regarded a vision he had. He was doing walking meditation one day and he had a vision of a beautiful woman standing at the end of the path, inviting him to disrobe, saying, "As long as you're still young, you should enjoy sensual pleasures. Wait until you're old. Then you can come back and become a monk, and I'll become a nun." He said that he looked at her and he saw her as a trap of death laid out. That's how you should regard your distractions here as you meditate.

If you find it easy to slip off into a distraction while you're young and healthy, or at least relatively well, what's it going to be like when you're at the moment of death? Contentment, acceptance, patience, equanimity won't be enough to cut it at that time. They may make things a little bit easier. The people who accept the fact that they're dying have a huge advantage over those who refuse to accept it. But there's a lot more that needs to be done beyond acceptance.

You have to comprehend craving, which means ending all passion, aversion, and delusion around it. We talk about the different duties with regard to the four noble truths, and that the duty with regard to craving is to abandon it, but there's one passage where Ven. Gavampati says he heard it from the Buddha that you should try to comprehend all four of the noble truths. After all, how are you going to abandon craving until you comprehend it? And of course, it's in developing the path that's you come to comprehend the path.

So look at this as an opportunity to understand your cravings. These are the things that will carry you on, and they mean business. They may seem playful—lots of fun. But they can lead you into all kinds of places where you don't want to go. Think of those Brahmas in one of the stories about how the universe evolves. After the previous universe had devolved, there were some Brahmas staying way up in the higher heavens. When the new universe begins to form, they come down to check it out, and they move along over the waters, lit by their own luminosity. They see a film on the water. They say, "What's that? It looks delicious." One of them, a little

more wanton than the others, tastes it with his finger. And he says, "It tastes like a combination of ghee and wild honey." So he sets on it. The other ones see him, so they set on the film, too. They start eating and eating and eating it, breaking it up with their hands. As they do, they lose their luminosity. That's the beginning of the fall.

This is symbolic for the way in which a lot of becomings seem appealing at the beginning, and part of the mind says, "Well, hey, what about this? Haven't tried this one in a long time." Then you fall for it. And you really fall—way down. The more you go after it, the more you change in a worse direction. So you have to watch out.

Cravings can take us to all kinds of places. The Buddha's image is of a fire going from one house to another, and it goes because the fire clings to the wind. In the same way, the mind clings to craving as it goes from this body to another one. And we know what wind is like. It can blow anywhere. So you want to train the mind so that it's not fooled by any kind of craving. We do work with the desire to get the mind to settle down. We work with the desire to develop the path. But you have to hold to that desire and fight off everything else, because it's only in that way that there can be some guarantee of safety for you. Craving may seem playful, but its consequences can be serious. And you have to take them seriously as well.

Serial Clinging Is Still Clinging

September 14, 2020

There was a book several years back on the topic of the Buddhist attitude toward desire. The author was making the point that our problem is that we cling to the objects of our desires, but if we could have a desire without clinging to the object, we'd be fine. Of course, that's the recipe for a serial sex offender: You keep on desiring. First you have one object; then you don't care about it anymore. You find another object, and then don't care about that anymore. This could go on without end.

The author had everything backwards. The desire itself is the problem. The fascination with thinking about sensual objects: That's what we cling to. The particular object may change: sights, sounds, tastes, smells, tactile sensations. And look at the mind: It runs all over the place. It's not so much attached to the objects as it is to the planning, the fantasizing. And even there, the plans and the fantasies may change.

Clinging to sensuality doesn't mean that you hold permanently to one fantasy or one plan. It means you hold on to this or that activity long enough to feed on it. Then you go looking for something else to feed on. The same holds for the other types of clinging: clinging to views, clinging to habits and practices, clinging to doctrines of the self.

Clinging to views doesn't mean you have a fixed view that you hold on to all the time. You hold on to one view, and then you can change it. You hold on to the next one, you change that, hold on to another one. You can't avoid view-clinging by just wandering around with different views or by claiming to be view-fluid, saying that you don't have any particular view you hold on to all the time. The fact that you hold on to one long enough to base an action on it—that's clinging enough.

The same with habits and practices. You can change your habits and practices, your ideas of what you should and shouldn't do, believing one

thing today, another thing tomorrow. It's still clinging. The same with doctrines of the self: You can have different ideas of who you are. You already go through the day with different ideas of who you are. Sometimes you identify with your body, sometimes with your feelings, sometimes with your perceptions, your thoughts, your consciousness, or any combination of these. If you were to draw a picture of your sense of self, it would be like an amoeba, changing shape all the time. It all still counts as clinging, because the Buddha's not telling you, "Wander around with your ideas about what should and shouldn't be done, what the world is like, who you are." It'd be hard to follow a path of practice that would amount to anything if it were so shifty.

So you can't avoid clinging simply by changing your mind all the time. You're just turning into a serial clinger. Because what do you do? You need to have some views about the world, some views about what is appropriate and what's not, who you are in terms of whether you're capable of making a change in the world, making a change in your experience. You have to have certain views about these things, and you have to hold to them if you want to behave in a consistent manner. That way, you can focus on a goal and work all the way to that goal.

The solution is not to keep changing your views. The solution is finding views that get you to act in the right way consistently until you reach the threshold to the deathless. This is what the Buddha calls the kamma that leads to the end of kamma, and it's going to require firmly held right views, and devotion to skillful precepts and skillful practices, and a consistent view of yourself as being responsible, of wanting to put an end to suffering, and believing in yourself that you can do this—at the same time, realizing that you're the one who *has* to be responsible.

So the way out of clinging actually is holding on to certain views, certain habits, certain ways of defining yourself that are skillful. This kind of holding on is part of the Buddha's strategy. You have to remember that discernment is always strategic. The Buddha's not just describing the way things are for the sake of the description. He's telling you, "Think in these

ways, up to this point, and then you're going to have to abandon those ways." But in the meantime, hold on and be consistent.

Now, the only clinging that the Buddha doesn't leave room for in the path is clinging to sensuality. This doesn't mean that you have to reject all sensual pleasures. Remember, sensuality is your fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures, planning for them, fantasizing about them. But as for the pleasures themselves, there will be those in accordance with the path and those not in accordance with the path.

There are some cases where the Buddha says, across the board, that certain pleasures are to be avoided. Any sensual pleasure that involves breaking the precepts, for instance, is out of bounds.

There are other pleasures that some people find they can indulge in with no problem. Other people have a problem. This is going to be an individual matter. You notice this in Thailand. There are some monks who live in the relative comfort of a forest monastery and they're able to practice perfectly fine. Other monks need the hardships of the wilderness in order to become heedful. So this will be an individual matter. As the Buddha said, any pleasure that accords with the Dhamma, any pleasure where you notice that, as you follow that pleasure, skillful states develop in the mind, unskillful states fall away—that pleasure is perfectly fine. The pleasures to watch out for are those where, if you indulge in them, skillful states deteriorate and unskillful states grow: Those pleasures you've got to stay away from. So you've got to look into your own mind and be honest about what sensual pleasures are doing to it.

But with the other forms of clinging, the Buddha gives you skillful ways of clinging for the purpose of the path, realizing that you'll have to let go at some point. Ajaan Maha Boowa gives a nice analogy. He says it's like climbing a ladder to the roof of a house. You hold on to one rung with one hand, and then you hold on to the next rung with the other hand. You don't let go of the first rung until your second hand is securely on the higher rung. Then you let go of the first rung and you stretch your first hand up even higher. Once you firmly grasp the next higher rung, you let

go of the second one, and so on up. When you get off the ladder and you're on the roof, that's when you let go of the ladder entirely. But until that point, you've got to hold on.

The Buddha once was teaching Ven. Ananda, going through a list of the different stages of concentration, starting with the fourth jhana and going higher, talking about how when you get to the highest level of concentration, you realize there's a pure state of equanimity. As long as you're attached to that equanimity, you won't be able to gain awakening. But if you learn to see that it, too, is inconstant, stressful, and not-self, you learn to let it go. Then you can be free. Ananda's comment was the Buddha was teaching how to get across the river by going from one clinging to the next. Think of it as stepping from one rock in the river to the next until you reach the far shore.

So you will be clinging as you follow the path. The more consistent you are in clinging to right view, the better. Our problem is that we hold on to it sometimes, and then change our minds and hold on to wrong views other times. So watch out for the justifying voice that says, "See? I'm letting go. I'm showing that I'm not clinging." That's not the case. You've just gone back to cling to something that's not as skillful. Then you get stuck in what Ajaan Lee talks about when he describes the two paths we usually follow, saying that our problem is that we follow the right path sometimes, and then the not-right path other times. As a result, we don't really get anywhere. If you want to get someplace, you have to hold on to the right path all the way.

Watch out for the mind's tendency to want to switch around. Remember, there's no justification in the Dhamma for it. And especially watch out for the voice that says, "I'm learning how to be unattached." That's very seductive, and it sounds as if it's got the Dhamma on its side. This is one of the things you have to watch out for all along, because the defilements know how to sound like Dhamma sometimes. They can take a Dhamma teaching that's true and beneficial, but not right for the time and

place, or it may not even be true. It sounds right, but if you look at it carefully, you begin to realize that something's off.

All this comes down to that tendency that Ajaan Chah noted. He said that when you really look at your mind, one of the first things you realize is how much it lies to itself. You can take the Dhamma and turn it into not-Dhamma and yet still think it's Dhamma. So remember this.

Clinging doesn't mean you just hold on to something fixedly. It means you hold on to something long enough to make a decision about what to do based on your idea of what the world is, what should and shouldn't be done, who you are, and the extent to which you'll benefit from that action. If you keep changing your views about this, Ajaan Lee's image is of paddling around in a little lake. You paddle and you paddle and you paddle, and you think you're going to get someplace, but you've just been paddling in circles. You want to get clear about right view, clear about what the precepts and practice of concentration are all about, clear about your abilities to follow the path, and clear about your desire to really want to make it all the way. When you're clear about these things, you hold on to them and follow them to the end. That way, your actions will be consistent and headed in one direction: the direct path. And it's the direct path that takes you where you want to go.

True for What Purpose?

February 10, 2020

Some facts are like the grammar of a language, and some are like words. The grammar gives the structure, helps us to interpret the words, puts the words in order and in context, focuses on which words are important, which words are not, what they mean. Then the individual words fit into the structure.

When the Buddha taught the four noble truths, it was as if he was teaching the grammar for the practice. They're not just four interesting facts that you file away in your vast library of facts. They're meant to structure everything you think about: how you organize your library. He's pointing out that the problem of suffering is the big problem in life, and here he's got the solution—and if you want to solve the problem, you have to be very careful about what you focus on, and what you don't.

You see this in his teaching on questions. Some questions are meant to be answered in a categorical way. In other words, the answer is true across the board. Some are answered in an analytical way, saying that it depends on the situation and how the terms are defined. Some are answered with cross questioning. The Buddha would question his listeners to make sure that they would understand the general framework of what he was going to say before answering their questions. And then some questions he simply put aside—and these included some pretty big ones: questions that people were fascinated with, a lot of the philosophy of the time. The reason he put them aside was because they got in the way of solving what he had realized was genuinely the big problem.

The same principle applies to the facts we see around us. We're sitting in this room, and there are lots of things you could be thinking about concerning what's going on in this room right now. You could decide that you wanted to count all the atoms in the air, or make a catalog of what

books we have over on the shelves and what Buddha images we have on the alter. But that would be a waste of time.

Especially if you think that your purpose is to put an end to suffering. You want to focus on your own mind. You want to focus on your own body as you feel it from within, to get the mind to settle down. This means you have to be selective in what you focus on, and also in what you say to yourself about it. You could be commenting on how your mind is not settling down, and how you're a miserable meditator. Or you could be commenting on how this time you were able to stick to five breaths, so next time let's try for ten, or fifteen. In other words, you could talk to yourself in a discouraging way or an encouraging way. It's up to you.

The question is, what purpose is being served? It may be true that you're not doing well in the meditation, but what is that truth for? What does it help?

This principle applies throughout the practice. When you're following the precepts, you could focus on the things that you're missing out on because you can't lie, can't steal, can't kill, can't have illicit sex, can't have intoxicants. Or you could focus on how much better your life is because you're not doing any of those things.

The same with the concentration: You focus on the breath, you talk to yourself about how the breath can be comfortable here, it can be comfortable there. There may be parts of the body that are in pain, but you don't have to focus on them. You focus on the parts that you can make comfortable. Get them on your side. Then, once you have them on your side, you can deal with the parts that are not so comfortable.

In some cases, you can actually make the pains go away. In other cases, the pains don't go away, but at least you're not tensing up around them, making them worse. You spread the comfortable breath energy through those parts of the body so that when the time comes to analyze the pain, you've got a good place to go in case you're not getting anywhere with the analysis.

You're learning to focus on things selectively.

The same with discernment: As the Buddha said, you could focus on how pleasant feelings and perceptions can be, or how much fun it is to engage in thought fabrication. As he admitted, these things do have their pleasures, but focusing on them in that way just gives rise to more passion, aversion, and delusion. Instead, you could focus on their drawbacks: that no matter how well you fashion them, there will still be parts of them that you can't rely on, parts of them that will be stressful, parts of them that you cannot control.

You have to ask yourself, why are you engaging in thoughts about them? If you're engaging in thoughts about them for the sake of putting an end to suffering, okay, you focus on their drawbacks, at the right time.

When you're trying to get the mind into concentration, though, you focus on the ways in which you can, at least to some extent, get them under your control, get them to be constant, get them to be easeful.

So you have to learn how to select your truths. Even as you go through the day, the same principle applies. In dealing with other people, you could focus on the ways in which they show disrespect to you, or you could decide that that's not important. After all, there have been times when you've had disrespect for them; it's only natural that they'll have it for you. If you can think in those terms, it's a lot easier to let the issue go.

You have to remember that all perceptions give only a sketch of reality. Every way in which you represent the truth to yourself has its false side. You have to simplify things for your purposes. This is what they call the pragmatic approach to truth: You focus on truths that serve a purpose. If they don't serve a purpose, then no matter how wonderful they are, why bother? If they do serve a purpose, and even though it may be stressful to think about certain issues—because they require that you think and work and put forth an effort—still, if they serve a purpose, it's worth it.

This is why the concept of *attha* plays such a large role in the Buddha's teachings. The attha of his teachings is the purpose of his teachings, their meaning, their goal. If you keep the goal clearly in mind, that helps you to sort out which facts are worth focusing on. Once you've got them selected,

then what are you going to think about them? How are you going to interpret them? What meaning are you going to give them, for what purpose?

Don't let yourself get waylaid by things that are irrelevant, because as you go through life there are lots of issues you'll simply have to put aside, put aside, because they get in the way of what's really important. Even as you're dying, you could focus on the fact that you're going to be missing this, missing that, and the mind will start thrashing around. Or it could focus on the question: now that the body is going to start falling apart, where are you going to focus your attention so that you don't create unnecessary suffering for yourself?

Here again, the four noble truths provide the grammar. They provide the structure, allowing you to organize your sense of what's important, what's not important, where your priorities are. Anything that fits into that grammar is part of the language of the practice. Anything that doesn't fit into that grammar, you can put aside. No matter how much you've been attached to it, no matter how large a role it has played in your life so far, you have to learn how to take it apart in line with the Buddha's grammar, so that you can see which aspects of the lessons you've learned from your life are actually going to be helpful in the path and which ones are not.

It's not as if you throw everything away, or that you deny the importance of your past experience. It's simply that you learn how to convert it to a new use. Memories of the past that made you miserable, you can take them apart: Where's the perception? Where is the fabrication? Where's the allure? Why do you go for them? What gets accomplished by them and what are the drawbacks?

As you take these things apart, you begin to get a new perspective. You'll think in terms of the principle of kamma—this is a huge back-and-forth that's been going on for who knows how long—and then the desire to get something brought to closure, to get something resolved, starts to seem meaningless. That's when you've used that particular story, that

particular narrative, for the sake of the Dhamma: when you develop that sense of samvega.

So think about the Buddha's grammar and how all the different things you're focusing on either fit or don't fit into that grammar. It's like any language. It's very good for expressing some things, and not so good for expressing others. This one is good for expressing the truths that lead to the end of suffering. There's no better language for that purpose than this.

As you look at everything else, reject what doesn't fit into this grammar and take on only what does. You'll find that it really does serve a purpose, and you'll be glad you took it on. As for the things you've had to let go, you'll be glad you were able to let them go. There will be no lingering regret.

The Buddha's Conventions

August 14, 2021

I know of a monk who's occasionally asked to name children, and he says he doesn't like doing it because that's the beginning of social conditioning: Giving the child a name makes it have a sense of self.

That attitude strikes me as strange. After all, everybody needs a name. As Ajaan Chah once said, "If we just called out, 'Person, person, person,' nobody would know who was being called." The Buddha himself called people by their names: He didn't call them *aggregates*. "Aggregates come here. Aggregates go away." Rahula, he called Rahula; Sariputta, Sariputta; Citta the elephant trainer, he called Citta.

There's nothing inherently wrong with developing a sense of self. In fact, you need one in order to function in this world. If you're not trained in a wise sense of self, you're going to pick up a sense of self willy-nilly anyhow, so you might as well learn a wise one. It's one of those assumptions that people just make—they're primed for it.

The question is, how do you teach someone to develop a good one? That's what the Dhamma is all about: examining our assumptions and asking ourselves what skillful assumptions we can adopt to question our old perceptions, to see what purposes they serve. Because every perception serves a purpose, good or bad.

As when you're learning a language: In some cases, people will point things out to you and say, "This is called that, and this means this." But often you simply pick up meanings by noticing how people use words. Sometimes your assumptions are wrong, and you have to adjust them later. Sometimes they work well enough that even though they may be a little off, they're okay for you because they serve your purposes.

When you come to the Dhamma, the question becomes not how to get rid of your social conditioning, but: What purposes do you want to serve with your conditioning? In what ways do you need to be re-conditioned to serve those purposes? Because our idea of a perception that's true basically comes down to: Does it work well enough?

For a lot of people, their attitude toward *well enough,* their definition of *well enough,* is pretty low. The Buddha is asking you to raise it: How about if *good enough* was *total happiness,* and anything inferior to that wasn't good enough? How would you sort out your perceptions then?

This is where we want to look at the Buddha's vocabulary: the way he teaches the Dhamma. One of the factors necessary for gaining stream-entry, the first taste of awakening, is listening to the true Dhamma, recognizing the true Dhamma, and adopting its assumptions. In other words, the Buddha is going to condition us as to what kind of perceptions are useful, what kind of thought constructs are useful, what ways of fabricating our experience will be helpful in that direction. He teaches us how to use these things as tools, knowing that at some point we'll have to put our tools aside.

It's like being taught how to make a chair. You have to learn how to use a saw properly, use a hammer properly, files, sandpaper: all kinds of tools. If you bring in an eggbeater, it's not going to be useful. If you bring in a violin, it won't help. Those tools are useful for other purposes.

Sometimes we have a saw already, but its blades are dull. Our hammer has been so worn through that if you hit anything with it really hard, the head would fly off and hurt somebody. In other words, we have some tools that are okay for everyday purposes; some that are dangerous. If you're going to look for true happiness, you have to be willing to inspect and replace your tools for the sake of the Dhamma.

So, when you listen to the Dhamma, remember that you're asking not only, "How does the Buddha describe things?" but, "What kind of description is he replacing?" When he asks a question, what questions is he *not* asking? This comes under the heading of appropriate attention—

how you frame things in the mind. The way you frame things, and the perceptions you use to provide the frame and then to fill the frame, will make a huge difference.

Again, think about languages: Some languages have a very extensive vocabulary for emotions; others have a more scientific vocabulary. It depends on what the language has been used for. Those are the things it'll emphasize. In terms of the language of the Dhamma, you want to look at things in terms of, one: "What is suffering? Where is the suffering?" And then, two: "What's causing it?" The Buddha recommends asking not *who* is causing it, but *what*—what activity? He's not saying whether there is or isn't someone behind the activity, because he wants you to look at the activity directly.

If you come to the Dhamma with a very strong sense of, "I'm me, and I'm the kind of person who does things this way," you have to learn how to put that assumption aside. You're putting it aside not as a bad tool, but just as a tool that's used for something else—like an eggbeater: If you're making a chair, you don't want the eggbeater. An eggbeater might be useful for things like cakes, but it's not what you want right now.

The Buddha says that suffering is clinging: clinging to the five aggregates. That means you need to figure out what kinds of clinging there are, what kind of aggregates there are, and the different ways you cling to the different aggregates. What kind of activity leads to the clinging? Well, there's craving. What leads to craving? Feeling. The Buddha chases these activities down in dependent co-arising all the way to ignorance.

When people would ask him, "Who's doing the feeling?" He would say, "Don't ask." "Who does the feeling belong to?" "Don't ask." Just look at the process of feeling, and you see it comes from contact; contact depends on the six senses, and so on down the line. He's giving you a framework for looking at things simply as events and actions. The framework is not the world and it's not your self. In fact, dependent co-arising is a framework that describes how you give rise to the concept of *world* based on your six senses, and how you give rise to a concept of *self* based on clinging. That

way, you see where these things come from. You see the activities that give rise to them.

As the Buddha said, you can focus on any one of these activities and try to understand where it's coming from, how it's causing suffering, what its allure is—why you like doing it—and then compare the allure with the drawbacks until you really see there's no worth to what you've been clinging to.

The allure is often just a tiny, tiny taste. One of the Buddha's images is of a bead of honey on the blade of a knife. He's not denying that the honey is sweet. It is sweet—but it's awfully small and in an awfully dangerous place. When you see that, you let go of the activity. And in letting go of that activity, you start sending cracks up through other activities that help to loosen up, on the one hand, your sense of the world and, on the other hand, your sense of your self.

You don't attack those things directly. You attack them by looking at activities, seeing where all the things you do, desiring to find happiness, are *not* causing happiness. Then you ask yourself, "Well, why? As long as there's an effort being made, why make the effort there? What's gained?"

Now, if you were to place that question within the context of who you are, you might say, "Well, this affirms who I am." Or, "This is just the way I am." Or, "This is the way the world has to be." Everything gets frozen in place. But if you allow yourself to look at the action simply as an action and analyze it in those terms, as part of a process, you find yourself letting go of things that otherwise you would have held on to really tightly.

So, when the Buddha gives his teachings like dependent co-arising, the four noble truths, or the three perceptions, they're a form of social conditioning, too. This is why the Forest tradition never describes them as *ultimate* truths. They're assumptions. They're conventions. We use the Buddha's conventions because they serve a purpose that our ordinary conventions can't. His perceptions work in a way that our ordinary perceptions don't work. This is how we test them as to whether they really

are true Dhamma: Do they work? And do they work for the purpose of an end of suffering?

This is why the word *Dhamma* is closely associated with the word *attha* in Pali: *Attha* means meaning, purpose, benefit. The Dhamma, if it's true Dhamma, provides a benefit, serves a purpose—and that's how you test it. When you're serious about awakening and want to have a taste of the deathless, you want to test these things in this way. As the Buddha said, you want to listen to the true Dhamma from a person of integrity, one who's basically an admirable friend.

The Buddha said that the true Dhamma would disappear not long after he passed away—by which he meant that other versions of Dhamma would get circulated so that the true Dhamma's monopoly on being *the* Dhamma would be called into question. He said it was like counterfeit money: When counterfeit money comes into the market, real money "disappears" because everything becomes suspect. Before there was counterfeit, everybody trusted the money. They could use it as a medium confidently. Nobody had to ask too many questions. But once counterfeit comes in, you have to ask the questions that test: How do you recognize genuine money? What are the reliable tests?

It's the same with the Dhamma: Now that there are many contradictory versions of the Dhamma, we have to make a test to see which is the true Dhamma. The Buddha taught the Kalamas a series of tests. He taught his stepmother, Gotamī a series of tests. He taught Upali, the Vinaya expert, a series of tests. In every case, it was: When you put this into practice—and that's what those conventions are meant for, to be put into practice—what are the results?

If a teaching leads to harm, there's something wrong. It's not the genuine article. If it makes you burdensome on other people, if it gets you entangled a lot with other people, it's not the genuine article. If it leads to being unfettered, leads to dispassion—that's it. That's the *attha* by which you recognize the Dhamma.

So, the Buddha never said that all social conventions are bad. After all, language is a convention, and he used language to teach. Names are conventions, and he used names so that people would know who he was talking to, what he was talking about. He used the conventions of the aggregates, the sense media, and the properties to get you to look at what was going on in your experience—not in terms of who you are, although it starts out with who you are, but you begin to realize that your sense of who you are is an action. There are times when it's a skillful sense of self, and other times when it's not. Learn to see your different senses of self as perceptions, as activities. Then class them as to whether they're skillful or unskillful activities. Thinking this way loosens up your perceptions, so you start looking more and more directly at actions and their results.

This is how you can pry apart your attachments and your clinging in a way that's in line with the Buddha's sense of what's *good enough*. He said he never let himself rest content with skillful qualities until he found the real thing. And that's the attitude he's asking you to adopt, too.

Fix Your Views

October 27, 2021

There's a line in the Karaniya Metta Sutta that's sometimes translated as *not holding to fixed views*. I've been tempted to take that translation and send it in to the people who collect fake Buddhist quotes, because the word *fixed* doesn't appear in the passage.

There's no place where the Buddha says fixed views are bad in and of themselves. There's right view and there's wrong view, but it's not the case that wrong view is fixed and right view is not fixed. The difference lies elsewhere.

After all, one of the adjectives for describing people who've attained the stream is that they've become *consummate in view*. They've seen that the four noble truths really are true. Their confidence and conviction in the Buddha, Dhamma, and the Sangha have been confirmed. That's the point where their view really is right. Of course, you don't stop there. You learn how to use right view properly to take you even further, from right view to right knowledge.

What this means in practice is that, as we're starting out, our views are not quite right yet. We have a general idea: The Buddha talks about the four noble truths; he talks about the basic teaching that skillful qualities should be developed and unskillful ones should be abandoned. Those are categorical truths—in other words, true across the board.

There's never any place where the Buddha defines suffering, say, in other terms aside from the five clinging-aggregates. He never says that they're the end of suffering. There's no place where he defines right resolve, say, as being resolved on sensuality.

Certain things are right and certain things are wrong, period, across the board. And even though we're coming from ignorance, when we start

on the path we have some idea of where the line is drawn between right and wrong, and we use that. Then, with practice, we refine our understanding of where the line is. So in that sense, we don't want to hold to our earlier understanding of right views. After all, right views are meant to be used, and as they're used they get further refined.

Remember what the four noble truths have to say about right view. It's interesting: The four noble truths *are* right view, but they also stand outside right view to describe the *position* of right view as part of the path —in other words, something to be developed. As you develop right view, it's meant to develop right resolve, right speech, right action, all the way through right concentration.

These are views that are meant to be used, and as you use them you get to know them better. That's one way of knowing that your views are right: You know the right use for them—and actually use them that way.

Then, as you begin to get results, you find that as you develop the path it does lead to something deathless. That's when your right view has been confirmed. It doesn't change from that point on. It's fixed.

Now again, the Buddha himself has gone beyond right view, but when he's teaching right view to others, it's always the same. So in that sense, it's *fixed*. The same with the principle of developing skillful qualities and abandoning unskillful ones: His teachings on those points are always consistent.

As for some of his other teachings, they have their time and place. There was a young monk one time who was asked by a member of another sect, "What is the result of action?" And the young monk answered, "The result of action is stress *(dukkha)."* The person asking the question said, "That's the first time I've ever heard a Buddhist monk say that. You'd better go check that with the Buddha."

So first he talks to Ven. Ananda, and then Ven. Ananda takes him to see the Buddha. Another monk is listening in as they talk. When the Buddha rebukes the first monk for having said that all action leads to stress, the monk listening in says, "Maybe he was thinking of the fact that action leads

to feeling, and all feelings are stressful." The Buddha replies that that's not the time to use that teaching. When you're asked about action, you talk about the three kinds of feeling: pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain, the purpose being to point out that skillful actions lead to pleasure, and unskillful ones to pain. That way, you can motivate your listener to act on skillful intentions. It's not the time to point out that even pleasant feelings, on one level, are painful, for then the listener would have no motivation to act on skillful intentions at all. So the teaching on all fabricated things being stressful may always be true, but it's not always useful. It's not always right for the context.

Then, of course, there are the many teachings on taking yourself as your mainstay, using yourself as your governing principle. If you try to bring in the teaching on not-self and say, "Well, everything's supposed to be not-self, so how can you use the self as a mainstay or a governing principle?" that would be bringing the teaching of not-self in at the wrong time, the wrong place.

You have to understand the teachings of the three characteristics, or the three perceptions, in the context of the duties of the four noble truths. They're appropriate and useful for abandoning your craving and for comprehending your clinging. But when you're trying to develop a path, you use those perceptions only on things that would pull you off the path.

You don't tell yourself, "Concentration is inconstant, concentration is stressful, concentration is not-self, therefore I'll let go of it." That's true on one level, but it's not right when you still need to develop concentration. That's not the time to use it. So this is one area where you want to make sure that your views are *not* fixed, in the sense of trying to apply a teaching across the board when it's not meant to be applied across the board.

There was a modern monk one time who, after reading about emptiness, told his mother, "The Dhamma teaches that you're not really my mother, because there's really nobody there." His mother looked at him and said, "Well, if anybody knows whether I'm your mother, it's me. They don't know." She was the one who was right at that point.

It's a matter of knowing the right time and the right place with teachings like that. As for the four noble truths, they are true across the board, and they don't change. That's one of the meanings of the word *noble*—noble in the sense of being universal. These truths are true for everybody everywhere. They're true not only in India, or only in one part of India, or at one point in time. They're true all through time, all through space. In that sense they're fixed.

It's your relationship to them that you have to watch out for, especially as you're getting started on the path. You have to keep reminding yourself: Right view is not to be used to beat other people over the head. It's meant to help you understand where you need to look to see your own ignorance, and what you need to do in order to see it clearly: You develop mindfulness, you develop alertness, so that you can gain clear knowledge.

Because this is *the* big problem: We're trying to battle ignorance, but where are we coming from? We're coming from ignorance ourselves. There are times along the path where it seems like the blind are leading the blind, but fortunately there is a part of the mind that has some clarity. That's what the Buddha meant when he said that the mind is luminous—it can watch itself and see clearly what it's doing.

So you apply your understanding of what the four noble truths are, particularly when you're developing the path, and you really commit to it. Then you reflect, "Am I getting the results I want? If I'm not, is the problem with the path or is the problem with me, my understanding of the path?"

In the beginning, you go on the assumption that your understanding is the problem. So you look again, act again, look again. Remember what the Buddha said about how the Dhamma is developed: through commitment and reflection. You commit to doing it as well as you can, and then you reflect on what you're doing. Then you make adjustments.

That way, by observing your actions, you begin to cut through a lot of your ignorance. You're not just reflecting in general terms. You're using reflection together with commitment, watching yourself in action. That's how you arrive at views that really are certain.

In fact, that's one of the adjectives used to describe people who have attained the stream: They're *niyata,* they're certain. Their right view is certain, and their future is certain: They're going to gain awakening for sure. That much is fixed.

So try to have a clear sense, when the Buddha's talking about right view, of which things are true and right across the board, which things are true but right only at certain times, certain stages of the practice. And be alive to the fact that as long as you haven't yet attained the first taste of the deathless, or you haven't gained the Dhamma eye, your views still need work.

But you don't work on them by theorizing or simply being fluid in what you think. You work on them by committing to what you understand the path to be, and then reflecting. This quality of the reflection is going to carry you all the way through. If you don't learn how to reflect on what you're doing, you're going to miss a lot of things.

Like that person who said in a letter to Ajaan Fuang that he was practicing seeing everything as inconstant, stressful, not-self: He watched TV, he engaged in all of his daily activities, trying to see all things as stressful, inconstant, and not-self. Ajaan Fuang told me to write back to him and say, "Those things are not the problem. The problem is, who is it that's telling them that they're inconstant, stressful, not-self? Look at that. That's where the real problem lies."

The inconstancy of the mind is the problem. The stress caused by the mind is the problem: the mind holding on to things it shouldn't hold on to.

How do you watch the mind? You get it to do something that you think is right and you watch it in action. You get it to commit, then you reflect. That's how you get past your ignorance.

Grasping the Snake

July 17, 2020

There are passages where the Buddha teaches the relinquishing of all views. There are passages where he advocates right view. There are passages where he argues with people about right and wrong view, and a couple where he actually seeks people out to question them about their wrong views.

So what's going on? I think a lot of it has to do with how we hold the view and what the view is designed to do. Some views are designed simply for the sake of argumentation. You take the position that the world is eternal, and what are you going to do with that view? You can get into arguments with people who say that it's not—that it was created by a creator god or whatever. That's the kind of view that issues only in arguments. There are other views, though, that can be used to put an end to suffering, and those are the ones the Buddha recommends as right view.

Even there, though, it's possible to use them to get into arguments.

Think of the image of the snake. If you grasp the snake wrongly—say, by the tail—it's going to bite you. But the Buddha doesn't say not to grasp the snake at all. After all, the snake may have some venom that can be used for making anti-venom. So you learn how to grasp it rightly. You take a forked stick, pin it down right behind the head, and then no matter how much the snake may writhe around your arm, you can hold it safely. You get the use out of it that you want.

So it's not that we don't hold to views at all. After all, how could you function if you didn't hold to views? Why would you talk? If there were no right and no wrong, what would be the purpose of talking? But you have to ask yourself: right for what purpose or wrong for what purpose? When you can answer that question, you can get somewhere with your views. The Buddha's views are not designed for argumentation. They actually

focus to a great extent on qualities in the mind, just looking at what your mind is doing right here, right now. They're right for putting an end to suffering if you keep this focus in mind.

Think of the Wings to Awakening: seven lists of dhammas that are useful for the practice—different ways of looking at the practice. You've got the four establishings of mindfulness, the four right exertions, the four bases for success, the five strengths, the five faculties, the seven factors for awakening, the noble eightfold path. They're almost all exclusively lists of mental qualities. Now, that kind of view, you can put to use. You can look at the lists and learn some important things about how the mind functions.

One is that the four main factors of the path, which appear again and again in the lists, are effort, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. These are the qualities we have to develop within ourselves.

The different lists differ in the order with which they place these qualities. Sometimes you start with discernment, and you use that to develop concentration. Sometimes the concentration comes first, and then the discernment comes later. It's the same with mindfulness. Sometimes mindfulness comes after discernment and sometimes before, which means in the practice that the causal influence can go either way.

With each of these two pairs—mindfulness and discernment or concentration and discernment—each side of the pair helps the other side along. As your mindfulness gets better, your discernment gets more expansive, because you can remember more things from what you've learned in the path. As your discernment gets better, it provides more useful things for mindfulness to keep in mind. The same with concentration: The more you get the mind firmly established, the more your discernment is going to see. But to get it established requires that you understand the mind at least to some extent.

However, it's interesting to notice that in all the various ways in which the Buddha lists these faculties, effort and mindfulness both come before concentration—always. So as you're trying to get the mind to settle down, remember it's not going to just happen on its own. There will be times

when the mind seems to settle down spontaneously, but that's because the conditions are right, and you can just plunk right down. But if you're going to wait for the conditions to be right, it's like waiting for the weather to be right. It's totally beyond your control.

You're trying to develop a skill here, which means that you look at the qualities coming up in the mind not only while you sit here with your eyes closed but also as you go through the day. To what extent do you allow anger to come in and take charge? To what extent do you allow greed to come in, or feelings of being slighted, or of not being respected? Those feelings, the Buddha said, come under restlessness and anxiety, which are hindrances. So as you go through the day, watch out for them. If they're allowed to take root in the course of the day, they're going to be here, rooted in the mind, when you sit down to meditate.

You've got to be very careful. Meditation is an all-day process. The effort goes in all the time. Now, effort doesn't mean that you have to walk long hours of walking meditation or sit long hours of sitting meditation every day. It means, though, that you have to keep watch over your mind at all times. The person meditating and the person working in the kitchen, the person meditating and the person working in the orchard: They're all the same person. Qualities that are allowed to establish themselves in the mind in the kitchen or the orchard don't automatically go away when you sit down to meditate. They're right there, established. They're going to get in the way.

So remember: There's an effort that is to be carried out all the way through the day. There's the effort to prevent unskillful qualities from arising. In other words, if you know that you have certain bad habits, you make a point to be especially on the lookout for them. Then do what you can to think in new ways. If you have a problem with anger, think in ways that will undercut the anger. Actively develop new thought patterns in the mind so that when an angry thought comes up—and you know the kind of conversation the mind has with itself when it's angry—you have an antidote ready. If anger does come into the mind, use the antidote to get

rid of it. At other times, think in the terms that would undercut the anger before it can come.

It's the same with skillful qualities. What can you do to be more mindful? What can you do to be more compassionate and have more goodwill? Actively think these thoughts. All too often, we think of meditation as not thinking. It may feel artificial to go around thinking thoughts of goodwill all the time, but it's a useful exercise. "Artificial" and "natural" are adjectives you can put out of your mind for the time being. Training the mind is artificial. Every effort is artificial. They're the products of artifice.

Now, some efforts come more easily than others, but that's because they're more habitual, that's all. Here you're trying to make right effort habitual. The same with right mindfulness: Try to go through the day rooted in the body, rooted in the breath. The lessons you learn as you try to keep the mind under control as you're rooted in the breath will be there in the breath. They'll be right there, available so that when you sit down to meditate and you get focused on the breath, a lot of good associations will come along with the breath. You'll be ready to practice and get the mind to settle down.

Right effort and right mindfulness are the qualities we need to develop in order to get the mind into right concentration. We use discernment in order to foster them. We need to have right view about right effort, along with right view about right mindfulness. We keep reminding ourselves that this is a really worthy activity we're engaged in. Then, as we engage in these activities, our right views become more precise.

The Buddha talks about three kinds of discernment. There's the discernment that comes from listening and the discernment that comes from thinking things through, but then there's also the discernment that comes from developing good qualities through the practice. You can listen to the Dhamma, and you get right view on the level of listening. That points you to the practice. You can think things through as you come up with difficulties in the practice. But the developing is what really gets the

discernment going. It makes it yours. Otherwise, you're just borrowing other peoples' discernment.

As long as you're in a position where you have to borrow somebody else's discernment, at least borrow the Buddha's. But ultimately, you want to get to the position where you can produce your own. You can depend on it. It really has been tested and fine-honed by your practice. That's when it's really yours. And paradoxically, once it's really yours, that's when you begin to let it go. But you can still use it. After all, after the Buddha's awakening, even though he said there was nothing in him that was fastened to any views, he still taught right view. And he still went out and argued with people who taught wrong view, especially the wrong view concerning action.

So it's a question of learning *how* to hold to the views. If you learn how to hold skillfully, then you can get a lot of use out of them. If you hold them wrongly, they bite. So find that forked stick—the attitude that you're going to use the views for the right purpose—and that'll keep you safe.

Pull Yourself Up by Your Fetters

December 1, 2020

Ajaan Lee often makes the point that people who've studied a lot of Dhamma, when they come to the practice, want to let go of things too quickly—things they actually need to hold on to. They know that at some point on the path they're going to have to let them go, so why not let them go right away?

He talks about how craving can actually be good. We know that it's the cause of suffering and that someday we're going to have to abandon all forms of craving. But, as he points out, if you don't have any desire—and the words *craving* and *desire* basically cover the same thing in Pali—if you don't have the desire, you don't have the craving to practice, the path is not going to happen.

Similarly with the three characteristics: Everybody hears about things being inconstant, stressful, and not-self, so they want to let go of the five aggregates right away. But we need to hold *on* to the five aggregates in order to develop the path. The things that are stressful, you learn how to make easeful. The things that are inconstant, you learn how to make constant. The things that are not yours, you learn to bring under your control—at least to some extent. It's only when you've pushed against these three characteristics that you can actually find out exactly where they are. You push against them by developing the path, getting the mind into concentration. And it's something you hold on to while you're developing it.

While you're sitting here, hold on to the breath. The image that they give in the Forest tradition is of a red ant. They have these big red ants in Thailand that live up in mango trees. If people climb up in a mango tree to get mangoes, the red ants bite them. And they bite hard—so hard that if you try to pull them off, sometimes the head detaches from the body, and

yet the jaws are still holding on. So hold on to your breath with the tenacity of a red ant. There will come a point where you let it go, but you're not going to get to that point unless you hold on first.

The same principle applies even to some of the fetters. The Canon lists five higher fetters: passion for form, passion for formlessness, restlessness, conceit, and ignorance. Of the five, only ignorance really has no role to play in the path, although Ajaan Lee says that even ignorance has its good side. Once you know you're ignorant, that gives you the motivation to want to find knowledge. But ignorance itself doesn't help. You've got to know the four noble truths from the very beginning to get a sense of what the landscape is and what you've got to do. But the other four fetters have their good points. They're actually useful. You don't let them go until you've gotten some use out of them.

For instance, with conceit, the sense that "I am": We're not talking about the conceit of pride but simply the idea that "I am." I know some people who say that when you're working with kamma, you've got to realize that your intentions are simply the result of causes and conditions. They don't have anything to do with you. But that doesn't give you any motivation to try to make skillful choices. Those people say you have to let go of every sense of "I" because it causes you trouble. Well, it's actually necessary for certain skillful decisions. Their approach is like putting up a ladder on the side of your house, cutting out all the rungs, and saying, "Okay, float up to the roof." If you cut out the rungs, the two sides just fall apart. You have no way of getting up at all.

There are some things you've got to hold on to first. Passion for form is what gets you into right concentration. The Buddha himself says that if you don't have the pleasure that comes from the first jhana or better, then no matter how much you know about the drawbacks of sensuality, you're not going to be able to let it go. You're going to keep coming back, coming back. So to overcome sensual passion, you have to develop passion for form.

Similarly with a passion for formlessness: The dimensions of the infinitude of space, the infinitude of consciousness, the dimension of nothingness, the dimension of neither perception or non-perception are levels of concentration you can get into because you enjoy them. There's delight there—passion, desire, delight. Granted, these are fetters. Think of them as chains. Some chains you can actually use to pull yourself up. Say you're at the bottom of a well, and you have a chain in your hand. You toss it up, get it wrapped around a bar or a tree branch above the well, and then you can pull yourself up with the chain. When you don't need the chain anymore, then you let it go.

Similarly with conceit and restlessness: Restlessness is the sense that there's more work to be done. If you don't have that sense of restlessness, you're not going to do the work. That together with your sense of self, the sense of "I am": Those are really useful for making progress on the path. I've heard some people say that the approach of the path is to put the mind at ease: Will it to rest in a state of equanimity; will it into a state of patience and acceptance. But there's very little thinking that goes into that. In fact, it actively discourages any attempt to think or to figure things out. But that's not the kind of person the Buddha was.

The Buddha was very inquisitive. He wanted to figure things out. Precisely how do you act in a way that's going to give good results? And what are the choices available to you when you act? When you make a choice, what's happening there? Do you have the freedom to choose? The Buddha assumed freedom as part of the path. The types of teachings that said we have no freedom of choice at all because everything is totally predetermined: Those were not among the options he even tried to explore. For one thing, you can't explore that principle. How can you test something like powerlessness? He wanted to explore freedom of choice. How far can it go?

If you don't have a sense of yourself as wanting to make progress, you won't put in the work. That's where conceit functions on this level. Think of what the Buddha said about renunciate distress. It's what you need to

get yourself out of ordinary householder distress. You think about the fact that there's a state of peace that others have found, but you're not there yet. That realization, even though it's a little bit painful and not at all easeful, does make you inquisitive. It motivates you to follow the path.

That renunciate distress is a combination of restlessness and conceit, and it's what makes you look at the spot in the mind where there is freedom of choice. How does that happen? There are causes and conditions. But as the Buddha said, sometimes there's a cause that comes together with the effect, and then it disappears together with the effect. In the present moment, there's a freedom to choose causes like that. If we can't assume that, then there's no sense in a path of practice at all. But what is that freedom? Where is it? How can we take advantage of it?

That's the big point: How can we take advantage of it? The more you explore it, the more you hover and circle around this point, the sooner you'll ultimately find that it does lead you to a different kind of freedom entirely. It's like going through a black hole into another universe, but one that's a totally different dimension, outside of space, outside of time. It's there.

Notice that voice that keeps trying to make choices: "What next? What next?" The assumption of the mind that has that constant, "What next, what next, what to do next?" does assume freedom, freedom to choose what to do. If it didn't assume freedom, it wouldn't ask the question. That's the whole point. We're asking questions as we practice. And any teaching that discourages questions—especially questions about what's skillful and what's not—has to be put aside. It's not helpful at all.

Our motivation for wanting to ask those questions is the sense that something's wrong: "There still is suffering. There still is stress. Even if it's very subtle, there's still stress. And I want out." That combination of restlessness and conceit is what forces you to ask the questions, and it's going to give you the answers.

So even though these things are fetters—passion for form, for formlessness, conceit, and restlessness—they're the type of chains, as I

said, that you can actually use to pull yourself out of the well. Then when you're out, you don't need the chains anymore. You can let them go.

As you read the Dhamma and try to apply it to your own practice, remember that some things are good across the board and some things are useless across the board. But then there are some things that are going to have their uses sometimes and have to be put away at others. Learn how to recognize them and get the most out of them. See how far you can take them—and they can take you—before you throw them away.

Delight

July 15, 2021

With a lot of the pleasures of the world, the real pleasure is not so much in the pleasure itself, but in the delight we take in it: anticipating how good it's going to be and, after it's done, talking to ourselves about how great it was. This is our way of encouraging ourselves to look for it again. This delight, as the Buddha said, usually is one of the accompaniments of craving. It's what nourishes craving. And in most cases, craving is a bad thing. It leads to suffering.

We delight in things that really don't have much true happiness to offer. But the delight is all in the way we dress them up. Like that dog that visits us every now and then—the one that wears sunglasses and little outfits. A lot of the owner's pleasure is in the outfits and the sunglasses. This, the Buddha said, is the reason why we fall for things that don't actually give us much satisfaction.

But we can learn how to delight in good things, too. After all, when you're getting started on the path, you need something to encourage you. Craving and desire are part of our motivation. We *want* to put an end to suffering. So you have to learn how to feed that desire, to keep it going.

The Buddha lists six kinds of skillful delight that really are worth cultivating as part of the path. He says that as you engage in these kinds of delight, you gain happiness in the here and now, simply anticipating how good it's going to be as you practice the path, and as you reach the end of the path. This delight is also what provides the nourishment for staying on the path.

The first in the list is delight in the Dhamma—the fact that there's a Dhamma teaching us that there is an end of suffering, and that it can be attained through human effort. This Dhamma explains how we suffer, why we suffer. It explains the big issues of life: aging, illness, death, separation.

It gives reliable guidance in how to act, how to speak, how to think. It reassures us that the effort put into developing skillful actions is well spent. It basically lays things out, and in an honorable way.

As the Buddha said, it's admirable in the beginning, admirable in the middle, admirable in the end. In other words, the words of the Dhamma are inspiring. The practice is a noble practice, one in which we engage in developing the noble qualities of our own minds. And the end result is total freedom from suffering of any kind, freedom from restrictions of any kind. It's a good Dhamma. So we can take delight in that.

There's that conversation the Buddha had with the asura who talked about how the asuras take delight in the ocean, which has many marvelous qualities. They look at the Dhamma and Vinaya of the Buddha, and notice that it had many analogous marvelous qualities as well. So when your practice begins to flag, remind yourself that you've got a good road map here, the most reliable one there is. It's been tested for more than two thousand years. It deals with the big issues in life, issues that are not specific to any race, class, nation, or culture. It not only presents the issues, but also solves them in a skillful and honorable way, pointing to a happiness that's free from aging, free from illness, free from death. Take delight in that.

The next two types of delight are delight in developing and delight in abandoning: in other words, developing skillful qualities and abandoning unskillful ones. The Buddha recommends this from the very beginning of the path, as in his instructions to Rahula, when he says that you should try to act only on skillful intentions. When you look at your actions and can see that they actually are harmless, you take delight in that. That delight should provide you with energy to keep on practicing to get better and better at training the mind.

Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about taking delight in seeing little flakes of defilement getting peeled off the mind, like flakes of bark peeled off a tree. In other words, regard it as a victory each time you're able to say No to a desire that you know is unskillful, or to say No to a mind-state that's

unskillful—to figure out why you would be inclined to go there, and then to see through it to the point where you realize you don't want to go there anymore.

The next delight is delight in seclusion: enjoying being alone. It's interesting that the Pali Canon portrays Ven. Maha Kassapa as being strict and stern, yet he's got a wonderful poem where he talks about how great it is to be out in the beauties of the wilderness. This was back in the days when wilderness wasn't appreciated as a beautiful place. When people wrote poetry about the beauty of nature, they were usually talking about domesticated nature. The oldest wilderness poetry we have is in the Pali Canon. It talks about the delight that comes from just being out in the wilds where there's nobody else around.

Think about the Buddha's story of the elephant: When it lived with its herd, it would go down to drink the water, but everybody else in the herd had already gone down and played in the water and made it muddy. When the herd went down to bathe, the other elephants would knock into him. So he decided to go off and live alone. Living along, he had clean water. When he went down to bathe, there was nobody knocking into him. When he felt an itch, he would take a branch and scratch himself.

The Buddha makes a comparison with a meditator out alone in the forest: You look around, and there's nobody to interfere with you, nobody to harass you, nobody to take up your time. You get into jhana as the branch with which you scratch yourself, and with which you find a pleasure that's really gratifying, a pleasure that you can't get when you're embroiled with people. So appreciate that. And note that the seclusion being discussed here is not just physical seclusion. It's also mental seclusion. When the mind is secluded from unskillful states, it can settle down with a sense of inner ease: uninterrupted, smooth, steady. Learn to appreciate that. Learn to delight in that.

The last two kinds of delight are delight in the non-afflicted and delight in non-objectification. These are two names for nibbana, or two aspects of nibbana, but they also describe ways in which you practice. As you

practice, you're not afflicting anybody: You're observing the precepts, finding pleasure in getting the mind concentrated, using your discernment to get past your defilements. You're practicing non-affliction even as you're headed toward the ultimate state of non-affliction.

The same with non-objectification: Objectification is when you start with the idea, "I am the thinker," and then from there you identify yourself as a being that needs to feed, that needs a certain part of the world to feed on, whether it's a physical part of the world or part of the world of ideas. You stake your claim and then you have to fight off other people. As the Buddha said, objectification is the kind of thinking that leads to conflict.

So instead, you think in terms of the four noble truths: simply what is suffering, what is the cause of suffering, what is the cessation of suffering, what is the path to the cessation. In other words, you think in terms that have nothing to do with becoming—a self or a world—and that cut through the processes of becoming. And you find that there's no conflict. You can delight in that.

As you take these different kinds of delight, they give you the energy you need in order to practice. You're doing a good thing. You've got a good roadmap. You're following it. And you see it has a good impact on you and the people around you.

These six kinds of delight can also counteract types of delight that are genuinely unskillful. Delighting in the Dhamma counteracts the delight some people take in the idea that there's really nothing explained in the world. It's all a big mystery. There's no true right or wrong. It's all a matter of different people's opinions, with some people trying to force their ideas of right and wrong on other people. Of course, if you take that attitude, you give your defilements wide range to roam around in. After all, if good and bad are simply social constructs, you're free to say No to any social construct. Nobody can say that you're wrong, because if they say that you're wrong, it's just a social construct, too.

If you leave the processes of birth and death as a mystery, then you don't know what to do. And when you don't know what to do, your

defilements can move in and take over. So delight in the Dhamma helps to counteract those attitudes, some of which have become part of modern Buddhism, sad to say. But if you really delight in the Dhamma, it gives you reason to put them aside.

Similarly with delighting in abandoning and delighting in developing: The mind that doesn't delight in developing skillful qualities or abandoning unskillful ones is a mind that's heedless. And there's part of the mind that likes being heedless, the part that likes to say, "I don't care what happens down the line. I want what I want right now. I don't want to have to think about things in the future. It gets in the way of my enjoying the present." If you have no sense of shame, no sense of compunction, that's a mind that leaves you unguarded, unprotected, easy prey for your defilements. When you delight in developing skillful qualities, it fights against those careless, heedless attitudes. When you delight in abandoning unskillful ones, you're basically saying, "I've been a friend to craving for a long, long time. I've taken craving as my friend, but now I realize that unskillful craving is not a true friend. I'll be more selective in who I choose as my friends, take as my examples."

When you delight in seclusion, that counteracts, of course, your delight in getting entangled with other people. When you get entangled with other people, as the Buddha said, it's hard for you to find time to settle down with the establishings of mindfulness, to get a proper object for the mind to find the happiness, the well-being that can come when the mind gets concentrated. So learn how to delight in seclusion.

Even when you haven't yet developed deep concentration, the fact that you learn how to like being alone will incline the mind in the right direction. It opens the possibilities that get closed off when you're constantly dealing with other people, entangled with other people.

To delight in the non-afflicted helps overcome the part of the mind that likes to exert power over other people—the one that doesn't care how much other people suffer or how much you have to struggle with them as long as you can get them to do what you want.

Delighting in non-objectification helps to counteract the side of the mind that delights in conflict, that likes taking a stance to lay claim to things and fight other people off.

Given that the mind does have these unskillful types of delight, you've got to fight them with skillful delight. You can't just tell yourself, "Well, the Buddha teaches us to be equanimous about all things, so try to clone that equanimous attitude about your defilements, too." That doesn't give you much strength.

The desire to stick with the path needs to be nourished. You need to learn how to talk to yourself about what a good path this is. Ultimately, it'll take you to a state that doesn't require any talking or elaboration, any embroidery.

That's what's so good about nibbana. It doesn't require a review. It doesn't require a critique. It doesn't require your talking about it all the time. It's just there, and you know that it's good—good in and of itself.

The ajaans talk about this a lot: how nibbana doesn't require any chatter, doesn't require any praise. It's good in and of itself. The practice takes you to the point where you don't need to delight in things, and you don't miss the activity of taking delight. It's that good. But just as the end of conceit requires a certain amount of conceit to get there, and the end of craving requires a certain amount of craving, so too the end of delight requires that you learn how to take skillful delight in the path to give you the energy to keep you on the path, and to find a sense of well-being while you're there so that you have the strength to follow it all the way through.

The Three Perceptions & Their Opposites

May 12, 2020

The teaching on the three characteristics or the three perceptions—inconstancy, stress, not-self—occupies a peculiar place in the Buddha's teachings. It's always true, but it's not always beneficial. That means it's not categorical. The Buddha doesn't apply it all the time. In fact, there are a couple of cases in the Canon where monks try to apply it, and he reprimands them for doing so.

In one case, a monk tries to argue from the principle that all feelings are stressful to say that all actions lead to stress. The Buddha reprimands him, saying that when you're talking about kamma, you're talking about skillful and unskillful action, so you talk about three kinds of feeling. There are pleasant feelings, painful ones, and feelings that are neither pleasant nor painful. It's obvious here that applying the three perceptions would be a mistake. If you said that everything you do, skillful or not, is going to lead to stress, there'd be no incentive to try to do anything skillful. If there's no incentive to do anything skillful, then you're going against one of the Buddha's truly categorical teachings, which is to try to develop what's skillful and abandon what's not—the reason being that developing skillful actions is going to lead to long-term welfare and happiness.

There's another case where a monk tries to argue that if all the aggregates are not-self, then what self is there to do the actions? And what self would there be to receive the results of actions? That line of thinking is a license for irresponsible behavior. There's nobody there to be responsible, nobody to be affected by the actions, so you can do what you want. Here again, the Buddha reprimands the monk, saying that that's a foolish application of the teaching.

So the three perceptions not to be applied at all times. I know some people who've argued from the three characteristics that we have no free

will, or that we have no choices in the present moment: Whatever's going to come up in the present moment is just going to come up willy-nilly, regardless of what you want. But that, as the Buddha pointed out, would turn the whole idea of following a path of practice into nonsense. How could you choose to follow the path if there's no freedom of choice?

So you have to be careful in how you apply these teachings. There's a right time and a right place, and a wrong time and a wrong place for them.

This line of thinking may have been behind Ajaan Lee's way of talking about the three characteristics. There are some times where he talks about things being inconstant, stressful, and not-self, saying that there's also another side to them, which is constant, easeful, and self. Sometimes he phrases it as inconstant, stressful, and not under your control on one side, and constant, easeful, and under your control on the other. But in both cases, he ends up by saying you have to abandon both sides.

It's good to look at the context when he says things like that, because he means two different things in the two instances when he talks on this topic.

In the first instance, he's talking about the practice of concentration. You're taking the breath—your sense of the body as you feel it from within—and as you start out, you notice that it's inconstant and stressful. As you try to get the mind to settle with the breath, there are a lot of things going on that you don't control. But you're going to try to work with the breath so that it does become more constant. The mind's concentration becomes more constant. There's a sense of ease in body and mind, and you gain some mastery over it. So there you are: constant, easeful, under your control.

Now, eventually, you're going to have to let go of the concentration. After all, it is part of the path. It's part of the raft that's going to take you across the flooding river and that you'll then have to leave behind when you reach the safety of the far shore. But if people try to practice without concentration—and this is what I think Ajaan Lee is getting at, the people who want to go straight for insight—then they haven't mastered an

important part of the path. Their raft isn't enough to keep them afloat. They start out with the perceptions of inconstant, stressful, and not-self. Then they see any attempts to develop concentration as going against the nature of reality. So they actually describe concentration as an unnecessary part of the path, or even an illegitimate part of the path.

I've seen cases of people developing the three characteristics without a firm basis in concentration, and they get extremely depressed, thinking there's nothing they can do to change unpleasant things coming up. They abdicate power because they've been told they have no power. It's like the dogs in those learned helplessness experiments where they're put in a room where, wherever they lie down, they get electric shocks. They try to avoid the shocks, but after a while they realize they can't. So they give up and just lie there.

Then the dogs are taken to a second room where half the floor is giving shocks, and the other is not. The researchers drag the dogs back and forth from one half to the other so that they can know which side of the floor gives shocks and which one doesn't. But the dogs have gotten so used to the idea that there will be shocks at some point regardless of what they do that they give up trying.

So just focusing on the three characteristics without having a basis of concentration to underlie it and without having mastered the concentration to fight against the characteristics to see exactly how far they go, you can end up becoming very fatalistic. You've learned helplessness.

Actually, as we're sitting here, focusing on the breath, we're fighting against the three characteristics. This is a necessary part of developing discernment, because only when you push against them do you really know how far they're true and how far they're not. But as Ajaan Lee says, eventually you're going to have to let go of the concentration, even though it's relatively constant, easeful, and under your control.

That's one of Ajaan Lee's discussions.

His other one has to do more with insight. He talks about how you develop the insight into things being inconstant, stressful, and not-self, but

it's very easy for the mind to hold on to that insight as something permanent. There's a certain pleasure that comes with that. You've got something you can hold on to that's solid and makes you impervious to the ups and downs of the world. It's similar to the Buddha's distinction between dependent co-arising and dependently co-arisen phenomena—dependently co-arisen phenomena change all the time, but the principle of dependent co-arising is constant. You can hold on to this insight into inconstancy, stress, and not-self and use it to pry away your attachments to lots of things. But you have to remember ultimately that these insights, too, are perceptions.

Now, the Buddha never called the three characteristics three characteristics; they're perceptions. And as he said, perceptions, no matter how perceptive they may be, are essentially empty and devoid of substance. He compared them to mirages, like a mirage of water on the horizon of a desert. The water looks real, but when you actually get there, it disappears. Just as the mirage has no essence, perceptions have no essence. But the whole purpose of the path is to find something that does have essence.

So it's important that you not mistake the insight for the goal. This again is something that happens in some insight circles. They say that when you finally see that there is no self, that's when you've reached the first level of awakening. Well, you've mistaken a perception for something that should be beyond perceptions. Even though the insights may be true about all fabrications, there comes a point where you have to let them go as well. After all, the insights are fabrications, as well. If you don't let them go, you suffer from what are called the corruptions of insight, where you latch on to an experience or an insight and think you've reached the goal. You're blind to the fact that you're still hanging on.

Even though the principle of these three characteristics applying to all fabricated things may be true, there's a time where you have to let it go. That's where Ajaan Lee is asking you to let go of both constant and inconstant, stressful and easeful, self and not-self. As he says, when the

Buddha is saying, *Sabbe dhamma anatta,* all dhammas are not-self, it's his way of saying that you have to let go even of the Dhamma of your insight. It's only when you let go of everything, even true and false, that the mind is free.

So it's important to see these perceptions as tools. They have their time and their place, and as with any tool, you take care of them as long as you need to use them, but there's also a time and place to put them down.

We should always heed the warnings of the ajaans that even when you're right, if you hold on to your rightness at the wrong time, it becomes wrong. Watch out specifically for applying a teaching in the wrong way that forms an obstacle to the practice.

Anything that denies the power of choice, or the distinction between skillful and unskillful choices, goes against one of the basic principles underlying everything we're doing as we practice. And any idea that you're going to be *arriving* at right view prevents you from arriving at the true end of the path. Right view is part of the raft, the raft that has to be let go. The further shore is something else entirely, and that's where we want to arrive.

The Not-Self Discourse

July 30, 2021

On the full moon in July, we commemorate the Buddha's first sermon —Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion—not only because this was the Buddha's first teaching, but also because, at the conclusion of the sermon, one of the five brethren, who were his audience, gained the Dhamma eye and became the first member of the noble Sangha. The texts tell us that in the days following, the Buddha taught more Dhamma to the rest of the five brethren so that all five of them had attained the Dhamma eye.

Then he gave his second sermon, at least the second one recorded. We don't know what he taught the others in the meantime. The second sermon focuses on the topic of not-self. It was because of this sermon that all five of them became arahants. So their awakening was no longer partial. It was full. We're not sure exactly how many days after the full moon he gave this talk, but it was about this time of year that he gave it. So we might as well commemorate it tonight.

It's good to reflect on it. Unlike his later talks, where he usually starts with a question, here he starts with a statement: "Form is not-self." He makes the same statement about the rest of the five aggregates: feeling, perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness. They're not-self. You might wonder why he brought up the topic of not-self. After all, all five of the brethren had attained the Dhamma eye, and one of the consequences of that attainment is that you let go of identity views—views in which you define yourself either as an aggregate, as the owner of the aggregate, as *in* the aggregate, or as having the aggregate in you. Yet, it turns out, even then there's still some unfinished business around the topic of not-self.

Sometimes you hear it said that stream-entry is when you see that there is no self, but the fact that the Buddha had to give this talk to the five

brethren shows that that's not true. The reason comes in another sutta, where a non-returner, a monk named Ven. Khemaka, explains what it's like to have abandoned identity views but not yet to have abandoned conceit. He says that even though you don't identify with any of the five aggregates as "I am this," still there's a lingering sense of "I am" around the five aggregates. In other words, when you let go of identity views, you let go of the "this" in "I am this," leaving a lingering sense of "I am."

The image Ven. Khemaka gives is of washing clothes. Even though the dirt is out, there's still the lingering smell of the detergent in the cloth. You put the clothes away in a hamper, and eventually the smell of the detergent goes away. In the meantime, it's still lingering around the cloth. In the same way, even when you gain the Dhamma eye, there's still a sense of "I am" lingering around the five aggregates. So that's what the Buddha had to get his listeners to let go of.

He starts by saying with each aggregate: "If this really were your self, then it wouldn't lead to dis-ease. You'd be able to say with regard to each aggregate: Let it be this way, let it not be that way." Now, to some extent, you *can* control the aggregates, but there's a lot that you can't. When the body gets sick, it doesn't ask permission. When your feelings turn from pleasure to pain, they don't ask permission. Your perceptions and thoughts can turn on you, and even your consciousness of good things passes away.

So the first argument is that these things don't lie under your control. The argument about control shows up only a few more times in the Canon. There's one great passage where a professional debater is coming to attack the Buddha on the question of whether the five aggregates are self. The debater claims that all activities have to be based on taking the aggregates as self. But, as the Buddha points out, "Kings control their property. Kings control their kingdoms, right?" The professional debater, of course, goes along with him, because he wants to appeal to the kings in his audience. In fact, he adds that it's *right* that kings control their kingdoms.

Then the Buddha goes on to say, "Kings can say that this should be done, that shouldn't be done in their kingdoms. But how about your body? Can you say it shouldn't grow old, it shouldn't get sick, and it shouldn't die?" The debater knows he's already been beaten. That's another case where the Buddha uses the argument based on control, but by and large that argument is pretty rare.

Much more common is the questionnaire that he then gives to the five brethren, which gets repeated many, many times throughout the Canon. In the case of each aggregate: "Is it constant or inconstant?" "It's inconstant." "That which is inconstant: Is it easeful or stressful?" "Stressful." And then, "Is it appropriate to claim of anything that's inconstant and stressful: 'This is me, this is myself, this is what I am'?" "No." Notice, he's not getting the five brethren to come to the conclusion that there is no self. He's simply making the point that each of the aggregates is not worthy of calling a self.

The question of whether there is or is not a self gets put off to the side. Just focus on the aggregate. Why is it important to focus on the aggregates? Because in the first sermon, the Buddha had already identified the aggregates, when you cling to them, as suffering. One of the ways in which you cling, of course, is through your sense of self. In fact, all the other forms of clinging can be directly related to that sense of self. So in line with the four noble truths, the main topic of the first talk, he wants the five brethren to see that these aggregates are not worth clinging to. They're not worth craving. Wherever there's craving and clinging for them, there's suffering.

Then the Buddha goes on to expand the range of the discussion. In the beginning he had them focus on the aggregates in the present. But then he goes on to say that any instance of the aggregates, past, present or future, near or far, refined or coarse: All of them should not be seen as "my self."

This is an interesting move, and very few people have noticed what he's done.

He starts out by focusing on the present moment. Then he has the brethren extend their minds everywhere they can think of: anyplace in

time, past, present, or future; anyplace in space, near or far—the point being that you could say, "Well, what I'm holding on to right here and now is not good, but maybe there's something else out there that I could hold on to someday that wouldn't have these drawbacks." To cut off that line of thinking, the Buddha's asking the brethren to reflect that everything out there in all the dimensions of space and time is just the same kind of aggregates.

There's a passage elsewhere where he says that when you recollect your past lives, that's all you recollect: aggregates. The recollection itself is aggregates, the things you're recollecting are aggregates, and they're all passing away, passing away. You can't go back and latch on to them. And no matter what you might gain in the future, it would be the same sort of thing: more aggregates. You can't really legitimately latch on to any aggregate anywhere at all.

It's in this point that the Buddha's reflection becomes overwhelming. There's no place to hang on. Anywhere. At all. Now, it depends on the listeners how far they're willing to follow the Buddha here, if they're still willing to let go, let go, let go of everything they can cast the mind to, seeing that the aggregates are not worth clinging to, not worth even craving to begin with. When you can do that, that's how there's awakening to another dimension. As long as you're holding on to anything, even your *concept* of that further dimension—which is what you experience in stream-entry, or when gaining the Dhamma eye—there's going to be suffering. Even that you have to let go of.

So when there's no place for the mind to focus its desires, this realization undercuts all possible craving, because as the Buddha said in the definition of craving, it delights here, delights there, focuses here, focuses there. It always has a place, always has a location, whether physical or mental. The purpose of the questionnaire is to deprive the mind of any possible location on which craving can land.

Then, when you let go all around, the Buddha says you're released everywhere. An interesting concept. The mind is usually focused

someplace. It has a location—if not a physical location, then a mental location. But here you're trying to deprive it of any possible location at all. This is how the five brethren became totally awakened.

Over the years, the Buddha gave the same questionnaire to others. In some cases, as in the case of the debater, people would listen to it and even though they assented to it, the words would go right past them. Other people would listen to it and gain the Dhamma eye. Other people would listen to it and gain full awakening. It all depended on how thoroughly his listeners were able to let go, how willing they were to cast their minds not only on the present moment, but also in all directions in space and time, to see that there's no place worth going. That's when they'd be willing to let go of all idea of place.

In the case of the five brethren, the conclusion of the second sermon says that through non-clinging all five gained release.

Again, it wasn't an issue of coming to the conclusion that there is no self. It was simply gaining release through not clinging to anything. That's the logic of the not-self teaching. It deprives you of places to cling, and it does that because, when you see things in terms of the four noble truths, you see that the clinging is suffering, and that you cling because of your craving. When you can undo the craving, then there's release from clinging and suffering. And that release is unassailable.

So it's in the light of the third noble truth—that suffering ends when craving ends—that this questionnaire makes a lot of sense. Otherwise, the questionnaire would be cutting the legs out from under you and giving you nowhere to go. If you don't see things in terms of the four noble truths, that prospect would be scary. But within those terms, the Buddha's saying that if you learn how not to *want* to go anywhere—present or past or future, near or far—that's when something really good opens up.

It's good to commemorate the second sermon because it reminds us that the Buddha's teachings are effective. When you practice in line with them, they can promise something really good.

Other people have benefitted from them over the years, and we have every right to benefit from them as well. It's just a question of what you're going to continue to hold on to. As long as the path hasn't been completed, you hold on to the path. First you've got to learn how to let go of everything except the path, and then when that's done, you can focus on your attachment to the path. When you can let that go, then your letting-go is all around. You're released everywhere.

So look at your attachments right now, to see which ones are really worth holding on to in the light of what can happen when you can let go. This is why, even though there's no formal holiday associated with this event, it's a good event to keep in mind every year—and, of course, to keep in mind every day as you keep on practicing.

Mud Houses

May 4, 2021

When the Buddha was asked to define what a being is, he didn't say there is no such thing. He answered in a straightforward way: Wherever there's attachment, there's going to be a being. Attachment to what? The five aggregates: form, feeling, perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness.

He illustrated his point with an analogy. He said it's like little kids playing with mud houses. You might think of kids playing with sand castles. As long as the little kids are fascinated with the little mud houses, they're very protective of them. If anyone tries to come along and kick their mud houses or step on them, they defend them. But when they lose interest in the mud houses, when they lose their desire and fascination with the mud houses, then they themselves will kick them and step on them and make them unfit for play.

In the same way, the Buddha said, try to lose your desire for the aggregates. Demolish them—make them unfit for play—and you'll be freed from being a being. We have to explain that a little bit though. You don't destroy the aggregates; you try to destroy your desire for them. That's a very different thing. The desire is what holds them all together. That's what you've got to focus on. But first you've got to see yourself—the being you've created out of these aggregates—in those terms. You have to get familiar with what an aggregate is. In other words, before you make them unfit for play, you've got to play with your aggregates to get to know them. That's what we're doing as we practice.

When you're meditating, you've got five aggregates right here. There's the form of the body that you're sitting in right now. The breath is part of that form. There's the feeling of pleasure you're trying to create by staying focused on the breath. There's your perception of the breath, the image you have of it that allows the breath to flow through the body and can direct

the flow in the different ways you want it to go. There are your thought fabrications, starting with directed thought and evaluation: adjusting the breath and figuring out how best to use the pleasure that comes when the breath is adjusted well. Then there's your consciousness of all these things.

You try to put these things together in the best way you can. Just like the little kids making the mud houses: You want to make a really nice little mud house here, very well designed and built. In doing so, you learn about the aggregates. Just in getting the mind to right concentration, you begin to see there are these activities that you do. As you go into deeper stages of concentration, you begin to realize that there are more refined versions of them. You can let go of the directed thought and evaluation, and the mind feels less burdened. You can let go of the feeling of pleasure, and you're left with a feeling of equanimity, which is even lighter.

You get the breath energy to fill the body to the extent that you don't have to breathe in and breathe out. Your sense of the boundary of the body begins to disappear. The perception that holds the notion of body in mind: You can put that down and replace it with more refined perceptions—perceptions of space, perceptions of knowing, of nothingness. You begin to wonder how far you can take this process of refinement, because you see that this is a really good way of dealing with these aggregates. It's like the little kids getting really good at making nice little mud houses.

You develop a skill, and that's the best way to know anything: to get skillful with it. Otherwise, you can hear about the aggregates, and the five categories may seem like an artificial way of dividing up your experience. But when you're trying to get the mind concentrated, you see how you put this state of becoming together with precisely these activities. You also find that you ultimately reach a limit as to how far you can go as you hold on to these activities.

Then you turn around and look at the rest of your life.

You realize that your sense of who you are is made out of these aggregates. As the Buddha said, even for people who have the ability to reflect back on past lifetimes, what are they reflecting back on? The forms,

feelings, perceptions, thought fabrications, and consciousness they had at those times. But you don't need to reflect on past lifetimes. Just think back on your life so far in this lifetime. When you remember your childhood, you remember form, feelings, perceptions, thought fabrications, and consciousness. That's all there was. That's how you created your sense of self, who you were, and what you were going to use in order to get what you wanted. This is where the desire for the aggregates comes in: Either you desire the aggregates directly, or you desire them for what they can do for you.

But now you begin to see their limitations. This is the best thing you can do with aggregates—create a state of concentration—and yet concentration has its limitations, the big one being that you have to keep maintaining it. It's always ready to fall apart. You get skilled in the concentration so that you don't let it fall apart, but a steady effort has to go into that. The concentration is always something you *do.* You look back and you begin to realize that your idea of what you were, your identity, was something you did as well—something you're constantly doing.

Then you look forward. As the Buddha said, you'll get so that you can't stay in this body anymore, but as long as there's still clinging and craving, there's still going to be a seamstress that stitches all this together into an identity. That's what the Buddha calls craving: a seamstress who stitches all the aggregates together and makes them into a being. When you can't stay with these particular aggregates, you're going to find other aggregates, of the same five types, to repeat the process. As you reflect on this, there comes a point where it all begins to seem futile. No matter how good it gets, you never really *arrive* anywhere with the aggregates, because they're all fabricated processes.

The nature of fabrication is that it's done for the sake of something. It's moving toward something. When it arrives, it arrives at something that falls apart, so it keeps on moving toward something else and then toward something else. It never really arrives. The only thing that really arrives is the path, which you're making out of these aggregates. It's the best thing

you can do with them. Use the aggregates of concentration to develop discernment to induce a sense of dispassion for other aggregates. But then you're still here with the concentration; you're still here with the discernment.

This is where the discernment gets really sharp, when it begins to see that even the concentration and the discernment are fabricated. If you're going to find real happiness, you have to let them go, too.

Insight is what allows you to let go.

It's going to be a very special insight. When the Buddha talks about it, he talks about it in paradoxical terms. You intend the path, putting it all together, but there comes a point where you have to stop intending. You can't tell yourself, "Don't intend," because that will become your new intention. But there is a middle way between intending and telling yourself not to intend, and that's the escape. What allows for the escape is dispassion. It's the point where you lose interest in this mud house, and you make it unfit for play. In other words, you take the mind to where it's not going to build mud houses anymore.

You've seen the house builder, as the Buddha said after his awakening. You've demolished the last house, and the house builder is not going to build any more. That's when you've really arrived. Even with just the first taste of awakening, stream-entry, you see that there is such a thing as a dimension where there is no fabrication, and it's totally devoid of any kind of stress. You don't realize how much stress goes into fabrication until you step out of it and have seen this dimension.

The only way you're going to get there is to get to know these aggregates really well. You can read about them and say, "Gee, what the Buddha says makes a lot of sense," but that's not going to cut through your fascination with them. You have to work with them. Make them into a state of concentration; use this body to practice virtue, generosity, and meditation; use the mind to get into concentration, to develop discernment, and to allow these things to deliver you to something that's

beyond them. That's when you really lose your passion for these things, and all the stitching of the seamstress comes undone.

What's left after that? It depends on your kamma, but your relationship with the six senses is altered. For an arahant, there's no more feeding on things because there's no hunger. There's no longer a being that needs to be fed. This is why, when people asked the Buddha whether an arahant after death exists or doesn't exist, or both or neither, he wouldn't answer, because it was the passion for the aggregates that defined the person who became an arahant. When there's no passion, the arahant is undefined. When something's undefined, you can't say anything about it.

But there is nibbana, and this is the path that takes you there. That's why the Buddha called it a path, one that takes you someplace really good. You don't stay on the path. You don't take the path as your goal. If you stayed on the path, he wouldn't have called it a path. It would have been a noble eightfold spot. But it's a noble eightfold path that takes you someplace beyond it. As you practice the path, you learn about these aggregates by playing with them, making the best things possible with them. Then, finally, they deliver you to where you want to go: something beyond the aggregates. And everyone who's been there said that's the end of all problems.

So think of that image of the children. They were creating problems—with their possessiveness—by playing around. But if you learn how to play wisely, you can put those problems down.

Only Natural

May 16, 2020

One of the main reasons for suffering is the way the mind talks to itself. Now, the solution is not to just stop talking. You have to understand the process of what's going on as the mind talks to itself. Who's talking? Where does it come from? Where does it lead? When you understand it, then you can do something about it.

The first part of the training is to learn how to talk to yourself in new ways.

When the Buddha talks about directed thought and evaluation as one of the factors of right concentration, if you're not familiar with what he's referring to, it sounds as if you're going to have to do something new you've never done before. But the phrase, "directed thought and evaluation," is simply another name for talking to yourself. So now, as you meditate, you're going to talk to yourself about the breath, and you're going to talk to yourself about getting the mind to stay with the breath, and *wanting* to stay with the breath—a new topic of conversation, a new way of talking.

So talk to yourself about the breath. How is the breath right now? Is it coming in? Is it going out? How does it feel? It is possible to breathe in a way that feels really, really good, really satisfying. Try to notice which parts of the body are especially sensitive to how the breath feels. Those are the ones that'll be especially gratified when the breath goes well. So pay attention to them. They're your barometer.

As for any other conversations coming into the mind right now, regard them as not-self. You have that choice, you know. When things come up in the mind, there's no need to say, "This must be me or mine because it's in my mind." Who knows where it comes from? Even if it does come from your old habits, you don't have to be defined by your old habits. You can

say, "Right now I don't want to identify with that." You're trying to step back from the voices inside and sort them out.

Having the breath as a focal point allows you to get out of the conversations and to look at them from the side. It's like going into a movie theater. If you sit looking straight at the screen, you can easily get sucked into the movie. It's just a play of light across a very reflective screen, but you can see it as people and locations of all kinds, and get pulled into the drama. You can laugh and you can cry, all over a play of light. But if you go and you sit on the side of the theater and look across, you'll see people sitting in the chairs, and a beam of light going over their heads, flickering. They're laughing and crying, and you can see clearly, "This is just a beam of light." That's the kind of perspective you want to get on the thoughts and voices that come into the mind. These are just fabrications, and you begin to see that, like the flickering light that gets people to laugh and cry, some of the fabrications provide a lot of emotional juice. Anger comes along with them. Lust. Fear. Greed. Envy. All kinds of things. But if you can see it simply as a play of light, then you realize, "Why get involved?"

Part of the reason for getting involved is that there's more than just a conversation going on inside. Some of the thoughts that come up in the mind hijack your breath, hijack the breath energy in the body, and squeeze it in various ways to make you feel that you've got to act on these things. They're like politicians who say, "You've got to choose the lesser of two evils." There was that great anti-two-party ad years back when they went around asking kids, "What do you want to do when you grow up?" And one kid said, "I want to vote for the lesser of two evils." I mean, nobody consciously likes to think in those terms, but that's often what our emotions present us with—either you give in to the emotion and act on it and then you're going to have bad kamma, or you fight it off and bottle it up and it turns into cancer. Those are the options they give us. So you've got to question those options.

There must be some other way. This is one of the reasons why it's useful to consciously work with the breath energy, because you've let your

emotions play with the breath, hijack the breath for who knows how long. The breath has been their tool for squeezing your nerves. So now you take it back and you unsqueeze things. Learn to breathe in a way that feels spacious inside. Learn how to get quick at that.

A good meditative exercise as you're going through the day, when you find yourself doing a chore and you've forgotten the breath, is to stop. Say to yourself, "I'm going to stop doing the chore right now. I'm going to focus on the breath for five minutes and I really want to settle down." That way, you learn pretty quickly where your spots are in the body, the spots where you're most sensitive. As you get good at settling down right there, right then, you have the tool you need when emotions come up, because they come up very quickly. Giving in to them quickly has become an old habit we've learned for who knows how long, how many lifetimes, to the point where it's natural.

We have that phrase in English where we say, "Well, it's only natural." That's just an excuse for saying, "Well, that's just the way it's got to be." But think of it another way: "Only natural" can mean that that's all it is, nothing more than natural. Aging is natural, illness is natural, death is natural, the desire for more becoming—all these things are natural. Suffering is natural. But we're here to go beyond natural. We want something better than natural. So when you say something is "only natural," think of it more as a put-down rather than an excuse. When someone says something irritating or is acting in an irritating way, it's only natural to be angry. But can't you make your mind do something *better* than natural?

That's what we're here for: something better than natural. This is why the Buddha talks about a lot of the states of mind we find natural as we go through the day as being defilements. He's not trying to say that you're a bad person for thinking in those ways, simply that your mind deserves better. Your mind should be brighter than this. You're darkening the mind when you engage in these things. You have a better potential. That's what he's saying.

That image he has of the defilements being like clouds that obscure the sun—a lot of ink has been spilled over it by people trying to say that your mind is innately pure, innately clean. Ajaan Maha Boowa has a good response to that. "If the mind were innately pure, then how could anything defile it? And if something could defile it, that means that if you got it back to purity again, then it could be defiled again." The brightness is not purity. It's simply the mind's capacity to know, to know itself clearly, to be aware all around, as in a state of concentration, and then from there to see things even more clearly. But if you give in to your only-natural desires and only-natural defilements, you're obscuring the mind's ability to see itself, to understand itself.

For the mind to step back is not really natural. For it to see itself as something separate, the voices as something separate: That's not really natural. That's a skill. During my first time with Ajaan Fuang, I asked him one day about the needs of the body. I said, "How can you follow the celibate life? The body has its needs." And he replied, "The body doesn't have any needs. The body would be perfectly content to die. *We're* the ones who have the needs. We're the ones who make the body get up, move around, do this, do that." So whatever comes up, you can't blame the body. The problem is in the mind, because the mind has just been only natural when it could be better.

This is why we bow down to the Buddha, because he found that there was something beyond only natural. This is what the noble search is all about. What's natural is going with the flow, looking for happiness in things that age, grow ill, and die, trying to solve the problem of suffering with a little bit of temporary pleasure. But then more suffering follows on that.

Samsara is natural. Coming back and suffering again: That's natural. The Buddha looked for something better than natural. And he found it. So the path he teaches requires going against a lot of old, ingrained habits. Remember that the defilements are just that. Habits. They're ways we've been acting in the past. Anger is an old habit. It doesn't necessarily have to

be you. You don't have to say, "I'm angry." Just know that there's anger there. There may have been times in the past where anger was effective and got you what you wanted, which is why you've kept it around. It's like a snarling little dog—not the friendliest of dogs, and it's not your favorite dog, but it has been useful for some things in the past, so you keep it on as part of your pack. But that dog often turns on you. It bites you. You have to realize that there are better ways of dealing with difficult situations than getting angry. That's one of those dogs you want to expel from the pack. So remember, you've got other alternatives.

When the mind says, "It's either *x* or *y,"* the Buddha was the sort of person who says, "No, there must be other alternatives." And you want to look for those alternatives in yourself. He gives you new ways of thinking, new ways of talking to yourself, new ways of breathing, new images to hold in mind—all the different kinds of fabrication: bodily, verbal, mental. He gives recommendations on how to do these things in a new way, in a way that becomes a path, not back to more aging, illness, and death, but a path to the deathless. So remember that that option is a real option, too.

When you find yourself caught in the claws of a particularly bad emotion, and it's telling you it's going to be either *x* or *y,* or sometimes it says "It's only going to be me, me, me, me, me," you have to say, "No, there is another alternative. There is something better."

This is why we listen to the Buddha's teachings: because they expand our imagination. We're addicted to suffering. As the Buddha said, when we're suffering, it's the five clinging-aggregates. And how do we identify ourselves? We identify ourselves with the five clinging-aggregates. We're identifying ourselves with suffering. But there's an alternative. Our problem is that we identify with suffering and we don't imagine any other way. The Buddha's allowing us to imagine something else.

As with most addictions, a huge part of the problem is a failure of the imagination. We have our ways of talking to ourselves that close off opportunities—and that phrase "only natural" is one of them. So learn how to say it with a new meaning, one that, instead of serving as an excuse

for ending the conversation, says, "Okay there must be something better, something better than natural."

And take delight in the path aimed at finding that. That's what the customs or the traditions of the noble ones are all about—to take delight in things that we don't ordinarily take delight in: stepping back from our lust and our anger, from our disappointments, from the way the mind likes to feed on its sense of being abused or victimized or treated unfairly. Learn to step back from those habits and say, "There must be something better, and I really would like to find that something better. I want to go *against* the flow. And I'll enjoy mastering the skills that get me out of this." If you learn how to talk to yourself in that way, you've made proper use of directed thought and evaluation. Even though it may not yet get you into jhana, it'll be a part of right effort, right resolve. And those are factors of the path as well.

Glossary

Ajaan (Thai): Teacher; mentor.

Arahant: A person who has abandoned all ten of the fetters that bind the mind to the cycle of rebirth, whose heart is free of mental defilement, and is thus not destined for future rebirth. An epithet for the Buddha and the highest level of his noble disciples. Sanskrit form: *arhat.*

Asura: A member of a race of beings who, like the Titans in Greek literature, battled the devas for sovereignty in heaven and lost.

Brahmavihara: Sublime attitude of unlimited goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, or equanimity.

Buddho: A meditation word meaning "awake."

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

Dhamma: (1) Event; action. (2) A phenomenon in and of itself. (3) Mental quality. (4) Doctrine, teaching. (5) Nibbana (although there are passages in the Pali Canon describing nibbana as the abandoning of all dhammas). Sanskrit form: *dharma.*

Dhammapada: A collection of short verses attributed to the Buddha.

Jhana: Mental absorption. A state of strong concentration focused on a single sensation or mental notion. Sanskrit form: *dhyana.*

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

Kasina: A concentration practice in which one stares at an object until it is imprinted in one's sense of vision.

Kathina: A ceremony after the end of the Rains Retreat, in which the Sangha is given a piece of cloth that they make into a robe before dawn of the next day.

Luang Pu (Thai): Venerable Grandfather. A term of respect for a very senior and elderly monk.

Metta: Goodwill; benevolence. See *brahma-vihara.*

Nibbana: Literally, the "unbinding" of the mind from passion, aversion, and delusion, and from the entire round of death and rebirth. As this term also denotes the extinguishing of a fire, it carries connotations of stilling, cooling, and peace. Sanskrit form: *nirvana.*

Pali: The name of the earliest extant canon of the Buddha's teachings and, by extension, of the language in which it was composed.

Pasada: Confidence.

Parami: Perfection of the character. The later books of the Canon list ten: generosity, virtue, renunciation, discernment, persistence, endurance, truth, determination, goodwill, and equanimity.

Sala: Hall.

Samsara: The wandering-on through rebirth and redeath.

Samvega: A sense of dismay, terror, or urgency.

Sangha: On the conventional level, this term denotes the communities of Buddhist monks and nuns. On the ideal level, it denotes those followers of the Buddha, lay or ordained, who have attained at least their first taste of the deathless.

Sankhara: Fabrication.

Satipatthana: Establishing of mindfulness. The act of being ardent, alert, and mindful to stay with any of four things in and of themselves—body, feelings, mind-states, or mental qualities—while putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.

Sutta: Discourse. Sanskrit form: *sutra.*

Vasana: Tendencies related to past kamma.

Vinaya: The monastic discipline.

Vipassana: Insight.

Wat (Thai): Monastery.

Table of Contents