



MEDITATIONS<sub>13</sub>

# Meditations 13

*Dhamma Talks*

by

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## *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](http://www.dhammatalks.org).

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*Thanissaro Bhikkhu*

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## *What It All Comes From*

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The Buddha tends to put aside most of the questions that activated Western philosophy: Who am I? Where in the past did everything come from? Is there some benevolent intelligence in charge of all things? A malevolent intelligence?

The Buddha said that the beginning point of all this wandering on is inconceivable. Not only unknowable. Something you can't even conceive. And he did say there's no one in charge. So we can't blame our suffering on some being in charge of the universe.

To understand how and why things are the way they are, the Buddha has you look into the present moment: What are you doing in the present moment? He says everything is rooted in desire. All our actions come out of a desire to get something, and the nature of that desire is that it wants our actions to have consequences: That's something we want.

As it turns out, they do have consequences. The problem is that there are often unintended consequences. We see something that we want, then we look for the world in which that thing exists, and then we want to take on a role in that world so that we can get it: This whole construct is called becoming.

It builds on the nature of desire. Desire is always moving someplace. When you look in the present moment, there's nothing static. It's moving, moving, moving toward a goal. One question is whether you're going to attain that goal or not. Another is, will it make you happy? That's all part of the desire. You want to find happiness.

But sometimes the things we want are in a world where they're connected to other things in that world—things that may not be desirable at all. It takes a lot of insight to see the connections, to see the whole picture.

Ajaan Chah's simile is of a snake. You glance at the tail of the snake and it looks like it'd be harmless to grab hold of. It doesn't have anything dangerous. But it's connected to the mouth, and the mouth has fangs. So if you pull on the tail, you get bitten. After a while, you begin to see how the tail is connected to the mouth. And you avoid that. You've learned.

But often the connections are a lot subtler and harder to see. Even when we see them, we can quickly forget what we've seen. Which is why we keep aiming at things that end up causing us trouble. This is what we've been doing as we keep wandering on, wandering on—a slave to craving, as we chanted just now.

That teaching comes from a sutta in which a young monk is talking to a king. The king had asked him why he had ordained, because the king assumed that most people ordained because they had family problems: They lost their relatives, lost their health, lost their money. Hard up, basically. Or in today's parlance, they were losers.

But here the young monk came from a wealthy family. His parents were still alive. He was healthy. So why did he ordain? The monk gave a series of Dhamma summaries he said he learned from the Buddha.

They start with: The world is swept away. All those things you aim at just keep going, going, going away.

It does not endure. It offers no shelter. There's no one in charge.

You have nothing of your own. When you die, you have to leave everything behind as you go on.

But yet we're still a slave to craving.

That's the problem. We can't think of anything better. We're not sure that there would be anything better. So we keep coming back for what we know, hoping to tweak it here, tweak it there, to make it better.

And we can, to some extent. As the Buddha saw in the night of his awakening, there are some very high levels of heaven where the beings live for a long, long time. More than one universe. Forty universes sometimes. That's a long time. They think they've reached the goal. They aimed at acting in ways that lead to happiness, but it turns out that the results of their past good actions wear out and they eventually fall because they get complacent.

So it takes a lot of determination to figure out the way out. We can't blame the situation on anybody. It's part of the nature of being a conscious agent: wanting something, acting on your wants, and then seeing the results of your actions.

The Buddha basically took that combination—the combination of desire and being able to be sensitive to the results of your desires—and turned it into a path. As he said, the Dhamma is nourished by commitment and reflection. You commit yourself to a path of action, you reflect on what you've done, what you've accomplished, and you adjust your commitments accordingly. Again and again. You

take your role as a conscious agent seriously. You try to keep as honest as possible, willing to do whatever is needed to act in ways that lead to true happiness.

This is a lot of where we fail. We put forth an effort and either we don't get the results we wanted and we just give up, or we do get the results and we get satisfied with them.

Like the Brahmās: They're satisfied with where they are. The Buddha tried to teach them, but there were cases where he couldn't get through to them. They were just going to stay where they were. But of course, that meant that eventually they were going to fall.

*It's when you really assume responsibility as a conscious agent that you can actually get out.* We take this role that we've already started assuming and we take it seriously. Why are we assuming it to begin with? There's no answer to that. But just take it as part of being a conscious agent. This is what happens. You have to learn how to be more and more conscious of what you do with your agency. There's no need to complain about that. Just complain about your old habits.

Sometimes it does seem as if saṃsāra is a sick joke. You work really, really hard to get to a high level—up with the devas, up with the Brahmās. Then you hang out there, and everything is very easy. You get lazy and complacent. Once you get lazy and complacent, you're headed for a fall. You fall down, sometimes very far, and it hurts. How you respond to that hurt is going to be really important.

There's a passage where the Buddha talks about dependent co-arising, his explanation of the causes of suffering, in an interesting way. In most of the cases, dependent co-arising ends with suffering. But there's one version where you get to suffering and then what comes next? Conviction: conviction that there's got to be a way out. Based on that, you start acting in skillful ways. There's joy as a result. Based on the joy, there's concentration. Concentration leads to discernment. And discernment, in turn, leads to release.

So to gain release, you've got to have the proper response to your suffering, which is confidence that there's a way out—and that you, as a conscious agent, can succeed in following that way.

We see this in the two main emotions that are talked about most in the Theravada tradition: *saṃvega* on the one hand, and *pasāda* on the other. *Saṃvega* is when you get a strong sense of life going around and around and around, and it's pretty meaningless, so meaningless that the sufferings it entails seem terrifying. *Pasāda* is when you're confident there's got to be a way out.

The Buddha found that way out, as I said, in being really good at being a conscious agent. That was how he discovered that the pattern by which our actions give results start with two very simple principles, but they can get complex.

This is why we're so deluded about what's connected to what, what the results of our actions really are: Some of our actions lead to results that don't give fruit for quite a while. By the time you get the fruit, you've forgotten even that you planted the seed. In other cases, the results come immediately—so quickly that it's hard to believe that what we did was related to what happened right then and there.

When you have this combination, things can get complex, because when something comes up, you don't know: Does it come from something you're doing right now or from something you did in the past? It could be either; it could be both.

You've got to get the mind really still so that you can see these things clearly. After all, how do you think the Buddha discovered these things? He didn't have any texts to read and argue about. He just had his own mind and his ability to observe his actions, to observe the desires on which they were based. He developed really good mindfulness and alertness so that he could see connections that other people hadn't seen before: connections between causes and effects.

First came his understanding about long-term causes—in other words, how you do something and it leads to a result in a succeeding lifetime. But he saw that even that was not as simple as many people had taught. It's not that case that you simply add up all your good actions in this lifetime, subtract all the bad actions, and then go to whatever the result is. He said it had a lot to do with your state of mind at the moment of death. A bad state of mind could delay a lot of good kamma for a long time. A good state of mind can delay some bad kamma.

Which got him to reflect that some actions, even just mental actions, can have an immediate impact that have nothing to do with your past actions. That showed him the possibility of freedom. Otherwise, if everything were dependent on your past actions, everything would be totally determined. You'd have to room for choice. But here we do have choices.

He started looking into those choices in the present moment. That's what led to his third knowledge, which led to his true awakening.

You see these things in the mind when it's really quiet and you stick with the determination to find the way out. Think of the Buddha on the night of his awakening. He gained many knowledges that a lot of people before him were very satisfied with. People in the past had gained knowledge of their own previous

lifetimes. They'd gained knowledge of seeing how beings are reborn after death. And they stopped there, satisfied.

But the Buddha realized that this still didn't end the problem of suffering.

So he took the knowledge he'd gained from those first two knowledges and applied it to the question of: What *is* the suffering right now? What's causing it? Can it end? And is there a path of practice that leads to an end of suffering? He found that there was.

That came from his determination, focus, strong honesty, and strong willingness to do whatever was required to get out. So: strong desire, strong awareness—those qualities of a conscious agent, just raised to an *nth* degree. And that takes you out.

When you get out, then you don't need to be a conscious agent anymore. Being a conscious agent is this role that we take on because we have a sense of lack. When there's no lack, then we can let that role go.

For a lot of us, we're more attached to our sense of our own identity than we are to the idea of a happiness that would be total and complete. But when you remember that your sense of identity came from the sense of lack and is maintained by a sense of lack, maybe you can change your attitude. Maybe a conscious happiness that's outside of space and time would be a good thing.

The Buddha says it is. All the noble disciples say that it is. It's up to you to give it a try.

## *In the Context of the Deathless*

September 20, 2025

For a long time, especially in the West, the Buddha has had a reputation for being a pessimist, and the passage we chanted just now would seem to confirm that reputation. *The world is swept away. It does not endure. It offers no shelter. There's no one in charge. You have nothing of your own. You have to pass on, leaving everything behind. Everybody's a slave to craving.* It sounds pretty negative, but you have to remember the context. When the Buddha first taught his first disciples, he told them, "I've attained the deathless, and I can teach you in a way such that you, too, can attain the deathless": a deathless happiness, a happiness that has no restrictions at all. He didn't say, "I'm going to teach you how miserable the world is, and how there's no hope for happiness." In effect, he introduced his teachings by saying, "This is all about happiness." A happiness that doesn't die. A happiness with no limitations.

So when he's talking about the negative side of the world, it's because he basically wants to make sure that you don't get stuck there, that you don't content yourself with the things of the world. There are better things in the mind. And there's a path to those better things. The path may require you to put forth more effort than you might want, it may be more difficult than you'd like, but the difficulties are then more than repaid. Even the path itself isn't all bad. It's not all hard effort. You're sitting here meditating. What does the Buddha say? You try to get the mind in a state of concentration with a sense of ease and rapture or refreshment. In fact, the ease, pleasure, and refreshment are one of the main points of getting the mind into concentration.

So the path may have its difficulties, but it has its rewards. And it doesn't save its rewards for the end. It's a good path to be on. You look at the things the Buddha asks you to do in terms of virtue, concentration, discernment: They're all honorable qualities. They're all things you can be proud to do. Good qualities of the mind. Qualities of the mind that you respect within yourself. The Buddha's asking you to develop them even further.

So there's a joy in being on the path. And if you learn how to take delight, as the Buddha says, in abandoning your unskilled qualities and developing skillful ones—in other words, if you find the challenge exhilarating, find the challenge really

worthwhile—then you're going to get to the end of the path. He says you have to delight in these things, in the same way as when you delight in mastering a challenging game—although here the game has some serious consequences. If you don't play it well, you just keep coming back to being born again and dying again and again and again and again. And the Buddha's description of the world gives you some pause.

What is it like to remember a past lifetime? The Buddha said that you remember your name and what you looked like, you remember your happiness, you remember your pains, you remember what you ate, and then you died. That's it. It's not much. The ways of the world, he said, involve gain but then they also involve loss. Status, loss of status. Praise, criticism. Pleasure, pain. These are normal things in the world. And you have to reflect on them, because otherwise you get content when the world goes smoothly, and really upset when the world doesn't go smoothly. You're trying to feed on the world, and all of a sudden the world gives you garbage. So the Buddha says to reflect on this. Don't let yourself be satisfied with what the world has to offer, because your mind, as you develop it, has much more to offer you.

So always keep in mind the fact that even though we have to deal with limitations, the goal that we're aiming at is without limit. And when the Buddha talks about things being inconstant, stressful, not-self, he's not saying that you have to content yourself with finding your happiness in the midst of things that are inconstant, stressful, and not-self. He's basically asking you to reflect on these things as you meet with them and ask yourself: In the context of your search for a deathless happiness, are these really worth going for?

There are few cases when the answer is actually Yes, in the sense that the path we're working on is something we're putting together out of these aggregates that the Buddha says are inconstant, stressful, and not-self.

Aggregates like the form of your body as you feel it from within, as you're sitting here right now, working with the breath.

Feelings: You hope to create feelings of pleasure.

There are perceptions, the labels you apply to things that identify them, give them meaning. Here you're identifying the breath as the topic you want to stick with.

There's fabrication, the way you talk to yourself about the breath.

There's consciousness, your awareness of these activities.

Even though these concentration aggregates ultimately will show that they, too, are inconstant, stressful, and not-self, you're trying to fight against those

characteristics for the time being.

Try to make your concentration as constant as you can. Make your mindfulness, your alertness, your ardency as constant as you can so that you can give rise to a sense of ease and well-being. Get the mind under your control so that you can create a path—a path that leads beyond the path. As for other things that are inconstant, stressful, not-self, don't let yourself be satisfied with them. To whatever extent they're useful on the path, you use them, but don't rest content there.

People often get the context all backwards. They think that when the Buddha talks about things being inconstant and impermanent, he's providing the context, saying that we simply have to put up with these facts and say that "If I'm going to look for happiness, I have to accept the fact that it's going to be inconstant and impermanent." That's pretty miserable. But there are people who keep saying over and over again that the reason we're miserable is that we don't accept our limitations.

I was reading, just the other week, a monk saying that our problem is that we would like to have a permanent self. As long as we want something permanent in life, we're going to suffer. But when we finally realize that there's nothing permanent at all, we say, "Okay, no problem. I'll accept that." But that attitude is really sad, given the fact that the Buddha does promise: You follow the path and it leads to a happiness that has no limitations. It doesn't even have the limitations of space and time. That's where we're headed.

So remember, it's not the case that the teachings on impermanence or inconsistency form the context, and that you have to find happiness within that context. It's the other way around. The Buddha has you take your desire for happiness seriously as your top priority, holding in mind the possibility promised in the third noble truth: There is a total end of suffering. And it's not just a blank. It's a state that the Buddha says is permanent. Refuge. The names he gives for it indicate that it's a state of consciousness totally without limitations. It's happiness. It's bliss. It's a sense of freedom. It's true—in other words, it's not going to disappoint. And it's the ultimate. As Ajaan Suwat would say, "Once you attain that, there's no question about who you are who's experiencing it, or where it's being experienced." The happiness is that all-encompassing.

This is one of the reasons why we respect the Buddha: He has us respect our desire for true happiness. He makes us realize that there will be things we have to give up for it, but the things we give up are really not worth all that much. We've *given* them worth. But when you really look at them, there's not much there.

So that's the context: the search for true happiness; the desire for true happiness. The teachings on inconstancy are then placed within that context to remind you that anything that's inconstant is not the goal. It may be part of the path there, in which case you develop it. But then there comes a point when the path, too, will have to be put aside. As the Buddha said, the path is constructed. It's fabricated.

This is another misunderstanding that sometimes comes up, that the path is somehow just a natural process that, if you get out of the way, will happen on its own. We've been told that the Buddha would use nothing but images of natural processes to describe the path. But that's not the case. There's one sutta where he compares the path to a chariot, going through a list of all the different parts of the chariot and equating them to aspects of the path. The chariots back in those days were pretty complex. They were considered works of the art of craftsmanship. And this path we're doing is a work of art. It requires that we do things that we haven't done before and let go of things that we haven't let go of before. But it also promises that we'll find a happiness that we haven't found before, realize what we haven't realized before, attain what we haven't attained before.

So keep the context in mind. When we hear the passages that talk about the negative side of the world, remember they're there because the Buddha has a really positive purpose. He's like a doctor. If you go to the doctor and the doctor says, "Where does it hurt?" you don't accuse the doctor of being pessimistic. He asks where it hurts because he's got a cure. So remember that when the Buddha introduced his teachings, he didn't say, "I'm going to teach you how miserable the world is." He started out by saying, "I'm going to teach you the deathless, and if you follow these teachings, you can find the deathless, too."

## *Strong-hearted*

April 5, 2024

When you focus your attention on the breath, you're focusing on something that only you can know—how you feel the breathing from inside, how you feel your awareness from inside. You're focusing here because this is where the problem is, and this is where the solution will be found.

The problem is that we act in unskillful ways. We let greed, aversion, and delusion take over. We look for happiness in short-term things and often forget the long term. The solution is possible because we can see the problem. We can develop qualities inside that allow us to stop acting in those ways, to the point where we don't have to suffer at all.

Noble people can give us advice. People like the Buddha can show us that it is possible to put an end to suffering. Without his example, without his teachings, we probably wouldn't be sitting here, watching our breaths right now. We wouldn't sense that the end of suffering is something that is possible, that it's something we can attain through our efforts. It's because we lack skill that we don't get there.

This is the crux of the problem: No one else can make us skillful. We have to learn how to be skillful ourselves. As Ajaan Lee points out, a teacher can give you the basic instructions in how to weave a basket, how to sew a pair of pants, or how to make clay tiles, but if you're going to make good tiles, clothing that looks good, wears well, or a basket that's well-proportioned and will last long, that's going to depend on your own powers of observation. You have to rely on yourself. So in that sense, the practice is something that you can do for yourself, and only you can do for yourself.

Of course, other people will benefit. If you have less greed, aversion, and delusion, then less greed, aversion, and delusion will come out in your actions to bother the neighborhood. So it's not as if you're being selfish as you focus inside. You're taking care of what you're responsible for. As the Buddha once said, that's the sign of a wise person: knowing what you're responsible for, knowing what you're not responsible for, and focusing your efforts on where you are responsible. This is work that only you can do. And it doesn't get easier as you get older, so you want to do it now.

Ajaan Suwat, the founder of our monastery who passed away twenty-two years ago on this date, made a comment one time. There was a famous teacher in Thailand who had said that the essence of the Buddha's teachings was not being selfish. Now, the Thai term for "not being selfish" means basically "not looking out for yourself." That teacher's students even made a little drawing of a Buddha image made out of the words, "Don't be selfish"—*yaa hen kae tua*. *Yaa*, "don't"—was the Buddha's head. *Hen* was the neck. *Kae* was the torso and arms. *Tua* was the legs. But Ajaan Suwat made the comment: "This is wrong. You have to look out for yourself, but you have to do it wisely."

And you need both strength of heart and strength of mind. Remember that, as you're training the mind, the Pali term *citta* covers not just the thinking faculty, but also a lot of the qualities that we normally associate with the heart. Unfortunately, in our culture, when we talk about someone who has a good heart, it usually means that they're kind and gentle. But from the Buddha's point of view, having a good heart requires a lot more. It requires a lot of strengths.

One, you're convinced of the truth that you are responsible for your actions, and your actions can make a difference between whether you're going to suffer or not, whether you're going to harm other people, harm yourself, or not. And you have it within your power to stop that harm. In other words, you're convinced of the truth of the Buddha's awakening, of the message of that awakening and how it bears on your life. It bears primarily on the standards he sets for you, and your willingness to put aside your reservations, put aside your doubts, and just give it a try. That's a strength of the heart.

The next strength is persistence. You stick with this. In other words, whenever anything unskillful comes up in the mind, you get rid of it. And you try to make sure that unskillful things don't take over. If they're already there, you flush them out. As for skillful qualities, if they're not there yet, you try to give rise to them, and when they are there, you try to maintain them so that they grow. That requires a strong heart. You have to be patient, to have endurance, to be determined—all those good Capricorn virtues. And that's a quality of the heart.

The ancient Greeks used to say that we had three energy centers in the body: one in the head, one in the chest, one in the stomach. The head, of course, was your intellect; your stomach was your appetites; and your chest, your heart. The heart had to do with your will. So a good heart wasn't just being sentimental, having nice feelings about other people, or being kind to other people. It meant seeing that there

was something really important in life, and you were willing to make sacrifices—in fact, to purify your will so that you willed things that were genuinely good.

This is exactly what we're doing: We're willing what's skillful, what's going to be harmless. We're willing to stop the process by which we travel around, trying to create little worlds around our desires, creating identities around our desires.

Our desires are pretty blind. We can learn how to want almost anything. A lot of things, when you think about it, are pretty disgusting, but our desires and appetites can dress them up. So we want to learn how to will to overcome those appetites. That's the quality of a good heart, a strong heart.

Then you will to keep these lessons in mind, because you realize that if you learn these things and then forget them or apply them haphazardly, they don't really accomplish anything. It's as if you never learned them. So you've got to keep them in mind all the time. That's the strength of mindfulness, and that requires having some priorities. There are a lot of the things that the world would like us to keep in mind that have nothing to do with our true well-being—or anybody else's true well-being. We have to realize that, no, our frame of reference has to be what we're doing right now.

So we try to stay established with our sense of the body as we feel it from within, so that we're fully aware of what's going on in the body. That means we're going to be fully aware of what we do with the body. The same with the mind, the same with our speech—both our inner speech and our outer speech.

We have to be especially mindful of how we relate to our feelings—feeling-tones of pleasure, pain, neither-pleasure-nor-pain—because those can spark some pretty unskillful desires very quickly. We're going to have to learn how to cultivate pleasures that are more skillful. There are pleasures that the Buddha calls “pleasures of the flesh”—nice sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, thoughts about these things—and there are “pleasures not of the flesh,” which are the pleasures that come from getting the mind concentrated. Those, he says, you want to develop. So we're mindful to develop them, give rise to them, and then maintain them.

This is where the practice of mindfulness shades into the practice of concentration. This, too, is a strength of the heart: your willingness to stay with one thing and not let your other desires come in and waylay what really should have top priority in your life. You know that, so you want to be able to keep your focus strong.

You're going to need this strong focus both as you're going through life and as you approach death, because think about it: If you're about to die, what's going to go through your mind? All kinds of things: memories of what this person did to you,

what that person did to you, things you regret doing to others, or things you wanted to do with somebody but didn't get to do. Sensual cravings, cravings to take on an identity as your body is pushing you out: Your mind is going to be running off every which way if you haven't learned how to control your focus, control your concentration. So while you're strong, healthy, and well, try to develop these powers. This, too, is a strength of the heart.

Based on this concentration where you really get the mind stilled, you can see what's going on inside. This provides the basis for discernment—a basis for discernment that's reliable, or at least more reliable than it would be if your mind were running around. If it's based on conviction, based on persistence, it's even more reliable.

This is where the head comes in, but even here, the head is motivated by the heart. What is discernment based on? The Buddha's framework for discernment, of course, is the four noble truths. Sometimes you hear it expressed as the three characteristics—seeing things as being inconstant, stressful, not-self—but those the Buddha calls perceptions. And those perceptions have meaning within the context of the framework provided by the four noble truths, which is that you're trying to comprehend suffering and abandon its cause.

So anything that would give rise to the desire to cling to things—that would be the craving and the clinging—you want to see those things through the lens of the three perceptions so that you can let go of the craving, really understand what suffering is. We tend to think pain is suffering, and in Pali they use the same word for both. But when the Buddha defines suffering, it's clinging to the five aggregates. This shows it's not just ordinary pain. It's something the mind is doing.

We try to understand these things—why? Because we want to put an end to suffering. Why do we want to do that? Because we have goodwill for ourselves and goodwill for all the people around us. Here again: a quality of the heart. So now that the heart is more willing to listen to discernment, and your discernment focuses on bringing about the heart's best desire, both sides get trained.

As Ajaan Suwat pointed out, there are a lot of things that we like that are actually suffering or are going to cause suffering. We wouldn't crave things if we didn't think we would like them. We wouldn't cling to things unless we thought that we liked them. The problem is that we're deluded. Discernment is what allows us to put an end to the delusion on the "head" side.

So your heart has to be willing to listen to your head, but your head also has to listen to your heart. If it's going to be reliable in its calculations, it needs a good heart,

a strong heart.

So we work on these strengths. As I said, even though the most that other people can do for us is to give us advice and set examples, and the work is done inside, still, the results of the work don't stay inside. They spread out to other people, too.

Think about Ajaan Suwat. He was born in a poor peasant family in northeastern Thailand. He didn't even speak Thai when he was a kid. He was in an area where they spoke Khmer. He got a basic education, learned how to speak basic Thai. Looking at him from the outside—he was one out of eight children in a very poor family—there wasn't much hope for him.

But he realized that the Buddha's teachings were not just for educated people or rich people. They're for everybody. And he saw that as an opportunity to escape the confines of what people would normally expect about his life. He trained himself both in heart and in mind. He came here to the States and ended up setting up this monastery, so that people of all nations and all backgrounds would have a good place to practice. He took care of his own internal problem, and did it in such a way that we benefit as well. We benefit because he did a really good job of taking care of his own internal problem.

So that sets an example for us. Our problem is inside, but the potentials for solving the problem are also inside: developing both a good mind and a good heart, developing these strengths of the heart—conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment—so that our wisdom, our discernment, has a good grounding, the kind of grounding that keeps it honest.

This is a total training, and it deserves our total attention, our total conviction. The more we give ourselves to the practice, the more we gain. That's called looking after yourself, looking out for yourself, in a way that's wise.

## *More Wisdom for Dummies*

March 12, 2025

Buddhist wisdom is often presented as very paradoxical, subtle, hard to understand. Yet the basic principles are actually quite simple. You learn how to make distinctions. You begin to see that some of the things you do are good and some of the things are not so good; you have the desire to stop doing the things that are not good.

That's a very basic principle.

In fact, there's one passage where the Buddha said that even though you may be a fool, the extent to which you see your foolishness, to that extent you're wise.

So there is wisdom for dummies. You don't have to be all that bright in terms of reading knowledge, but you do have to have to be truthful and desire to be harmless. Parts of the world say that the desire to be harmless is foolish, childish, immature, unrealistic. But the Buddha pointed out that goodwill—the desire for your happiness, the desire for everybody else's happiness—is a part of wisdom.

So, what does it mean to see your own foolishness? You see that you did something and the results didn't come out well. You see that you had the choice not to do what you did. You didn't have to do that. If it were something you had to do, then no foolishness would be involved. But you did have the choice and you made a bad choice. It's a very basic principle.

These principles of wisdom are contained right in the realization of your foolishness. One, you do have the choice to act in different ways. Two, your actions do yield consequences. This is the basic principle of kamma.

Then comes goodwill. Once you realize that you can have the choice not to be foolish, not to cause harm, then the next step is to want to find out what you can do to become wiser.

One of the basic principles the Buddha lays down is that you see which duties fall to you and which ones don't. If you're wise, you take up the duties that do fall to you, whereas you put aside the ones that don't. This principle goes all the way through to the highest level of the practice.

What duties does the Buddha talk about?

First is the duty to abandon unskillful qualities and to develop skillful ones. That comes right out of the principle that you do have choices, some choices are better than others, and again, you have the desire, based on goodwill, to not do harm.

Then a more refined version of that duty comes in relation to the four noble truths. Each of those truths has a duty. The duty with regard to suffering and stress is to comprehend it. For the cause of suffering, the duty is to abandon it. The cessation of suffering is something you should realize. And the path to that cessation is something you should want to develop.

Notice: You want that because of your goodwill, so you try to maintain that attitude as you look at your actions. When the Buddha was teaching his son—we're told the son was seven years old at the time—he first taught him the principle of truthfulness: If you're going to become wiser in your actions, you have to be true in observing what you're doing, why you're doing it, and the results you're getting. If you can't be true to yourself in these ways, then no matter how much you may know about the Dhamma, you haven't really learned the first step.

Before you act, you ask yourself, "What will be the consequences of this act I want to do?" Some of the consequences, of course, you can foresee, and some you can't. If you're not sure, you can try things out. But if you know that if you do  $x$  somebody's going to get harmed, then you just don't do it. But if you don't foresee any harm, either to yourself or for others, you can go ahead and do it.

While you're doing it, you look at the results that are coming up in the immediate present. If you're actually causing harm, you stop. If you're not causing any harm, you can continue.

Then when you're done, you look back at the long-term consequences of what you did. If you realize that you caused harm in spite of your efforts not to, then you go talk it over with someone who's more advanced in the path to see what advice you can get. Then you determine not to repeat that mistake.

But if you don't see any harm, then you can take joy in what you've done, that you're advancing in the training, and you continue trying to train to become even better. In other words, you're happy with your successful efforts, but not yet satisfied. You take joy in wanting to do even better.

Now, those instructions teach a lot of basic principles of the Dhamma, one of which is that some of the actions you do have results immediately in the present, and some of them will take time to show their results. In other words, some actions are like spitting into the wind: The spit comes right back at you. Or putting your finger in a fire: You don't have to wait until the next lifetime for it to burn.

Other actions are like planting a seed. If you plant a redwood seed today, you can't expect the full-grown redwood tree right away. It'll take time. Those two principles are the basis of the principle of causality that the Buddha taught: that what we do now can have consequences right away and on into the future. That further means that what we experience in the present moment is a combination of results from past actions, our current actions, and the results of current actions.

You can pursue the implications of that fact and they can get quite complex, but as long as you hold to the basic principle that you're going to keep trying to do your best, then you can use this principle for its intended purpose: to realize that, through changing your actions in the present moment, you can stop causing suffering.

Again, you see the thread all the way through: You do your best, you find joy in doing your best, because of goodwill. That's how you turn from a fool into a wise person.

So, you can derive all the Buddhist teachings from this basic principle: You recognize that you've caused some harm when you didn't have to, and you don't want to cause harm again. You recognize that you did something foolish, and you don't want to continue acting like a fool. There's nothing complex about that, nothing abstruse. But it does take a lot of truthfulness to abide by it. And a lot of goodwill. Still, those things are free.

We had a discussion yesterday about holy fools. To whatever extent a holy fool recognizes that he's a fool, there's some hope for him. The Buddha simply offers some advice, based on truthfulness and goodwill: If you want to stop being a fool, you look into your own actions. Learn from your mistakes. Hold on to the things that people like about holy fools, which are, one, they have goodwill, and two, they're truthful. To that extent, they have the seeds for wisdom.

Where the training differs here is that you have to turn around and look at your actions very carefully. Be very observant—because even in the best-intentioned mind, there are some falsehoods going on, areas where you're lying to yourself.

So your goodwill is what's going to see you through. That, and the realization, "I've been lying to myself. That's foolish. I've got to stop."

This is wisdom for dummies. When you admit the fact that your actions have not been all that smart, that you have some big blank spots in your wisdom, then there's hope for you. The people who are already good are the ones who will never learn anything.

That was Ajaan Lee's comment one time about a monk who came to visit him. The monk was pretty proud of the fact that he was a student of Ajaan Sao. He made a public declaration that he was going to come and have a Dhamma discussion with Ajaan Lee. Yet when they met, Ajaan Lee talked about all kinds of things aside from the Dhamma. When the monk left, someone asked Ajaan Lee, "Why didn't you talk about the Dhamma?" He replied, "When a person thinks he's already good, what more can I teach him?"

So, there's wisdom in seeing your own foolishness and wanting to do something about it. Which is why some of the best expressions of Buddha's wisdom are when he explains wisdom for dummies. It's there that everything becomes clear.

## *Strong Through Mindfulness*

February 3, 2025

Most of us learn about mindfulness starting with mindfulness meditation, mindfulness of breathing, the four foundations or establishings of mindfulness. But in the time of the Buddha, mindfulness started much earlier in your practice—in the act of memorizing. You memorized passages of the Dhamma. You heard the Dhamma from the Buddha, tried to take it to heart, and then you maintained it, as they said. In other words, you kept it in mind.

The Buddha's talks were designed for that. We complain about the repetitions they contain, but that's for ease of memorization. For the people who couldn't memorize a whole talk, he would often summarize the main points at the very end with a verse—so that you could remember the verse, and then as you thought about the verse, you could remember bits and pieces of what the Buddha had to say in the talk.

When the Buddha talks about mindfulness as a strength, it encompasses both—both the memorization and the establishing of mindfulness as a meditation practice. The two help each other along. When you're meditating, you want to keep in mind the instructions as to what to do.

When something unskillful comes up in the mind, how you recognize it as something unskillful: That's a function of mindfulness. Then you remember what to do with it. When something skillful comes up, if it needs to be developed, you work on it. If it needs to be maintained, you maintain it. You've got to keep these things in mind.

On top of that, you have the whole set of values that go along with the practice—and you want to be able to keep those values in mind as well. When you find yourself in difficult circumstances, it's good to remember a passage or two in the Dhamma that's relevant to what's happening so that you can keep your values straight.

There's a scene at the very end of Thomas Mann's novel, *The Magic Mountain*, where the main character suddenly finds himself thrown into the trenches of World War I. He's walking along, and words of a Schubert song come to him. In the midst of all that misery of the war, the words of the song give him some comfort.

Well, the words of the Buddha are meant to give comfort, too. You remember his statement about the two bandits: Even if people are sawing you up into little pieces with a two-handed saw, you should *still* have goodwill for them. It's an image that sticks in the mind. And it's meant to stick in the mind.

Ajaan Lee tells a story about a mother monkey who ends up dying out of concern for her baby monkey. I've known people complain about that image—but it's one that sticks in the mind. In this case, the point that Ajaan Lee is making has to do with attachment, clinging.

So you want to keep these images in mind, you want to keep these words in mind, because they provide you with values—even when everything else gets stripped away in your life, as it will. As the Buddha said, we're subject to aging, illness, and death; we'll grow different, separate from all that is dear and appealing to us. It's going to happen sooner or later.

So we want to have something good to hold on to—which is why it's good to memorize some passages of the Dhamma. This is why we chant them in Pali and in translation. If the Pali doesn't mean much to you, the translation will. It then becomes part of the rhythm of your own mind.

Then, as the Buddha said, you take the ability you've developed through memorizing passages to get better and better at holding things in mind. That makes it easier to settle down and do the real work of the meditation. After all, we're not here just to be aware of things, to watch their coming and going. The Buddha wants us to be discerning, and he wants our discernment to be penetrating, which means seeing, when things come, *why* they come, *how* they come, and how we can recognize, when something comes, whether it's to be developed or abandoned. That's the kind of discernment we want. And that depends on keeping things in mind.

When the Buddha talks about making yourself an island in the flood so that you don't drown, it comes down to establishing mindfulness, like we're doing right now: focusing on the breath in and of itself. You want to put aside all the other thoughts. To put them aside, sometimes you just say No to them. Other times, you remember what the Buddha had to say about the drawbacks of that kind of thinking. Sometimes you remember your own ingenuity and can use it to remind yourself of why you don't want to go to things outside of the breath right now.

But you also have the Buddha's images of the quail that leaves its ancestral territory and gets caught by a hawk that comes swooping down. Or his image of the monkeys who leave their safe space where only monkeys go and they go into areas where human beings go as well, where they get caught, skewered, and killed. Those

images, again, are pretty stark, but they're meant to give you a strong sense that you really do want to master this skill of keeping the mind with the object you've chosen to stay with. It's not going to waver and it's not going to slip off.

So we're here to remember what to do and then to do it: remembering to develop skillful qualities inside, abandon unskillful ones; being alert to what we're doing; keeping in mind what we should be doing and then being ardent in doing it well.

Of those three qualities—mindfulness, alertness, ardency—Ajaan Lee focuses on ardency as being the wisdom factor. We have this knowledge, we've memorized these things, and the wise response is to want to use them well to do this well. It requires effort, but it's effort well spent.

Again, to make that kind of effort, you have to remind yourself of why it's good.

So memory functions in a lot of ways to keep you here, to keep you alert, to get the mind into concentrations in such a way that you can develop your own discernment. That way, instead of just remembering what the Buddha had to say, you can produce some discernment of your own as to what's skillful, what's not, what works, and what doesn't work in your mind.

You borrow the Buddha's wisdom to begin with and use that as a template for figuring out how to produce some wisdom of your own. That's when you have an island in the flood. That's the Buddha's image for the world: It's a flood, a river overflowing its banks, and it can pull you along.

He has lots of images associated with rivers: There's the river where, as you're being swept along, you see some grasses on the banks. You try to hold on to the grasses, but the grasses either get uprooted or they cut into your hands. That's a symbol for trying to hold on to your body, to your feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, consciousness—all the aggregates. They get pulled away and can cut you as you try to hold on to them. You need something better—the island you build through your mindfulness, your alertness, and your ardency. That island becomes the island of concentration.

There's a school of thought that says mindfulness practice is one thing, concentration practice is something else, but the Buddha didn't belong to that school. To him, mindfulness, when it's really done well, leads straight to concentration. And mindfulness *is* something you do. You're not just passively sitting here watching things go by as you do nothing. You've got a lot of work to do.

That's another school of thought that's strange: the idea that mindfulness is something that's just always there, and all you have to do is lie back and relax into it—and there you are. Well, where are you, really? You're in the aggregate of consciousness. The Buddha said that the duty with regard to that is not just to be with it. The duty is to try to comprehend it, to figure out how you're clinging to it and learning how you can let it go. To get that kind of discernment into what's going on, you have to learn how to take the aggregates and make them into that island—the island of concentration. So here again, you remember what you're supposed to do, and you get down to work and you do it.

This is how you become strong through memorizing, strong through developing your memory, learning how to use your memory well. It's part of the information that should be used to educate your inner critic.

Many of us don't like the idea of an inner critic, but if we had no inner critic, there'd be no bounds to our actions. There'd be no good or bad. What you have to do is to train your inner critic with right view so that it's actually helpful and becomes part of the path. In other words, you have to learn how to talk to yourself.

I've noticed again and again and again, wherever I go to teach, that for a lot of people, their number one problem is not knowing how to talk to themselves.

So again, you try to remember: How did the Buddha talk to himself? How does he recommend that you talk to yourself? When you remember these good things and put them to use, then your inner critic actually becomes part of your inner strength, rather than something destructive inside. It knows how to encourage, how to point out things that you might have forgotten, for the sake of your genuine well-being.

So try to use your faculty of memory as a part of the path for making you strong. We live in a world that demands a lot of us. It's probably going to demand a lot more in the coming years. Having this inner strength will provide us with the island we need so that we don't get overwhelmed by the flood.

## *Breathing Skillfully*

May 18, 2025

A point that Ajaan Fuang repeated again and again was that the Buddha taught a skill. He wasn't teaching us about reality out there. He was teaching us a *how*: how to breathe, how to think, how to talk to ourselves in a way that doesn't cause suffering.

As the Buddha said, we suffer because we do very simple things in ignorance. But he wasn't satisfied with just talking about how people are ignorant. He wanted to train them so they could overcome their ignorance.

One of the things he said that we do in ignorance is the way we breathe. There are so many other things we think are more important that we let the breath go on automatic pilot. Yet there are still parts of the mind that are keeping track of when the breath is coming in, when the breath is going out, when it should stop coming in, when it should start going out. And those decisions happen in the dark.

As we meditate, we're trying to bring some light to them. So focus on your breath. When we talk about a skill, it's important that you actually *do* the skill, that you practice it. Otherwise, it's like talking about swimming without actually swimming. You don't get the exercise; you don't get the enjoyment. If, on a hot day, you talk about swimming, it doesn't cool you down. So get in the water.

Close your eyes and focus on your breath. Take some good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing in the body. When we talk about breath, it's not so much the air coming in and out through the nose. It's the feeling of energy that flows in the body, that allows the air to come in, allows the air to go out. Where do you feel that? Focus your attention there.

Then ask yourself if you like the way you're breathing. You can breathe in lots of different ways. You can do long breathing, short breathing, fast, slow, or in long, out short; in short, out long; heavy, light. The breath is yours to play with. Find a way of breathing that feels good, that you like to be with.

The Buddha says this is like being a cook. You're working for a king, and the king doesn't always tell you what he likes or what he doesn't like. You have to observe. You make lots of different foods for him, put them on the table, and then notice what he reaches for a second time, a third time. That's a sign that he likes it. Something he reaches for once but doesn't reach for again, that's a sign he doesn't particularly care

for it. So you make less of that kind of food and more of the earlier kinds of food. That way, you get a reward.

In other words, find something that the mind likes right now. Does it like long breathing? Does it like short? Does it want the body to be energized? Does it want the body to be calmed down? Notice what the body tells you. Notice what the mind tells you. We're doing this to get to know the body, and more importantly, to get to know the mind, so that we can use it well, so that when it shapes its present-moment experience, it does it well. After all, we *do* shape our experience. What comes to us through sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations is the result of old kamma. What we do with these things is new kamma. You can't change your old kamma, but you can change your new.

Again, it's like being a cook. You open the refrigerator today and there may not be all that much in the fridge. But if you're a good cook, you can figure out how to make good food out of what you've got. If you're a bad cook, they can give you lots of good ingredients, but you can still make miserable food out of it.

So the important thing is the skill that you develop right here, right now. Ajaan Lee expands on the Buddha's image. He says if you're a good cook, you don't just find one thing that your employer likes and then keep fixing that same thing day after day, because the employer is going to get tired of it. You want to vary your offerings. Try long breathing for a while. Then, when you're tired of long breathing, you can try short breathing. Fast, slow. Deep, shallow. Think of the breath as a whole-body process.

If your mind wanders away, just bring it back. Remind yourself that all the important things you're going to learn about are right here, where the mind and the body meet at the breath. After all, it's right here that you're creating whatever suffering weighs down the mind. If you don't create suffering here, nothing else weighs down the mind.

We're not here to try to figure out the nature of reality outside. We're simply trying to figure out how the mind makes its choices, how it can make them more skillfully, and how it can learn not to burden itself with unnecessary pain and suffering. It can provide itself with an actual sense of joy.

The stresses of the world come in two kinds. They can be illustrated by a story. Ajaan Suwat once came up to the meditation hall at the top of the hill here, pointed to the mountain over there on the horizon, and asked some lay people, "Is that mountain heavy?" Now, you know when an ajaan asks a question like this, it's a trick question. So everybody who was listening waited to get the answer. He said, "If you

try to lift it, it's heavy on you. But if you don't try to lift it, then even though it may be heavy in itself, it's not heavy on you. That's what matters."

The fact that the mountain is heavy is the stress in what are called the three characteristics, or the three perceptions. That's just the way things are.

But the fact that you're lifting it: That's the problem. The weight that comes when you lift it is stress in the four noble truths—in other words, the stress that comes from craving and is involved in clinging. That's something that doesn't have to be there. The mountain is going to be heavy on its own whether you think of picking it up or not. But you have the choice: Are you going to pick it up? If you do, you're going to suffer. You don't have to pick it up. Just leave it there.

What this means is that you want to look for how the way you're clinging and craving in the present moment would lead you to pick up unnecessary burdens. When you're coming from a place of well-being with a breath, it's easier to see that a lot of the burdens you take on *are* unnecessary.

That's what we're concerned with. We're not here to study mountains. We're here to study the act of picking up mountains. Why do people do that? Because they're hungry. They want some pleasure and they think they'll get some pleasure by holding on to things. So, what we have to learn as we meditate is to see that whatever pleasures we get out of holding are outweighed by the stress and dis-ease that come when you try to carry things around, when you try to take possession of things.

We do it through three activities that the Buddha calls *saṅkhāra*, or fabrication.

One of them is bodily fabrication, which is the way you breathe. There's an intentional element in the way you breathe. So learn how to intend to breathe well.

Then there's verbal fabrication. That's the way you talk to yourself: the topics you choose to talk about and the things you choose to say. We tend to do that in ignorance, too. That's why we suffer.

Then there are mental fabrications. These are the perceptions or images you hold in mind to identify that this is this and that's that. Mental fabrications also include feelings: feelings of pleasure, pain, and neither pleasure nor pain.

When we do these things in ignorance, there's going to be suffering.

This is why our skill starts with focusing on the breath and then looking at how we're talking to ourselves about the breath. Usually, in the very beginning, your mind will be talking about other things. It drops the breath and goes running after whatever comes past. You've got to learn how to drop those other things and come back to the breath.

If you pay attention, you'll find that the breath can be interesting, especially when you think of it as a whole-body process. You can explore how it feels down in your hands, down in your arms, in your shoulders. How does it feel in your feet, in your legs, in your torso, in your head? When you focus on these parts of the body, are you putting too much pressure on the focus, or not enough? You can talk to yourself about these things.

And you can change the way you breathe to make it more comfortable—more energizing when you want energy, more relaxing when you want to be relaxed. The breath has lots of potentials that we don't realize because we don't explore them. We're too busy looking after other things.

But now's the time to look after your breath, to explore it, to learn about it.

Then there are the perceptions you hold in mind. How do you perceive the breath? When you think of the breath coming in, where does it come in? We're talking about the breath not as the air, but as the energy. So when the body expands, where does that sense of expansion come from? And what does get pulled in? There's a back-and-forth here. Think of it just as energy. That's the perception you hold: that energy can flow anywhere and in any direction. So, what direction feels best? These are things you can explore.

As you explore them, you're bringing knowledge to this process of fabrication. You learn about its potentials; you learn about its limitations. When you get really advanced in fabricating concentration, the mind gets subtler and subtler all the time. It gets to the point where it doesn't want to fabricate anything anymore. Even these states of concentration—which can feel very refreshing, very calm, very stable—involve some work. You realize you'd like to have a sense of stability without the work. That's when you let go of everything, even the path.

You even let go of your sense of self, because your sense of self is made out of these same fabrications. If you still hold on to anything, saying, "This is me, this is mine," that's a fabrication you haven't let go of. So however you define yourself at that point—permanent, impermanent; individual, separate, interconnected, whatever—you've got to let it go.

But before you let it go, try to use your sense of self, in the sense that you are responsible for what you're doing right now, you're capable of doing it, you're going to benefit from it, and you can observe what you're doing, comment on it, with the hope of making it better.

This is how you learn. You learn how to train yourself. Only when you've trained yourself in this way do you get to the point where you can let the training go.

So it's all a matter of skill. We're not here to learn about reality outside. That was one of the questions posed to me in France: How do you learn about the nature of reality through meditation? I had to rephrase the question. The Buddha wasn't concerned with the nature of reality. He was concerned with the problem of suffering, stress, pain. Why do these things weigh down the mind? Why do we weigh ourselves down with them? Meditation teaches us how to answer those questions because it shows us how we're doing that.

As the mind gets more solidly here in the present moment, clearer and more still in the present moment, it's going to see these processes more clearly. And then it's going to see that it doesn't have to do the things that create suffering. It can let them go. That's what the Buddha was aiming at as he taught. That's the goal of this skill, the aim of this skill, why we master this skill.

So you take the first steps. You don't have to know all the plan of where this is going to go. Just know it's going to a good place.

Do your best to take this on as a skill. When you do something, you commit yourself to trying to do it well and then you reflect on what you've got: what you've done, the results you've gotten. If the results are not yet good, you can ask yourself, "What can I change in what I do?"

These are the questions that meditation can answer. You're looking directly at what you're doing, and learning, through reflection, how to do it better.

It's in this way that you take on the Buddha's training, but you end up training yourself. You get so that you breathe with knowledge and skill, you think with knowledge and skill, you use perceptions with knowledge and skill. That's when you learn the true meaning of what the Buddha had to teach.

## *Breath Breathing Breath*

March 24, 2026

The Buddha's instructions on how to do right concentration are actually found in his descriptions of right mindfulness. The passage describing right concentration basically tells you the different levels you can get into, what they're like, what characterizes them, so that you can recognize them when you reach them. But how to get there is described in right mindfulness. You keep one thing in mind and keep track of that one thing—in this case, the body in and of itself. What that means is you look at the body, not in terms of its role in the world—how it looks, what strength it has to do jobs in the world—but in terms of the experience of having a body right here, right now. You can take one aspect of that, such as the breath. At the same time, you put aside any thoughts of greed or distress with reference to the world. So those are two activities that work together: keeping the focus and then protecting the focus by cutting away any thoughts that would disturb it.

You bring three qualities of mind to these two activities: mindfulness itself, which is the ability to keep something in mind; alertness, watching what you're doing while you're doing it, along with the results of what you're doing; and then ardency, the desire to do this well.

The description of how to do right mindfulness doesn't mention the issue of perception—the way you label things—but it's involved. The Buddha says that concentration is a perception attainment. In other words, you have to hold on to a certain perception of your theme in order to stick with it. In fact, all the levels of concentration up through the dimension of nothingness have to depend on a perception. But perception plays a role in the practice of mindfulness, too. You need a mental image of what the breath is as you keep it in mind so that you can keep telling yourself, "Stay with this, stay with this." You need a pretty clear notion of what *this* is. Then as you're alert, you're looking to see what this is doing. As for ardency, you compare what the mind is doing with your perception of what you *want* it to be doing. You try to make up the lack wherever there's a lack. You try to maintain what's good where it's good.

All of this depends on perceptions. So, what is your perception of the breath? For many of us, it's the air coming in and out through the nose, going down into the

lungs. That perception inclines you to think of the breath as something contained in the solid and liquid parts of the body. The lungs are like bags that inflate and deflate, while the breath is the air that comes in and out of them. But when the Buddha describes in-and-out breathing, he doesn't include it under the tactile sensations of the body, which would be the case if you were supposed to focus on the contact of air at the nose. Instead, he includes in-and-out breathing under the wind property, one of the four properties of the body—the Pali word is *dhātu*—and those properties all permeate the whole body. That means that the breath, connected with the wind property in general, can permeate the whole body. Think of that. Try to hold that perception in mind.

One of the steps in mindfulness of breathing is to be sensitive to feelings and perceptions as they influence the mind, and then to try to calm that influence. So, what perception of the breath would be most calming, that would allow you to get the mind solidly into concentration? Remember, concentration is a steady, whole-body awareness in which you allow feelings of pleasure and refreshment to permeate the entire body. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha talks about being aware of the whole body as part of breath meditation, because the air coming in and out through the nose doesn't have many variations that would allow you to say that it's comfortable or not. But the breathing, say, as you feel it in the torso, as you feel the energy throughout the different parts of the body, can be made very comfortable. Gratifying, even.

That's exactly what you want. You want a good physical feeling of pleasure that can spread throughout the body. Some people say that when the Buddha talks about pleasure in concentration, it's a purely mental pleasure, but then he says that pleasure permeates the body when you get into right concentration. Mental pleasures don't permeate the body. Physical pleasures do.

So think breath as a whole-body process. It's not contained by the solid or liquid parts of the body. It surrounds them. You're sitting in breath right now. Your whole body, your whole awareness, is surrounded by breath. Think of that. Hold that image in mind. What's doing the breathing? It's not the solid parts; it's not the liquid parts. It's the breath itself. It's breath breathing breath. Hold that image in mind. Be aware of how it feels.

There's another strange interpretation you sometimes hear, which is that when you're practicing mindfulness of breathing, you're simply focused on the perception of breathing, but not the actual physical sensation of breathing. If you're focused on

the physical sensation, that would put you in another type of meditation, property meditation.

But that interpretation is drawing artificial lines. After all, if your state of concentration is going to have feelings of pleasure throughout the body, you've got to feel the breath in addition to having a perception of it, because those pleasant feelings are caused by how you sense the breath. And how are you going to test which perception is best for that feeling unless you're aware of feelings and perceptions along with sensations of the breath?

So try to be aware of the breath, the feeling of pleasure, and the perception that anchors all three of the mental qualities you're trying to develop: the perception you're holding in mind with mindfulness, the perception you're alert to, and the perception that you're using ardently in order to make this go well. How can you refine those perceptions? What alternative perceptions can you use? One I like to use is that every cell in the body is breathing in and breathing out in harmony. Another is that the body is all surrounded by a cloud of breath energy.

Ajaan Lee talks about this in some of his writings: the breath around the body, outside of the skin. For people who have trouble getting over feelings of tension or tightness in the head or in the chest as they focus on the breath, they can think of the breath energy surrounding the head. There are channels opening up in the head, extending into that cloud of energy around you. You can do the same with the torso, the same with any place in the body where there seems to be a blockage. Allow this surrounding breath to permeate everything.

As for the solid parts of the body, think of them as being like a sponge. You have pores in your skin, there are spaces between the molecules, spaces between the atoms, so there are plenty of spaces for the breath to move in and out of the body and to move around inside. As for getting the breath to flow in different parts of the body or to go longer or shorter, deeper, more shallow, try to use a perception to make adjustments. Don't physically force these things. Don't tighten up around the breath or grow tense to push it. Don't squeeze the bag. Just think. Hold a perception in mind. The breath will respond, growing longer, smoother, more energizing if you want energy, more relaxing if you want to relax. Let the perceptions do the work and allow the breath to breathe the breath.

It's when you have good perceptions like this that you find it easier to concentrate. As for any other thoughts that might come through the mind, just let them go through that cloud of energy, in and out, in and out. Don't grab hold of

them. Don't push them away. If they can come in, they can go out. You simply don't have to pay any attention to them.

As for the various stages of concentration you'll go through, you don't have to anticipate them. Simply know that for a while you'll be investigating this perception of the breath, investigating which way of breathing is best, and making adjustments. Then there will come a point where you don't need to make any more adjustments. There's a sense that the breath energy fills the whole body in a way that feels just right. Ajaan Fuang's image is of a big jar of water. You fill it up, fill it up, until finally it's full. You could add more water, but the jar can't hold any more, so what's the point of adding more water? In the same way, there comes a point where the adjustments are no longer necessary. They don't add anything new or good to the breath. So why bother doing them?

That's when you can just settle down and become one with what you've got. Then the job is to maintain that oneness, maintain what you've got. A part of the mind will say, "When do I move on to insight?" or "When do I get something else beside this?" Tell it that the good things come by staying here and really getting to know this spot. Advancement in the meditation comes from becoming more and more sensitive to what you've already got, once you've made it good and maintained it. And in maintaining it, you get more and more sensitive to what feels good. That greater sensitivity will allow things to develop in the right direction.

There will be some slight adjustments here and there, but there will be more and more a sense that you can simply settle in, settle in, to more refined levels. At first you're not willing to settle totally in the body, because you know there are pains here and there, and you've felt them in the past. But as soon as you feel more and more comfortable all around, it's easier to totally settle into this cloud of breath energy. So see what happens when you maintain that and get more sensitive.

The descriptions of right concentration talks about different levels of jhāna, but you don't need to know those descriptions beforehand. Just see what happens as you settle in and get more sensitive, holding this perception of breath in mind, becoming more and more convinced that, yes, this is the way the breath really is. It's not the muscles causing the breath to come in. It's the breath that causes those muscles to move. It's not the case that the earth element or the water element, the solidity or the liquidity of the body, contains the breath. The breath contains them. You're sitting in the breath. You're bathed in the breath. See how far that perception, when you maintain it, can take you.

## *Mindfulness in the Driver's Seat*

September 23, 2024

There's a passage where the Buddha compares the different aspects of the path to the parts of a chariot. A lot of the comparisons don't mean much to us now because we're not familiar with chariots, but some of the parts can correspond to what we know about cars, trucks, and other vehicles. One of them is that the chariot has a driver—a charioteer—and the charioteer is mindfulness. Mindfulness is what directs everything else.

It's a very dynamic picture. The mindfulness has to keep in mind where you're supposed to be going and that you have to watch where you're *actually* going.

Seeing where you're actually going, of course, is the function of alertness. The charioteer has to then compare that with the question: Are we going where we want to go? Then he has to steer the chariot in the right direction.

As I said, this gives a very dynamic picture. Sometimes mindfulness has a very static image: You just note whatever's coming up in the present moment. You accept it and let it go, accept, let it go, without any sense that you're going anywhere, or that the things you're watching are going anywhere, either.

But actually, everything you do, say, and think, is *going* someplace. It has its consequences. That's what the teaching on kamma is all about. Our thoughts have arrows in them. They're pointing in a direction. So we want to make sure we're going in the right direction. That's what mindfulness is for.

It starts as a faculty of the memory. If you think of the charioteer, he has to keep a map in mind of where the different roads go. He also has to remember to recognize what's coming up: where the obstacles are, where the problems are, so that he can work his way around them, recognizing what needs to be done.

It's like that story that Mark Twain tells of when he was learning to be a captain on a steamboat on the Mississippi River. At the end of his first day, the captain came to him and said, "Okay, now tell me how many bends we went through in the river and where the sandbars were." Mark Twain was taken aback, because there had been a lot of bends. The captain said, "Look, if you're going to steer a steamboat down the river, you have to recognize each bend, because each bend has its own characteristics.

It has sandbars here, sandbars there. The current runs here, the current runs there. You have to recognize that for each bend in the river.”

In the same way, as you practice you have to recognize, when something comes up in the mind: Is it a skillful quality? Is it an unskillful quality? If it's unskillful, what *kind* of unskillful quality is it? You've got all those different hindrances that could get in the way, and that's just a basic list. There are lots of other things that can get in the way as well.

Then you have to remember what to do: When sensual desire comes up, how do you handle it? How have you handled it in the past? What's gotten good results? Try that again. If it doesn't get good results this time, use your ingenuity. Work on a new solution to the problem.

You can't just let the problem fester there and you can't just accept it. You can watch it for a while, but with the purpose of figuring out where the allure is. Sometimes when desire comes up, the allure is for the object of your desire. Sometimes it has to do more with your perception—or lots of different perceptions around the object. Or your perception of your relationship to the object. Or just the desire for desire itself. Once you can locate the focal point of the desire, then you can figure out what to do.

So you have to be observant, you have to be alert, and you have to have a fund of knowledge. This is what we build up as we practice. Remember the Buddha's definition of mindfulness: the ability to remember what was done and said even a long time ago. In this case, what was done was what you learned from others and what you've done in the past as you've meditated.

Similarly with ill will: Sometimes the cure for ill will is trying to develop goodwill, and sometimes that's scratching where it doesn't itch. So you have to figure out exactly where the ill will is located. And why would you have any ill will for someone? Why would you want somebody to suffer?

You could think of all the bad things they've done, but then you ask yourself, “What good comes out of seeing somebody suffer, even if they've done bad things?”

There are a lot of people who, when they get punished for their bad deeds, don't take it to heart. They have all kinds of excuses for arguing as to why they shouldn't have been punished that way. It's a lot better if you can think of the person suddenly coming to his or her senses and realizing that it was a mistake—whatever they did—and then resolving not to repeat that mistake. That's what goodwill means: hoping that people can voluntarily come to their senses. If there's anything you can do to

help in that direction, you're happy to do it. That way, you make the world a better place.

Otherwise, we have the back and forth that we see going on all around us. "So-and-so hit me, so I've got to hit them back harder." And of course then they're going to hit you harder. It just escalates. This is the way it is on a children's playground, and this is the way it is in the world at large.

I knew a monk in Thailand one time who had a number of students who were very highly placed in the government. He said that when they'd come and talk to him about their problems, it was like listening to four-year-olds: "He did that to me. She did that to me. I've got to get back..."

That's the mindset that's running the world, and it's going to ruin the world. You can see it played out on a large scale, and you can look at your own mind and ask yourself, "Why do I play along with that game?"

These are some of the things you *keep in mind* when you recognize that you're actually getting involved in ill will.

Similarly with sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, and doubt about the Buddha's teachings, doubt about yourself: You've encountered these hindrances before, and it's good to remember how you've gotten past them.

If they're coming on really strong this time and they don't respond to your old methods, well, use your ingenuity. The important thing is that you learn to recognize a problem *as a problem*, and that something has to be done about it. You don't just let things fester in the mind.

Some people have the attitude that when an emotion comes up, you have to allow yourself to really feel it, "get into it." Well, the Buddha's actually saying, No, you've got to acknowledge it and then get *out*.

But there are skillful and unskillful ways of getting out. The unskillful way is to deny it. The skillful way is to be willing to watch it, but from the outside. See where it came from, see where it's going, and ask yourself, "Is this really where I want to go?" You're going to need this ability to step out as much as you can as you go through life. Otherwise, your emotions take over. They color everything you see as you "get into" them. That's what *becoming* is: getting into a hindrance, getting into an emotion.

You've got to realize that they'll take you places you don't want to go. So you basically say, "Okay, stop the car. I want to get out or change the direction we're going in." This is mindfulness in the driver's seat, making sure you're going in the right direction.

Just ask yourself, “Here you are. Your body is relatively healthy. You’re relatively alert. Whatever pains there may be in the body are not overwhelming. What are you going to do when things do get really bad, and the mind will tend to slip away? Who’s going to be in charge?” You have to have mindfulness in charge. You have to have mindfulness in the driver’s seat.

So you’ve got to develop this quality of stepping out of your mind states and seeing where they’re going. If they’re going in the wrong direction, direct them in a new way. As I said, all mind states take you someplace. They’re not just static bubbles welling up and then bursting. They’re currents, like the currents of a river. Or you can compare them to the engine of your car: You turn on the engine, and it’s going to go someplace.

So with all your actions, you have to see them as part of a process. They come from someplace in the mind and they go someplace out into the world. You’ve got to decide: Are they going to the right place? Get used to developing this habit now of putting mindfulness in the driver’s seat, and it’ll serve you well when things get more difficult in life.

Just imagine when you’re on your deathbed. Or imagine that you have a sudden death and you don’t have the luxury of a deathbed. Either way, when you realize that you can’t stay here anymore, the mind is going to run off in every direction, like the story of the man who jumped on a horse and rode off in all four directions at once. You need a part of the mind that’s trained not to go along with those things, that can step back and say, “I’ve got to direct this chariot, I’ve got to direct this car in a good direction, at the very least make sure it stays on the road to a good rebirth where I can continue practicing the true Dhamma.”

So, tend to this quality in the mind—this ability to step back, to see where you’re going, and to change direction when you have to, mindful of the fact that we’re always going, going, going. You want to make sure you’re going in the right direction.

## *Issues of Control*

May 7, 2024

There are times when the Buddha finishes his Dhamma talks by sending the monks out to meditate at the roots of trees, in empty dwellings. But he doesn't say, "Go do *samatha*," tranquility, and he doesn't say, "Go do *vipassanā*," or insight. He says, "Go do *jhāna*."

The noun *jhāna* is related to a verb, *jhāyati*, which has a second meaning—it means to burn with a steady flame.

Pali has different words for what we in English would say "to burn." *Jalati* is the usual one: It's the burning of a bonfire or a fire in a fireplace. It flickers here and there. *Jhāyati*, though, is the verb for burning with a steady flame—like the flame of an oil lamp. That gives you an idea of the kind of mind state you're trying to develop. Steady. Still.

It's interesting that the Buddha's instructions for how you get the mind into *jhāna* don't mention the word *jhāna* at all. His descriptions of right concentration, where he does mention the word *jhāna*, don't tell you how to do it. They simply say, "This is what this state is like, and that's what that state is like."

Instructions for how to do it come in the definition of right mindfulness: You keep track of something in and of itself, in this case the breath. You're ardent, alert, and mindful, and you put aside greed and distress with reference to the world.

So you stay focused on the breath. Any other thoughts that would get in the way of the breath, you put them aside. And for the time being, thoughts of *jhāna* might count as thoughts related to the world because all too often you want to come out and say, "Well, I got this *jhāna*, I got that *jhāna*..."

I noticed that when Ajaan Fuang was teaching, he never guaranteed anyone's level of *jhāna*. He'd talk about the breath: "How does your breath feel?" he would ask his students. As the mind settled down, they would describe it in different ways.

Then he would use their vocabulary with them, making the point that we're not here to score points on the *jhāna* scorecard. We're here to get to know our own experience, know our own mind, to get the mind to settle down. How deeply it settles down has to do both with our ability to calm things down in the mind, and also to gain some insight into what's going on.

There's another sutta where the Buddha talks about how getting the mind into jhāna requires that you have some tranquility and some insight; and to gain insight and tranquility—on a higher level—you have to have jhāna.

So the process of getting the mind to settle down—what the Buddha calls “developing and abandoning”—is going to develop both the levels of tranquility you already have and what insight you already have.

The place you focus, though, should be the breath, along with your mind as it relates to the breath. In the Buddha's breath meditation instructions, he talks about bodily fabrication and mental fabrication. Bodily fabrication, of course, is the in-and-out breath itself. You train yourself to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in and breathe out. Then you try to calm the bodily fabrication.

Why he uses that technical term may have to do with the fact that he's trying to sensitize you to the fact that you are shaping this.

I was talking the other day to someone who had been taught that you shouldn't try to shape the breath, you shouldn't try to influence the breath, just let it do its own thing. He found that it felt like he was being pushed out of his body—because when you deny the fact that you're shaping your breath, a lot of things go underground.

So be upfront about the fact: There is an intentional element in how you breathe, so learn how to make the most of it.

As for mental fabrication, it's the same sort of thing. You sensitize yourself to the fact that feelings and perceptions are shaping your mind, and then you try to calm their impact.

Which feelings you can focus on are most calming? In the beginning, there might be some intense feelings of pleasure that you just want to drink up, drink up, drink up. Well, drink them up. As the Buddha said, when you gain some pleasure in the meditation, indulge in it, but not to the point of losing your focus on the breath.

By “breath,” here, we mean breath *energy* in the body.

Then, after a while, you feel that those more intense levels of pleasure get tedious, so you want something quieter.

It's like listening to the radio: You've been listening to hard rock, and after a while it just sounds like a lot of noise. You want something more soothing. So you change the channel, change the frequency.

Here in the body, what that means is that you'll notice there are sometimes some strong feelings going through the body as the mind settles down. But there are also subtler levels of energy. They seem to be on a different frequency.

Another analogy is that you're flying under the radar.

Whatever analogy works for you, realize that you want something that's subtler, more calming. There are these various levels of energy already there, it's simply a matter of tuning into the one you want.

As you can see, there's developing and there's abandoning. Anything that would get in the way of the mind settling down, anything that would stir up the mind, you want to let it go. Go for what's most calm.

Now, if you're already sleepy and sluggish, you don't want to go straight for the calm. You want to energize things first, and then let them calm down. But again, this is a skill you learn: observing what the mind needs, observing what the body needs, and learning how to provide for those needs.

And you are exerting some control here. Sometimes we're told that the lesson of the meditation is that you have no control—but that would be depressing. As you sit there watching whatever comes up, sometimes some really bad things can come up, and you've got to have some tools to deal with them to protect yourself.

Even though the Buddha says that, in ultimate terms, the five aggregates of form, feeling, perceptions, thought constructs, and consciousness don't lie under your total control, still you *do* control them to some extent. If it weren't for that "some extent," you wouldn't fall for them.

The question always is, with your sense of self: Is it worth identifying with these things? Is it worth taking them on as a responsibility, and trying to influence them?

There will be a lot of stages in the path where certain things *are* worth identifying with: Your desire to get the mind to settle down—identify with that. Your desire to enjoy the results of your meditation—identify with that. Your desire to have a useful commentator in your mind—that's a skill worth developing, a responsibility worth taking on.

As for issues in the world outside, as the Buddha says, "Put them aside." The verb he uses, *vineti*, means to subdue. Remind yourself that you have some responsibilities here, and they're not going to get done by paying a lot of attention to what's going on in the world outside.

One of the Buddha's definitions of the difference between a wise person and a fool is that the wise person knows what duties fall to him or her, and takes on those duties, and doesn't take on things that are not his or her duties.

Right now, your duty is the shape of your mind. The fact that you're creating suffering for yourself and a lot of it spills over to burden other people: That's where

you're responsible, so that's where you need to develop a good sense of self as being responsible.

Ajaan Lee comments on this a lot. That observation that we do have some control over the aggregates, and that's what the path is all about—that's his observation. The observation that there are things you identify with as you go through the path, and then you have to let them go—that's his observation, too.

So the question is when to take them on, when to let them go. A lot of that has to do with your taking them on and then observing: What are the results?

You take on the breath: You learn how to control the breath and you learn by trying to adjust it here, adjust it there; learning what kind of adjustments are too strong and too harsh; which adjustments are too weak; where the breath needs to go.

As for when you need to think of the breath in different ways: There are phases in the meditation when you want to think of the breath coming in from outside. There are other phases when you want to think about it as originating *inside*, especially as the breath grows more calm, and there's a tendency for it to stop. If you feel that breath is something you have to bring in from outside, the stopping of the breath will scare you. But if you realize that you already have breath inside—"breath" being the energy of the body—and that it can get full, so full that you don't need to feel the need to bring in anything more, that allows the mind to settle down with greater confidence.

So you are taking responsibility for certain actions: You are the one who develops the path. You are the one who abandons the things that are opposed to the path. As long as the concept of "you" is useful, helpful—as long as it's worth it—keep it up.

There will come points in the path when you realize that it's the only thing standing between you and something unfabricated. But because you've been relating to it as an *activity* rather than as a solid thing, it's a lot easier to stop doing it.

So when the question comes up about what to identify with, ask yourself, "What, when I identify it, with, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?"—basically, the same question that underlines all aspects of discernment. You're simply taking what you do and replacing it with what you identify with. You're still dealing in actions, as long as you can see your sense of self as an action that you can choose to do and choose not to do.

Then the question is: When is the right time and place to identify with this? When is the right time and place to identify with that? When is the right time to let

go of them and not identify with anything? That makes the issue of self and not-self a lot easier to resolve.

So take responsibility for your practice. That sense of “the responsible you” is going to be a really useful identification. It’ll be worth it, because it can take you far.

## *When the Mind Is Still*

January 13, 2025

One of your main tasks as a meditator is to keep up interest in what you're doing. In the beginning, that's not hard because there's a lot to be done in getting the mind to settle down. Sometimes it takes a while, takes some strategizing: "What can you do to get the mind to be willing to settle down, stay with one thing, the breath, with a sense of ease?"

Ajaan Lee gives some advice. You can notice where there are patterns of tension, where there are pains in the body, and you ask yourself, "How are they related to the breath? Can I breathe in a way that soothes the pains or dissolves the patterns of tension?" That gives you something to do as you work through the body.

You can start at the navel and go up the front of the body, over the head, down the back, out the arms, out the legs. Or you can start at the feet and the hands, and work up to the center of the body. Or start with the feet, go up the legs, up the spine, up through the head.

There's work to be done, and when there's work to be done, you can maintain interest—especially if you have chronic diseases or chronic pains. You have a riddle to solve. If your mind likes riddles, here's a really good one.

But then the problem comes when the mind actually does settle down and you don't know what to do with yourself. This is where a lot of people begin to lose interest. They get bored. Nothing's happening. They blur out. There's a sense of ease, you just go with the ease, forget the breath, and you get into what's called delusion concentration, where you're quiet, things are kind of hazy, you're not really sure whether you're awake or asleep. That's not where you want to be.

When you settle down, there's still work to be done. The main work is maintaining the sense of ease, the sense of stillness, while staying alert. As for what else you can do, the Buddha gives directions right there in his instructions on right mindfulness: You put aside greed and distress with reference to the world.

So you decide with any other thought that comes up in the range of your awareness that you want to stop it in its tracks—like the game of whack-a-mole. When a thought appears, look for where in your sense of the breath and the body there's a tightness or a little knot of energy getting tangled up around that thought.

Sometimes the tangle appears first, then you slap a perception on it. You say, “This is a thought about  $x$  or a thought about  $y$ ,” and then you run with it. By that time, it’s too late—not too late to stop the thought, but you’ve missed a lot of important steps. You want to see how your thought worlds are formed. The best way to see how they’re formed is to try to interrupt their formation as quickly as you can.

One image you can think of is a spider on its web. It’s sitting very still, waiting for the web to quiver. When the web does quiver, the spider has to figure out where on the web that movement came from. It runs over and finds a fly or some other insect that’s flown into the web. Then it spins its web material around the fly and goes back to its spot to wait for the next fly. That’s one image you can use.

Another is that you zap the thoughts with a vaporizing gun. As soon as there’s a stirring in the breath energy or in the area where the breath energy and the mind meet, you try to dissolve it, vaporize it.

So you have your home base someplace in the body. You’re fully aware of the body and then you wait: What little stirrings will appear? Where will they appear? And how quickly can you sense them? How quickly can you vaporize them?

As you vaporize them, you begin to see that there are certain steps that go into the formation of a thought. Sometimes a thought arrives ready-made from the past. Other times, there’s a stirring and you decide, “I want to think about  $x$ ,” and you slap a perception on the stirring to turn it into a thought about  $x$ . As you see this, you’re learning some important lessons about the process of fabrication in the mind. You’re learning about becoming.

Becoming is the act of taking on an identity in the world of experience. Our major becoming, of course, is our identity as human beings in this human world. But there are also becomings in the mind and they happen all the time. A thought comes up, it looks appealing, it looks intriguing, it has an allure of some kind. Even if it’s a thought about something you don’t like, something you’re worried about, there’s part of the mind that feels, “I have to think about this, so I might as well think about it now.”

Whatever the appeal, it pulls you in. Then you become a person in that thought world. And when that happens, as the Buddha said, you’re already entangled in the processes of suffering. You want to catch yourself before those processes form into a thought world, before you take on an identity in that world.

That’s one of the reasons why we meditate, so that we can see these preliminary steps more clearly. Without this stillness, they’re buried in all the background noise

of the mind, all the background chatter. It's when the stillness allows that chatter to calm down, calm down, that you can begin to see these things.

So it's in the process of creating a steady state of mind that you're going to learn about fabrication, because you want to see fabrications as they arise, as they change, as they pass away, but you don't want to arise and change and pass away with them. You want something more solid.

This is why Ajaan Lee says that when you're doing concentration, you're basically fighting against the three characteristics. You're taking what's changeable and inconstant in your mind and you're trying to make it more and more constant—because when it's constant, then you can see other things arise and pass away. If you arise and pass away along with them, you can't see the process. You've got to have some constancy in the mind as your point of reference.

And for that to last, there has to be a sense of ease. So you're taking what's basically stressful—your sense of the body as you feel from within—and you turn it into something easeful. There's a fair amount of stress just in maintaining the body, keeping it going, but you're learning to do that with a sense of ease.

As for thought worlds that are beyond your control, you're trying to bring them under your control. You learn that you can control them to some extent. That's the important thing: How far is that extent? Where is the boundary? We're not here just to give our allegiance to the Buddha and say, "Yes, he's right."

These three things are built into the world, as the passage we chanted just now said, "Whether or not a Tathāgata arises in the world, there's this quality of the Dhamma: All fabrications are inconstant. All fabrications are stressful. All dhammas are not self."

But we're not here just to affirm that "Yeah, what the Buddha said is true." As he noted, fabrications have their pleasant side. If they weren't pleasant, we wouldn't fall for them, we wouldn't have passion for them. But if you focus on their pleasant side, that just aggravates the passion. You want to focus on their unpleasant side so that you can develop some dispassion for them.

Why do you want dispassion for them? Because when you learn how to pull out of them, you begin to realize that they really are stressful and you're better off not getting engaged. It's only when you can step out of fabrications like this—the fabrications of states of becoming—that something unfabricated will appear.

That's what we're here for. We're going to use those perceptions of what are usually call the three characteristics to develop dispassion. So we're not just sitting

here, saying, “Yeah, I think the Buddha’s right.” Or, “I’m not sure yet, but let’s keep working until I feel that ‘Yeah, he’s right.’” That’s called agreement through pondering views.

The Buddha said you can’t really guarantee that something is the truth just because it agrees with what you’ve thought about, what you’ve generalized from your experience. Instead, he wants you to use his teachings as tools to work on the problem, which is craving and clinging—the craving that causes suffering, the clinging that constitutes suffering—learning how to let go of the craving so that you can put an end to suffering. The end comes when you find that something not fabricated is actually there to be touched by the mind.

This is why, when the Buddha gives his image of the two messengers—tranquility and insight—who come running into the citadel of consciousness bringing a message, the message is not the three characteristics. The message is nibbāna.

When insight has done its work, you’re going to experience something deathless inside. That’s what all this is for. But this means that you have to learn how to view your thought fabrications from the outside so that you don’t get sucked into them as you ordinarily do.

That’s why we create this sense of stillness in the body, an expansive awareness filling the body with a sense of ease and, ultimately, with a sense of stillness and equanimity—so that you can see those processes from the outside, zap them; learn how to stop creating a sense of identity around them or in them. When you do that, you see their many layers as you catch them in different stages of the process. That’s how the meditation works.

But it requires a lot of patience. Think about the image of the spider or the image of zapping: It relates to the image of the hunter. The hunter has to be very still and very patient but very alert, maintaining interest in what he’s doing. If he gets bored, he starts fidgeting around, thinking about this, thinking about that, not paying attention to what’s going on. Then, not paying attention, he’s going to miss the signs that there’s game. And the fidgeting around is going to scare the game away.

So learn to be still. Learn how to take an interest in being still—and in what you can learn, what you can begin to observe when you’re still that you wouldn’t observe otherwise.

Those thought worlds that you used for your entertainment and for figuring things out in the world outside: You’ve got to learn how to pull out of them. And concentration allows you to do that as you maintain it. So learn how to take an

interest in maintaining stillness. In that way, you can develop this skill, and it'll teach you a lot.

## *Samatha, Vipassana, Jhana*

June 26, 2024

When the Buddha would tell monks to go meditate, he wouldn't say, "Go do *samatha*," or, "Go do *vipassanā*." He'd say, "Go do *jhāna*," right concentration. As for *samatha* and *vipassanā*, he explained those as qualities in the mind. He didn't have a specific *samatha* technique or *vipassanā* technique. He said you needed both qualities to get the mind to settle down, depending on what the problem is.

Sometimes you can lull the mind into a sense of comfort just by staying with one thing. That's the *samatha* side.

Other times, though, you've got to analyze what's going wrong. Why is it that the mind doesn't settle down? What are you holding on to? What's getting in the way? There's an image I can use here in America—you can't use it in Thailand. You're like a dog lying down to sleep. It lies down and then discovers there's a rock or a root or something in the way. So it has to get up and scratch here, scratch there, get the rock out of the way, then lie down again. It keeps this up until it's made that spot as comfortable as possible.

As you're getting the mind to settle down, you're dealing with aggregates: You're dealing with form, feeling, perceptions, thought fabrications, consciousness. If the mind is willing to settle down, you don't have to think about those things. Just give it one thing to think about, and your perceptions and thought fabrications will center on that, revolve around that, without your having to identify what they are. After all, we're not here to think about those activities, we're here to think about the breath, focus on the breath, perceive the breath, feel the breath. The breath is the focus. As you focus on the breath, all these other activities will gather around.

If something's getting in the way, then you can scratch here, scratch there, analyze it, ask questions about it. That's what *vipassanā* does: It scratches around. It asks questions: How are fabrications to be understood? How are they to be seen with insight?—"insight" here being the insight that allows you to let them go.

If you're not clear about what exactly is a perception or a thought fabrication in the beginning, that's fine, too. Just have a sense that if there's something disturbing the concentration and you can identify it and let it go, that's all you need to do.

But as Ajaan Lee would often point out, modern-day people are in too much of a hurry. They get a little bit of concentration and they want to go straight to insight, because that's where the real action is—or so they're told.

But it reminds me of an image in the Canon. The Buddha uses it to refer to something else, but it's applicable here as well. The story is of an old brahman with a young wife who gets pregnant. Because he's such a doting and devoted husband, he provides her with whatever she wants. She decides she'd like to have a baby monkey for her baby to play with after it's born. So the old brahman gets the baby monkey, and then she says, "I'd like to have it dyed—blue if we have a boy, pink if we have a girl." The brahman says he'd be happy to do that. "Wait until the child comes out." But she says, "No, I'd like to have it done now." So she goes into another room, takes a knife, and slits open her belly to see what gender the child has. Of course the fetus dies because she's in too much of a hurry.

The whole point about getting the mind into concentration to give rise to discernment is not just to check off the boxes, that you've got this factor or that factor all taken care of. It's in the act of trying to master concentration that you're going to gain a sense of what exactly a perception is, what a thought fabrication is, and so on with all the aggregates, all the possible ways you could fabricate around concentration.

The Buddha talks about how different levels of concentration get peeled away as you go from one level of concentration to another. Or alternatively, how you can look at a state of concentration and begin to identify: Where is the form, i.e., the breath? Where is the feeling? The feeling of ease. Where is the perception? The mental image you use to hold the mind with the breath. Where is the fabrication? The intention to hold things here. And the consciousness, the awareness of what's going on.

As you get better and better at concentration, you can sort these things out without destroying the concentration. That's the important thing. If you try it when you're not ready, you start analyzing things and the concentration is gone.

To make another analogy, it's like playing the piano. When you start out, you're happy just to get the notes right. But then as you get better, you learn how to listen to yourself. You learn how to phrase things. You learn how to get different emotions out of the piece. You see more and more potentials there. You see more and more of what you're putting into the practice, putting into the playing—because you do it again and again and again, and you get more and more sensitive to what you're doing.

Your primary task right now is to get the mind still, to get the mind centered with the breath. Whatever helps keep you here, you do that. After a while, as the mind

settles in and feels more naturally centered here, then you can let up a little bit. You don't have to talk to yourself about the breath. You don't have to adjust it. When it feels good, you just stay with the breath. As for whatever it is that's disturbing the concentration, as you get more sensitive, you'll sense it. In the beginning, you don't notice that it's disturbed at all when it's really settled in.

Of course, if there are hindrances getting in the way, you do what you have to do to get rid of them. You can begin to see how a hindrance might be formed out of a perception or a thought construct. Or it might come with a feeling.

You learn about these things by doing them—because that's what you're doing all the time. You're doing the aggregates, in the same way that, with your sense spheres, you're adding an intentional element there. Without that intentional element, you wouldn't sense anything in the senses. You have to get really sensitive to what's going on in the mind in order to see that. And again, the concentration allows you to get more sensitive to what you've been doing all the time: one, because you're quieter, and two, because you have a more developed sense of what really does feel good in the present moment.

So the work is in getting the mind still. The descriptions for how you do right concentration are there in right mindfulness. You stay focused on the breath in and of itself. You're ardent, alert, and mindful. As for anything else that's not related to the breath, anything that's related to the world, you just put it aside. Then you get more and more refined in how you stay with the breath, more and more solid in your concentration.

You learn things as you do the concentration. In gaining an understanding of how the mind can disturb itself and how it doesn't have to: That's where the insight arises.

It's not an insight that's carried over from books. Ajaan Lee would talk a lot about *vipassanā saññā*: insight perceptions. They're not real insights. They're just ideas you picked up from reading about insight. Those things simply disturb the concentration and pull you out.

So allow things to develop. Get really intent on getting the mind settled down and on getting more and more refined in your sense of how you can get it even more settled down. The insights will arise naturally.

## *When Nothing's Happening*

December 26, 2025

Tonight I'd like to address two questions that came up recently. The first is what to do when you've hit a plateau. Every time you meditate, things seem to be just the same as they were the last time you meditated. Nothing seems to be improving. Part of the problem may be that that's the nature of the mountain you're climbing. Some parts of the trail up the mountain go up, up, up. Others will actually go down for a while, and others cross a plateau before heading up again.

So you don't complain about the mountain; you just follow the terrain. When you're on a plateau, it may be a sign that your mind is doing some catching up. Or to change the image: Think of Ajaan Lee's image of trees. Banana trees have a single top end to the main stem, so they grow fast. Just one stem grows. Oak trees, though, have many stems. One stem may grow fast and the others have to catch up.

Your mind has many members. Maybe one member got up to the plateau, and now the other members have to catch up. You're learning how to inhabit the area you've attained. One way to test this is to try meditating in different circumstances. Sit longer, sit in places that are not quite so ideal, and see what happens. See if you can maintain the level of the plateau.

Another way to test it is to ask yourself, "Maybe you've gotten lazy. Maybe you haven't been paying careful attention." That's what is going to be to pull you up, makes you go further: Your insights get more refined because your attention has become more refined. So instead of thinking about moving up, think about focusing more carefully on where you are.

Start with the breath. Is the breath as totally comfortable as it could be? Is it a comfortable breath filling the whole body, every little square centimeter? Look at the areas where you don't normally look: spaces between the toes, spaces between the fingers, around your eyes. See if you can maximize the amount of refreshment, pleasure, stillness, you can get out of the breath by being more observant.

So even though you may be just catching up, still you can test it. Try to notice your awareness: Does your awareness fill the body as much as it could? Are there parts that are not as full of awareness as they might be?

And the activities you're doing: Are you still talking to yourself on subtle levels? Can you abandon those more subtle levels of conversation?

When Ajaan Fuang was teaching, he wouldn't have you think about the different levels of *jhāna*. But there are times when you do have to review your practice. Ask yourself, "Exactly where am I on the map? To move on to the next stage, what has to be abandoned? And where right now is that activity that has to be abandoned?"

So you do question your plateau here, just to make sure you haven't gotten lazy. You want to be more and more observant of more refined things. It's in the refinement that the concentration deepens and gets stronger.

The other question I want to address—similar, in a way—is when the mind gets still, where do you look for the unfabricated? The answer I gave, of course, was that you don't look for the unfabricated. You look for where your clings still are. Remember your duty with regard to the four noble truths. You do want to realize the cessation of suffering, but you don't do that by realizing the cessation of suffering. The realizing is a result. The *cause* of that result is that you develop the path.

And in developing the path, you have to comprehend wherever there's any stress or suffering that you're doing—remembering that suffering is something you *do*. As for any craving you're engaged in, a good test for that is to watch the level of your concentration. You focus not so much on where you want to go, and more on what might be in the way.

You can't intend to see the deathless and just stick with that intention, because that intention will get in the way of developing the path. You have to focus your intention on what's getting in the way of the path. One thing you might do is to ask yourself, "The level of stress in the mind: Does it have its ups and downs? When it goes up, what did you do that could be abandoned? When it goes down, what did you do? What did you abandon at that moment? And when you let go of that again, what happens?"

If it happens that you lose your concentration by letting go of that, it shows that you've let go of something that you need to hold on to for the time being. If you let go and find you go into a deeper level of concentration, that's fine. Learn to settle in and get to know that level of concentration.

But there will come a point where you realize that your concentration is as good as you can get it. If you hang on here, it's something that has to be maintained. If you go to any other level of concentration, that also has to be maintained. The prospect of having to maintain these things really hits you as a burden. Something in the mind says, "Even though these are the best states of mind I can create, I don't want to stay

here, but I don't want to go there to another state I create. Isn't there something that doesn't have to be maintained?"

And in the prospect of neither staying here nor going there, something may open up. That might be your opening to the deathless. But you have to test it, of course. Once you arrive, the question again is, "Is this something that has to be maintained?" The genuine experience of the deathless will be something you can't control, because it has nothing to do with intention, nothing to do with kamma at all.

But it's important that you realize that you can't just land in concentration and then look around to see where the deathless is. There are some teachings that would suggest that you can, saying that your awareness at the present moment is unconditioned, and if you just stay purely with that awareness, you've arrived. But your awareness of the present moment is part of the concentration aggregate. It's something that you have to comprehend.

And it is conditioned. The fact that it's aware of something: Whatever that "something" is, it's part of the conditioning. The fact that there is a present moment there, that present moment is conditioned by fabrication. Remember the Buddha's statement about the different aggregates. Each aggregate is a potential coming in from the past, and then it's fashioned through fabrication into an actual experience of the aggregate.

That's how you have the present moment. This is one of the tests for the deathless. There's no sense of time or space at all, not even the present moment, as none of the activities that would define space or time are there. There's no here or there. There's no coming, going, or staying.

In your everyday awareness, there's lots of coming and going and staying, and there's here and there everywhere. So your simple everyday awareness is conditioned. It's part of your concentration, part of every mind state you have. What you want is something beyond that. So again, you're not going to be looking for the deathless, you're going to be looking for what's getting in the way.

There's that koan I encountered one time in a book of koans with answers, kind of like a cheat sheet. One koan was about a master who told a student, "See that fire in that little brazier over there? There seems to be nothing but ashes, but there's a burning coal inside. Find it." The student takes some tongs and pokes around and pokes around in the ashes, but he doesn't find anything that's still burning.

So he goes back and tells the master. The master comes over, takes the tongs, reaches right in, pulls out the one coal that's still burning, and shows it to the student.

When I read that, I thought to myself, “Well, I know the answer to that one. He told the student to look for a defilement. The student didn’t see the defilement, so the master showed him where it was.”

Then I looked at the supposed answer. The answer was that the student was supposed to be looking for the Buddha nature inside, but he couldn’t find it. The master found it for him. I’m *sure* that answer is wrong. After all, the whole point of the challenge was to put the fire out, not to treasure the burning coal. And besides, no one—not even a master—can show you awakening. You have to find it yourself.

Our problem as meditators is that we don’t see where the fire is still burning, but that’s where we have to focus: on finding where the fire is burning. Then we can put it out. Once it’s out, then in that state of unconditioned awareness, there is no action. This is why they say that arahants have gone beyond good and evil, right and wrong—because there’s no action in nibbāna to be right, no action to be wrong, to be good or evil.

Ajaan Mun makes this point: The four noble truths have their duties. Even the third noble truth has its duty, which is to be realized. So it’s not nibbāna. It’s the realization of nibbāna. That moment of realization: That’s something you *do*. But then beyond that—nibbāna itself—there’s nothing to be done at all.

So as far as that attainment is concerned, there is no right or wrong, no good or evil. Now, when arahants are engaged with the world and they have to act, they can make mistakes. Not mistakes based on greed, aversion, or delusion. Not mistakes based on breaking the precepts. Simple mistakes based on having the wrong information. That’s possible.

So there is still right and wrong for them in this area. But in the area of nibbāna, there is no right or wrong. As Ajaan Lee says, right view and wrong view are matters of the world. Nibbāna is beyond right view and wrong view, because views are actions—and there’s no action there.

How can there be action? No space, no time: That’s what we’re looking for. But you don’t get there by looking for it. You get there by being focused on doing the path, following the duties with regard to the other noble truths. When those duties are done, you’ve developed the path.

Then you see that the path itself is based on some craving, and it’s got some clinging. So you let go of that craving. You comprehend that clinging. You have no passion for it. That’s when the realization of nibbāna comes. And beyond that is nibbāna itself.

## *Throughout the Day*

March 5, 2024

For many of us, concentration is like a fragile object that you hold in your lap while you're sitting here. As long as you're sitting still, the object is safe. When you get up, it falls off your lap and breaks. Then the next time you come to sit, or the next time you do walking meditation, you have to pick up the pieces and glue them back together.

An important part of the practice is learning how to *hold* the concentration as you get up, as you go through the next movements after coming out of the sitting posture, and as you begin to take on your responsibilities for the day.

How do you hold it?

It's an extra duty, what the psychologists call metacognition: the mind watching itself. It's a skill that every mature person has to develop, but the Buddha is asking you to develop it to the *nth* degree. In other words, be aware all the time of what your mind is doing, where it's going, whether it's going in the places it should be going or not.

Because this is an extra duty that requires more energy, you need to get a sense of well-being with the breath, taking the breath as your basis. In the past, I've used the image of going through the day juggling: Instead of thinking of the meditation as one more ball you have to juggle and keep in the air, think of the breath as the place where you stand. Learn how to stay there and to return there when you slip off and go away—because it's going to happen, for sure.

Think back to your early days of practicing concentration. You find yourself with three breaths and then you're gone. Well, you come back. Next time around it may be five breaths. At least you're heading in the right direction. You learn how not to get discouraged. Over time, as you're sitting here, you can get more and more continually focused on the breath.

The same principle applies outside. As you're walking around, as you're taking on duties, the mind will slip off and forget itself. So as soon as you remember, just come right back to the breath.

Here you may want to use a shorthand version of the meditation you do as you sit, because you do have other things to do. So learn how to figure out what are the

essentials for keeping the mind centered, keeping it solid, keeping it aware of itself as you take on other duties.

One is to have a range of images to hold in the mind about what the breath is doing as you breathe in, as you breathe out. Then figure out which image is right for which activity.

One image I've found useful is to remind myself that the breath doesn't have any clear boundaries. It's a field of energy. Energy doesn't have the clear boundaries, say, that a solid does. So think of yourself walking through the day in a cloud of breath energy. Figure out how to make it as peaceful and as coordinated as possible.

In other words, the cloud is not a storm cloud. It's a peaceful cloud. Then, within that cloud, you'll find that certain parts of the body are more sensitive to the breath than the others.

Those are the parts that tend to seize up, say, when something makes you a little bit angry or gives rise to a little bit of desire or fear. Those spots can be your centers, and you want to keep in touch with them.

Even if you lose focus on the body as a whole, make sure that you're sensitive to those spots. Then as soon as anything tightens up inside them, relax. Tightens up again, relax. At first, you don't have to ask yourself why it's tightening up. Just take it as a sign: Something came into the mind—an old habitual way of thinking, an old habitual way of relating to the body. Then just breathe right through the tension. Drop it, drop it, drop it.

Make that center in the body, that sensitive spot, as open and wide, as comfortable as you can, and try to protect it to keep it open and wide. That's one shorthand way of doing the practice.

Another, if you have some mental work you have to do, is to give yourself frequent breaks. As long as you're focused on the job at hand, you're doing okay. If you find your mind wandering, ask yourself, "Why can't it wander to the breath?"

But then, every now and then, give yourself regular intervals throughout the day when you stop and get in touch with how the breath energy is going in the body—because mental work does take a lot out of the energy of the body.

I read a Chinese medical treatise one time, saying that mental work takes three times as much energy out of the body as physical work does. That's because it doesn't stop. If you've been shoveling all day or working in the fields all day, when you stop, you stop. But if you have mental work, you come to the end of the day and you carry

the work home. It's there in the back of the mind, sometimes in the front of the mind, taking up energy.

So remind yourself: You have to take regular breaks to rest, restore. The important thing is that being with the breath is something you find to be energizing, so it has to be comfortable, it has to be nourishing for this to work. Otherwise you get frazzled. It's as if you've put the mind into a prison, and you're doing prison labor. It may work for a while, but then the mind will want to rebel.

So instead, give it a good place to stay. The important thing is that you don't get discouraged by the fact that you're not 100% present with the breath all through the day. Whatever percentage you can manage at any particular time, take it as a good sign.

Often the insights that come as you go through the day, trying to keep the mind centered, come in those little moments when the mind is about to slip off, and you catch it. You begin to see, "Oh, this is what the mind does. This is how it slips off." Or you can catch not only *when* it's happening, but also see *why* it's happening: You get insight into that question of the allure of things that you're trying so hard to figure out—why the mind likes anger, or why it keeps gravitating back toward fear.

Sometimes when you're not fully observant, fully vigilant, you catch things out of the corner of your eye. There's that part of the mind that thinks it can slip past without your noticing. But you're *there* enough to see, "Oh, there's this. This is why I do this. This is why I say things this way. This is why I act in this way. And it's stupid." When you can see that, you've gained some important insights.

Ajaan Suwat once said that his best insights came when he was doing walking meditation, because when you're doing walking meditation, you're not only centered in the body, but you also have to be aware of the world outside. You can catch the mind as it's moving from inside to outside and back. You can see the times when something else tries to slip in.

In Thai they have the phrase *suam roi*, which means basically to step in the footsteps of someone else so that your footprints can't be detected. It's what thieves do as they try to sneak undetected into your house.

This is what a lot of our defilements do. As you're innocently looking outside to make sure you're not running into the end of the path, something else will come in. If you can catch that, you've seen something that you wouldn't have seen when the mind was fully here—sitting, with nothing else to do.

It's like being a teacher. Sitting meditation is like being in the room with the kids, so they behave themselves. When you're doing meditation throughout the day, it's as if you're outside the room. You don't see everything going on in the room, but every now and then, you overhear something: the kids saying *x*, saying *y*, things they wouldn't say in your presence. But now you've caught them. Now you've seen what they're all about. You see who the troublemakers are.

So even though the concentration or mindfulness you develop as you go through the day may not be perfect, still it helps you to see things you wouldn't have seen if you just allowed the mind to wander as it liked.

An important part of sticking with the breath as you go through the day is not getting upset when you're not there. Just take it in stride.

At the same time, remember that as you stay with the breath, it gives you a new opportunity to relate to your body in a new way.

The breath is *kāya-saṅkhāra*. But any movement of the body is also *kāya-saṅkhāra*. Any kamma done by the body is *kāya-saṅkhāra*.

Some people say that this means that *kāya-saṅkhāra* has two totally different meanings—breath on the one hand, bodily action on the other—but that's not a useful way of looking at the issue. A more useful way is to realize that every movement of the body has to start with the breath.

So when you're with the breath, you're back at square one and you're learning to relate to the body from square one. That gives you a greater sense of being centered in the body, in touch with the body. As you go through the different postures of the day, you can do it with more fluidity—because you're coming from square one and you're making it a good place.

As you begin to see the little things that slip in, you realize how important it is to maintain as much of this sense of being mindful throughout the day as you can. If your mindfulness slips, well, pick it right back up and set it upright.

Have a positive attitude about this. You're not standing over yourself with a whip. You're learning to relate to your sense of the body, your sense of yourself, as you go through the day in a new way. And that's all to the good.

## *When You Practice on Your Own*

May 22, 2025

When I was in France recently, the question was posed, “When you’re practicing on your own, how do you know what level of practice is appropriate for you?”

This was asked by someone who had been trained in one of those traditions where practices are clearly delineated as being elementary, intermediate, or advanced, and where it’s dangerous to take on the advanced practices before you’ve mastered the earlier ones. I told him, “Our tradition is not like that. Ours is that you start with the basics and you really get good at the basics. As you get good at them, they develop on their own without your having to decide when they’re going to go from one level to the next.”

As the Buddha said, you start out with virtue and you really get into virtue: You learn about your mind by observing the precepts. You develop more mindfulness, more alertness, more ardency, and those qualities turn into the practice of right mindfulness.

As you practice right mindfulness, the mindfulness gets good and develops into the factors for awakening as mindfulness settles in, gets established, and turns into concentration practice.

As you get really good at concentration practice, you start getting insights into what you’re doing. Take breath meditation for example: You start out focusing on the breath and, as you’re focusing on the breath, you can’t help but notice how the breath has an impact on feelings, how the fact that you’re alert to the breath will influence what feelings you have in the body, and how you can develop them.

That gives you some insight into the process of fabrication: You see that feelings are not just givens. There’s a lot of intentional activity going into how you focus on a feeling and what you do with it. As you learn how to deal skillfully with feelings, you gain more and more insights into the mind as the mind is settling down.

At the same time, you’re making sure that the mind doesn’t wander off to other things. You begin to notice: What does it mean to “wander off” to other things? What happens?

You begin to see the process of becoming as a thought-world appears and you decide whether to go into it or not. If you go into it, that becomes a state of becoming

and birth.

You learn how *not* to fall for those things. You begin to learn the stages, the steps that lead up to those thought-worlds. Seeing them clearly leads you to feel dispassionate toward them.

All of this leads to deepened, deepened, deepened insight: learning how to do something very basic and simple, but being really observant about how you do it. You stick with developing the basics, and the basics—if you're observant—will develop you.

In this sense, the path is the same for everyone. It's just a question of how observant you are, how patient you are. But the path is all the same.

The question was posed to the Buddha one time about how many people were going to gain awakening. The whole world? Half the world? A third? He didn't answer. The brahman who asked the question was getting upset. Ven. Ānanda was concerned: This brahman is asking an important question, and the Buddha just stays silent. So he took the brahman aside and gave him an analogy: It's as if there's a fortress with a single gate, and there's an experienced gatekeeper who walks around the fortress, checking the walls. He doesn't see a hole big enough even for a cat to slip through. He comes back to the gate, and what he knows is this: He hasn't learned how many people are going to come in and out of the fortress, but he *has* learned that everybody who's going to go in or out of the fortress has to go through the gate.

In the same way, the Buddha has seen that everyone starts with the practice of virtue, and it develops into mindfulness, the factors for awakening, and then release. That's the pattern everyone will have to follow. How many people will follow it, though, he doesn't know, because people have some freedom of choice.

Now, even though there's a standard pattern for all of us, the way each person follows the path will depend on his or her background. In other words, *what you bring* to the practice is going to determine whether it goes quickly or slowly, whether it's going to be pleasant or unpleasant.

You see this in the way the Buddha taught: A horse trainer came to him one time, and the Buddha asked him, "How do you train your horses?" The horse trainer said, "There are those I treat gently, and they're easy to train. There are those I have to treat harshly before they finally submit. Some will respond to a combination of gentle and harsh treatment, and some don't respond at all. Those," he says, "I kill to maintain my reputation as a good horse trainer."

The Buddha said that it was the same with him. There were those he would teach in a gentle way, those he would teach in a harsh way, those he would teach with a combination of gentle and harsh ways, and those he would kill. The horse trainer was shocked. “How can you kill anybody? You’re the Buddha!” The Buddha explained, “What that means is that I just don’t teach them, which is the same as killing them.”

But notice, the Buddha had to develop different styles of teaching. In some cases, a gentle teaching: He’d start with what’s called the “graduated discourse.” He’d start talking about generosity, acts of giving, and then virtue. Then he’d talk about heaven as a place where generosity and virtue are rewarded with sensual pleasures.

If you’re listening to this teaching and you’ve been practicing generosity and virtue, you feel good about what the Buddha is saying—you get to go to heaven. But then he talks about the drawbacks of even heavenly sensual pleasures. From that context, you’ve gladdened your mind, “softened up” the mind, as the Buddha would say. Then you’d be ready to see, “Maybe I could go for something better.” That’s when he would teach you how sensuality has its drawbacks, and how you should learn to see renunciation as rest, as something positive.

Renunciation here doesn’t mean just giving up things. It means looking for your pleasures in a place aside from sensuality—in other words, in the practice of concentration. So you settle the mind in with the sense of the body as you feel it from within—with a sense of ease, a sense of well-being—and from there, you contemplate the four noble truths.

Many people listening to the Dhamma in this way would gain their first taste of awakening.

There were other people, though, whom the Buddha would treat more harshly. There’s the time when he was walking with a group of monks and they came across a huge bonfire by the side of the road. He went down from the road and sat down by a tree near the bonfire. The monks followed him down, and he asked them, “Which would be better, embracing that fire over there, or embracing a pretty woman?” The monks said, “Of course, embracing a pretty woman would be much better.” The Buddha said, “For an immoral monk, it would be better if he embraced the fire. Why is that? Because embracing the woman would take him down to hell, whereas embracing the fire would not.”

Then he went on to talk about accepting gifts and salutations. If you’re an immoral monk, accepting salutations—as when people place their hands palm-to-palm over the heart: “Which would be better, receiving that kind of salutation, or getting stabbed in the chest with an iron spike?” Again, the monks said, “Ah, the

salutation would be better.” But the Buddha said, “If you’re an immoral monk, you’d be better off getting that spike in your heart.” The sutta goes on in this way, and the images get stronger and stronger. At the end of the talk, a large number of monks coughed up hot blood, another large number of monks left the training, but another large number became fully awakened. After being chastised like that, they saw that the only course of action left open to them was to train their minds, right then and there. So that’s a case where people responded to harsh treatment.

There was another case where thirty monks came to see the Buddha, and he asked them, “Which do you think is greater, the water in all the oceans or the blood you’ve lost by having your throats slit open?” It turns out that the blood was more than the water in the oceans. He goes through all the different reasons why your throat has been slit open over the many, many lifetimes you’ve experienced, either because you were a sheep, a goat, or a cow, or because you were a thief, a highway robber, or an adulterer. The monks experienced a really strong sense of *saṃvega*, a strong sense of being chastened, and they all became fully awakened right then and there.

What this means is that you come to the practice with a background and you don’t know what that background is. So as you follow the path, sometimes you find that it’s easy and fast, sometimes you find that it’s easy and slow, sometimes hard and fast, or hard and slow.

You can’t order which way you’d like it to be, as you would order things off a menu, saying, “I’ll have the easy path. I’ll be okay with slow, as long as it’s easy, and I’ll take a side of fries.” The path you follow, even though there is a standard pattern, has its variations that depend on your background. So in some cases, you can take a pleasant theme of meditation, like the breath. Sometimes you have to focus on a less agreeable theme, like the contemplation of the body. Especially if you have strong lust, you’ve got to spend a lot of time thinking about what’s really unattractive about the body.

That’s one kind of painful practice. There are other painful practices that involve the ascetic practices. And again, the Buddha says some people don’t need them, some people do. He didn’t have a doctrinaire attitude toward asceticism.

There are some extreme ascetic practices that he didn’t recommend, such as trying to burn your kamma away through enduring pain, but others, like taking one meal a day, accepting only the food that you get on your alms round, living out in the open, living under a tree: These things, the Buddha said, work for some people and

not for others. So it's good to give them a try to see if you're the kind of person who responds to that kind of training.

Then there are the people who find discernment easy and concentration hard, and those who find concentration easy but discernment hard. In cases like that, the Buddha would have you work on developing the area you find hard.

This goes against the grain with a lot of people. People who tend to be very intellectual and find it easy to think things through, to analyze things, just want to keep on doing that. They like being told that they don't have to get their mind really quiet. They prefer to think that they can think their way to nibbāna—without realizing that they haven't touched the pride that runs through their thinking at all.

Other people just want to be very quiet. Their attitude is, "Don't disturb me. Let me just be quiet, quiet, quiet. I don't want to have to think. I don't want to have to deal with difficult things." That's not the path. That's laziness.

So you have to look at yourself. If you're the kind of person who, as Ajaan Fuang said, thinks too much, you've got to work on the stillness of your mind. It may take time to get the mind still, but once you've gotten it quieted down, you've learned some important lessons.

People who find concentration easy don't learn those lessons. As a result, on the days when, for some reason, settling down is hard, they don't know what to do. But if you've had experience dealing with a mind that's been taken over by thoughts of your work, thoughts of your family, sensual thoughts, thoughts of ill will or anger, and learned how to get the mind past those hindrances, then when they come up again, you know how to deal with them again.

The problem is that you might get bored—either bored with the fact that progress is slow, or then, when you do succeed in getting the mind still, you get bored with the stillness. You have to realize that even in the stillness, some interesting things are happening. As you maintain that stillness, you begin to see distracting thoughts right as they appear. It's subtle, but you'll see the steps by which they appear and develop.

The first thing you've got to deal with is those thoughts of boredom. Who's bored? Why? What reasons do they give for being bored? Why do they need to be entertained? Why do you have to believe those thoughts? Why do you have to identify with them? If you look into those questions, there's a lot to learn.

As for the people who are attached to their stillness—who find stillness easy and don't want to be bothered—they've got to learn how to think, because the stillness

isn't reliable.

It's like hiding out. You can hide out only for so long. You have to come back out again. If the affairs of the world disturb you, it's not the fault of the world, it's the fault of your own mind. If other people make you angry, it's not necessarily their fault. Why do you find it so easy to get angry at other people? Why can't you overcome that anger? Why do you believe the anger? Why do you identify with it?

You've got to learn how to ask these questions. Face them: You can't just run away, run away, run away, because the fault is *inside you*. If you don't see that fault inside you, your meditation is blind, and the fault follows you around like a shadow.

So the lesson here is that you've got to learn how to read yourself, just as in the image of the cook. The cook has to notice what his boss—who's the king—likes. The king may not say, but he expects that you be observant, to notice what he reaches for, to notice what he eats a lot of. You then provide him with what he likes.

Here the case, though, is that you're not just providing the mind with what it likes. Sometimes you have to give it lessons it doesn't like. This is all part of being your own teacher. This is what's involved in meditating on your own. Even when you've got a teacher around, the teacher can't be with you 24/7. You've got to learn how to internalize the principles of a good teacher who knows how to recognize what your strengths are, what your weaknesses are, and how you can use your strengths to work on your weaknesses, so that you can bring your practice into balance.

This is what it means to be observant as you practice. And the ability to observe is what takes those basic practices and can make them advanced. Ajaan Lee used to say, watch out for the attitude that says some practices are lowly and basic, and other practices are high, because you're not going to get to the high practices until you treat the basics with respect and get really good at them. It's your ability to observe and to accept lessons that you may not like to accept but are good for you: That's how your practice becomes advanced.

## *Reading & Meditating*

November 1, 2025

Ajaan Fuang tells a story of a time when he had a really severe headache, going on for weeks and weeks. He tried Western medicine, didn't work. Thai medicine, didn't work. Chinese medicine, didn't work.

It got so bad that he had to have other monks staying with him at night, in case he woke up in the middle of the night in a lot of pain. They could give him hot compresses and other things to help alleviate some of the pain, but still the pain was persistent. Then one night he woke up, and all the monks who were looking after him were fast asleep.

The first thought that went through his mind was, "Who's looking after whom here?" But then he told himself that as long as he was awake, he should sit up and meditate.

So he meditated for a while. Suddenly he realized he'd been doing everything he could to get rid of the pain, whereas the Buddha taught that pain, suffering, was something to be comprehended. So he changed his approach. He tried to comprehend exactly what was the suffering. He said he was able to attain something he'd never attained before in his meditation that night.

The important point here is that what he had learned of the Dhamma in the basic textbooks about the duties of the four noble truths came in handy. It turned him in the right direction—which is a sign that an important part of being a meditator, an important part of practicing, is knowing how to read the Dhamma and how to use what you've read. There are lots of ways of using what you've read that are going to get in the way, but there are also ways that can actually be helpful.

One of the prime uses of reading the Dhamma is that it gives you a vocabulary. It's like the vocabulary that professional tasters and professional scent experts develop for their work. The more refined and precise their vocabulary, the more sensitive they become to how things smell, how things taste, what they're smelling, what they're tasting.

It's the same with your own mind. The Buddha provides a very clear vocabulary for what's going on inside the mind, in terms of feelings and perceptions, thought-

fabrications, acts of consciousness, and all the other many elaborations on those basic terms. It's good to have those terms in the back of the mind as you meditate.

For example, what he has to say about the three kinds of fabrication in dependent co-arising: We tend to think of dependent co-arising as something too abstract to get our heads around to apply to our own minds, but it's better to look at it as a list of possibilities. As you're working with your meditation, you'll come across the fact that you're actually doing something that's described by those terms.

Then you can ask yourself: How do those terms help illuminate what you're doing? One thing, of course, is that they illuminate what might be causing what you're doing. The list of causes may be complex, but it's not random. One of the lessons you'll learn looking at dependent co-arising is that feeling occurs in many places. It's associated with many different things. So when there's a pain or a feeling of pleasure in the body or in the mind, there's a variety of things that you can question. How is it related to these other aspects of what's going on in the mind?

Sometimes a pain might be bothering you because of a perception. Well, feeling and perception are together in the factor for fabrication, and they're together in the factor for name and form. Sometimes the feeling is invading your mind because of the way you talk to yourself: directed thought and evaluation, also in the factor of fabrication. Sometimes the feeling is related to sensory contact. Sometimes it's related to craving. Sometimes it comes about as a result of clinging.

So, when a pain is bothering you, you can ask yourself: Which of these many opportunities or potentials could be a useful way of looking at that particular pain so that you don't have to suffer from the pain? That may require some discursive thinking, and that's perfectly fine, as long as it doesn't discourse too far away from what you're actually doing. But you can ask yourself these questions.

This is a lot of what the texts are good for. They spark questions in your mind about what your mind is doing. I've been looking at some different passages where the Buddha gives a Dhamma talk during which the people listening to the talk gain awakening. I've been struck by how many of those talks involve him asking questions of his listeners, questions that may not have ever occurred to them before.

In that way, the readings are good for giving you a vocabulary and then asking questions, giving you an idea of what questions might be useful.

So it's important that we not look down on reading. It has its uses.

A question came up when I was teaching in France a while back. Ajaan Lee, Ajaan Chah, went out in the forest. They didn't have much knowledge of the

Dhamma, and yet they were able to attain the Dhamma. Whereas we're highly educated in the Dhamma and it's getting in the way. So should we stop reading the texts?

Actually, that question is misinformed. Both Ajaan Lee and Ajaan Chah read a lot. Ajaan Chah spent years studying the Dhamma. Ajaan Lee, when he set up the monastery in Chandaburi, became a subscriber to the magazine *Dhammacaksu*, which had translations of suttas and articles on the Dhamma. Ajaan Fuang said that when the monthly issue arrived, the meditation period that evening would be given over to Ajaan Lee reading the magazine aloud to everybody. So the ajaans did get an education. They didn't find that being well-read in the Dhamma was an obstacle.

The important thing is that they learned how to use what they had read. One of the ways of *not* using what they had read was trying to force things into a mold. For example, you may have heard that your sense of a pain should be separate from the sense of the body. But you can't just force them to be separate. You can't drive a wedge between the two of them. As Ajaan Fuang once said, "If nibbāna were something we could take by force, we'd have all gone there a long time ago." It requires getting the mind really still and seeing what happens when the mind gets really still. When you're very observant of what happens, you'll find that things begin to separate out on their own.

It's like having a bottle of salad dressing made of vinegar and oil. You shake the bottle, and they're going to get mixed. You can't separate them out by pouring part of the mixture into an oil bottle and part of the mixture into a vinegar bottle. Yet when they're still, they separate out on their own.

This is an image that's used a lot in the forest tradition, because that's a lot of what has to be done: getting the mind really, really still, and then observing what happens in the still mind. After all, all those factors for dependent co-arising are showing themselves all the time, but they show themselves more clearly, more distinctly, when the mind is really still. You see their connections more clearly when the mind is really still.

So you have to know, one, how to get the mind still and, two, what to look for when it's still. Ajaan Maha Bua points out that one of the ways of getting a pain to separate out from your sense of the body is to see that the pain is a feeling aggregate, whereas the body, of course, is a different aggregate, made up of earth, water, wind, and fire. Those are two very separate things—the feeling of the pain, and the sensations of the elements—but we tend to glom them together. You can't pry them apart, but if you ask questions about the pain—one of which would be, where is the

strongest point of the pain?—you start chasing it around and you find that the pain separates out on its own. You don't have to separate it out. It just goes away from the body on its own as you've been engaging in directed thought and evaluation, asking the right questions and pursuing an answer.

That's an example of getting a result without forcing it, without pre-designing it. Sometimes it won't separate out as you chase it around, in which case you have to try another tactic, because pain is related to lots of different factors of the mind. You never know, without experimenting, which of the many factors that are related to the factor of feeling in dependent co-arising would be the ones that are in play right now.

But if you have a good repertoire of concepts, a good vocabulary, and a good series of questions to ask, you can try them all out and see what works. Then you can use your ingenuity. You begin to gain an intuitive sense for the mind from dealing with it directly.

So reading about the Dhamma is an important part of practicing the Dhamma, but the important thing is learning how to use what you've read right.

And when to use it and when to put it aside. Ajaan Mun would tell his students to take whatever knowledge they had of the Dhamma and put it away in a chest, partly because there was so much bad Dhamma being taught back in those days, but also because there are times when you just need to get the mind really, really quiet, and then reflect on what you've got when it's quiet. Only then can you begin to pull out your knowledge to see if it's helpful. If you pull it out when you're trying to quiet the mind, it can get in the way.

So learning from your reading is a skill. It's not something you can just force on things. As with all aspects of the practice, you have to see what works and what doesn't work. Gain a sense of time and place, and then you'll find that what you've read can be a great help.

## *Surprise Yourself*

May 15, 2025

It's possible to focus on the breath and not learn much of anything.

One of Ajaan Lee's friends who was also a student of Ajaan Mun complained to Ajaan Lee one time, "Why do you teach people to focus on the breath? All there is in and out, in and out." And as Ajaan Lee said, "If that's all you can see, that's all there is."

The implication being that the problem is not with the breath, it's with the way you look at it. The Buddha says that one of the qualities you want to look for in yourself as a meditator is ingenuity. He doesn't explain it much. It's one of those terms that's very rarely mentioned in the Canon, but it is listed as an important thing to know about yourself: how far you've developed in terms of ingenuity. Which means that you have to be ingenious in how you interpret that.

When I stayed with Ajaan Fuang, the two things he said you have to develop most in your meditation are, one, your powers of observation and, two, your ingenuity. You have a clear idea of what you want here. You want to get the mind to settle down with a sense of well-being. But then you run into obstacles, and some of the obstacles are things you didn't expect.

Look at the Buddha's instructions on breath meditation. They're just 16 steps. It's not much to go on. You have to fill in the blanks. We're practicing mindfulness of breathing to get the mind into concentration. That much is clear.

Another thing that's clear is that the 16 steps fall into four tetrads. One tetrad deals with the body, one with feelings, one with the mind, and one with dhammas. In other words, they deal with the frames of reference we use to establish mindfulness. But the question is, do you follow them 1 through 16?

The way the Buddha describes how they embody mindfulness practice suggests that you could focus on any one tetrad all the way to awakening.

Like the first one: You discern when the breath is long. You discern when the breath is short. You breathe in and out sensitive to the entire body. You breathe in and out calming bodily fabrication. The word "bodily fabrication" there means the in-and-out breath.

The question, of course, is: Why did the Buddha use a technical term there? The answer seems to be that he wants you to think in terms of fabrication. He's trying to direct your ingenuity: To what extent is the breath a fabricated process? "Fabrication," here, means that you're working with intention. To what extent is the breath intentional? It is one of the processes in the body that can either be automatic or intentional. The question is, how much of the automatic side of it really is automatic? How much of it is directed by intentions that have become subconscious?

One way to learn about that is to try to adjust the breath. Find a way of breathing that feels good. The Buddha himself suggests this in one of his analogies: You're a cook working for a king or a king's minister—people who are not easy to please.

So you prepare different kinds of dishes and see what the king or the king's minister likes. Now, the king may say that he likes this or likes that, but he also may not say anything at all. In which case you have to look: What does he reach for? What does he take more of? Then you provide more of that. When you do and you satisfy the king, you're going to get a reward.

In the same way, as a meditator, you want to find something that the mind likes. Which means you have to experiment. You can try long breathing, short breathing, fast, slow. See what the body likes. Ajaan Lee shows his ingenuity by expanding on the analogy. He says that you not only have to find what the king likes, but you also have to change what you make, because it's not the case that the king will want the same thing day in and day out. In the same way, there are days when long breathing feels good, and other days when it's not so interesting anymore. So you have to change. Vary your offerings. *That's* when you get a reward.

When the breath feels good, what do you do with it? There's another sutta where the Buddha says that you take whatever sense of ease or well-being that comes as the mind begins to settle down and you work it through the body, the same way that a bathman would work water through a ball of bath powder.

Back in those days, they didn't have bars of soap. They had a soap powder that you'd make into a dough by mixing it with water, working the water through the whole ball of dough. So how do you work the ease through the body? How do you knead the ease through the body?

Ajaan Lee talks about the breath energies in different parts of the body: the flow along the nerves, the flow along the blood vessels. When you think of the property of the wind element, and the fact that the in-and-out breath is also a property of the wind element, you work the two of them together.

There's nothing in the Canon that says to do this, but it's a solution to the problem posed by the fact that the Buddha doesn't explain how to work the pleasure through the body.

So, what way of working with the energies in the body will work for you? How do you perceive the energies in your body? A common problem is that when the mind begins to settle down, there's a feeling like a band of tension around the head or centered between the eyes. Often it seems pretty resistant to any way of breathing around it or through it. The question is, how do you perceive it as you breathe through it? Do you think that it's got a surface that you've got to push through? And when you're breathing through, where are you breathing from and where are you breathing to? Maybe that's aggravating the tension.

I've personally found that it's good to imagine that band of tension not as a band, but as a cloud. As with all clouds, there's no clear surface and there's a lot of space between the water droplets. So let that space do the breathing.

In other words, you don't let the tension do the breathing, you let the space inside the tension do the breathing, and the breath breathes into the tension from all directions. That changes the way you feel that tension in the head. It becomes just a heaviness and not a pain.

Think about the fact that when you're sitting here and the mind gets calm, the areas of the head that tend to get tensed back and forth, back and forth, tensed and released, tensed and released as you think in the course of the day: Suddenly they're released entirely. So, of course, the blood is going to flow into those areas. And if you push the blood around, of course you're going to get headaches.

So don't think of blood, don't think of surfaces, don't think of bands. You can think of a knife cutting through the bands until it's all just little pieces, and each little piece is breathing in and breathing out. It's breathing for its own sake. You're not trying to push the breath through it to get to someplace else. What does that do?

In other words, you play with your perceptions. That's how ingenuity works.

First, you've got to alert yourself to what your perceptions are, then you challenge them and think of alternatives. One of the easiest ways to think of alternatives, of course, is to ask yourself the opposite. If the in-breath seems to be going in one direction, what if it's actually going in the opposite direction? Or if you can just think of it going in another direction, what happens? Learn to play with things like this.

You'll come to see the extent to which your perceptions actually shape what you experience, and how they don't have to be written in stone. They can be changed. In fact, that's what the Buddha's teachings all come down to: the fact that you can change things.

If you couldn't change things right now, he said, the path to the end of suffering would be impossible. But the fact that things in the present are not totally shaped by the past gives you some leeway right now to make a difference.

So, play with that. Ask questions that you never asked before. Try to use perceptions you never used before. That's how we learn things we never learned before. We borrow the perceptions we learn from the Buddha, from the ajaans, and if they don't work for us, we don't say that they were bad, simply that they were not quite the solution to *our* problem. Then the question becomes, how do we play with them so that they *do* become the solution?

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha's instructions on breath meditation are so sketchy. We have to learn how to fill in the blanks, and in doing so, we exercise our ingenuity. The way you fill in the blanks, and the way somebody else fills in the blanks, may not get the same results, even if you do the same things. So you have to make adjustments. You have to fill in.

So, just as Ajaan Lee recommended ingenuity and also showed ingenuity in how he played with the Buddha's teachings, you should learn to show some ingenuity to yourself. Surprise yourself with the questions you ask. You may get some surprisingly useful answers.

After all, if insight were something you could anticipate or clone, it'd be something you could read in a book and that'd be the end of the problem. But the insight that's going to work for one person may not have the same effect for another person. That's because the way you've created your own problems may differ in its particulars from how other people create theirs. Again, the Buddha talks in large terms. You have to bring them down to the specifics if you really want them to work. Which means that the Buddha doesn't do all the lifting for you. You have to do some of the lifting yourself.

I had a student one time who wanted to have the path laid out for him ahead of time and just be told what to do, so that he could follow instructions and do it without having to think too much. He got frustrated when I told him, "Try this. Try that. See what works." After his fifth year here, he went to Thailand. He found out that that's how the ajaans over there taught as well.

There's no one insight technique that's going to work for everybody, no one penetrating question that's going to penetrate your particular defilements, your particular misunderstandings. You've created your misunderstandings, and now you're going to have to use your ingenuity to take them apart.

There are certain general principles that work across the board, but a lot of the practice lies in the details, the specifics. That's where you have to use your ingenuity. That's where you have to play.

## *The Skills of Truth & Calm*

March 3, 2025

The Buddha's most basic teaching is the four noble truths. It's a teaching about action: cause and effect in your actions. To understand it, you have to get very sensitive to what you're actually doing.

This is why we watch the mind right now. It's hard to observe a past action or a future action, so you have to observe present actions right here. As the Buddha indicates through many images in the Canon, we're working on a skill. He compares meditation to being a skilled archer, a skilled cook, a skilled carpenter, a goldsmith. It's good to think about what that imagery means. When you're working on a skill, you have to get really sensitive to what you're doing. If you want to see what you're doing, work on a skill. You get very conscious about what you do, the results you're getting, and you're learning how to judge the results so that you can get better.

We're working on something good here, to get the mind to settle down. Here again, the mind is easiest to observe when it's doing something good. When you're being devious or underhanded and not quite honest, you hide things from yourself—and you hide from yourself the fact that you're hiding things from yourself. But when you know that you're doing something good, it's easy to be open and honest about when you're doing it right and when you're not. And because we're focused on getting the mind to be still, that makes what's going on in the mind really transparent.

Remember the Buddha said that our trouble is that we have cravings that lead to becoming. With every problem that comes up to us—about what we want, about what we don't want—we create a state of becoming around it. We're like beavers. Whatever the problem facing the beaver, his solution is one thing: build a dam to make a lake and then put a lodge in the lake. Even beavers that haven't been raised by their parents, that were separated from their parents as children and raised in captivity: When they're released into the wild, they build dams and build lodges. That's their solution to every problem.

Our solution to every problem is to create a state of becoming: a sense of you in a world of experience around something you desire. But as long as you've created one of those, there's going to be suffering. If you try to destroy what you've created, there

will be suffering, too. The trick is to catch the process before it's turned into a state of becoming.

That's what we're doing as we meditate. If you look at dependent co-arising, even before there's sensory contact, there are some factors that we actually focus directly on as we meditate. Under the factor of fabrication, you've got the breath. Okay, we're focused on the breath. You've got direct thought and evaluation, which means you're talking to yourself. Well, you're talking to yourself about the breath, about the mind settling down with the breath, adjusting them to get them fit snugly together. Then you've got perceptions and feelings. You're trying to create a feeling of ease, well-being. And you've got certain perceptions about how the body relates to the mind, the mind relates to the body. Where is your mind right now in relation to the body? And there are perceptions about the breath: When the breath comes in, what's actually happening? You've got air coming in through the nose, going into the lungs. But there's also an energy in the body that allows that to happen—and it's the energy that the Buddha wants you to focus on. That's the perception you've got to hold in mind.

So there you are: As you're working on concentration, you're dealing directly with this first factor in dependent co-arising, right after ignorance—fabrication.

If you work your way down, you get to name and form. And here you are again: Form is the body as you experience it in terms of its properties. One of those properties is the wind property, and an aspect of the wind property is the in-and-out breath. But as you settle down, you may notice you're also sensitive to the warmth in the body, the liquid feelings in the body, the solidity of the body. So again, you've got these raw materials right here.

As for name, that includes perception again, feeling again, attention, intention, and contact. Attention: You're paying attention to the breath, and the question you're asking yourself is, "How do I get the mind to settle down? Once it's settled down, how do I get to understand the process of fabrication?" It's all right here.

The intention, of course, is your intention is to stay with the breath, to stay with one object, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world so that the mind can settle down.

Contact is the contact between these mental events and also between mental events and the properties of the body as you feel it from within.

In this way, these processes that we tend to slip through very quickly are now being laid out. And we're getting a handle on them by trying to do something skillful with them.

As Ajaan Chah once said with regard to the different factors of dependent co-arising, normally it's like falling out of a tree. You go past lots of different branches, but they're such a blur that it's hard to see which branch is which. But when you're settling down and being still, that gives you a chance to examine the different branches more closely and carefully.

At first you get attached to them because these are the raw materials from which you create a state of concentration. But then you're working here not only with the idea of creating a state of concentration. There are also what the Buddha calls the four determinations. You're determined on discernment, on truth, on relinquishment, and on stilling or peace. In other words, you're trying to use your discernment to understand how to get the mind to settle down. You're true to yourself in trying to master this skill and in being very honest about when the mind is wandering off, so that you can do something about it. Relinquishment: You're letting go of anything that's going to get in the way of the concentration. And calm: You're trying to bring the mind to greater and greater states of calm. So these determinations give some direction to this skill.

Another aspect of developing a skill is that, when you first get started, it's awkward. You're not quite confident in what you're doing. You're not familiar with the tools. That develops a very strong sense of self. Wherever you encounter any resistance, any obstacles, there's going to be a strong sense of self. Then you either give in to the obstacles or overcome them. To overcome the obstacles requires that you develop a healthy sense of who you are and what you can do.

The Buddha starts by saying that this is something that human beings can do. It may not be easy for everybody, but it's something that everybody can do, and it's worth doing. If it weren't possible or if it weren't worthwhile, the Buddha said he wouldn't have taught this. Simply the fact that you're a human being means that you've got what it takes. Have confidence in that.

Ajaan Mun, when he was teaching his students, would repeat this again and again, that we as human beings are in the ideal position to master the teachings. Most of his students came from very poor families in the Northeast, which is the poorest section of Thailand. They were at the bottom of the ladder in the Thai social structure. So he kept encouraging them to be confident. The Buddha himself would urge, rouse, and encourage his students in addition to just instructing them, to remind them that, yes, they can do this.

So as you're dealing with the obstacles of trying to master this skill, and things don't quite fit—the mind doesn't fit with the breath, the breath doesn't fit with the

mind, different members of the inner committee seem to be rebelling—you have to have a strong sense that, yes, you can do this. You don't let setbacks get you down. You learn how to talk to yourself in a way that's encouraging, rousing, and urging, so that you *want* to do this.

After a while, you begin to have occasional tastes of what mental peace is like. You have to learn how to use those tastes to encourage yourself, and not to get discouraged. Don't be a voice in the mind that says, "Ah, this'll last for just a little while and then it'll go away. It's not worth it." You can't listen to those voices.

What you're doing is planting seeds. Seeds may start out small, but the important thing is that you protect them to give them a chance. What's especially interesting as you get better and better at the skill is that you need less and less a sense of self in order to do it, because the obstacles grow fewer. It's like sport, when they say that the athlete is in the zone where everything seems to flow and go just right. There's very little sense of self there, because it's not running into anything. It's there, but it fades into the background.

The Buddha has you take advantage of this fact as you approach the training of your mind. You learn how to look at events in the mind simply as events, rather than as you in a world in the mind, or you in the world outside. These are just events, causes and effects. You begin to see that, even in the state of concentration, there's going to be some stress, there's going to be some disturbance. You think about that determination for truth and determination for calm. You use your discernment to figure out what needs to be let go—for the sake of truth, for the sake of calm.

Those determinations are interesting. They function both as means and as ends, particularly the determinations for truth and calm. You muster your discernment, truth, relinquishment, and calm to arrive at the highest discernment, truth, relinquishment, and calm. You let those be your guiding examples. So when a state of mind comes up, you ask yourself, "Is this something I can truly rely on? Is there any disturbance here?" If you can detect the disturbance, you realize that you've got to drop something, you've got to relinquish something. You have to discern what the problem is. So you're working with all those determinations to make progress on the path.

Finally, you get to the point where even the best state of concentration you can master, you realize, has its drawbacks because you have to keep it going. That's the disturbance. You have to keep fabricating it. That's the disturbance. It's not truly calm. So for the sake of truth and the sake of calm, you let go.

That's how this skill leads beyond itself to something that's not fabricated. With whatever sense you do have of yourself talking to yourself, or putting up images in the mind, perceptions in the mind, you begin to ask yourself, "Who's talking to whom in here? And these messages that are being sent with the different perceptions: Who's sending them? Who's receiving them? Why does there have to be a sender and a receiver? Why is the mind divided like this?" You begin to look askance at these fabrications and any potential for becoming that you might develop around them. When you drop them, and there's nothing else being fabricated, you realize that these are the fabrications that are creating your sense of the present moment. When they've been dropped, something else appears that's not in the present moment, not in time or space at all.

You're able to get there because the idea of self, or of things that you have to hold on to, gets weaker and weaker. You're just interested in the skill of how to find truth, something that's not the least bit deceptive, and how to find calm, the ultimate calm. You use your discernment, you use your powers of relinquishment, but even they are just ultimately means. You let them go.

These are some of the reasons why the Buddha has you work on this skill to become more sensitive to your actions, and in particular to actions in the mind. The fact that you're doing something good makes it easy to be open and aboveboard with yourself. And although it requires building a healthy sense of self to begin with, the sense of self begins to get more and more attenuated as you go on until you're looking simply at actions, cause and effect. When you're looking on in those terms, then when you see that an action is causing stress, disturbance, it's easy to let it go. You begin to see even your sense of self as an action, built up around these mental and verbal fabrications. In that way, it's a lot easier to let go of your attachments, your clinging. That's how this skill leads beyond itself.

So it's a good skill to master. We're fortunate we have the time. Just make sure that you maintain the inclination and that strong sense of values that this is really worth it—because there's nothing better than what this skill can accomplish.

## *The Need for a Purpose*

May 31, 2024

There's an interesting passage in the Canon where the Buddha talks about how we fashion the aggregates. The language is kind of strange, but the point is that we want to have aggregates and we fashion them for the sake of something.

It doesn't say what the sake is for, but that's how we ordinarily engage in the present moment. We have a purpose, which means, of course, that we have some expectations. By fashioning a sense of form, feelings, perceptions, thought fabrications, and consciousness out of the raw material given to us by our past kamma, we're looking for something. We have a purpose in mind.

This is the nature of our mind. It's purposeful. When it has no purpose, it's miserable. This is why depression comes when people feel that no matter what efforts they make, they're accomplishing nothing. All the avenues for happiness are closed off; there's nothing they can do. That's when they get depressed.

The only way out of that depression is to realize there are goals that are worthwhile, they may take a lot of effort, but the effort will pay off, yielding long-term happiness. This is why, when the Buddha defines the question that lies at the basis of discernment, it's not a question about acceptance or about oneness or about simply being in the present moment. It's, "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?"

There's a duality there. You realize that your actions do make a difference. And long-term happiness is possible. We hear so much about inconstancy, impermanence, to the point where some people say, "Well, everything that happens is going to disappear right away, so why bother? Just learn how to accept and be okay with what's happening."

But the Buddha never said that. Long-term happiness is possible. It's better than short-term. And it can be attained through our efforts.

So wisdom lies in giving yourself a good goal, a good "for the sake of" that you're going to be fabricating things for.

It also gives you guidance on how to go in the right direction. This is what right view is all about: identifying which actions are skillful and then raising your sights

from just skillful thoughts, words, and deeds, to actions that can actually lead to a goal that's beyond long-term, beyond ordinary welfare and happiness, outside of space, outside of time, free from all limitations. That's the one thing that doesn't have a purpose. Nibbāna itself doesn't have to go anywhere, doesn't involve any fabrications. There's no "for the sake of" anything else.

Someone asked the Buddha one time, "What is virtue for?"

"Virtue is for the sake of developing concentration."

"What's concentration for?"

"Concentration is for the sake of developing discernment."

"What's discernment for?"

"For the sake of release."

"What's release for?"

"For the sake of unbinding, total freedom."

"What's unbinding for?"

The Buddha said, "No, stop there. Your question is going too far. When you get to nibbāna, there's no 'for the sake of.'"

So the message of the Buddha is extremely optimistic. There's a happiness that's so satisfying and so reliable that you don't have to do anything more once you've got there. But to get there requires that you do have a sense that you're doing this for a purpose. And the purpose is a good one.

In some cases, the motivation focuses on the fact that you're not there yet. That's called renunciate pain. But renunciate pain has a hope. The expression in the Canon says, in effect, "There are those who've attained this goal, but I'm not one of them." It recognizes the fact that there is a goal that's attainable. That's the hope. The pain is in your realization that you're not there yet. There's work you have to do.

This is where you have to learn how to talk to yourself. That's why the Buddha's teachings don't only instruct you, but also urge, encourage, and rouse you. He recommends that you develop a passion for the path, foreseeing that it'll lead to something good.

So we're not just here to hang out in the present moment, thinking that the present moment is all the world has to offer. The present moment can be good for someone whose material and social status is comfortable. You look at Buddhist history, and there tend to be times when there are people whose view of the world is that things are fine as far as they're concerned. That's because the interconnected web

of causes and effects is working pretty well for them. They're the ones who tend to glory in the present moment.

But what about people whose present moment is not that glorious? Years back, I was going to be teaching at a vipassanā center in Paris. I was waiting outside my hotel for someone to come and pick me up. And I realized that, since my arrival in France on that trip, there had always been someone around to translate for me. But here there was no one. The thought went through my mind, "What if somebody comes up and asks me a question?" I could usually understand what people were saying in French, but I was really poor at speaking it.

And sure enough, there was a group of telephone linemen across the street. One of them caught my eye and came over and said, "You're Buddhist, right?" "Yes." "Are Buddhists happy? Does Buddhism make you happy?" "Yes."

He said, "I'm miserable. I've got this horrible job. I've got horrible friends I can't trust." I was able to cobble together a sentence. I said, "Well, look at our website. We've got some teachings in French." He smiled and went back to work.

The people came, picked me up, took me to the vipassanā center. The theme of my talk that night, I had already decided on, was that the present moment is not the goal. The present moment is something that's constructed. As we practice, we construct it for the sake of finding something that goes beyond the present moment. You don't just rest here, content.

I started the talk by telling the story of the lineman. I commented that if I had told him simply to accept the present moment, don't have any expectations, learn how to be okay with where you are with your horrible job and horrible friends, he wouldn't have smiled. He would have just walked off. It wouldn't have met his needs.

But the whole point of the Buddha's teachings is that it *does* meet our needs. We've been living a life where we're not satisfied with the goals we've been aiming at. The Buddha gives us a better set of goals, along with instructions on how to get there and how to motivate ourselves to want to do it.

As he says, you learn how to delight in the fact that there is the true Dhamma, something that points out the way and affirms that you do have the power to make a difference.

You learn how to delight in abandoning unskillful qualities and in developing skillful ones.

The word *delight*, here, is good to understand. It means the way you talk to yourself about what you're doing and about the goals you have. The delight is that

you've found some good goals and some good ways of getting there. So you talk to yourself about how good that is, to encourage yourself.

Now, we tend to delight in things that are not all that satisfactory. In fact, that's the mind's way of encouraging us to keep on going in spite of disappointments.

The Buddha says, though, that you can use that capacity for delight to help you on the path.

For instance, you learn how to delight in solitude. When you're alone, sometimes you're feeling lonely, but you remind yourself that there are all kinds of people in the world who could be really harassing you right now, bothering you right now, and you don't have to deal with them. You've got time to look into your own mind, to develop the qualities in the mind that are going to be helpful, and to do really important work. The work of cleaning out your greed, aversion, and delusion is not a minor thing. No one else can do it for you, and you're not the only one who's going to benefit.

So you learn how to tell yourself to be happy that you've got this seclusion.

When the mind is beginning to settle down and part of it says, "Well, you're not doing much thinking right now, it's not very intelligent," learn how to talk to yourself then. Remind yourself that this is an important skill: learning how to keep the mind content as it gets quiet so that it can see itself clearly. The quiet is not an end in itself. It's something you do for the sake of discernment. But do it well. And be happy that you have the opportunity to do it.

The last two things the Buddha has you delight in are the fact that this is a path that, as he says, is unafflicted, and leads to the unafflicted. In other words, the path itself doesn't cause any harm to anybody and it leads to a goal that doesn't cause any harm to anybody at all.

You look at the way most people look for happiness in their lives, and it's going to cause harm one way or another. Most people learn how to turn a blind eye to that. But here you can look at this goal in a clear-eyed way and see that it's not harming anyone. The path there doesn't harm anyone. So take delight in that.

The final thing the Buddha has you delight in is what he calls non-objectification. This, too, is a name for the goal, one of the Buddha's many names for the goal. Objectification means that once you identify yourself as a person, as a being, beings need to feed. When they feed, they tend to feed in areas where other beings are trying to feed as well. Sometimes they even feed off of those other beings, which

inevitably leads to conflict. But here you're going to a goal that has none of that. No feeding. No conflict. It's a good goal to be aiming at.

Now, there are times when the Buddha would say to just focus on the present moment, but he also tells you *why* you're focusing on the present moment: It leads to something beyond the present moment.

First it leads to results that you'll see now and on into the future—long-term welfare and happiness—and then to something even beyond that, something outside of time entirely.

So when things get dry, remind yourself that you're on a good path. It may have its fallow periods, but those are periods you can learn from, as you learn how to talk to yourself, learn how to take delight in the fact that you've found the Dhamma, and it's pointing you in a good direction. So learn how to keep yourself going in that direction. Your talking to yourself, your practice of virtue, concentration, discernment, is all for the sake of something really good. After all, the mind functions for the sake of something. Feed on the fact that you're training for the sake of something really good.

This will take you eventually to a goal where you don't need to do anything at all for the sake of anything. It's the ultimate happiness. It's the one thing you can do and really *arrive*. There's nothing more to do, and you're perfectly content that there's nothing more to do for the sake of your own happiness. The happiness is that complete.

## *Meditate to Win*

January 17, 2024

You'll notice in the Buddha's instructions on breath meditation that there are sixteen steps. In the first two, you simply discern long breathing and short breathing. From that you can extrapolate: fast, heavy, slow, deep, all different kinds of breathing. Get a sense of what the different kinds of breathing can do for you. See which combination feels best.

The remaining steps, though, the Buddha called trainings. You train in how to breathe aware of the whole body. You train in how to breathe calming bodily fabrication, which basically means calming the breath itself. And, as a couple of suttas say, you get to the point where the breath stops. That's when it's really calm. Similarly with training in feelings, mind-states, and mental qualities.

So when you come here, you're submitting to a training. We often translate those passages as, *you train yourself* to do these things, and you do have to play a big role in your own training. But also have to try to live up to the standards the Buddha set.

Some of us have problems with that—living up to standards—because we've been subjected to all kinds of harsh and unhelpful standards being imposed on us. But you have to remember that the Buddha didn't just make up these standards. They're part of the actual duties of the four noble truths.

Again, the Buddha didn't make up these duties, either. If you want to put an end to suffering, this is what you've got to do, based on the way causality actually works. And these duties, these *shoulds*, are all formulated for your true happiness. You always have to keep that in mind.

We're aiming at a happiness that's totally enveloping, totally all-around. That fact should give you a sense of joy as you practice. It's one of the reasons why Ajaan Fuang would always say to *play* with the meditation.

Now, he didn't mean playing in a desultory way, just doing whatever you want. He meant that you play to win. That requires a fair amount of dedication, but the dedication is fueled by your sense of enjoyment. To begin with, you may enjoy exploring different ways of breathing; you may enjoy getting to know your own mind as you focus on the breath. Then there's the sense of satisfaction that comes when you know that you've mastered a skill. Take joy in that as well.

Remember what the Buddha said to Rāhula: You reflect on your actions—your thoughts, your words, your deeds—and if you’ve done something that doesn’t harm anybody—doesn’t harm you, doesn’t harm other people—take joy in that fact. Learn how to remind yourself that this is a worthwhile accomplishment, because for so many of our lives we’ve been looking for happiness in an irresponsible way, not really caring about the consequences.

You can see this in simple things, like the hummingbirds out there: They’re really sloppy eaters. You put up a nice, clean hummingbird feeder, and by the time it’s ready to be refilled, it’s got sugar syrup and their piss all over it. That’s the way most people go about their happiness. They take what they want without any thought about the consequences: They spill things and piss on things. But here you’re thinking about the consequences, you’re a responsible human being, so take joy in that. See it as a game—a game you want to win.

A while back I was talking to a professional athlete and gave him a copy of the book *Bases for Success* on the *iddhipādas*. He looked at the title and said, “The basis for success is working your ass off.” I said, “Well, yes, that is one of them: persistence.”

But then he also admitted that that wasn’t all. You don’t just put in a lot of effort. You also have to be observant. And you have to take pleasure in being observant, because you’re going to learn from it.

Afterwards, I thought that you could take all four of the *iddhipādas* and express them in sports language.

Desire: You really have to want to win.

Persistence: You have to work your ass off.

Intent: Lock-in—in other words, really focus on what you’re doing.

*Vimamsā*, use your brains. Or as Ajaan Fuang would say, “Be observant and use your powers of ingenuity.”

If you’re trying to master a game, you want to hit the ball many, many times. Notice when you hit it right, notice when you hit it wrong: What was the difference? See if you can recreate the way you hit it right. Again and again and again.

The same principle applies here at the end of each meditation. Take a little time to reflect: When did the mind settle down really well? What was the best spot during the hour’s meditation? Where were you focused? What was the breath like? What had you been doing leading up to that? If you’re really mindful and alert, you should be able to remember. Then take what you’ve managed to observe—however well

you've observed your mind—and try to apply that knowledge the next time around to see if it still works.

And again, you're taking this as a game. If it doesn't work the next time around, that doesn't mean you're a failure. It just means that maybe the mind is more complex than you thought. Maybe there was more going on than you thought. So look again, more carefully this time.

Take it as a challenge—a friendly challenge, because these are friendly duties. This is a friendly game. The only losers in here are your defilements. So this is a game that should be entertaining. If you get grim about it, you'll find it hard to stick with it.

One of the things I noticed about the ajaans in Thailand was they all had really good senses of humor. Even some of the ajaans who were known to be fierce really had good senses of humor.

There's that story that Ajaan Fuang tells about Ajaan Mun. When Ajaan Fuang went to stay with him, he was still young. There was a nun's community down the road, past which the monks would go on their daily alms round. One of the nuns took a liking to Ajaan Fuang. She started knitting little things for his spoons, fixing special central Thai food for him, that kind of thing.

Ajaan Mun noticed this. The first thing he looked at was Ajaan Fuang's reaction. Ajaan Fuang wasn't interested, so then Ajaan Mun decided to help the nun.

One day the nuns came for their periodic instructions from him. He started out asking if they were all observing the eight precepts, following the pattern of the old instructions that used to be given to bhikkhunīs.

Then he told them a story about Lady Visākhā seeing groups of people observing the eight precepts, and she wanted to know why.

She asked a group of old people why they were observing the eight precepts, and they said they wanted to go to heaven after they died. Then she went from group to group and finally got to a group of young women. She asked them why they were observing the eight precepts. They said, "We want something better than heaven. We want a husband."

That was the end of the special knitted things and dishes for Ajaan Fuang. So even Ajaan Mun had a good sense of humor, and he used it to good effect.

You need a sense of humor when you're dealing with your defilements. If you can't laugh at your greed, aversion, delusion, and lust, it's going to be a grim battle. But if you can laugh, you can basically step back. That's what discernment is all about: stepping back.

I mentioned this the other day around the issue of metacognition: You step back and watch the mind in action. You watch the mind thinking, you watch the mind as it focuses, you watch the mind as it's doing the meditation. That requires a certain distance. You're not totally immersed in these activities.

Now, there are times in concentration practice when you do get totally immersed in the object. That's basically to give the mind a chance to rest and get still. But then once it's been still for a while, and things start moving again, you can see those movements very clearly if you step back a bit.

The discernment is in the stepping back. It's one of the reasons why, in that image of the dead cow, discernment is represented as a knife. Suppose there's a dead cow, and a butcher takes a knife, cuts all the different tendons that connect the skin to the cow, and then puts the skin back on. Is the skin attached to the cow as it was before? Well, no.

That's an image for the awakened mind. It's not a pretty image but it's very effective. The skin stands for the outside sense spheres; the cow's body stands for the inside sense spheres. There's a sense of being disjoined, of a separation between the two, even though they're right next to each other. It's through the knife of discernment, cutting through the passion that connects them, that these things get separated. Or, as the Buddha said elsewhere, discernment is what sees things as separate, sees things as other. You step back from them, separate yourself from them, so that you can observe them in action. Having a sense of humor is one really good way of stepping back from things.

So it's important that you learn how to enjoy the meditation as you're really doing it well. You are trying to hold yourself to high standards, but you want to do it in such a way that you're not beating yourself up. So look to where you find the enjoyment in the meditation, but also look to where you can discipline yourself more. Train yourself to have a good sense of discipline.

Remember, we're here to live up to some standards, not just to reinvent the Dhamma or redo the Dhamma as we'd like it to be. The basic principle is that we practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma for the sake of dispassion.

An important element in dispassion is learning to outgrow your old attitudes, i.e., the attitudes you have *now*.

So it's a big job. But the important part of learning how to do a big job is, one, breaking it down into little jobs. And then, two, having a sense of lightness, a sense of enjoyment as you see that you can begin to do things you weren't able to do before.

You understand things you didn't understand before. Which requires there'll be times when you have to work your ass off, lock-in, use your brains.

It's all because you really want to win. It *is* a battle, but the best battles are the ones where you develop all the skills you need, you can be confident that you're going to come out victorious, and that victory is well worth the effort.

## *Equanimity After Victory*

August 5, 2024

There are so many lists that end in equanimity: the four brahmavihāras, the factors for awakening, the Buddha's explanation of the different kinds of emotions you encounter on the path—renunciate grief, renunciate joy, renunciate equanimity.

It makes it sound like equanimity is where the practice is all aimed, what it's all about. And with our typical Western efficiency, we say, "Why bother with the lower stages? Go straight for the top." But those "lower stages" are really important, because there's a kind of equanimity that the Buddha doesn't praise—what he calls "householder equanimity"—and that's what people usually start out with. If they don't develop anything else, that's where they stay—learning just to accept the fact that things are inconstant, stressful, not-self; things have to change, so tell yourself not to get worked up about it.

Now, we do have to use some for that kind of equanimity on the path.

Think about the Buddha's instructions to Rāhula: "Make the mind like earth." People throw disgusting things on the earth, but the earth doesn't react. "Make the mind like water." You can use water to clean dirty things away, but the water doesn't recoil. "Make the mind like fire." Fire can burn garbage, but it doesn't seem to be upset by the fact that it's burning garbage. "Make the mind like wind." Wind can blow clean things and unclean things around. It doesn't make a difference.

But the Buddha's meditation instructions didn't stop there. He went on to explain all 16 steps of breath meditation, which are very proactive.

You learn to breathe in ways that give rise to pleasure, breathe in ways that give rise to rapture; train yourself to be aware of the whole body, thinking of yourself as being like a bathman who's working water through a ball of bath powder. In the same way, when there's the sense of ease, well-being, and rapture you feel with the breath, you let it spread throughout the whole body, so that no part of the body isn't saturated with that sense of ease and well-being.

This doesn't happen on its own. You have to work on it.

You have to do battle with your defilements, do battle with your hindrances, the parts of the mind that want to go off and think of something else—that want to think about sensual pleasures, want to think about thoughts of ill-will, or are happy to be

sleepy so that you can just drift off. Or the parts that feel responsible when you're restless and worried about this or that and the other thing, assuming that somehow by worrying about it, you at least show that you're responsible, your attitude is responsible. Then there's the mind's tendency to want to go for doubt, because when you can doubt the Buddha's teachings, you say, "Well, maybe I shouldn't have to practice these things after all."

You don't want to accept those attitudes. You don't want to be equanimous about them. You have to fight them. As the Buddha said, when the mind is bogged down in hindrances, it's as if it were imprisoned, as if it were a slave, as if it were in debt, crossing across a desert where you're not sure about your safety. The Buddha doesn't want you to stay there in slavery or in debt. He wants you to get out of debt, out of slavery, out of prison, arrive at safety. You've got to do something.

And, of course, one of the ways of getting the mind to want to go past those hindrances is to learn how to breathe in ways that are really satisfying: energizing when you're sleepy, soothing when you're irritated and restless. So use the concentration to fight off the hindrances and then use it to develop other, subtler forms of discernment. When the mind has come to discernment—the discernment that comes as you peel away layers of fabrication on the mind—then you can arrive at equanimity. But you don't stop with equanimity in the practice of concentration. You use that equanimity to look more carefully into the mind, to see the subtler defilements that come up, that are apparent when the mind gets really still like this.

So equanimity is not the goal.

The Buddha never wants you to settle for the equanimity that just accepts things. After all, the equanimity that comes with concentration comes after you've satisfied the mind with feelings of rapture, after you've satisfied the mind with feelings of pleasure. It's not a matter of just telling itself to be equanimous. There's a natural equanimity that comes when you've completed the work of getting the mind to settle down.

The same with those lists of emotions the Buddha talks about on the path: Renunciate grief—he actually encourages that you develop that. It's the grief over the idea that there are people who've found awakening, but you're not one of them. That grief is meant to motivate you. The fact that there are people who have done this means that it is possible. This is grief with hope of getting out of grief. Motivated by this grief, you get to work, do what has to be done until you've trained the mind so that it gains the joy that comes with insight.

Here again, this insight is based on concentration. You've got to do the work—fighting off the hindrances, getting the mind to settle down—so that you can begin to gain insights into the mind, and those insights free you.

The sense of freedom that comes with those insights gives rise to joy. That's called renunciate joy. Then, when there's the satisfaction that comes with that joy, the mind can have a sense of equanimity in the sense that it doesn't need anything more.

There's also an equanimity that goes beyond the equanimity of concentration. That's the equanimity that comes when the mind realizes that it's free from all the defilements. It's the equanimity that comes with the deepest happiness.

So again, you don't just go straight to equanimity. You have to do the work so that equanimity is well-nourished and comes from a sense of a job completed, a job well-done.

As for the equanimity in the brahmavihāras, the Buddha again doesn't say to go straight to equanimity. You have to start with goodwill. There are some people for whom it's easy to feel goodwill; for other people, it's not so easy. You don't just tell yourself, "Okay, goodwill, goodwill, goodwill." You have to think about, "Why do I have trouble thinking thoughts of goodwill for that person?" This way, you begin to understand some of your unskillful attitudes and learn how to fight them off.

The equanimity comes when you realize that there are certain people you simply can't help. You have goodwill for them, you have compassion for them when they're suffering, empathetic joy when they're happy. That requires work, too, because there are a lot of people who have more wealth than you, more power than you, they're better looking than you, their lives seem to go better than yours in every way. There are people who've gained awakening before you do. You still have to have empathetic joy for them. You can't be resentful. Those are test cases for your goodwill. You say, "May all beings be happy." Well, here are some people who are happy. If you resent their happiness, then what kind of goodwill is that?

So there's work to be done before you can arrive at an equanimity that's solid and expansive. There's a lot of fighting that has to be done. The Buddha's most frequent images in the Canon are of people who are engaging in battle, people who are searching, people who are trying to master skills, all of which require effort.

So it's good to remember that we're here battling with our defilements. We have to adjust our attitude as to what it means to be a warrior. Nowadays, most warriors say just to bring in a lot of firepower and you'll render your enemy defenseless with shock and awe. But what's happened with shock and awe? It just builds a lot of resentment.

When you rely only on strength and not on your intelligence, that's stupid. If you really want to win a war, win a battle, you have to think strategically. You have to understand your opponent.

In this case, you have to understand your own defilements. What is their allure? That's what keeps them going. And how can you counteract that allure by finding something else in the mind that has even greater allure that's on the side of the Dhamma? You have to strategize. To think. Choose your battles.

So we're not just here to accept whatever comes up on the kammic screen.

We're here to see what's wrong with what we're doing and how we can change what we're doing so that we can do it better. That's what the four noble truths are all about. If you think of the three characteristics as being the Buddha's most important teachings, they do tend to point you toward equanimity, but on their own, they can lead to an unskillful type of equanimity in which you tell yourself, "Well, I've just got to accept that things are inconstant, stressful and not-self. I can't get a permanent happiness, so I've got to accept, be content with whatever bits and pieces I can get."

That's a very defeatist attitude. Remember, the four noble truths are the basic teaching. They point out that you're doing something wrong, but that you can also learn how to do it right. The Buddha says that learning how to do it right is the unexcelled victory. There are going to be some battles. There's going to be some fighting. So you need strength, but you also need intelligence, the kind of intelligence that thinks strategically. Then, when you come out winning, you can rest in the equanimity that comes when the battle is over and won.

## *Ven. Ananda's Awakening*

October 30, 2024

There's a story of how Venerable Ānanda gained full awakening.

Very early on in his career as a monk, he had gained stream entry, which is the first glimpse of the deathless. Then he took on the job of being the Buddha's attendant, which meant that he didn't have much time for his own practice.

But he did ask of the Buddha a favor: that when the Buddha gave a Dhamma talk anywhere, he would come back and repeat it to Ānanda. This meant that Ānanda knew more about the Buddha's teachings than anyone else.

So after the Buddha passed away, the monks got together and decided to create a standardized version of the Buddha's teachings that could be memorized by all the monks. They realized that even though Ānanda was not an arahant—they wanted to have arahants making this collection—still, he couldn't be left out.

So he felt compelled to practice extra hard in preparation for the Council. The night before the Council, he meditated very late into the night, practicing mindfulness immersed in the body. It got very late, and he hadn't gotten anywhere, so he decided to lie down. As he was in the process lying down—he wasn't sitting, he wasn't lying down, he was halfway between—he gained full awakening.

The next day he levitated into the meeting to show that he'd gained full awakening and that he was fully qualified to join the rest.

The story of how he gained awakening is sometimes interpreted as meaning that he'd been trying too hard, he had too much desire—and when he gave up his desire, gave up his effort, that's when he gained awakening.

The irony, though, is the Canon's two most explicit descriptions of how important it is to want to practice and to want to gain awakening are by Ānanda himself.

In one case he's talking to a nun, telling her that the end of conceit is one of the goals of the practice, but the conceit that goes with the thought, "There are others who have gained awakening—they're human beings, I'm a human being. If they can gain awakening, why can't I?"—that's to be encouraged. It's part of the path.

The same with the craving to gain total awakening. We practice to put an end to craving, but that particular craving is an important part of the path. It's to be developed and not to be abandoned. You abandon it only after you've gained what you want.

That's the message of the other passage, where Ānanda's talking to a brahman. He's staying in a park. The brahman has come to see him and asks him, "This holy life you're practicing, what's the goal?" Ānanda says, "One of the goals is to put an end to desire." "Is there a path to putting an end to desire?" the brahman asks. And Ānanda replies, "Yes." He describes the four bases for success, one of which is concentration based on desire, accompanied by right effort. The brahman says, "In that case, it's an endless path, because you can't put an end to desire by using desire."

So Ānanda asks him questions in return. "Before you came to this park, did you have a desire to come to the park?" "Yes." "And did you make an effort to act on that desire?" "Yes." "Now that you're here, what happened to that desire? What happened to that effort?" "Well it's gone, because it's already been fulfilled."

Ānanda says, "In the same way, whatever desire there is to put an end to suffering, to attain the goal—when that's satisfied, then the desire ends."

So this is not a path of not wanting. There are lot of things you have to learn not to want, but you do have as your overriding goal, your overriding determination, that you do want to attain awakening. You do want to put an end to suffering. You do want to make that change in your heart. It's simply a matter of learning how to use that desire and use that effort so that the desire and the effort don't get in the way. In other words, you focus your desires on the causes—what will take you there.

So here we are: Sitting in meditation, but not thinking about awakening. We're thinking about our breath, because thinking about the breath gets the mind to settle down with a sense of ease in the present moment, which is where the work is to be done.

Wanting to be balanced, at ease, happy to be in the present moment: That's an important part of the path. The breath can help you because, of the different elements in the body, it's the most responsive to what the mind tells it to do.

It's hard to tell your heart to beat at a certain rate or to tell your blood pressure to go down. But you can tell yourself, "Breathe more slowly," and the body will respond. "Breathe faster, breathe more deeply, breathe more shallow, heavier, lighter, in long, out short, in short, out long"—the body responds.

That way, you can create a sense of ease, asking yourself what kind of breathing would feel good right now and where can you think of the breath energy coming into the body. Or you can think of it originating in the body itself—one spot, two spots, many spots.

Simply by holding an image in mind, you'll see that the breath responds. The mind will begin to settle down with a sense of ease with that perception—whatever the perception is that allows you to stay with the breath and that allows the breath to spread comfortably through the body.

So we're here with the desire for awakening, but we learn how to channel that desire into our efforts to stay with the breath, to stay here in the present moment, to be fully aware of the breath bathing the whole body.

This is a full-body experience. We're not just aware of the breath at the nose or at the pores. It's not a tactile sensation that we're focusing on. We're focusing on what the Buddha calls "form." When he classifies the in-and-out breath, he doesn't classify it as a tactile sensation, he classifies it as an aspect of the wind element in the body, which is one of the elements that make up your inner sensation of the body, what's called proprioception. That wind element can be felt anywhere in the body. In fact, the more conscious you are of the breath in the whole body, the easier it is to get the breath to feel really good inside.

You come to the practice ideally with a sense of joy, which may be a mental joy based on generosity and virtue, but it also can translate into a sense of physical ease—and that's what you can spread through the body. The Buddha talks about spreading a sense of rapture, a sense of ease through the body. It's not just a mental ease, it's physical. In that way, you have a good grounding for watching your thoughts—not only as you're sitting here, but also as you go through the day.

That's the real lesson of that story of Ānanda's awakening: You want to be able to watch your mind all the time—not only when you're formally meditating, but continually, throughout the day, regardless of your posture, regardless of what you're doing.

The story about Ānanda's awakening doesn't say that he stopped focusing on the body as he was lying down. If he had stopped focusing, he wouldn't have seen anything. Some people note that he was changing his position, and all too often, when we change position, we drop the breath and we start thinking about other things. Like at the end of a meditation session: If our object of meditation were made out of glass, you'd hear the sound of glass shattering at the end of every session as

people get up, forget about the meditation for a little bit, and go do whatever chores they have to do to until they think about meditating again.

Ideally, you want to stay with the breath as you get up, as you move around—even as you talk with other people. You want to be grounded all the time. That’s what heedfulness is all about, because the breath will show itself, the mind will show itself, in those unexpected moments.

It’s as if it behaves itself during the meditation, like a child in a classroom when the teacher is present, but then when the teacher is out of the room, the children run around as they like. If the teacher really wants to know what’s going on, she’ll need to have a sense of what the kids are doing while she’s in the room and also when she’s outside of the room. You can do that as you monitor the breath all the time.

So that’s the lesson of Ānanda’s awakening—that it can happen in unexpected moments if you’re continually alert.

There’s a similar story about Paṭācārā, one of the nuns. As she comes back to her hut, she notices farmers working far off in the fields. “If they can do their job,” she says, “why can’t I do mine?” So she concentrates her mind as she’s washing her feet and then goes into the hut. There’s a lamp lit in the hut, so she pulls out the wick. And at the moment that she pulls out the wick and the flame goes out, that’s when she gains awakening.

So insights can happen at any time, which means you want to be there—so that you can be aware of what’s going on. You have to *want* to be there all the time. That’s the lesson of these stories.

## *Positive Capability*

January 17, 2025

The Romantics had a concept they called negative capability—the ability just to be with things and not try to figure things out; just to appreciate the basic flow of sensory impressions and be content to stay there.

This concept has had a huge influence on how Buddhism is understood here in the West. A lot of people approach meditation as a process of developing negative capability—just to be with things as they are, not to pass judgment on them, not to try to figure them out—which is very ironic, because the teachings of the Buddha and the forest masters take a very active approach to meditation and they encourage you to figure things out.

There's a Dhamma talk in which Ajaan Maha Bua defines vipassanā as exploration. You're trying to figure out: Why is the mind suffering? What is it doing to make itself suffer? How can it stop? This takes the four noble truths as questions.

The Buddha points our attention in the right direction. When we look for the cause of suffering, we can't be looking outside. We have to look inside. We have to look at our cravings, see why we crave things. He has you look for the allure of something. That's precisely what he's focusing on: Where are your cravings focused? Why do you crave these things?

Think of that passage we chanted just now: the four Dhamma summaries. It was given to a king. He had asked a monk, "Why did you ordain?" because he was under the impression that people ordained because they'd lost family, they'd lost wealth, their health was bad. Yet none of this was true in the monk's case. Basically, the monk's reasons came down to the problem of craving: We live in this world where there's aging, illness, death, where nothing is really ours, and yet we keep craving, keep wanting to come back for more. The teachings of the Buddha give us an opportunity to explore that question: Why? Why do we do this?

It's going to take a lot of figuring out because the mind is very subtle. As Ajaan Chah once said, one of the first things you learn when you watch the mind is how much it lies to itself. So you don't just sit there with the lies and say, "Well, the lies are like this." Try to figure out: What are they misrepresenting? What are they hiding? Why?

All too often, the allure is something we're not fully aware of, because we're not very proud of it. The Buddha teaches us the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, not-self, not just to say, "This is how things are," but to point out the drawbacks of the things we find attractive, and to figure out why, even though we've run into their drawbacks many, many times, we still go for them.

As in the case of the king, King Koravya: The monk, Ven. Raṭṭhapāla had him reflect on how he used to be strong but now he can't even control where he puts his foot—he wants to put his foot in one place and it goes someplace else. When he's sick, he can't order his courtiers, even though they have to depend on him, to share out some of his pain. Those are the teachings on inconstancy and stress. As for his wealth, he can't take it with him when he dies. That's not-self

So he's been reflecting on all this, yet still he wants to come back for more. If he had the opportunity to conquer another kingdom, even on the other side of the ocean, he'd go for it. Eighty years old. He's a fool. But so are we all—we keep coming back, coming back, coming back.

And here we have an opportunity to understand why. It may take time to figure things out, but it also takes time not to figure things out—a lot more time.

It's like being stuck in prison and wanting to get out. You realize it's going to take a lot of work—a lot of subtle work: How are you going to find a tool to dig your hole? And how do you know exactly where to dig the hole and not be found?

Other people may say, "All that effort for getting out? It's a lot easier just to accept the fact that you're in prison, 'Prison is like this.' Be accepting"—but you're still stuck in prison. If you try to get out, at least there's hope.

And the Buddha is saying there *is* a way out. You may run into all kinds of weird things underground: You can dig a tunnel in one direction and run into a concrete foundation. So you have to turn around and try another direction.

But you want to keep your desire to get out as strong as possible. And you have to learn the patience that goes with that. "Okay," you say, "this is a long-term process. I have to be patient, but I also have to be persistent and inquisitive." For a lot of us, that's a hard combination, but that's what we have to learn. If you're going to get out, you have to master the skills for getting out.

You've probably seen escape movies where it takes a long, complicated process to figure out how to dig the tunnel to get out, how to slip out without being detected. But when you get out, it's worth it. And you've learned a lot in the process—much

more than simply saying, “Well, this is what prison is like. This is what prison food is like. I’ll learn to accept it.”

We’re not here to anesthetize ourselves. We’re here to become more perceptive, more inquisitive. Things we ordinarily take for granted, we want to start questioning them, especially when we say, “I like this, and of course I like this. Who wouldn’t like this?”

Well, arahants don’t let liking or disliking get in the way of getting beyond these things. So it’s something you’ve got to learn. And that “of course” attitude—you’ve got to watch out for that attitude because it hides all kinds of things. It imposes restrictions on you. This why the Buddha says that when you define yourself, you’re placing limitations on yourself. When you simply accept things, you’re placing limitations on yourself, too.

There are some things that Buddha has you accept—the fact that there is pain in life; the fact that people will say nasty things to you; the fact that when you look back on your past behavior, you’ll see you’ve made some bad mistakes. All these things you learn to accept. But as for the unskillful qualities in the mind right now that are causing you to suffer, the Buddha says not to accept those.

I came across a book one time on the four noble truths, in which the author was saying, “We’re not here to get rid of craving. We’re here to learn how to live with it and be okay with it.” I translated that for Ajaan Suwat, and he said, “The author is teaching people to be stupid.”

The Buddha’s not here to teach us to be stupid. He’s teaching us how to figure things out, how to figure out what are the right questions to ask to get out. And he gives us the tools for examining where our attachments are—the attachments that keep us imprisoned.

That’s the big irony.

This is one of the reasons why early Buddhists used fire as an image many times. They believed that fire was an element that existed in all things. When you provoked it, it would latch on to fuel and start burning. It was trapped in the fuel because it was clinging to the fuel. The fuel was not trapping it. The fire was trapping itself in the fuel through its clinging—the same way the mind traps itself with its clinging. That’s why it’s in prison—and why getting out of prison requires letting go.

Letting go, of course, is a lot more complicated than we might think. You can’t just say, “Well, let go and be gone.” As we were saying today, the mind is like a parliament. It’s got lots of different politicians with lots of different agendas. One

member of the parliament may be holding on for one reason; another member may be holding on for another reason. It's very meticulous work, taking these things apart.

But again, what else are you going to do in prison? Just sit there? You've got the skills to get out. And if you don't yet have the skills, you *can* develop them. What we're doing here is not humanly impossible. As the Buddha said, if this path of abandoning unskillful qualities and developing skillful ones wasn't possible, he wouldn't have taught it. And if it didn't lead to real happiness, he wouldn't have taught it, either. So he's basically saying, "You can do it and you'll be glad you did." You've got to keep that attitude in mind all the time, whatever you do, wherever you go. It's in that way that you can hope to be free.

So we're developing positive capability here. We do have to figure things out—but take joy in that. Think of the problem of suffering as a puzzle you enjoy learning how to solve. You'll learn a lot in the process, and you'll have freedom as your reward.

## *A Trained Observer*

May 21, 2024

We had a visitor the other day who made a strange comment: that my approach to insight followed Majjhima 64. I always thought my approach to insight followed Ajaan Fuang. Majjhima 64 does talk about one way in which insight develops, in which you analyze your concentration.

First into the different aggregates: When you're sitting here, you've got form, which is the breath. Feeling, which is the feeling of pleasure you're trying to develop. Perception, the image you hold in mind of how the breath moves through the body, where it starts, where it finishes. Fabrication, how you talk to yourself about the breath, evaluate it, make adjustments. And then consciousness, which is aware of all these things. As you reflect on these activities, you're aware of how they're inconstant, stressful, not-self. That provides an opening to the insight to release.

That's one way in which insight can arise, but living with Ajaan Fuang I discovered he had lots of different ways that he would recommend for insight to arise. There's another way that corresponds to another sutta, Saṃyutta 36:11—in which the insight arises as you go from one level of concentration to another, and you see the different fabrications fall away.

Verbal fabrication falls away as you move from the first to the second jhāna. Bodily fabrication falls away as you move from the third to the fourth. Then mental fabrication would fall away when you move from the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception to the cessation of perception and feeling. That's way up there.

That's another way in which insight can arise. You see how the mind constructs things, and how you can move from one construction to another. You begin to see how each is fabricated, how you put these things together. That insight helps you develop some dispassion for the concentration.

That's the important thing—how you develop dispassion—and that's going to vary from person to person: which level of concentration it's going to happen in, and whether it's going to happen in the concentration as you move from one level to another, or as you leave concentration. There are also stories in the Canon where

people are washing their feet, they gain concentration, and then from the concentration they gain insight. So all kinds of things can spark your insight.

That was one of the things I learned from Ajaan Fuang. He said, “You can hear about other people’s strategies for developing discernment or insight, but you can’t assume they’ll work for you the way they worked for the other people.”

It’s good to read about them to get some ideas of what kinds of things have helped other people, but you’re going to have to look at your own mind and see what works. And you’re going to have to use your own ingenuity.

This boils down to those two words that I keep repeating over and over again, because Ajaan Fuang kept repeating them over and over again: You have to be *observant*, and you have to use your *ingenuity*. That’s how you develop in your meditation.

Now, an important part of being observant is something that Ajaan Fuang would teach across the board, which is that you’ve got to get a very strong sense of *the watcher* or *the knower* in your meditation—the part of the mind that can watch anything and not get excited by it, not get upset by it, but just witness what’s going on. This is an ability that you have to consciously develop. Some people have more trouble with it than others.

But time and again, I would hear people coming to see Ajaan Fuang and say “As I watch my mind, and if something bad comes up, I try to get rid of it. If something good, I allow it to continue.” And he would say, “Well, learn how to watch the bad things, too. You don’t follow them, you don’t act on them, but learn how to watch your defilements because,” he said, “you may learn something from them. Sometimes your defilements may even have their good side.” This is a point he picked up from Ajaan Lee.

If we didn’t have desire, for instance, we wouldn’t be here practicing. If we didn’t crave the end of suffering, we wouldn’t be here practicing. If we didn’t realize that we have some ignorance, we wouldn’t search for knowledge. So even the defilements can have their good side, but to see that without falling for the defilement requires developing a very resilient observer inside.

An important part of the observer is learning to be aware of things and then just drop it at that. You don’t continue, as they say in Thai, “weaving” things. You notice the presence of something, you observe what it’s doing, but you don’t play along with its games.

You're gaining a sense of how to watch something in the mind and yet be separate from it. This is one of *the* important principles in gaining discernment. You hear so much about the importance of seeing the oneness of all things, but when the Buddha talks about insight, it's all about seeing things as separate.

Your awareness is one thing. Your greed is something else. Your anger is something else. If you're watching pain, the pain is one thing, the awareness is something else, the body is something else. It's this ability to watch, to step back, that allows you to see the whole story of how different things interact.

One of Ajaan Fuang's students complained to him once that the insights she gained in her meditation were all very fragmentary. He said, "It's like listening to a record"—he was thinking of long-playing vinyl records where a needle had to be put into a groove. He said, "The needle has to stay in the groove. It can't jump around." When something good comes up, you stay in the groove, when something bad comes up, you stay in the groove.

That reminded me of a novel I taught when I was teaching English in Chiang Mai University. I had the students read Ford Maddox Ford, *The Good Soldier*, which, admittedly, even for a native speaker, is not an easy book to read, but I wanted to stretch the students, to get them to think about the narrator, because that's what the book is all about.

This man is narrating basically his wife's suicide and his best friend's suicide, and he plays a role in both. He doesn't intervene, doesn't help to stop them when he could have, perhaps. But he doesn't want to assume any guilt for what he failed to do.

As he's telling the story, anytime he comes across some incriminating evidence of his own complicity, he jumps over it. When he's telling of an incident and it looks as though he's portraying himself in a bad way, he'll suddenly switch to something else. So the book jumps around, which is why it's a difficult book to read. But our minds are just like that.

We're thinking along and something makes us look bad or just shows us something about ourselves that we don't like to see, and we jump. The needle jumps out of the groove. When a record is like that, when the needle's jumping around—*screech, scratch, screech, scratch*—there's no sense to anything at all.

If you want to make sense out of your own mind, you have to stick with things, good and bad, and just tell yourself, as Ajaan Fuang told one of his students: "Look, the mind can think good things, so why can't it think bad things? Just make sure you don't fall under the power of the bad things." You learn how to step back from both, because that's when you get to see the mind in and of itself, and that's the real culprit.

It's not the good or bad things that are the culprits, it's how we relate to them. Like that passage in the Canon where the question is when you have two oxen, a black one and a white one, is the black one the fetter of the white, is the white one the fetter of the black? No, it's the yoke that's holding the two together: That's the fetter there.

In the same way, sights are not the fetter of the eye, the eye is not the fetter of sights, and so on down with all the senses. It's the passion and desire between the two of them that connects them. That's what you want to see. Where does the passion and desire come from? It comes out of the mind.

So whatever comes up, you want to learn how to keep the observer in control as you just watch. You don't act on it, but you see it: "This is an event in the mind." When you can see the events in the mind simply as that—as events—then you're going to learn about them and their causes, in whichever way your insight is going to come, whatever questions you ask about why something makes inroads into the mind when it doesn't have to.

That's what you have to realize: Things don't have to make inroads into the mind. We let our minds get colored by its objects, but they don't have to be. Yet we take it so much for granted: Something sad happens and the whole mind gets sad. Something pleasant happens and the whole mind gets happy.

This may be one of the reasons why the Buddha uses the word *rāga* to describe these fetters—in addition to *passion* it also means *color*. It's like putting dye into a glass of water. You put some blue dye into the water, and it doesn't take long for the whole glass of water to get blue. You put red in, and it doesn't take long for the whole glass to get red.

That's our problem. We allow our minds to be colored by what we see and what we know. But in developing this sense of the observer, you have to learn how to say, "Okay, the observer is one thing, your awareness is something else, the object is something else, and they don't have to be connected." That way, your observer and your awareness can stay clear even in the presence of red or yellow or blue or green things.

This is a part of the training of the mind that's constant for everyone. Now, how you're going to gain your insight, what questions you're going to ask that are going to break things open: That's going to be an individual matter. We learn from the strategies of others what's possible, what might work, but that's not necessarily going to work for us.

This is where you're encouraged to ask your own questions to understand your own greed, aversion, delusion, your own desires and passions, and to learn to develop some dispassion around them.

Basically, it comes down to that old pattern of seeing the allure, seeing the drawbacks, and catching yourself going for the allure when you realize at the same time, "This is nothing worth going for."

Now, *when* that's going to happen, *how* that's going to happen, we can't say. But what you can create are the conditions for it to become *likely* to happen. That's all dependent on learning how to make this sense of the observer strong and independent, and not colored by anything it knows.

## *Four Roles to Play*

October 2, 2025

You're here to learn how your mind functions. And it's important that you understand that it's actively functioning all the time.

When the Buddha lays out the principles in dependent co-arising, right next to ignorance is a factor he calls fabrication. It covers the intentional activities in the mind. One of those activities is directed thought and evaluation—in plain terms, how you talk to yourself. You choose a topic to think about, and then you comment on it.

You're talking to yourself in this way all the time. One problem is that you're usually doing it in ignorance. Either you don't know that you're talking to yourself, or there are many layers of conversation going on inside. Another problem is that you're telling yourself strange things, things that are actually going to lead to suffering.

The purpose of the meditation is, one, to get you more sensitive to how you're talking to yourself on these many levels and, two, to start talking to yourself in a skillful way.

This is why, when the Buddha has you get the mind settled down in the concentration, one of the factors of the first jhāna is directed thought and evaluation. For example, you talk to yourself about the breath. Focus on the breath and ask yourself: Where do you feel it? Focus your attention at where it's clearest. That's the directed thought.

The next question is: How does it feel? Does it feel good? You can try experimenting. Tell yourself to try long breathing for a while, then to try short breathing. Fast or slow, heavy or light. Deep, shallow. Broad, narrow. That's the evaluation.

This is where you bring in another aspect of fabrication, which is perceptions, the images you hold in mind that identify things and give them meaning. What image of the breath is most conducive to settling down? If you think of the breath simply as the air coming in and out through the nose, it's hard to think of that having any impact on much of the rest of the body.

But if you think of it as the energy flow that allows the lungs to expand and contract, that energy flow goes throughout the whole body. So hold that perception

in mind and ask yourself if it helps. You can think of your body as being like a big sponge. When you breathe in, there's no obstacle to the breath coming in from any direction. Ask yourself how that works. More evaluation.

You're engaged in what the Buddha calls commitment and reflection. You commit yourself to doing something and then you watch yourself doing it. You pass judgment on the results. This, too, is a part of your directed thought and evaluation. You're talking to yourself about your fabricating in the present moment.

We're constantly shaping the present moment. We're not just passive observers. To make a comparison, it's the difference between watching a TV show and getting engaged in an interactive computer game. If you watch a TV, you can't change things in the program no matter how much you yell at the screen. With an interactive game, though, how the game goes is going to depend on what you do.

That's what you're doing right now. As you get more familiar with what you're doing—getting the mind to fit with the breath; getting the breath to fit with the mind; getting a sense of the whole body being aware; the breath going through the whole body; a sense of ease going through the whole body; everything coming together like this—you get more and more conscious of this process of talking to yourself, and what roles you're playing in this exploratory conversation.

You find that altogether there are four roles you play. One is the you who desires to gain a sense of well-being from this. You desire to benefit from this process. If you didn't think you were going to benefit from it, you wouldn't do it. The stronger you can nurture the sense that this is really going to be good for you, the more you're going to enjoy it.

It's like one of the classics of literature that look big and imposing and oppressive, but then you start reading them and you realize they're classics because they're fun to read. That's how the meditation should look to you: that you're going to enjoy it, both in the process of doing it and in the long term.

That's you as the consumer.

Then there's you as the agent who actually does the meditation—who asks questions. Tries things out. Makes adjustments. And learns skills. Who can do this better and better.

To master a skill requires two more functions for you. One is that you're the observer, giving this your full attention, really intent on observing what you're doing. You want to get down to the details. We're not dealing in abstractions here. We're dealing in very practical things: how to breathe, how to talk to yourself. Once there's

a sense of well-being in the body, how do you let it spread? If pains in the body are getting in the way, what do you do with them? These are practical issues. And there are skills associated with them.

As with pain: First you try to get a sense of which part of the body can be made comfortable by the way you breathe. Then you let that sense of comfortable breath flow through the areas where there's pain. See if that helps. Sometimes you find that there's a lot of tension around the pain. As you breathe through it, the tension begins to relax. Part of you may be afraid of that. The whole reason the tension built up around it was that you wanted to keep the pain under control, to keep it within bounds.

But it's like that science fiction story where a group of beings on a distant planet had suffered an invasion from another planet. They built up a defense system after they had repelled the invasion, an impenetrable force field around their planet. Then they found themselves stuck because nothing could get in, nothing could get out, so nothing good could come in. They were running out of resources. So the force field became the problem. In the same way, the tension you build up around a pain often becomes the real problem, more than the original pain. You have to be willing to allow it to dissolve and see what happens.

That's one way of dealing with the pain. There are lots of ways of dealing with the pain. It's all part of your set of skills. With all of the skills, you try things out, observe the results.

Then you pass judgment on them. Did they work? Did they not work? If they did work, you remember them. If they didn't work, you try to figure out why. Then you try something else, you try something else, observe it, pass judgment on it again. That's you as the judge and the analyst.

So you've got four roles here all together: you as the consumer, you as the agent, you as the observer, and you as the judge. All four of those roles have to work together for this to work. If you try to hold on to just one—like just making effort, effort, effort, without judging it—you can simply wear yourself out. Or if you're just the witness, watching whatever comes and not passing judgment at all, nothing happens. It may feel good not to be doing anything, you're relaxed, but nothing develops.

The Buddha compares that to a goldsmith who doesn't do anything with the gold but just lets it sit there. You can't make anything out of gold if it just sits there.

So we're working on a skill requiring you to play these four roles.

They correspond to a traditional teaching called the bases of success. The Buddha talks about them in terms of qualities you can emphasize in the process of settling down into concentration. The way he describes it sounds as if there are four different types of concentration: concentration based on desire, in other words, the consumer; concentration based on persistence, the agent; concentration based on intent, the observer; and concentration based on analysis, the judge.

When he talks about the right effort that leads to concentration, though, he includes all four functions. Right effort requires you to generate desire, exert persistence, uphold your intent to develop what's skillful and abandon what's unskillful. You have to use your discernment to figure out what's skillful and what's not skillful, and how to encourage what's skillful and discourage what's not. So concentration always requires all four.

The difference among the different types of concentration is mainly a matter of emphasis. It's important, though, that you remember you're here to understand how things work. Sometimes you hear people say that you're here to see things as they are, the implication being that you have to get very passive and watch things as they are on their own without your doing anything to them.

But that just takes a lot of these processes that the mind is engaged in and drives them underground. You have to be very frank about the fact that you are constructing things. And you're basically here meditating so that you can learn how to do it in a better way, to construct a path that leads you to something that's unconstructed. You have to make sure you don't confuse the path with the goal.

When all four of these roles are working together, then that's a true base for success. You're here to see not things as they are, but things as they function. As I mentioned last night, when the Buddha described his awakening in the simplest, shortest form, it was a principle of causality: what causes what, and how the process of causation functions, whether it's immediate or over the long term.

That's the sort of thing that can be found only by doing things and then judging the results. Commitment. Reflection. In the bases of success, the commitment gets divided into desire and persistence; the reflection gets divided into intent and analysis.

That's how the Dhamma is nourished. So feed it well.

## *The Making Of*

August 28, 2025

You may remember the days of movies on DVDs. If they had extra space on the DVD, they'd include a video on the making of the movie.

Often the video was more interesting than the movie itself. It explained how they created their special effects—these were more interesting before the days of computer graphics, the things they would have to do to create an impression.

Our approach to our thoughts as we meditate is like that.

You get into the thought world, and that's like being "in" the movie, allowing yourself to be deceived by the appearances. But the Buddha is having you step out to look at the making of your thoughts. That's where you get some reality, because the thought world is basically make-believe, but the act of making is real.

There's the word *saññā* in Pali, which means perception. It's been taken over into Thai, where it also means an agreement. Ajaan Suwat was commenting one time on how both meanings actually come together. When you agree that *x* means *y*, you're agreeing to make-believe.

So when you're "in" your perceptions, you're in an agreement to make-believe. As a meditator, you want to learn how to step out of that, because those thought worlds are states of becoming. As the Buddha said, when you have a craving for becoming, that craving is also going to create suffering. So we have to change our values.

Often we like our thought worlds because they're entertaining. We use our thoughts to figure things out—and sometimes not just to figure things out, but also to have some fun. And we think it's innocent fun.

It's like a novel written by a friend of mine about male and female Chinese deities engaged in a storytelling contest. In the novel you see the politics among the deities themselves as they compete in writing the story, and you also see the story as it goes from chapter to chapter.

It's a sad story, with people suffering all over the place. The deities kill off characters just for the fun of it. Then at the very end, Kuan Yin appears, representing Buddhism and the principle of kamma, saying, "Okay, now that you've made up this story, you're going to have to go down to Earth and *live* it." The final scene is of the

deities falling from heaven down to Earth, where they have to play the roles in the story.

It's the same with our states of becoming, our thought worlds: It's because of this pattern of making thought worlds that we get reborn, coming back again and again and again. The thought worlds that you like to go for now are the ones you're probably going to go for when you die, because you've etched these grooves in your mind.

So think about that when you find yourself entertaining thoughts while you meditate.

It's much more interesting to figure out how these things are formed. Look into the making of these things. That's why the Buddha taught dependent co-arising.

You've got these states of becoming. What are they based on? Trace them back: You're clinging to something, you're craving something. There was some contact at the senses that sparked that craving.

But those contacts wouldn't have sparked a craving if you hadn't had some tendencies in that direction already. That's why dependent co-arising doesn't start with contact. It goes back further and further, through name and form, consciousness, fabrications.

When you learn how to see these things in these terms, it allows you to step out. We get practice in these terms as we try to get the mind into concentration—as with fabrication. There's bodily fabrication—which is your breath. Verbal fabrication—directed thought and evaluation. And mental fabrication—perceptions and feelings. These are the things that create the illusion of a thought world. But they're also the things we focus on as we create a state of concentration. You focus on your breath. You think about the breath. Ask yourself, where is the breath comfortable? Where is it uncomfortable? How is it fitting in with the mind? How is the mind fitting in with the breath? And when there's a sense of ease, what do you do with it?

In the Buddha's images for the different jhānas, the first jhāna has the only image in which a conscious agent is doing something: a bathman kneading the water through the pile of soap powder, mixing it so that it's perfectly mixed. All the powder is moistened; all the water is absorbed by the powder. As the Buddha said, that's a symbol for allowing the ease and well-being, the rapture and refreshment, to seep throughout the body. You have to work it through the body, because sometimes there are obstacles in the body's energy field. And the man working it through stands for directed thought and evaluation.

Then there are perceptions and feelings. Of course, there's the feeling of pleasure. The perception is whatever perception allows you to be with the breath, with a sense of ease, with a sense of belonging, allowing the breath energies to fill the whole body, so that the ease and rapture have a medium that allows them to spread them throughout.

While you're doing this, there may be some thoughts in the back of your mind that you are the person doing it, but primarily you're focused on your actions—how to do them well. You want to learn to keep thinking in those terms.

The same with name and form: That's another one of the factors of dependent co-arising that come before contact. You've got the form of the body sitting right here, and it's composed of sensations of warmth, energy, solidity, and liquidity. You've got name, which includes intention and attention: your intention to stay with the breath, and the act of attention, where you're actually paying attention to what's going on, asking questions to help solidify your concentration. And there are more perceptions and feelings.

So you're learning how to think in terms of dependent co-arising as you get the mind into concentration. This gets you more and more aware of the *making* of concentration.

When you're aware of this, you can start looking at all your thought worlds in the same terms: the making of a thought about yesterday, the making of a thought about tomorrow, the making of the thoughts about your duties here at the monastery, the making of thoughts of things you're going to do when you leave the monastery.

The mind is doing these "making of" little films all the time. We're used to just falling into the film, enjoying the illusion of being someplace else, doing something else, but it's all make-believe.

What's more interesting is how you *make* the make-believe. That's real. That's where you begin to see things in terms of the four noble truths—where the Buddha talks about the clinging that *is* suffering, and the craving that goes into the clinging.

Ideally, you develop a sense of dispassion, seeing the allure of these thought worlds, but also the drawbacks of just wandering around from one thought world to another to another—like hobos, hopping from one train to another, ending up where? Northwestern North Dakota?

Where do your thought worlds take you? They drop you here, drop you there. They keep dropping you, but you don't mind, because you're going to make another

thought world, and then another one, and then another one. That's the attitude most people have.

They're not interested in the making of thought worlds, and so they fall for thought worlds continually. So how much longer do you want to fall for them, knowing that they *do* have their consequences?

Certain thoughts have a real pull, and you allow yourself to be pulled. They have their hook, and you allow yourself to be hooked, like a fish. Then, when the body is weak and is about to die, those old habits will come back.

So, what kind of habits do you want to develop? Do you want to have the habit of falling for the thought worlds, or the habit of being able to step back and look at the making of thought worlds from the outside?

If you can have that outside perspective, even at the moment of death, the result is going to be much better. You can learn how to stop fooling yourself, stop falling for your illusions, because you see how they're made.

It's like the video of the making of a *Star Wars* film I saw one time. I never actually saw the *Star Wars* films, but I did see a video about how they made some of them. They had robots that looked like they were walking on two arms. And they really did look like little robots, because you couldn't imagine a human being fitting into the space of that costume.

What they'd done was to put out a call for people who'd had their legs amputated. They dressed them up in these little robot costumes, and because their proportions were not like those of a regular human being, it created quite an illusion. But you realize that they had to find people who had lost their legs, people who had really suffered, to do that.

In the same way, not all thought worlds are innocent.

Even with the innocent-seeming ones, you have to watch out, because they get you addicted to your inner films. Then you get some other films that would actually involve some suffering for yourself or for other people, and you're primed to fall for them.

So think about *that* as you find yourself interested in your thought worlds. Take an interest, but take an interest in *the making of* the thought world, and you'll actually learn something of real substance.

## *Kamma for Freedom*

July 3, 2025

That passage we chanted just now sounds like bad news all down the line: aging, illness, death, separation. And on top of that, kamma.

For most people, kamma is a negative thing. It sounds like punishment coming in from your past bad actions. We can all think of bad things we've done in the past, and the idea that we're not done with those things yet, that there may be some bad results lurking around, waiting to pounce on us in the present moment or in the future, sounds pretty much like bad news.

But that's not how the Buddha meant it. After all, remember, he's teaching suffering and the end of suffering, and kamma explains both. The fact that it explains the end of suffering is what makes it positive.

As the Buddha's very clear, kamma doesn't mean that your present moment is totally shaped by the past. There's that saying you hear sometimes: that if you want to see a person's past actions, look at their present state; if you want to see their future state, look at their present actions. But that's much too simplistic.

It's actually opposed to what the Buddha himself said. His explanation was that if everything you experience right now were dependent on your past actions, there'd be no path you could follow to the end of suffering at all. As he points out, the state of your mind in the present moment plays a large role in shaping how you experience the results of past actions. Even past bad actions don't have to make you suffer if your present state of mind is good.

That's because what you're experiencing right now is the combination of three things: the results of past actions, your current intentions, and the results of your current intentions.

You can see this in the meditation. You focus on the breath in a certain way, and it doesn't take that much time to see results, either good or bad. If you have skill in the present moment, you can shape things really nicely. If you lack skill, then the range of what you can do is limited.

This is one of the reasons why we meditate, and why the meditation is focused on what we're doing right now in the present moment. You make up your mind to breathe in one way, and you can watch the results. If you don't like the results, you

can breathe in another way. Heavy, light, fast, slow, deep, shallow, short, long—there are lots of variations.

Some people find that the variations in the in-and-out breath aren't all that captivating. But when you start thinking about the breath energy in the body, then you get a real sense that not just one little area of the body is involved. The whole body is involved.

You can go through and make a survey. Where are the patterns of tension right now? Release them. Relax them. Go through the body systematically. You can change your experience of the body very quickly. You're taking advantage of the fact that present-moment kamma has a huge role to play. You may run into some obstacles created by past kamma—zones of tension that simply will not dissolve—but if you approach them in the right way, with the right attitude, you don't have to suffer from them.

In fact, if it weren't for your present intentions right now, you wouldn't be experiencing past kamma at all—which is one of the reasons why this is a theory of kamma that really is good for putting an end to suffering.

So, it's not kamma to tie you down. It's kamma for freedom.

It's the understanding of kamma that explains how you can develop a skill. You look at the results of what you've done, and you can change what you're going to do. If we didn't have this freedom, then, to say nothing of meditation, scientists couldn't do experiments. The experiments wouldn't have anything of real value to teach us, because the scientists would've been determined to design and run the experiment the way they did it. They would have had no choice. There would be no way that they could play around with the causes. The experiments wouldn't prove anything at all.

But when you can see which things you do actually make a difference and which things don't make a difference, you can get a sense of what causes what. It's because we can do that—because we have this ability to make choices in the present moment that don't have to be determined by the past—that we can learn things.

And specifically, we can learn how to put an end to suffering. This is why the Buddha said that the Dhamma is nourished by committing yourself to the path and then reflecting on the results. But then you don't just stop with the reflection. You commit yourself more. You learn from your reflection, make changes in what you're doing, and as a result, the results get better and better. This principle follows all the way through the practice.

Meditation is here to teach you about action. It's amazing that some people think that they can meditate without having any reference to the Buddha's teachings on kamma at all. Actually, kamma is what makes meditation worthwhile. It also tells you what you can actually learn from your meditation.

When I was in France recently, I was being interviewed by a person who came from a Tibetan tradition where they talk about how meditation teaches you about the true nature of reality out there.

So one of his questions was, "How does meditation do that?" I had to tell him, "Meditation isn't concerned with the nature of reality. It's concerned not so much with what things *are*, but with how things *function*."

That's something you can actually test as you meditate. Breathe in a certain way, and the results will come out a certain way. Breathe in another way, and they come out differently. You can hold different perceptions in your mind and see what effect the act of holding those perceptions can have on your experience of the body. Start with the images you have of what's happening with the breath, where it comes in the body when you breathe in, where it goes out, how it runs through the body as you're breathing in and out.

Or you can try the perception that it's not coming in from outside, that the energy is actually originating inside the body. Where does that start? In one spot? Two spots? In every cell? Can you change your perception of where it starts? See what that does.

Or just the idea that you're "watching" the breath: Sometimes that creates an internal image of you like a bird perched on your shoulders, looking through your eyes down at the body. That has one effect. How about thinking the perception of *wearing* the breath, being *bathed* in the breath? It's all around you, in the head, in the body. What does that do?

You're learning how your present-moment input does make a difference. Which is why when there are disturbances in the meditation, you're not going to ask yourself, "What did I do in a previous lifetime?" You ask, "What am I doing now? And what can I change in what I'm doing now?" It's all about action and result, and specifically, which kind of actions lead to suffering, which kind of actions lead away.

So when you think about kamma, don't think of it tying you down. After all, the Buddha's teachings are about how to free you from suffering. His teachings on kamma are designed to free you from suffering. They explain how and why it can be done.

If you had to suffer from the past, then Buddha wouldn't be able to help you. It's because you don't have to suffer, and the fact that you're lacking skills in the present moment, that makes it possible for the Buddha to teach you, "These are the skills you want to develop." And they will make a difference. They can form a path to the end of suffering.

So this is kamma for freedom. Try to have that image in mind every time you hear the word "kamma," because in the Buddha's teaching, that's what it is.

## *Things Aren't as They Should Be*

*October 1, 2025*

The common understanding of the Buddha's teachings on kamma is that all the pleasures and pains you experience right now come from your past actions; there's no way you can avoid them. But actually, there are two places in the Canon where the Buddha refutes that idea as being totally antithetical to what he taught.

There's one case where he hears that there are other people who teach that, so he goes and challenges them: "Is it true that you teach this?"

They say, "Yes."

"Then in that case, people are murderers, they steal, they have illicit sex, they lie, they take intoxicants, because of what was done in the past"—in other words, they have no choice in what they're going to do right now. They have no freedom to choose whether or not to do these things. "When you teach that," the Buddha said, "you leave people unprotected and bewildered."

Now, "bewildered" is the term he uses for our ordinary reaction to suffering. Suffering comes in ways that we don't understand. If you think that everything you're going to experience in terms of suffering or pleasure right now comes from past actions, there's nothing you can do about it. As the Buddha said, there wouldn't even be an idea of things that should or should not be done, because everything was already ordained by past actions. Anyone who taught that everything was already ordained by past actions, the Buddha said, doesn't deserve to be called a contemplative. That, for him, was strong criticism.

The other time was when someone comes and asks the Buddha, "Is it the case that all pleasures and pains come from what was done in the past?"

The Buddha replies, "Even the world knows that that's not the case." Then he gives a list of the different sources of pains—a list based on the medical theory of the time for why we have pain: Sometimes it has to do with bile, sometimes with phlegm, sometimes with the wind energies in the body—all of which, in the Buddha's analysis, would be coming from past actions.

But then there are other things, things you're doing right now, that could also give rise to pain. So here he's making the point that you can adopt the analogy of a doctor. If everything you experienced in terms of pleasure and pain depended on past actions, there would be nothing a doctor could do for you; there'd be no medicinal

treatment for you. You can't go back and change what you did, so you'd simply have to bear with the pains or pleasures until they ran out on their own. And they're certainly not going to run out on their own, because you keep on doing things.

So it's a really important part of the Buddha's teachings that what you're experiencing right now, particularly in terms of pleasure and pain, is not totally dependent on the past. There are some influences coming in from the past, of course, but what's really important is what you're doing right now, and you have the freedom to *choose* what to do right now.

This is why doctors can treat patients; this is why we can get something out of our meditation. There are things we can change. Sometimes we're told that awakening comes when you see, basically, that this is the way things are. But that term that's usually translated as, "knowledge and vision of the way things are"—*yathā-bhūta-ñāṇa-dassana*—really means knowledge and visions of how things become: in other words, understanding the process of causality. And you want to understand it not just for the sake of knowing, but for the sake of using it to go beyond causality to the end of suffering—to the deathless.

Meditation is not just simply a matter of watching. You're doing something, or as the Buddha says, you commit and then you reflect to see how well you're doing on the path. You're learning about cause and effect. This is why, when the Buddha gave his shortest description of his awakening, it was the principle of causality—in which some influences take time to bear fruit, and others bear fruit immediately: When  $x$  exists,  $y$  will exist; when  $x$  doesn't exist,  $y$  doesn't exist. It's immediate—it's in the present moment, and that's where you have your freedom.

Which is why what you're doing right now, meditating on the breath, can make a difference. Or if you're meditating on goodwill, meditating on the parts of the body, whatever you're doing right now can make a difference. To make a good difference, you have to be confident that you really *can* make a difference. Without that confidence, what are you doing here? So be confident that, yes, your choices do make a difference. Things are not totally determined by the past.

There's a phrase you often hear in Buddhist circles, that you have to accept that things are the way they should be. There's one way in which that's right, but a lot of ways in which it's wrong. It's right in the sense that, given the past and present conditions, you can't complain because this is the raw material you have to work with. But you don't just let it sit there and say, "Well, that's just the way it's got to be." That's what you're presented with, but you can learn skills to deal with what's coming up in the present moment and to handle it well, to do something good with it.

If you don't have the skills, then no matter what good things are coming up in the present moment, you can suffer from them. Like the instructions to relax as you meditate: Some people turn them into a real burden, a harsh duty that they have to do—relax. Try to have a better attitude toward it—you're *allowed* to relax. You're allowed to take things easy, not in the sense of being lazy, but in the sense that when you're trying to work with the breath, you don't have to be very tight about it. You don't clamp down on it. You loosen up and try to listen to it.

Listen to the body. What does it need? Have a sense of what the body seems to be trying to get as it breathes in, as it breathes out. It breathes in quest of well-being, so what direction is it leaning? That's an example of how, with even a very relaxed set of instructions, if you don't take it right, you can suffer from it.

Or the instructions on goodwill: We start out with certain phrases on goodwill as a way of educating ourselves. "May all beings understand the causes of true happiness and be willing and able to act on them." "May all beings look after themselves with ease." "May they be happy." But as you cultivate that attitude, you don't have to keep on repeating the phrases. As with every form of meditation where there's a phrase that you repeat, there comes a point where, if you really want the mind to settle down, you have to drop the phrase and just be with the feeling tone.

What you're doing right now can make a difference if you understand, if you have a set of skills to handle whatever comes up. Now, you do have to accept the fact that you've got a certain set of raw materials you're working with here, coming from your past actions. So, in that sense, the idea that things are as they should be helps you to develop an attitude of equanimity: This is what you've got to work with.

But you don't stop there, and this is where the idea that things are as they should be is actually very harmful. On the one hand, it seems to imply, "Well, it's good that they're this way." Or else, on the other hand, it's, "They have to be this way." Neither is true.

The world didn't have to be the way it is now, and it's certainly not good the way it is now. People have made choices, some very bad choices, but they didn't have to make those bad choices—in the same way that you don't have to make bad choices right now. You look at the way the world is and you realize, okay, this is an example of what happens when people are not careful, when they lack skill. The wise response to that is to decide that you want to be careful to develop some skill. You do that by acting and then reflecting on the results you get so that you can get better results the next time around.

That's what you can learn from the meditation. We're not here to simply see things as they are; we're here to see how things have come about and, learning from that, how they can be made to come about—how things can be. You can take something simple like this—the fact that you're talking to yourself about the breath, focusing on the breath; you have a perception of the breath, an image of how the breath flows in the body; you're trying to create a feeling of well-being: Okay, that's the activity. You can watch yourself doing that activity and you'll learn a lot.

In the beginning, the focus is mainly on the breath. As you get more skilled at that, then that focus turns to: What is the mind doing around the breath? You're committing yourself to this practice and then you reflect on what you're doing and the results you're getting. You reflect all around. That way, you start seeing things about the mind that you wouldn't have seen otherwise, when the mind wasn't so gathered—and these things can make a difference.

They can actually take you all the way to the end of suffering. They can open you up to a dimension that you wouldn't have expected—the dimension the Buddha calls the deathless.

It's striking how much he talks about the deathless—especially at the beginning of his teaching career—and what a key role it plays in his teachings.

When he decided to teach, after Sahampati Brahmā had come and pleaded with him, the Buddha surveyed the world and saw, “Oh, it's true. There are those who would benefit.” Then the first thing he said was, “Open are the doors to the deathless. Let those with ears show forth their conviction.”

When he went to teach the five brethren, even before he said anything about the middle way or the four noble truths, he said, “The deathless has been attained, and if you follow what I teach you, you can attain it, too.” When Sāriputta heard a very short synopsis of the Buddha's teachings and gained the Dhamma eye, he went back to see his friend, Moggallāna. Moggallāna, looking at him, said, “Your faculties are very bright. Have you attained the deathless?”

It's a simple concept that there could be this dimension, but there was some discussion of this concept at that time, about what it actually meant. There were those who thought that to be deathless, you had to find an unending source of food. In other words, you'd be deathless in time. What the Buddha discovered, though, is that you can experience the deathless only if you step outside of time—and you can do that. It's a possibility—a dimension where there's no need for food.

If you commit yourself to this practice and are really reflective and observant, you see that things are the way they are, and in this sense, they're not necessarily the

way they should be, simply that there's an orderliness to them. The Buddha never said the orderliness was good or bad, but it can be used. You can take advantage of it to reach the deathless. That's the good thing.

This is why there's that strange passage at the end of the sutta where the King Ajātasattu comes to see the Buddha, and the Buddha gives him one of the longest and most detailed Dhamma talks in the whole Canon. At the end, all the king can think about is that he wished he hadn't killed his father.

He leaves, and the Buddha addresses the monks. "The king has cut himself off at the root," he says. "If he hadn't killed his father, he would have gained the Dhamma eye right here, in this very seat." Then the sutta says, "Gratified, the monks delighted in the Blessed One's words."

It sounds a little heartless, that they're gratified, but what they're delighting in is the orderliness of the Dhamma. And the reason they're delighted in it is because it doesn't favor wealthy people, it doesn't favor powerful people. It's the same for everybody. It can be misused and abused, but it can also be used to attain the deathless. That's what's good about it.

There are a lot of things about causality, how it works itself out in the world, that are pretty horrifying—in terms of the cruel things that people can do to one another. The fact that things can be done to people means that they've probably got that kind of kamma in their past. But that doesn't excuse the people who keep on doing cruel things. So the way things are is not necessarily as they should be. They're just the way they are.

What you want to find out is *things as they can be*, and in particular, what can be done to put an end to suffering. Because things are not totally determined by the past, it is possible to do this. So have a strong sense of the power you have here in the present moment. If you commit yourself to the practice and are really reflective, you can use that power to gain results that you wouldn't have expected. They exceed anything you can expect.

Let that thought inspire you.

## *Goodwill Is Respect*

October 7, 2024

Some people say that the drive for survival explains everything. But if that were the case, there wouldn't be people wanting to die. And why do some people want to die? Because they feel that the avenues for happiness are all closed. This means that survival is good only as long as we feel that it can lead to happiness. The drive for happiness is what explains a lot of human behavior.

The Buddha was special in discovering that the drive for happiness doesn't have to be selfish, doesn't have to be harmful. It is possible to find a happiness that harms no one, a happiness that lasts. He respected his own desire for happiness and, through that, he was able to develop qualities of wisdom, purity, compassion.

And he respected other people's desire for happiness, too. When we extend thoughts of goodwill to others, we're not saying, as some people say, that we're basically *accepting* them. Actually, we're respecting their desire for happiness.

Now, this doesn't necessarily mean we respect the way they're looking for happiness. After all, a lot of people are looking for happiness in ways that are harmful to themselves, to other people, or to both. But the basic desire there is something we're going to respect.

We start within, looking for a happiness that doesn't harm people, realizing that if our happiness harms other people, one, they're not going to like it and they'll do what they can to destroy that happiness; and two, even if they're weak and can't destroy our happiness, still, the simple fact that we're doing things that are unskillful will lead to our own pain and suffering down the line.

So we're respecting both the desire for happiness *and* the principle of kamma. That's what genuine goodwill means.

Think about goodwill for yourself: We live for happiness, there's no way we can survive without it, so let's look for happiness in a way that's responsible.

The Buddha lists three ways that are responsible: generosity, virtue, and meditation, learning how to turn within and finding the resources within our body and minds—our *many* minds—to see what we can develop that would lead to that happiness.

Ajaan Lee talks about how human beings have so many good potentials within them that go undeveloped. So let's see what we can develop out of the breath. You can breathe in short, out short; in long, out long; in short, out long; in long, out short—heavy, light; deep, shallow; fast, slow. All kinds of ways of breathing. Explore this elementary property, this potential you have in the body.

You do that by paying a lot of attention. This is a lot of what respect is: You're paying careful attention to things, not just sloughing them off.

For most people, the breath doesn't have much potential. It's there, coming in, going out, and as long as it keeps on coming in, going out on its own, you can turn your attention to other things.

But what happens when you give it your full attention, i.e., all around? Think of the breath coming in and bathing the whole body. It's not so much that you're watching the breath. You're letting the body be bathed in the breath. You're feeling the breath wherever it can be felt.

All too often, the breath doesn't get much room in the body because we're using the breath energies in the body to help us think. But now we can let the thoughts fall away and maintain only enough thinking to be aware of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out. Let the breath have the whole body. And try to be as sensitive as you can—as *attentive* as you can—because the needs of the body will change. For a while, long breathing will feel good. After a while, it begins to feel tiring. So let the breath grow shorter. And keep looking for other ways in which the breath-needs of the body may change.

As the breath gets more comfortable, and there's a sense that the breathing fills the whole body, it begins to calm down. Your awareness of the present moment comes more to the fore.

Again, be alert to that sense of simple awareness watching the breath. It's not totally bare, because you're giving it tasks to do. But try to make it as simple as possible. The simpler you make your awareness, the more mental activities you begin to see.

After all, there's not just the breath and the awareness. There are thoughts about the breath, perceptions about the breath. There's a sutta where the Buddha talks about how Ven. Sāriputta—his foremost student in discernment—could see all kinds of mental activities going on even as the mind settled into very deep stages of absorption.

So there are things to observe here. You want to see how you're putting this state of body and mind together: by the way you breathe, by the way you talk to yourself, by the perceptions you hold in mind, and the feelings you focus on.

Be careful as you focus on the feelings, because if you generate a feeling of ease and then leave the breath to focus just on the ease, that's going to last for a little while and then start to blur out.

Sometimes you hear the warning that if you get into concentration, you'll get so absorbed in pleasure that you won't want to go further on in insight. But actually, if you do your concentration right, you have to learn the right attitude toward the pleasure: It's there, you let it do its work, but it's not your focal point. The focal topic is the breath.

So, show some respect for your breath. See what it can do. Show respect for what's going on in the mind.

We live in a world where disrespect is so rampant. And look what happens. People don't respect one another's happiness, and so it becomes easy to kill other people, easy to force them to starve. You even hear people saying, "We have too many redundant mouths in the world. Maybe it would be good to have some depopulation. People are living too long. Defund the health system." It's all out of disrespect.

If we bring an attitude of respect to our own happiness, it makes us more sensitive to how we should bring an attitude of respect toward other people's happiness, too. In this way, we can live together.

So, what we're doing here is not just finding some peace inside, but also creating a peaceful, responsible example that we can then bring out into the world. One of the things we want to know—when we're wishing for other beings to be happy—is: What does that mean? What do they have to do? After all, your wish on its own is not going to be enough.

The Buddha says that it's through their skillful actions that they'll find happiness. That's one of the reasons why he says that if you really care about your happiness, you not only refrain from harming other people, but you also don't get them to do harm. And you try to discourage them from doing harm.

But how well do you know what it means not to do harm? You learn that from developing your sensitivities inside, so that you can be clearer and clearer on where you've been causing harm in subtle ways, and what exactly it means to find true happiness.

The Buddha lists one of the forms of suffering as not getting what you want. He goes down the list of things that people want: They're subject to aging and they'd rather be free from aging. They're subject to illness and death, and they'd rather be free from illness and death. They're subject to sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair, and they'd rather be free of those things as well.

But then you look at his own quest. The simple fact of wanting these things is not the problem, he showed. The problem lies in hoping that they will go away *just through our wanting*.

He tried another approach. He searched for a method: Is there a path of practice that can take you past these things? Is there a course of action? He found that there *was*. So the desire for the end of aging, etc., is to be encouraged if it gets you to practice in line with that path, that course of action.

He also showed that if you want to get past pain, distress, and despair, you have to look for the deathless, and you have to act in ways that will lead to the deathless. That's how you find true happiness.

When you've found that happiness within yourself, you're in a much better position to help other people find it within themselves, too. Otherwise, it's guesswork: You listen to what the Buddha had to say, it sounds reasonable, but you don't really *know*. It's when you really know through experience: That's when you can really be helpful, because you can see clearly where people are causing needless affliction to themselves and to others.

So a large part of having goodwill for others lies in having goodwill for ourselves. This is why the commentaries recommend that you start with goodwill for yourself—not only because it's easier to feel goodwill for yourself than it is for a lot of other people, but also because you're going to have to find out within yourself what it means to be truly happy and what has to be done to be truly happy. Then your views on happiness will have some authority.

So this process of meditating that we're doing right here: It's not selfish. It's showing respect inside and out. In that way, it's a gift to ourselves and a gift to the world around us.

## *Learning from the Precepts*

October 14, 2025

I received a message from a student today who had been caught in a sudden set of circumstances where she ended up telling a lie, and she was wondering if there might be some leniency around the precepts for laypeople who live a more difficult life than those of us who live in the monastery—leniency, I guess, in the sense of not being punished for the breaking of a precept.

Well, the precepts are not a question of punishment or of a judge who does or doesn't grant leniency. Precepts are training rules. You're supposed to learn from following them. The more strictly you hold to them, the more you learn. This is part of the Buddha's general teachings on how to get to know your mind at the same time that you're developing good qualities in the mind. Those two things go together.

After all, if you act on intentions that you *know* are unskillful, you're putting up a resistance. You're putting up a wall, saying at that point: The Buddha doesn't matter; the teachings of the ajaans and all the effort they went to re-establish the Dhamma, they don't matter. When you have that kind of wall in your mind, you're not going to learn anything. It's when you act on impulses that are skillful that the mind is a lot more open to itself, more open to judging the results of acting on those impulses, to see how harmless they really are. In this way, you're training both the heart and the mind at the same time. You're training the heart in the desire to be harmless, and the mind in the desire to know itself.

Remember, of course, that the Pali word *citta* means both heart and mind. If you're going to train one side of it, you've got to train the other side, too. Otherwise, it's like exercising your body: Exercising only the right side, but not the left side, you get out of balance. When you exercise both sides, then things are in balance. You become strong, and your strength doesn't become a burden or an actual hindrance.

So. What do you learn? Well, one thing: You learn about being mindful. You have to keep the precept in mind.

And you have to be alert, because things are going to come up *fast*, both inside and outside.

I find this particularly relevant in the case that the student was talking about today: By telling a lie, she saved herself a lot of inconvenience. But that means your

convenience is more important than the precept. Is that really your sense of values? If it is, you've learned about your values, but then you've got to say: "This attitude is getting in the way of my training. I've got to do something about it."

Sometimes you lie out of the desire to please, to be friendly, to not make waves. Okay, which is more important: holding to the precept, realizing that in the long run it's going to be better to tell the truth, or just going for the quick fix of being pleasing?

If you hold by the precept, you're learning the set of values that underlies the third quality, which is ardency.

Remember that when Ajaan Lee was describing these three qualities of mindfulness, alertness, and ardency, ardency for him was the insight factor of the three. This is different from what you get in the commentary. The commentary defines the word *sampajañña*—which we define as "alertness"—as "clear comprehension": understanding things in terms of the three characteristics and other aspects of discernment. Now, you find this not at all in the Canon. Every time the Canon talks about alertness or *sampajañña*, it means knowing what you're doing while you're doing it.

The commentary says, though, "Well, everybody knows what they're doing while they're doing it. Even jackals know that they're howling when they howl. Babies know that they're sucking on their mother's breast when they're sucking on their mother's breast." But do they really know? Their minds are off someplace else. When the commentary gets snide like this, you know its interpretation is on shaky ground. To be alert, you have to be really on top of what you're doing, clear about what you're doing.

Now, as you're ardent in trying to do things well, you begin to see more clearly what gets in the way. If you're not especially ardent, things can get in the way and yet they seem okay. Ardency contains the value judgment that you really do want to hold by the precepts and to learn the lessons they have to teach.

You begin to understand layers and layers in the mind. After all, how do you break a precept? You do it intentionally. How clear are you about your intentions? Most people are not clear at all. You ask them, "Why did you do that?" and they have to pause and think for a minute. If you really were on top of your intentions, you wouldn't have to pause.

Actually, there are many layers in your intentions, some of which are skillful, some of which are not. And you're not going to see them if you keep breaking the precepts. You *will* see them, though, if you try not to break them. That's when you begin to focus on the Buddha's teaching about where craving is located, which is

basically the same as, “Where is the *allure* of these things that would pull you away?” What do you like about them?

As the texts say, the allure could be anywhere. It could be in a perception; it could be in a thought construct. You read the long list of possibilities and you can get overwhelmed by the fact that the allure could be anywhere, but the Buddha isn't describing things to overwhelm you. He's giving you leads. Follow this lead and see where it takes you. Follow that lead and see where it takes you. The list opens your mind to possibilities.

For instance, look at your perceptions. Look at your perception of a situation. Look at the narratives you tell yourself about a situation, especially the ones that would say, “I don't have to observe the precept here,” or, “The precepts don't apply here.” What in that narrative has its pull? Or is the allure in the desire to please? Or in the desire for convenience? Exactly where is that craving located? Where is the allure located?

When you try to thwart these things, that's when you know them. The Buddha gives the analogy of a dam. You put a dam across the river, and it holds the water back. But it doesn't just hold the water back. In the course of putting the dam across the river, you learn a lot about the currents flowing beneath the surface.

So remember, these precepts are called training rules for a good reason. You train the mind so that you can get to know it. The more you train the mind in the precepts, the more open it is with itself. The fact that you're able to stick with the precepts makes you more willing to open up, look inside, with the confidence that you *can* do something about what you find inside if you run into things you don't like to see about yourself.

This, too, teaches you a lesson: that your sense of self is fluid. It can be tricky because it's fluid, in that you find yourself identifying with things that you wouldn't expect sometimes. This fluidity seeps into your perceptions, seeps into your thought constructs, seeps into your inner conversations. But you can make it seep in a good way.

That's a large part of the practice right there: seeing things you don't like about yourself but not having to identify with them. Identify with the precepts. Create a sense of self around the precepts, for the time being at least, so that you can undo your sense of self that would be willing to break the precepts.

Just because you've been a certain kind of person for who knows how long doesn't mean you have to continue being that kind of person. After all, the Buddha said that if people couldn't learn how to develop skillful qualities and abandon

unskillful ones, there'd be no point in his teaching. It's because we *can* do this that he taught. So he has confidence in you that you can change your ways. And you find that you're able to live with yourself more and more, and be open to yourself more and more, the more you hold by the precepts.

There's a tendency sometimes to divide the practice of Buddhism into two areas: one is the area of making merit, and the other is the practice leading to nibbāna. Making merit is considered to be a lowly practice. Of course, it's better than not making merit but it's more than that. It's not divorced from the practice leading to nibbāna. After all, you make merit for a good life in future lifetimes, and part of that is holding to the precepts. When we chant the factors of the noble eightfold path, we run into the precepts again. The difference simply is in how you use them. If you use them for training the mind so that it can get to understand itself, you're actually doing both practices at once. It's simply a matter of how refined you are in the lessons you learn, how observant you are.

This is one of the reasons why we practice meditation by developing mindfulness and concentration. That practice builds on the precepts but also turns around and helps us to be even stricter with ourselves in holding to the precepts.

After all, the Dhamma eye has as one of its rewards the fact that your precepts now become pleasing to the noble ones. In other words, you hold to them continually in a way that's conducive to concentration.

So there's a lot to learn by observing the precepts: this quest to always choose the right thing, the most skillful thing to do and say and think. See them as a training, an opportunity to come to know yourself and to be open to yourself, so that the mind is open to the heart, the heart is open to the mind—and both sides grow.

## *The Culture of the Practice*

May 28, 2024

There's an aspect of the Buddha's awakening that often gets overlooked, and that's the social dimension in the second knowledge he gained that night.

You may remember the second knowledge was in response to a question that came from the first knowledge: Why is it that birth goes up and down? You can be born to something good and then fall to a bad rebirth, and then go back up again and down again.

The analogy the Buddha gave was like throwing a stick up into the air. Sometimes it lands on this end, sometimes it lands on that end, sometimes it lands splat in the middle. Why?

In the course of the second knowledge, he saw that it was because of the kamma of beings. Stated simply: Those who acted on skillful intentions tended to go to good destinations. Those who acted on unskillful intentions tended to go to bad destinations. It's made complex by the fact that you're not doing just one action per lifetime. You're doing many actions, and your views in the course of a lifetime can change for the better or for the worse. So it's possible that you can do good things now and go to a bad destination or do bad things now and go to a good destination—because of the other things you've been doing and the views you hold.

But where do you get those views? One of the sources is how you attend to things, in other words, what you notice, what you don't notice. The other source is other people.

Those who acted on skillful intentions tended to listen and have respect for the noble ones. Those who acted on unskillful intentions tended to have no respect, or maybe they respected those who they shouldn't respect. It's a result of this insight that the question of who you hang out with, who you associate with, plays such a large role in the Buddha's descriptions of the practice. As the Buddha said to Ven. Ānanda one time, admirable friendship is not just half of the practice, it's the *whole*. Without having the Buddha as our admirable friend, we wouldn't know anything about the possibility of putting an end to suffering.

He's our most admirable friend because he pointed this out to us. But he not only pointed it out, he also set a good example. Admirable friendship is not just a question

of having a friend who's admirable, it requires noticing what good qualities the admirable friend has and trying to replicate them in your own behavior.

The four qualities the Buddha pointed out—and these apply not only to monks and nuns, but also to lay people—were (1) conviction, (2) virtue, (3) generosity, and (4) discernment. These are the qualities that create the culture of awakening, the culture of the practice.

There has been a tendency in Buddhist circles, especially in the 19th and 20th centuries, to reduce everything to technique. You learn a particular meditation technique, you follow it, and you gain awakening without really having to engage with anyone else or change your values. But the problem of focusing exclusively on a technique without the culture means that once the technique is placed in a different culture, it takes on a new meaning.

The other day I read a piece by someone claiming to be a lineage holder in the forest tradition, talking about how she had trouble one time in a meditation retreat because she had chosen a really nice zafu and a really nice place in the meditation hall, then gone to dinner, come back, and found that someone else had taken her place. She struggled with this for quite a while. Now, this is the sort of thing you might talk to a psychotherapist about. But I can imagine if she had actually talked to Ajaan Chah about this, he would've said, "Look, you don't need a zafu at all. Go and sit on the ground under a tree."

A different set of values—no coddling, no pampering, learning some contentment. This is one of the aspects of the culture of the noble ones. You're content with the things that come to you on an external level in terms of food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. In terms of shelter, if your zafu is in the wrong place or a place you don't like, well, you put up with it because there are more important things you've got to focus on. It's not the case that having the right zafu or the right spot in the room will make the difference between whether you gain awakening or not. It's more a question of the qualities of mind you develop, the strengths of mind you develop.

But making a big deal about the right zafu and the place you claimed for yourself: That's what happens when you take the technique out of the culture. Things can get distorted.

So think about what it means to engage in admirable friendship. Conviction means being convinced of the fact of the Buddha's awakening. Of the many different things he came to know in the course of his awakening, he pointed out three as being

especially important. The first is the fact of rebirth and the fact that your rebirth goes up and down, up and down. It's not a steady, nice progress.

The second thing you hold to is the fact that rebirth depends on your kamma, as I said. Believing in that focuses you really intensely on being convinced in the power of your actions. What you intentionally do, say, and think will have an impact on shaping your life, in this lifetime and in future ones. So you have to be careful about what you do and say and think.

Third, there's the fact that you can put an end to suffering through your efforts. To take on this type of conviction means that you have respect for your admirable friend. This is why we have such a vocabulary of respect around here. We respect the Buddha for what he shows about the potential we have within us. He has us respect our desire for true happiness: (1) that it is possible in general, and (2) that we—men, women, children, young old—can do it.

That's the message of the awakening: It is possible to find a dimension that you touch inside that's totally free from suffering. I've had people ask, "Well, given that we're conditioned beings, how can we know anything unconditioned?" That's putting the cart before the horse. You're defining yourself and then, in your definition, limiting yourself. As the Buddha said, no matter how you define yourself, you're going to limit yourself. So put the question of defining who you are aside. Focus on learning from other people who are skillful how to act skillfully, how to talk to yourself, to behave more skillfully, how to stick with the path. Those things are worth thinking about.

That's how the Buddha progressed. He tried to find what was skillful, and he didn't rest content until he found a level of skill that brought him to something totally unconditioned. Given that he found out what it is possible to know, that was the first principle.

Then the next question is, how do you define yourself in the light of what it's possible to know? For the purpose of the path, you define yourself as competent to do this, confident that you can be responsible for your actions. You define yourself as someone who really desires a happiness that doesn't disappoint, that doesn't harm anybody. There are a lot of value adjustments there. In fact, there's a lot to the path as a whole that involves value judgments.

We see this in all the rest of the qualities of an admirable friend. Virtue is important. In fact, it's so important that the Buddha said that losing your virtue would be one of the most serious losses in your life. Which means that when the choice comes between maintaining the precepts and maybe having to sacrifice other

things *vs.* sacrificing the precepts for the sake of other things, you sacrifice the other things. That's a very strong value judgment. To maintain it, you want to live with people who maintain those values as well.

So again, there's a social aspect of the practice. It's part of the culture.

The same with generosity, when you're able to share and happy to share: You try to develop the quality of the mind where you can see that you have something more than you need and you're happy to give it to others. You think about their needs as well. This expands your mind—and your heart.

It's the basis for the whole culture we have here. The economy here at the monastery is an economy of gifts. You notice that we don't have courses where you have to pay  $x$  amount or where there's a suggested donation for how much you pay. The best way to repay the teacher is to put the teachings into practice. The teachings are given as a gift. Everything is given as a gift. You look around the room here. The money that went into building this building was a gift, down to every nail.

We're living off the generosity of others, which requires that we develop an attitude of generosity as well. As the Buddha said, if you're not generous, if you're stingy with your belongings, stingy with your Dhamma, you can't even get into right concentration, much less gain awakening.

The fourth quality is discernment. It's defined as penetrative knowledge of arising and passing away. Now, you're not just watching things coming and going and accepting them. The knowledge has to be penetrative, which means that you have to understand cause and effect. When something good comes, *why* does it come, and particularly, where does it come from in your own mind? When something bad comes, where did it come from in your own mind? This is the knowledge that's meant to give you an understanding into where suffering comes from and how you can put an end to it.

You also realize that your attitude toward suffering has to be noble. In other words, you accept responsibility for whether you're going to suffer or not, and then you look into the machinations of the mind to see where they're creating suffering.

You may say, well, it's because there's pain here, there's pain there. But why do you suffer around the pain? Because of the stories you tell to yourself, the images you hold in mind, the way you grab hold of a pain.

You may notice this as you're breathing in, breathing out, and there's a pain in part of the body. There may be a tendency to actually try to use the pain as the part of the body that's doing breathing. In other words, you're taking on the pain and

grabbing on to it for the future, for the next breath. We're not talking about long-term future here, just the immediate future.

Do you have to do that? Can you see the pain as something that's past, past, past, going away, going away? How does that change your relationship to it? How does that change the relationship to how much you can endure? After all, those are the values you look for in this culture. You want people who have powers of endurance, people who have wisdom. They can put up with difficulties to inspire you to put up with difficulties.

One time Ajaan Fuang announced an all-night sit without much advance notice. I had been working hard that day. I told him I didn't think I could do it, and he said, "Well, is it going to kill you?"

"No."

He said, "Then you can do it."

Think of that question you hear every now and then in the forest tradition: "Are you afraid to die?" In any other culture, the obvious answer would be Yes. In the culture of the forest tradition, though, you'd be embarrassed to say Yes. They're expecting a greater nobility out of you, which is why this is such a good culture for the purpose of becoming responsible. Respect and nobility are all part of becoming a respectable person yourself, a noble person yourself—because that's what's required in this path.

The culture is all part of it. The system of values is all part of it. The Buddha didn't just discover a *vipassanā* technique or a samatha technique. He discovered how cause and effect operate in the world and he also discovered the best use of that knowledge. Of all things he came to learn—about rebirth, about kamma, about how suffering happens—he would all invest it into: "What is the best use of this?" That's a question of values. When your values are noble, you're going to come up with a noble answer to those questions.

That's what this culture is for.

## *To Be an Adult*

June 7, 2024

A few mornings ago, I was down here sweeping around the sala, looking out across the valley, and it was a very pretty scene: very peaceful, very green, much greener than it usually is this time of the year.

But then there was the sound of artillery shells booming off in the distance, again and again and again. I was reminded that the human world can be a very beautiful place but that sometimes its beauty can disguise a lot of danger, a lot of defilement—which means that we have to be heedful.

I was reminded of a book I read once, *The Magic Mountain*, by Thomas Mann. In the climactic scene in the novel, one of the characters has decided to go on a cross-country skiing hike in the Alps and he gets swallowed up in a storm. He just barely makes it to one of those little cabins they have in the Swiss Alps for people who might be stranded like that. There was food, firewood, matches, blankets.

He was able to get out of the storm, take some food, light a fire, and lie down. He quickly fell asleep and had a very vivid dream: He was in a bucolic scene, somewhat like ancient Greece, walking through fields. The peasants in the fields seemed very happy with their work, and they kept motioning to a temple on the hillside at the end of the valley where their fields were located. He finally made it to the temple and went inside. There he found some old women sacrificing babies and bathed in blood.

Again, a bucolic scene, very pleasant, very peaceful, but hiding who knows what—some pretty dark and gruesome things.

So as we're sitting here meditating in a quiet spot, we have to keep reminding ourselves that the world is a dangerous place. We have to use our opportunity to meditate, to practice the Dhamma in all ways—in terms of generosity, virtue, concentration, and discernment—as protection, both from dangers within ourselves and from dangers outside.

As the Buddha says, the real dangers outside are not so much what people can do to us, they're what other people can get us to do. They can get us to break the precepts, they can get us to give in to passion, aversion, and delusion, telling us that greed is good, anger is good—all kinds of horrible things they can say are good. If we

believe them and act on those beliefs, that becomes our kamma—and that’s the danger.

So we have to look into our own minds. Where are we susceptible to these kinds of messages? We’ve got to learn how to see through them. No matter who tells them, no matter how many people tell us, no matter how many times they tell us, we have to hold firm.

After all, who else can protect us? As the Buddha said, “The self is its own mainstay. Who else could your mainstay be?”

We’ve depended on people who love us to shelter us, to bring us into this world, but their love and protection can extend only so far. From that point on, we have to learn how to depend on ourselves and basically become *adults*.

Of all the religions in the world, the Buddha’s teaching is the one religion designed for adults. Others teach dependence on this or that power, this or that outside being who’s going to help you, encouraging a childlike dependence and devotion.

In contrast, think of when the Buddha was teaching his son. Again and again and again, it was how to be an adult. His lessons when Rāhula was seven: Take responsibility for your actions. Stop and think—when you do something, what will the consequences be? If you foresee any negative consequences, i.e., any harm for yourself or others, don’t do it.

Here the Buddha’s teaching Rāhula to be an adult, to take responsibility for what he’s doing, take responsibility for the results of his actions. And notice, the Buddha has Rāhula judge his actions both by the motivation and by the results.

In the West, our discussions of ethics tend to switch back and forth between the two: Should a person be judged by his or her motivation for acting, or by the results of the action? This line of thinking comes from trying to determine how much guilt you might assign to an action that’s not quite skillful. You pass final judgment and then stop. You’re finished with the matter.

Whereas the Buddha is teaching you a skill. When you’re learning a skill—how to be skillful in your thoughts, your words, and your deeds—both the motivation and the results are relevant, because you can learn from both. You’re judging a work in progress.

So the Buddha is teaching Rāhula to be honest, to have integrity, to have compassion, to show restraint—all the signs of a good healthy ego, all the signs of a good healthy adult.

Another time, when he taught Rāhula meditation, he started out by saying, “Make your mind like earth. Disgusting things get thrown on the earth, but the earth doesn’t react.” He didn’t say it, but he implied that when pleasant things like perfume get poured on the earth, the earth doesn’t react, either.

Quick reactivity to our likes and dislikes is part of being a child. Here, though, the Buddha’s saying to grow up and show some restraint—not only outside but also inside.

This is especially necessary as you meditate, because you’re going to find negative things coming up in the meditation. If you let yourself get blown away by them or brought under their influence, the meditation won’t go very far.

Sometimes it’s said that the Buddha is teaching non-reactivity so that we can also be non-judgmental and not pass judgment on things. Actually, he’s teaching non-reactivity so that you can become a *better* judge of what should and shouldn’t be done. When you’re faced with a certain situation, what would be the best thing to do? Don’t just go on your impulses; don’t just go on your emotions. Look carefully and then use your powers of judgment judiciously.

Again and again, the Buddha kept teaching Rāhula—even when Rāhula was young—to be an adult. Our problem is that even though we’re adults, we often act like children. So it’s good to remind ourselves: The Buddha is teaching us to be self-reliant, to be mature. This is why we train the mind.

Society likes to keep adults like children. They dangle flashy things in front of you, saying, “If you want this, do what we tell you.” They don’t care whether you’re really an adult or not. In fact, advertisers, politicians, the people who run the media: They all want to keep you like children.

The sad thing is that I’ve been to Dhamma centers where they feel that keeping you like a child is not enough, they want to keep you like an infant. Everything gets watered down so that you don’t feel too challenged, you don’t feel that you’re being judged, you don’t feel like anybody’s going to say anything negative about you. They’re creating an infant’s world, and then tell you that that’s the Dhamma.

It’s like those little pictures you see in books from China, and especially Taiwan, where monks are portrayed as little tiny baby monks. The people putting food in the monk’s bowls are little tiny children—as if the Buddhist teachings were for children.

In fact, in the past, starting around the time of the Sung Dynasty, that was the attitude in China: Buddhism was for weak-minded women and children. It taught a

fairy-tale world in which good intentions lead to happiness and bad intentions lead to harm, but that's not the way of the real world—that's what they said.

They got it all backwards. The real world where people get ahead by doing harmful things: That's the fantasy world where people think they can get away with doing whatever they want without thought of the consequences. The people who want to live in that world: Those are the children. They're the ones who cause a lot of damage. Whereas the people who take responsibility for their actions are the real adults, the ones who provide protection.

As the Buddha said, when trouble comes into the world, it's because of fools. He compared it to a house on fire. Once one house is on fire, it can set fire to the houses around it. You want to make sure that you don't pick up fire from other people, and that you don't start a fire within yourself.

So learn to be responsible. You might say, "I'm already very responsible," but there's still a lot within the mind where you tend to indulge in your defilements with the attitude of, "Well, a little indulgence here and there doesn't matter."

That attitude of "It doesn't matter": That's a child's attitude. That's what we've got to learn to outgrow.

## *Disconnecting*

March 28, 2024

There's a story in the Canon of a man who's lost his son, his very young son. He goes every day to the cemetery and cries out, "Where have you gone, my only son? Where have you gone, my only son?"

One of those days, on the way back to home, he stops off to pay respect to the Buddha. The Buddha asks him, "Where have you been? You look like someone out of your mind."

The man explains, and the Buddha says, "Yes, sorrow and lamentation come from those who are dear, from those we love."

The man says, "What do you mean? Those we love give us nothing but joy."

So he leaves. He runs into a group of gamblers, tells them what the Buddha said, and they agree with him that the Buddha's wrong. It's interesting: It's gamblers who believe that nothing but joy comes from those we love. After all, love is a gamble. Every time you have a child, you have no idea what that child's background is, where it's coming from, what your karmic connection is with that child. When you get married, you have no idea how your partner will change—or how you will change. And of course, no matter how good the relationship, it's going to end.

At any rate, word of the conversation between the man and the gamblers gets to King Pasenadi, who at that point is not yet a follower of the Buddha. He calls in Mallikā, his queen, who *is* a follower of the Buddha, and he says, "This Buddha of yours: Listen to what he said."

And she says, "Well, if he says that, it must be true."

He chases her out of the room. "Everything your teacher says, you say it must be true! What kind of attitude is that?"

So she sends a messenger to the Buddha to ask him what he meant. The Buddha explains how people go out of their minds out of grief when losing their loved ones: He tells the story of a husband who has lost his wife and goes wandering from street to street, saying, "Have you seen my wife? Have you seen my wife?"

He tells of a wife who's lost her husband and does the same thing. He tells of one case where a young woman and a young man have been married, but her relatives are

not happy with the marriage even though the two of them are happy. So the relatives lure her away and try to marry her off to somebody else. She sends word to her husband, who then kills her and kills himself, with the idea that they'll be together after death. But who knows where they're going after death?

The point is that people do extreme things under the force of love, and the grief that comes when they've lost love or a loved one.

The messenger comes back to the queen and tells her what the Buddha said. In this case, she doesn't simply repeat the Buddha's words to the king. Instead, she goes to him and takes a more independent tack. She asks the king, "Do you love your other queens?"

"Yes, I do."

"If they were to die, what would that do to you?"

He said, "That would change my very life."

"Do you love your son? Do you love your daughter?"

"Yes. Yes."

"Do you love me?"

"Yes, of course."

"If something were to happen to me, how would that affect you?"

"It would change my very life."

Then she says—"*That's* what the Buddha meant when he said that sorrow and lamentation come from those we love."

This is the first time Pasenadi listens to the Dhamma and decides that it's actually good, and that the Buddha is worthy of homage.

We think that interconnectedness is a good thing, but think of all the sorrow that the Buddha saw as he reflected on his many past lives in that first watch of the night: birth, aging, death. Pleasure, pain, death. Eating this, eating that, death. Repeat. Over and over and over again. When you think about all the different relationships you've had through the vast span of time you've been wandering around, how everybody you meet has in the past been your father, and your mother, and your brother, and your sister, and your son, and your daughter, it's a staggering thought. We've been through this so many times and yet we tend to think that love has meaning. But when there are so many different people and there's so much loss, after a while it becomes meaningless. Yet we keep going back for more, largely because we don't know how to find happiness inside.

It's because of our sense of lack that we go looking for others to fill up the lack. Then, when they can't fill it up, we look for somebody else, somebody else, somebody else. That's because inter-being comes down to inter-eating. The Buddha says we're defined as beings by the fact that we eat, physically and mentally. This is what we all have in common. Our mental feeding is what makes us beings to begin with. Wherever there's a being, there has to be a world in which you look for food. And often you're in conflict with others, who are looking for the same food. There are even cases where we take those others as our food, and they want to take us as theirs.

This kind of reflection is what gave rise to *samvega* in the Buddha's mind. The world would be so much better, and we would be so much happier, if we didn't have to feed, especially off one another.

Think about the world that Kurt Vonnegut imagines in *The Sirens of Titan*. Two of the characters go to the planet Mercury and discover that it's a honeycombed crystal: one side facing the sun where it's very hot, the other side facing outer space where it's very cold. As a result, the crystal sings. Little beings called Harmoniums live off the vibrations of the crystal. They're shaped like little kites, with little suction cups on each corner. They crawl around inside the crystal until they find a spot where the vibrations are really good and then they move in to attach themselves there. Because they can feed off the vibrations, they don't have to feed off of one another. They don't need one another. Instead, they send two telepathic messages to one another. The first message is, "Here I am, here I am, here I am." The second message is, "So glad you are, so glad you are, so glad you are." Pure empathetic joy, both for themselves and for others, again, because there's no need to feed off of one another.

This makes you think of the Brahmās. They've become Brahmās from developing the brahmavihāras. They don't need one another. They're able to generate happiness inside—independently. That means that their goodwill, compassion, and equanimity are total and pure. Of course, even their lives aren't totally perfect. They can stay there for a while but then they fall back down.

Yet it makes you think about nibbāna, where the Buddha says there's no need to feed at all. Ever. There's no hunger, no nostalgia, no regret—because that's the other part of having relationships: No matter how much you love one another, there's always regret in one way or another: over things you said, things you did, things you *didn't* say and *didn't* do—and sometimes that sears into your heart because you were feeding off the other person. But when you can finally reach a state where there's no need to feed, there's no need to depend on anything—then your compassion can be pure, as can your empathetic joy.

So this is the way out. When we see the suffering that comes from interconnectedness, we realize that the best way would be to pull ourselves out of that, so that we don't have to be part of that interconnected network.

Now, you can't just rip yourself out and leave a gaping hole. The Buddha says that the path requires generosity. If you don't have a generous heart and mind, you can't get into right concentration—and forget about genuine discernment. So generosity is something you can learn to do well. This is how you create good interconnections. Instead of feeding and taking in, you're giving, distributing out. It goes in the opposite direction.

The same with the precepts: There are some grubby ways you can feed, but you decide, "No, that's beneath me." In cases where other people are going to take advantage of you if you hold to the precepts, well, you're willing to give it to them. Let them feed; you can abstain. That's your gift.

And with the meditation, you're looking directly inside for your sources of well-being. An important part of the meditation is developing the brahmavihāras: having goodwill for all, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity for all. You're giving, giving, giving, and you're creating good connections—but not for the sake of connections. They're for the sake of repaying whatever old debts you've got. That's how you free yourself.

We can get very sentimental about the idea of interconnectedness, but you have to remember: Inter-being is inter-eating. It's all very unstable, very precarious, and can be very hurtful and harmful. When the Buddha taught dependent co-arising, it wasn't to emphasize the fact that we're all independently helping one another. It was to point out that we're dependent on things that can change unreliably. We're dependent on relationships that feed. When the Buddha taught causality to young novices and female novices, he started out with the image of feeding.

Then you look at dependent co-arising: It's all "dependent on this, dependent on that." It's all very precarious, and when it's done in ignorance, it leads to suffering. When it's done with knowledge, it becomes part of the path, and when the path arrives at the goal, the whole thing just falls apart.

So the Buddha doesn't celebrate interdependence. He does celebrate the fact that you can choose to be interdependent in a skillful way through your actions, through your thoughts, words, and deeds. But there's also that danger: You can act in skillful ways and then get waylaid, get distracted, get born in a comfortable place, and then forget about the practice.

One of the sad things about *saṃsāra* is that it's almost a sick joke. You work really hard to develop good qualities in the mind, and then you can get reborn in a good place. Sometimes it's so good that you get very lazy, very complacent, very used to having all your wishes fulfilled. You can imagine what kind of habits you develop—and then you fall.

Ajaan Fuang had a couple of students who were extremely difficult people to please. One time he mentioned to me, “They were devas in their previous lifetimes. They're used to having things their way. Now they've come back down to earth and discover they have to work for a living again and put up with all kinds of things, and they don't have the strength of character to deal with that.”

So interdependence is not necessarily good. You can make it relatively good by creating connections of good kamma. But again, think of that as the repayment of a debt, so that you can become more and more independent inside. After all, getting out is something we do individually. It's not the case that when the Buddha gained awakening, he pulled a lot of beings with him. There were other beings who wanted to go there, and that's why he was able to teach them. But they had to come to that desire independently. There has to be something inside you that's independent of others and says, “I want out!”

This may sound selfish, but think of *saṃsāra* as an addiction. If you're addicted to cocaine and you want to help other people who are also addicted, the best thing to do is get over your addiction first, and then you're in a position to help: You know the difficulties involved, you know how you overcame those difficulties, and you can show other people how good it is to be off cocaine and that they can do it, too. If you're still addicted, you can't inspire anyone with your advice on how to get not addicted. You can't do the job for them but if you can get over your addiction, you *can* be a good example to show that it is possible. That's the best we can do for one another.

We interconnect through our choices, so make good choices, realizing that the best choices are the ones where you work on developing your own independent sources of happiness inside so that you don't need to depend on others. You don't need to lean on them. You don't need to feed off of them, and you don't need to suffer and cause the suffering that comes when you make your happiness depend on others. When you're dependent, you're creating suffering not only for yourself but also for the people around you.

When you learn how to be independent, you're not creating any suffering and you're not leaning on others. That's when your goodwill can be pure. Your

compassion, your empathetic joy, your equanimity can all be pure. They can be all-around and universal—because you yourself are free.

## *Samvegic Ironies*

September 26, 2024

When Ajaan Lee gives his beginning instructions in meditation in the book *Frames of Reference*, he starts by having you develop the right attitude—one of *samvega*. He has you think of the body and all the struggles that we have to keep the body going. Yet what do we have in a body? Take out the parts, take out the elements—it's not much, and yet it runs our lives.

That's one way to develop *samvega*.

But sometimes, to develop *samvega*, you have to take in the bigger picture. Think about the Buddha on the night of his awakening: He gained his first knowledge about rebirth, seeing that he had gone up and down, up and down, up and down, many, many times. The question was, why? In the second knowledge, he saw why: It was because of *kamma*. He looked at the bigger picture, and he saw that beings were dying and being reborn in line with their *kamma*, their intentional actions.

It was all very complex but it went nowhere: People would develop, get better and better, get to a comfortable place, then get lazy and complacent, and then fall. Up and down, up and down. His instinctive reaction was, "I've got to get out." Then the question was, "How do you get out?"

You look at the world. You see people being oppressed and you want to help them. But all too often, when people who have been oppressed get in a position of power, they start becoming oppressors. People who have been abused start abusing. You see it again and again and again.

The only people who are really trustworthy are those who are on their way out—the noble ones. The only people whose virtue is firm are, at the very least, stream-enterers, those who have had their first glimpse of the deathless. And they're going to be around for only seven more lifetimes at most.

Otherwise, everybody is unreliable. They can be very good, but all too often their goodness depends on unstable conditions. They listen to the wise ones, they listen to the noble ones, they try to act in line with right view, but then they fall from that—for one reason or another—and start acting on wrong view.

It's scary, because that's the way *we've* been all along: doing good, getting results, and not appreciating the connection between the good *we've* done and the results *we*

get—or the bad we’ve done and the bad results we get. It’s as if we never learn.

So it’s good to think about the Buddha’s vision of the universe to see what you can learn from it. One lesson is that even though people are not necessarily true to the principles of morality, and *you* haven’t been true to the principles of morality, still, that doesn’t mean that the principles are not objective.

I was reading an article recently by an author saying that scientists have discovered that monkeys have moral behavior in their tribes, but it’s all very self-centered, all in self-interest. Then the author reasoned that if the evolutionary roots of morality are tainted, human morality has to be tainted, too—and that a morality based on self-interest has to be hypocritical and unreliable.

The principles of kamma and rebirth, though, show that morality has objective standards: no killing, no stealing, no lying, no illicit sex, no taking of intoxicants, no harsh speech, no idle chatter, no divisive speech, no lying. These are principles that govern how people die and are reborn throughout time and space, regardless of culture, so it’s in your enlightened self-interest to follow them. If you don’t afflict other people, you won’t have to suffer affliction yourself.

Whether you believe these principles or not, that’s how things happen. So there is an objective basis. The irony is that this vision of the world—which gives morality an objective basis—also shows why people tend to be unreliable in how they follow through with their good intentions. They don’t see the connection between their actions and their results because there are times when the results take a long, long time to show themselves. So people easily fall back on the quick fix, whatever gets pleasure right now. You can’t rely on people like that.

Of course, the scary thing is that as long as you’re not on your way out, you can’t be relied on, either: If you haven’t had a view of the deathless, your sense of right and wrong depends very much on conditions being a certain way. When those conditions are not met, your idea of right and wrong can change very easily.

When life is going relatively well, it’s a lot easier to be moral, a lot easier to do good for yourself and for other people. But when things get very iffy—and they can do that very easily, when you suddenly find yourself starving or deprived of shelter—what are you going to do? Can you trust yourself? That’s the scary part of saṃsāra.

Think about what the Buddha said about saṃsāra: how many times you’ve been up and down, up and down, up and down. You lose count. The other irony, of course, is that the vision that shows that morality is objective also shows why people are unreliable; and it also shows that the only people who are reliable are the ones who are on their way out.

So think about this: Wherever your thoughts could go that would pull you away from your object of concentration, you have to realize they're taking you to a place that's unreliable. The only way to make yourself reliable is through the practice.

That's what your breath offers. It may not seem like much—just in and out, in and out—but the way you develop your mind as you stay with that in and out, explore it, experiment with it, use it as a mirror for seeing what's going on in the mind, can take you to freedom. And it can make you reliable. When you can depend on yourself, that's when you have a true refuge.

As the Buddha said, "*Attāhi attano nātho*: The self is its own refuge." And who else could be your refuge? So look at yourself. How good a refuge are you? *You* have to take responsibility for this, so that you can be one of those people who are reliable and leave a good example for the world even as you leave.

After all, leaving doesn't mean you don't care about the world. You do care and you leave behind this good example. And to get out, you can't just run away. You have to be generous, you have to be virtuous, you have to have compassion, goodwill, empathetic joy: all good social virtues.

But you also have to remember—again and again—that they're not reliable until you've trained the mind and learned how to understand the process of how intentions happen—how good intentions happen, how bad intentions happen, what's the allure of good intentions, what's the allure of bad intentions, what are their drawbacks—so that you develop dispassion.

Another irony: Dispassion is what makes you reliable. It's what makes you free. The prospect of dispassion doesn't seem all that attractive. As the Buddha pointed out, you have to be passionate about the path in order to do it, but it requires that you become dispassionate for other things that so you really can be reliable. Ultimately, though, you reach a point where total freedom comes from having dispassion for the path itself.

So, there are many ironies in the path. You have to care about goodness, and really caring about it—really wanting to be reliable—has to take you to a point where you get dispassionate. You have to learn to see dispassion as a good thing. You're growing up. In becoming reliable, you become free.

Those are the lessons that the Buddha learned from his second knowledge and that led through to his third: the knowledge where he realized that what kept all that round and round and round of rebirth going was circling around in his own heart. He would have to take care of that if he was going to solve the problem outside and actually be a reliable help to the world.

Through his quest for true happiness, look at what he left behind. Out of his compassion, he taught other people how to find the same happiness as well. His quest for happiness has meant more for the human race than anything else that has ever happened.

So learn to think in those terms. These are not the terms that most of us grew up with, but that doesn't mean we can't learn how to adopt them and adapt ourselves so they provide the framework for our sense of what's worth doing in life—and why sitting here training your mind right now is the best thing you can be doing, for your own sake and for the sake of everyone else.

## *A Sense of Duty*

July 12, 2025

The Buddhist view of the world at large can be pretty bleak. There's a forecast in the Pali Canon that the quality of human life is going to deteriorate over time. People's lifetimes will get shorter. People will treat one another with more and more violence. It'll get so bad that it reaches a "sword interval," during which people hunt one another down like game.

But then things will turn around. People will realize that they have to learn how to live by more humane values, and the world will begin to develop again until the time of the next Buddha. But in the meantime, as I said, it's pretty bleak. On top of that, you have the different forest ajaans making forecasts about the world in the near future, and some of them are pretty bleak as well.

So, what do you do in a world so bleak? Most of us swing back and forth between hope and despair. The Buddha says there *is* hope, but it has to be placed in our actions. Our actions are our personal refuge. The extent to which they can change the world outside, though, is going to depend on a lot of things beyond our control.

The real hope is the solidity we can build inside, the qualities we can build in the mind. Some of those qualities are dependent just on how we relate to ourselves, and others are dependent on how we relate to others. There's a passage where the Buddha said that if you look out after others, you're looking out after yourself. In other words, looking out after other people requires strengths that are good to have for your own sake, too: equanimity, kindness, goodwill, and a lot of endurance and patience.

That's because people are difficult. Each of us is a kamma producer, free to make whatever choices we want to make, and you can't force choices on other people. Even the Buddha realized that he couldn't force the path on everybody. There's that passage where a brahman comes to see him and asks, "Is the whole world going to go to awakening? Or a half? Or a third?" The Buddha doesn't answer.

Ven. Ānanda gets upset because he thinks the brahman will be offended over the Buddha's silence. So he pulls the brahman aside and tells him that the Buddha is like an expert gatekeeper to a fortress. The gatekeeper walks around the fortress and he sees that, aside from the gate, there's no place that anyone could come into the fortress. There's not even a hole big enough for a cat to slip through.

So, what does he know? He doesn't know how many people are going to come in and out of the fortress. But he *does* know that all those who go in and out of the fortress will have to go by the gate.

In the same way, the Buddha doesn't know how many people are going to gain awakening, because each person has the choice to practice or not to practice. But he does know that if they follow the path—as he expressed it, the path of skillful action, thoughts, words and deeds; the four establishings of mindfulness; and the seven factors for awakening—then they'll get to awakening.

So it's up to us to make the choice. We should ask ourselves, "Where are we going to place our hopes?" The only thing we have within our power is our choices, so place your major hopes there. But again, you can't stop with empty hopes. You have to do things right. You have to foster the right attitude, because some of the goodness we develop, as I said, depends on how we interact with others. If our interaction swings back and forth in line with our hopes and despair, it's not going to be dependable.

What the Buddha recommends is an attitude where you know you have some duties and you follow those duties. That's what he taught from the very beginning. As he said, his duty as a teacher was to give you a clear sense of what should and should not be done.

In terms of skillful and unskillful actions, skillful actions should be developed, unskillful actions should be abandoned. In terms of the four noble truths, suffering should be comprehended—in other words, you should see that suffering is in the clinging to the aggregates. That takes a lot of effort to comprehend because we tend to see suffering in other places. But this, the Buddha said, is where the real suffering is. So you want to comprehend that. How do you cling? Why do you cling?

That gets to the second noble truth, which is the origination of suffering. Where in the mind does this suffering come from? It comes from craving. Three types in particular: craving for sensuality, for becoming, and for non-becoming.

Sensuality is our fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures, planning sensual pleasures.

Becoming is when you have a desire for something, and you get a sense of what world that desired object exists in and how you can enter into that world and take on a role, take on an identity in that world. We do this in our thoughts very often. You think of something you want. Where is it? What would you have to do in order to get it? That's becoming. The Buddha says that even though we enjoy that, and most of our thinking is in those terms, the craving that leads to becoming is making us suffer.

And finally, there's craving for non-becoming. You've got a world and an identity, and you realize they're not working out. They're not what you wanted. You feel more and more confined by them. You want to get out, want to destroy them. You'd prefer oblivion. But that desire, too, causes suffering. That's a craving that, ironically, leads to more becoming. You take on an identity as a person who wants non-becoming. That becomes your new becoming.

So when you see these things happening in the mind, your duty is to abandon them.

The duty with regard to the third noble truth, the cessation of suffering, is to realize it: realizing that when the craving stops, when you abandon all passion for your craving, then the suffering stops.

You gain that realization by developing the path, which boils down to virtue, concentration, and discernment. That's the duty with regard to the fourth noble truth,

These are your duties. Now, no one's imposing them on you, aside from the fact that suffering imposes them. If you really want to get beyond suffering, these are the things you have to do.

It's important that you have a strong sense that if something is a duty, you do it. And it will see you through. No matter how bleak things are outside, no matter how hopeful things are outside, you stick by your duties and you'll be safe. The happiness you get will be reliable, because you've become a reliable person.

There's the story they tell, the true story, of Shackleton going down to Antarctica on the *Endeavor*. He had a crew he'd pulled together. Their plan was to land their ship on one side of Antarctica, go across the continent—walking all the way to the South Pole and then over to the opposite shore—and someone else was going to come pick them up to take them home.

But they couldn't even get to the coast. Their ship was locked in the ice, and they had to abandon it. Things looked pretty bleak—who was going to help them? There was no help anywhere for thousands of miles away. But their attitude was: "Things may look bleak, but if we're going to survive, it's going to depend on our doing our duties."

Whatever was required, they were going to do it. If it turned out that they didn't survive, at least it wouldn't have been because they had shirked their duties. So they stuck by their duties, even when things were looking really, really bleak. But they managed to get out. All of them survived.

Now, they didn't accomplish their original aim, but they did survive because they had a strong sense of duty, and ultimately, that's what counts. As we practice the Dhamma, we should have the same attitude, that our strong sense of duty will see us through.

Now, in terms of the goodness we want to leave behind in the world, we do our best. It's part of our generosity. It's part of developing our perfections. But what other people will do with the goodness we've left behind is totally beyond our control.

Think of the Buddha toward the end of his life. One of the last things he said to the monks was that if they decided that any of the minor rules in the Vinaya should be rescinded, they could go ahead and rescind them. Now, here the Buddha had been spending 45 years setting up the Vinaya. He'd put a lot of thought, a lot of care, into formulating the Vinaya rules. And he had said again and again that the long life of the religion would depend on the monks not adding new rules and not taking away any of the rules he had established.

But he showed at the end of his life that he wasn't possessive of the Vinaya. That was one of the things he had to leave behind. He had to let go. So he said, okay, if you want to change any of the minor rules, go ahead.

Now, in some ways that was a challenge to the monks: It offered them the opportunity to show that even though they were allowed to change the rules, they were going to be loyal to the Buddha's vision, loyal to his compassion in setting out the rules. So they met the challenge: They decided not to change any of the rules.

That became a principle that's been held to ever since. Now, every now and then you get some monks who say, "Hey, we should change the rules, bring them more up-to-date. After all, the Buddha himself changed the rules"—which shows that there is the constant tendency for things to get worn down and thrown away. You leave good things behind in the world, and there will be people who want to tear them down and destroy them. You have to accept that fact.

But you can't let it make you despondent. You can keep up your spirits by focusing more on the good qualities you're developing. Like the people in the expedition: Their main aim was to do something no one had ever done before, which was to walk across the continent of Antarctica, but that didn't happen. What did happen was that they cared for one another, saw one another through, and everyone on the expedition survived.

So we live in this world that can be very bleak, but you want your goodness to survive and to thrive. You can't make your goodness depend on your hopes for how good the world is going to be. You place your hopes on trying to be as skillful as you

can in all your actions. You notice that if you do something and you think it's going to be harmless but it actually causes harm, you don't do that anymore. You learn to train yourself.

There's where hope lies: in your ability to observe your own actions, your ability to learn to become more and more truthful and honest with yourself as to what your real intentions are when you act, what you're actually doing when you act, and what the results are.

Your duty is to be observant and to try to learn from that. As the Buddha said, the Dhamma is nourished by commitment and reflection. You want to learn how to be as skillful as possible in committing and in reflecting, and then committing and reflecting again. That way, at the very least, you learn you're your actions and your goodness becomes solid, because it's based on something solid—your strong sense of duty that this is what has to be done.

If we feel that our emotions are needed, well, you know how reliable your emotions are. They come and go. Hope comes and then despair, and then despair and then hope.

We were talking today about how when people are fully awakened, they don't need a lot of emotion to be compassionate. They don't need a lot of emotion or a lot of anger to get stirred up to do something to help people who are being mistreated. They just see that this is what needs to be done, and they have none of the selfishness that would require a strong emotion to overcome it.

Again: a strong sense of duty. That's a lot more reliable than your emotions. So do your best to develop that sense. Your own goodness will become more reliable for you and for the people around you.

## *Delight in Conviction*

September 5, 2025

The Buddha tells about how he saw the world before he went out into the forest. It was like a river that was drying up, and there were fish in the river, fighting one another over that last little bit of water before it all dried up. Of course, they were all going to die—the winners *and* the losers. Everywhere he looked where he might want to find happiness in the world, somebody had already made a claim to it. So if he was going to find his happiness out there, he was going to have to fight people off.

Then he realized that the problem was inside his own heart, and that he could solve the problem inside his own heart as well.

That's the message of his awakening. And not just *his* awakening, not just his solution of his own problem. The way he taught about his awakening was meant to help us realize that we can solve our problems, too—again, by looking inside.

This is why we meditate, bringing the mind into the present moment where we can see it in action and figure out where we're causing ourselves suffering—and where we can find the strength inside so that we don't have to suffer.

One of those strengths is conviction in the Buddha's awakening—not just that it was a good event for him, but also that it has meaning for us. What he learned about the principles of kamma, in particular, has a lot of implications for us in our search for happiness. As he saw, people would fare through the world up and down, based on their actions. Their actions were shaped by their intentions. Their intentions were shaped by their views. The way these things worked out was pretty complex, but the basic principle was simple: You act on skillful intentions, the result is happiness. You act on unskillful intentions, the result is suffering, pain. Of course, you look at your life, and it's not the case that you do nothing but good actions, nothing but bad actions. There's a mixture. But what's important is that, as you go through life and you realize you've made mistakes, you admit the mistakes and you try to develop right view. Then your actions really do make a difference. Believing in that gives you the energy to try to do your best.

There are people out there, just as there were people in the Buddha's time, who say that you're powerless. Either actions are not real at all, or even though they are real, they have no impact on shaping your life. Or they have an impact, but it's totally

deterministic. In other words, what you did in the past determines what you do now. With views like that, there's not much hope to change your ways. But as the Buddha saw, what we experience in the present moment is shaped partly by our past actions, but more importantly by our present actions, our present intentions. And our present intentions can be freely chosen. They don't have to be determined by the past. Which means we can learn.

As he said, he would teach people to abandon unskillful actions and to develop skillful ones. If they couldn't have done that, he wouldn't have taught it. But the fact is that they can. And if doing that didn't lead to happiness, he wouldn't have taught it, either. But the fact is that it does. So, what he's telling you is that you have power. You can train your mind. And he showed through his example that training the mind can take you really far.

This is what he's asking us to have conviction in—and it's a good thing to be convinced of. Would you want to be convinced that your actions had no meaning? Would you want to be convinced that there is no pattern in acting on good intentions or bad intentions? It's good to hold to that principle. You may not *know* it yet. After all, it took the Buddha a long time to gain his awakening, and he had to learn lots and lots of lessons in the course of that time. So we're tapping into his knowledge. We're tapping into his wisdom, borrowing it for the time being until we can confirm it in ourselves.

So take joy in that fact. This is called delighting in the Dhamma. We look at the world outside, and if we're looking for happiness out there, we will find some. The Buddha doesn't deny that. But it's not reliable. It comes and it goes. People give us happiness and then they decide to take it away. Sometimes they take it away in situations where there's not much we can do about it. And if our happiness depends on what we can get from other people, we're in a really bad shape. There are people who love us, but the time will come when we'll be parted from them. Or there are people who love us and then decide they don't love us anymore. This happens, too. Or there are people we have to depend on, but we learn that they're not as dependable as we thought they were.

So if you're looking for a reliable happiness, you've got to look inside. Of course, you look at yourself and you ask yourself, "Am I very dependable?" Well, maybe not yet. But you can work on it. Again, if we couldn't develop skillful qualities, the Buddha wouldn't have taught us that. But the thing is, we can. And he shows by his example that you can find something really reliable inside when you do.

This is what conviction means in the context of the Buddhist teachings—not that you believe that he’s going to come and save you, but that what he saw in his awakening is a good guide to how you’re going to live your life. And you delight in that Dhamma.

We live in a world where there has been a Buddha, someone who understood the problems of suffering, who not only solved the problem for himself, but also laid out the teaching so that others could solve the problem for themselves. That’s a good world to live in.

So think about that when you sit down to meditate. You’re focusing on your mind in the present moment because your mind in the present moment has a lot of potential power, and you want to learn how to use it well. There are a lot of potentials you have here for understanding yourself, understanding your breath, understanding the way you talk to yourself, understanding the perceptions you hold in mind—even the feelings you focus on.

These are not just random things. They’re things that you play a role in shaping. With some good guidance, you can learn how to shape them well. The Buddha is offering that guidance. So learn how to take delight in that fact. And realize that you’re also going to learn to develop some strength from it. After all, if you believe in your freedom to choose wisely, you’ll put more effort into doing that.

This is a lot of what it means to develop your strengths inside. We all have this potential to do well, but if you believe that you don’t have it, or that it’s not going to make a difference, then it’s hard to stir up that potential. It’s hard to realize it.

It’s like being lost in a forest. If you believe that there’s no way out of the forest, you give up pretty easily. You run into this obstacle, that obstacle, and you lose strength. You lose hope. But if you believe there’s got to be a way out—after all, you found your way in there to begin with, so there must be a way out—then you don’t let the obstacles get you down. And you’ll find you have resources of strength that you wouldn’t have imagined otherwise.

I remember the first time when Ajaan Fuang had us sit and meditate all night. I didn’t believe we could do it. But then he told stories of the forest monks sitting all night long. And you have to think, “Well, they’re human beings. I’m a human being. If they can do it, there must be a way to do it.” When you believe there is a way out, that’s a lot of the strength you need right there, in the belief. And it’s not just an empty belief. There have been lots of people who’ve found the way out before. When you have confidence in that, conviction in that, that makes you strong. And you can delight in that strength. That gives you even more energy.

So learn to think in ways that give you more strength. All too often, our internal conversation can be pretty discouraging. We tend to limit ourselves in ways that we really don't have to. Part of it's out of laziness; part of it's out of just a sense of hopelessness, disappointment. But you have to realize that the Buddha himself went through periods when things looked pretty hopeless and disappointing. But he was able to find the strength that he had in himself not to let those disappointments overcome him.

As he said, the strengths he found in himself—conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment—were things that other people can find in themselves, too. And you're one of those people. So find strength in your conviction in the Buddha's awakening, because it does have a lot of meaning for your life. It's not just an incident in his life or in the distant past. It's one of the events that defines the world in which we find ourselves right now. And it helps us to redefine ourselves in terms of our sense of what we're capable of.

So make the most of it.

## *The Buddha's Wisdom*

November 7, 2024

When we hear the word “wisdom,” we usually think of wise sayings, the sort of thing you find in books where you have one per page. You read them, they put your mind at peace. They remind you of important things that you tend to forget, or that you’re holding on to when you don’t need to hold on. You read them and you get a sense of peace because they seem to be coming from a peaceful mind.

The Buddha has wise sayings like this. That’s one of the reasons why the Dhammapada is so popular—short sayings that you can hold in mind and that make you feel peaceful. Because the way you talk to yourself is often very unwise, it’s good to have new voices inside.

But the Buddha saw that for wisdom to stick, it had to be more than just wise sayings. There had to be a training. He saw that there was an ultimate peace in the mind that couldn’t be found simply by repeating wise things to yourself or thinking skillful thoughts. You had to take the mind apart to see what the real problem was.

He identifies the problem for you in the four noble truths: The problem is suffering—the suffering we inflict on ourselves but don’t have to. He defined this suffering as clinging to the five aggregates, and he defined clinging as desire and passion.

The cause of suffering is craving. Craving, too, is desire and passion, the difference being that the word for craving, *taṇhā*, is also the word for thirst—you’re looking for something to feed on. With the word for clinging, *upādāna*—also desire and passion—you’re feeding on something. You’ve found what you want, or something similar to what you want, and you’re holding on to it. The fact that you’re still feeding means you’re not full. You’re trying to take things in. There’s still desire, there’s still passion—there’s still a lack—and you think you’re filling the lack.

But the Buddha points out that that’s a really precarious position, being dependent on something like that. The fact that it’s precarious and you’re not satisfied: That’s where the suffering is.

He said it is possible also to put an end to that suffering, which of course means putting an end to the desire and passion. That sounds kind of scary, but he promises that it’s the ultimate happiness.

We think we're gaining something from feeding ourselves, but we're actually getting in the way of our happiness. So as he analyzes it, he says the cause for the suffering that we feel in the world doesn't come from things outside. It comes from within the mind.

The mind is talking to itself in an unwise way. To begin with, you have the messages you send from one moment to the next: telling you what to watch out for, what's important—basically, telling you *where* to pay attention, and *how* to pay attention. You're sending messages that you then pick up.

Sometimes other messages come in that don't seem to be coming from the present moment. They're coming from someplace else. The Buddha identifies these as voices coming from the past—your past kamma.

Ajaan Lee describes them, in some cases, as other consciousnesses in your body. Why are there other consciousnesses in your body? Well, there are little beings in your body. Some you can see; some you can't. But they, too, would be a manifestation of past kamma.

Or you can think of them as the committee of the mind. You have lots of old habits, old ways in which you've looked for happiness in the past, and they come bubbling up to join the committee and make their suggestions.

As in a Thai phrase, "*suam roi*," they step into the footprints of your inner conversation so that you can't see *their* footprints. And they seem to be you talking to you, they seem to *be* you, but they come from someplace else—maybe an old you. But still you have to learn how to not listen to these voices, not take them on.

This is one of the reasons why, when the Buddha explains suffering and the causes of suffering in dependent co-arising, so many things come prior to sensory contact. Before you even see or hear or think anything, the mind is already primed, sometimes by your opinions, sometimes by your perceptions—the labels you slap on things. You're already looking for something, and what you're looking for is usually based on ignorance.

Ignorance of what? Ignorance of the real problem, which is that you're causing suffering through your desires and passions.

What sets the Buddha apart from other wise teachers is that he offers a real training. You borrow his wisdom to train your actions and to learn how to create your own wisdom. That training, of course, is the noble eightfold path, which can also be expressed in the triple training of heightened virtue, heightened mind—or concentration—and heightened discernment.

These are the practices that help you become more sensitive to what's going on in your mind, to help get rid of your ignorance so that you can see exactly where you're causing yourself suffering and where you don't have to.

The Buddha recommends the practice of virtue, beginning with the five precepts, giving you something new to tell yourself: Watch out for these actions. Don't do these actions. Don't kill; don't steal; don't engage in illicit sex; don't lie; don't take intoxicants.

You can break these precepts only intentionally, which means that you have to become very sensitive to your intentions. In other words, if you step on an ant but didn't intend to, or you intentionally stepped on it but you perceived it as something else—not a living being—you don't break the precept. That draws your attention to your intentions and your perceptions.

At the same time, he reminds you, you've got to try to be as harmless as possible. You get more and more sensitive to the ways in which you do cause harm—some of which are expressed in the precepts, and others which are not, but they become part of your virtue.

After all, virtue is expressed not only in precepts, but also in principles like contentment, modesty, restraint: ways in which you can look at your impact on the world and the impact of your actions on your mind, to see where you're causing harm, so that you make up your mind you don't want to cause that harm anymore.

The precepts also require that you become honest with yourself. This is a really important principle in the practice because—especially as you get into concentration—you see that even in a quiet state, the mind can delude itself. So you want to be really honest about what you're doing and the results you're getting.

The practice of concentration actually begins with mindfulness: The Buddha gives you new things to keep in mind, not just the precepts. Now you're going to focus on, say, just the breath in and of itself, or feelings or mind states just in and of themselves. But it's good to start with the breath, because everything else revolves around that.

You're ardent, alert, and mindful. Ardent in trying to do this well. Alert in watching what you're actually doing. And mindful to have a sense of what you've learned from the past about what's skillful and what's not skillful, so that if something unskillful comes up, you recognize it as unskillful and also remember how to deal with it.

The Buddha talks about the main obstacles to concentration as being the five hindrances: sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, and doubt. The factors of right concentration, the first level of right concentration, are also five: directed thought, evaluation, singleness of preoccupation, rapture, pleasure. Those factors, together, form the state you're trying to create through right mindfulness.

The texts talk about getting rid of the hindrances first and then developing the factors of the first jhāna. But sometimes you work on the factors of jhāna first, and then you run into the hindrances.

Ajaan Lee gave a Dhamma talk one time in which he pointed out how each of the five factors of jhāna counteracts a specific hindrance. It's the only talk I can find in all of his teachings where he tried to make that connection. The nun who was taking notes on the talk could remember only two of them.

Maybe he sensed that the correspondence was kind of artificial, because you can't say, "I'm going to counteract sensual desire with just one factor of jhāna." You need to have all five of them working together.

But each of them does have a specialty, and you can see that it does actually deal with a particular hindrance. For example, you start out with directed thought: That's to counteract sensual desire. Instead of thinking about pleasures of the senses, you give yourself something better to think about.

First you remind yourself of the drawbacks of sensual pleasures, and the drawbacks of the quality the Buddha calls *sensuality* in the mind. Those are two different things. Sensuality is your fascination with planning for sensual pleasures or—once you've experienced a good one, as when you've had a good meal—then talking to yourself about what a great meal it was, priming yourself for more.

That's what you're actually trying to counteract, those kinds of thoughts. So the Buddha recommends giving yourself something better to think about: Think about the breath and what it can do in the body.

Then you bring in evaluation. That's to counteract doubt—the doubts you might have about, "Is this really going to work? Am I capable of doing this? Can I really get good results?" If you sit there doubting, nothing's going to happen.

But you tell yourself, "Well, let's give it a try. Let's really evaluate what's going on in the mind. What is skillful in the mind? What's not? What's skillful in the breath and what's not? What happens when you actually develop skillful qualities?" You

begin to see cause and effect in action. You breathe in a certain way and there are certain results. You perceive the breath in a certain way and there are certain results.

Try to think of the breath, not so much as the air coming in and out through the nose. Think of it in the Buddha's terms—as part of the wind element in the body itself—the energy that flows through the body that *allows* the air to come in, *allows* the air to go out. It also accompanies the flow of the blood, the flow of impulses through your nerves. Try to get sensitive to those energies and see what that sensitivity does for the mind.

As you begin to see that it really does make a difference, that overcomes your doubt. It allows you to settle down, get deeper into concentration.

It also allows for singleness of preoccupation, which counteracts restlessness and anxiety. You stay with one thing. You remind yourself: Whatever happens in the world, whatever can happen in the world, you're going to need mindfulness, you're going to need alertness, you're going to need the qualities you develop in concentration.

You realize that giving your full attention right here is really important, for otherwise you're not going to learn anything. Or you'll just learn bits and pieces. So this is your safe place, because as you stay here, you're developing all the good qualities you're going to need.

When you have these three factors of the first jhāna, then the other two come: pleasure, which helps to counteract ill will, and rapture, which energizes you and helps to counteract sloth and torpor.

When you've got these five factors working together, they can help ward off the hindrances, and create a real sense of stillness in the mind. You're going to need this stillness if you really want to see your mind. You don't know your thoughts until you've gotten out of them.

You can be in what you think are really clever, skillful thoughts, but you're not really going to know whether they truly are clever, truly are skillful, until you've stepped out of them and have been quiet for a while, and put yourself in a position where you can see the thoughts as a process.

In other words, instead of getting into the content of the thoughts, you step outside and see the process of how they arise. Where they begin is a little stirring in the energy of the body, which could either be physical or mental. You see how the mind slaps a perception on that little stirring, saying, "Oh, this is a thought about *x*." Then it runs with it—fabricates more thoughts around it.

You're not going to see this happening until you've stepped out of your thoughts. This is why you need to get the mind really absorbed in the sense of the breath filling the body: so that your sense of your awareness is larger than the thoughts; surrounds the thoughts, allows you to step out of them.

It also gives you a sense of well-being, which you're going to need to stay out of your thoughts. After all, our suffering is feeding on things, and we feed on the pleasures of the senses because we think they're the best things we can find to eat. Well, the meditation gives you a better pleasure to feed on: the pleasures of form—the body as felt from within—rather than the pleasures of sensuality.

That way, you can begin to question your old ways of feeding—your old ways of suffering. You actually see the equation that the Buddha made: Feeding is suffering.

The concentration also allows you to get into a position where you can apply the analysis the Buddha would often recommend, which consists of five-steps. You might call it *The Buddha's Five-step Program*: When something comes up and you see that it's potentially harmful, the first thing you want to do is look for its *origination*. In other words, what is its cause in the mind? We're not looking for the suffering that comes from unpleasant things outside. We're looking for: What is this tendency the mind has to crave, cling, desire, go for its passions? Where does that come from?

Then you notice that, whatever it is, it doesn't last as long as you thought. Sometimes we think that we're angry for a long time or lustful for a long time. But these things just come and go, come and go. So you want to see the origination *passing away*. When it goes, you want to see why. And then if you pick it up again, well, why did you do that?

That's where you get into the third step, which is to see the *allure*: What's attractive about these things? You have to be forewarned that what's attractive about it may not be the first thing that appears to your awareness. The mind has a tendency to lie to itself, to create distractions. Hopefully, your practice of virtue and concentration has taught you to be a little bit skeptical about what the mind tells you.

Then you want to look for the *drawbacks*, to counteract that allure. Those desires and passions that cause suffering and constitute suffering are basically based on value judgments as to what's worth doing and what's not. What you're trying to do now is to arrive at new value judgments inside, so that you see the drawbacks, to which you've often blinded yourself so that you don't see them. And you see the allure, which you've also blinded yourself to—you haven't admitted to yourself what the allure genuinely was. That means that now you're in a better position to see that it's not worth it, whatever it was that you were going for.

That's when you can find the *escape*, which is the "subduing of desire and passion." That's the fifth step. You see that the unskillful mind state is not worth it, and you don't want to get involved. And it was your desires and passions that got you involved to begin with.

Not only that: Desire and passion also created those five aggregates that you were clinging to. When there's no more passion, there's no more drive to fix those aggregates. You can think of fixing food: As long as you think you're going to eat, and it's good food, you fix it. But when you see that it's bad food and not worth it, why fix any more food like that?

The mind can drop all these things and it can see that what the Buddha said really is true: That letting go of these things lifts a huge weight off the mind.

As you look further, you find that even this concentration that you were using as a basis for your discernment: That, too, is fabricated. And the right view that was pointing you there: That, too, is fabricated. So you apply the same five-step program to these things: You see their allure, which is that they've created a lot of pleasure that you wouldn't have had before, but their drawback is that you still have to keep fabricating them. You remember the Buddha's statement that there is an unfabricated happiness that comes when you *totally* let go. That gives you encouragement.

That's when you can let go, and the mind is *unbound*. It's freed by letting go.

The Buddha doesn't talk very much about unbinding, but he does have names for it. The names indicate that it can be appreciated in five ways.

One, it is a kind of consciousness, called consciousness without surface. The image is of a light beam that doesn't land anywhere. You can think of going out into the night, looking at the night sky, and you have to remind yourself there's light filling all of that darkness. We don't see it because it's not reflected off of things. When we see it reflected off the Moon, for instance, we say, "Oh yeah, there's light." But the sunbeams that miss the Moon, we don't see, but they're still there. So that's one of the good aspects of unbinding: It's not a blanking out. It's unlimited consciousness.

Two, it's intense bliss. The Buddha calls it *safety, refuge, harbor*—it's a good, safe place to be, at your ease and undisturbed.

The third quality is that it's truthful. In other words, it doesn't change, because it's not caused by anything. It doesn't come and go with causes as the causes come and go.

Fourth, it's freedom, a radical freedom: You're even freed from the constraints of space and time.

And the fifth quality is excellence: It's the best thing there is.

These are the indications that come from the names the Buddha gives to nibbāna. But the names are just pointers to get you interested in going there. When you finally get there, you find that no perceptions at all can do it justice. But you've used perceptions—as you've used all the other aggregates—as part of the path to get you headed in the right direction. But the goal itself is something beyond.

That's the wisdom of the Buddha: He points you there and trains you how to get there.

He's training you, basically, so that you don't have to keep borrowing his wisdom. You can start creating some of your own. And the wisdom you create will take you to this goal.

And as he guarantees, it's the best thing there is. Which means that the wisdom he offers you and trains you to create for yourself is much better than just reading wise sayings out of a book. It actually delivers you to the real peace of which you may taste a little bit when you read wise sayings—but the Buddha shows you how to plunge fully into the real thing.

## *The World of the Noble Truths*

November 8, 2024

When I was in school, I was taught that if you wanted to understand somebody's thinking, you had to look for the structure—the underlying framework in which all the points this person was discussing found their meaning, found their place.

In the Buddha's teachings, you have two structures. One is the four noble truths, the other is the noble eightfold path, and they contain each other. The fourth noble truth is the noble eightfold path. And the first factor of the noble eightfold path, right view, consists of the four noble truths. This makes the point that the four noble truths are not just a theory. They *are* a way of looking at the world but they also play a role in a path of action. The act of taking them on determines how you're going to act.

For most thinkers, the underlying structures start with first principles and then argue from those first principles to build a structure, like building a building based on a foundation.

But the image the Buddha gives is of a path. What ties all his teachings together is not where you're coming from, but where you're going.

He teaches that it is possible to put an end to suffering, and everything in his teachings has meaning in the quest to put an end to suffering. He's not just offering four interesting facts about suffering. He's saying this is *the* important issue to focus on. As you focus on this issue, everything else makes sense, everything else finds its meaning.

That's because the truths don't just sit there. They have duties. The truth of suffering—What is suffering? It's clinging to the aggregates—is to be comprehended. We don't usually comprehend our sufferings in that way. We think, "Why is this pain afflicting me?" "Why is this situation in the world outside afflicting me?"

But the Buddha is saying that suffering is the act of clinging to form, feelings, perceptions, fabrications, or consciousness. It's something we *do*. It's not something we're just on the receiving end of. We're actively *doing* the suffering.

He then defines the clinging as desire and passion for these things. The word he uses for "clinging" can also mean *feeding*—we like to feed on these things.

This is where the analysis gets really counter-intuitive. We think that feeding is one of our main pleasures of life, but the Buddha is saying that feeding is really suffering: You're dependent on something, you've got a hunger, and it's not yet satisfied.

The cause of that suffering, he says, is craving, which he defines as desire and passion. But in this case, it's desire and passion that would lead to a state of becoming. This is reflected in the fact that the word for craving, *taṇhā*, can also mean thirst.

So you see the basic analogy he's got here. You're thirsting for something; you're hungering for something: That's going to cause you to suffer. As you find what you want to eat, you think you're happy. But he says, actually, the feeding in itself means that we're still feeling a lack, that we're really dependent on something that we're feeding on: That's the suffering.

The cessation of suffering would be to put an end to that desire and passion, that craving. He offers the noble eightfold path as the path to follow to reach that end.

Now, as I said, each of these truths has a duty: Suffering is to be comprehended; the cause or origination, as the Buddha calls it, is to be abandoned; the cessation is to be realized, and you do that by developing the path. So understanding of the four noble truths is something to be developed as part of a larger path of action.

You can see that the Buddha analyzes things in ways that go against the current of our ordinary thinking. It's almost as if you go into another world when you're taking on his teachings—because he offers these four truths, as I said, not just as interesting facts, but as a structure, a framework for deciding what to do.

If you know anything about the Buddha's teachings on becoming, you realize he's putting you into a certain state of becoming.

Becoming is an identity you take in a world of experience, centered on a particular desire. The desire in this case, of course, is to put an end to suffering. And all the becomings the Buddha talks about, good or bad, can happen in the mind. The world outside that we know is also a state of becoming. We're in it because of becomings in the mind.

We take on many different becomings in the mind in the course of the day. You focus on wanting something and then you take on an identity within your image of the world where that thing is located.

The world has its customs, its laws about what works and what doesn't work. It also has a sense of what's relevant and what's not relevant to the desire on which it's based. And it's the same way with the state of becoming that the Buddha is having

you take on, as you take the four noble truths as your framework. This is why the Buddha says that, in the context of this world, some questions should be answered because they're relevant to the end of suffering, and others should be put aside because they're not.

This world, like other worlds, is also based on the act of clinging. There are four types of clinging that he identifies as leading to becomings in general. One is clinging to sensuality. Another is clinging to habits and practices. Another is clinging to views. And another is clinging to a sense of yourself.

As we take on the path, we actually use these last three kinds of clinging that create this world of the four noble truths.

The one kind of clinging the Buddha doesn't recommend here, of course, is clinging to sensuality. But to make up for the fact that we ordinarily look for our pleasure in sensual fantasies, the Buddha says there's a better place to look for pleasure. He offers the practice of right mindfulness and right concentration as a way of feeding the mind's need for pleasure. It's your nourishment on the path.

In this world of the four noble truths, your views, of course, are shaped by the four noble truths themselves. And the duties related to them go into our clinging to habits and practices. These are the practices we should do: We should try to comprehend suffering. We should try to abandon its cause.

This, again, goes against a lot of thinking in the world. We just want to get rid of suffering so we start pushing it away. As for the cause of suffering—the different kinds of craving, desire and passion—those are things we like. We actually cultivate them.

But here the Buddha's saying that in the world of the four noble truths, cultivating craving is going to lead you to more suffering. You have to see craving, not as your friend, but as your enemy. Instead of palling around with your cravings, you have to start looking at them askance, to see that they are really the problem.

As for your sense of self along the path, it mainly comes down to feeling that you're competent to do this practice that will get you to the end of suffering: you as the agent, and you as the experiencer. Then there's the you in there who's the mindful commentator who can keep this framework in mind and look at your actions to see where they measure up and where they don't. Those are the three roles that you play in this world of the four noble truths.

But as I said, it's so easy to forget this particular world and start going back to your old world, which has its other ideas, other shoulds and views and ways of

finding pleasure.

Ajaan Fuang tells the story of when he suffered from chronic headaches. He tried Western medicine, he tried Chinese medicine, he tried Thai medicine, and nothing was working. It got so that sometimes he couldn't even sleep at night—the pain was so bad he actually had to have a couple monks or novices staying in the room with him, in case he woke up in the middle of the night and needed hot compresses or whatever.

But then, there was one night when he happened to wake up in the middle of the night, sat up, and the monks who were supposed to be looking after him were all fast asleep. The first thought that went through his mind was, “Who’s looking after whom here?”

Then he said to himself, “Well, that’s their business. I’ve got my business I’ve got to take care of.”

And suddenly he realized: He’d been trying to get rid of the pain, get rid of the suffering of the headache, which is not the duty in the context of the world of the four noble truths. The duty, there, was to comprehend it.

Okay, what was he clinging to? Where were his desires and passions aimed? What was he craving? When he looked at the headache from that point of view, things opened up in his mind. He didn’t make any claims about what happened in his meditation that night, but the way he described it, it sounded like stream entry—when you gain your first glimpse of the deathless. He came out of that experience and realized that simply engaging with the senses is stressful, for he’d found something that had nothing to do with the senses at all and was totally free of stress.

That’s a case of putting yourself into the world of the four noble truths and realizing, “What are my duties within this context?”

So when you’re suffering from something, ask yourself, “Am I actually trying to comprehend my suffering or am I doing something else with it? Am I developing it? Am I trying to abandon it?”

You can abandon the cause, but the suffering itself has to be comprehended first, so that you understand: What are you clinging to? What are you feeding on? Why? What’s the allure? And what are the drawbacks?

It’s in this context of trying to comprehend suffering and abandon its cause that the Buddha teaches those three characteristics or three perceptions—the perceptions of inconstancy, suffering, not-self. That’s where they fit into this larger framework.

All too often, you hear it the other way around, that the world is described by these three characteristics, and the four noble truths are true because they admit the truth of the three characteristics.

But that's getting things backwards—because the three characteristics, on their own, don't have any duties.

You can say, "The world is inconstant" and you can do all kinds of things with that idea. You can decide that you simply have to accept things, and not try to desire anything better or more reliable. Or you can decide to grasp at any pleasure that comes your way before it disappears.

"The world is stressful": Again, you can decide that you simply have to accept that fact. And from there, many people conclude, "Well, there is no self."

But if there's no self, who's going to do the practice? Who's going to benefit? Who's going to be able to analyze what's going well and what's not? If there's no self, there's nobody doing anything.

You hear some people teaching, "There's no choice at all. We have no free will at all, the path just happens on its own"—which is totally opposed to what the Buddha actually taught.

He taught truths that are a call to action. He says, basically, that with these truths, you can know what to do, you're capable of doing it, and they'll take you to something beyond them.

Remember, the four noble truths are part of the path. The path goes to the cessation of suffering. It's not the same thing. The factors of the path are means.

You're in this world of the four noble truths, which is a kind of becoming, but we're here to put an end to becoming—which means that the four noble truths have to point to their abandoning. And they do.

Right view looks at things in terms of how they're put together, and everything that's put together has its drawbacks, so you want to let it go. Then you realize, well, right view itself is put together, so it has similar drawbacks. You don't let it go, though, until the very last step of the path.

All the factors of the path, then, are things you have to abandon—because they've delivered you to where you want to go. That's what gives them meaning—which is why I say this is a structure that's built not on first principles, but on *final* principles, on goals, attainments.

We're talking about how the Dhamma has an *attha*, which is a Pali word that means "meaning," "goal," "benefit." This world of the four noble truths delivers you to

that *attha*, that benefit, that goal. They find their meaning in taking you there.

So try to look at your actions in the context of that view, that world—because then you know what to do.

Of course, you can decide to take on other worlds. The Buddha's not forcing this one on you. But he is saying that this is an opportunity—you can put an end to suffering, a *total* end to suffering. It would be good to take him up on that offer.

## *The Tools of the Path*

June 23, 2025

When the Buddha talks about the factors of the path, he lists them in the order in which you learn about them, not in the order in which you master them. You master them in the order of virtue, concentration, discernment; but when the path factors are listed, they start with the discernment factors.

They start with the right view. Notice—that's right *view*, not right knowledge. Some people say that the Buddha doesn't have you accept anything unless you know it to be true, but you don't really know the truth of suffering, or the cause of suffering, or the cessation of suffering, or the path to the cessation, until you've actually done the duties appropriate to these things. So when you first learn about them, it's just right view.

It's a view that the Buddha recommends that you adopt for the sake of putting an end to suffering. You try it out, you take it as a working hypothesis—and you realize that it doesn't express the entirety of the Buddha's own views.

Anāthapiṇḍika the householder, who was a stream-enterer at the time, was once asked by a group of sectarians, "What are the Buddha's views?" Here he was, a stream-enterer. He'd seen the truth of the four noble truths—in other words, he'd actually had a taste of the cessation of suffering—but even then he said, "I don't really know the entirety of the Buddha's views, or the entirety of the views of the awakened monks."

So think of right view as the Buddha's directions to us specifically: *This is how you want to look at the problem of suffering in order to solve it.* See that it's in the clinging to the five aggregates. It's caused by craving—three kinds of craving. And it can be brought to an end through the noble eightfold path, which attacks suffering at the cause—at the craving. So you start with that picture in mind, that understanding in mind.

The second discernment factor is right resolve. What's interesting is that right resolve doesn't attack all of craving. It attacks only the things that get in the way of settling into right concentration. In fact, that's one of the duties of all the remaining factors in the path after right view: to get you into right concentration. You adhere to

the virtues of right speech, right action, right livelihood, because they're conducive to concentration.

When you act in ways that don't cause any harm to anyone, then as you come to sit down and meditate, there are no scars in your mind. You look back on the actions of the day and there's nothing you have to regret. At the same time, in developing virtue through these precepts, you're focusing on what? You're focusing on your intentions.

That's what makes the difference between breaking a precept and not breaking a precept: the intention behind your action. So the practice of virtue gives you practice in focusing on your mind. After all, concentration is what? It's a solid, steady intention. So first you have to get sensitive to your intentions and learn how to train them—to keep them in line with the precepts. Those are the virtue factors.

Then there are the concentration factors. You start with right effort. You develop the desire to get rid of any unskillful qualities that are there in the mind, and then to develop skillful ones in their place. Here right view comes in to inform you of how and why you do that.

As the Buddha said, some of the causes of suffering that you should learn how to abandon will go away simply by looking at them. These are the ones that are there in the mind because you haven't been paying close attention. When you do pay close attention, you realize: This is really stupid. You see no reason to follow those causes of suffering anymore, and they just go away.

There are others, though, that are more deeply entrenched. In that case, you have to exert a fabrication.

Now, what are the fabrications? The Buddha talks about three fabrications: bodily, verbal, and mental. These have to do with the five aggregates that are suffering when you cling to them. So, to learn about the aggregates, you actually learn how to use them. You get hands-on experience with them in using them to get rid of unskillful thoughts.

You see what kinds of feelings lie behind the thoughts, especially if there's a strong emotion. You look at the way you breathe to see if you can get out of the cycle where the breathing aggravates the thoughts, and the thoughts aggravate the breathing. Of course, there are perceptions and thought constructs, consciousness of these things—it's all there. You have to learn how to use these aggregates to get rid of unskillful thoughts.

This is going to be a lesson for concentration, because once the mind gets into concentration, you don't just stay there. The whole point of getting into concentration is that, in the process of getting it into concentration, you begin to see for yourself what the Buddha saw: what is suffering, what is the cause of suffering, and the fact that there is a cessation of suffering. You do that by seeing how the mind constructs its experience of the present moment. So, if you're constructing it in an unskillful way, you can reconstruct it by using those aggregates in new ways.

This then carries on to right mindfulness, where you take, as a foundation here in the present moment, your sense of the body as you experience it. Try to be mindful to stay with this one object—the body—as you sense it. Then be alert to what you're actually doing. Is the mind staying here, or is it not? Like right now: Where is your mind? Is it with the breath? Okay, fine. Try to be really sensitive to the breath. This is the quality of ardency. And what is ardency? It's basically right effort.

Doing concentration is like making a cake. You have your batter, and then you fold different ingredients into the batter. In this case, you fold the right effort into right mindfulness. So here again, you're working with the aggregates. As the Buddha said, when you're being mindful of your breath, you have to be sensitive to how your feelings and your perceptions have an impact on the mind, how they fabricate your mind. And you want to talk to yourself in ways that are conducive to getting the mind to settle down.

So again, you're using the aggregates; you're getting sensitive to these aggregates as you put them into practice, as you make use of them. This means that you don't just reject them right offhand, saying, "Well, these are aggregates, and clinging to the aggregates is bad, so I've got to let go of them."

First, you have to learn how to use them properly. And in using them properly, you get really sensitive to how you're relating to them. Then this gets folded into the concentration, as you stay steadily with the act of establishing mindfulness. That's when the mind gets settled down.

Here right view comes to inform you that you don't just wallow in the pleasure of the concentration, but you do stay here long enough to enjoy it, to be nourished by it. Otherwise, any effort to understand it won't be solidly based, and you won't have the nourishment that comes from the concentration. Your resolve to stick with the path will begin to flag. So allow yourself to be nourished.

This is one of the lessons you learn out in the forest. If you're going to survive in the forest, you have to have a sense of well-being inside. Ajaan Fuang talked about how, when he was up in Chiang Mai during World War II, he was separated from his

teacher, Ajaan Lee. He was off on his own. What made it bearable was the fact that he could get the mind into states of rapture every day, every day.

When the mind is well-fed like that, then it's a lot more willing to look at its unskillful sides—its defilements—and not be bowled over by them, not try to deny them. The mind is much more on an even keel. That way, you can see, “Oh, hey, there's some lust here still, there's some anger here still.” You can see these things as puzzles to be solved, rather than as something to be embarrassed about or as something to indulge in.

You've got something better to indulge in—the concentration. But you always have, in the back of your mind, those lessons you've learned from right effort and right mindfulness. This is a constructed state, and you remember from right view that these constructions are made out of the aggregates, and when you cling to them, there's going to be suffering.

One of the things you learn from right concentration is that what the Buddha said about suffering is true—in the sense of the fact that you're both constructing and clinging to things. Because with the concentration, what do you have? You've got the breath, which is form; you've got the feeling of pleasure you've created here by the way you breathe; you've got perceptions—the images you hold in mind about the breath; thought fabrications—your intention to stay with the breath; and consciousness, which is aware of all these things.

As the Buddha said, when you get used to being in a concentrated state, there comes a point you begin to see the drawbacks of that state. You know that five-fold analysis that he gives for getting past a defilement: seeing the origination, seeing the passing away, seeing the allure, seeing the drawbacks, and finally gaining escape through dispassion. Well, now you apply that same analysis to the concentration itself.

Its allure, of course, is the sense of well-being that it provides, but its drawbacks are in the fact that it's fabricated. You have to keep working at it, working at it, working at it—maintaining, maintaining, maintaining, until it finally hits you: Wouldn't it be better if there was something you didn't have to maintain?

When you develop dispassion for the concentration, then you can go beyond it. You can do this either by analyzing one specific level of concentration you're in or, as you go from one level to another, you begin to see certain fabrications fall away.

After you hit the first jhāna, you can drop the verbal fabrications of directed thought and evaluation, and you go into the second jhāna. When you leave the third jhāna to go into the fourth, you stop bodily fabrication. The in-and-out breath stops.

Everything is still; it feels very full inside. You don't stop the breathing intentionally or by forcing it. It's simply that there's no felt need to breathe.

So, either way, concentration is there to help you see that, yes, these things are fabricated, and this is as good as fabrication can get, this is as good as the aggregates can get. Yet you still want something better. The third noble truth, which you remember from right view, promises that there *is* something better. That's why you're willing to let go.

If this were as good as things could get, then you'd be wise to hold on. This is why, when the Buddha was first teaching not-self, he taught it to the five brethren *after* they had seen that the third noble truth was true. Without having had that experience, it's really hard to let go of these things.

So those factors of the path are aimed at getting you into concentration. But right view is there to remind you: You don't want to stop at the concentration. You want to use the concentration to affirm the fact that, yes, you are creating your suffering, and suffering is the clinging—but you don't have to do it; you can let go and be free.

So you affirm the truth of the four noble truths, you affirm the truth of right view, but at this point, it turns into the right knowledge, and right knowledge leads to release—because the path, after all, is just a means to a goal.

I received an email today from someone who said he'd read the book *Skill In Questions*, and he'd detected a subtle undercurrent of goal orientation that may not have been intentional. I was tempted to write back, "Well, any fool can see that it's goal-oriented." And it *was* intentional.

The Buddha was the most goal-oriented person you can imagine in the world. It's just that he'd learned that you follow the path, it gets you to where you want to go, and *then* you can let go of the path.

You're not here just to settle into the present moment as it is. You're here to dig into the present moment, take it apart, see what lies on the other side of the present moment, and how the present moment is put together through those five aggregates.

There are things that you're doing, things that you're clinging to, and whatever sense of agency you have in doing, or a sense of the self as a consumer in enjoying what you're doing, is going to have to be let go of. But first, you have to do it well. Then you can put it down.

The image they use in the forest tradition is of a carpenter working on a piece of furniture, like a chair. You use your tools, you pick them up, you put them down, you pick them up, you put them down, until the job is done. Then you put them down for

good—as far as that particular piece of furniture is concerned: in other words, as far as *your* mind is concerned. Then from that point on, if you see that somebody else needs a chair, somebody else needs a table, you can pick those tools up again. But you pick them up in a different way.

Right now, as you're working on the tools of the practice, you have a sense that they are yours and that they belong to you. People sometimes ask, "When you put aside your sense of 'I am' or 'This is me, this is mine,' how can you function?" Well, it's the same way you can function as if you had tools that you possessed as yours, but then you decided to allow them to be common property. You can still use them, even though the sense of ownership is gone. You can still keep them in good condition. Why? Because you see that they're good for people at large.

So, it's not that you stop being motivated or stop being able to act. When you totally let go, it's simply that you no longer cling. The tools are still there. Ajaan Lee makes this point: that even though the Buddha let go of the path, he could still use the path in his work as Buddha—and that point applies to all those who are awakened.

So don't be afraid that when you let go of your sense of self you'll be hindered or unable to act. You can actually act with more skill, in whatever way you see is appropriate. This is the point where, as the Buddha said, he has nothing more to teach you.

Until that point, though, you want to take on right view as your working hypothesis, and then develop all the other factors of the path until you can see for yourself that that hypothesis actually works: It takes you to the goal that it promises. That's when you've completed the task the Buddha sets for you. As for whatever other tasks you want to pick up after that, you pick them up in a way that doesn't weigh you down.

## *Make a Difference*

April 9, 2025

When we first hear the four noble truths and we have a sense of conviction that they're true, the proper response is to see them as an opportunity to make a difference. You realize you've been acting in ways that lead to suffering, but you don't have to continue in those ways. This means that the Buddha doesn't simply teach you to practice acceptance. You look at your actions and you realize that if they're not acceptable, something has to be done. Something *can* be done.

This is why what follows on right view in the standard descriptions is right resolve: the resolve to think in ways and act in ways that will lead to happiness, that will lead away from suffering. You realize that the path has to start with the mind, because after all, the cause of suffering is in the mind. Things have to be done to change the way you think. So you focus on three things: renunciation, non-ill will, and harmlessness.

Renunciation here means putting aside all your thoughts about sensuality, your fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures: that you'd like them this way, that way, or maybe no, you'd like them some other way. You can think for hours in these ways, but when you realize it's going to lead to more suffering, you want to put that kind of thinking away.

Thinking in terms of non-ill will refers to cases where you'd like to see justice done, you'd like to see somebody punished, but then you realize that it's going to lead to more suffering, not only for the person you want to punish but also for you. So you try to develop goodwill and equanimity instead. You don't have to like the people who are misbehaving, but you just wish them well. If they're behaving in ways that are really unskillful, you hope that they'll see the error of their ways and start acting in ways that would lead to the end of suffering. If there's anything you can do to help in that direction, you'd be happy to help. But you certainly don't want to get in the way of their true well-being.

Finally, harmfulness: There are times when you treat people in a poor way, not because you have ill-will for them, but simply because you dismiss them. They don't count in your eyes. Here you have to have compassion, because if you act in ways that are harmful, even without ill-will, you're going to suffer as a result. So you have to

think about the well-being of those who might be affected by your actions. And again, if there's anything you can do to help them end their suffering, you'd be happy to help.

Try to develop these qualities of mind. The Buddha compares this to being a cowherd. With any thoughts that go off in terms of sensuality, ill-will, or harmfulness, you beat them back just as a cowherd would beat back the cows during the rainy season when the rice is growing, for fear that the cows might get into the rice, and then there'd be trouble. Then you have to replace these thoughts with better thoughts: thoughts of renunciation, non-ill will, harmlessness.

Those are exemplified by getting the mind into concentration.

There's a very clear and direct connection here between right resolve and right concentration. One, in the Buddha's analysis of what counts as mundane right resolve and transcendent right resolve, transcendent right resolve is any directed thought and evaluation that helps get the mind to settle down. Two, the definition of right concentration says you've put aside all thoughts of sensuality and you're secluded from thoughts that are unskillful. Both of those cases embody right resolve. As the Buddha says elsewhere, right resolve, skillful resolves, find their highest expression in the first jhāna. You're directing your thoughts to the breath, you're directing your thoughts to whatever your topic of concentration might be, and trying to maintain them there.

But then he also says you go beyond skillful resolves. That's when you get the mind into the second jhāna. You've done your work in adjusting the mind, you've done your work in adjusting the breath, and they fit. All you need to keep the mind with the breath is just the perception of breath, or the perception of oneness with the breath. This is like going even beyond being a cowherd. You don't even have to be the cowherd who's aware of the cows wandering around: You've gone beyond cows entirely. This is the state in which the Buddha said you're focused on the body in and of itself, or feelings in and of themselves, or whatever your concentration object may be, but you're not thinking thoughts about the object, and you're certainly not thinking thoughts about anything else. You're getting the mind still.

It's only when the mind is still that you can really see what's going on inside. Otherwise, you're like a person who's trying to find where the mice are in the wall while you're humming a tune to yourself, and you've got the refrigerator on, you've got the stereo on, you've got the TV on, the radio's blaring. When there's all that noise, you're not going to hear the noise of the mice. Even if the TV is saying good things, helpful things—you've got Dhamma talks on— still, it's making a lot of noise.

This is when you put aside all the things that you've studied and learned. You just get the mind really, really still.

This is a principle you see throughout the Forest Tradition. In Thailand, the monks who have studied enough of the Pali to pass three out of the nine Pali exams get a title: "Mahā," which means "great." If a Mahā would come to see Ajaan Mun, he would say, "Put all your knowledge in a trunk and seal it. Now you're going to learn directly from your breath, you're going to learn directly from your mind, right here, right now." That requires that the mind get quiet.

For the mind to stay quiet and to be willing to stay there, there has to be a sense of well-being. This is why we have the directed thought and evaluation in the beginning, to get the mind happy to be here, to peel away any thoughts that would pull you away, that would want to go away, and to provide you instead with a sense of well-being, a sense of pleasure, a sense of rapture even.

Ultimately, you're going to get to a state where the mind feels very equanimous about things, but it's an equanimity that comes from have been well-fed. The Buddha never teaches equanimity on its own. It's always in the context of either the pleasure that comes from gaining insights or the pleasure that comes from getting the mind to settle down. And the pleasure there is both physical and mental. He talks about how bodily discomforts grow calm when you get into jhāna and the mind is happy to be here. From that state of well-being, *then* you get the mind to be equanimous. If you simply try to go around and put aside all pleasures and all pains, the mind gets hungry after a while, and it starts doing strange things when it's hungry, looking for food in strange places, even dumpster diving. So settle down with a sense of well-being.

Then you can see subtler areas of suffering in the mind. The Buddha doesn't call it suffering at this stage, though. He calls it "disturbance." *Daratha* is the Pali term. If you want to see the subtle stuff, you've got to get very, very still. That's how right resolve leads to right concentration in a way that goes beyond right resolve but doesn't abandon the purpose of right resolve, which is to make a difference. You make a difference in the mind when you get it to stay with one thing and it's not wandering around. Even when it wanders around with skillful thoughts, and there's a difference in the mind that thinks skillful thoughts from one that thinks unskillful thoughts, the *real* difference comes when you get the mind quiet. That gives you an entirely new relationship to your thoughts.

You can stand outside of them more clearly, more easily, and you're in a better position to pass judgment on them. We hear so often that we're not supposed to be

passing judgment. Well, that idea doesn't come from the Buddha. Wisdom, discernment, for him, is a matter of passing judgment: "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What will lead to my long-term harm and suffering?" It comes down to judging which actions are worth doing, which actions are not.

So we're passing judgment as we try to make a difference, based on our understanding of what the Buddha said about suffering and its cause, and the way to put an end to that cause. We're making a good difference, a difference that will have a good impact on us and on the people around us.

## *The Skill of Letting Go*

September 11, 2024

You may know the story of Anāthapiṇḍika, who was one of the Buddha’s main lay supporters. He was the one who founded Jetavana, the monastery where the Buddha spent more rains retreats than any other place and where he gave lots and lots of discourses.

The time finally came when Anāthapiṇḍika was on his deathbed. Ven. Sāriputta and Ven. Ānanda go to see him. Sāriputta asks how he’s doing, hopes he’s doing well, Anāthapiṇḍika replies that he’s not doing well at all.

So Sāriputta starts teaching him, “Train yourself: ‘My consciousness will not be dependent on the eye, the ear, nose, tongue, body, or mind; sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, ideas. Consciousness at these things, contact at these things: I will not cling to these things. I will not let my consciousness be dependent on them.’” Then, he goes through the six properties: earth, water, wind, fire, space, consciousness; the five aggregates, the four formless states, consciousness itself—anything imaginable that your consciousness could be dependent on, that you could be clinging to—he tells him to let go.

Anāthapiṇḍika starts to cry, and Ānanda basically says, “Get a grip! Are you sinking?” Anāthapiṇḍika replies, “No! I’m not sinking. It’s just that in all these years that I’ve been coming to support the Buddha, coming to the monastery, I’ve never heard a Dhamma talk like this.” Sāriputta says, “Talks like this are usually not given to lay people.” So Anāthapiṇḍika says, as a request, “Please tell the Buddha to give talks like this to lay people.”

Then he dies and is reborn as a deva, which is a sign that he wasn’t able to follow the instructions given in the talk—his emotions got in the way. If he’d followed the instructions, he would’ve been an arahant.

There may have been a good reason why the Buddha didn’t give a talk like that to lay people. If you just tell people to let go, let go, let go, he wouldn’t be giving them a full instruction. He’d have to tell them *when* and *how* to let go. If you let go of everything at the start of the path, the path never gets a chance to develop. Even if you let go of everything at the later stages in the path, you can fall into wrong release. For example, it is possible, as you focus down on things in your mind and you tell

yourself, “Okay, I’m not going to stay focused on anything. Anything that comes up, I’m going to push it out of the way, push it out of the way”—and there’s a certain amount of aversion in that—you can put yourself into a state of non-perception, where everything blanks out.

This blanked-out state is not where you want to go. Some people actually think that it’s nibbāna. It seems like cessation. Based on this experience, they say, “There is no self,” because whatever they had identified as “self” stops happening. They don’t sense anything there at all. But it’s just blanking out.

The Buddha didn’t teach the Big Sleep, he taught awakening—which is something entirely different. So it’s important that you understand the skill of letting go.

The Buddha sets it out in five steps. The first step is to look at whatever it is you want to contemplate and get beyond, and to observe: “What is the origination of this thing?” The second step is to observe: “What is its passing away?”

The origination here doesn’t mean just arising. Origination means it’s caused and you’re looking for the cause. The word *origination*, usually, is used for causes coming from inside the mind. So you want to see what, here in the mind, is causing it to come. Then if the cause goes away, it’ll go away, too.

So those are the first two steps, to establish the *fact* that these things are fabricated because, the Buddha said, wherever you find arising, passing away, and change while remaining, it’s a sign that that experience has been fabricated. It’s been willed by the mind.

We hear that so many times that we don’t stop to think how radical that is: Your experiences are something you intended.

You didn’t think you were in on the planning too much. A lot of it was presented to you. But what’s been presented to you is actually the result of your old intentional actions. So, it’s intended—but it may not be in line with what your desires intended it to be. Still, that realization should focus your attention inside. The source is here.

*Mano pubbaṅgamā dhammā, mano-setṭhā*: Phenomena are led by the mind, created by the mind, dominated by the mind. So you want to focus your attention inside at the mind.

The next three steps have to do with not just the fact of fabrication but also the *value* of fabrication.

First you want to see, “What is the allure of this thing that I’m attached to? What do I find attractive?”

Say, with sensuality: What, about a sensual fantasy, pulls you in, turns you on?

The details will change from time to time and they're not necessarily about the details of the body or the food that you're lusting after. The appeal may have to do with your perceptions around these things, your perceptions of yourself as related to these things. Sometimes you just simply crave craving.

So look into it—what is the allure?

Then, in the next step, you compare the allure to the drawbacks: “When I cling to this, what happens? What are the negative results?”

This is where the Buddha pulls out the three perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self for you to apply. The things you're attracted to, no matter how attractive they may be, are inconstant. This doesn't mean that they just change. It means they're really unreliable.

Sometimes the word *anicca* is translated as “impermanent.” But you could argue that, with some things, the fact that they're impermanent is actually a good thing. When disease is impermanent and goes away, that's good. When afflictive emotions or bad conditions go away, that's good.

But think about things as being inconstant—and that's basically what the word literally means, it's the opposite of the word *nicca*, which means constant: If something is inconstant, you can't rely on it. The mind wants something to rely on, something to settle in on with confidence, yet all of its fabrications are denying that possibility. That's one of the drawbacks.

Another is that it's stressful. It weighs down the mind—or in Ajaan Maha Bua's terms, it puts a squeeze on the heart.

So if something is inconstant and stressful, why claim it as yours? Why think that it's you? It's not worth it. That's a value judgment.

When you can see that it really is true, that it's not worth it—you compare the allure with the drawbacks and the drawbacks way outweigh the allure—that's when you can subdue desire and passion for the object, whatever it was. That's the fifth step: the escape.

So you're not just telling yourself, “Let go, let go.” You're giving yourself reasons to let go. And as the ajaans all say, when you see the reasons, you don't have to tell yourself, “Inconstant, stressful, not self.” When you see that something is not worth holding on to, you let go. It's like when you realize you're holding on to something that's burning your hand. You don't have to tell yourself that the pain is inconstant, stressful and not-self before you let go. You simply let go immediately.

You may remember that the Buddha said there are two types of causes for stress or suffering: one for which you develop dispassion simply by watching it with equanimity, and the other where you have to exert a fabrication before you develop dispassion.

The first category includes the cases where you haven't basically been paying attention to why you're holding on to something. When you look at it directly, you see quickly that it's not worth it. Whatever allure it has, you automatically see it and how its way outweighed by the drawbacks.

But there are other cases where it's not so obvious, or the allure goes deep. That's when you have to dig it out using the Buddha's five-step process by employing bodily fabrication—the way you breathe; verbal fabrication—the way you talk to yourself; and mental fabrication—feelings and skillful perceptions, such as the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, not self.

When you really see that it's not worth it, and the desire you had for the allure just withers away, that's when you've seen with insight. You let go not because you've been told to let go or you tell yourself to let go or you force things out of the mind. You let go because you see.

As Ajaan Fuang once said, "If nibbāna could be attained by force, we would have all gone there a long time ago." There's no force in this, but there's a lot of insight and understanding that goes into the letting go.

What's amazing, of course, about those instructions to Anāthapiṇḍika is how thorough they are. Everything you could possibly imagine: You're not supposed to cling to it, you're not supposed to let your consciousness depend on it. You can't even let consciousness depend on consciousness. Ven. Sāriputta makes that point several times: in the context of the six properties, in the context of consciousness of the six senses, consciousness in the aggregates, and the infinitude of consciousness in the formless states.

You have to be really sensitive to the fact that whatever consciousness you have of an object is really dependent on that object, it's conditioned by that object, and conditioned by your intention to latch on to that object. This is an important insight. It's something that's often missed.

There are people who say that "Consciousness has to be unconditioned. Your basic awareness in the present moment has to be unconditioned because how can something conditioned know something else that's conditioned?" But, that's exactly what knowledge is. That's what awareness is. Awareness of objects is conditioned.

What the Buddha's trying to get you to see is what happens when there's no object at all, when you've looked at all the possible objects, you see there's nothing there at all that you would want. You've seen this not because you've forced yourself, but because you've seen it through understanding.

Then, if everything comes together just right with all the factors of the path, then you open up to something that's totally unconditioned. That, too, is called *consciousness* but it doesn't come under any of the six properties, five aggregates, or six senses. It's not known through any of these things. And it has no surface. The image the Buddha gives is of a light beam that has nothing to land on—although, even that image is limited because a light beam goes in one direction, but this isn't limited to any direction.

If Anāthapiṇḍika had followed the discourse that Sāriputta gave him that day, then he might have seen *that*, he might have experienced *that*, reached *that*. But he let his emotions get in the way, and as a result, he was reborn as a deva.

The commentaries tell us that he was a special kind of deva—Lady Visākhā was another—who had, basically, what would amount to a “deva-pass,” where they're going to get to visit all the levels of the devas, all the levels of the Brahmās, before they leave saṃsāra.

But as the Buddha said, just as a little tiny bit of excrement smells, he wouldn't praise even a tiny bit of becoming. So if you take this to heart, then eventually you're going to have to let go of everything—but before that, you have to learn *how* to let go.

You let go in bits and pieces as you're sitting here meditating.

Think of Buddha discovering the different levels of jhāna. In each case, he said, his heart didn't leap up at first at the idea of letting go. When he realized that, to enter the first jhāna, he'd have to give up sensuality, his heart didn't leap up at the idea. But then as he contemplated the drawbacks of sensuality, his mind was more and more inclined to want to get beyond sensuality. That was when he actually entered the first jhāna.

Then when his heart didn't leap up at the idea of abandoning directed thought and evaluation to enter the second jhāna, he looked at the drawbacks of directed thought and evaluation until he was ready to let them go. The same principle applied to each stage of concentration as he moved up the ladder.

So even just getting into concentration requires that you see drawbacks, and you ask yourself, of course, the opposite question: “Where's the allure of what I have to let go?”

In this way, you get practice in letting go through discernment, through understanding, sensing the amount of effort you put into manufacturing your experience, and getting a sense that a lot of things you manufacture are simply not worth the effort.

You do that, as I said, in bits and pieces first—you let go of something so you can get something better.

An image that Ajaan Maha Bua uses is of climbing a ladder to a roof. You hold on to one rung with one hand, then you hold on to the next higher rung with the other hand, and only then can you let go of the lower rung so that you can hold on to a higher one. Up, up, up—until you finally get firmly on the roof. That's when you let go of the ladder totally.

As long as you're on the ladder, though, you don't want to let go totally, because there are things you have to hold on to so that you don't fall—things you have to put together. You have to fabricate the path so that it's complete. Then, when the path is complete, then you can let go, safely. But you do it with understanding, because of these five steps: looking for the origination, the passing away, the allure, the drawbacks, so that you can escape through the ending of desire and passion.

Eventually, the same analysis gets applied to the five faculties—which is another way of saying that it's applied to the path as a whole. You see the allure of the path and what it's done to get you past many forms of suffering. But you also see its drawbacks—it, too, is fabricated. And you've had enough of fabricated things. At that point, you can let go safely.

But in the meantime, learn how to let go step by step. As you let go of some things and hold on to others, you get practice in talking to yourself about these things. This is what exerting a fabrication means—that you talk to yourself in these ways so that you get more and more skilled at what actually has to be done to let go in a way that opens you up to something greater than you've ever encountered before.

## Good for What Purpose?

September 9, 2024

The Buddha has a list of what he calls *craving-verbalizations*—things we tell ourselves because of craving. Two of them are: “I’m good” and “I’m bad.” You might wonder, “Why would the Buddha mark these out as being craving-verbalizations?”

Well, suppose you believed that you’re innately bad—how could you practice? All your intentions would be corrupt; all your perceptions would be corrupt. You’d have to depend on some outside force to come in and save you. And there *are* teachers who take advantage of that, telling you that you’re basically depraved and you need their help.

But the idea that “I’m basically good” also has its problems. To begin with, it makes you complacent. You think that you can trust whatever urges come up in the mind. Yet who knows what’s going to come up in the mind? As the Buddha said, the mind can change directions very fast. If the mind is basically *anything*, it’s basically changeable—and quickly changeable at that.

So, what do we do? I know some people who say they don’t want to believe in rebirth, for instance, because the idea of having to be moral simply because you’re afraid of punishment strikes them as childish.

But the Buddha never said that that was the meaning of the teaching of rebirth. He taught, basically, that you’re responsible. Your actions have impacts that will extend not only into this lifetime, but also into future lifetimes.

So you want to be heedful. When you do something, you want to think about *why* you’re doing it and what the long-term consequences are going to be. That’s called being responsible—and that’s an attitude that he actually *does* encourage.

So we take his teachings as working hypotheses, realizing that they make us adults. Responsible adults. Mature adults. Mature in the sense that we tell ourselves that if we’re going to get anywhere in this practice, it’s going to be up to us. We *do* have that potential within us.

We’re not innately bad but we *do* have some bad characteristics. We have a whole stable of different selves in here. Some of them can be pretty selfish, some of them can be pretty nasty, and we have to recognize that fact. But we also have to recognize that we have some good selves in here as well—selves that are more skillful. They’re

all based on the desire for true happiness—in the sense of what actually works to bring lasting happiness about.

As we take on the path, the Buddha wants to give us a higher standard of what it means to *work*. This is called a pragmatic approach to the truth: when you take on your perceptions and your views with an eye to what they will lead to—what they lead you to do and what the consequences of those actions will be.

Because we're proactive, we come into the world and learn a few perceptions, and then we start pasting them onto things.

And the question is—the perceptions we have that don't come from the objects themselves, but come from within our minds: Where do they come from? Being careful about this point is called *safeguarding the truth*.

Then you have to ask yourself, "What are those perceptions useful for?"

They may be useful for all kinds of things. For instance, when there's a pain in the body, part of the mind really wants to know where the pain is so that you can identify what's wrong. Sometimes that's wise. If you don't pay attention to the pain, it could lead to bigger problems down the line, especially if it's something internal.

But the question is: When you locate the pain, what are you doing? You're putting together some perceptions that lead you to tighten up around the pain, and they may actually make the pain worse. So when you're sitting here meditating and there's a pain, say, in your legs, in your knees, whatever, ask yourself, "This tendency I have to want to locate the pain, pinpoint the pain: Is that actually helpful right now?"

How about *not* pinpointing it, not placing that label on it? See what that would do.

So you're questioning your perceptions. A perception that might have been useful for one purpose may not necessarily be useful for the path.

As you're sitting here, you can see the body as one thing, the pain as something else, your awareness as something else. You can divide things out like this.

To begin with, it makes it a lot easier to live with the pain and not feel oppressed by it. It doesn't invade your mind and remain. At the same time, you learn the arbitrary nature of your perceptions. You get to thinking about the arbitrary nature of your sense of who you are, and of those various stables of selves you have inside. Some you find easier to identify with than others. But you have to ask yourself: "For what purpose?"

In many cases, it's simply out of the force of habit. But how about changing your habits? This is what the Buddha wants you to do: Change your habits. Change your

way of looking at things.

We tend to really resist that. For many of us, our attitude is that our view of ourselves, our view of the world, is perfectly adequate. But he wants to point out that it's not.

This may be one of the reasons why he focuses on the issue of suffering, stress, pain, because those are the facts that make you sometimes wonder: This view that you have of things, is it really good enough? Or is it actually part of the problem?

When you can start asking questions like that, you can pull yourself out of your old habits, your old ways of looking at things, your old ways of slapping perceptions on things, and get some distance from them.

It's when you get distance like this—through this process called metacognition—that you can actually train yourself.

If you can see that what you already have is not innately good or innately bad, but the purposes they used to work for are not necessarily what you want anymore, you're raising your standards for what works.

This is one of the complaints that's usually leveled against pragmatism—which is the philosophy that says that we hold to our ideas of truth based on what works for us.

That's true in a lot of ways, but the criticism is that, with a lot of people, their standard for “what works” is pretty low: what works for making a good profit, what works for getting other people to do what you want them to do. And pragmatism, in its pure form, can't really say that any one particular purpose is better than another.

This is why the Buddha put so much emphasis on his four noble truths and on the fact that suffering can be ended. Totally. Completely. It's something that human beings *can do*.

And when that can be done, why settle for anything less?

The answer for most people is: “Well, force of habit. That's the way I'm used to doing things.”

So even though we talk about how you shouldn't be focusing on the goal all the time, and how you should focus instead on the path going to the goal, sometimes you do have to remind yourself, “Where is this path going?”—so that you can see clearly the things that come up in the mind—which thoughts, which ideas, which perceptions—actually are part of the path and which ones are not.

Think of those standards that the Buddha taught to Mahāpajāpati as to what counts as Dhamma and what doesn't.

The question is always, “Where does this lead?” Does it lead to being fettered or being unfettered? Does it lead to passion or dispassion? Does it lead to modesty or to self-aggrandizement? Does it lead to entanglement or seclusion? Does it lead to contentment or discontent? Does it lead to laziness or aroused effort?

The teachings are all judged as to where they lead, what actions they inspire you to do. So you should look at your senses of self, your ways of perceiving things, and ask, “Where do these lead?”

After all, facts are not just individual poker chips that just sit there. The facts of our awareness, the facts of our consciousness, are all fabricated. And what is fabrication? Fabrication is putting things together *for the sake of* something. In other words, there’s an intentional element, there’s an aim, there’s a desire underlying everything. This is why the Buddha said, “All things are rooted in desire.”

So you have to ask yourself which desires are being served by this particular way of looking at things or this particular way of looking at yourself. It’s not a question of whether you’re basically good or basically bad, or your ideas are basically good or basically bad. The question is: “What purpose do they serve and can you serve a better purpose?”

Those are the Buddha’s standards.

His teachings are fabrications too. But he’s thought very carefully about where these fabrications lead: what happens when you adopt them, what happens when you breathe in line with his instructions, what happens when you talk to yourself in line with his instructions, what happens when you use his analogies and similes to look at your life.

If you see that the results are good, okay, adopt them.

This helps to give you a more fluid sense of who you are and the world you’re in, with a slightly skeptical attitude toward your perceptions—that this has got to be this way and that has to be that way. You can ask yourself, “Well, for what purpose?”

This is how we test the truth of our perceptions: Do they serve our purposes? And are our purposes good enough?

The Buddha’s purposes for his own life focused on putting a total end to suffering and then teaching that way to others. He has a purpose for your life, but of course, it’s up to you to decide whether you want to take it on or not. He doesn’t force this on anybody. But he left behind a whole series of teachings that are basically for you to use for the highest purpose possible: your own freedom from suffering.

It's almost as if he had more compassion for you than you have for yourself. But you can change. As I said, you're not innately bad; you're not innately good. You're changeable. And you're free to change in many different directions. Even though a lot of the things you experience are based on past kamma, past actions, not everything is. How you put it all together is determined by your fabrications right now, your intentions right now, your desires right now. And you're free to choose those.

So this is what we're trying to train: What kinds of desires are really useful for you?

Just because something comes up in the mind doesn't mean it's part of your innate nature that you've got to follow. You can say Yes; you can say No.

So it's through the practice that we take our ideas of what's right and what's wrong, what's true and what's false, and we test them for the purpose of putting an end to suffering. That's when you're on the path. That's when you're practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. As the Buddha said, that's how he wanted people to pay homage to him. It's basically a matter of paying homage to your desire someplace inside your heart and mind for happiness that's harmless and that doesn't let you down.

## *Perceptions, Not Characteristics*

March 26, 2026

Recently I met with members of a community-led vipassanā group who wanted to start a Dhamma school for their children. They asked for some advice on the curriculum. They said they already had the first part of the curriculum set out, which was to teach the kids the three characteristics. After all, this is the Buddha's basic teaching about the facts of reality, and they wanted to start the kids with basic facts.

I told them that would be a very bad place to start, that teaching the kids about inconstancy, stress, and not self as the basic nature of reality would make them depressed and lazy, because it doesn't come in context. It would be better to start with a larger context: the question that the Buddha said lies at the beginning of wisdom, which is, "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 suffering?" In the context of that question, you can teach generosity, virtue, meditation on goodwill, along with the other perfections.

Unfortunately, they seemed disinclined to adopt my suggestions. You can't blame them, though, for thinking that the Buddha's basic teaching was the three characteristics. This is what the commentaries have said for a long time. It has influenced a lot of Theravada practice.

But the Buddha himself never said that. For one, he said his basic teaching was suffering and the end of suffering. He expanded it in the four noble truths. As for the three characteristics, he never called them *characteristics*. Inconstancy, stress, not-self, he said, were *perceptions*.

It's good to think about why that makes an important difference. If you're talking about characteristics of things out there, your basic interest is in the nature of reality out there. But here the Buddha is talking about one particular problem, the problem of suffering, what you do to create suffering, and what you can do to put an end to suffering. The problem and its solution center on things you do.

When you think of the three perceptions as perceptions, you realize that these, too, are things you do. A perception is something you fabricate. You're acting on an intention and you have a purpose in doing it. The question is, what is the intention, what is the purpose? And what are the actual consequences? In terms of the three

perceptions, in what way, when you use them, can you cause long-term suffering? In what way, when you use them, can you cause long-term welfare and happiness? By calling these things perceptions, the Buddha is asking you to notice what you're doing, to reflect on it, and to see what the consequences are.

This falls into the pattern that he says nourishes the Dhamma, which is that you commit to doing a practice and then reflect.

First, reflect on why. What's the purpose of these perceptions? What's *your* purpose in these perceptions? How do they fit into the things you're doing that are causing suffering? How do they fit into the factors of the path?

This is particularly important when you realize that the Buddha also said that perceptions are not just actions or fabrications. He also said they're like mirages. A mirage can be totally distorting, or it can give you a true but partial view of something beyond the horizon. Of course, the Buddha teaches these three perceptions as true regardless of whether he points them out, but he does admit that their truth is partial. These perceptions don't tell you everything about the five aggregates. After all, as he said, if the aggregates didn't have their pleasant side, we wouldn't fall for them. So they're not totally stressful. And if they were totally out of your control, you couldn't use them to make a path. But that's exactly what you do. You have to use them to make the path.

As in the practice of concentration: As Ajaan Lee points out, we're taking things that are said to be inconstant, stressful, not-self, and we're trying to make them more constant. You're trying to make your breath more constant. You don't want to chop the in-breath away from the out-breath. You try to see the in-breath flowing into the out-breath, and the out-breath flowing into the in-breath. You're doing this to give yourself a good constant place to stay so that the mind can stay constantly focused and find pleasure in doing so. In this way, you're taking things that are stressful and making them pleasant. And you're trying to get the mind under your control so that you can do this.

This is why the Buddha says there are times when you need to develop a skillful perception of self to make progress on the path. You want a perception of self as competent, as someone who can do this, as someone who will benefit from doing it, as someone who can watch what you're doing, see the results, and make suggestions: In other words, you've got the self as producer, the self as consumer, the self as observer, the self as commentator and judge.

You need all this because you have to *do* the concentration. It's not going to do itself. It's not a mushroom that sprouts on its own in the forest. It's a skill you have to

develop. As you do so, you apply the perception of not-self only to things that are going to pull you away from the path: things like the pleasures that come from distractions and the hindrances. You want to see them as inconstant, stressful, not-self—in other words, not worth the effort that goes into them.

When you choose to do something, the deciding question always is, “Is it worth it?” The perception of self is something you do. The perception of not-self is something you do, along with all the other perceptions here. Now, at that point in the path, it’s really worthwhile to do the concentration, because you can’t see the mind clearly, and you can’t see the aggregates clearly, until the mind has gotten into good concentration.

As the Buddha said, what does a concentrated mind see? It sees: Such is form, such is feeling, etc., down through the aggregates. Such is their origin, and such is their disappearance. You’ve got to get the mind concentrated to do this properly.

And where are you going to see the aggregates? You’re going to see them in the act of doing the concentration.

You’ve got the form of the breath here, the form of the body. You’ve got the feeling of pleasure you’re trying to create. You’ve got the perception that holds the mind with the breath, its picture of what the breath can do and what it is doing. Fabrication is your intention to stay here—plus, in the beginning, the directed thought and evaluation that hold you here, that adjust things so that the breath feels pleasant and refreshing, the mind feels right, and they fit nicely together. And then you’ve got consciousness, which is aware of all these things.

As the Buddha said, when you finally master concentration, then it’s time to start analyzing it in these terms. This is when it becomes right to use the perceptions of not-self, inconstancy, and stress in an all-around way for the purpose of developing dispassion.

Why do you want dispassion? Because of the duties of the four noble truths. The duty with regard to suffering is to develop dispassion for it through comprehending it. The duty with regard to the cause of suffering is to abandon it through dispassion. The third noble truth is dispassion itself. And the fourth noble truth, even though you have to exercise passion in order to construct it, does reach a point where you begin to reflect on it and realize that it, too, is inconstant. It can’t be the goal. It, too, is stressful. It, too, is not-self. You’re trying to come to that value of judgment at that point in the path, so that you can feel dispassion for it as well.

Why? Because you’ve heard of that third noble truth. Without the third noble truth—that there is a total cessation of suffering—you’d just say, “Well, this is as

good as it gets, so I'm going to hold on to it." But the Buddha wants you to let go completely. He wants you to let go even of the path, even of these perceptions of not-self, etc., so that you can experience something even better.

This is why he says that all dhammas are unworthy of adherence. You use this idea to let go of all other dhammas—phenomena, teachings, and actions—and then you realize that this idea, too, is a dhamma. It, too, is unworthy of adherence at that stage. The fact that this teaching can be turned on itself and tells you to let go of it is what makes it right—part of the noble eightfold path that acts as the kamma that puts an end to kamma. It's a view that puts an end to holding to views, itself included. The Buddha teaches in this way because he wants to make sure that you let go totally, all around, so that you can be totally free.

This touches on another common misconception about the teaching on not-self, which is that it applies only to the idea of a permanent self. But that would mean that people who didn't believe in a permanent self but who did have other ideas about who they were wouldn't be engaged in clinging.

But if you think of your self as impermanent, that it depends on certain conditions being a certain way, you're going to *really* cling, trying to make those conditions the way you want them to be so that you can keep on surviving. The Buddha, though, is trying to get you to let go of *all* notions of self so that you can let go of all forms of clinging.

It's in this way that seeing the three perceptions as perceptions helps you all around. You're reminded that teachings are actions, and that ultimately you have to let go of them. Even all the teachings that tell you to let go, you have to let go of those, too. We're not here to arrive at a clear view of what reality is. We're concerned with reality only insofar as it helps us understand the problem, which is the clinging that is suffering and what we're going to do to put an end to that clinging. Views about reality, no matter how accurate they are, are things that you can cling to.

Focusing on the fact that these views are perceptions helps get you some distance from them, realizing that these are things you have to commit yourself to for the time being, and then you reflect on them to see how far they can take you. When they can't take you any further, you've got to let them go.

The Buddha's understanding of the path is subtle, sensitive, and circumspect, which is why commitment has to be paired with all-around reflection. Be circumspect in the original meaning of the term: Look around. Look back on your actions and their results. Learn from them. Keep them up when you're getting good results. Stop doing them when you don't need to do them any more.

This principle starts from the very beginning of the practice, and of any attempt to understand the Dhamma. When you're going to teach kids about what, when they do it, will lead to long-term welfare and happiness, you give them some basic principles, but you also have to teach them how to look in the areas where those principles are not clear, or where the kids might wonder if they really apply. The overarching principle is this: You have to look at what you're doing to see where you're causing harm and what you can do to stop causing that harm.

That's why the Buddha taught this principle to his son right off the bat. But it carries all the way through the practice to the very end: Commit, reflect, and let go of anything unskillful. Seeing the three perceptions as perceptions allows us to treat them in that light, as actions we commit to doing, and then we reflect on the consequences. That way, we can get the most use out of them but without burdening ourselves with them. We use them when they're needed; we let them go when they're not.

The image they use in the forest tradition is that you're like a carpenter making a chair. You have tools. You pick them up and put them down as you need to, but you don't carry them around all the time. You simply have them at hand while you're working on the chair. Then, when the chair is done, you let them go. You put them down for good. Then you can enjoy the chair as you like.

The Buddha is concerned that we not cling to anything unnecessary. We cling to only the things that are helpful when they are helpful. We let them go when we don't need them anymore. That's how we put an end to suffering. And this is how these three perceptions, when we see them as perceptions, can help in that direction.

## *Truth Without Air Quotes*

May 8, 2024

Once, on the day of my honors oral exam in college, I was sitting in the room with the professors, and one of the professors was late. So as we were waiting for him, the other professors were talking among themselves. One of them, the one who taught modern European intellectual history, was telling about a student who had just come into his office. She wanted to discuss Goethe. So he talked about the Marxist interpretation of Goethe and the Freudian interpretation of Goethe. But she told him, “I don’t want those interpretations. I want the truth.” All the professors in the room laughed. And I said to myself, “I’ve got to get out of here.” I was appalled at the idea that the search for truth would be something you would laugh at—and this was even before postmodernism had taken over the college.

A lot of us come with an education that calls the whole concept of objective truth into question. It teaches us to view truths simply as efforts by people to influence other people, to get them under their power, either politically or intellectually. When you’re taught that, everything gets called into question. This is not only in modern academia. You see it in academia all over the world, through many different periods—even the late Middle Ages in Europe—as people get more and more dubious about the idea that they’re actually learning anything of objective value.

But when we come to the Buddha’s teachings, he talks about the four noble truths as being undeceptive and not other than what they are. He’s basically saying that they’re objective truths. He didn’t have much use for the idea of truth with air quotes.

You might ask, “How does he know they’re objective?” Look at his analysis in dependent co-arising. He’s showing you why we have that question about objective truth. We think that the information we get through our senses is our most reliable information, but prior to sensory contact, there are all kinds of things going on in the mind. There are intentions, acts of attention—choosing what to focus on, what not to focus on—perceptions; all kinds of things shaping the things we’re going to see and hear and taste and touch and smell, even before they happen. So no wonder we’re dubious as we get conscious of these different factors and see how they shape even

basic things like how we see an object, how we listen to a sound. We begin to wonder, “Is there any objective truth at all?”

The Buddha, though, said that there is one noble truth that’s the noblest of the bunch. That’s the truth of nibbāna. It’s outside of dependent co-arising. It’s totally unfabricated. The processes of dependent co-arising are fabricated. They’re put together. They’re put together with a purpose, often with ignorant purposes, but there’s this other possibility of something where you actually step out of the processes of your mind into something that’s outside of space, outside of time, outside of purposes.

That gives you a different perspective, something that’s not conditioned in any way at all. To say nothing of social conditioning or linguistic conditions, there’s no conditioning, period: no perceptions, no thought constructs, no feelings, no sensory consciousness, no awareness of the body. As the Buddha said, it’s the ultimate happiness. And it is a state of knowing, even though you’re not engaged in the six senses. As he said, this consciousness is not experienced through the six senses. It’s something outside.

The image he gives is of a beam of light. Ordinarily, say, when the Sun rises in the morning and a light beam goes through a window in the eastern wall of a house, it’ll land on the western wall. If you take away the western wall, it’ll land on the ground. And as he asked the monks, “If there’s no ground, what happens?” Back in those days they believed there was water under the ground, supporting the earth. So it would land on the water. What if there’s no water? The beam doesn’t land.

Think about that for a minute: a beam of light that doesn’t land. Because it doesn’t reflect off anything, you don’t see it. Think about outer space. It looks black to us, but there’s light streaming through it in all directions. We see the light only when it’s reflected off of things. In the same way, there is this consciousness that doesn’t engage the senses, and it’s totally unfabricated.

The question is, how do you know? This is where the path comes in. All four of the noble truths, the Buddha said, are true and not otherwise than what they seem. The third truth tells us that there is this possibility of the cessation of suffering. But to get there, we need to fabricate a path. And it’s in the fabrication of the path that you get more and more sensitive to how the mind fabricates things—even with something as simple as the practice of virtue.

Some people treat virtue as an optional part of the practice, while the real practice, of course, lies in the techniques of meditation. But the Buddha never taught it that way. He taught virtue as an integral part of the path, because it’s through the

practice of virtue—when you take on certain precepts and you try to follow them—that you start learning about the mind. The basic principle of the precepts is that you can break them only if you do so intentionally. So the precepts call attention to your intentions, which are one of the ways in which we fabricate our experience.

You also learn which kinds of intentions are skillful, which kinds are not. And you can see how they have an impact on your life. As you start holding to the precepts, your life is going to change. The world around you is going to change. That sensitizes you to one of the factors that comes before sensory contact: intention.

Even more so when you get the mind into concentration. As we were saying today, the techniques that seem to get the best results are those that make you very sensitive to the process of fabrication, like focusing on the breath. The Buddha's instructions deal with what he calls bodily fabrication, the in-and-out breath, and then mental fabrications, which include the perceptions you use as you try to get the mind to settle down, the mental images, the words you use—individual words—to direct yourself.

For example, you can have an image of where the breath could flow into the body. Say there's a pain in the back. Do you want the breath to flow through the pain from above? Through it from below? Or do you want it to go straight into the pain itself without having any other part of the body involved? That's an issue of perception.

As the instructions to breath meditation say, you try to sensitize yourself to these kinds of mental fabrications: perceptions and feelings. Then, of course, the instructions for how to talk to yourself as you guide the breath meditation are verbal fabrication. You pick a topic and you comment on it.

The Buddha's trying to get us to see these things simply as processes, rather than in terms of what their content might be, because these are the same processes by which we create an emotion, we create a state of becoming. The emotion has a meaning, it has a content, but here we're trying to stay away from the content and to focus on the processes just in and of themselves, so that you can get more sensitive to how you do things. And also more sensitive to how you can pull yourself out of something that you've fabricated by realizing, "I don't have to fabricate it that way."

We have moods where we talk to ourselves, and usually it's the same thing over and over and over again. But you don't have to talk to yourself in those ways. Can't you imagine something else? Look at these inner conversations simply as directed thoughts and acts of evaluation. That pulls you out of the content of your thinking,

the content of your internal dialogue—or monologue or whatever—to see the processes just as processes.

Breath meditation is really good for that. Contemplation of the body is really good for that, too, because it requires that you hold a mental image of the body in mind. That's a perception. You start asking questions about it. That's verbal fabrication. Some ajaans recommend that when you're focusing on a particular organ of the body—say, you're trying to think about your liver—notice: What does it feel like in the area of the body where the liver probably is located?

Again, you're getting involved in the different kinds of fabrication, but in particular, you're going to be interested in the acts of perception, because it's through perception that you decide that the body is attractive or unattractive. You start seeing how quickly you can switch from one to another. That raises the question: Why do you do that?

This makes you pay more attention to your intentions. What do you want? All too often, we think that, say, lust arises because somebody attractive walks by. But often there's lust without anybody else around at all. The mind is looking for something to lust for, and if it has nothing outside, it'll imagine all kinds of things inside. But you begin to realize a lot of those imaginations are lying to you. They focus only on the details you find attractive, and as for the other details, they're just blotted out. Why is that? Again, it's your intention. It's what you're looking for.

So these are concentration practices that are also very useful for insight because they get you more sensitive to the processes of fabrication *as processes with a purpose*. And that's what discernment is all about: seeing these things as processes and then passing judgment on them. Are they really worth it? Are their purposes good? How do they come about? How do they pass away? What's their allure? What are their drawbacks? Again, you're looking at them as processes by stepping out.

Ideally, you get to the point where you develop some dispassion for them, because passion is what drives the processes of fabrication. This is why Ven. Sāriputta—when he was asked how he would explain the Buddhist teachings to people who had never encountered them before—started with the sentence, “Our teacher teaches the end of desire and passion.” He doesn't discuss a worldview, which was very typical of the teachings of those times. He talks about an action and a value judgment that come from looking at these things as processes.

When you get really familiar with the processes, then—when there's an opening that comes from developing a strong sense of dispassion for them, not wanting to stick with your old processes and not wanting to create any new ones, and you're

really at your wit's end—something opens up, which is unfabricated, and you recognize it as unfabricated because it's not in space, and it's not in time. It's not for the sake of anything, which is what all fabrication is all about. It's not for the sake of anything at all.

There was someone one time who asked the Buddha, “What's the purpose of virtue?” Virtue is for the sake of concentration. “What's concentration for?” Concentration is for the sake of discernment. “What's discernment for?” Discernment is for the sake of developing dispassion. Dispassion is for the sake of unbinding. “What is unbinding for?” The Buddha stopped there and said, “No, you can't go any further. This is not for the sake of anything else.” That's how you recognize it as unfabricated.

And it's the same for everybody. As the Buddha said, those who have attained awakening have no disagreement with anyone else who has attained awakening. It's all the same thing for everybody. That's what's objective about it.

So even though the Buddha's teachings are, you would say, more pragmatic than empirical, they're still objective: This is the way consciousness is built. This is the way the mind works. These are the processes that lead to suffering. If you want an end to suffering, this is what you've got to do.

It's interesting that with dependent co-arising, in later centuries, the question arose: Is dependent co-arising happening in the context of the world at large or inside the mind? There was a good reason why that question was left uncertain in the early texts, because the Buddha basically would have said, well, neither. Dependent co-arising is how we create a sense of the world, how we create a sense of ourselves. Instead of being inside you or inside the world, dependent co-arising contains you and the world. Seeing things in these terms requires stepping back from our usual worldview, stepping back from our usual views of the self, seeing how they're formed, to induce that dispassion that can lead to what's unformed, unfabricated.

The steps leading there have to be the same, in principle, for everybody. That's why the path is also objective. All four noble truths are objective in that way, because they lead to something that's not conditioned by anything at all. And when you arrive there, you recognize it as the highest possible happiness. It's not only objective, but also objectively excellent. That's the truth that the Buddha is teaching us, the truth he's aiming at us at. It's truth without air quotes. It's the real thing.

## *What's Relative, What's Constant*

July 30, 2024

There's a parallel between the Buddha's teachings and the theory of relativity. Most people think that relativity means that everything is relative, but that's not the case. It simply means that the constant is not what we thought it was. In Newton's theory, space and time were constants, and everything else was relative to them. But then Einstein came along and said, "No, the speed of light is the constant. Space and time are relative to that."

It's a little disorienting, thinking that space could shrink or expand, time could speed up, slow down, relative to their speed next to the speed of light.

The parallel is that we ordinarily think of ourselves as a constant—"me and my story"—and our experience of pleasure and pain is pretty random: Sometimes we do good things and we get bad results; we do bad things and get good results; we do good things and get good results; bad things, bad results. It doesn't seem to make any sense.

But think about the Buddha on the night of his awakening. In his first knowledge, his identity was the constant he was trying to trace. But he saw that his identity was pretty random: From one lifetime to the next it would change. And it didn't necessarily go up. Sometimes it would go down. Way down.

An analogy he used later was that it's like throwing a stick up into the air. Sometimes it lands on this end, sometimes it lands on that end, sometimes it lands splat in the middle.

So his question was, is there a pattern to the ups and downs, or was it truly random? Then in the second and third knowledges he found out that there was something that was constant—the laws of causality, particularly as they pertain to kamma: intentional actions.

So the question is not so much who you *are*, it's what you *do*. And who you are is a *result* of what you do. That changes the constant, because, who you are can change. There's a lot of good news there, too: If you hold on to yourself and say, "I'm this kind of person and I wouldn't feel comfortable being anything else," reflect on the fact that you've been through many, many identities.

Think of Ajaan Mun recollecting his previous lifetimes. He came across a period when for 500 lifetimes he was a dog. It's hard to think of Ajaan Mun as a dog. But as he said, there was a period when he was satisfied with the pleasures of dogs—dog sensuality—and that's why he was stuck there.

So if it could happen to Ajaan Mun, imagine *your* past history. It's all kinds of things. Which is why all kinds of things happen to us, based on the actions of the many different identities we've assumed all along.

The constant is this pattern that in acting on skillful intentions, you get good results; acting on unskillful intentions, you get bad results. Now, the working-out of that pattern can be complex because what you're experiencing right now is not *totally* determined by the past. It's also partially shaped—in fact, *largely* shaped—by your skills here in the present moment: how skillfully you shape your thoughts, your words, your deeds, your experience of the body, your experience of feelings, perceptions, thought-constructs, even consciousness. All these things are shaped by intentions.

This is why, when we meditate, we're sitting here with our eyes closed to look at what we can do to improve our internal skills. As issues come up that deflect us from the present moment, think of them in terms of kamma. As I said, the causal principle underlying kamma is the constant. Your identity is not.

People can do things to you that you think are horrible, and you can tell yourself, "I never would have done that. Why is this happening to me?" Well, how do you know? If you hadn't done something like that sometime in the past, it wouldn't be happening to you now.

So remember, you're not the constant. *What you are* is relative to the principle of action, the principle of causality. This is why when the Buddha talked about dependent co-arising, and people would ask questions that would try to put it into a context—say, the context of the world outside or the context of who you are—he would refuse to answer those questions. The pattern of dependent co-arising: That's the constant. That's the context. Your identity is something shaped *within* that constant. Your sense of the world is shaped *within* that constant.

It takes a while to get your head around this, but it's a useful theme to learn to think about. Try to see things from that perspective, rather than from the perspective of "me and my problems," or "me and my issues." Learn how to take those things apart.

As when the Buddha talks about the present moment and the role of fabrication: He says you experience the aggregates because of this intentional activity. The

process of fabrication here and now takes the potential for form, the potential for feeling, perceptions, thought-constructs, even consciousness, and turns it into actual aggregates.

I was listening to a Dhamma talk the other day in which someone was saying, “Consciousness has to be unconditioned. After all, how could one conditioned thing know another conditioned thing?” Well, that’s what precisely what happens: Knowing something is a conditioned process. Without the conditions of the six senses and their objects, ordinary consciousness wouldn’t come about.

The only thing that’s unconditioned is consciousness without surface, and that has no objects at all. All other consciousness is conditioned. So the question is, how are you conditioning your consciousness right now? What are you focusing on? What are you paying attention to? How are you talking to yourself? Your inner conversation: Have you ever stepped back and said, “Well, this is just a bunch of directed thoughts and acts of evaluation,” and looked at it simply in those *impersonal* terms? When thoughts are going through the mind, have you ever stopped to categorize, “What are the actual perceptions, the labels I’m putting on things, that have led to this riot of thoughts in my mind?”

The Buddha talks about the perceptions and categories of *papañca*. *Papañca* is a kind of thinking where you identify who you are, and then once you’ve taken on that identity, you have to lay claim to your part of the world as your food source in order to survive. Of course, you’re going to get into conflict with other people who want food from the same source. So there you are, going from “I am the thinker” to fighting.

Sometimes *papañca* is translated as “conceptual proliferation.” That translation has entered the vocabulary of vipassanā communities, where it simply means that your thoughts are running wild. But for the Buddha, it’s not so much that your thoughts are running wild, or how many thoughts you’re having, it’s the categories you’re using to talk about things. Once you put an “I am” in there, you’re trying to make that the constant, and it’s going to lead to trouble.

So just notice the acts of perception—the labels you put on things. What would happen if you changed them, changed the labeling? Take something like colors: We have a pretty set notion of what the different colors are, and where one color shades into another. But when you learn other languages, you find that the map of the color wheel is very different from one language to the next. You can’t say that one map is more accurate than the others, it’s just how things have developed. There’s an arbitrariness to our perceptions, even for something basic like that, to say nothing of

our ideas about social interactions or our emotional life. They've made lists of words, of emotions that you would have in one language that other languages have trouble describing. So it's good to look at perceptions as pretty arbitrary, pretty random, and then ask yourself: "To what extent am I driving myself crazy by holding on to certain perceptions? I could change them to other perceptions that are just as true, but actually more useful."

So you look at your perceptions, not so much based on the terms you're used to thinking in, but based on where they're coming from, where they're going: parts of a causal process. This was how the Buddha got onto the path, by dividing his thoughts, not in terms of what he liked or didn't like, or what thoughts were his kinds of thinking and not his kinds of thinking, but simply: thoughts that came from skillful mental states and thoughts that came from unskillful mental states; thoughts that would lead to good actions, thoughts that would lead to afflictive actions. That's changing the constant, changing the categories.

It may be disorienting at first, but you find that the Buddha's way of looking at things in terms of kamma and the many identities you've had over who knows how many eons is actually a good tool for liberation.

Remember the image of the handful of leaves, when he was going through a *simśapā* forest. The *simśapā* tree has tiny, tiny leaves, like little dimes—even thinner than dimes. They're very small. He picked up a whole handful and said, "Which is more, the leaves in my hand or the leaves up in the trees?" The monks said, "Of course, the leaves in the trees are more numerous." He said, "In the same way, the things I learned in the course of my awakening are like the leaves in the trees. What I've taught, what I've been teaching, is like the leaves in my hand."

Among the things he taught, of course, were the teaching on kamma, the teaching on dependent co-arising, and the teaching on rebirth. Those are all part of the handful of leaves. They're part of the teaching on the four noble truths, the part of the teaching that can help put an end to suffering.

So, instead of seeing these teachings as weird artifacts of Asian culture that somehow got stuck in the Buddha's teachings, realize that they're something he thought about and he chose carefully as *tools* you can use. So learn how to use the teaching on kamma and rebirth as a tool.

As for dependent co-arising, that's a very complex tool if you try to comprehend the whole thing. But break it down: As the Buddha said, if you bring awareness to any one of the connections there—between one event and the one right next to it—that's enough to bring the whole thing down.

So look at the different connections and see which ones speak to you. The connection between ignorance and fabrication is a useful one to start with, because as you're sitting here meditating, you're getting direct hands-on experience with bodily fabrication—i.e., the in-and-out breath and all the variations of the ways that you can breathe. Verbal fabrication—directed thought and evaluation—all the different ways you can talk to yourself about the breath, all the different questions you can ask, all the different ways you can try to change the breath and evaluate what you've done. And then mental fabrications—feelings and perceptions, i.e., the mental images you use. Try out different ones. Learn how to master them.

I was reading an article today on the topic of mastery, and they were saying that people who master a skill have four qualities: enthusiasm; generosity—generosity in the sense of really giving themselves to their field; unbroken concentration; and playfulness. Well, those correspond to the bases for success. Enthusiasm corresponds to *chanda*, desire. Generosity, in the sense of really giving yourself to the practice, corresponds to persistence, energy, effort. Unbroken concentration corresponds to intentness. And playfulness is a part of your using your powers of analysis: trying something out, seeing what works—if that doesn't work, using your ingenuity to figure out something else.

Try to master just these issues of bodily, verbal and mental fabrication, seeing them as processes, not so much as your old ways of talking to yourself, your old ways of perceiving things, or even your old ways of breathing. If you get the “you” out of the way, the “me” out of the way, you find there's a lot to play with, and a lot of possibilities there that you wouldn't have thought of before.

So try to get a clear sense of what really is constant—i.e., the pattern of causality—and how everything else is relative to that. That's a tool for liberation.

## *Look Around as You Follow the Trail*

October 15, 2025

Someone was complaining the other day that she didn't understand the distinction between the realization of nibbāna and nibbāna itself.

That's a non-problem. Nibbāna is not something to understand. It's a goal. It's a place you go. You don't get there by understanding it. You get there by following the path.

It's like thinking that you have to understand Paris before you can go to Paris. To get to Paris, you get a plane ticket, get on the plane. Then, when you get there, you realize what it's like there.

A lot of people want to have everything explained ahead of time. Actually, all they have to know for sure is that this is a good path and that everything's guaranteed. The Buddha gives his guarantee, but then again, how do we know we trust the Buddha? We have to commit to doing the path.

Like we're doing right now, developing concentration: This is how you get to the higher dhammas—by being really diligent in doing what you have to do right here, right now. Whatever the stage you're at in getting the mind to settle down, work at that. We're working on a skill that requires you to commit to doing it and then to reflect on the results. Then you commit to doing it better the next time. There may be setbacks, but you learn not to be discouraged by the setbacks.

Realize that what you're doing right now is important. There are people who complain, "Nibbāna is something that has nothing to do with the body, so why are we focusing on the breath?"

If you want to catch the mind, you have to give it something to focus on, and the breath is one of the best things to focus on. It's right here. Of all the physical things in the world, it's the closest to the mind. It's with you wherever you go and it's very responsive to what the mind tells it to do. You tell the body to breathe long, it'll breathe long. Short, it'll breathe short. Fast, slow, heavy, light, deep, shallow: You tell it what to do, and it does it.

And you can make it comfortable. Experiment with different ways of breathing, and you'll find what feels best right now. If you're not sure, just tell yourself, "Well, as long as it feels good enough, stick with it." Then if you find that it starts getting

mechanical or uncomfortable, you can change. What's important is the quality of the mind you develop—a willingness to commit and reflect on your actions, not to insist that everything has to be explained beforehand.

Some people read the Kālāma Sutta in a way where the Buddha says, “Believe only in your own sense of right and wrong. Don't accept anything unless you know it to be true.” But if *you're* not true, how are you going to know things that are true? You've got to commit.

The way to nibbāna is not through understanding nibbāna, it's through developing the path. The immediate purpose of the path is to help you abandon craving, and you want to abandon craving because it's causing suffering. It's causing you to latch on and cling to things. That's the suffering. The Buddha's genius—or at least part of it—was that he saw how the way to the unconditioned is to focus on the problem of suffering and its cause, and how to attack it at its cause, because he saw that the way we cling to things is getting in the way of finding what true happiness can be.

That's the big irony. The things we like, the things we hold on to most strongly, are actually getting in the way of our happiness. Which is why a sense of irony is required as you practice. The things you're most 100% confident that you know, you have to realize you don't really know as well as you thought. That's what the Buddha calls “guarding the truth.” When you have a particular idea that you're really attached to, ask yourself, “Where did you get that idea? What are you basing your ideas on?” You begin to realize that there's very little that you have direct experience of. It's mostly inference and guesswork.

So, if you want to find the truth, you work with what you can directly experience—and what is more direct than your experience of the breath? Stay right here for the time being. Then you build on that as you see the qualities of the mind that get developed as you stay here. Let your mindfulness, your alertness, your ardency engage in directed thought and evaluation around the breath, so that the mind can get centered and concentrated on the breath.

As you do that, you start seeing things in the mind, different activities of the mind, in terms of how it pays attention to things, how it forms and maintains an intention, how it forgets its intentions and has to remember them again. Doing this, you begin to get a lot of insight into the mind that you wouldn't get just simply reading about it or thinking about it in the abstract.

The best way to get to know your mind is to give it something good to do, something that's relatively quiet and near at hand. So focus on the breath. Try to *stay*

focused on the breath. When a sense of well-being comes with the breath, realize that that's part of why we're focused here, but it's not the whole story.

We're also trying to develop our own powers of observation. As the Buddha said, your discernment is what allows you to realize the goal, so you have to develop your discernment. After all, everything you need to know, everything you need to be aware of, is all here right now, simply that you're not properly focused, not continually focused, not really observant, not asking the right questions.

So you work on staying with the breath, learning to give yourself pep talks so that you're happy to stay with the breath, realizing that whatever you're going to gain from this, you have to put in quite a lot. The people who want to have everything served to them on a platter, so that they can pick and choose only what is to their liking, are never going to get there.

What we're talking about here is the principle that Ajaan Mun taught repeatedly: practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. Even though the breath may seem very far away from what we'd like to attain in the meditation, it's actually the way to get there. When the goal is realized, it's going to be realized right here, or right next to right here. So you don't have to go thinking far away. Just get really dedicated to what you're doing right here, right now.

There's a humility in that, in that you're willing to settle down and do the steps that have to be done. But there's also a lot of wisdom in realizing that you have to be strategic. If you're going to develop the kind of discernment that can detect what has to be realized, it's going to have to be developed right here, as you observe the mind observing the breath, something you can observe directly.

You observe the mind trying to stay with the breath, and when it doesn't stay, trying to bring it back. You learn about the processes by which the mind deceives itself into falling for states of becoming—because there's a lot of deceit in the mind. The ignorance the Buddha talks about: Some of it is simple not knowing, and some of it is *willful* not knowing.

So you have to tease things out, strand by strand by strand. But as long as you're willing to do the work, you're going to get the results. And when you do the work, you come to realize things that the people who want to understand it ahead of time are not going to realize.

Everything you need to know is right here. It's simply a matter of making yourself true and discerning and observant, with the exercises that the Buddha gives you. As he said, he wants someone who's honest and observant. He'd teach that person the

Dhamma. So you come with a certain number of good character qualities and you refine them.

This is why it's not just an intellectual exercise. It requires the whole heart and mind. So you're training the whole heart and mind. As the Buddha promised, the goal, when it's attained, will be totally satisfying to the whole heart and to the whole mind. There's a wholeness to the practice that you can't find anywhere else.

So be happy that you're on this path, even if it just means bringing the mind back, bringing the mind back, bringing the mind back, again and again. Learning to be cheerful, patient, and persistent.

Cheerful in realizing that you're on a good path.

Patient in realizing that the mind has put up a lot of obstacles to itself over the many, many lifetimes, so getting rid of those obstacles will take time.

And you're persistent in that you don't let that get you down.

So follow the path step by step by step, as with any journey. If you stick with the steps, you get to the goal.

It's not just a matter of obeying the Buddha. I mean, he does set out the duties, but in the course of obeying what he tells you to do, you're going to see things on your own. Things he doesn't mention, or that he only hints at. So be alert.

It's as when someone tells you, when you're going to Zion National Park, that you should follow a certain trail. They point you to the trailhead, they tell you how to follow the trail, but what you see as you walk on the trail is going to depend on you.

I've seen this many times. Go as a group to any one of the scenic areas of the American Southwest, with each member of the group taking pictures. They'll compare their pictures afterwards and someone will say, "How did you see *that*?" "Well, it was right there."

In the same way, the ability to eventually gain the Dhamma eye requires that you develop the inner eye in your own mind. The trail is all laid out. The path is all laid out. But what you see as you follow the path is going to depend on your own powers of observation.

So stick with it. And look around. You're going to be focusing on the breath but, as you focus on the breath, you realize that your mind is right here. Feelings and dhammas are right here. All four of the frames of reference for establishing mindfulness are right here. Make sure you look around and see them all.

## *A Goal Without Limits*

March 10, 2024

Our duty with regard to the third noble truth is not to talk about it too much, it's to realize it. But still, to do the duty with the fourth noble truth—the path to the end of suffering—we have to have some motivation. We have to convince ourselves that the path does lead to a good end. It's for this reason that even though the Buddha said that the goal can't be properly described, and the person attaining the goal can't be properly described, either, still he would talk about the goal in enough of a way—through similes, names—to give us a sense that it is a positive thing. After all, he said, if you have any idea that on attaining the goal you would be disappointed or there would be any regret at all, that's wrong view. The goal is totally satisfying.

Ajaan Suwat made this comment once, that it's so satisfying that you don't even ask who's there experiencing it, whether you exist or don't exist. The pleasure of the goal, even though it's not a feeling, is a pleasure. It is a happiness. It is a bliss. And it's that fulfilling.

So, what are some of the ways the Buddha talks about the goal? One of the epithets he gives for it is: *anidassana*. It's a word that doesn't appear often in the Canon. It does appear in the suttas in two contexts: In one, the Buddha refers to space as being *anidassana*; in another, he talks about a special kind of consciousness that's *anidassana*.

Now, *nibbāna* is obviously not a space, but the way the Buddha talks about how space is *anidassana* gives some idea of what the word means. The sutta says that you can't draw pictures or draw words on space because it's *anidassana*—it doesn't have a surface. Some people translate it as invisible, but you can draw pictures on invisible things, as when you draw pictures on glass. But if something doesn't have a surface, there's no place for pictures to stick.

This image is given as an analogy for the type of goodwill you want to have, the kind of mind you want to have, a mind where unkind words don't stick. People can say horrible things to you, but their horrible words don't stick. That makes it easier to be patient with difficult things, and to have goodwill even for the people who say those things.

As for consciousness, there are two passages where the Buddha talks about *viññāṇa anidassana*. They're both in the contexts demonstrating what makes the Buddha superior to Brahmās. This type of consciousness is something he knows that they don't know. In one case, he says it's where name and form have no footing and are brought to an end. Some people say the Buddha here is referring to the concentration of infinite consciousness and not to nibbāna, but the concentration of infinite consciousness does contain some of the sub-factors of name: It's based on a perception, the perception infinite consciousness, and it's maintained by acts of attention and intention. So when the Buddha says that there's no name or form in *anidassana* consciousness, he's talking about nibbāna, because that's where there's no experience of name and form.

Consciousness without surface is a type of consciousness but it's not like the consciousness of the six senses, which depends on objects. This has no objects. The consciousness of the six senses or the five aggregates covers all consciousness in space and time—near, far, past, present, future—but this is something outside of space and time. That's why it's so hard to talk about. Our language can cover things within space and time, but things outside of space and time really can't be described.

As for the other reference, the Buddha says that this consciousness is not known through the six senses. In other words, even when the six senses grow cold—which is the definition of what happens to an arahant at death—this consciousness is not affected.

Some people say that all consciousness is dependently co-arisen, therefore there cannot be any consciousness outside of space and time. But the Buddha himself never said that. There's an interesting passage where a monk claims that this one consciousness goes from one life to the next. The Buddha asks him, "Which consciousness are you talking about?"

The monk says, "This consciousness that I experience right now."

The Buddha says, "Didn't I say with regard to dependently co-arisen consciousness that consciousness is inconstant?"

Notice he makes that qualification: "Dependently-originated" consciousness doesn't last, it keeps getting replaced by other acts of consciousness, but it itself doesn't last. But the fact that he makes that qualification leaves open the possibility that there could be a consciousness that's *not* dependently co-arisen. So the idea of consciousness without surface being outside of space and time doesn't conflict with anything else in the suttas.

There's an image in one of the suttas that gives you an idea of what it means for consciousness to be without surface. The Buddha talks about a house with a window on the eastern wall. The sun rises in the morning. If there's a wall on the west, where does the sunbeam going through the eastern window land? The monks answer, "It lands on the western wall." Literally, they say, it's *established* on the western wall. "What if there's no western wall?" Then it lands on the ground. "What if there's no ground?" It lands on the water. (They believed in those days that the earth was supported by water.) "What if there's no water?" It doesn't land. It's not *established*, there's no surface for it to settle on.

Think about that, a light beam that has no surface to reflect off of. You can't see it, which is why they say that an arahant whose consciousness is not established can't be found. There are two places in the Canon where monks die, and Māra is looking for their consciousness. It can't be found because it's not established, it doesn't land anywhere. A light beam of this sort can't be seen by anyone else, because there's nothing to reflect it. But that doesn't mean that the light beam doesn't exist. It's like the light beams going through outer space. You look up at night and space seems totally black except for little pinpoints of light. Those are either sources of light or objects off of which light is reflected. If there were more objects in space, you'd see more reflected light. Space is full of light, actually, simply that when there's nothing to reflect it, the light can't be seen.

So think of that: a light beam that doesn't reflect off of anything—totally unlimited. This lack of limitations is one of the descriptions both of the goal and of the person who attains the goal.

The few times that they try to talk about someone who has gained awakening and has passed away, they use the simile of the ocean. Just as the ocean is limitless, hard to fathom, and the amount of the water in it can't be measured, in the same way, the person who has gained awakening and has passed away is limitless and hard to fathom.

So we're aiming at a state where there are no limitations. As the Buddha said, he dwelled with unrestricted awareness. As he lived in this life, he was aware of things, but these things didn't impinge on him. As he put it, he would experience things "disjoined" from them. Even when he was practicing meditation, he was aware of the body in and of itself but disjoined from the body; aware of feelings and mind-states but disjoined from them—not in the sense of being alienated, but simply because he was no longer feeding on these things. When you don't feed on them, they don't

come into you. They don't invade you. They can have their separate existence. You're not limited by them.

So this is the main image to take away—total freedom from limitations. That's the goal we're aiming at. You can trust that the Buddha wouldn't send you to annihilation or non-existence. It's just that because you have no attachments when you're fully awakened, you can't be defined. When you can't be defined, you can't be described as existing or non-existing or both or neither or anything else.

There are some people who advocate the idea that you're basically nothing after gaining awakening and passing away, saying that when the Buddha says, "You can't be described as existing or non-existing or both or neither," he's talking about the idea that you exist while you're alive and stop existing when you're no longer alive, but that you're properly described as non-existing at any time at all. But that would be another way of describing the awakened person after death. Yet the Buddha says there are no ways of describing such a person. When we ask about whether we'll exist or not, the answer he gives is not a trick answer. He refuses to answer because he says the question comes from a wrong state of mind in which you're holding on to something. You're holding on to the aggregates, either for fear of losing them or out of the desire to be done with them, but either way, you're holding on.

So he has you put those questions aside, but you can rest assured that the goal is a good goal, that when you attain it there will be no regrets. That's the Buddha's promise. And it's the promise of all those who have found the goal and confirmed that the Buddha was right.

So take heart in your practice. This is a practice going to a good goal—total freedom, total limitlessness. Let that be your motivation to stick with the path.

## *Nibbana Is Better than You Think*

June 2, 2025

The Buddha said that he taught just suffering and the end of suffering. Suffering is the problem he focused on, and the end of suffering is the solution. First he was able to solve that problem inside himself. Then he taught other people to solve it within themselves.

It seems fairly simple. You look at all the suffering in the world, and it's obvious that it'd be really good that people not have to suffer. You see war, famine, induced war, induced famine. The things that happen in even just the human world are pretty bad, and there are realms where it gets a lot worse. So, any teaching that offers an end to suffering would seem to be something that would appeal to everyone.

Yet when the Buddha talks about the implications of what it means to put an end to suffering, when he talks about nibbāna, a lot of people say it doesn't sound all that appealing.

Years back, when I gave my first study weekend here in California, the topic was the four noble truths. You get to the third truth before you get to the fourth. The third truth is the end of suffering. We talked about it a bit and then we talked about the fourth truth, and finally we got to the right concentration in the fourth truth: pleasure and rapture throughout the body. A number of people said, "The path sounds better than the goal."

That's because we're on this side of the path. In other words, we haven't completed it yet. We haven't reached the end. The Buddha asks you to reserve judgment because you're looking at things through distorted eyes.

We live in a world where there's always suffering, so our minds are active, doing what we can to get away from suffering. We keep on doing a cost-benefit analysis. You put in an effort: Will it be worth it? We feel that if it's worth it, it has meaning.

But in nibbāna, there's no activity. There's no doing at all, no *need* to do anything at all. So, there's no act of balancing the effort against the goal. Questions of meaning become meaningless.

Listening to that from our side of things, it doesn't sound all that attractive. But as the Buddha said, if you think that there's anything negative about the experience of nibbāna, that would be wrong view. So, reserve judgment. Take it for granted that the

ability to put an end to suffering would be a good thing. An incredibly good thing. Then, when you get there, you can look around for yourself.

As the Buddha said, that's as far as he's going to teach you. From that point on, you're free: free to do as you like. Once you've solved this problem, you've solved the major problem in life. Then you pass judgment from that side, with new eyes.

From our side, we have to be careful, though, because sometimes things get a little bit comfortable and we get lazy. This is one of the ironies of *samsāra*. We work hard, hard, hard to get things comfortable, but then as soon as they're comfortable, we get complacent. You don't have to look for the heavenly worlds to see this. Just look at the human world when things get comfortable. Not even the human world, the dog world. If dogs are well-fed, they just lie around as if there were nothing better to do in life.

In the human realm, as we start getting lazy, start getting complacent, the good qualities we needed to develop to get to that comfortable spot start eroding away.

If you go to the heavenly realms, it's even more obvious. Imagine what life is like there: You think of wanting something, and there it is. Want something else? There that is. You can imagine how that can really corrode your character. You get lazy. You get demanding. You get a strong sense of entitlement.

But it's not going to last. You eat up all the good things you've done and then you fall. This is why, when the Buddha was introducing the four noble truths to lay people, he would start out with the goodness of generosity, the goodness of virtue, saying that these things do have meaning.

But then they get rewarded. Many people who are generous, many people who are virtuous, go to the heavenly realms. There they get complacent and then they fall.

So the Buddha would then talk about the drawbacks of sensuality, what he even called the *degradation* of sensuality, so that you begin to see that renunciation would be a good thing. You see that renunciation doesn't mean you renounce all pleasures. It simply means that you try to look for pleasure in a place that's not involved with sensuality. You give the mind the sense of rapture, the sense of pleasure that comes simply from being secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful thoughts.

Like we're doing right now with the breath: There's nothing sensual about the breath. It may feel good physically, but that's not what the Buddha means by sensuality. Sensuality is your fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures: envisioning this, envisioning that, thinking, "I'd like it like this. Well, no, maybe I'd

like it like that.” You can run through all kinds of scenarios of possible sensual pleasures for hours.

Here, though, we’re trying to divorce the mind from that sort of fantasizing because we see that it’s going to pull us down at some point. We work on the pleasure of just inhabiting the body from within, what the Buddha calls form: how you feel the body in terms of the energy of the breath, the warmth of the body, the coolness of the liquid parts, the solidity of the solid parts—how you feel it from within, what we call proprioception. Look for your pleasure there, because this kind of pleasure doesn’t corrode the qualities of the mind.

Then, from there, the Buddha would teach the four noble truths. Given your new perspective, you see that it’d be a good thing if the mind could find a happiness that doesn’t involve harming anyone at all, a happiness that has no drawbacks. That’s what the four noble truths are about.

One of the big ironies of Buddhism coming to the West is the complaint that the Buddha is so pessimistic, focusing on suffering, suffering, suffering—four whole truths about suffering. Well, they don’t all say just suffering. The second truth explains the causes of suffering. The third truth is the end of suffering. The fourth is that there are things you can do to reach the end of suffering. Otherwise, what is there? We keep coming back to our old pleasures and the sufferings that go with them.

When you see this happening over and over, the things that seem to give meaning to life start getting meaningless. You look after your parents to try to reward them for the goodness they’ve done for you, but then they die, and you die, and you all go your separate ways. You get other parents, and you try to repay them. Then you go your separate ways. This goes on and on and on, repeatedly, without end. You look back. Your parents an eon ago: Where are they now? What does that relationship mean now? Things that seem meaningful close up begin to lose their meaning when viewed from a distance.

Then there’s the repetitiveness of it all, in the sense that you try to establish something and then it gets worn away. You get it established, and it’s worn away.

You have to think about these things as life gets comfortable, because there’s that tendency, even in stream-enters, to get complacent. They’re pretty secure. They have only seven lifetimes left to live. They’re not going to fall deeper than the human realm. But that doesn’t mean they’re not going to suffer between now and the time they reach full awakening.

So work on your heedfulness. Think about the long-term consequences of what you're doing. Think of how much work you had to put in to get what you have now. And what are you doing with it? Frittering it away? Have some compassion on the you from the past who worked hard to get the you in the present to this human life. You've got the opportunity to practice the Dhamma. The Dhamma is available. The opportunity to practice is here. So take advantage of it.

As for what it means to finally put an end to suffering, what it would be like to have no more suffering, it's really going to change your mind. The meaning we have in life is the meaning that "I put in this effort—there was a lot of effort, and a lot of pain, and a lot of whatever involved—but the rewards were worth it." But what if there were something that, once it was gained, required no further effort, something in which there was no pain involved at all, something that wouldn't have to be looked after, something that wouldn't have to be repaired. It just is. Would you need meaning then?

When I was in Europe, I was reading a teaching from a teacher from another tradition, saying that the third noble truth is just your basic awareness: not thinking, not trying to figure things out, just being aware, aware, aware of whatever's happening. He was saying that the problem with this—what he called the third noble truth—was that it wasn't very interesting.

That's a horrible idea: You'd get to nibbāna and you'd be bored? That's not the case at all. There's no time to get bored, because you're beyond space and time entirely.

But what it would actually be like not to have to do things, not to have to suffer: That's something so out of the range of what we've experienced so far that it's really hard to get our imagination around it.

Which is why the Buddha said it's not something that you should imagine, it's something you should realize. Do what's needed to get there, and then pass judgment. Again, as he said, he'd take you that far, and from that point on you're free. Nobody ever gets trapped in nibbāna, because nibbāna is freedom in the most absolute sense.

So be prepared to have your values change as you follow the path. The practice opens possibilities that otherwise would never have been open to you before. We're not trying to get back to some earlier innocent state, before social conditioning. As the Buddha said, we're working to reach what has never been reached before, to attain what has never been attained before, to realize what has never been realized before. It's going to be something radically different.

And no one who has ever gotten there has ever regretted following the path that took them there. So allow that possibility to open your mind.

At the same time, have a strong sense of the dangers of *not* opening your mind that way. That's why the Buddha said all goodness, all skillfulness, comes from being heedful. It's not that we're naturally good. We're good for a while, and then when circumstances get bad, that goodness can easily change into something else. You have to see that where you are is very unstable, very precarious, whereas there's the possibility of absolute stability and absolute safety if you follow the path with a strong sense of dedication, with a strong sense of heedfulness.

So let the path open your heart and mind.

## 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*.

*Bhikkhu*: Monk.

*Bhikkhunī*: Nun.

*Brahmā*: The highest level of deva, living in the heavens of form or formlessness.

*Brahman*: A member of the priestly caste in India.

*Brahmavihāra*: Sublime attitude of unlimited goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, or equanimity.

*Deva*: Literally, “shining one.” An inhabitant of the terrestrial or heavenly realms higher than the human.

*Dhamma*: (1) Event; action. (2) A phenomenon in and of itself. (3) Mental quality. (4) Doctrine, teaching. (5) Nibbāna (although there are passages in the Pali Canon describing nibbāna as the abandoning of all dhammas). Sanskrit form: *dharma*.

*Dhammapada*: A collection of short verses attributed to the Buddha.

*Jhāna*: Mental absorption. A state of strong concentration focused on a single sensation or mental notion. Sanskrit form: *dhyāna*.

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

*Māra*: The personification of death and temptation.

*Mettā*: Goodwill; benevolence. See *brahmavihāra*.

*Nibbāna*: Literally, the “unbinding” of the mind from passion, aversion, and delusion, and from the entire round of death and rebirth. As this term also denotes the extinguishing of a fire, it carries connotations of stilling, cooling, and peace. Sanskrit form: *nirvāṇa*.

*Pali*: The name of the earliest extant canon of the Buddha’s teachings and, by extension, of the language in which it was composed.

*Pasāda*: Confidence.

*Sala*: Hall.

*Samatha*: Tranquility. Originally, this term meant tranquility as a quality of mind, but over time it has also come to mean a type of meditation aimed at making the mind peaceful. See *vipassanā*.

*Samsāra*: The wandering-on through rebirth and redeath.

*Samvega*: A sense of dismay, terror, or urgency.

*Saṅkhāra*: Fabrication.

*Satipaṭṭhāna*: 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: *sūtra*.

*Tathāgata*: One who has become authentic or has truly gone to the goal. An epithet of the Buddha and, occasionally, of arahants in general.

*Vinaya*: The monastic discipline.

*Vipassanā*: Insight. Originally, this term meant insight as a quality of the mind, but over time it has come to mean a type of meditation aiming at insight into inconstancy, stress, and not-self.

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