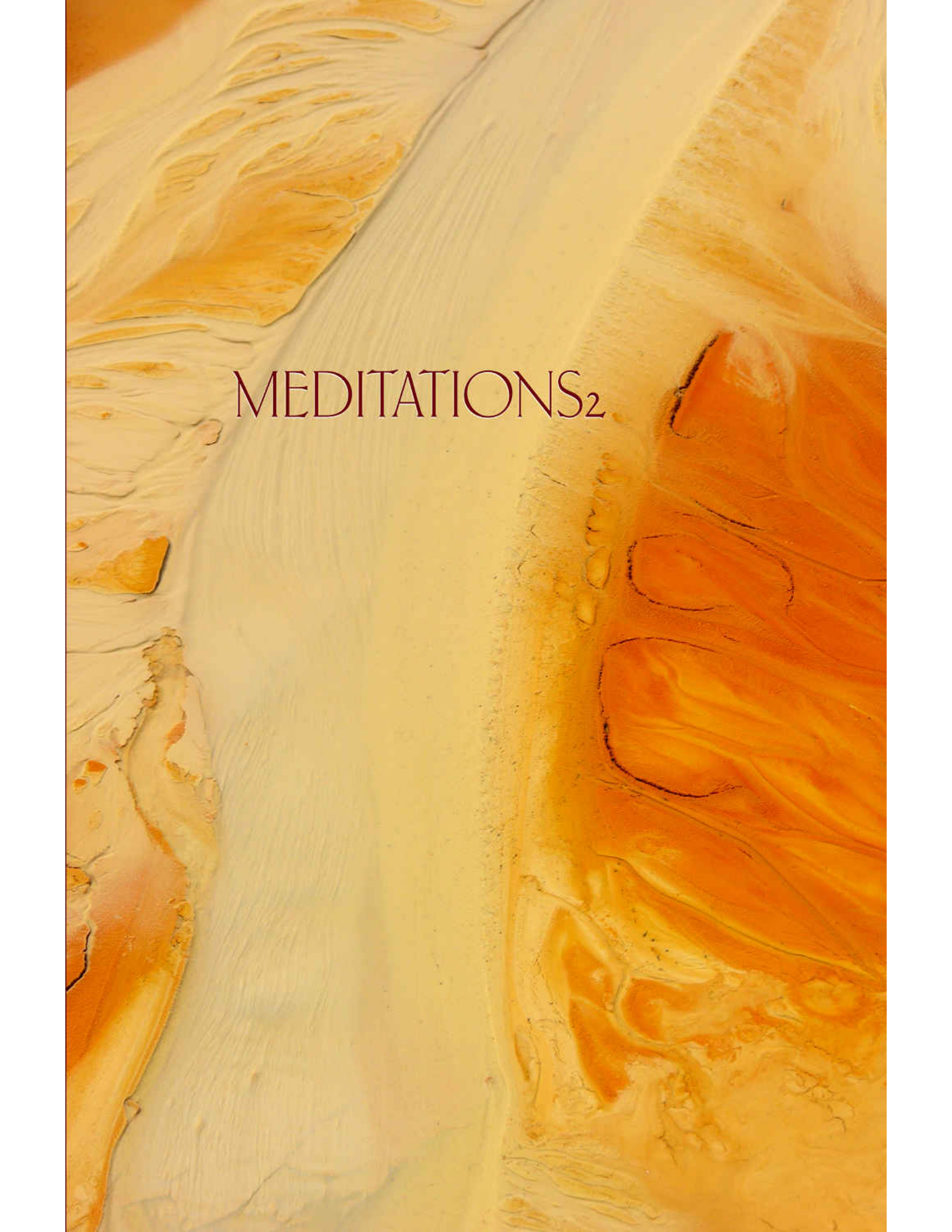




MEDITATIONS₂

Meditations₂

Dhamma Talks

by

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Introduction

The daily schedule at Metta Forest Monastery includes a group interview in the late afternoon, and a chanting session followed by a group meditation period later in the evening. 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 essay, "A Guided Meditation." If you are not familiar with these instructions, you might want to read through them before reading the talks in this book. Also, further Dhamma talks are available at www.dhammatalks.org.

I would like to thank Bok Lim Kim for making the recording of these talks possible. She, more than anyone else, is responsible for overcoming my initial reluctance to have the talks recorded. I would also like to thank the following people for transcribing the talks and/or helping to edit the transcriptions: Paul and Debra Breger, John Bullitt, Richard Heiman, Walter Schwidetzky, Craig Swogger, Jane Yudelman, Balaggo Bhikkhu, Gunaddho Bhikkhu, Khematto Bhikkhu, and Susuddho Bhikkhu. May they all be happy.

Whatever merit there may be to these talks comes from the training I received from my teachers, Ajaan Fuang Jotiko and Ajaan Suwat Suvaco. This book is dedicated to their memory, with utmost gratitude.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

Metta Forest Monastery
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Close to the Heart

December 1, 2003

Okay, time to practice. There are times when talk about practice is helpful and times when it gets in the way. The best way to solve that problem is simply to *do* the practice. When you talk about the practice, you can start getting lost in abstract space. You forget that the whole purpose of the Dhamma is to point into our hearts. The big issues that we carry around inside us — our fears, our sufferings, our whole sense of what life is all about: To the extent that talking about the practice helps to get perspective on these things, then it's useful. But the talk has to be part of a larger *doing* — doing something about those problems.

Sometimes the doing may seem strange. Here we are sitting, watching our breath. What does that do? It brings us close to the heart, very close to our minds. Of all the things we can know outside of our minds, the breath is the closest. As we're one-on-one with the breath, that changes our perspective on things. We let go of the outside distractions, and ultimately turn our attention to the other part of the one-on-one, which is the mind aware of what's going on in here.

Back when I was first ordained, Ajaan Fuang had me memorize the *Divine Mantra*, which, I must admit, struck me as kind of strange, as it centered on the six elements, a way of looking at things that felt very foreign. He had me chant it every evening. I was living alone up on the hill in Rayong, and would chant the *Divine Mantra* every evening just after dusk. After doing this for a while it became less of a weird aspect of Thai Buddhism and more of a friend as I sat there through the night, all by myself.

Finally, one evening it really hit me. I was going through the six elements, and when I finally got to the chant on consciousness I realized that I wasn't chanting about some foreign, abstract idea of consciousness. I was chanting about my own awareness, my own mind, my own heart, right here, right now. I felt as if a huge block of ice inside me just shattered. I was able to open up and realize that the meditation wasn't some strange foreign thing I was doing to

myself. I hadn't consciously thought that it was, but subconsciously, deep down inside, there was a feeling that it was alien, something from another culture. That night it became mine: *my* awareness of *my* mind, *my* awareness of things really deep inside. The Dhamma was no longer a foreign mold that I was trying to impose on the mind. It became a message pointing to my deepest awareness. And I became aware of a real tenderness deep down — a tenderness not in the sense of being nice or fuzzy, but in the sense of having been wounded, of needing some help. There was a need for some healing there, and the meditation was what it needed. I wouldn't say that I hadn't gained anything from the practice up to that point, but the quality of what I gained changed that night.

This is what we're working on as we're practicing. The term *patipat* in Thai means to practice, as when we're practicing the Dhamma, but it also means to look after somebody. Sometimes the Thai ajaans say, "We're not here to *patipat* the Buddha's teachings, we're here to *patipat* our own minds: to look after our own minds, our own hearts."

So although the words may seem foreign and the process of meditation mechanical — you're focusing on the breath, you're dealing with the mechanics of the breathing, how the breathing relates to the pains in the body — ultimately these things start getting closer and closer to your heart. As you learn to treat your heart with more sensitivity using the breath, using the understanding you gain from the Dhamma, after a while the heart begins to open up. It opens up and allows you to heal it. Without that opening up, there's going to be a resistance.

Now, this opening may happen suddenly or gradually, but the important point is that as you get to know the breath, get close to the breath, you're also getting closer and closer to your own mind, closer to the more sensitive parts of your mind. As you deal with the breath more precisely, with more sensitivity, you find that the mind is finally willing to open up to itself. Prior to that point it was used to being abused and misused and so it shut itself in, shut itself up, even against you. One part of the mind shut up against another part, and so the healing couldn't take place. Your conscious awareness has to learn to be a healing awareness, so that the parts of the mind that need to be healed will be willing to open up.

So an important part of the practice is sensitivity. Start out by getting very sensitive to the breath. Get to know how it feels in the different parts of the body, how different rhythms of breathing feel. It's not so much that you want to become a breath mechanic, although that's one of the side benefits. It's more that

you try to develop your sensitivity to the present moment, your sensitivity to the least little bit of stress, the least little bit of harshness you're adding unnecessarily to the present moment. You gain more finesse with smoothing it out, evaporating it, dissolving it away. You begin to see that even the simple process of breathing can be done well or poorly. If you pay attention to it, it can be done well. That way, the simple fact that you've got a breath becomes more than just a means for keeping the body alive. It can actually be used to heal the body, to deal with different types of pain in the body. At the same time, it gets more and more healing for the mind.

As you become more sensitive to precisely how you approach the present moment, how you deal with the present moment, all those parts of the mind that shut themselves off because they didn't want to be mistreated seem to realize instinctively that there's better treatment in the offing. Your conscious awareness is more of a healing awareness than it was before. This allows the rest of your awareness to begin opening up.

Those parts of the body that you often have trouble accessing even with the breath: There comes a time where your sensitivity reaches the point where they begin to open up, too. You may have noticed, when you really look at your inner sense of the body, that certain parts seem to be missing. There's a holding in, a tension that blocks things off. But as your sensitivity to the breath begins to get more and more subtle, the blockages dissolve and you realize that what seemed to be a physical blockage had its mental side as well. It's opening up now that you have the physical and mental tools to deal with it, along with the sensitivity to use those tools well.

So, your sensitivity to the present moment is a very important part of developing concentration, developing insight, and dealing with the whole problem of suffering, the burdens that the mind carries around. It gives you the tools you need to deal with all the unskillful mental states that seem to get lodged in the mind and do their damage in both body and mind, and yet that we're often afraid to deal with. When you're given the tools of not only the breath but also other perspectives of the Dhamma — and this is why talking about the Dhamma can be helpful at times, to gain a clear and precise sense of your tools — then you're ready to handle them.

When I was staying with Ajaan Fuang, the lessons didn't just come from the meditation technique. They also came from being around him, getting his perspective on things. I found myself learning a lot just by living with someone

from a totally different background. I'd come up with a problem and mention it to him, and he'd look at me as though I'd come from the other side of the world — which, of course, I had. My way of looking at the problem seemed very natural to me, but to him it was extremely strange. Learning to see the strangeness of some of my problems was a useful exercise in getting outside of the problems for a while — sometimes for good. So, if our discussions help in that way, then they're useful discussions. They can give us a new perspective on our problems.

The real work, though, is something that's done inside, and often it's hardly even verbal at all. This is why the breath is such a good way of getting around a lot of our internal blockages. Instead of attacking the problem verbally, you come at it from the nonverbal side — the energy in the body — becoming sensitive to the side that gets around the mind's automatic nonverbal defenses. These patterns of blockage in the mind are what ignorance is all about. Hiding behind that ignorance are all the causes of suffering.

This is one of the scary parts of being born into any realm, especially the human realm and the realms below that. As you come into this life, you immediately meet with suffering — wham! immediately — and there's nobody to explain it to you. You're facing it head-on. Other people can comfort you, but they can't show you how to deal with it. So the mind comes up with all sorts of jerry-rigged approaches, improvised approaches, to keep the suffering at bay. Then, even after we learn language, we carry those pre-verbal approaches toward suffering into our adult lives without realizing it. Often those approaches involve blocking, denial, and it's not just a mental blocking. It's a physical blocking as well.

So, as we're working with the breath and getting around some of these blockages, don't be surprised when the sleeping dogs — the things that seemed to be lying very peacefully in the mind — suddenly get stirred up. That's because the barrier behind which they were hiding has suddenly dissolved away. When that happens, you can use the sensitivity you've developed in the meditation — along with the understanding of the Dhamma you've developed by reading and listening, gaining a perspective on the whole issue of suffering and the end of suffering — and apply them directly to your own, immediate sufferings. The Buddha wasn't talking about suffering in the abstract; he was talking about the sufferings lodged right here in each person's heart, right here in *your* heart, right

now. And the tools he offered are meant to come here into the heart, to the particular sufferings in the heart, where they can make all the difference.

The Sublime Attitudes

July, 2003

The Buddha's teachings on skillful qualities of mind come in clusters: five this, seven that. Even the one quality that's always appropriate — mindfulness — is always taught in the context of clusters. To begin with, it's paired with alertness: Mindfulness means keeping something in mind, as when we keep reminding ourselves to stay with the breath as we meditate; alertness means noticing what's going on, being alert to what you do and to the results of what you're doing. For mindfulness to be effective in training the mind, it always has to be paired with alertness. And both of them have to play a role in larger clusters as well. They're part of the five strengths, the seven factors of Awakening, and the noble eightfold path.

The reason the Buddha teaches skillful qualities in clusters is because unskillful qualities come in clusters, too. The three roots of unskillfulness — greed, aversion, and delusion — can branch out into five hindrances, seven obsessions, ten fetters, 108 forms of craving. They grow exponentially. No one skillful quality can take them all on. Each skillful quality has to be strengthened by others to be effective, to play its part in the training of the whole mind. At the same time, each has to be balanced by others to make sure it doesn't go overboard and end up as a tool for the opposing forces. This is why the Buddha left teachings like the four bases of success, the seven factors for Awakening, and the four sublime attitudes: armies of skillful qualities to do battle with the armies of Mara.

When you see the various lists placed down — one, two, three, four, five, six, whatever — it gives the impression that you start with one skillful quality and then drop it to move on to the next. Actually the process is more a question of gathering all the qualities together, and then leaning in the direction of one or another as is appropriate so that the mind can maintain its balance. This is the principle that applies to the sublime attitudes: immeasurable goodwill, immeasurable compassion, immeasurable appreciation, and immeasurable equanimity.

We start out with goodwill not because it's the least advanced of the qualities but because it's the most essential, the most basic. On top of that you build the others: compassion, appreciation or sympathetic joy, and finally equanimity. A balanced mind is one that knows when to emphasize which of the four. It's not that you abandon number one to move to number two or number four; you're trying to keep all four of them on hand so that you can use whichever one is appropriate for the occasion.

Goodwill lies at the basis of everything. In fact you could say that it lies at the basis of the whole practice. If we didn't have goodwill for ourselves and the people around us, the four noble truths wouldn't make any sense as an important teaching. It's because we would like to see suffering end, not only for ourselves but for the people around us, that we want to follow the path to the end of suffering. We're concerned to find out what suffering is, how we can abandon its causes and help to realize its cessation.

So goodwill is where everything starts. Think about it: Why would you want anyone else to suffer? You might think about the evil or cruel things they've done in the past, but even then why would you want them to suffer? To learn a lesson? Well, they're going to learn their lesson because the principle of karma is going to take care of that — that's why the teaching on equanimity is there — so you don't have to go out and be God's vengeful sword to make sure that everyone gets their just punishments.

Your only job is to make sure there are no limits on your goodwill. When people have done horrible things, you don't have to like them; you don't have to condone their behavior. That's not what goodwill means. Goodwill means that you don't wish anyone harm. If they're doing horrible things, you have every right to stop them if you can — after all, in doing horrible things, they're creating bad karma, more suffering for themselves. Just make sure that you don't harm them in trying to stop them.

So try to make your goodwill limitless — or as the texts say, immeasurable. Take this as a challenge. When you spread thoughts of goodwill, test to see where the limits are. Don't just pretend that your goodwill is immeasurable. Everyone's goodwill starts out with limits. What are the limits of yours? After spreading goodwill to people you already feel it for — your friends, your family — start spreading it to people for whom you don't spontaneously feel it. Does your heart object when you try spreading goodwill to people you dislike? Stop and ask it: Why? What would you gain from seeing them suffer? Look at the little voice

inside that resents their happiness. Is that a voice you want to identify with? Can you drop that attitude?

This is where the practice of developing goodwill really makes a difference in the mind: When it forces you to challenge any smallness or narrowness in your heart. If you think of goodwill as a billowing pink cloud of cotton candy covering the world in all directions, what you're really doing is covering up your actual attitudes, which is of no help at all in gaining insight into the mind. Goodwill is meant as a challenge, as a way of searching out and working through your small-hearted attitudes one by one so that you can examine them, uproot them, and really let them go. Only when you work through the particulars like this can goodwill become more and more limitless.

That's when your compassion can become limitless as well. If you feel goodwill for people, then when they're suffering the ill effects of their bad karma you can't help but have compassion for them. You want them not only to stop experiencing whatever pain or suffering they're undergoing at the time, but also to stop doing whatever's going to cause them to continue to suffer. This is an important part of compassion. It's not simply a soft spot in your heart for people who are suffering. It also means also trying to find some way to help them to stop doing the things that are causing them to suffer to begin with.

When you can help them, you appreciate their happiness. You feel sympathy for the happiness they encounter. Even in cases where people are experiencing happiness that has nothing to do with you at all, you appreciate the fact that they're experiencing the results of their past good actions or present good actions. You don't resent their happiness. Even if you're in a contest and they come in first and you come in second and you felt that you really deserved to come in first, this is where you have to practice sympathetic joy. There's a larger framework for things than the one you're probably aware of.

Notice in all these cases that there comes a point where you have to leave things for what they are, cases where you want to help someone and you can't, or you would rather see yourself gain the happiness that somebody else has. This is where you have to develop equanimity.

Notice that the teaching on equanimity is a reflection on the principle of karma. Of the four chants we have for the sublime attitudes, it's the only one that's simply a statement of fact. The others say:

"May all beings be happy."

May they be free from stress and pain.

May they not be deprived of the good fortune they're experiencing."

The first three are wishes, attitudes, things you would like to see happen. "May... May... May...." The fourth one is simply a reflection on the way things are.

"All living beings are the owners of their actions, heir to their actions....Whatever they do, for good or for evil, to that will they fall heir."

This reflection actually turns up in lots of different contexts. In the five reflections, the reflection on karma is the one that gives hope. You realize that you're in charge of your actions. You're not simply a victim of fate or of the stars or of some other being acting through you. You're the one who's making the choices. That's what gives you hope.

But it's hope coupled with heedfulness. You've got the power to do good with your actions, but also the power to cause harm. The principle of karma is a double-edged sword. If you're not careful, you can use it to cut your own throat. This is why the Buddha recommends reflecting on the principle of karma as a way of inspiring heedfulness.

Taken a little further, the universality of the principle of karma is a reflection for developing equanimity both toward yourself and toward other people. In other words, you come across incidents in your life where you can't gain the happiness you'd like. There's a karmic block there. So you learn to accept it with equanimity. That doesn't mean that you give up and become totally passive and indifferent. You look for the areas where your actions *can* make a difference. Don't waste your time and energy, butting your head against the wall in areas where you can't make any change. Focus on the areas where you can.

So equanimity is not hopelessness, it's not passive indifference. It's there to redirect your energies in the proper direction, to the areas where you can act for your own wellbeing and for the wellbeing of others.

The reflections on karma are also used as a basis for developing wisdom and insight. They form the background for all the teachings on discernment. The central insight of the Buddha's Awakening was that pain and pleasure come from your actions. There are actions that bring pain, actions that bring pleasure, actions that bring both, and then special actions, that put an end to action, an end to suffering, and bring total happiness. That's the essence of the Buddha's discernment. So it's an interesting combination: equanimity, hope, heedfulness,

discernment. These things all go together. They hover around that same reflection:

“I am the owner of my actions. All beings are the owners of their actions.”

In other words, all beings are responsible for what they do. Ajaan Suwat once gave a Dhamma talk on this reflection, focusing on the difference between the *anatta* teaching and this one statement. Form, feeling, perceptions, thought-constructs, consciousness: These are not self. But we are the owners of our actions. “Think about that,” he said.

In other words, don’t latch on to the results of your actions; latch on to the fact that you’re making the decisions right now, all the time. Once a decision has been made, it’s been put into a larger circle of cause and effect beyond your control; but you do have a chance to make a decision again the next moment, and the next moment, and then the next. Focus on that. Don’t get caught up in the results of past actions. Focus on what you can do now to make the present actions skillful. That’s the focus of the teaching, “We’re the owners of our actions.”

“We’re the heir to our actions”

We’re going to be receiving the results of these actions. So act in a way whose results you’d like to receive. Be concerned about that: That’s what’s meant by the Pali word, *ottappa*. It can be translated either as fear of the results of your actions or concern for the results of your actions. However you translate it, it means that you’re not apathetic; you know that whatever you do is going to bear results.

Here again the quality of discernment comes in. There are lots of things we like to do that will give bad results and things we don’t like to do that will give good results. The Buddha said the measure of whether we’re a fool or a wise person lies in how we handle situations like that. In other words this is where the quality of discernment really shows its worth. You can talk about discernment, you can describe the three characteristics, the five khandhas, the six sense-spheres, dependent co-arising, emptiness, all these wonderful concepts; you can talk about them, but if they can’t help you make the right decision when you’re faced with a hard decision, your discernment’s useless. Useful discernment is the type that enables you to talk yourself out of doing things you would like to do but that you know would give bad results, or to talk yourself into doing things you

don't like to do but would give good results. That's where discernment shows its stuff.

"We're born of our actions."

Our actions are the source of everything we experience. If you want experiences to be good, focus on the source. If you don't like the kind of experiences you're having, turn back and focus again on the source. It's constantly right here, right here in the present moment.

The Buddha's teachings on time are interesting in that even though they do talk about time, they don't talk about a beginning point in time. The beginning point for your experience is right here in the present moment. It all comes springing out of right here; so instead of trying trace things back to first causes someplace way back in the past, the Buddha has you look for first causes right here and right now. Dig down deep inside into the area of the mind where intention and attention and perception play against each other, for that's the point from which all things are born.

"We're related through our actions"

The connections we have in life with different people are created by our actions: things that we've done together *with* other people or *to* other people or *for* other people. These create the connections that we have with the people around us.

Interconnectedness is a very popular teaching in Buddhism, especially nowadays, but it's funny that people like to talk about interconnectedness without the teaching on karma. They turn to dependent co-arising as a model for interconnectedness, this web of connections where one factor can't exist without a whole lot of other factors, but they neglect to realize that dependent co-arising is a teaching on how ignorance is connected with suffering, how craving is connected with suffering. It's the kind of connectedness you want to cut, not the kind you want to celebrate.

Connectedness through karma can go either way — the connections can be good, or they can be bad. So you want to foster the good ones.

And again, where do you look? You look at what you're doing right here and right now. How are you behaving with other people? How are you treating them?

These create the relationships you're going to be able to enjoy or you're going to be stuck with, now and on into the future. So choose your actions carefully.

"We have actions as our arbitrator."

Our actions decide our lives. In other words there's no judge up there someplace in the sky sitting on a big throne passing judgment on us. We're passing judgment on what kind of life we want to have by the way we act — which is both empowering and also a little scary. Think of how many times you've acted on unskillful motives. Think of the unskillful motives you still have lurking around in your mind that could form the basis for future unskillful actions. Think hard about that. It means there's work to be done — not just to escape unskillful actions but also to foster skillful ones.

This is where the hope comes in. Even though we may be suffering in our lives, there's a way out through our own actions. We don't have to sit around waiting for somebody else to come and save us. We're not victims of fate. We can make the choices, we can order our priorities so that we can reshape our lives in a positive direction through our thoughts, words, and deeds.

This is why we meditate, because meditation creates good qualities, skillful qualities in the mind: mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment, persistence, truthfulness, perseverance. As we work at these qualities, as we put them into action, they get strengthened and become more and more the wise arbitrators of our lives, pointing our lives in the direction we really want to go.

Then the final reflection builds on that:

"Whatever we do for good or for evil, to that will we fall heir."

This is a reminder to be heedful, that we really want to act on our good impulses, our skillful intentions. We want to develop the qualities in our minds that will foster these skillful intentions, because these are the things that really make a difference.

These teachings foster equanimity in reminding us to be equanimous toward our past actions, toward the results from past actions. Certain things we can't change because they've already been done. We can't turn back the clock.

But the teachings foster hope in that we can make a difference in what we're doing right here and right now. There's that opening for us to design our lives, to point them in a better direction.

In that balance among equanimity, heedfulness, and hope, learning how to make proper use of this principle of karma: That's where the discernment comes in.

The teachings on karma have gotten a bad rap, largely because they've been mangled, turned into a simplistic caricature: either fatalistic or tit for tat. But if you understand the complexity and also the purpose of the teaching, you begin to realize that it's not what we thought it was. It's not an excuse to justify the suffering that people are going through or for our being indifferent to that suffering. When you really understand the workings of karma, you see other people's suffering as an opportunity to help them. You don't know how much longer their karma for suffering is going to last. Wouldn't it be a good thing if you could be the agent to help bring their suffering to an end? Put yourself in their place: Wouldn't you like to have somebody come and help? And someday you may actually be in their place too. After all, as the Buddha said, you've already been there before and if you don't get out of the cycle of rebirth, you'll probably be there again. Karma is not a teaching meant to make us feel superior to other people. You never know: Maybe the results of their past bad karma are simply coming faster than the results of your past bad karma, and you may someday be in a similar place to where they are — or even worse.

So you can't be complacent. And the teaching on karma is not designed to make you complacent. If anything, just the opposite: It's meant to make you uncomplacent. I once read someone saying that September 11th burst his complacent Buddhist bubble. Well, that's an oxymoron: "complacent Buddhist." The whole purpose in following the Dhamma is that it teaches you not to be complacent. As long as there's suffering in your heart, there's work to be done.

So, on the one hand, the principle of karma makes you heedful, reminding you that you've got work to do. But it also means that there's a way to work with suffering so that you can go beyond it: That's where the hope lies.

If you understand how to use the teaching on karma, you see how really useful it is, how relevant it is to the meditation we're doing right now. The prime factor you want to dig down and find in your meditation is just that: the karma, the factor of intention. Watch to see how it moves. See how you can make it more skillful. See how you can perfect that factor so that it takes you not only into more pleasant places in space and time, but also — when you get really skillful — outside of space and time, to the end of karma, to the point where there's no more work to be done.

That's one of the descriptions of an arahant: *katam karaniyam*, someone who's done the task, done what had to be done. The burden is laid down. Understanding the principle of karma, and using it the right way, is what makes all that possible.

Basics

September 10, 2003

The first step when you meditate is to get your body into position: your right leg on top of your left, your hands in your lap, your right hand on top of your left. Sit up straight, look straight ahead of you, and then close your eyes. That's the body in position.

The next step is to get the mind in position. Start with thoughts of goodwill, because that's why we're here. Goodwill is the wish for happiness — both for your own happiness and for the happiness of everybody else. This is what we're working on as we meditate: We're taking that wish and we're working on it, looking for a way to bring true happiness to ourselves and to the people around us. Spread thoughts of goodwill first to yourself and then out in ever-widening circles to people who are close to your heart, people you know well and like, people you're more neutral about, and even people you don't like. Don't let there be any limitation on your goodwill, because that's a limitation on your own mind, on your own happiness. At the same time, think about it: If everyone in the world could find true happiness, the world would be a much better place. No one would have any reason to harm anyone else.

With that thought, spread thoughts of goodwill to people you don't even know — and not just people: all living beings of all kinds, east, west, north, south, above, and below, out to infinity. May we all find true happiness.

The next step is to bring your awareness back to the present moment. What have you got here? You've got the body sitting here breathing, and you've got the mind thinking and aware. So bring all those things together. Think about the breath and then be alert to the breath: What's the breath doing right now? Is it coming in? Is it going out? Where do you sense it coming in? Where do you sense it going out?

For the time being, put aside any preconceived notions you may have about where the breath comes in and where it goes out. Just notice how it actually feels — because breathing is not just air coming in and out of the lungs; it's the whole process, the whole energy flow by which the body brings the air in and expels it.

And that's not just a matter of the nose and lungs. The entire nervous system can be involved. Different parts of the body expand and contract to bring in the air. That's all counted as part of the breathing process. So wherever you're most aware of the breathing process, focus your attention there. Try to make that spot comfortable. You can do this by adjusting the length of the breath, the width, the depth of the breath — whether it's fast or slow, heavy or light — whatever ways you have of adjusting the rhythm and texture of the breath so that your sensation of the breathing feels good. That's getting the mind in position.

Now the problem with both the mind and the body in position is how to keep them there. It's not that difficult to get them into position, but to *keep* them there: That takes effort. And particularly the mind, because the mind is so used to running around. The body can sit here perfectly still, yet in the course of five minutes the mind could have gone around the world many, many times.

So this is the point you have to focus on most. In fact, all the real issues are in the mind. Even when there's pain in the body, the body itself doesn't really object to the pain; it doesn't mind. The mind is what gets upset by the pain. So you have to work mainly with the mind here. If it wanders off, just bring it right back. If it wanders off again, bring it back again. Try not to get frustrated with it, try not to get discouraged. It's used to wandering, so you have to accept it as normal that the mind is going to wander. Your duty right now is to catch it as quickly as you can and to bring it back without a lot of recrimination — just gently, but firmly, bring it back to the breath.

And let the breath be as comfortable as possible. The more comfortable it is, the less likely the mind will be to wander off. In fact, if you get the breath really comfortable, it becomes really absorbing. Explore where in the body you feel the different parts of the breathing sensations, the breathing process. Which parts of the body feel tense? If you want, you can survey the whole body, starting from the top of the head on down, or starting at the navel and going up the front of the body then down the back and out the legs, and beginning again at the back of the neck to go out the arms. Notice how the different parts of the body are or are not involved in the breathing process. Notice where you feel tension related to the breath. If you feel any tension anywhere, let it relax, let it dissolve away, so that no new tension builds up with the in-breath, and you don't hang on to any tension with the out. This way you make the breathing a lot more interesting. Then choose whichever part of the body you find congenial, and settle down there.

As for pains, at this stage of the game you don't have to focus on them. If there's a pain in the leg, just let it be in the leg. You don't have to be down there in the leg with it. You can stay in any other part of the body where the breathing feels comfortable — that's your choice. And be careful not to tense up around the pain. Remember that the breath is a whole-body process. When the breathing is comfortable, the breath energy can go through all the nerves and right through any pain there may be, so that you don't compound the pain by tensing up around it.

Try to develop a sense of wanting to be here, of liking to be here. Try to make the breath your friend. Often, when you're meditating and things don't seem to be going well, the object of your meditation seems to become your adversary. It's the hardest thing to focus on and it seems to keep wanting to slip away. But that's not the case at all. That's your own misperception. If you make friends with the breath, it's a lot easier to stay here. Beings friends means, first, trying to sense as precisely as possible what it really feels like, as opposed to your preconceived notions of what it should feel like or where you should feel it. In other words, *listen* to the breath. And then, second, allow the breath to get more comfortable. These are basic principles in establishing any kind of friendship: Listen to the other person, allow the other person to feel at ease and at home, and soon the other person will start opening up.

The same with the breath: The breath energy in the body has lots to offer. On the physical side, it can relieve a lot of stress, a lot of diseases associated with stress. On the mental side, it can create a sense of ease and belonging here in the present moment so that you enjoy being right here just breathing in and breathing out. When you get on more friendly terms with the breath, and the breath becomes your friend, then you're more inclined to want to stay, to see what you can learn from the breath. That's the first step in having the meditation go well.

There are actually four steps altogether — although maybe it's better not to think of them as steps. There are four component factors in the mental attitude you should bring to the meditation to make it go well. They're called bases of success.

The first one is simply the desire to do the meditation, wanting to do it, being inclined to do it. If you find that your mind isn't inclined, step back and reason with it. Think of the importance of training the mind. Here it is, the major factor in your life, and if it's untrained it's like giving your car over to a wild, crazy

person to drive. You have no idea where the crazy person is going to take that car, whether he's going to run off the road and into somebody, because you have no control over him. It's the same with your mind — the mind that shapes your life. If you have no control over it, you don't know where it's going to take you.

So as we're meditating we're trying to develop a measure of control. Not the sort of control of control freaks, but the control of someone who's intelligent in knowing how to administer and manage things so that the mind feels happy to do what really should be done. That requires mindfulness; it requires alertness. And those are precisely the qualities we're developing as we meditate.

The mind is the chief producer of all the happiness and suffering we experience in the world. That's why, when the Buddha gave his first sermon, started out with the issue of suffering. That, he said, is the big problem in life. And it's to be solved right here, in the mind in the present moment, because the suffering isn't something coming from outside. The real problem in life is the suffering that comes from craving. And you can't work on craving until you're really mindful and alert, and have the steady concentration that allows you to look at it calmly to see it in action.

So those are the qualities we're developing as we meditate: mindfulness, alertness, concentration, the ability to see things clearly as the mind grows more still. So even though we haven't quite gotten there yet in our meditation, at least we're working in that direction. And the more you sense the importance of these qualities, the more you strengthen your desire to meditate.

Once that desire is in place, the next step is just to stick with it. Persistence is the second base of success. Just keep at your task. If the mind slips off, bring it back. If it slips off again, just bring it back again. If it slips off ten times, a hundred times, bring it back ten times, a hundred times. Don't give up. Don't get discouraged.

Remember that this is a task that nobody else can do for you. We suffer in life because of our own lack of skill in dealing with sights and sounds and smells and tastes and ideas that come our way. And because it's our own lack of skill, we're the ones who have to overcome that lack by developing more skillfulness in how we manage our minds. If we don't do it, nobody can do it for us. And if we don't do it now, when is it going to get done? Are you going to wait until you're older? That doesn't help. On the one hand, even if you do live to a ripe old age, the mind gets more and more difficult to train the older you get. And then of course there's the question of whether or not you're going to live that long.

You've got the opportunity to meditate now, so go ahead and do it. Make the most of it each moment you have the chance. That's persistence.

The third base of success is intentness: You really focus on what you're doing; you give it your full attention. In the case of the breath, this means noticing when it's too long, when it's too short, when it's too heavy, when it's too light. The more careful your attention, the more sensitive you are — and the more you start to see here. You also try to be attentive to the mind. Pay attention to what kind of breathing really helps the mind to settle down, what kind of breathing doesn't. Once you notice that, you can make changes. In other words, be observant. Watch carefully what's happening, and make adjustments. The more sensitive you are to what's going on, the more you're going to see, and at the same time, the more the mind will be willing to settle down.

The fourth base of success is *vimamsa*, the one that's most difficult to translate. It covers the mind's ability to discern, its ability to be ingenious — in other words, all the qualities of active intelligence. If you see that something is not working in your meditation, use your imagination to figure out another approach that'll get better results. You can make the breath deeper, you can make it more shallow, you can make it come in and out different spots in the body. There's a lot to play around with here.

Sometimes you have to use auxiliary meditation topics to help you. If you're having a problem with anger, work on goodwill and equanimity. There are meditation topics that help foster those qualities. If you're having a problem with lust and desire, contemplate the body in terms of its parts. Notice that when you're attracted to a body, it's not the whole body you're attracted to. It's only certain parts. If you took the whole body into your mind, inside and out, you'd find it really difficult to get attracted to it. If you're feeling lazy, you can start thinking about death. As I said earlier, you have no idea how much longer you're going to live. The only thing that's for sure is that you've got this opportunity right now, so take advantage of it.

These are ways of thinking that get the mind directed back to its work. They're ways of using your powers of intelligence, your powers of ingenuity, to see what works to bring the mind to the present moment. Once you've got it there, you can focus on the breath again. Treat the breath as home base, and other topics simply as means of bringing you home when you've wandered off course.

When you've got all these qualities together — your desire to meditate, your persistence, intentness, and your powers of ingenuity and intelligence — you find that the meditation grows; it develops. It starts showing results.

Notice that desire does have a role in this. Sometimes people say that when you meditate you shouldn't have any desires — you should just be in the present moment, allowing whatever comes up to come, without any idea of “progress” at all. The Buddha never taught meditation that way. At all. The whole point of the practice is that it *is* a path; it *goes* someplace. That someplace is right here into the present moment, but there is progress in terms of what you see, develop, and abandon here in the present moment. And desire does play a role in that seeing, developing, and abandoning — as do all the other qualities: intentness, persistence, ingenuity, the mind's ability to see what works and what doesn't work. It's simply a matter of learning how to use these mental qualities in a way that's helpful. Like desire: We've all had the experience of focusing on the goals we want in our meditation and then discovering that our desire gets in the way. Well, the solution is not to drop the desire; it's to learn how to focus the desire in a way that's more useful. Focus on the causes that are going to get you there.

Think of yourself as driving to a mountain on the horizon. If you spend all your time focusing on the mountain, you're going to drive off the road. So what do you do? You don't give up your desire to go to the mountain. You stay focused on the road. Every now and then you glance up to make sure that you're headed in the direction of the mountain, and that the mountain hasn't appeared in your rear-view mirror. But your main focus should be on what you're doing right now. Once you focus your desire here, make your desire more mindful, more alert — not in a general sense, but more precisely mindful right now, more precisely alert right now. And then the next moment, and then the next.

Try to focus your desire on making the practice continuous. As I said, the problem is not getting in position; it's staying in position. That's what you've got to work with here. And you do that by being mindful of the breath, alert to the breath, more continually. Once you focus your desire properly, it becomes an aid to the meditation and not an obstacle.

The same goes for the other qualities. Sometimes your effort can push, push, push so hard that it gets in the way of any kind of progress. So step back. Then it doesn't become a matter of not pushing; you just learn where to push — what things to push, what things to let be. In other words, you take these four bases for

success and refine them. You learn through experience how to master them as aids to the meditation.

Sometimes ingenuity, or thinking processes, can get carried away as you get too abstract in analyzing things. When that happens, step back and be ingenious about what you're doing right now. Analyze what you're doing right now, what the results are. Don't go beyond what's happening right now, what you're doing right now.

That way these qualities become focused, they become a part of the meditation. They help your meditation succeed. Ordinarily we don't like to think in terms of success in meditation. There's so much pressure to succeed in the material area that we don't want to hear about standards for success in the area of the Dhamma. But if you're serious about putting an end to suffering, the issue of success is something you can't avoid. When you approach the meditation skillfully, you get results. Your efforts have succeeded. They're actually accomplished something. That's the whole point.

So if you find that things aren't working in the meditation, it's because one of these qualities isn't properly focused. Either your desire to be with the breath is flagging; or you're not being as consistently persistent, breath after breath after breath; or you're not really paying attention — you're just going through the motions; or you're not using your analytical powers to see what's wrong, what could be changed if something has to be changed, or see where you're trying to push change too much. Use your powers of analysis to watch over all four of these qualities — to see what's unbalanced, what's unfocused — and then figure out how to put things into shape. Once you've got these qualities working together on the meditation, there will have to be progress. There are no two ways about it.

In Thailand they like to take these qualities as a guide to how you progress in *anything*, how you succeed in anything. To succeed in school, to succeed in business, you need the desire to succeed, you need to be persistent, to be intent, to use your powers of analysis and ingenuity. If you apply those qualities to *any* task, you're sure to succeed.

And what do you succeed in here? You succeed in putting an end to the suffering you've been causing yourself unnecessarily. You succeed in realizing the Deathless. And you do it by developing more alertness, developing more mindfulness. You do it with this simple process of focusing on the breath, being

sensitive to the breath, exploring the way the breath is moving in the present moment. All the good things in the mind build on this.

Start Out Small

September 22, 2003

Focus on your breath. And as for what's going to happen when you focus on the breath, put that thought aside. And where the meditation is going to take you and how it's going to take you there: Put those thoughts aside as well. Be careful not to anticipate too much, because when you know too much in advance, it's not really knowing. A lot of it is guesswork. A lot of our preconceived notions come from ignorance. That's precisely what we're trying to get rid of, and yet our ignorance shapes the way we practice. So when you meditate, it's important to clear away as many of those expectations as possible. Just be with the breath: When the breath comes in, know it's going in; when it's going out, know it's going out. That's all you really have to know right now. As for what's going to happen with the next breath or the one after that, wait until those breaths come.

Ajaan Fuang once noted that we now have lots of books on meditation, lots of explanations, and in some ways it's a help, but in other ways it's a hindrance — a hindrance in that many of our perceptions and memories picked up from books and Dhamma talks clutter up the present moment. They actually get in the way of seeing what's going on. And this gets compounded with our general impatience: We want to see results fast, and in order to make them happen fast we squeeze them too much in the direction we think they're supposed to go. But a lot of the genuine results of the meditation have to come from simply allowing the causes to do their work, to develop on their own, without your having to push them too much in any particular direction. So if you see your thoughts leaning into the next moment or what's going to happen further on in the future, just pull back to stay balanced right here, right now. Look after the causes, and the results will take care of themselves.

As Ajaan Lee often advises in his talks, start out small. Notice where you feel the breath, and then watch it. If it doesn't seem comfortable, you can nudge it into what seems to be a more comfortable direction. Don't be in too great of a hurry to go on to the next step, because we want to come from a position of strength, of real knowledge, as we meditate.

There's a passage in the Canon where the Buddha says that a person who doesn't have a basic level of happiness and inner goodness simply cannot do goodness. Sounds like a Catch-22, but that's not the point. The point is we all have a certain amount of goodness in our minds, and so we should tap into that first. The goodness here not only means good intentions but also a good-natured attitude toward what you're doing, a good-natured attitude toward the people around you. That's why we recite that chant on goodwill every night. You have to bring a certain level of humor to the practice: the humor that allows you to laugh at your mistakes without getting bitter. When you get bitter, you start lashing out at people around you. You start criticizing the techniques — there are all kinds of things you can criticize. But if you can sit back for a minute and tap into your own basic good-natured attitude — and it's there inside all of us — try to bring that to the fore, and then work from that. It may be a small thing, but you've got to start small.

Start with what you know. The breath is coming in. You know that? Yes, you know that. It's going out. You know that? Yes, you do. Okay, know just that much. Don't forget that. Is it comfortable or not? Well, you may not be sure. Could it be more comfortable? Experiment and see. Try to sensitize yourself to how the breathing feels. Without this level of sensitivity, the meditation becomes mechanical. When it's mechanical, it becomes a chore. And when it's a chore, the mind will rebel. So ask yourself: What really feels good when you're breathing right now? If you can't figure out what really feels good, hold your breath for a while until the mind comes to the point where it's screaming at you: "Breathe! You've got to breathe!" Then, when you breathe, notice what feels really good as you breathe in. Take that as a guide.

We in the West seem to be especially cut off from our own bodies. We're so much in our heads that the area of the body becomes unexplored territory, like those old maps from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that would show distorted coastlines of continents with big blank spaces in the middle. "Here be tygers," they would say. Who knew what was in there? It's the same with the body: We know a little bit about it, but there are huge unexplored areas inside.

So take as your beachhead this one point where you know the breath is coming in. You know the breath is coming out. You know whether it's comfortable or not, and you begin to get a sense of what adjustments can be made to make it more comfortable — so that it feels really good just breathing in and out right there.

As for the other steps in the meditation, put them aside for the time being. Make sure you've got this step well under control. The people who try to take on too much at once are the ones who end up not mastering anything at all. Even if your progress is incremental, at least it's progress. You're building solidly on a solid foundation. That's what matters. Otherwise the meditation is like a ladder that you lean up against an unstable wall: You may be able to climb very high, but when the wall falls down, you're going to be in really bad straits. Try to build step by step on a solid staircase. Build on what you really know.

As for what you've heard about how the meditation is supposed to develop — even if you've had experiences in the past when it's developed in interesting ways — put all that aside for the time being. Don't let it clutter up your mind, because any progress in the meditation has to come from being very solidly focused on the present moment, fully intent on what you've got right here. If a lot of expectations are cluttering up your view, you're not going to see what you've got right here. Whatever progress you make won't be genuine.

So, as Ajaan Lee says, be willing to be dumb about the meditation. Sometimes this is called “beginner's mind,” but for me it's always been more effective to think, “Be dumb about it.” The “dumb” person is the one who sees when the emperor isn't wearing any clothes.

You may have heard a lot about meditation, but how much do you really know? You *do* know right now that the breath is coming in, you know it's going out. You know if your mind is with the breath or if it's wandered off. Focus on being really clear about what you know, what you're directly experiencing, as continuously as possible. The continual clarity is what actually creates the state of concentration you're looking for, the developed mindfulness you're hoping for. It starts with these incremental steps.

So, whether the results come fast or slow, be sure that at least you're getting the causes right. And they're simple: Be with the breath, all the way in, all the way out. Just this breath. And if the breath is uncomfortable, you can adjust it. You're not required to breathe in a particular way, and you're not required to refrain from influencing the breath. The mind is always going to have some influence on the breath, whether it's conscious or not, so it might as well be conscious. If you pretend that you're not influencing the breath, the influence goes underground. It's better to learn how to be open about the fact, to be sensitive to what's going on.

And this simple exercise, if you allow it to do its work, will bring the results you want. In fact, it will bring results better than you might expect. If you clutter up your meditation with your expectations, that's all you'll get: things that seem to fit in with your expectations. But if you allow it to be a little bit more open-ended, you create possibilities for other things to happen as well — often better things, more genuine.

So have faith in the process. If you've got the causes right, the results have to come. Even though what you're doing right here may seem a small thing, remember: All the great things in the world had to start out small. Coastal redwoods, the tallest trees in the world, come from the tiniest imaginable seeds. So even though the seed may be small, don't underestimate its potential. This spot where you're with the breath may seem to be a small thing, but as you get down into it, you find that there's a lot there. In fact, the Buddha's whole teachings on causality have one big consistent point: that whatever's happening in the universe, the basic pattern is something you can discern right here in the present moment.

In chaos theory they call this "scale invariance": the patterns on the large scale, on the macro scale, are the same things happening on the micro scale. And you've got the micro scale right here. On the macro scale you see that even scientific theories keep changing — sometimes very fast. They're not anything you can directly observe, for they're based on so many assumptions. But on the micro scale, right here in the present moment, with your mind on the breath, all the basic processes you're going to have to know for Awakening are occurring right here. It's simply a matter of getting more and more sensitive right here.

So, even though it may seem like a small spot, it's got a lot of potential. It's like those seeds they have in Thailand — I've forgotten the name of the plant, but it has a seed with the diameter of a quarter. If you break the shell and stick it into about three or four gallons of water and come back a few hours later, it turns out that these little noodle-like strands inside the seed, which were sitting there waiting to soak up water, now fill your entire three- or four-gallon container.

This small spot in the present moment is like that: There's a lot to tease out in here. So don't be disdainful of its potential. Learn to start out small, and those small things are going to reward you. Like the old fable of the mouse and the lion: The lion saved the mouse's life, and later on the mouse was able to save the lion's life, even though the lion originally was pretty disdainful of what the mouse claimed it would be able to do. But it could; it could eat right through the net in

which the lion was trapped. And so this little present moment you've got here: Don't step up on it, hoping that you're going to get someplace higher. Focus right here. Really give it a chance to open up. Whether it opens up fast or slow — that's not the issue. The issue is that you give it the space, you give it the time, you're patient enough and watchful enough to allow it to open. And someday it will eat through the net in which you keep catching yourself.

When we say that big things grow from small things, it's not that they have to grow in such a way that other people might notice. It's just that what's there in the present moment becomes a lot clearer. The intricacies of what are going on right here play out in a much larger perspective — if you give them the time to develop.

So, start out small. If you have to be small for a long time, that doesn't matter. What matters is that the progress, when it comes, is solid.

A Small, Steady Flame

July, 2002

The breath is where the mind and the body meet. We often have a sense that the solid part of our bodies is the part we know best, the part we inhabit, and the breath is something that just comes in and goes out through the solid part we're inhabiting. But when you close your eyes, what do you actually sense of the body? There's a shape defined by the area where there's energy flowing back and forth. And that energy is actually our most direct perception of the body. We tend to overlook it and focus on other things, but our primary sensation is right here. It's breath.

As we meditate, we're learning to get back in touch with that primary sensation so that eventually we can use it as a mirror for the mind. Because, as I said, it's where the mind and the body meet. It's the part of the body the mind is most sensitive to, the part most immediately responsive to the mind. The way you breathe is very much affected by the states of your mind. When you're worried, you breathe in a certain way. When you're happy, you breathe in another way. When there's anger, there's still another way of breathing. If you keep at certain ways of breathing, it's going to have an effect on other aspects of the body as well. Certain ways you hold your body are really shaped by the breath. And it's through the breath that so many mental states can cause physical disease, particularly diseases related to stress.

So one of the first things you have to do as you meditate is to work through the breath energy in the body. Find a spot where the breathing feels comfortable. It might be at the tip of the nose, the middle of the chest, around the abdomen, the base of the throat. Actually it can be anywhere in the body where you feel that the sensation of in-breathing feels good and the sensation of out-breathing feels good. Then you train yourself to stay with that sensation.

In the beginning the sensation may not be all that impressive — just a simple, comfortable feeling, sometimes a neutral feeling — but you find that if you stick with it, it gets more and more relaxing, more and more comfortable.

Like a fire. In the beginning a fire starts as just a tiny little spark that you have to shelter against the wind. It takes a long time for the fuel to catch fire, but once it does, the fire begins to spread to the different parts of the fuel. It's the same with the body and the breath. You find one spot that seems small and not all that impressive, but it feels okay. Then you stay with it, and the consistency of your attention — as you keep that spot relaxed, without pushing it or pulling it or putting any pressure on it — is what allows it to develop a sense of fullness. The longer you stick with it, the more the fullness gains strength. Once it's more solidly established, you can start allowing it to spread to different parts of the body.

The word *jhana*, or concentrated mental absorption, is related to a verb, *jhayati*, that means “to burn.” Pali has lots of different words for the word “burning,” and *jhayati* is used to describe a steady flame, like the flame of an oil lamp. The words for “burning” used for other types of fire — like a raging bonfire, a wood fire, or a forest fire — are something else entirely. The word for a steady, constant flame: That's *jhayati*, which relates to *jhana*. And as we practice concentration, that's the kind of consistency and steadiness we're trying to develop.

Our focus starts as a small, steady flame, and then you try to allow the steadiness to flow through the body. But first you have to establish that comfortable spot. If you go around the body adjusting the breath here, adjusting the breath there, without a real sense of comfort, then you can make things worse. You're just messing things up. So, it's important that you get this sense of ease first, and then allow things to spread from there so that your awareness fills the whole body, and your sense of comfortable breath energy fills the whole body as well.

Think of it as a healing process. Many times, as soon as the mind gets a little bit still and the breath gets comfortable, you think, “Well, what's next?” But before you can move to what's next, a lot of healing has to be done in the body — all the areas of tension and tightness and discomfort that you've allowed to take hold in the body. The breath has to very gently massage them, very gently heal them, and sometimes this takes time.

Just like a wound. You can't just say, “Poof,” and it's gone. You have to put the medicine on and let it stay there for hours. In the same way, the process of healing your inner energy field takes time, so be patient with the breath. When

things get still, stay with it. And even though things may not seem to be happening, there's a slow, steady process of healing going on in the body.

This is why patience is such an important part of this skill. When they talk about putting an effort into the meditation, the word for “effort” really means persistence. It's this stick-to-it-tived-ness that's going to make all the difference. The continuity of your focus, the steadiness of your persistence: Those are the qualities that make the breath a solid foundation for the mind.

One of the problems in teaching meditation to people in America is that very few of us have learned any skills requiring that kind of steadiness, that kind of patience. Here, when you sharpen a knife, you just run it through the knife sharpener — zip, zip — and it's done. Over in Thailand, though, when I had to sharpen a knife I was given a big stone and a knife and told, “Okay, be very careful not to be in too great of a hurry, because if you get impatient you may ruin the blade.” So, you have to be very consistent, very steady, and very patient as you work the blade over the whetstone. As you do this, you learn all the mental skills that go along with being patient: how not to get bored, how not to give up, the kind of conversation in the mind that helps keep it going. If you have any skills like that, think back on how you've talked yourself into being patient, consistent, persistent, and then apply those skills to the breath.

So, work with a sense of comfortable breath. Allow the breath to get comfortable, allow it to be easeful, and then allow it to spread through the body. When it begins to spread through the body and it starts working through patterns of tension, you come to a more intense sense of absorption. Stay with that. Learn the skills required to stay right at that point of balance where you're not pushing it too hard and not being too lazy or lax — just the right amount of interest, the right amount of attention and intention to keep things going — so that the breath can have a chance to heal the wounds in the body, soothe the mind, and bring both the body and the mind to the stages of practice where the concentration gets stronger and the insights sharper, more subtle.

This all depends on the groundwork. As for the question of how soon you can move on to the next step: Don't ask. Just keep on doing the work. Things will develop.

It's like waiting for a plant to grow: You can't sit there and pull it up, up, up to make it grow faster. If you do that, you uproot it, and that's the end of the plant. What you have to do is just keep watering it, applying fertilizer, removing the weeds as they come, and your patient effort will pay off as long as you focus

that effort in the right spot, which is the persistence, the attention, and the intention you're bringing to the breath. As long as these are consistent, you can expect results. Whether those results are fast or slow doesn't matter. What matters is that they're solid.

So, stick with it. We've got a whole hour right now to be with the breath — and don't stop with the end of the hour. Try to maintain that sense of ease and comfort, that sense of being centered inside as you bow down, get up and leave, go back to your meditation spot, and continue meditating until it's time to go to bed. When you wake up tomorrow morning, try to be right here again, right here at the breath.

This consistency is what makes all the difference.

The Steadiness of Your Gaze

March, 2001

Getting into position to meditate isn't all that hard. First you get your body into position: your back straight, your head facing straight forward, your eyes closed, your hands in your lap.

Then you get your mind into position: Just focus it on the breath. The breath is right here. You don't have to search around too much to find it. The difficult part lies in *keeping* the mind in position, trying to maintain a steady awareness. That takes some doing because the mind is used to *not* being steady. It's used to jumping around. It has a sense of there being some entertainment value in jumping around. You get bored with one thing, so you jump to something new.

And for a lot of people, that's where their freedom lies: in their ability to think about anything they want to. But when you come right down to it, how much happiness comes from jumping around like that? Once you jump from one thing, you know you're going to have to jump to another thing and then to another. So no matter where you land, you start finding yourself immediately tensing up, ready to jump again, which leaves the mind constantly in a state of tension.

So when we meditate, we give it a good, solid place to stay, and then we remind it: You can stay there. You don't have to jump. That way the mind can begin to relax a lot of its tension and can actually dissolve into the object of the meditation. When you focus on the breath, you want to become one with the breath. When you focus on the body, let your awareness become one with the body — not an awareness ready to jump someplace else, but an awareness that seeps into the body, saturating everything down to your fingers and toes.

The steadiness of your gaze is what's going to help things seep into one another, to come together here in the present moment. So as you stay with the breath, try to keep your gaze — your focus on the breath — as steady as you can, as continuous as you can. The more continual your focus, the more you see how things are actually connected, actually related to one another. If your gaze isn't steady, you end up connecting things in your imagination.

It's like playing connect-the-dots with your mind. There's a little bit of awareness here, and another little bit of awareness there, and then someplace else, and as for what was happening in between, you're not really sure. But you can guess, so you draw your own lines to turn the dots into a duck or an airplane. And whether those lines actually correspond to reality or not, whether the dots were parts of a duck or an airplane or something else entirely, you don't really know because you weren't there. You were off someplace else. This is the way most people's knowledge of the world gets built up: It's a game of connect-the-dots, with very few dots and a lot of lines.

So when we meditate we try to erase all the imaginary lines and make the awareness itself the line that connects things. The Buddha gained Awakening because he saw cause and effect and how they are connected. *When this is, that is. From the arising of this comes the arising of that.* That's how he described one of the central insights in his Awakening. He directly saw these things as they were connected, and that was because his awareness was connected.

So we stay with the breath as a way of developing this continuous, connected, steady awareness. If you find yourself letting up in your focus, just come right back.

In the beginning, our awareness is like the phrases in music: There's a phrase and then a pause, another phrase and then a pause. But what you want to do as you meditate is to develop an awareness that doesn't come in phrases and pauses, that just keeps going, going, going, just as the breath keeps going.

There may be a rhythm to the breathing, but underneath the in-and-out breath is another level of breath energy that's continually there. It's like a background noise in the body. And to make your awareness continuous, that's what you want to focus on: this background energy. Sometimes you notice it as the energy in the body during the pauses between the in-breath and the out-breath and between the out-breath and the in-breath. There's a slight pause in the breathing, and yet there's still energy in the body that lets you know that the body's sitting here. It doesn't totally dissolve away.

The more you tune in to this more subtle level of energy, the less you need the in-and-out breath as your focus. The in-and-out breath becomes just one aspect of a larger field of breath energy that begins to grow more and more calm, more and more calm, because you're down on another level. You've tuned in to another level that's more continuous, that can be used as a basis for insight.

When your awareness is continuous and the breath is continuous, you just stay there together. That's what we're working toward.

So try to be sensitive to even the slightest lapse in your awareness. Don't wait until the mind has already left the breath before you register what's happened. Sometimes you feel a stirring in your awareness. Something wants to move. Things aren't as interesting as they were, or for some reason or another the mind begins to let up a little bit before it actually moves on to something else. Learn how to detect that. Then work with the breath, work with your focus in a way that can get around that tendency to stir a little bit and move on.

This is why it's so important that the breath be comfortable. The more comfortable it is, the easier it is to stay with it. Once it's comfortable, then you have to watch out for the mind's tendency to lose its focus, lose its sharpness. That's why we work with spreading the breath energy through the body, being aware of the different parts of the body as a way of keeping ourselves awake and alert even though things are getting comfortable — because when we meditate we're here to do work, not just to zone out or have a little stress reduction.

The reason we've reduced the stress and made the mind more comfortable in the present moment is because it's got work to do in the present moment. There are things it's got to figure out. It's got to figure out why it's causing suffering, exactly *where* it's causing suffering. The Buddha emphasized the issue of karma and intention, so we look to see: What intentions are there in the mind that make us suffer? Why don't we see them? Why do we feel that those choices are so necessary that we even forget they're choices?

These are some of the big questions we've got to figure out. And the only way to figure them out is to stay right here continually, because those choices are usually made in the gaps, in the seams in our awareness when we're off someplace else. In fact, when there's a seam or a gap in your awareness, it's usually a sign that a choice is going to be made in the mind. It's the mind's way of fooling itself, of hiding all of its choices behind the curtains.

So when you sense that tendency to want to leave, remember: Something important's coming up. If you're not here to see it, you're going to miss it. Don't follow the same old pattern that you've followed who knows how many times, letting the mind hide important things from itself. Why is it hiding? Well, look into it. What is it embarrassed about? What is it ashamed to show itself? What is it trying to deny? When you're operating from a sense of steady comfort then it's easier to look into those issues and not run away.

So this issue of steadiness is very important. It allows you to see things that you otherwise wouldn't see. It plows right through the gaps in your awareness in which the mind hides things from itself, and it zeros in on the big issues in the mind: Why is the mind causing itself suffering? Why is it causing itself stress in ways that don't have to be there?

In the context of the Three Characteristics, the Buddha does point out that anything fabricated is stressful, but in the Four Noble Truths he focuses more on the issue of the stress of clinging and craving. The craving causes the clinging, and the clinging to the five aggregates is his basic definition of stress and suffering. That's what we've got to work on, because that's the part of stress and suffering that's not necessary. Once it's taken care of, then the other stresses in the world are not an issue at all.

So what is this clinging? What is this craving? How and why do we hide it from ourselves? How can we learn to see through it? Ignorance is what allows these things to happen in the mind, and the only way to combat ignorance is to be as steady and consistent as possible in maintaining your awareness.

What this means is that being steady in your awareness is not just a matter of concentration practice. It's the basis for allowing discernment to arise — because you're right here, and when you're right here watching what's happening, you can't help but see. The problem is we're all too often *not* here. Our gaze has been diverted. Our attention has slipped off someplace else.

So keep zeroing in on the breath, zeroing in on the breath. Don't let anything else pull your attention away.

One Step at a Time

September 8, 2003

Try to stay with each breath. If it's too much to think about staying here for the full hour, stay with *this* breath, and then *this* breath. In fact, if you start thinking too far ahead, you're going to miss this breath, and you're going to miss the point where the mind slips off. But if you keep things small, keep things manageable, you do a lot better job. So: *this* breath, *this* breath, *this* breath. And as for your past breaths — well, for one thing, they're not here anymore, and whether you were able to stay with them or not doesn't matter any more. What matters right now is this breath. Similarly, breaths in the future are not here for you to look at, either. You can't be responsible now for whether you're going to stay with them then. You will be responsible then if you learn how to be responsible now. So take it one step at a time.

Even when the meditation is not especially easy or pleasant, taking it one step at a time makes it a lot more manageable. In other words, if the breath doesn't seem all that enthralling or absorbing, and there's a pain here or a pain there, it's a lot easier to take it one step at a time.

Back when I was in Thailand, I had a fairly long alms round, and there were days when the rain was just pouring down in buckets. There was no way I was not going to get wet even though I had a big umbrella. The wind would blow, the rain would come from all sides. And when I thought about the whole hour and a half I was going to be out there, slogging through mud, it was difficult to get up the energy just to take the first step. But then I realized, of course, that if I didn't go on my alms round I wouldn't get to eat that day. So I took it one step at a time: this step, this step, this step. You'd be surprised how quickly — when you take it one step at a time — that hour and a half goes, how manageable it is, even when it's raining hard. You're not weighing yourself down with the past or future, with how many steps you've taken, or how many minutes you've been out on the road, and how much longer it's going to be before you get back to a place that's dry. You're right here, right here, right here. And you find that right here is okay, it's

manageable. It may not be the most wonderful moment, but at least it's manageable.

This principle can help carry you through a lot. When you're dealing with pain, often the pain gets really bad — not so much because the actual physical sensation is bad, but because you're weighing yourself down with thoughts about how long the pain has been going on, and how much longer it's going to go on in the future. And so all that past and all that future weigh down this one little moment here in the present: No wonder the present buckles under the weight. But if all the present has to support is just this one moment, you find that it's capable. It can stand up to whatever weight there is in the moment. So the ability to focus exclusively on what's happening right here, right now is a very useful skill.

But it's not the only skill we have to develop while meditating. Some people want to make the whole meditation just that: being in the present moment. But that's only one of the skills we need to develop. There's also the skill of how to *make* the present moment a pleasant place to be. And that requires some memory of the past: what's worked in the past, what hasn't worked in the past. That's called the skillful use of the past. Just as there's a skillful use of the future — having a sense that this practice is going someplace, there's a direction to it, it's going to take you to total freedom.

And as you work on your skills, it's not always going to be a story of stumbling along and falling down, having to pick yourself up, dust yourself off, walk a few more steps, and stumble again. It's not always going to be that way. There comes a time when you really get into the breath and you begin to notice patterns. If you had no memory of the past and no sense of the future, you wouldn't be able to see patterns — the patterns in what you've done, the results that come when you do it. That requires using the past skillfully. Some of your actions will have results in the immediate present, but some of them will take time to show their results. If you don't have that sense of mindfulness — which is what this memory of the past is: mindfulness — if you don't have that mindfulness, you can't learn any lessons. And although each present moment may be a wonderful new beginner's moment, still you don't learn anything from it. Your progress gets short-circuited right there.

So an important skill in the meditation is how to make skillful use of the past, skillful use of the future. The Buddha outlined this in his teachings to the Kalamas, and also in his teachings to his son, Rahula. Notice the intention

behind what you do, watch what you're doing while you're doing it, and then watch for the results. See the connections between the type of intention and the type of results you get, either immediately or over time. That's the skillful use of the past.

Unskillful use of the past is when you run back to either getting happy or sad about how things were in the past. Unskillful use of the future is when you start anticipating either with desire or aversion or fear what's going to happen in the future. The one fear that *is* useful is the fear of the consequences of unskillful actions. That's what keeps you on the path in the present. Another skillful use of the future is your anticipation of how good it's going to be when you finally master this. But still, there's no way you're going to get there unless you follow the steps. So learn to recognize when your mind is referring you to the past or the future: What are skillful ways of bringing in the past or the future, and what are unskillful ways? Sometimes a skillful recollection, say, of the future could be, "Death could come at any time. Are you ready to go? If you're not — well, what are you doing right now to prepare yourself?" That's using the future as a spur.

So when you realize that the past and the future do have their uses, you give more dimension to the practice. If this were just a practice of staying in the present moment, we could all go out and have frontal lobotomies and that would take care of it. But it doesn't work that way. You need some sense of the past. You have to be observant and remember what worked and didn't work in the past, and then see how those lessons apply to the present moment. Sometimes you have to re-learn a lesson or adjust a past lesson, because what seemed to work in the past may not be working this time. That simply means you have to be even more observant of what's going on. It doesn't mean you totally throw out the past. It means you take your knowledge and adjust it, you make it more refined. And this is how the practice develops, as you build on your past mistakes — and on your past successes as well.

So remember that there's more dimension to the practice than just simply the present moment. But the skill of staying in the present moment is one of the more difficult ones to learn, which is why we emphasize it so much. After all, where are you going to observe things if you're not really observant of the present moment? If the lessons you learned in the past aren't working, maybe you weren't really observant then. This is a chance to get more observant, more precise, with each and every breath.

Learn at which part of the breath cycle you tend to lose your focus. For some people it's between the in-breath and the out-breath, or between the out-breath and the in-. Sometimes it's when a particular breath is uncomfortable: You don't like it, you move off. So learn to watch for any tightness or tension that may appear in the breath. Watch out for the tendency to lose focus in between the breaths. See what you can do to counteract those tendencies. Ask yourself how you recognize the point where the out-breath turns into an in-breath. In some cases it's very subtle. And we have a tendency, when we're trying to create a boundary line like that, to make it more clearly drawn than it really has to be. So watch for that tendency as well, because it creates a lot of unnecessary blockage and tension. Try to be with the whole cycle of each breath, all the way through, as precisely as you can.

Then at the end of the meditation you can stop and reflect on what you did, what lessons you learned. Some lessons are immediately obvious. You do something, you immediately get good or bad results. With those lessons you don't have to reflect too much on the past; they're right there. Other lessons you learn by reflecting on, say, a bad session: What are you doing? Why isn't it going well? When you have good sessions, reflect on those after you're done: What did you do? How did you focus the mind? Take that lesson and file it away for future reference. You may, when you pull it out from your mental filing cabinet, discover that it wasn't quite as precisely observed as you might want. But you have lots of breaths to watch, lots of opportunities to relearn your lessons.

So this is an incremental path, a gradual one, but there's nothing wrong with that. Fortunately, Theravada never had a Shen-hui, the Rush Limbaugh of the Chan tradition with his sudden Awakening buzz saw, who viciously ridiculed every hint of a gradual path, every hint of a developing skill, as being an obstacle to Awakening. It got so that nobody in the Chan tradition after that dared talk about methods or progress. Fortunately, Theravada doesn't have that problem.

In fact, its problem goes the other way. There's a passage in the *Udana* where the Buddha compares the practice to the continental shelf off of India: a gradual slope and then a sudden drop. The commentaries reinterpreted that to mean *totally* gradual, without any sudden drop. But the Pali obviously says there is a sudden drop. So the gradual slope does take you in the right direction. Without the gradual slope, you wouldn't get to the sudden drop. Without the sudden drop, the gradual slope wouldn't have any real meaning in terms of opening up to something really new. But the way causality works, there is the opportunity for

making gradual, very precise observations about your breath, getting more and more skillful as you learn over time. Then you finally hit the point where it all breaks open in unexpected ways. In this way the path is both gradual and sudden.

So as you're working on each breath, each breath, each breath, remember that you're on a path that can take a long time, but every journey requires individual steps. This is why the Buddha called it a path. If it weren't a path, it wouldn't have any direction. But it *does* have a direction, and the gradual steps are good steps to take. Not all the good things are saved to the end. But ultimately — as you get more and more precisely in the present moment with more skill, the skill that you've learned from the past — those gradual steps suddenly open up to something totally Other. And it's all found by looking right here; you don't have to look anywhere else.

This is one of the amazing things about the Buddha's teachings: All the great lessons we have to learn are right here. We don't have to speculate about some event way back at the beginning of the universe — that's not relevant. We don't have to pin our hopes on a judgment day at the end of the universe — that's not relevant, either. The relevant things are what we can see for ourselves, right here, right now. Things change: Well, how do they change? Is there a pattern to their change? Watch right here and you'll find out. Watch in a way that grows more precise over time by learning how to make skillful use not only of the present, but also of your memories, and your anticipation of where you want this to lead you in future. Learn to use these things properly and they all become part of the path.

Generating Power

July, 2003

Concentration practice involves work. We often think of it as a place for the mind to rest, and it is, but it's even more a place for the mind to recharge its batteries. That requires energy, requires effort, requires work. In Thailand the idiom for meditation is "to make an effort." And in meditating there very definitely are things we have to *do*. It's not just a letting go of the tension, a letting go of the stresses of daily life. There's also work to be done to keep mindfulness continuous, to keep your alertness continuous and all-around, to keep both mindfulness and alertness spinning around inside here like a generator. A generator sits in one place but it has to spin around to create electric power. If the generator simply sits still, it can't create anything. There has to be some activity for the electrons to run in a current.

The same is true with concentration. The two causes for gaining a sense of ease and wellbeing are directed thought and evaluation. Directed thought grows out of mindfulness; evaluation, out of alertness. You have to keep directing your thoughts to the breath, keep evaluating it, noticing when it's comfortable, noticing when it's not. And then there's singleness of preoccupation: You try to keep the mind at one with its object, make it *become* one with its object. All of this takes effort, and sometimes people will sit in meditation, put a lot of effort into it, and at the end of the period say, "Well, the meditation didn't get any results. It was just constant effort." However, it's a normal principle in practicing concentration that it requires effort before it can start giving results. The effort is never wasted.

Over time you begin to get a sense of how much effort is too much, how much is too little. When you get a sense of "just right," the results you want start appearing. At that point, the payoff comes as you're doing the work. You don't have to wait until the end of the year before your paycheck arrives. You receive installments all along the way. So as you're doing the meditation work, keep this point in mind: It *is* work, but as you get more precise at it, more subtle at it, the results you're looking for will start to appear.

Ajaan Lee talks about concentration work being basically three activities — directed thought, evaluation, and singleness of preoccupation — with all three spinning around in one place. When you start being very precise in doing them, they start showing their results. In other words, you keep reminding yourself to stay with the breath. If you notice that the mind is wandering off, you immediately get it back on track. Try to sense when the mind is preparing to go even before it actually goes. That way you can nip the distractions in the bud.

And try to be as alert as possible to how the breathing feels. Try to make it feel refreshing. This way the work becomes something you can easily keep on doing, because you feel refreshed in doing your work. Sitting here, it feels good breathing in, feels good breathing out. Ordinarily large areas of the body are starved for breathing energy, so give them a chance to drink it in, to bathe in it. Think of the energy going to the different parts of the body — “Who wants this breath? Who wants the next one?” — until you’ve got the whole body nourished. If it feels good, do it again. Next time around try to be even more perceptive as to what’s going on, what’s needed where.

As for singleness of preoccupation, make sure the mind doesn’t lose itself, doesn’t start wandering off in other directions, getting distracted. And watch out for the hindrances, because they drain your energy. Even though you may be generating a lot of power here, if the hindrances get in the way everything gets drained away. Like the solar electric system here at Wat Metta: When we were first setting up the batteries, we were careless and put them on a couple of boards on the ground. Well, sure enough, a rain storm came. One of the wires shorted, and by the next day the batteries were totally dead. Even though the solar panels were pumping out energy, the batteries were so dead you couldn’t revive them.

The same holds true in the meditation: If you keep coming back to the breath but then allow the mind to go wandering off in other directions, then all the power, all the recharging in your batteries, just gets drained away. So you’ve got to be careful not to go thinking about anything else while you’re here with the breathing. When thoughts about other things do come passing through, you don’t want to get involved in them. Just let them go, let them go. Part of the problem is that you get curious: “What’s this thought about? What’s that thought about? Maybe it’s something important, maybe it’s something entertaining.” Watch out for those attitudes, because that’s like opening the door for thieves to come into your house, or like scraping away the insulation on your wires before

the rats do. So as soon as a thought that's not related to the breath comes into the mind, just let it go.

And there are certain ways of thinking about the breath or the meditation that actually get in the way of the meditation, too, so you've got to watch out for them as well. The big troublemakers are restlessness and anxiety. Restlessness is wanting to push for results before the mind is really ready to give them, trying to figure out things beforehand, before you've actually done the concentration work. You've got to do the work first and let the results develop on their own.

Ajaan Lee gives the example of getting gold out of a rock. You can't just go to the mountain and use a pick to extract the gold. You've got to take the rock and subject it to heat. The fire will take time, getting hot enough so that it can melt the gold, but when it reaches the melting point, the gold will all come out on its own. In other words, when your powers of concentration are strong enough, when they reach the point where they're ready, then the work of discernment gets a lot easier. Things separate out right before your very eyes without your having to do an awful lot of analysis. When the mind has been concentrated long enough and solidly enough, you just pose a question and things will appear very clearly, for you've created the environment in which they *can* appear clearly, in that the mind is solid and still.

As for anxiety, one of the standard definitions is concern about what other people think. "What's this person going to think? What's that person going to think? If what I know is right offends people, what am I going to do? Do I dare do it?" That kind of anxiety really gets in the way of your goodness. If you let yourself get led astray by those thoughts in your daily life, it's very hard not to get led astray while you're meditating. One of the things I really appreciated about Ajaan Fuang was that he really didn't care what other people thought. If he knew that what he was doing was right, then even if it was unpopular he went ahead with it, because he realized that there's no way you can control other peoples' attitudes toward you. If they want to think ill of you, well, that's their right. And, ultimately, where does popularity get you? Not very far. It certainly doesn't get you very far on the path.

I also noticed that Ajaan Fuang didn't trust people who were concerned about being popular. There was an interesting exchange once when he was going to appoint one of the merchants in town to be the monastery treasurer. The first question he asked the man was, "In your future life would you rather be popular or wealthy?" And the man said, "Wealthy. If you're wealthy you can buy

popularity.” So Ajaan Fuang appointed him treasurer. He liked the idea that the man was not all that concerned about being popular. If the treasurer was concerned about being popular you couldn’t trust him. He might be afraid to do the right thing when push came to shove, and certain people wanted to get their hands on the monastery funds.

So it’s important to keep this attitude in mind when you know that something is right: Don’t worry about whether it’s popular, don’t let yourself be swayed by public opinion. Of course this means that you have to be very careful about what you see as right. In other words, you let yourself be swayed by advice from wise people, from people you respect. But as for people in general whose opinions don’t have any real principles, you don’t have to worry about what they think. No matter what they can do to you, they can’t touch the most important part of you, which is your own inner integrity.

This is how the practice requires courage. Conviction in the principle of karma requires that you make a commitment not to hedge your bets. You’re going to depend totally on the skillfulness of your own intentions to whatever extent you can develop that skillfulness. That’s the principle to which you have to devote yourself.

As for other principles or lack of principles, let them go. Sometimes this feels a little scary. You’re so used to hedging your bets so that at least you’re popular, at least you’ve got connections, so that if the principle of karma doesn’t work out you’ve got something else to fall back on. But to be really committed to the principle of karma, to get the best results from it, you have to be committed.

And to be really committed requires repeated acts of commitment. This is why in the Forest tradition so much emphasis is placed on the virtue of courage. Not foolhardiness, but courage. It takes a certain amount of courage to keep the mind centered and still, because otherwise we’re always trying to plan ahead, second guess things, anticipate things. But for the mind to have really strong powers of concentration you basically have to tell yourself, “I don’t care. I’m going to focus on doing what needs to be done right now and I’m not going to try to provide for alternative things to fall back on.” In other words, when the time comes to be focused and concentrated, that’s all you do. Give yourself to it totally. Have a sense of conviction, a sense of confidence in the practice, and don’t try to second guess things. When the concentration has developed to a proper level, it’ll start showing its results on its own.

In terms of that simile I often use about the unripe mango: You don't keep yellow paint on hand just in case, to make the mango nice and yellow if watering the tree doesn't work out. If you're convinced that your mango is going to become yellow by pouring water and fertilizer on the roots of the tree, that's all you focus on. You don't worry about when it's going to get yellow. You realize that if you stick with the watering long enough, the mango will have to ripen. That's all you have to do.

When you have this kind of single-mindedness, then concentration gets more and more powerful. It really recharges you. It's not just a relaxation technique. It contains an element of commitment, an element of applied energy. At the same time, you're making sure that nothing is draining your battery away. That way you gain more and more strength from the concentration, so that when the time comes to leave the concentration — even though it involved some work — you feel refreshed, energized, charged. That's not simply because you've been able to let go of patterns of tension in the body. The different channels of breath energy in the body have also been able to reinforce one another. At the same time, the good qualities of the mind get reinforced and strengthened. They've been allowed to nourish one another, too.

This is how the work of concentration starts showing its results, with a sense of wellbeing, a sense of inner strength, a sense of being energized. After all, concentration is one of the five strengths. And if our discernment is going to have the strength it needs to penetrate all the veils of delusion we've put up in the mind, it's going to require good strong concentration, good committed concentration to do the work that leads to release.

The Walls of Ignorance

January 29, 2004

Try to be alert to the breath: what it's doing right now and what *you're* doing with it right now. Sometimes you may notice that you're putting too little or too much pressure on it. "Too little" means that the mind keeps slipping off. "Too much" means that the breath feels confined. It's constricted, placed in a box, and can't get out.

Ajaan Lee once compared alertness to a rope over a pulley that you can pull in two directions. You pull it toward the breath to see what the breath is doing, then you pull it back to the mind to see how the mind is relating to the breath, to see that things are going well, that things are working. If they're not, you can make adjustments: Pull back a little on the pressure you're placing on the breath, change the breath, change your focal point.

Or you can think of the breath in other ways. If you find that the way you breathe is building up tension in the neck, think of the breath coming in from the back of the neck to reverse that process. See what that does. Tell yourself that everything you experience in the body right now is an aspect of breath energy. When you look at the body in that way, you can gauge whether the sensations you feel are breath energy flowing smoothly or breath energy that's constricted or blocked. Then make adjustments so that everything can open up and flow.

This simple exercise of being very clear about what you're doing and checking the results of what you're doing is basic to the whole practice. It's how you develop sensitivity. It's how you break down barriers in the mind. Often we're sensitive to what we're doing but not to the results, or we notice the results but not what we're doing to cause them. This applies to all areas of our lives.

Sometimes our ignorance is simply a matter of not pointing our attention in the right direction. Other times it's more willful. There are certain things we don't want to see, and so we erect firewalls in our minds. We put up stage sets to hide from ourselves. Part of us knows that we're doing this, and yet part of the mind's agreement is to pretend that we don't. This way we block off unpleasant things, most of which are things we've done in the past that caused harm. Especially

when they were things we *knew* would cause harm but we went ahead and did them anyway: That's where we try to block things thoroughly. If this is a habit with us, those firewalls get thicker and thicker, and our willful ignorance becomes a bigger and bigger problem in our minds.

We tend to think of ignorance, or *avijja*, in very abstract terms — not knowing the four noble truths, not knowing dependent co-arising, not knowing the Deathless — but you can't chip away at those forms of ignorance until you've chipped away at the more blatant, immediate ones: the mind's habit of disassociating, of leaving gaps in its inner conversation. Say you decide to do something unskillful. If you had a sense of the Buddha watching over your shoulder all the time, it would be harder to do it, so you erect a barrier in the mind as if there were no Buddha in the world, never had been a Buddha, no arahant disciples. Then all kinds of unskillful actions are possible in the world remaining in your mind. But those walls can't stay forever. They have to come down. And then you expend a lot of energy into putting them back up again.

We develop alertness in the meditation for the purpose of drilling through those walls, tearing them down, letting them collapse. Then, when they're down and we can really see, we use equanimity to gauge for ourselves where we actually have been skillful and where we haven't. That way we can learn from our mistakes. As the Buddha once said, "One of the signs of wisdom is in seeing your own foolishness." At least that's the beginning of your quest for knowledge, your quest to overcome ignorance. And the foolishness here is not that you don't know a particular Buddhist teaching; it's simply that you aren't sensitive to what you're doing or to the results of what you're doing. We have the power to shape our experience and yet for the most part we use it in ways that cause unnecessary suffering. This, according to the Buddha, is the biggest danger in our lives: not what other people may do to us, but what we can do through our actions to ourselves.

This is why he focuses the Four Noble Truths on the suffering that comes from craving and ignorance. There's a natural stress in the fact that things change, but our real problem is that we create extra suffering through our craving and ignorance. As long as we have the habit of putting up walls in the mind, we're in a position where we can't even trust ourselves to do the right thing, not even for our own good. That's scary.

Decades ago an Alaskan shaman was interviewed by an anthropologist about his tribe's religious beliefs. The shaman went along with the anthropologist's

questions for a while, but then finally noted, “It’s not what we *believe* that matters,” he said. “It’s what we *fear*. That’s what matters.” And a lot of the Buddha’s teachings come right down to this: What is there to fear? What should we fear? Our own misuse of our power to shape our lives, that’s what. His teachings are designed to help us learn and use that power more wisely. And that means breaking down those firewalls, those closed-off compartments in our mind that allow us to do unskillful things.

So we work with mindfulness and alertness, trying to be as continuously aware of the breath as possible without any gaps — because the gaps are what give ignorance the space to create walls, to create little dark corners where it might seem right to act on anger, on lust, on fear, passion, and greed. These things seem right because we block off our sense of shame and conscience, block off our knowledge of what’s really right. And if this becomes a habit, we can’t trust ourselves. We end up doing things that will harm ourselves, will harm other people, because we create these false little worlds where karma doesn’t seem to have a role, where we think we can get away with things. “It won’t matter,” we tell ourselves. But inevitably those walls will come crashing down, those worlds will come crashing down. The principle of cause and effect will assert itself, and what we’ve done *will* matter. A lot.

So this world of make-believe, in which we build these walls, in which we lie to ourselves and agree to be deceived by our own lies: That’s where we have to start our work. And we do that through developing mindfulness and alertness by working on the meditation, working on being sensitive to the breath all the time, as continuously as possible.

When we learn to be true to ourselves, then the truth holds no dangers, no fear. But when we create make-believe worlds for ourselves and work hard to keep them shored up, we know deep down inside that eventually they’re going to come tumbling down. Our work will be in vain. So in the back of the mind we fear the truth because we haven’t been true to ourselves. But when you learn to be true to yourself, the truth holds no danger, the truth holds no fear, because you’re right there with the truth all the time.

It’s like a person who holds to the precept of not lying: You don’t lie at all, so you don’t have to remember what lie you said to this person, or what lie you said to that person, because you’ve been saying the truth all the time. The same principle works on the inner level as well. If you’ve been with the truth all the time, nothing that the truth will serve up will cause you any fear, any danger,

because over time you've become more and more skillful in how you relate to the truth. Even the suffering that comes from past actions, the pain that comes from past actions: You learn how to relate to that skillfully without trying to pretend it's not there, without trying to make too big or too little an issue out of it. You simply look for exactly what it is and learn to understand it. When you understand it, you can get past it. You can transcend it.

This kind of understanding requires seeing cause and effect, seeing your actions, the results of what you've done, and learning to fine-tune your sensitivity so you become more and more skillful in relating to the truth. This, in turn, allows you to stay with the truth more and more steadily so that you don't go running off into make-believe worlds.

So the causes of suffering — craving and ignorance — are not abstract things; they're habits of the mind, often *willful* habits of the mind. Craving comes from ignorance, but ignorance can also come from craving. We set up walls in our minds to get away with the things we want to do, but we can't really get away, which is why craving and ignorance cause suffering.

So staying with the breath is not a technical exercise that allows us to bypass a lot of the necessary work in our lives. It actually gives us the tools we need in order to do the real work. But the tools need to be supplemented with the knowledge of what the Buddha taught. You can't simply do a technique and hope that the technique will reveal everything to you. You have to reflect on what the Buddha taught about the principle of action, the principle of its results. Generosity, virtue: All the teachings form a coherent whole. Even the teachings that we tend to regard more as the religious trappings around Buddhism are really integral to the practice.

For instance, the act of taking refuge: What does it mean to take the Buddha as your guide in life? For one thing it means that you keep remembering him. The word "*sarana*," or refuge, is actually the same word for "something to remember." You try to remember the Buddha all the time. It's as if he's looking over your shoulder. His example is always there for you to reflect on: This is how true happiness is found, through the way he did it. And the qualities he developed — truthfulness, compassion, wisdom, and purity — were the way to the end of suffering. He left us the Dhamma as his guide in how to develop those qualities.

And he always based his approach in developing compassion, wisdom, and purity on the idea that we want happiness. He never assumed that we're basically good or basically bad. He builds all his teachings on the assumption that we

basically want happiness. Now, our desire for happiness often seems to run counter to compassion, but the Buddha uses that desire in such a way as to foster compassion. Think about the fact that you truly want happiness. Are you different from anyone else in that? Not really. Everybody thinks the same way, everybody feels the same way. Everyone wants happiness, everyone strives for it. When that's the case, how can you create a lasting happiness for yourself that would be based on the suffering of other people when they're going to be constantly working to subvert that happiness as they work toward their own? Your search for happiness has to include a desire for other people to be happy, too. Otherwise, it won't last. When you learn to think in that way, then your desire for happiness doesn't require that you be uncompassionate or unsympathetic. Just the opposite. It becomes the basis for compassion.

The same with wisdom. The Buddha once said, "Wisdom starts with asking the question, 'What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?'" Here the emphasis is on the "long-term," and it builds on the realization that you are responsible for the actions that will lead to that happiness, that you have to be careful not to go running off after short-term happiness that leads to long-term pain. This is something we all sincerely desire. The Buddha's simply asking us to reflect on it in a way that leads to wisdom, leads to discernment.

And it's embodied in his teachings to Rahula, his son: reflecting on what you're going to do, your intention before you do something, "Will it lead to harm? Will it lead to happiness?" If it leads to harm, don't do it. If it looks like it's going to be harmless, then go ahead and do it. While you're doing it, however, check to see if any unexpected results are showing up. If the action leads to any unexpected harm, stop, change, do something else. If it seems to cause no harm, continue with it to the end. Even when it's done, you're not really done, for you have to reflect on the long-term results. If the action caused unexpected harm, talk it over with someone else on the path and resolve not to make that same mistake again. If it didn't cause harm, take joy in the fact that you're on the path and keep on practicing. In other words, you don't focus on whether or not *you're* a good or bad person, which could tie you all up in knots. You focus simply on the actions and their results, and on learning from them, which is a lot more manageable. These principles apply not only to your physical actions, but also to your words and thoughts.

They also apply to your meditation. You intend to stay with the breath, to breathe and to focus on the breath in a certain way. Check to see the results: “Is it going to cause harm? Is it causing harm, is it causing pain or stress right now?” If it is, change. If it’s not, keep going. When you come out of meditation, keep noticing the results of your actions. That’s your meditation in daily life.

One interesting thing about these instructions to Rahula is how they begin and how they conclude. The Buddha started with the principle of truthfulness: If you can’t be truthful about your actions and their results, you can’t do this training at all. After giving these instructions, he concluded with the observation, “This is the way to purity.” This is how you purify your thoughts, words, and deeds, through looking at your actions in terms of their intentions and the quality of the results. If you see that you’ve made a mistake, then resolve not to make it again. This is where the purity comes in. Purity requires not having firewalls in your mind. It means seeing the connections between what you intend to do and the results you get, realizing that you can change your ways if you’ve made a mistake.

So this is how compassion, wisdom, and purity — the virtues of the Buddha — are fostered: by taking our desire for happiness and learning to work with it truthfully, in a skillful way. And this is the Dhamma. This is how we take refuge in the Dhamma: remembering these principles and actually putting them into practice, so that the qualities of the Buddha appear within us, become embodied within us. By following the examples of the Noble Disciples, the third member of the Triple Refuge, we become Noble Disciples as well. That’s when the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha become a totally internalized refuge. And that’s where the refuge is really secure, where they all become one with no dividing lines among them, because at that point the *mind* becomes one with no dividing lines inside. Wisdom, compassion, and purity all come together and become one at that point.

So when we talk about divisions, or a lack of oneness in the mind, it’s not an abstract, conceptual thing. We can’t overcome those divisions simply by dissolving them in a feeling of oneness. They don’t dissolve that way, because they were created with a purpose. We’ve created them through our willful ignorance. We’ve put up firewalls in our minds to deny that we’ve done certain things or that certain results have come from what we’ve done. So we need to learn how to take down these walls and divisions through our relentless honesty, relentless mindfulness, relentless alertness. The compartments of the mind that would allow us to do unskillful things — which would mean that we can’t trust

ourselves — get torn down. The mind that's truly one is the mind that can trust itself totally. There are no hidden corners. Everything is wide open in a mind like that. We gain release from the barriers we create for ourselves, release from the suffering we create for ourselves. When those barriers and that suffering are gone, there's nothing to confine the mind, nothing to weigh it down.

And when you've made your mind trustworthy like that, you become a member of the Noble Sangha, a refuge for others, for they find that they can trust your example. This is how oneness inside leads to oneness outside: not a sentimental, oceanic feeling of oneness, but the oneness that comes when the barriers that lead to mistrust are torn down. It's through tearing down those barriers that the Dhamma of compassion, wisdom, and purity can spread throughout the world. When you gain your internal refuge of trust, you become an external refuge of trust for others. But the work has to start here.

So when we're looking for the freedom and release that the Buddha talks about, this is where we look: learning to see through the barriers we create for ourselves. The release is right here to be seen, simply that we need to learn how to stop creating the barriers that get in the way. It's a demanding path, but at least it's a path of possibility. You don't have to depend on anyone else. You don't have to be afraid that other people are not going to do the work for you, because all the work is for *you* to do. And the more you tear those barriers down, the more you can trust yourself to do the work properly.

Rites of Passage

July, 2003

Many ancient tribes marked the line between childhood and adulthood by sending the person off into the wilds to be alone. Some of the tribes called it a vision quest. The person could be alone for days to see what kind of vision would come up from within the mind, from within the heart, independent of the training he or she had received as a child. That was supposed to mark the person's entry into adulthood, to give a sense of what the adulthood would be all about. From that point on, the person would drop whatever childish things didn't fit in with the vision, and embark on adult life with a clear sense of direction.

Even in modern cultures, that's what the line between childhood and adulthood is: the point where we step back from the training we've received, step back from all the influences received as children, and find a place within where we can decide what our own ideas are, what our own sense of our direction in life is. It's a shame, though, that in modern culture the line is a fuzzy line. A fractured line. We don't have a formally recognized time of quietude to make the break in a clear and socially recognized way.

But that's what we do when we meditate: We step back from all the influences inside our mind — ideas that this is good, that's bad, you should do this, you shouldn't do that. You have to stop and really take stock of these things, find a place within where you can be really, really quiet, and then look clearly at these voices to see what they are. Instead of identifying with them, you watch them. You watch to see what they're coming from, where they're going, seeing them as part of a causal process. What kind of mind state do they come from, what kind of mind state do they encourage? Are those the kind of mind states you want to identify with?

This is essentially how the Buddha's teaching on not-self works: seeing the things that have control over our lives, that have power over our minds, and in the course of the meditation stepping back a bit from them, gaining enough independence from them that we can look at them simply as events and see if we really want to identify with them. As the Buddha pointed out in one of his

discourses, you can't really look at these things as long as you're identifying with them. You've got to step back. This applies not only to ideas in the mind, but also to the body, this form we're sitting with here. The same principle also applies to feelings of pleasure and pain as they come and go, to perceptions, to thought-constructs, even to our consciousness of things. Meditation gives us a place where we can step back from these things and watch them to see the influence they have over the mind, to decide whether that's an influence we'd like them to continue having.

So as we practice it's important to create this space where you can step back. The quietude and seclusion are important.

There are actually three kinds of seclusion. The first is physical seclusion, getting away from people. It's hard to get the random voices out of your mind when people are constantly feeding them into your ears. It's hard to focus on your own mind when you're running up against the contents of other people's minds all the time. You've got to get away. You've got to get out — which is what we're doing as we come here: finding a place of seclusion. We're not totally cut off from other people here, but at least we're in a place where the values of the practice are honored, where the bottom line is not the profit margin, where the bottom line is how you're training your mind — a place where we try to give space to one another, to show respect for on another's need for quietude, for concentration.

But there's still the problem that when we come out to a place like this, we don't leave our thoughts behind. Even though we may be surrounded by physical seclusion, there's still a lot of companionship in our minds as we go and sit out under the trees. Thoughts of the past come along; thoughts of the future come along. As long as we're tied up in these thoughts we're not really alone.

This is why we take the body in and of itself sitting here as our frame of reference. That's a way of developing mental seclusion, dropping unskillful mental states. We drop thoughts of past and future, and try to be right here with the body in the present moment. We drop thoughts of how much we'd like to see this thing or hear that thing or taste or touch the things we like. We're willing to let the mind be here secluded from all that.

Our culture is a funny one: It tends to distrust people who try to get away from sensual attachments — partly because the economy would collapse and partly because of the old Judaic-Protestant prejudice that people who try to abandon sensual attachments must be weird. The truth of the matter, though, is

that there's a part of the mind that flourishes when it's not burdened with sensual attachments. When it's really secluded from sensual attachments, it blossoms. And part of the practice is learning to appreciate that very still center of the mind, the sense of wellbeing that comes from dropping all those attachments. Even though we're not yet letting go of them for good, we at least drop them for the time being.

Simply be with the sense of the breath coming in, going out, allowing it to fill the body. Allow it to find its own right rhythm. You nudge it a little bit here, nudge it a little bit there to make it feel good, and this makes it easier to get pulled into the present moment rather than into the future or the past. You develop a greater and greater sense of mental seclusion by just dropping those distractions, dropping all those voices and attitudes that pull you back or pull you forward. You allow yourself simply to be right here, absorbed in working with the breath, settled down with a sense of wellbeing, settled down with a sense of familiarity.

It takes time, of course, to get familiar with the present moment, because for the most part we're just running through. We're like a little kid who runs home — “Hi, Mom!” — grabs a sandwich and runs out again: That's “dinner.” We have a fragmentary sense of the present moment as we rush through from the past to the future and from the future to the past.

The only time we really take notice of the present is when pain transfixes us here. Well, during the meditation, get a sense of pleasure and allow *that* to transfix you in here instead. This is what creates true mental seclusion. The past and the future drop away and all you've got left is the body sitting here breathing — right here, right now. You've got mindfulness reminding you to stay right here, alertness keeping watch over what's going on, and discernment absorbed in trying to understand it.

That's a much deeper and more satisfying sense of seclusion. Ultimately, it forms the basis for the third one, seclusion from craving. As the Buddha said, craving is our constant companion even when the mind is in the present. To cut through this craving, we have to call into question the things we've been identifying with. In his second sermon, the Buddha pointed out to the monks that if you let go of your attachment to form, feeling, perception, thought-constructs, and consciousness, what happens? In their case they attained Awakening. In other words, they became secluded even from their sense of who they were in the present moment — because our sense of who we are is

composed of those five kinds of things, coupled with craving and clinging. Form: the form of the body. Feelings: You may identify with a pain, saying “This is my pain,” or you may identify with a more metaphysical feeling, a larger sense of light or wellbeing, a sense of bliss. You may think that that’s who your true self is. Then there’s the label that says, “This is my self.” That’s a perception. Thought-constructs: You identify with your thinking, or the Thinker. Or you identify with the moment-to-moment consciousness of things.

As long as you identify with these things, you crave them. You’re still not secluded from them. You still have companions. But when you create that still center inside and allow yourself simply to watch these things, you step back and realize that you don’t have to identify with them. Self-identification is an act. Our sense of who we are is something we create. As you step back from these things and allow that activity of repeatedly creating your sense of who you are to fall away, see what happens. Then learn to drop your sense of identification even with the still center inside. See what happens then. The Buddha says that an even greater sense of freedom comes. See if he’s right.

When you taste that freedom, you’re no longer a slave to these things. Instead, they become your tools. You can use them for good purposes.

So this process of gaining seclusion is a process not only of growing up but also of gaining freedom. We look at all the influences rushing around in our minds and we come to realize that we have the ability to choose which ideas are useful and which ones are not, which of the phenomena we’re aware of are useful and which ones are not. We don’t have to be driven around by them all the time.

For most of us, life is a story of just that: being driven around. And this involves a lot of conflict because there are so many conflicting voices in our minds. This or that person gets under our skin and all of a sudden we start identifying with their particular way of thinking; another way of thinking gets under our skin and that gets incorporated too. We never really have a chance to sit back and sort things through, to see where they’re harmonious and where they’re not.

A group of people called the Kalamas once asked the Buddha, “How do we know which of the many different teachings coming our way are true? One teacher comes and says x is true. Another person comes and says, ‘Any person who says x is true is crazy. Y is true.’ How do we know who’s telling the truth?”

“Well,” the Buddha said, “You can’t go by outside teachers, you can’t go by old texts, you can’t go by received wisdom.” That’s the part of the teaching

everybody remembers. But at the same time he also said that you can't go by your own sense of what you like, what seems logical, or what fits in with your preconceived notions. That doesn't give you any proof of truth, either. You have to look and see: When you do something, what are the results?

If you act on particular mental qualities, which ones give happy results, harmless results, and which ones give harmful results? In other words you have to look at cause and effect. This principle applies not only to outside teachers but also to the voices we tend to identify with in our minds.

You have to step back and see what happens if you follow a particular way of perceiving things. Say you've got a pain in your leg and you perceive or label the pain in a certain way: What happens? Is that a skillful way of labeling the pain? Could you label it some other way? Can you label it simply as "sensation" instead? Can you step back and simply watch the pain and the perception as a series of events, part of a causal chain? What kind of freedom comes when you do that? This is how the teaching that the Buddha gave to the Kalamas applies not only outside but inside as well.

Even if we don't have the seclusion of vision quests any more in our culture, we do have a chance to find an even more thorough seclusion when we meditate. Meditation trains us in the ability to look and see what's in our minds, to decide what we really want to identify with and what we don't. So, it's through the meditation that we learn to grow up, we learn to gain independence, we learn to stand on our own two feet.

Ajaan Lee once made the comment that people who are still attached — still a slave to their thoughts, their bodies, and their feelings — are still children even if they're 80 years old. On the other hand, if you're the wise person who's no longer a slave to these things, then even if you're only seven years old, you're already an adult.

So think of the meditation as giving you a chance to step back and draw the line between childhood and adulthood. Draw the line, make it sharp, and then step over into adulthood by giving yourself that space, that sense of seclusion inside where you have time to sit down and watch things for what they really *do*. When you realize that you have the freedom to choose — and you take advantage of that freedom — that's when you've grown into an adult.

Simplify

July 5, 2003

The Dhamma strips things down to their essentials, with the realization that if you try to take on too many things all at once, you end up not doing anything very well. This is what the principle of renunciation is all about: realizing that some problems are more important than others, and some solutions more important than others as well. Some forms of happiness last longer than others do.

So we have to look at ourselves with the realization that we have only so much energy. If our energy gets scattered around or spread too thin, we end up not succeeding at anything at all. Given the fact that we have limitations in our time and energy, we want to make the best use of them. Focus them on the issues that really do make a difference, and be willing to give up other issues that are not so important. It'd be nice if we could cover all of our bases, to have our cake and eat it too, but it just doesn't work that way. We don't have the time; we don't have the energy.

We can think of renunciation as a process of simplification. That's a word with a nicer ring to it nowadays: You want to simplify your life, to cut away the unnecessary clutter. But either way, whether you call it simplification or renunciation, there are hard choices you have to make. And so it's best to look at it as a tradeoff. You can spend your time on activities that give immediate results that don't last very long, or on activities that give more long-lasting results but take more effort, more time, more patience, require more precision. Ultimately you realize that the best trade is the one where you give up lesser forms of happiness for more long-lasting ones, ones that speak to the really deep issues in life.

What are those issues? Well, there's the fact that we're active creatures. We're constantly acting, constantly putting forth an effort of some kind or another. So the question is: What's the best use of that effort? As long as we're putting forth an effort in some direction, we want to get results that last even though the effort itself might not last. With all the energy that goes into the effort

— and sometimes the suffering and stress that go into the effort — we want good results to show for what we've done, so we can look back at our lives and say, yes, that was a life well spent. A life well worth the effort involved. At the very end of life, it's all going to seem so short — just that little bit of time we have here as human beings. We want to make sure that we don't fritter it away.

Look at your life in the same way you'd look through an attic, deciding what you're going to keep, what you're going to throw out. You're moving from a house with a large attic but you've got only a small trailer to make the move. Some things need to be thrown out so that you have space in the trailer for the things that really mean a lot to you. In other words, there are things you've got to give up in order to have the time for the things that really matter, really make a difference, really do give substantial results. That's the underlying insight that informs the teachings on renunciation.

When you think about it, you realize that the time best spent is the time spent developing good qualities in the mind, because those are things that can help you in any situation. You have to devote a certain amount of time to keeping the body strong, but with the body you reach a point of diminishing returns. Ultimately there comes a point where no matter how much you've looked after the body, it's going to leave you. And sometimes it doesn't leave you nicely. Sometimes there's a messy parting. And in cases like that, you'll be glad for the time you spent working on the mind, because you realize that that's much closer to home. At the same time, the strength of the mind when really developed doesn't have to depend on the strength of the body. It doesn't end when the body dies.

This is one of the things you discover as you meditate. Ordinarily, when people are tired they get in a bad mood. They feel overwhelmed, really put upon. But when you learn how to develop a greater sense of spaciousness in the mind, a greater sense of wellbeing in the mind, after a while you begin to realize it doesn't depend on the level of energy in the body at all. The mind begins to have its own internal nourishment, its own internal place to recharge.

This is why we spend so much time sitting here with our eyes closed, working on mindfulness, concentration, and discernment, because these are the qualities that will see the mind through any situation. When you see people really "losing it," this is what they've lost. They've lost their mindfulness, they've lost their concentration, they've lost their discernment. So you want to work on

strengthening these qualities. Whatever time is spent making them stronger is time well spent.

This is what's meant by taking refuge in the Dhamma: realizing that if you focus on these few things, you don't have to worry about other things. You can really trust the practice to see you through. Often our desire to cover all the bases is a fear that if one thing doesn't work out, something else will. And we hesitate to commit ourselves to a particular path of action for fear that it may not see us all the way through. We hedge our bets. Yet instead of providing us real protection, this attitude ends up giving us a life of nothing but bits and pieces: a little bit of this, fragments of that, a little bit of peace, a little bit of wealth, a little bit of health, nothing in any really solid measure.

But by taking refuge in the Dhamma we're taking refuge in the conviction that developing the mind will cover all contingencies. And because the practice of virtue, concentration, and discernment — all the seeds for happiness — lie right here, that simplifies matters. It also allows us to give our full energy to the things that matter most.

So even if from the outside it may look as if the life of practicing the Dhamma has a lot of hardships, a lot of renunciation, a lot of doing without, it's not an impoverished life. You find that real wealth develops inside.

One of the first things that attracted me to the Dhamma was seeing my teacher, Ajaan Fuang, living a very simple life — a little tiny monastery out in the hills of Rayong, just a couple of huts, not that many people — but he was happy. You could feel a very strong sense of wellbeing just emanating from him. And you realized that it didn't depend on his being wealthy, it didn't depend on his being famous or having a lot of students or friends or anything. It was simply because he had worked on his mind. As he said, he wasn't born that way. Whatever sense of wellbeing he had developed in the mind came through the practice. And as you come to know the practice, come to know the Dhamma, you realize exactly how all-encompassing it is. Once these qualities are developed in the mind, they take care of all kinds of situations. Qualities of mindfulness, discernment, and concentration are basic to any skill, basic to our ability to deal with any situation. So by focusing on these few things we really do cover all of our bases. They encompass everything.

One of the good things about the Dhamma is that it's so big. You can give your whole life to it. It's something *worth* giving your life to, because it teaches you what you need to know, teaches you the skills you need to handle whatever

life throws at you — and more. So even though a life of renunciation may seem like a life of getting pared down and narrowed down, it's not really that way at all. It broadens out because you're not confining the mind with narrow, petty issues. You're dealing with the few really big essential issues in life that cover everything.

Years back when I was a young monk I had to take the Dhamma exams — the exams they give to the monks in Thailand once a year — and part of each exam involved writing a short Dhamma talk. They'd give you a phrase from the Pali Canon or a couple of verses from the *Dhammapada* or *Sutta Nipata*, and you'd have to develop that particular theme, bringing in another related Dhamma quote before you finished. The first year you had to bring in one quote; the second year, two; and for the final year, three. To prepare you for this part of the exam they gave you a book with Dhamma quotes to memorize. And being your typical American I hadn't had that much memorization practice in school. The little novices would memorize pages and pages of these Dhamma quotes, but I realized that in my own case it would be wise just to pick a couple of quotes that would be useful in all circumstances. The one I found useful every year was a passage from the *Dhammapada*: If when you see that there's a greater happiness that comes from abandoning a lesser happiness, be willing to abandon that lesser happiness for the sake of the greater one.

That's a principle that covers all situations and it's the one underlying the teachings on renunciation. In fact, it underlies the whole practice: realizing that as long as we're putting forth effort into our lives, we might as well put forth effort that will leave us something to show for it. Think of the number of people you know who have lived very active lives but then toward the end look back and say they have nothing to show for all that activity, for all that effort, for all that suffering. But you won't find in that group of people anyone who's been practicing the Dhamma. The effort that goes into the Dhamma gives long-term benefits in terms of developing the qualities of the mind, opening us up to new dimensions that we wouldn't have even imagined otherwise.

So when the Dhamma requires that you give things up, remember that it's a tradeoff in giving up a lesser happiness for a greater one. You're giving up the habit of scattering your energy around in exchange for a better habit, one of focusing on the qualities of the mind that will see you through every situation and take you beyond situations.

This is why it's so important to strip things down to the essentials and stay with the essentials. The essentials cover everything. They take care of everything. They can provide you with all of the refuge you need.

So even though it may seem simple-minded, we're sitting here focusing on what? The breath coming in and out. It may not seem all that profound or intellectually stimulating, but it's one of the essentials. Not only the breath in and of itself, but the habits we develop as we keep the mind focused on the breath: mindfulness, alertness, persistence, clarity of mind. These skills are basic to all skills in life, so make sure that you really have them mastered. Whatever you have to give up in terms of time devoted to other things in order to master these skills, it's a wise trade, a trade that leaves you with something far more valuable than whatever has been abandoned. That's something you can depend on, because these are qualities that teach you how to depend on yourself. There's that passage, "The self is its own refuge." It means that ultimately you have to be your own refuge, and that you can be your own refuge only if you develop these qualities that make you dependable. If you depend on them, ultimately you find that they allow you to depend on yourself. That's a promise that comes with a 2,600 year old guarantee.

Culture Shock

June 16, 2004

When you come to practice the Dhamma, there are a lot of times when you experience culture shock. It's not a question of going from a Western culture to an Asian culture. It's going from a culture of ordinary people with defilements — Asian or Western — to the culture of the Noble Ones. Their culture involves a radically different set of values, a different etiquette, a different purpose.

The culture of ordinary people — no matter where in the world — is just to keep families going, to keep the human race surviving, to keep people clothed and fed, to try to sort out a balance among different peoples' greed, anger, and delusion in such a way that things are relatively peaceful. But this always takes place within the context of what's possible in a world where when you have gain, loss; status, loss of status; praise, criticism; pleasure, pain. These things all come in pairs, so you don't get anything that's totally whole.

The purpose of the customs of the Noble Ones, however, is to lead to something that, as Luang Pu Dune once said, is one single thing all the way through. There's no concern about keeping the human race going or keeping your appetites going, but there *is* a focused concern on finding a true happiness. That one point, that one focus, trumps everything else. And it affects everything within the culture — from the way we walk, the way we talk, what we wear, what we eat, the kind of shelter we look for, the medicine we use, everything from the very basics all the way up to how we comprehend our own minds.

So as you shift from one culture to the next, there are bound to be periods of culture shock. But you have to keep reminding yourself that the purpose of all this is to take seriously the deep desire that everyone has for true happiness.

If you think about it, you'll see that the Buddha was a very demanding person: He wanted nothing less than absolute happiness, a happiness that was one single thing all the way through, that didn't have other things nibbling away at the edges. So even though he had wealth, status, all of what they call the good things of the world, they weren't good enough for him. His totally overwhelming motivation was a desire for true happiness, a happiness with no drawbacks — in

other words, a happiness that wasn't going to cause suffering for other people either. It would have to be a happiness built on developing his inner resources, one that wouldn't have to take anything away from anyone else. Instead of taking things, he lived off of what people offered him, as a way of making that happiness more pure. He also realized that that happiness was not going to come from owning or having things. He was going to have to teach his mind to be more self-reliant, and by developing that self-reliance he found that there's a lot more to the mind than he originally expected.

So as you come to the Dhamma, try to keep that same purpose in mind: a true happiness that doesn't have to depend on anything, a happiness that's one thing all the way through. And of course there will be culture shock when your ordinary old desires, your old habits are thwarted, screaming for attention. But you have to look: Exactly where are they going to take you? They take you back to that world of opposites, the world where there's nothing in a really pure form. If you're nurturing your desires in that context, you're simply learning to put up with second best.

There was an article recently in *Tricycle* where a psychologist was arguing that the true Buddhist attitude toward craving is that craving or desire is really a problem only if you want the objects of your craving to be total, to be with you forever. As long as you're realistic and realize that nothing lasts forever, he said, then desire is no problem. Just learn not to cling to the object of your desire. Just be content with being with the desire itself.

That's his idea of being realistic, and of course that has nothing to do with what the Buddha taught. As the Buddha taught, it's not so much that we cling to the objects of our desire, we cling to the desire itself, we crave desire itself. It's something we enjoy. And if desire without latching on to the expectation of permanent objects for the desire were okay, then why is there so much trouble from sexual predators or war mongers who don't really care to hold on to their conquests but want to keep going on for more and more and more? They like the process. They like the thrill of the chase. And this is the real problem with human desire. In its quest for "enough" in terms of the things of the world, it never can find satisfaction, so it always keeps wanting more and more. In this way it wrecks the world, and also wrecks the mind.

So we have to find something that will put the mind in a state where it doesn't need to desire anything anymore. Part of this quest means learning to temper your desires, but it also means refocusing them. Instead of having

scattered desires for all things in all different directions, you focus it on one big desire: the desire for total freedom. Now, what's radical about the Buddha's teachings is that that desire is realistic, too — that desire for total freedom, ultimate happiness.

After all, isn't that why we desire things? We hope that they'll give us happiness, and they end up not giving it. Psychologists have done studies showing that people are very unrealistic about the amount of happiness they're going to get out of things. Relationships, advancement at work, a new car: These things are painted in all kinds of beautiful colors in the mind, and yet when we actually get them, the colors fade. This sets you up for wanting something else. You keep going in that direction, and there's no end to it. But even though we've been disappointed before, even though we've seen the colors fade right before our eyes, we start imagining, "Well, the next one, the next person, the next thing, the next position in life — that'll have colors that are colorfast." But it doesn't work out that way.

It's like the old story of the person eating peppers and crying because the peppers were hot. And the people said to him, "Why do you keep on eating peppers?" And he said, "Well, I hope to find the sweet one in here someplace." That's the way most people are about their happiness.

According to the Buddha, though, there is one thing that doesn't disappoint. When you pursue Awakening, when you pursue nibbana, it's not going to lead to disappointment. Quite the contrary, it goes wildly beyond your expectations, wildly beyond your hopes. Even just the first taste of the Deathless, stream entry, is enough to produce a seismic shift in your whole awareness, your whole understanding in what you think you are, and what's possible in life, and in the importance of your own actions. Once you reach that state, your conviction in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha is unshakeable. Your standards for what counts as true happiness get ratcheted up immeasurably.

But in the meantime, until you reach that state, you're going to have shakable conviction. It's part of the game. It's only to be expected because you haven't seen the results really turn into something earthshaking yet. This is why you have to work at your sense of conviction. Your drive for true happiness, your belief that such a thing is possible, is what's going to see you over the hurdles placed in your way. Your conviction that there is a way out is what's going to help find that way out.

Like someone lost in the forest: If you're not really convinced that there's a way out, you give up very easily. You run into a thicket here, a steep cliff there, and it just seems way too much. It stops you. But if you're convinced there's got to be a way out, you've heard of other people who've made their way out, you think, "It's got to be in here someplace." You keep looking, looking, looking. And finally you see how the other people made their way out: "Oh. That was the path they took."

So conviction plays an important role in the path. The Buddha cites it as the first strength of mind that leads to Awakening: conviction in the Buddha's Awakening, conviction in the principle of kamma. The Buddha was a human being; he did it through his own actions. You're a human being; you can do it through yours.

This also requires having a single-minded focus, a single-minded respect for your desire for a really single, totally unadulterated happiness — a happiness that doesn't keep corroding at the edges, doesn't have other stains mixed in. It's something total. Deep down inside, that's what we all want, but part of us doesn't believe it's real. We've been taught so much — this culture that we're trying to outgrow has been teaching us all along — that total happiness isn't possible. "Content yourself with what we have to offer. We have nice jobs, we have nice cars, nice families. If you don't like a family you can have an affair." All the legal and illegal pleasures that worldly cultures promise: They teach you to settle for these things. And people have been settling for them for how many lifetimes?

But the Buddha tells you, "Don't settle for that. Aim higher. Aim at the heart's true desire: unmitigated happiness, total freedom." Because it's here that effort is well spent. The Buddha saw that our experience of the world — these four dimensions of space and time — depends on our own karmic input. A constant effort is required to keep it going, keep it going, keep it going. And the question is, "Is it worth it?" If you look at the world of conditioned things, if those are your goals, they're not worth it at all because they come only to fade, fade, fade away.

But the Buddha realized that conditioned things are also conditioning things. In other words, these fabricated things, if you learn how to use them skillfully lead someplace. Even if you don't learn how to use them skillfully, they still lead places: random places, miserable places. The question is, "Do you really want to go where they're taking you?" If you make the effort to get skillful at fashioning

conditioned things, they can lead you to a happiness that's worthwhile, that can be taken as a goal in and of itself.

So we're living in the same world of conditioned things as everyone else, but we're approaching them in a different way. This is what makes the culture of the Noble Ones so special. The cultures of the world teach us to delight in gaining conditioned things — thrills, people, power, possessions — thinking that we can stop there. The culture of the Noble Ones, though, teaches us to delight in developing skillful mental states, to delight in abandoning unskillful mental states, for the purpose of a happiness that's unconditioned.

You do this by developing the conviction that there is a release. As the Buddha saw, the laws of causality are such that there are points of resonance, as in chaos theory, where the laws of your causal experience lead you to an opening that takes you out of this system entirely. That's possible. That effort, he says, is worth it. And it's up to us. As the Buddha said, this opportunity is here. We have this human life. What are we going to do with it? Are we going to explore that possibility? Are we going to test it to see if what he's saying is true? Are we going to stick with the limited possibilities offered by our old culture, or are we going to try the possibilities promised in the culture of the Noble Ones?

The nature of what the Buddha promises is really inviting, even though it's challenging. And it seems a shame that people don't take him up on that challenge — but we can't make the choice for other people. It's a choice that each of us has to make for himself or herself alone. But you find that if you stick with that desire for a dependable happiness, if you stick with the conviction that it's possible, the results really are greater than anything you can imagine.

A Load of Straw

April 8, 2004

The mind has a habit of loading itself down with all sorts of unnecessary garbage. It's like a phrase they have in Thai, "the old woman loading herself down with straw." The story goes that she thought that someday she might find herself in need of some straw, so everywhere she went she carried a huge load of straw on her back. Of course she was always bent over and at the same time could never pick up anything that was any better. When she got home that's all she had: this big load of straw. She had been all over the place, carrying her big load of straw, and yet had nothing to show for it.

It's like a person on a camping trip who tries to prepare for all the possible contingencies and as a result loads his pack so heavily that he can hardly walk. He won't get very far. If he wants to get anywhere, he's got to learn how to minimize his load. In the same way, we have to learn how to get rid of all the unnecessary things we carry around. Even though we're out here in an extremely peaceful place, we keep finding things to weigh the mind down.

So it's important to have techniques for letting go, for putting down those burdens. The four sublime attitudes that we chant every night are good tools for putting down your load. Start out with thoughts of goodwill: "May I be happy, may all living beings be happy." Think about it for a while: Why would you want anyone to suffer? Do you want anyone to suffer? Look down, be very honest with yourself, because with all the conflicts in life, you may have a residual grudge against some people. You'd really like to see them get theirs. And yet who's being weighed down by that desire? You are, all for no purpose. You don't have to make sure that just punishments are meted out. The law of karma is going to take care of everything, sooner or later. Of course, often we'd like to see it sooner, but the desire for "sooner" is right there an unnecessary load on the mind.

So think about goodwill for a while until you can really see why you'd genuinely want to see everybody happy. After all, if everybody had true happiness welling up from within, nobody would harm anyone else, no one would cheat anyone else, no one would take advantage of anyone else. If

everybody had true happiness, there would be no reason for all the wars and cruelties in the world. The possibility for peace and wellbeing in the world has to come from everyone's being happy from within. So you wish that happiness for everyone, whether they're people you like or people you don't like. Don't make your likes and dislikes a big issue. Dig into each person a little deeper than that, to see the part where you can sympathize with his or her desire for happiness.

The next two sublime attitudes follow immediately on goodwill. If you see people who are suffering, you feel compassion for them, you'd like to see them gain release from that suffering. As for those who are already happy, you wish them to continue in that happiness. It's funny that this last attitude, appreciation or sympathetic joy, is the harder of the two. Sometimes compassion is easy because we can view ourselves in a position of being over somebody, looking down on that poor suffering person, whereas with sympathetic joy, sometimes the people who are happier than we are, are in a higher position than we are. They have a happiness we don't yet have. In situations like this, thoughts of envy or resentment can easily come up, so if they do, look at them. Do you really want to think those thoughts? Do you really want to identify with those thoughts?

These sublime attitudes are measuring sticks against which you can measure what's actually going on in your mind. In other words, you're not just smothering all the unskillful thoughts in your mind with these nice warm fuzzy clouds of goodwill. You're using these skillful thoughts as measuring sticks. These are the attitudes that put people into jhana. These are the attitudes that brahmas, who live in jhana, actually dwell in. This is why they're able to stay in jhana. So how do your attitudes measure up against theirs? If you find that your attitudes don't measure up, try to reason with yourself until they do. You can't force yourself without reasoning.

The same with compassion: Can you feel compassion for someone without a sense of your superiority getting involved? Just simply seeing someone suffer hurts your heart. Don't make an issue of whether you like that person or not. If someone is happy, again it doesn't matter whether you like or don't like that person. Try to make your heart as fair as possible with regard to all beings. Once you've developed these attitudes, then when thoughts that go against these principles come into the mind, you'll catch them more quickly, see them more easily, and in this way these attitudes become a basis for good concentration, a basis for developing stillness within the mind.

Of course there are cases where people are suffering and you can't do anything to put an end to their suffering, or when happy people are going to have to lose their happiness. This applies to you as well as to other people. This is why equanimity has to be the safety net for all these sublime attitudes. Realizing that there are some cases you just can't help, you have to reflect on the principle of karma. This again is a very useful principle for preparing yourself to meditate. Realize that you don't have to straighten out the world before you're going to be able to gain Awakening or before you're going to be able to sit down and meditate. The principle of karma is at work here. Often, when people have made up their minds to straighten out the world, the things they do to straighten out the world tend to get very unskillful and they end up making things worse. They don't like other people's greed, anger, and delusion, yet in the course of trying to straighten them out, they inflict them with their own greed, anger, and delusion. They simply compound the problem.

So your only responsibility to the world is to focus on doing what's skillful. That's all you have to take care of. As for the working out of everybody else's karma, that will work out on its own without your having to get involved. Just make sure that your own present karma is skillful.

One thing you can do that's skillful right now is to allow the mind to settle down with the breath. There's no unfinished business with other people that you've got to take care of right now. Your unfinished business is to see how skillful you can be in the way you direct your mind, for if you want true happiness this is what you've got to do. You're not going to find true happiness by straightening out the world, but you *can* find true happiness by straightening out the mind. Doing skillful things, saying skillful things, thinking skillful things: This is how your world is going to become a better world.

And this is not a small or narrow minded idea. You may have read that these poor Hinayanists, all they can think about is their own individual liberation, while other Buddhists have nobler, broader aspirations: They want to save all sentient beings from suffering. Now if suffering were a thing — like a house — that you could clean up, then it would be possible to go around cleaning up other people's houses for them. But it's not a thing. It's a pattern of unskillful behavior. Each person is suffering because of his or her own lack of skill. So each person has to clean up his or her own act. You can't make other people more skillful. You can't force them to choose to be more skillful. You can't clean up their act for them. You *can* show them by example, by cleaning up your own act. You can

recommend that they clean up theirs, but your recommendations carry weight only if you can speak from experience in how you cleaned up your act, and you can show the actual example of your own behavior. But the actual cleaning is something that each person has to do for him or herself. Nobody can save anyone else. There's no other way that the world will get clean.

And regardless of whether the world will actually ever get clean — which is pretty open to doubt — there's no doubt that you've got issues coming up in your mind right now. Those are the ones you have to deal with; that's your field for skillful work right now. When you have this perspective, it helps you focus on your meditation and do the work that has to be done. There's a passage in the Anguttara describing two kinds of fools in the world: those who take on work that's not their own work and those who neglect the work that *is* their own. So look at the work your mind has to do. It's right here in front of you in terms of your thoughts, your words, your deeds. When you focus on this, you're doing what has to be done, what should be done, the best thing you can do.

So these four Sublime Attitudes are not there just to give a warm, fuzzy feeling to the mind. They help you gain perspective on what you're doing. When you have the right perspective, it's a lot easier to keep focused on the path.

For the Good of the World

Mid-September, 2001

Tonight I'd like us to dedicate our meditation for the people who've died in the events of the past week. This is a traditional practice in Thailand and in all Buddhist countries. It's based on the realization that when people have passed over, the only way you can get in touch with them is through the power of the mind, what Ajaan Lee calls the current of the mind. And the best thing you can do for them is to send them a current of peace, a current of goodwill, hoping that they find a good rebirth.

A lot of people have been asking recently about how karma has played out in recent events. The Buddha generally discourages trying to trace back exactly what people did that caused them to die in this or that way. He said that if you tried to trace that back you'd go crazy, for the issues of karma are so complex. The basic principle is simple: Whatever was done with a skillful intention gets a pleasant result, whatever was done with an unskillful intention gives an unpleasant result. And there's a correspondence between a particular type of unskillful action and a particular type of unskillful result. But the precise details — “What exactly did these people do? Did they do it all together? Did they do it separately?” — no one can trace those back.

What the Buddha did teach, though, is to focus on what's the most skillful thing we can do now, given the situation. That's where the emphasis should lie. And one thing we can do is to help the world through our meditation. Many people think that to sit with your eyes closed like this is irresponsible, that we're running away from the world. But when you think about the unhealthy energies people are putting out in the world all day, every day, through their thoughts, words, and deeds, the world really needs people who are putting out peaceful energy. That's where meditation has a lot to offer.

The mind is like a broadcast station. It sends out currents. If we create a peaceful, steady, calming current, that has an effect on the world in ways that are hard to trace, but they're there.

So reflect on the fact that all who are born into the human race have unskillful karma. There's no need to wish ill on anyone, no matter what. The best you can do in difficult circumstances is to figure out the most skillful thing to do right now. You try not to give in to your emotions, not to give in to your fears, but to create within your mind as skillful a state as possible, as calm and steady and mindful a state as you can, and then offer that to other people. That's one way of helping. And when the people are far away, it's probably the best thing to do right now.

So as you're meditating, realize that you're not doing this just for yourself. You're doing it for the good of the world. And you want to do it well, do it truly, so that it can truly be helpful to others as well. Sometimes that thought can give you an extra incentive to be more careful with your meditation, to put in more effort than you might feel inclined to. We can all get sloppy, thinking, "Well, it's just me and I'm perfectly content with a sloppy meditation tonight so I can get over with it and get on to something else." But what does that kind of meditation do for those who are what the Thais call our companions in aging, illness, and death? Nothing much at all.

The general current of energy in the world requires as much calm, steady input as possible. So, if this is what you're broadcasting right now, make sure you're broadcasting it well. Ajaan Mun once said that the only true goodness in the world is goodness without any drawbacks, without any harm. There are so many things that are good in one way but harmful in another. Yet the practice of meditation, the practice of training the mind, is good all around, good for ourselves and for the people around us.

I was talking on the phone this evening to a woman in lower Manhattan who was saying it's been very heartwarming to see how New Yorkers — and we know the reputation of New Yorkers — have come out of their usual shells, showing kindness in all sorts of ways she would never have imagined. That's the proper response to a disaster: to realize, one, that disasters keep happening all over the world; and, two, when a disaster strikes near home, it gives you an opportunity to do your best. The shame is that when opportunities like this pass, we usually get back to our normal ways and tend not to think about doing our best, doing the most skillful things. But actually that's what's really demanded of us all the time.

This is one of the reasons we develop mindfulness: not to be non-reactive, but to be mindful of what we're doing, of what situation we're in, and of the most skillful thing to be doing right now. Keep that in mind, because the principles of

karma, the laws of karma, are not traffic laws that apply only in certain places, only at certain times, on the south side of the street from 4:30 to 6 p.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays, that kind of thing. Karma is a law that applies to all of our actions, 24/7.

So be skillful at all times. No matter what the situation, no matter how minor or major it may seem, we've got the opportunity to do good, to act on skillful intentions — not just good intentions, but intentions that are skillful as well. That requires work. It requires training. This is what we're doing right here. It's important always to keep that in mind, no matter how ordinary or extraordinary the situation. It's a teaching that applies everywhere: What you're doing right now is important, so be careful to do your best.

A Meditative Life

July, 2003

Often we like to think that simply by adding meditation to our daily schedule, the effects of the meditation will permeate everything without our having to do much of anything else. Simply add the meditation to the mix of your life and it will transform all the other ingredients: That's what we'd like to think, but it doesn't really work that way. You have to remake your life to make it a good place for the meditation to seep through, because some activities, some states of mind, aren't like fertile soil. They're like rocks. They're really resistant to receiving any influence from the meditation.

This is why, when you're a meditator you also have to look at the way you live your life, your day-to-day activities. See if you're creating a conducive environment for the meditation to thrive and spread. Otherwise the meditation just gets squeezed into the cracks between the rocks here and there, and never gets to permeate much of anything at all.

There's a teaching in the Canon on five principles that a new monk should keep in mind. These principles apply not only to new monks, but to anyone who wants to live a life where the meditation can seep through and permeate everything.

The first principle is virtue. Make sure you stick to your precepts. In the case of monks, of course, this refers to the Patimokkha. In the case of lay people, it refers to the five precepts and, on occasion, the eight. When you're holding to the precepts, you're holding to firm principles in your life. The Buddha described observing the precepts as a gift, both to yourself and to the people around you. You give protection to other people's lives, their property, their knowledge of the truth. You protect them from your being drunk; you protect them from your engaging in illicit sex. And when these principles become precepts — in other words, promises to yourself that you keep in all circumstances — the Buddha says that you're giving unlimited protection, unlimited safety to other beings, and you have a share in that safety, a share in that protection yourself.

So the precepts create an environment where there's more protection. When there's more protection, it's easier to meditate. At the same time, the precepts foster an attitude of giving. You realize that for the sake of your own happiness, you have to give. When you hold to that attitude, you find it easier to meditate, because all too often people come to the meditation with a question of "What can I get out of this'?" But if you're used to giving and seeing the good results that come from giving, you're more likely to ask, "What can I give to the meditation? What needs to be given for the good results to come?" With that attitude you're more willing to give of your time and energy in ways that you might not have been willing to before.

The second principle for creating a good environment for meditation is restraint of the senses. In other words, you're not only careful about what comes out of your mind, you're also careful about what comes in, in terms of the things you look at, the things you listen to, smell, taste, touch, and think about. Be careful not to focus on things that will give rise to greed, anger, or delusion. If you're careless in your looking, careless in your listening, it's very difficult to be careful about your thoughts, because thoughts are so much more subtle.

This doesn't mean that you go around with blinders on your eyes or plugs in your ears; it simply means that you're skillful in how you look at things, skillful in how you listen. If you know that something tends to arouse lust or anger, learn to look at it in a way that counteracts the lust, counteracts the anger. In other words, if something seems attractive, you look for its unattractive side. If something seems unattractive, you look for its attractive side. As Ajaan Lee says, be a person with two eyes, not just one.

This is why we chant that passage for the contemplation of the body. It doesn't tell us *not* to look at the body; it says to look more carefully at the body. Look at the parts that aren't attractive, to balance out the one-sided view that simply focuses on a few attractive details here and there and tends to blot out everything else in order to give rise to lust. After all, the body is not what produces lust. The mind produces lust. The mind starts hankering to feel lust and so it goes out looking for something to incite the lust, and grabs hold of whatever little details it can find, even when those details are surrounded by all sorts of unclean things.

So keep watch on what comes out of the mind and what comes in. For lay people, this means being careful about the friends you associate with, the magazines you read, the TV you watch, the music you listen to. Be very careful

about how you look at these things, how you listen to these things. After a while you find that this is not a case of restricting yourself so much as it is learning to see things more carefully, more fully, because you're seeing both sides of what used to seem solely attractive or solely repulsive.

This takes some effort. You have to be more energetic in watching out for how you look and listen. But the reward is that the mind is put in much better shape to meditate because you're not filling it up with all sorts of garbage, poison, or junk food that's going to harm it, weaken it, or get in the way. So when you sit down to meditate, if you've been careless about what's been coming in and out of your mind, you find that it's like cleaning out a shed after a year of neglect. There's just so much garbage in there that you spend almost the whole hour cleaning it out and then realize that you have only five minutes for any real stillness at the end. So keep the mind clean from the beginning, all the time. Don't let any garbage in the door or in the windows. If garbage does come in, let it go right out. Don't collect it. That way you find that you have a much nicer place to sit down and settle in quickly when you create your meditation home.

The third principle for creating a good environment for meditation is restraint in your conversation. When I first went to stay with Ajaan Fuang, he said that lesson number one in meditation is keeping control of your mouth. In other words, before you say anything, ask yourself: "Is this necessary? Is this beneficial? Is there a good reason to say this?" If there is, then go ahead and say it. If not, then keep quiet. As he said, if you can't control your mouth there's no way you're going to control your mind. And when you make a habit of asking yourself these questions, you find that very little conversation is really necessary.

If you're at work and you need to talk to your fellow workers to create a good atmosphere in the workplace, that counts as necessary speech. But often social-grease speech goes beyond that. You start getting careless, running off with your mouth, and that turns into idle chatter, which is not only a waste of energy but also a source of danger. There's so much grease that it gums up the works. Often the things people say that cause the most harm are when they're just allowing whatever comes in their mind to go right out their mouth without any restraint at all.

Now if observing this principle means that you gain a reputation for being a quiet person, well, that's fine. You find that your words, if you're more careful about doling them out, start taking on more worth. At the same time you're creating a better atmosphere for your mind. After all, if you're constantly

chattering all day long, how are you going to stop the mental chatter when you sit down to meditate? But if you develop this habit of watching over your mouth, the same habit then comes to apply to the meditation. All those mouths in your mind start going still.

The fourth principle is, for the monks, to frequent wilderness spots, to get out of society, to find a quiet place to be by yourself, so that you can gain perspective on your life, perspective on your mind, so that what's going on in your mind can stand out in bolder relief. This principle applies to lay people, too. Try to find as much solitude as you can. It's good for you. When people have trouble living in solitude it shows that there's lots of unfinished business inside.

So make a little wilderness place in your home. Turn off the TV, turn out the lights, allow yourself to be alone without a lot of distractions. Tell everyone in the house that you need a little time alone on a regular basis. When you do this, you find that things submerged in the depths of your mind come up to the surface. Only when they come up to the surface can you deal with them. When you're alone in this way without a lot of outside input, it's natural that the mind will tend to stay with the breath more easily. There may be a lot of mental chatter at first, but after a while you get fed up with it. You prefer just to be quiet. At the same time, you get away from the influence of everybody else's thoughts and opinions. You have to ask yourself, "What do you really believe? What are *your* opinions? What's important to *you* when you're not swayed by the opinions of others?"

Which leads to the fifth principle: to develop Right View. Right View has two levels. First, there's belief in the principle of karma, that what you do really does have results — and you really are the one doing it. It's not some outside force acting through you, not the stars or some god or some force of fate. *You're* making the decisions and you have the ability to make them skillfully or not, depending on your intention. It's important to believe in this principle because this is what gives more power to your life. It's an empowering belief — but it also involves responsibilities. This is why you have to be careful in what you do, why you can't be heedless. When you're careful about your actions, it's easier to be careful about your mind when the time comes to meditate.

As for the second level of Right View, the transcendent level, that means seeing things in terms of the four noble truths: stress and suffering, the cause of stress and suffering, the cessation of stress and suffering, and the path of practice to that cessation. Just look at the whole range of your experience: Instead of

dividing it up into its usual patterns of me and not me, simply look to see, “Where is there suffering? Where is there stress? What goes along with it? What are you doing that gives rise to that stress? Can you let go of that activity? And what qualities do you need to develop, what things do you need to let go of in order to let go of the craving, the ignorance underlying the stress? When you drop craving can you be aware of what’s happening?” All too often when we drop one craving we simply pick up another one. “Can you make yourself more and more aware of that space in between the cravings and expand that space? What’s it like to have a mind without craving?”

According to the Buddha it’s important to see things in this way because if you identify everything in terms of your self, how can you possibly understand anything for what it actually is? If you hold on to suffering as your self, how can you understand suffering? If you look at it simply as suffering without putting this label of “me” or “mine” on it, you can start seeing it for what it is and learn how to let it go. If it’s your self, if you hold to that belief that it’s your self, you can’t let go of it. But looking at things in terms of the four noble truths allows you to solve the problem of suffering once and for all.

So start looking at your whole life in this light. Instead of blaming your sufferings on people outside, look at what you’re doing to contribute to that suffering and focus on dealing with that first. When you develop this attitude in everyday life, it’s a lot easier to apply it to the meditation. You create an environment where sticking to the noble path makes more and more sense.

So these are the factors that create the environment for the meditation whether you’re a new monk living here in the monastery or a lay person living outside the monastery: You want to stick to the precepts, exercise restraint over the senses, practice restraint over your conversation, create quiet, secluded places for yourself, and develop Right View. When you follow these principles, they create a more conducive environment for allowing concentration to develop, to thrive. At the same time, they create a more receptive environment for allowing the results of concentration to permeate out in every direction. This way your practice, instead of being forced into the cracks of a hostile, alien environment, has room to put down roots, to grow, and to transform everything around it.

Inner Voice Lessons

August, 2002

One of the first things you notice as you try to quiet the mind is the lack of quiet — all the chattering going on, all the discussions, the dialogs, the committee discussions going on up in your head, and sometimes all over your body. There seems to be never-ending chatter.

Often our first thought as we start to meditate is, “How can I stop the chatter? How can I just quiet all those voices so things can be perfectly quiet inside?” But as you practice, you begin to realize that you just can’t put a stop to things that way. It requires a more gradual process, learning to bring that conversation under control. When you start out there are lots unskillful voices in there, and frequently the discussion is not being run according to Robert’s Rules of Order. This voice comes barging in, that voice yells at you, this voice whispers in your ear. And all the subterfuge and techniques of a political meeting are nothing compared with what goes on in the mind — all the tricks the mind plays on itself, how the different voices try to get their way — because many of them are not just aimless voices saying random things. They have a purpose in saying their thing. There’s an urging on to action in one direction or another, so they try all kinds of tricks to get their way. The mind has countless ways of getting a particular idea or a particular motion through the committee. So to begin with, when we work with the mind, we want to make that discussion more skillful.

As you start meditating, try to gain some detachment from the voices, so that you’re watching them from outside, instead of joining in with the conversation, taking on the voices as your own. This is one of the lessons of the teaching on not-self: It’s not *you* talking in there. There are voices in there, and you’ve tended to identify with them, but you can begin to dis-identify with them as well. Tell yourself, “I’m not necessarily responsible for things that come bursting into the mind. I don’t have to act on the firing of every nerve end. I don’t have to get involved.” If a voice comes and urges action, just let it urge, urge, urge, and then it’ll stop after a while. You can just keep on watching.

Just the act of wanting to make that conversation more skillful: That in and of itself begins to distance you from it. Practice concentrating on the breath as a way of giving you a good firm basis on which to stand so that you can stay outside of the discussion. But simply watching the discussion isn't going to make it go away on its own. You've also got to learn how to make it more skillful. Sometimes that means introducing new voices — like the meditating voice that says, "Hey, stay with the breath, stay with the breath, make the breath comfortable, allow the breath to be comfortable. Give us some *room* here."

This is why the Buddha didn't encourage his monks to take a vow of silence. There's a story in the Vinaya of a group of monks who began the Rains retreat with a vow: "Okay, we're not going to talk to each other. Each person just maintain silence throughout the Rains." At the end of the retreat they went to see the Buddha, very proud of the fact that they had succeeded in not talking to each other for the entire three months. But he didn't praise them. Instead he said, "You've been living like sheep, like dumb animals." This inner conversation doesn't become more skillful just by stopping your talking. To improve your inner conversation, you get a lot of help by learning good examples of outer conversation.

The first thing to learn as you live together is how to talk to each other in skillful ways — which may mean talking less than you might normally do. But it also means that when something has to be said, you figure out the best way to say it: the best time, the best place, the best words to couch your comments. As you get more skillful with the use of your mouth, it forces the mind to get more skillful in the way it thinks, and you begin to notice the effects of your words. If there's something negative you have to talk about, when's the best time to bring it up? What's the most effective way of saying it? What way of saying it does the least damage to the group? As you get more skilled in using your mouth this way, you find the conversation in your mind will begin to mature as well.

On top of that, there are Dhamma tapes you can listen to, Dhamma books you can read, to introduce new and better voices into the conversation. This is also why we have the chanting. Some of the phrases of the chant keep coming back into your head at odd hours of the day, and they're designed to be skillful additions to that conversation.

You'll notice, as you try pulling out of your inner conversations, that some conversations are easier to pull out of than others. The ones filled with recriminations and negative thoughts, harmful thoughts: Those are the hardest to

extract yourself from. But the conversations in your mind dealing with issues of true happiness, issues of being skillful, issues of reflecting on what's really important in life: Those are a lot easier to pull out of because they tend toward quietude, they tend toward concentration.

So as we're training the mind, it's not just an issue of immediately stopping the thinking. It's learning how to think more skillfully, and that starts with learning how to use your mouth more skillfully. As Ajaan Lee once said, "You should bow down to your mouth every day." You have a human mouth, and the human mouth has a lot of power. It's not like the mouths of dogs and cats with very limited vocabularies, just barks and meows. We can say all kinds of things, and these things can have an enormous effect on our lives. If you start paying attention to what you say in the course of the day and try to make it more skillful, you begin to see that it does have an effect on how you relate to other people, how other people relate to you. The whole context of your life is strongly affected by your speech.

As you work on that fact, the act of working on your external speech connects with the issue of working on your own mind. The care you use in framing what you say, the thought and circumspection you use as you notice the right time to say it, deciding what's worth saying, what's not worth saying: These things develop mindfulness; they develop alertness — all the good qualities you need in the meditation. You learn how to gauge what's worth thinking, what's the right time to think, what's the wrong time to think. Your inner speech turns into Right Speech, another factor of the path.

At the same time, as you've got these better voices in your head, it's a lot easier to pull out of them and watch them so that you can see: When a thought forms, how does it form? Beneficial thoughts are a lot easier to take apart in this way. Thoughts filled with self-recrimination and regret are very hard to take apart because it's so easy to get caught up in their stories. The more skillful the thinking, the easier it is to take apart. You can simply watch the thought calmly as it comes and goes because it doesn't hold any poison for the mind. As you work with the meditation, you get quicker and quicker in seeing how the thought forms, how it disbands, how it can deceive you, and how you don't have to be deceived.

When we talk about making progress in the meditation, many of us think that it means very strong experiences of, say, rapture, oneness, or light. And these things are not to be sneered at. They're important. They give a sense of

lubrication, a sense of refreshment to the practice. But the real progress is measured in how quickly you notice what's going on in the mind. For example, when the mind begins to slip off, the faster you catch it and can bring it back: That's a sign of progress.

As you get quicker and quicker this way, you begin to see the process of thought formation in and of itself — exactly what's happening in there. When do you start participating in a thought? All too often we're aware of a thought only when it's fully formed, but how did it get formed that way? Did it just happen on its own or was there some subliminal participation on your part? As you watch more and more carefully, you begin to find answers to these questions, for you can catch the process in action.

Each thought starts out as just a little stirring, and it's hard to say whether it's a stirring in the body or a stirring in the mind. It's on the borderline between the two. Then there's the act of getting interested, paying attention to it, followed by the question, "What's this thought about?" Then the mind labels, "Oh, this is a thought about x , this is a thought about y ." And that turns it into a full fledged thought. So the question is: Can you watch the stirring that would normally lead to a thought and then not participate in labeling it, not participate in trying to figure it out? When you can do this, you see that these stirrings come and — if you don't participate in them — they go. They come again and, if you still don't participate, they go.

This way you begin to realize the extent to which thought formation is really an intentional process on your part. The desire to figure out a thought, the desire to get into the thought: What's the basis of that desire? Is it boredom? Are you tired of just being very still? Do you want some entertainment? It's dangerous, you know. Some of those thoughts, once they get formed, take over the mind and turn into nightmares.

So you try to get quicker and quicker in seeing these voices as they form — where they're coming from, exactly how much you're putting into them right now, how much of this activity is just the result of past karma bubbling up in the mind. You gain more and more control over the conversations so that when you need to talk about things to yourself, you can. When you don't need to, you can keep things quiet, and the only conversation that goes on at that time is the part of the mind in control of the concentration saying, "Stay here, stay here, spread the awareness here." That's the skillful conversation you want to place in charge. Once the concentration gets really solid, then you can start turning your spotlight

on those voices, the control center for your concentration. But don't be in too great a hurry to do that. You want the concentration really solid before you take those voices apart.

So the training of the mind is not a process of stamping out all the mental chatter in the mind. It's learning first how to make the chatter more skillful — starting from the outside, being more skillful in what you say. This is why Right Speech is such an important part of the practice. Because where does speech come from? The Buddha says it comes from directed thought and evaluation, which — when well trained — will turn into factors in your concentration. You direct your thoughts to the breath, you evaluate the breath. That helps get you into the first jhana. But to get to the point where you can really be effective in using directed thought and evaluation with the breath, you have to be more skillful in the way you direct your thoughts and evaluate what you want to say to other people, the way you use those powers of directed thought and evaluation to create words: both the words you address to other people and the conversation in your own mind.

Then, when that inner conversation gets more skillful, you can start taking it apart in even more refined ways. Finally, when all other conversation is stilled, you can turn to question the more subtle voice of the perception in charge of your concentration: "Who's talking here? Who's it labeling *for*?" That's when things really open up in the mind. Of course we all want to jump to that spot, where you find the transcendent, but to get there it takes skill, it takes time, it takes perseverance. That's the way it is with any good thing in life. Things of lasting value take time to master.

So right now we've got an hour. Do what you can within the hour. At the very least bring some control into the on-going committee conversation to make it easier and easier for the chatter to settle down. Once it can settle down, you can see it more clearly. That's why the Buddha said that concentration and discernment go together. You can't do just insight practice or just concentration practice. The two of them go hand in hand.

And it's right here at this issue — these mental voices and how skillful you are in relating to them — that's where the real meat of the practice lies.

Breathing through Daily Life

September 4, 2003

The mind is always working. If it were doing just one or two jobs at a time, that would be no big problem. But it's usually juggling several jobs at once. No wonder it's tired. Relationships, responsibilities, jobs, issues: Lots of things are going on in the mind all at once. Often when we start meditating it seems like the meditation is just one more ball to keep in the air, one more thing you've got to juggle. So there's no wonder that when people leave the monastery and start trying to juggle the meditation along with everything else, they drop some of the balls. And usually it's the meditation ball that gets dropped.

The alternative is to think of the meditation as a way of cutting down on the jobs of the mind. The practice as a whole is a way of cutting down on the jobs, and the meditation gives you a place to stand and do your more focused work. So instead of making the breath a job, you make it the place where the mind stands. It's good to get practice in this. This is why you need to have time away from your daily life so that you can get used to taking the breath as your foundation, lowering your center of gravity so that you stay with the breath at all times. In Pali, the word for the object of the meditation, *arammana*, literally means "support." It's the support for the mind. It's what the mind sits on, where the mind stands. So at first you have to put some work into getting that foundation solid. Once it's solid, though, you can stand on it; it gives you support. Then you can take on the other issues in life.

One of the purposes of meditation is to put you in a position where you can see which issues are really worth taking on and which ones are not. Being with the breath helps here in that it makes you more and more sensitive to the movements of the mind, more sensitive to what you're doing, to where there's wasted energy. At the same time, the breath gives you a place where you stand apart a bit from the activities of the world, so that you see them in a new light. Again, this is one of the reasons why you have to come out and take some time away from those activities, to get used to looking at things in that light, from the

point of view of an outsider, someone who's not totally involved, not totally taken in.

The Buddha recommended that his monks go off into the wilderness, places where they could get away from people, so they could have a chance to evaluate what's really worthwhile in life. You try to develop what might be called a deathbed perspective: Suppose you're lying on your deathbed, looking back on your life. What things are you going to wish you had done? What things are you going to wish you hadn't? Learn to look at your life as a whole in that way, choosing your priorities, instead of just taking on whatever little bits and pieces are thrown up at you in day-to-day-to-day activities. Otherwise, your life gets frittered away in meaningless things, trivial pursuits, and the important issues get pushed to the side. But when you step out for a while, you begin to get a sense of your life as a whole. What do you want to do with it? What's a worthwhile use of your time?

Often you hear of people who are told by the doctor that they have, say, two or three months left to live, and suddenly they start dropping a lot of unimportant activities to focus on the things they find really important in life. It's good that they're getting focused in this way; the shame is that they had to wait until the last three months of their lives. One of the purposes of meditation is to let you step back from your life while you still have time (as far as you know), so it's not just three months that are lived wisely with a sense of their importance. You can live your whole life with a sense of its importance, with a sense of direction.

Even if you decide that you want to stay involved in your ordinary activities, still you're doing it from a different perspective — you've got that foundation from the time you spent separately. You carry that perspective with you as a foundation developed with the breath as your support. As a result, you don't have to juggle so much, and you have a more solid place to stand when you do have to juggle the affairs of daily life. You can see which balls are worth dropping, which are not really worth trying to keep in the air, so that you can focus on what's really important.

So even though the meditation is work — and that's what the word *kammatthana* means, it's our work as meditators, the object we're focusing on — don't think of it as one more burden to add to the mind. It's a new, more secure place for the mind to stand, a place where it can get a better sense of its

priorities. That way, when you leave the monastery and go back into everyday activities, you've got a foundation to take with you.

So get to know the breath. Learn to be on good terms with it. If you're not on good terms with the breath, if you seem to be fighting it all the time, it's not going to become a good foundation. This means giving it some time to show itself for what it is. You can nudge it a little bit here or there. If it seems too long, you can make it a little bit shorter. If it seems too short, make it a little bit longer. If it needs to be deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter — whatever — you can nudge it in those directions. But then give it some time to show its results once it's been nudged. If you want it to be your friend, you have to be friends with it. You have to give it a chance to speak for itself. You have to listen.

Listen carefully to what the breath energy in the body is telling you right now. What kind of energy feels good for the body? Sometimes when you're tired you want good long in-breaths to energize the body. When you're feeling tense, you might try long out-breaths, to let the tension dissolve away. You may find that certain parts of the body that haven't been involved in the breathing process really would like to get involved, or it would feel good for them to get involved (they, of course, don't have any opinions on the matter). But if you learn to read the sensations from your body, you can tell which parts of the body are lacking breath energy. Think of the breath going to them for the next breath, and then the next, until that part of the body feels full. Then search for any other parts of the body that could use some good breath energy. Let them get involved in the breathing, too.

So even though this is work, it's work in establishing a foundation. And while you're here, it's the only thing you have to worry about. You have no other responsibilities; just be in touch with the breath, the way the breath feels. How far does the sensation of the breath go down into the body? Examine it: Is there any line in the body where you say, "This part is breath and this part is not breath"? Or do you have a sense that the whole body could be involved in the breathing process? Explore this so as to get to know the breath, to listen to the breath. The more carefully you listen to it, the more you learn about it. And the more you learn about it, the more it can be your friend to help you with all the various jobs the mind has to undertake.

So while you're here, you don't have to listen to the Dhamma talk — just listen to your breath. What kind of breathing feels good right now? Use your imagination. Say, "Well, how about breathing like that? How about breathing like

this?” and then see what happens. This way you get to know the breath in ways you might not have otherwise. If you don’t experiment, there’s no knowledge gained. You don’t know why things happen. But if you know that if you change the breath in this way you got those results, you change the breath in that way you got these results: That’s knowledge. It comes from participating. It comes from acting. It comes from doing.

At the same time, there has to be a part of the mind that just watches, just evaluates, observes. So you’re learning from a combination of two factors: your improvisation, using your ingenuity in adjusting the breath to make it feel better; and then your powers of observation to see what works and what doesn’t. When I was staying with Ajaan Fuang, these were the two words he used more than any others when giving meditation instructions: to improvise (the word he used, *patiphaan*, also means “ingenuity,” your ability to experiment) and to be observant — to see what works, what doesn’t.“

This way you develop a friendship with the breath. When you’re friends with the breath, you feel at home with it; it’s a good place to stay. When you get used to staying here, then it really can become your foundation. When you leave the monastery and go back out to your daily life, you’ve got a solid place to stand. You’re not constantly buffeted around by what other people are saying or doing. You’ve got your inner foundation, your inner refuge.

As long as you’re on good terms with the breath, that’s the best relationship you can have. Other relationships come and go. Even our family comes and goes. As long as you’re alive, the mind has to be on good terms with the body, the body should be on good terms with the mind. All our relationships in life are based on how well the body and mind relate to each other. When you’re on good terms with your breath, it’s easier to be on good terms with other people. When you have goodwill for the breath, it teaches you how to have goodwill for others. At the same time, when the body and mind are working together, they get their work done. They aren’t fighting at cross-purposes. In this way they validate each other. You don’t have to go looking for outside validation; you’ve got your inner validation as to what feels right, what feels good, because you’re really observant. As you develop your powers of observation, they get more and more reliable.

So try to be sensitive to what’s going on here in the body, going on in here in the breath. It may require work, it may be a job that you’re not used to, but as you get more and more used to it, it becomes more and more second-nature. Then you find that it really is a helper, it really is an assistant in whatever other

work you've got to do. In other words, when you're driving the car, you're standing in the breath driving the car. When talking to other people, you're staying in the breath talking to other people. All your activities get brought into the breath in this way. The breath becomes the foundation that underlies them all — the solid floor on which you stand so you can juggle your activities with skill. And with a continuous foundation like this, your life isn't chopped up into little bits: a little time for this, a little for that. It all becomes time to be with the breath, and then to work from the breath on whatever else you need to do in the course of the day.

Varieties of Mindfulness

May, 2003

The word *sati* in Pali has lots of meanings. The basic one is to keep something in mind. We're often told it means alertness or awareness, but that's not the case.

Alertness and awareness come under the Pali word, *sampajañña*. Sati means keeping something in mind, like remembering to stay with the breath, remembering the various things that help in the training of the mind. It functions a lot of ways in the practice.

First off, there are the recollections: a series of themes to remember, to think about, to keep in mind when you find your meditation wandering off course in the direction of doubt, laziness, discouragement, or just general hopelessness. That chant we had just now about aging, illness, separation, and death: Those are important things to keep in mind so that you don't get complacent. But notice that the Buddha didn't stop at aging, illness, separation, and death. He went on to the principle of karma, because if all you think about is aging, illness, and death it gets pretty discouraging. The potential for happiness lies in our actions. In other words the Buddha didn't teach fatalism. He didn't teach that our actions are insignificant. They're important. Our happiness, our lack of happiness, depends on our actions. So that's where we focus our attention. That's what we should keep in mind. This is called *dhammanussati*, keeping the Dhamma in mind. This is why the Buddha has us listen to the Dhamma, read the Dhamma, because the Dhamma contains all sorts of useful and encouraging ideas.

For instance, there's the passage where the Buddha is talking to his son and says that when you make a mistake, resolve not to make it again. If you see that your actions have gone off course, resolve not to do them again. When they've been on course, develop a sense of happiness and joy. Often we mistrust that joy. We think somehow that the critical thoughts in our mind are more real, and that the more self-congratulatory thoughts are deluded. Well, that's not the case. When you do something right, you should congratulate yourself on it as a means of encouragement, to give some juice to the path. Otherwise it's very easy for

things to get dry. If you criticize yourself about your actions all the time, you find yourself totally hemmed in. Remember that you *do* do some things right. Focus on those to put the mind in a good mood. In Thai they use the word *arom* to mean both mood and object. When we're meditating, we're looking for a good *arom*, both a good mood and good object. So that's an important thing to keep in mind as well. That's another function of sati, mindfulness.

If you're feeling discouraged about yourself, focus on two of the recollections, *silanussati*, *caganussati*, thinking about the times when you *did* hold to your principles, when you *were* generous. Call those to mind as a way of giving yourself energy on the path. This doesn't mean that you have to reflect on examples of perfect virtue or perfect generosity. Reflect on what you've been able to do as a means of encouragement.

So there are topics of recollection to deal with just about every direction the mind can go when it falls off the path, topics of recollection to bring it back onto the path. Once you're *on* the path, it's important to reflect again on what sati or mindfulness means: You're keeping something in mind. Say for instance that you're keeping the breath in mind. You're tuning in to that part of your experience. Our experience has many layers. You might think of it as many frequencies, like the radio waves going through the air right now: lots of different frequencies coming right through this building from Los Angeles, San Diego, Tuscon, Tijuana. If you bring a shortwave radio in here, you can tune in to lots of different stations from all over the world. It's simply a matter of choosing which frequency to tune in to, which layer to tune in to.

The same holds true when you're keeping the breath in mind. When you create a frame of reference here in the present moment, there are lots of things you can tune in to. You can choose the body in and of itself. You can choose feelings, mental states, mental qualities in and of themselves. Those frequencies are on the path. Other frequencies are off the path — there is such a thing as Wrong Mindfulness, you know. Our meditation consists of choosing the frequencies most beneficial for the mind.

So try tuning in to the breath in and of itself. Be aware of the breath, making it your point of reference in relationship to everything you do while you're sitting here quietly with your eyes closed. Even when you get up and walk away, try to stay tuned in to the breath. When you do work, stay with the breath; when you rest, stay with the breath. If you're going to change your frame of reference, try to be deliberate about it.

In the sutta on the frames of reference, the Buddha talks about being aware of the body in and of itself, either internally or externally. “Externally” means how the body relates to the world outside. In other words, you don’t have to be only inside the body for it to count as Right Mindfulness. When you’re dealing with other people, you need to have a frame of reference that includes the outside world but doesn’t grab hold of it. You can stay tuned in to the body even as you’re involved in dealing with other people, being sensitive to how those dealings register with the body. Then when you’re sitting again with your eyes closed, you can make your frame of reference totally internal if you like. Or you can tune in to the sense of space that permeates the body and extends out in all directions.

So there are a lot of different things to tune in to that would qualify as the body in and of itself. It’s important to realize this because sometimes we fall into an ironclad notion that only certain kinds of awareness count as mindfulness. We feel that we’re strapped there and can’t function. There are reports of people who go for long retreats where they’ve been working on only one kind of mindfulness for three months and when they come out they can’t function. It takes them a couple of days to readjust to being in the outside world. Well, the Buddha didn’t have us practice so that we couldn’t function, couldn’t adjust, couldn’t adapt. He simply wants you to be conscious and deliberate about the way you adapt: the different levels, the different layers, the different frequencies you’re tuning in to. If you can shift levels mindfully, you’re okay.

There’s an old science fiction story about a spaceship that didn’t have to use fuel. It moved by changing its frame of reference. If its frame of reference was here on earth, it would stay still on earth. If it switched its frame of reference to the sun, it would suddenly zip out into space, away from the direction the earth is revolving around the sun. If it switched its frame of reference to the center of the galaxy, it would shoot *way* out there, to other arms of the Milky Way. And the plot of the story revolved around the fact that when the ship changed its frame of reference, everybody in the ship would go unconscious for a while.

Well, this is *exactly* how our minds work. Normally we change our frame of reference who knows how many times in the course of a day, and we blank out for a moment in between. Ajaan Lee even said that we pass out for just a brief moment and then find ourselves in another frame of reference. The purpose of the practice we’re doing right now is to be able to change our frames of

references without blanking out, so that we're clear about what we're doing. That's what alertness is all about.

In this way we can function appropriately. When you're dealing with people, you choose the proper frame of reference that includes them, that includes that level of reality, that level of experience. When you're sitting here with your eyes closed, you can drop that frame of reference. You don't have to think about there being anyone else here in the room at all. Instead, you can focus totally on the breath in and of itself. In this way, you see how much your frames of reference really do depend on memory, another meaning of *sati*. What are you going to remember in order to deal skillfully with the reality before you? You can be selective. In fact, you have to be.

Years back when I was a young monk in Thailand, the monastery where I was ordained had a rotating roster of monks to give the evening Dhamma talks. Out of the fourteen monks on the roster, maybe two could give good talks. The rest I found really irritating. After a while I realized that, rather than giving in to my irritation, I could use the talk as a meditation exercise: how to be aware of the sound of the Dhamma talk without registering the meaning — in other words, deliberately forgetting the meaning of each word and remembering only to be with the level of the sound. That's a function of *sati*, or mindfulness, too: deciding what you're going to remember and what you're not going to remember, what you're going to apply to your experience and what you're not. I found that after a while I could just listen to the sound, word by word by word, consciously forgetting the last word to be present only with the sound of the current word. It worked fairly easily because Thai wasn't my native language, but you might want to try the skill out yourself. If you don't like the Dhamma talks you hear around here, you can just be with the sound. You don't have to listen to the meaning. Be selectively forgetful.

To be consciously forgetful in that way requires an act of mindfulness — in other words, deciding which level you're going to tune in to while you let everything else go for the time being. If you're going to work on concentration, you'll want to stay on one level as consistently as possible. This is why concentration practice is best done alone or in areas where you don't have to interact much with other people. But you also need to learn how to balance it with interactions with other people in a peaceful way, so you can get skilled at consciously changing your frame of reference as appropriate. This is why we live in a community.

Our ability to live together is an important skill in the meditation, for it's in the changing of our frame of reference that a lot of the machinations of the mind become clear. We tend not to see them if we let our awareness blank out during the switch, but if we can learn to be conscious as we switch from one frame to the next, we begin to see the way the mind creates a reality for itself out of all the whole buzzing confusion of our senses, to use William James' term. Of all the sensory input that comes in at any one particular moment, you make a choice of what you're going to pay attention to, what memories, what frame of reference you're going to bring to that particular moment. And it's an important mental skill to be able to shift your frame of reference as necessary.

So remember that that's all part of the practice. It's not the case that we're really being mindful only when we're on the level of pure sensation. We're also mindful as we shift our frame of reference to be appropriate to whatever is needed. If you go into the kitchen and you're totally on the level of pure sensation, you're going to forget how to fix the food. You have to remember enough to fix the food. When you're dealing with other people, you have to remember enough about common courtesy, remember enough about the English language in order to deal with them. But you can be selectively forgetful while you're sitting here with your eyes closed, so that you can give your full attention to the task at hand. You can take this skill and apply it to all sorts of situations.

Mindfulness is not just one level of awareness, one level of experience. It means being very deliberate and clear about what you bring to whatever you're doing: what you're going to remember, what you're not going to remember, what you're going to recollect, what you're going to let go, which things are useful to recollect right now. If you wanted to, you could sit here and spend the whole hour thinking about facts that would make you totally miserable, but what does that accomplish? We're sitting here to think about things that are useful for the mind, so remember the things that are useful for the mind, that will help it develop. As for the other voices coming in and out of the mind, listen to the ones that are helpful and ignore the ones that are not. You can be selective.

This way, mindfulness becomes a quality we can apply to everything we do. And instead of making us unable to function, it actually heightens our ability to function, because we understand the process that the mind goes through as it shifts its frame of reference from pure sensation to remembering language, remembering customs, whatever needs to be applied to your current situation, to your current task.

So try to keep these points in mind whenever you find them useful.

Beyond Likes & Dislikes

April, 2002

One of Ajaan Mun's favorite topics for a Dhamma talk was the theme of practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma — in other words, in accordance with what the Dhamma demands, not in accordance with what our likes and dislikes demand.

As the Dhamma comes to the West this is probably one of the hardest things for Westerners to appreciate. Everywhere you look, the Dhamma is being remade, recast, so that people will like it. Things that people don't like are quietly cut away; and if things that people like are missing, they're added on. And so the creature that comes out is like the old cartoon of a committee designing a bird: The bird looks pretty good to begin with, but then after the committee's done with it, it looks like an ostrich with no legs. It can't walk and it can't fly, but it sells. In this country of ours, where democracy and the marketplace are all-powerful, the question of what sells determines what's Dhamma, even if it can't walk or fly. And who loses out? We lose out. The Dhamma doesn't lose out; it's always what it is. But we like to add a little here, take away a little there, and as a result we end up with nothing but things we already like and already dislike.

The Buddha pointed out the four ways that people get led off course. Two of them are following your likes and dislikes; the other two are giving in to delusion and fear. These things pull people off the path. We go wandering into the underbrush and then off to who-knows-where simply because we like to follow what we like and to avoid what we dislike — even though the things we dislike are often the things we've got to really look at carefully. Why do we have such a dislike for them? And as for the things that we like, why do we like them? Exactly what do they do for us?

It's easy to doubt other people. It's easy to doubt the teachings. But for some reason we find it very hard to doubt our defilements — all these convictions and preconceived notions we're unwilling to give up. Only when we're willing to put them aside and open ourselves to the possibility, "Okay, maybe they're wrong," can we open ourselves to the Dhamma.

What this comes down to is respect. The Buddha says that the reason we're suffering is because of the craving in our minds, and yet we like to hold on to our craving. We're attached to it. Of all the things we're attached to in life, that's probably the hardest thing to let go: our attachment to our cravings. And it's precisely here that the Buddha says, "That's the problem."

So it's a question of how much we're willing to suffer before we say, "Maybe he's right," and give some respect to his teachings — to take our respect for our likes and our dislikes, our preconceived notions of what's right and wrong, what's good and bad, to put them aside for the time being and give some respect to what the Buddha has to say. For all of us this is very hard. It's not hard just for Americans. It's hard for everybody. But given our culture these days, it seems especially hard for us, so we have to be especially careful about this issue — of taking only what we like and avoiding what we dislike in the practice.

What do we miss out on when we do that, given that so much of the practice goes against the grain? We like to create little worlds for ourselves — this is called the effluent of becoming that comes fermenting up in the mind — and we're really good at it. We can create all kinds of worlds: beautiful worlds, ugly worlds, delightful worlds, horrible worlds. The movies that play in the theatres are nothing compared to the productions we can create in our minds over and over and over again. We're really good at it. We get our entertainment that way. It's a game we like to play.

There are two parts of the mind: the part that likes to fool itself and the part that likes to be fooled. It's like little kids playing together. "Okay, I'll be the doctor, you be the patient," or, "I'll be the doctor, you be the nurse," or whatever. The two parts of the mind say, "Okay, let's play along," and then they dive into the make-believe. This is something we do so well, day after day after day.

When we come to the practice, we want it to be another fun thing to do, we want to be entertained, so when we're told to deconstruct these things it's very difficult. We're very good at putting together, at creating these worlds, but deliberately stepping out of them is hard. It's only when we begin to realize that the more we keep creating these trains of thought that we love to follow backwards and forwards, the more we create suffering for ourselves. That's when we begin to wonder: Maybe there's a way out; maybe there's something better.

The Buddha has a teaching on what's called transcendent dependent co-arising. It starts with the regular chain of dependent co-arising up to suffering and then adds, "But based on suffering comes conviction." At some point you

have to suffer enough to say, “There must be a way out.” And you’re going to look for that way out. You’re serious about it this time. You’re willing to make whatever sacrifices are needed, even if it means sacrificing your pride, sacrificing your attachment to your craving, sacrificing all these little worlds you create for yourself to fill up the day. You want to see through that process.

It’s not easy, but the results are more than you can imagine, better than you can imagine. Up to now you’ve been living in imaginary worlds, and look at where they’ve gotten you: not all that far. But if you learn to step outside them, you find that things are much wider open than you could have imagined. Even after just the first stages, when the mind settles down into states of concentration, you find that whatever presents itself as an object of discussion or elaboration of the mind, you can just say, “No, no, no, not interested.” You can shoot it down, shoot it down, zap it out of your range of awareness. This yields a great sense of spaciousness. Even on just this level you begin to realize about this process we’ve been following for so long: “Maybe the Buddha’s right; maybe there is a way out.”

Every now and then we chant about having respect for concentration. Learn how to have respect for that quiet spot in the mind, the spot that’s not creating any interesting ideas, not creating any interesting conversation. It’s just a very quiet, still spot in the mind that hasn’t yet settled down anywhere. Allow it to settle down on the breath, and just stay right there. Catch it if it seems to be moving off in any other direction. Bring it back. Learn how to freeze the mind at that spot. In other words, as soon as it seems to move to pick up something, just stop it, stop it, stop it, and then allow it to relax in that stopped position, and stay there. The mind may complain, “Well, there’s nothing interesting going on here; this is pretty dumb.” Okay, just let it complain, but don’t listen to it. After a while, as you train yourself to grow comfortable with this quiet spot, you won’t need to freeze yourself there. You find it natural simply to plug into it, for it’s a good place to be.

Learn how to develop this skill — and it really is an important skill — this willingness to give up on your normal inner conversations and try something really new. It requires some imagination to try it. And it requires a lot of mindfulness and a lot of alertness to stay there because we’re so good at creating little worlds right away, letting these things bubble up and flow out. The problem is they keep bubbling up and flowing out until they overwhelm you in a flood. The word *asava*, or outflows, effluents, fermentations: The list for these —

sensuality, becoming, views, and ignorance — is the same as the list for the *ogha*, or floods, when the things that bubble out are allowed to drown the mind. Learn how to keep your head above water. Learn how to keep these fermentations in check.

If you're going to create something in the mind, then create this sense of stillness, this sense of centeredness, this sense of expansive awareness. Work at this, because what you're doing is taking those raw materials, taking your tendencies to create things, and turning them in the right direction. You're bringing those tendencies in line with the Dhamma, with the Dhamma that points outward. It says, "Look! Freedom lies in this direction."

You've tried lots of other things; why don't you really give this a serious try?

Humility

December 16, 2003

Ajaan Suwat often mentioned that one of Ajaan Mun's two favorite Dhamma talk topics was the "customs of the noble ones": the *ariyavamsa* in Pali. One of his reasons for focusing on this teaching was something that we tend to miss when we look at the forest tradition from an American perspective. From our perspective it's a very Thai tradition. But Ajaan Mun got a lot of flack in his day for going against Thai customs, Laotian customs — following the *dhutanga* practices, eating only one meal a day, eating out of his bowl, living out in the forest. People criticized him for this, saying that he was breaking with Thai custom. His response was that he wasn't interested in Thai customs or Lao customs or anybody's customs aside from the customs of the Noble Ones. He said, "If they're not the customs of the Noble Ones then they're the customs of people with defilement."

That applies to American customs, European customs, customs all over the world. "Only the customs of the Noble Ones," he said, "can keep you on track to the Noble Attainments." So it's good to keep those customs in mind as we're practicing. There are four all together, but the one immediately relevant to what we're doing right here as we're meditating is the fourth. The first three have to do with the use of the requisites: You make do with whatever food, clothing, or shelter you have. If you don't get good food, clothing, or shelter, you're not upset. You're content with what you've got. If you do get good things, you don't get carried away, you don't get careless. At the same time, you don't pride yourself over the fact that you're more content with these things than other people are. You use the requisites without doing harm to yourself or to anyone else. Those are the first three.

You'd think, listening to the first three, that the fourth would deal with medicines, but it doesn't. The fourth has to do with "delighting in developing, delighting in letting go" — in other words, delighting in developing good qualities in the mind, delighting in letting bad qualities go. In fact, the word *bhavana*, "developing," here, is the same word for meditation, but it means

specifically developing whatever good qualities are needed in the mind. No matter how much effort needs to be invested in developing mindfulness and alertness, you're happy to put in the effort. You see the benefits that come from training the mind.

The same with delighting in letting go: Many things that we really should let go of are things we hold onto dearly. In terms of the customs of the Noble Ones, though, you have to learn to delight in letting go, to delight in renunciation, to delight in giving those things up, for you see the benefits that come when you give them up.

As long as you have these two attitudes, you're on the path. In other words, you realize that there's always room for improvement, either in terms of developing good qualities or letting go of bad ones.

The question often comes, "Is my practice good enough?" Well, are you an arahant yet? If not, it's not yet good enough. There's more to be done. That's setting a very high standard. Many people don't like living with high standards, but remember what happens when you set a target for archery: You never hit higher than you aim. If you wish for true happiness, aim high, and then try to live with high standards. This means, on the one hand, not being complacent. On the other hand, it means not brow-beating yourself over the fact that you haven't reached the goal, not getting discouraged in ways that will actually get in the way of your reaching the goal. You need to have the right attitude toward making progress along the path, focusing on what needs to be done rather than on your image of what or where you are. What this means is that you don't get down on yourself but you realize that there's always a better way to do things. You learn how to focus cheerfully on where to improve. This is why so much of the practice lies in focusing on the present moment, because this is where the improvements can be made.

It also involves learning *where* to focus in the present moment — realizing that a lot of the big, abstract issues in the mind come down to events, very specific patterns of events. This is a lot of what discernment is: seeing the processes of the mind as they give rise to greed, anger, and delusion, or to mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. Even though these things have abstract names, they're specific events. Choices are made each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out. Look for the specific choice, look for the specific movement of intention that heads either in a skillful or an unskillful direction. Try to notice the trigger points that set off anger, set off delusion, set off greed or

fear. Also look for the trigger points that help develop mindfulness, that remind you of what you should be doing. In other words, learn to break down the big job facing you into specific events in the mind, specific choices in the mind. See where you can make a difference with the specifics right here, right now.

This is a constant learning process. If you want to gain a sense of confidence in the practice, gain it from the fact that you're always willing to learn, instead of talking about how good you already are — which is a very hollow sense of confidence because it always has to be shored up as it's crumbling away. If you're willing to learn all the time, it can give you a solid basis for confidence on the path.

I noticed that Ajaan Suwat, even though he'd gone very far on the path, was always working on a little something here and there. Sometimes he'd take a volume of the Canon down to his hut, read about things, see if he could expand his knowledge of some of the details of the Dhamma. A year or two before he left America, he asked me to come up with the English translations that we chant here in the evening. Up to that point we'd been chanting in Pali and Thai during the morning and evening chants. One day he said, "It's time we had some English translations around here." So I worked them up, and *he memorized them*. It took him quite a while, because English was of course not his native language, and he had never formally studied it, but he memorized the chant in English. He was always working at something.

What this attitude requires is humility: realizing that there's room for improvement, and that there are lessons to be learned all around. I've been reading a book on tracking animals, the physical and mental skills needed to go out into the wilderness and notice things that you wouldn't ordinarily notice. The author says that one of the qualities needed in tracking is *empathy*: empathy for the animals you're trying to follow, realizing that you have something to learn from them. Even though they're common animals, they've got something to teach. You empathize with them, and you have humility. As he says, those are two qualities sorely lacking in our society. We reward people who come on with a really strong sense of self-confidence, a sense of self-esteem, a strong sense of pride. And yet those attitudes get in the way of learning a lot of subtle, important things.

So remember, we're here to learn — not only from the obvious places, such as Dhamma books and Dhamma talks, but also from all the specific things around us. They're teaching us lessons in terms of cause and effect. Last week

someone came with the question of how to welcome difficult events in life. Well, look on them with humility. There's a lesson to be learned. When you're open to learning that lesson, you gain in knowledge. That way there's hope. When you close off your willingness to learn, there's no hope for you on the path.

So even with little things like sitting here with the breath: You watch one breath and you can ask yourself, "How can this breath be more comfortable than the one before it?" Look and see what your sense of the body has to tell you that way. It might be a part of the body you've been ignoring all along. Give it some good breath energy. Then, when the next breath comes in, here's another chance to learn from the breath. And the lesson might be, "Don't mess with me. Just sit and watch." But whatever the lesson, try to watch carefully. Try to empathize with each breath.

And try not to be mechanical in the way you breathe, thinking that if you can somehow get through a thousand breaths you're going to gain Awakening. It's best to take each breath one at a time, because that's all you've got: one breath at a time. We're not just trying to get through the breathing to the end of the hour. We want to open up and appreciate each breath for what it has to teach us. It teaches us about the processes of breathing, it teaches us about where our blind spots have been.

So, approach the breath with an attitude of humility and empathy. Delight in the opportunity it gives you — each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out — to abandon unskillful mental qualities and develop skillful ones: more mindfulness, more alertness, more consistency in the way you make an effort in the meditation.

Several skills are involved here. In addition to the attitude of empathy with the breath and humility in learning the Dhamma, there's also an ability to break down the larger issues in this recalcitrant mind of ours into smaller ones. We have to learn how to break down all of its unskillful qualities into manageable bits so that we can really observe how they take control. That way we can see how specific skillful qualities can be strengthened to fend them off. You can read the books and learn all about the names for these skillful and unskillful qualities, but to get results you really have to be alert and sensitive to each individual movement of the mind. This is where the humility lies, because a lot of time the lessons we're going to learn are the lessons that come from little things.

A few days ago I was in a Dhamma discussion in Laguna Beach and we got into the first precept, dealing with ants and termites. After a while, someone

made a sarcastic comment: “Gee, what a profound Dhamma discussion we’re having here, talking about ants and termites.” Well, that comment misses the whole point. The way we treat ants and termites is very important in our practice. It’s in how we deal with the little things that spreads out and influences how we deal with the larger issues. If you learn to show respect for ants and termites, it means you can learn how to show respect for other things as well, little things that you wouldn’t anticipate.

There’s that classic story about the Buddha during his quest for Awakening. He had attained all the states the teachers of his time recommended but he still wasn’t satisfied. He had tried years of self-torture, but hadn’t gotten anywhere. He was at an impasse. Then he came across the simile of the lute that was strung too tight, the lute that was strung too loose. One version of the story says that a woman happened to pass by in the forest singing a song on this topic. He learned something from her that he hadn’t learned from all the highly respected teachers of those times.

That’s what’s meant by an attitude of humility: a willingness to learn from the little things, no matter where they show themselves. Humility requires being attentive, watchful, not assuming that you already know, that you’re already good, realizing that there’s always room for improvement. You have to delight in that fact, to delight in actually making the improvements, letting go of the unskillful qualities in the mind, developing the skillful ones. This is how we follow the customs of the Noble Ones. And that way we open ourselves to the opportunity of experiencing the attainments that the Noble Ones have attained.

Creativity & Play

October 4, 2004

An important part of learning how to meditate lies in learning how to play with your meditation. For example, when you're focusing on your breath, you want to learn how to play with your breath.

To understand why, look at what you do when you're playing. You're trying out new things, you're enjoying the fact that the mind can create something and can think of new ways of doing things. Look also at the different approaches to playing. Some games are played without rules, but a lot of games have rules. In fact, the more rules, the more fun the game is, the more of a challenge. When you're playing with the breath there are certain rules. The satisfaction comes in learning how to master the rules, play within the rules, and yet still play well. When you win at this game, you're winning out over your defilements. You're winning out over greed, anger and delusion. But in the meantime the important thing about playing is that what you're doing isn't drudgery. It's fun.

Researchers have found that people whose work doesn't challenge them, doesn't inspire them, are the ones most likely to get Alzheimer's, because the brain isn't engaged. Playing requires intelligence. It develops a certain kind of intelligence, precisely the kind of intelligence that we want to develop in the practice. It's not the intelligence that simply memorizes things and, as one of my professors used to say, vomits them back out on an exam. It's the intelligence that sees problems and can work with them. It sees problems that other people didn't see, and can also see connections that other people didn't see — how a lesson you learned in this part of the practice can be applied to that part of the practice — and it can test to see if the connection has any practical value.

That's the kind of intelligence, the kind of playing we're talking about. After all, what is the Dhamma? It's a set of strategies — strategies for gaining happiness given the fact that there are certain laws governing the way action gives results. The laws are a little complex, like the laws governing turbulence in water. They're complex but not mechanical. That's what makes them challenging, like taking a boat through rapids. And the purpose of the practice is

what makes you want to rise to the challenge. After all, it is your happiness at stake here.

When you come to the practice, you already have certain strategies for becoming happy. Our whole sense of self is just that: a strategy. You learn to identify which things are worth looking after, to see that the wellbeing of certain things is more productive of happiness than the wellbeing of other things. Having a sense of self also teaches you to deny yourself certain things now so that you get better results in the future. It inspires you to practice. It inspires you to get skillful. That's a positive side of the sense of self. It also reminds you that you're responsible for your happiness, that you can't sit around and simply expect it to come to you. That's another positive side to the sense of self. And in the practice we're encouraged to think in that way. This is why we chant the passage on being subject to aging, illness, death, and separation, for that's the predicament in which we find ourselves. If you didn't have a sense of self, you wouldn't see it as a problem; if you have an immature sense of self, you wouldn't have any idea of how to go about solving the problem.

So your sense of self is an important strategy, but remember: It's just that, a strategy. If you dig around to find anything of lasting value that's worth identifying as, "Yes, this is my self" — if you look at it carefully it starts dissolving away. You can use that sense of self as a strategy when it's useful, but after a certain point you have to start taking that strategy apart because there's a more subtle strategy, the not-self strategy, that leads to a more subtle happiness. But in both cases, if you can learn to play with these concepts to see exactly how far they're useful and where they're no longer useful, that's when the practice really seeps into you, because the things you play with are really close to your heart.

What is your heart? On the one hand, it's the ability to fabricate, and on the other hand it's the ability to experience the pleasure or lack of pleasure that comes from the fabrication. And right there is where you're going to look for Awakening. Right there is where you're going to look for the Deathless: right in this ability to fabricate and in your sensitivity to how much your fabrication is leading to happiness. The path is something you fabricate, so learn how to play well with the path, within the strictures, the rules, formed by the laws of causality. As with any game, you've got to stay within the rules, but within the rules you find that there's a lot of latitude. What kind of meditation object works best for you? That's something you've got to find out by playing with the

different objects of meditation and learning to see which object you enjoy playing with most — the one you keep coming back to, coming back to, because it sparks your imagination.

Ajaan Fuang once told the story of Ajaan Kongmaa complaining to Ajaan Lee, “How can you meditate on the breath? It’s just in and out, in and out. That’s all there is to it.” And Ajaan Lee said to him “If that’s all you see in it, then that’s all you’ll get from it.” Ajaan Lee saw a lot of other things there. If you read his Dhamma talks, you’ll see that he continued exploring the breath all the way up to the end of his life. He was always finding new ways of looking at the breath, new ways of playing with the breath energy, new strategies of conceiving the breath energy, to help the mind settle down quickly and comfortably and have it stay there for long periods of time.

To play this game, you have to see the wandering mind, the curious mind that wanders around getting itself in trouble, as a problem, but you’ve also got to see the curiosity as a potential for helping you with the path. You can use it to explore the breath, to work with the breath in different ways to get the mind to settle down, to get it engrossed in the present moment. And what’s more engrossing than playing? With some things, you can play with them for a while and you lose interest, for you’ve taken them as far as they can provide entertainment. But with the breath you can keep exploring here, exploring there, and then as you get more intimate with the breath you finally get more intimate with the processes of the mind. The thinking — the directed thought and evaluation: Play with those, see how subtle they can get, see what level of wellbeing they can give, what level of gratification they can give in the present moment.

To begin with, try different ways of adjusting the breath. Sometimes all you need to do is *think* and the breath will change. Think, “Comfortable breath.” Think, “Full breath.” You don’t have to do anything else — just think that thought, maintain that thought, and see what happens to the process of breathing in the body.

Or, if you want, you can play with your focus. Instead of focusing on just one spot, try to focus on two spots at once. I personally always find that riveting. One spot can be in the middle of the head, the other spot can be down in the body — say, at the base of the spine — and think of a line connecting the two. Try to be aware of both spots, all at once, all the time. When you can maintain that double focus, the mind doesn’t have any other hands to latch onto things. One hand is

holding on to one spot, the other hand is holding on to the other: Your hands are full.

So there's a lot to play with, a lot to work with here in the present moment. Ajaan Fuang would often say, "Try this approach. If it doesn't work, try something else," in the same way a coach would say, "Well, if that way doesn't work, try this," to encourage you to experiment, to judge the results, to start thinking on your own. If you try one approach and it doesn't work, there may be other approaches you can think of that will work. It's important that you engage the inventive side of your mind as you meditate, learning how to use it so that it's not just wandering off in abstract imagination, but so that it's actually applied to what's going on right here, right now. Put it into play as part of your practice.

What we're doing is learning where true happiness comes from. True happiness is not going to be dull, so keep your interest up, keep your expectations up. And this requires a sense of play. There are certain challenges that you're bound to run up against, and the element of play provides the side of you that's up for the challenge: "How about this? How do you get around this problem? How do you get around that problem?" Play wouldn't be fun if there weren't rules you run up against, certain facts of life you run up against, and you find them challenging.

So you've got this mind that's creating suffering for itself. It's busy concocting things all day long. See that as a challenge. How can you take that process of concoction, the way the mind randomly fabricates this, that, and the other thing, and turn it to better uses, so that it can concoct the path that leads to true happiness? That's the challenge we've got here. We use the breath — the in-and-out breath, the breath in the nerves, the breath in the blood vessels, the breath energy that goes up as we breathe in, the energy that goes down as we breathe in, the energy that's always coming up the spine — as tools in responding to that challenge. We use the things we learn about the mind as we stay with the breath, as ways of responding to that challenge. We get directions from the books, we get directions from teachers, but a lot of the insight that's actually going to liberate us comes from experimenting with this approach, playing with this idea, experimenting with that strategy on our own, seeing what works, what doesn't work. If it's not working, what can you do to adjust it so it does?

The curious, inquisitive side of your mind is what's going to lead to discernment. The people who aren't inquisitive are the ones who get stuck in

concentration and don't want to move. Or they blindly want to follow a method where everything is spelled out for them, but all they get is pre-packaged meditation product — like the packaged foods that contain so little actual food that they have to be labeled as “food product.” But if you're naturally inquisitive, if you can make a game out of learning how to bring the mind to settle down, then once the mind is settled down it'll naturally want to understand this, understand that, understand the processes of what you're doing. That's insight.

So these are qualities you want to bring to your meditation: the ability to play, to respond to challenges, to be inquisitive, to find something here in the present moment that engages your imagination. And then you apply your imagination to a genuine problem: the fact that you're causing yourself suffering right here and now. This means, one, being able to imagine yourself not causing suffering and, two, imagining approaches that might get you to that goal. Experimenting with different ways of breathing, different ways of conceiving the breathing, different ways of focusing the mind, different ways of asking questions: There's a lot to play with here. And as long as you're fully engaged, you're bound to make discoveries.

This is called the quality of *citta*, or intentness: the intentness that comes when you're really absorbed in something, when you're really engrossed in something, when you find that what you're doing gives you satisfaction, the satisfaction of learning how to master a problem. You've got this very creative mind, so how can you use it so that it doesn't create problems? How can you use it to find those areas of experience where there's no creating going on? Not out of dullness. I mean even dull people create things all the time — this is what the mind does, it fabricates things — but they don't get engaged in trying to do it well. What we're looking for instead is to see if there's a dimension where there's no creation and yet there is total happiness. How do you find that? To some extent you follow instructions, but you've also got to have the attitude of “Give this a try, give that a try.” If you don't learn how to try things you've never tried before, never imagined before, you're never going to find anything new that you haven't experienced before. That's why the element of play is so important.

Adolescent Practice

October 25, 2003

If you don't think the idea of rebirth is scary, think of having to go through adolescence all over again — all the awkwardness, the embarrassment, all the problems of adolescence, high school, dating, asserting your independence. We're always glad that we've gotten past those things. But when you come to meditate, it's like going through adolescence all over again. When you start out, you're given a set of rules to follow. That's like being a child: Don't do this, don't do that, do this, do that. And for a while the rules work. But then there comes a time when, if you're going to make the meditation your own, you've got to test the rules. That's adolescence, which is why it's difficult, because sometimes the rules are good rules that can carry you all the way through adulthood, while other rules are best put away now that you're no longer a child. Sometimes the problem is that you had a childish understanding of the rules and, as you grow up, you've got to change that understanding. So you've got to sort that all out. No wonder it's an awkward time.

The same goes with meditation. You're told, "Focus on the breath." And in the beginning you're often told, "Don't meddle with the breath. Just let it come in and go out at its own rate." You may get the basic idea that the less you interfere in the present moment, the better; the more passive you become, the better. But that makes it difficult to integrate meditation with your life. Are you going to go through life totally passive in every situation? That doesn't work. It's like a walking death. So you've got to test the rule to see whether it's the kind of rule that says, "Before you cross the road, hold onto somebody's hand," or the type that says, "Before you cross the road, look both ways. Check the oncoming traffic first." Holding somebody's hand is a rule specifically for children; when you grow up, you don't need to follow it anymore. But the rule about looking both ways is a good rule to follow whether you're a child or an adult.

So, the rule about not meddling with your breath: Which kind of rule is that? It's a holding-the-hand kind of rule. Meditation teachers often feel that people brand new to meditation will probably mess up their breath if they try to control

it too much. In order to avoid that, they tell you not to get involved, to be as passive as possible. But as you gain more experience with the breath, you don't need to hold onto the teacher's hand anymore. You have to look for yourself. You have to experiment with the breath. Otherwise you'll never get a sense of how much subconscious molding of the breath is still going on, down under the surface of your consciousness. You'll never get a sense of what input you're putting into the present moment. That's crucial to the meditation, for only when you see it are you in a position where you can try to refine it.

So you have to go through that awkward stage of messing with the breath too much, making it too long, making it too short, using too much pressure to change the breath to fit it into what you think might be a good mold. Or when you find something good, you tend to hold onto it well past the time when it's really worth holding onto. Or you force the breath into different parts of the body where it's best not to force it. These are issues you have to learn through experience, through making mistakes. You have to go through the adolescence of your meditation to get a sense of what's just right. That's where you begin to reach maturity, to develop finesse in your meditation.

But to gain that finesse, that sense of "just right," you have to go through the awkward stages — doing it wrong, learning how to recognize it for wrong — and because of the awkwardness, we tend to avoid them. But there's no way you're going to get out of your childhood and into your adulthood as a meditator unless you go through these stages.

So, when you work with the breath, keep two things in mind. One is that you're going to experiment with the breath to see what feels good right now. The other is that you also have to look at the way you're experimenting. You watch both the breath and the mind as it's dealing with the breath. And there are no hard and fast rules here. You have to feel your way.

This is why the path is a gradual path. The Buddha once compared the path of practice to the continental shelf off of India. There's a gradual slope and then a sudden drop, like the continental shelf off the east coast of the United States. We all look forward to that sudden drop but, as the Buddha says, you first have to go through the gradual slope before you get there. Sometimes our approach to meditation is simply hoping for the sudden drop to come, thinking that if we can make ourselves as still and passive as we can in the present moment, that will open a space for grace to drop on us. In other words, we're waiting for the

accident of Awakening to happen, but it doesn't happen that way. You reach the drop by taking the gradual slope.

In other words, as you get more and more sensitive to what you're doing in the present moment, your input into the present gets more refined until you finally get to the point where you really can let it stop. But you have to go through many, many layers of intention first, for it's only through gradually developing skill in this area that you can really sense the most subtle forms of intention. This is why the activity of developing skill in the way you deal with the breath is not a distraction from vast openness of Awakening. That's not the case at all. True Awakening comes through the process of getting more and more sensitive to what you're doing, doing it with more and more refinement, until the ultimate layers of refinement can be seen and abandoned.

So this focus on being skillful is a preparation. It's what gets us to the sudden drop of Awakening. Otherwise, how are you going to develop your sensitivity? If you don't develop your sensitivity, where are you going to get the discernment that leads to Awakening? It has to come through this process of being willing to make mistakes, of being patient with the gradual process.

We're an impatient nation. We want things to happen right away. We look at the past and say, "Oh, those people didn't know anything. They had to go through this long, involved process because they didn't understand the quick and easy way to get things done." And yet so often the quick way to get things done may yield quick results but not lasting results — results that might not be good over the long term, that might actually go bad. And meditation is one of those areas where time is required. Patience is required. You've got to invest the time and attention needed to develop a skill.

You're getting to know the breath. It's like getting to know a person. As the Buddha said with regard to that kind of knowledge, you have to be observant and willing to put in a fair amount of time. Only then can you gain a sense of familiarity. Think of yourself as becoming friends with the breath. In any friendship there's got to be give and take. There are going to be awkward moments. Ups and downs. But if you stick with it, with the good-heartedness needed to weather the downs, and the powers of observation to know when you've made a mistake, to admit your mistakes, then the friendship can grow. That's when your friend can start revealing all of his or her secrets.

And the breath has lots of fascinating secrets. There are lots of interesting things to find out in the energy flow of the breathing. You can start seeing how

the breath affects your feelings, exactly which experience is a breath experience, and which experience is a feeling experience — feeling pleasure or pain. As you really look into these things, you begin to see that you've often drawn the lines in your body and mind in the wrong places. For instance, the aggregates of form and feeling: the actual movement of the energy is form, the sense of pleasure or pain that goes along with it is the feeling, and it can be extremely fleeting. When you see how fleeting feelings are — much more fleeting than even subtle sensations of breath — that rearranges your notion about how you've been living your life. You realize how much of your life you've spent chasing after pleasant feelings and only to see more and more clearly how fleeting they are.

So as you really look into this process of breathing, there's an awful lot to see. If you're willing to stick with the ups and downs of that gradual slope, you find that there's always something to do, something to learn. If you're sitting around waiting for Awakening to happen, it gets pretty desensitizing after a while — putting yourself into a dead, dull mood, saying, "We'll just wait here long enough and maybe it'll come." You get so that you no longer look at what you're doing. So the end result is that you're actually desensitizing yourself to a lot of the stuff going on in the mind. You try to hide it from yourself hoping that, "If I hide it well enough, then the enlightenment will be fooled and it'll come" — like a child trying to fool Santa Claus.

But if you work with the breath — each breath coming in, noticing what kinds of feelings it gives rise to, what you can do to make it a more pleasurable breath — you're engaged in a process that makes you more sensitive. And what is discernment but heightened sensitivity? We often think of discernment as trying to clone our minds into seeing things the way the Buddha tells us to see them. But that ends up just adding one more layer of conjecture to our ignorance. When he tells us to look for the inconstancy and the stress in things, he's not telling us to come to the conclusion that they're inconstant and stressful. He's telling us how to develop sensitivity: Can you sense really refined levels of inconstancy? Can you sense really refined levels of stress? What happens when you do?

This is what the meditation is designed to do. As you discover those more and more refined levels and take them apart to create a greater sense of stability, a greater sense of wellbeing in the mind, you finally get to the point of equilibrium where everything opens up. You fall into what they call the stream — the point where there's no input into the present moment. You know this for sure

because you've thoroughly sensitized yourself to every kind of input the mind has had, every little discussion, every little agreement it's made with itself, even the sublinguistic communication going on in the mind. You've become more and more sensitive to that, to the point where it stops and you're no longer doing anything.

This is where the path takes over. The path actually does the work from that point on. It opens you to the Deathless. This is why it's called the stream, because there's a sense of current pulling you along without your having to do anything at all. But to get to that point, you've got to do a lot of doing and be very sensitive to what you're doing, so you can know for sure when there's really and truly no intention in the mind, and when it only seems that way.

So this little exercise here, of adjusting the breath, evaluating the breath: That's the beginning of discernment, the beginning of insight into the three characteristics of inconstancy, stress, and not self. It's crucial to the practice. It's the stage where you're not just obeying the rules for children. You're actually getting a sense of how the rules really work, and of which ones apply to you as a mature meditator.

And even though it may be awkward going through this adolescence of testing things and tripping over your mistakes, nobody else has to know about the mistakes you've made. The important point is that you actually learn from them. Even though it may be awkward, that's how you grow up.

No Mistakes Are Fatal

January, 2003

Our minds are pretty chaotic systems, which is why following the middle way is so difficult. It's so easy for a chaotic system to get knocked out of equilibrium, to veer off to the left, to veer off to the right. Staying in the middle is difficult; it requires a lot of balance.

So it's no wonder that when psychologists describe the workings of the mind, they tend to use fluid mechanics as their main analogy. In other words, the mind acts like water: the way water swirls around and forms eddies, the way it gets pushed down here, goes underground, and comes out over there. Sometimes it builds up into huge waves. I was reading the other day about enormous waves, called rogue waves, that suddenly form out in the ocean. Things come together just right — this little wave adds on to that little wave — and all of a sudden they build into enormous rogue waves that flow through the ocean and then after a while, mysteriously dissipate. It's the same with the mind. Sometimes rogue waves come crashing through the mind and you wonder where they came from.

It's easy for tiny little things to set them off. This is why we have to be careful in our practice. Don't regard the little details or little distractions as totally unimportant. Ajaan Mun used to say that it's very rare that a whole tree gets into your eye, but sometimes just a little sawdust can get into your eye and blind you. Sometimes the little things are the ones that set you off, so you have to be careful.

On the other hand, though, you have to be confident that even if the mind does get knocked off balance you can bring it back. Otherwise the practice would be full of fear all the time — afraid of tipping off too far to the left, too far to the right, toppling upside down. There's only one way of learning what the balance point is, and that's through experimenting. And you can experiment only when you're not afraid. So you have to develop the confidence that even when you do go far off the path to one side or the other, you can pull yourself back. There's always that new opportunity in the mind to give yourself a fresh start.

In this way you can experiment and gain a sense of where the balance is because you know that no mistakes are fatal. You come back and you put

yourself on the path again. You fall off... well, you put yourself back on the path again. Ajaan Mun once said at another point, “It’s normal for people to go off on the side.” You get stuck on the right side of the path looking at the flowers, sniffing the breeze, or on the left side on the path where you’re stuck in the mud. But you can extract yourself from both sides.

This is why we have techniques in meditation. This is what they’re for. They assume that you’re going to go off on either side, and so they give you paths for bringing yourself back. When the level of energy in your mind is too strong — your mind starts bouncing around like a ping-pong ball — there are calming practices. When your energy level goes weak — you start getting bored, nothing seems to interest you, nothing seems to be worth doing — there are practices for energizing you. Think about your motivation — why you’re practicing — and that can help get you going again.

And then there’s the factor the Buddha calls “analysis of qualities,” which means really looking carefully at what’s going on. Often we get bored with the meditation because we’ve grown sloppy, we’re not really paying careful attention, and nothing new seems to be coming along. Look very carefully at what you’re doing. Look very carefully at each breath, and you’ll begin to see things you didn’t notice before.

This is why mindfulness and alertness are qualities appropriate at all times. Remind yourself why of you’re on the path and then be very careful to look at what you’re doing, be very precise in watching, watching, watching what’s going on. You begin to see that there’s *a lot* going on here in the present moment. After all, you’re creating a world here in the present moment, and that’s not a simple activity. There’s lots to observe, lots to notice, starting with the simple building blocks: the breath, and the mental qualities that are called “directed thought” and “evaluation,” the ones that do all that chattering in your mind. You direct your thoughts to a particular topic and then you think about it, you evaluate it. You say, “This is this, and that’s that, and this is good, and that’s bad.”

So you take those very basic building blocks and you put them together in a new way. Instead of chattering about things outside, you direct your thoughts to the breath, you evaluate the breath. Then there are the final set of building blocks, feelings and perceptions: feelings of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain, and the labels you put on all these things. You apply all those to the breath as well.

So you've got all the building blocks for your experience right here, and instead of building them into elaborate worlds, you very consciously *don't*. You build them into something very simple: a focused state of mind. Now, "simple" doesn't mean "easy." As I said, there are all these other currents going on in the mind. But as you keep coming back, coming back, you're coming back to these building blocks on a simple level. Keep it basic, but be very observant.

One of the reasons things don't stay basic in the mind is that we're so good at whipping things up out of these building blocks. It's like a meringue, or whipped cream: You take a little tiny bit of cream and you whip it up into this big blob of whipped cream. There's a lot of air in there, a lot of fabrication going on. So what you want to do is keep things basic but be very observant, because you've got a lot of tricks up your sleeve for creating something out of nothing, making mountains out of the tiniest molehills. So, keep it on the level of molehills, very simple, very basic, and keep your eye out for those other tricks.

That's where things get fascinating, realizing how you deceive yourself all the time. Sometimes it comes down to a basic level of dishonesty in the mind. One part of the mind is very good at lying to another part of the mind. So you can start asking yourself, "Who's actually fooling whom here?" "Where's the curtain, the window shade, the wall that allows one part of the mind to fool another part of the mind?" Or, "Does it depend on the other part of the mind's willingness to be fooled?" There are lots of interesting political maneuvers going on in the mind, so watch out for those.

Fortunately, the best way of dealing with them is to keep things basic. Just refuse to play along. When things do come up in the mind as you're trying to get it to settle down, try to cut them off as quickly as possible. When a thought comes into the mind — you remember this person, you actually see this or that person's face — just say, "Goodwill for that person," and that's enough. You don't have to get involved in the stories associated with those faces. And in the beginning you don't have to trace those faces back: "How did that image come?" Just let it go.

This principle of keeping things simple is what enables balance to come more and more easily to the mind, for you can see the little movements that otherwise might set things off. It's what they call the butterfly effect. A butterfly flaps its wings in Hong Kong and a jetliner, as a result of the change in the currents of air, later crashes in Texas. So keep things simple so that you're aware of those little butterfly flutterings in the mind. But fortunately when the mind crashes it's not

like a Texas airplane; it doesn't die unless you let it die. You can always pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and move on.

This is a good thing to remember in the practice. There's the story of King Ajatasattu. He killed his father and later felt a lot of regret, but there's a tradition that he's going to become a Private Buddha someday, even though he's got some really bad karma to pay off first. Even Mara, who's the figure of temptation in the early Buddhist texts: There's a tradition that he, too, will someday become a Private Buddha.

So no matter how much your mind may seem ready to crash, or if it has already crashed, you can always take heart, pick yourself up, because there's always new karma, always new things you can do, with every moment. No mistakes are fatal.

When you have that confidence, you can experiment in the mind. Find out how much effort is too much, how much effort is too little, how too much activity in the mind gets you all stirred up, how too low a level of energy starts you falling asleep. These are all questions of balance and they can be answered only by experimenting, testing for yourself, finding out for yourself — What's too much? What's too little? What's too far to the right? What's too far to the left? — with the confidence that no matter what your mistakes, you can always correct them, you can always learn from them. That's the important thing.

Don't view a mistake as a really bad thing that you have to make up for afterwards. Use it as a learning experience. When you approach everything as a learning experience then no meditation is wasted. Every meditation becomes an opportunity to learn. It's just a question of whether you take that opportunity or not.

The Buddha talks about the bases of success in meditation: concentration based on desire and Right Effort; concentration based on persistence, or energy and Right Effort; concentration based on intentness and Right Effort; and concentration based on the mind's powers of analysis and Right Effort. And he talks about how important it is to reach a balance in all these factors, because your desire can be too strong, too weak. Your persistence can be way overboard or way too lax. The same with intentness and your powers of analysis: Sometimes they go way overboard and sometimes they dribble away into nothing. There's only one way to learn balance in all these things, and that's through trial and error.

Yeah, I know. We here in America are all busy people. We want things to be packaged easily so we can get the most out of them and move on to our next ... whatever. But the practice isn't like that. There isn't a "next whatever" to move on to. This is the most important issue facing the mind right now: the fact that it's creating suffering for itself. Its every action is aimed at happiness, but it's creating suffering for itself. That's the big problem in life. Only the practice can solve it. And the practice is an activity that gives results only when you're willing to be patient and experiment and learn from your mistakes. So that's what you've got to do.

But take heart. Even the Buddha made mistakes. Big mistakes. Six years of self-torture. *All* the noble disciples have made mistakes. It's just that they were willing to learn from them, and they didn't let the mistakes get them down.

A Light in the Darkness

May, 2002

Let the mind settle down in the present. Sometimes you can use the word, “let.” Other times you have to force it because the mind sometimes has its moods where it’s not willing to settle down. It’s got all kinds of other issues to think about, all kinds of other agendas, and now it’s got a whole hour when it can think of those things, things that were suppressed in the course of the day because other things captured your attention. Now they can start popping up to the surface, so you need tools to keep them from getting in the way.

One effective tool is simply the desire to be still. For example, when the mind is tired, it really wants to rest. In cases like that, all you have to do is give it a good resting spot. Your main concern then is to make sure it doesn’t fall asleep or drift off into a zone where it’s not really aware of what’s going on. If the body’s tired, do some good deep in-and-out breathing to make sure there’s enough oxygen in the brain. Then gradually allow the breathing to settle down to a more comfortable rate. Once it’s comfortable, spread that sense of comfort to fill the whole body and then try to stay very consciously aware of the whole body. Don’t let your awareness shrink.

There are other times when the mind has more energy to think, and in that case you’ve got to cut it off in other ways, partly by explaining things to it, partly by having values that will cut off the thoughts. All too often our values go in the other direction — encouraging thought — especially with the idea we have that if we figure out things beforehand, we don’t have to do the work. So many of us come to the meditation with that attitude: If you read enough books, if you think things through, reason things through ahead of time, then you won’t have to do all the work. You just settle down, insights will pop into the mind, and the job will be done. But it doesn’t work that way, because a lot of the insights we’re trying to gain deal with the way the mind functions, and you can’t really see the functioning of the mind until you wrestle with it to know its ins-and-outs, to know where the tricks it plays on itself are coming from.

And you also have to develop some good retorts. Sometimes there's a conversation, an argument going on in the mind. Part of the mind wants to think about this, think about that. Well, you've got to argue with it, give it good reasons for *not* going there. And keep the reasons short and sharp, for otherwise you'll get drawn into endless conversations. Remind yourself that knowledge, at least the knowledge that we're looking for in the meditation, isn't something that comes from thinking things through.

Ajaan Suwat had a good line on this. He said, "It's like darkness. You don't like the darkness, but you can't attack the darkness. You can't scratch a hole in it, you can't rip it, you can't tear it. You have to light a light. The light will then take care of the darkness." All of the other things we might do to try to grab hold of the darkness or rip it away just don't work. It's the same with the mind. We can't think our way out of ignorance. We have to watch so that we can give rise to discernment. The discernment here is precisely that: the awareness that comes when you really watch things carefully, when you observe what's going on in the mind.

So you have to set up the right circumstances. Again, it's not a matter of thinking things through. The proper preparation for the meditation, the part that explains it beforehand, simply tells you how to set up the right situation, and then you just have to watch. A good analogy is with a hunter: The hunter does what he can to prepare to go out hunting, to get all his weapons in the right order. Then he goes out and has to sit very still. He can't decide beforehand that the rabbit's going to come along at two p.m. so that he can come back at three and have dinner before dark. The hunter goes out and all he can do is sit there very quietly and yet at the same time be very watchful. Whether the rabbit comes at noon or two or four or if it doesn't come that day, the hunter still has to be very watchful all the time. He can't let his attention slip, can't make a noise, and can't schedule events beforehand. He can't, through the force of his will, make the rabbit come at a particular time or at a particular place. The hunter just does the best he can to set up the right circumstances, along the path where rabbits ordinarily come, and then he sits still and watches.

The same with the meditation: You get the mind as still as you can and then you have to watch. That's the only way you're going to get any really new insights into what's going on. Actually, as meditators, we're better off than hunters because the mind is constantly sending out little signals. It's always giving us something to catch as it deals with this, deals with that, makes this

choice and that. The problem is that we're not still enough to notice these things. We're not attentive enough. We don't focus our attention in the right places. We don't ask the right questions. As a result, we don't see, even though everything's happening right here before our eyes.

So you have to be very, very careful, very, very still, and then ask the right questions. The Buddha gives instructions on this: the questions that surround the four noble truths. Where is there stress? Where is there craving? When is mindfulness present? When is it absent? Can you see these things? When mindfulness is present, how can you keep it going? When it's absent, how can you give rise to it? These are the questions he has us ask about the present moment. Aside from that, he tells us to put everything else aside — all your other concerns, all the other distractions that come along — and focus on the real issue at hand, which is how to deal with suffering, how to deal with stress. Once that issue is dealt with, everything else is taken care of.

I recently received a letter from a doctor who was claiming that modern psychology has made an advance over Buddhism in that Buddhism deals only with the problem of suffering, while modern psychology deals with suffering *and* also gives meaning to life. I don't think he understands the depth of the problem of suffering. Once you really eradicate suffering, what remains to your life, the meaning of what you want to do with it, is very clear. And it will vary from person to person. But the big issue facing everybody is digging out the roots of suffering. Once those roots are dug out, then the question of meaning is no longer a problem. Why does the question of meaning bother us? There must be some suffering, there must be some stress surrounding it. We look into it. Why does there have to be a meaning to things? What's the suffering that comes from there *not* being a meaning? Dig into it. Look into it.

And if that's too abstract or too subtle, focus on where you *do* see the suffering, where you *do* see the craving, because developing your powers of observation is a process just like anything else: You work from the crude to the subtle, from the gross to the refined. You don't sit there and say, "This issue is too crude for me. I'm going to wait until the subtle ones come." You have to handle the crude ones first, the blatant ones first. Get practice with them and then your sensitivity, your awareness, will grow more and more subtle. You have to start where you are and accept where you are as your starting place. You can't say, "I wish my concentration were better. I wish it was the way it was years ago." You have to put those thoughts aside and say, "Where is it right now? What are my

abilities right now? What issues are presenting themselves right now?" If you get used to handling what's here right now, you're focused on the right spot. You're developing the habits you need.

After all, this is a skill we're working on. It's not an intellectual puzzle where you can just think things through. Skills require dedication. They require time. They require commitment. There's an interesting story they tell about choosing candidates for the brain surgery program at a famous university. As you can imagine, everybody who applies to be a brain surgeon has to be smart, but not everybody who's book-smart is going to succeed in the program. So the question is how to weed out the people who are not going to succeed. They found that one of the most useful questions to ask the applicants is, "Could you tell me about a recent mistake you made?" The candidates who say, "I can't think of any mistakes I made recently," are immediately crossed out. The ones who say, "Oh, yeah, just the other day I made this mistake," are the ones who pass the first question. Then the follow-up question is, "What would you do differently if you had another chance?" The ones who showed that they had already thought of this question and had come up with a few alternatives were the ones who were accepted into the school.

The people who are going to succeed are not the ones who have everything figured out beforehand; they're the ones who keep learning all along the way. The same principle applies to meditation. You have to learn to put your mind in a learning mood all the time, because only then will you see the things that you didn't see before, that will light the lamp that will drive away the darkness of ignorance.

So, keep on watching.

The Knife of Discernment

April, 2002

The mind feeds on its moods and its objects, so you've got to find something good for it to feed on. We have the choice. There are all kinds of things you could focus on right now. It's up to you to choose the right place to focus, the right place to feed.

So look around in the body. Where is a comfortable place? At what spot can you watch the breath clearly and comfortably? Try to stay in touch with that place — and stay in touch with that sense of comfort as well. After watching it for a while, you'll find that certain ways of breathing give rise to a feeling tone that feels good, feels healing. Try to maintain that feeling tone. This may require adjusting the breath now and then, because the needs of the body, as the mind begins to settle down, begin to change. The breath can grow more and more still, more and more refined. The less your mind jumps around thinking about this, that, and the other thing, the less oxygen you need. So, allow the rhythm of the breath to change as is necessary.

The important thing is learning to *ride* that feeling tone, the way you'd ride a wave with a surfboard: getting a sense of when to lean a little to the left, a little to the right, steer here, steer there, to maintain your sense of balance. As for whatever other issues may come up, remember that you're choosing to feed right here. You don't have to feed on anything else. There may be a little voice in your mind saying, "Look at that! Watch this! You've got to worry about that, worry about this." Just keep reminding yourself, "No, not right now." Your current priority is to develop a good, strong foundation so that you can feel secure in the present moment — so that no matter what happens, you've got a place where you're safe.

As you feed here more and more often, you find that the mind gets stronger. When it gains a sense of nourishment and inner comfort, you can spread that sense of comfort around the body so that it gets more encompassing. If there are parts of the body you can't spread it to, that's okay: You don't have to focus there yet. Focus on the areas where you *can* spread that sense of comfort, where it can

seep through easily. Allow yourself to be bathed by it, surrounded by it, so that the mind has more and more good food to feed on.

As it gets stronger, it can begin to look at the other areas that are more problematic, because now it doesn't have to feed on them. This is why pain, for example, has been such a big problem. We keep trying to feed on it. It's as if you have a good kitchen with lots of good food stocked up, but you go rooting around in the garbage pail. So get the mind well fed with this sense of ease, this sense of wellbeing, and then when you turn to look at pain you can see it in a different way. When you look at something as food, as something to gain sustenance from, you're going to see it in one way. When you look at pain as food, it's disappointing. It's lousy food, and yet when the mind is hungry it feeds on whatever it can find. But when the mind isn't hungry, you can look at the pain with pure curiosity: "Let's look into this. What is this? Let's try to understand it." Your whole attitude toward it changes. Remember: The Buddha said, "Try to comprehend pain." He doesn't say, "Snuff it out."

One way of comprehending it is to see how much you can use the breath to deal with the pain. Another is to see how much your different attitudes toward the pain will change the way you experience it. Experiment *around* the pain to see what happens, and particularly to get a sense of the difference between the physical pain and the mental pain. The Buddha compares pain with being shot by arrows. Physical pain is like being shot with one arrow, but then on top of that you shoot yourself with another arrow, the anguish you build up around the pain, is totally optional. When you've got a body, there are going to be pains. Even the Buddha had physical pains after his Awakening, but the difference is that he knew how not to shoot himself with those unnecessary second, third, fourth, and fifth arrows. And as it turns out, *those* are the ones that really hurt. Those are the ones causing the problems.

But you can't just go marching in and say to yourself, "Okay, you! Out! Stop! Stop shooting arrows!" You've got to learn to see where the dividing line is between the physical pain and the mental pain. You do that by experimenting with the breath, experimenting with the labels you put on the pain, asking yourself questions about the pain — and sometimes the strange questions are the ones that ferret out the strange attitudes you've built up around the pain. For instance, you can ask, "What shape does the pain have?" It sounds like a strange question, but when you pursue it you find that your imagination has actually given the pain a shape. What happens when you don't give it a shape?

How does the pain move around? Is it moving around on its own or is it moving around because you're pushing it around? These are things you have to learn through experiment. It's only through experimentation that things begin to divide out on their own. In other words if you go in with preconceived notions, "The dividing line has to be *here*, or *there*," it turns out that that's not the case at all. You're forcing your ignorance onto the pain which, of course, just makes it worse.

So you've got to learn how to experiment. How do changes in the breathing change the pain? How do changes in your concept of the pain change the pain? How about changes in your concept of how the mind relates to the body: Is the mind in the body? Is the body in the mind? Where in the body is the mind? These may seem like strange questions, but you begin to realize that the mind on an unarticulated level actually does think in those terms. And a lot of our basic assumptions of where the center of our awareness is, where the pain is in relation to that center, and how it affects that center: These play an important role in how we experience the pain and how we make ourselves suffer unnecessarily from it. So you have to experiment and test things.

But first you've got to get the mind settled down with a sense of wellbeing, for otherwise it's going to be sneaking little bites of the pain, feeding on the pain, and then not liking what it eats. That just complicates the issue, makes it impossible to analyze things and separate them out. To gain this foundation of wellbeing takes time. You've got to be patient. Keep working at it *again and again and again*. You can't say, "I've done this x number of days, or x number of weeks, or x number of years, I should be beyond that."

You just keep working at it as long as necessary. The concentration is the part of the meditation you can *do*, the asking of the questions is something you can do, but the insights that actually give you that "Aha!" — those you can't do. Those come as a result of the other actions, but they're not something you can intend. You can intend to get the mind to settle down, you can intend to learn how to ask those questions, but when the results come, that's something you can't determine in advance. Just make sure that you've got the causes right in terms of the stability of your gaze, the sense of wellbeing you can fall back on whenever you need it, and the quality of appropriate attention — learning how to ask the right questions. That's what you *do* in the meditation, that's what you intend in the meditation, and when these things fall together just right, the results will come.

To ferret out the difference between the physical pain — the pains of the *khandhas*, the pains of the aggregates — as opposed to the pain of attachment, craving, and clinging: That's a distinction you see in the doing. You catch yourself in the doing; you see how the doing affects things. This is something you can't figure out in advance. But when the distinction becomes clear in the doing, then you've cut the mind away from those attachments and cravings.

When the Buddha said that his job was done, this is what he meant. There were still pains in the body, there were still issues in life, but the mind no longer had to suffer because of them. That's where Awakening makes a permanent difference, once and for all. We hear over and over again that, because of the principle of impermanence, even Awakening must be impermanent, but that's not true. The Buddha didn't say that everything is impermanent, only that conditioned things are impermanent. And even on the conditioned level, it's possible to make irrevocable changes.

This is why training the mind is so worthwhile. With practice, we can cut through the fetters that keep us bound to suffering so that they'll never bind us ever again. One of the images they give in the texts is of a palm tree with its crown cut off. It'll never grow any further. Another image is of a carcass of a cow. The butchers take off the skin — cutting all the little tendons and all the connective tissue — but then, no matter how they try to put the skin back on the cow, it's never connected in the same way. It's right next to the cow, but there are no connections because the knife of discernment has cut them — once and for all.

The Treasure Hunt

August, 2002

When you meditate, try to think of it as a process of exploration. Don't have a lot of preconceived notions about what you're going to find. If you go into it thinking that you're going to reprogram your mind, well, you could reprogram your mind into seeing almost anything. If you believe firmly enough that if you saw iridescent clouds all around you that would be a good sign, you could make yourself see iridescent clouds. If you believe firmly enough that if you saw the whole world as blue you'd find true happiness, then you would make yourself see the whole world as blue. But that's no indication that the world really is blue.

So instead, you're asked to explore. The Buddha doesn't give a lot of descriptions of the goal — although he does give a few hints — but he gives a lot of detail on how to find it. It's like a treasure hunt. He says that if you go into the next room and you look in this particular way, you're going to uncover something of value. And he gives you a couple of tests for determining whether the object you find is the valuable object or not: Is it subject to change? Is there any stress? Is there any sense of possession? If there is, it's not what you're looking for. But as to what precisely it is that you're looking for, he gives only a few hints. So what we should focus on is the process of what we're doing.

Think back on his Awakening. There were three knowledges that preceded his attainment of nibbana: knowledge of previous lives, knowledge of beings passing away and being reborn in line with their karma, and then knowledge of the four noble truths. Those first two knowledges were not all that certain; there was still an element of possible doubt. Visions of previous lifetimes don't necessarily mean you actually had previous lifetimes. You can see people passing away and being reborn in line with their karma, but does that mean that it really happens? You can see all kinds of things, but it doesn't mean they're true.

The Buddha realized that the way to test those visions lay in testing that issue of karma, what people do, in the present moment. This is one thing you can know directly. You can know directly what you're doing. When you focus the mind, you know you're focusing the mind. When the mind settles down, you

know it's settling down. When the mind wanders off, you know it's wandering off. These are things you really know here and now. When you experience suffering, you know. When you experience a lack of suffering, you know.

So those are the two issues the Buddha focused on: the feelings of suffering and the knowledge of actions. The second knowledge suggested that there was a connection between the two, so the Buddha decided to see if this was true. These two are very certain things. When you're suffering, no one can convincingly tell you, "That's not really suffering; you're not suffering." Other things you might know can be shaped by the rules of the languages you've learned, but your experience of suffering is pre-linguistic. You know it more directly than anything else. At the same time, when you do something, you know you're doing it. So the Buddha wanted to see if people's experiences of pleasure and pain are related to their actions. For his answer, he looked in the immediate present. "What are you doing right now?" he asked himself. "Is there any relation between what you're doing right now and an experience of pain or lack of pain?" The next question, when he saw that there was a connection, was, "Is it possible not to do anything? What happens then?"

So he worked to let go of the craving and ignorance that lead to action, that are involved in action, to see what happens then. In this way he was dealing with realities that are immediately apparent, immediately present. He was running an experiment to see: What happens when you do it this way? What happens when you do it that way? He wasn't dealing in visions; he wasn't dealing in mystical abstractions. He was looking at very ordinary things — the actions of the mind — and seeing what they resulted in.

We're trying to do the same thing as we meditate here. That's where the focus should be. We're not just sitting here waiting for enlightenment to plop on us out of the sky. We're looking for an enlightenment into what we're actually doing right now. It's amazing how much the mind can disguise that from itself. This is a tendency we've had ever since we were little children: to hide our intentions from ourselves, because sometimes our intentions are not all that sociable, not all that admirable. We can find ways of justifying almost anything to ourselves, and in the process we learn how to be a little bit dishonest — sometimes not just a little bit, sometimes outrageously dishonest — with ourselves.

So when we're meditating we want to muster up some honesty and focus it on this issue here. Let's really get truthful about what's going on right now. We

apply our honesty — this is not to say we're by nature either honest or dishonest, it's just that we've developed both patterns — and we try to take advantage of our skillful habits to uproot the unskillful ones. How do we get honest and clear about our intentions? You have to make the mind really still.

That's why we're focused on the breath. We give the mind an intention: "Stay with the breath. Don't move. Don't go wandering off to other things." And we give it a further intention: "Try to breathe as comfortably as possible." That right there is an immediate exercise in the relationship between your actions and feelings of pleasure and pain. You want to develop that particular sensitivity as much as you can. What's important is the particular combination of the stillness of your focus and the point where you're focused, right at this issue of intention and its relationship to pleasure and pain. This is why breath meditation opens things up in the mind, for it's focused on the real issues.

The Buddha once said that insight is knowledge of *sankhara*, fabrication, and fabrication comes in three forms: physical fabrication — that's the breath; verbal fabrication — the directed thought and evaluation that give rise to words; and then mental fabrication — your feelings and perceptions. When you're focused on the breath properly, all these things are brought together. There's the physical fabrication of the breath, there's directed thought and evaluation directed to the breath, and there are the perceptions of the breath and the feelings that arise from how you deal with the breath. Everything you really need to know for Awakening is right here.

And what is the process of fabrication? There's a lot of intention involved in it, and that's what you want to focus on, because intention lies at the essence of action. The Buddha's genius was to realize that the things we need for Awakening, the things we need to understand the problem of suffering in our lives, all lie right here. It's simply a question of bringing them together and giving them a really steady look so you can clearly see what's going on. What happens when you really focus your attention right here and don't let yourself get distracted? What happens when you develop your sensitivities in this area? What do you find?

Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about his time with Ajaan Mun, saying that Ajaan Mun would give long Dhamma talks, sketching out the whole path of the practice, because at any one time there would often be lots of different people coming to study with him, all at different stages of the practice. In order to cover everybody, he would start from the most basic levels of practice on up to the

highest. And Ajaan Maha Boowa noticed that as Ajaan Mun was giving his Dhamma talks he'd get to some really crucial parts of the practice, really important discoveries that would move you from one level to the next, and he wouldn't describe them in detail. He'd just move on to the next level. He'd set up the problem and then bypass around it. This had Ajaan Maha Boowa mystified — for a while. Then he began to realize that if you explain everything in a lot of detail beforehand, people would come to those points bringing a lot of preconceived notions. Those notions would get in the way.

So the important thing about listening to the Dhamma is that the Dhamma *points* you. In fact the word, *desana* — the word they use for a Dhamma explanation — literally means “pointing to.” It points you to the places where you should look, gives you instructions on how to look, and then it's up to you to see. When the Buddha would give instructions for meditators, he wouldn't say “Go do insight,” he'd say “Go do jhana.” In the course of doing jhana you'd have to develop tranquility and insight as well. The insight would become your own because it's something you discovered. You noticed things that you didn't notice before.

What else do you think Awakening would be? It's not that the skies open and some god comes down bearing a message, or some light beam comes down, from the outside. And it's not something you can clone from what you've heard about other people's Awakening. It's simply a matter of looking very carefully at what's already here; looking to see what happens when you get your focus really well tuned, when you get it steady. You develop all the skills you need to see clearly — learning how to look, learning where to look — but the actual seeing, when it becomes clear seeing: That's something you can't will. The looking will point you there. If you keep looking, you'll see.

So, look carefully. There's a lot to awaken to here — a lot to understand, to explore, to discover. It's simply up to us to want to discover it enough, and to apply ourselves to what needs to be done.

Exploring Possibilities

July 25, 2004

When you meditate, you're exploring. You're not trying to program the mind in line with somebody else's notions of what it has to do. You're exploring possibilities. Can you stay with the breath? How long can you stay with the breath? Can you make yourself stay with the breath longer than you might have thought possible? Where are the little gaps where mindfulness lapses? Can you bridge those gaps? Can you relate to the breath in a friendly way? These are the questions you set up, and then you explore. This is important to remember: that even though the Buddha has explored this territory himself and all the noble disciples have explored it — they've sent back reports on what can be found here — still for each of us it's a process of exploration. We're testing the Buddha's teachings. Is it possible, as he said, to find true happiness, a happiness that doesn't change?

As we explore, all the answers we arrive at then become questions we use to keep the mind pointed in the right direction. As you sit and meditate, you often come up with interesting insights, uncover things about the mind that you never noticed before, possibilities that you had never realized were possible. Often a weight is lifted off the mind. But sometimes your tendency is to focus on the world outside. You suddenly see the world in a new way: "The world is perfect as it is." Or, "The world is illusory." Those aren't the insights the Buddha focused on. He focused more on what it's possible for the mind to do. Can it operate in a way that it doesn't create suffering for itself?

As you meditate you begin to catch sight of little moments in the mind where things seem a lot less weighty than they did before. You feel less burdened by different concerns, long-term or short-term. But it's important in each case to turn around and look: What did you just learn about how the mind can function? How was it functioning in the past? How about the new way of functioning you've suddenly discovered? How is it better?

Sometimes it may be a general psychological issue. People who have problems with guilt and blame suddenly find a moment without that guilt and

blame. It's possible to look at the world without the guilt and blame. That's an important insight, just to remind yourself that it's possible. You don't have to carry these things around. But as to what the insight says about the world — Is the world perfect as it is? Are you perfect as you are? — that's a more controversial issue.

And it's not what the Buddha said to focus on. Focus on the fact that it's possible for you not to be carrying this weight around continually. The next time you detect it coming up, remember that you have the choice of putting it down. Just the realization that you've been able to do it once: That's liberating. It expands the range of your imagination. Remind yourself that there is that possibility.

Sometimes the insights are related more directly to the meditation itself. It's possible to relate to the breath in a particular way. It's possible to relate to your feelings in a particular way. In other words, you don't have to identify with them. You begin to see them. Awareness really is separate from these things. It doesn't have to take on — lay claim — to these things as being yours. That opens up a possibility in the mind. You see that, for a moment, the mind was totally without any sense of identification with these things. It's possible.

Many of the possibilities we uncover in the mind are skills we've already mastered in other areas, just that we haven't applied them consistently. There have been many times when feelings have come up in the mind and we don't identify with them, but we don't notice the fact. What meditation does is to help us notice that we can apply that skill in areas where we hadn't applied it before. So when a particular state of mindful alertness or concentration arises in the mind, it's important that you try to maintain it in all sorts of different situations, for this helps you gain just that sort of insight: realizing that the habits you've found useful in one area of your life can be used in other areas as well.

After all, you don't go around holding on to all your cravings all of the time; you have to let go of one craving in order to pick up another one. The habit of letting go of craving is something we all have developed unconsciously. The problem is that when we let go of one craving it's usually because another, more compelling, one has come along. We let go of one craving only to pick up another. But we do have the ability to let go of a craving. The drawback is that we do it unconsciously and as part of another process, the process of picking up something else. What the Buddha teaches is a new process: that you can let go, let go, let go, without picking up anything else. If something is causing you

suffering, if something is causing you pain, you can let it go. It might still be hanging around, but you're not holding onto it. That makes all the difference in the world.

It's like living near fire. As long as you're not grasping the fire, you're okay. You don't have to drive fire out of the world. If you tried to, of course, it would be impossible. And even if you could, you'd create all sorts of hardships for yourself when you want to cook food. All you have to do is let go of it and you're okay. You don't have to grab hold. Our problem is that we learn how to let go of one fire but we find other kinds of fire and hold on to those. And we think that somehow it's different. "These are the fires you have to hold on to. That other fire you could let go of because it's unimportant. But these ones are more important." Or, "It's there in the mind, so you have to grab on, because you have to hold on to everything that comes into the mind."

An important part of insight is realizing that you don't have to hold on. Things can be there in the mind and you don't have to lay claim to them, you don't have to let yourself be influenced by them. It's possible. And you try to apply that possibility to other areas of your life that you wouldn't have thought of before. But as you try to develop these good habits, expand their range, you still run into old bad habits that you've carried around for who know how long. Just focusing on the breath, if you try it continually, you run into all the issues that you're used to creating around any activity, any job any responsibility. They're going to come in to mess up your focus, to push and pull and mess up the breath.

Which is why this is such a good place to take the mind. After all, the breath is going to come in, it's going to go out, all on its own. You don't have to do the pushing in, the pulling out. When you realize that, you begin to see the pushing and pulling habits you picked up from other jobs, other responsibilities, that are totally irrelevant here and actually get in the way. When you see clearly how they get in the way, remember that, because they often get in the way in other activities in life as well. In this way the breath is a good testing ground for learning about the habits of your mind.

Years back, when I first went to stay with Ajaan Fuang, he said, "Your only responsibility in all your activities is to stay with the breath." He meant it in a way to unload my mind, to clear away thoughts of other responsibilities. What it did of course was to make the breath seem suddenly onerous. It was a weight. It was a responsibility, something I had to worry about all the time. But then as I worked with it, one of the big lessons came in learning how to be with that

responsibility and not make it a weight, not make it a burden. After all, why should the breath be a burden? It's what you do to stay alive. It's the basic process, the basic force that keeps you alive.

That was a good lesson in seeing how the mind can create problems out of even the simplest things, things that are in its own interest. Learning how to be with the breath comfortably, learning how to breathe comfortably: You can make that a big issue, a big weight. But if you step back a little bit, you realize how ridiculous that is. And that ability — to step back and look at things and say, "Wait a minute, this isn't right. You're creating unnecessary problems for yourself" — is what opens you to new possibilities. Seeing that your old, unskillful habits are unnecessary is what allows you to let them go.

And noticing *how* you let them go is important as well, because then you can take that insight and you apply it to other areas where you're making yourself miserable for no good reason at all. You realize that it's possible to let go. Even though there are problems in the world, there are issues in the world, things you've got to be responsible for, still you don't have to weigh yourself down with them all the time. It's possible. This is what the insights are all about. You see possibilities in the mind, possibilities for letting go of old habits that create suffering.

So when anything new comes up in the mind, keep reflecting back on that question: What does this new mind state show about the mind's possibilities? What does it show about how the mind can relate to things in a way that involves less suffering? Keep your questions directed in this area and you'll learn useful things.

We were talking today about the insight of seeing the world as perfect just as it is. That's directing your attention in the wrong direction. You're not supposed to think about the world as being perfect or imperfect. Instead, turn around and ask, "What did that just teach you about the mind?" It may have shown you how you've made the imperfection of the world into a burden. Do you feel personally responsible for it? Do you carry guilt around about it? Is it possible not to carry that guilt and still function skillfully, helpfully, in the world? That's the important question of the insight, because it then becomes a skill you can apply to other things.

If your attention gets directed out to the world, as to whether the world is perfect or not, you can argue for days and days and days and get nowhere at all. People in a comfortable position might say that it's perfect; people starving in

Africa would say that it's not. But if you look at the insight as an opportunity to see that you've developed a new skill in the mind, you can drop the way of thinking that wants to pass judgment on the world. Then you can remember the new skill and apply it to how you function in other areas as well.

This is why Ajaan Fuang was not interested in hearing about your meditation experiences unless you could keep them going for a while. If you asked him about a meditative state, he'd ask, "Are you in there right now?" And you'd say, "Well, no." Then he'd say, "Go back and work on it." In other words, when you've gained a state of concentration, gained an insight into the workings of the mind, see if you can maintain it as a skill. Whatever you've learned, look at it as a skill that has shown you a new possibility in the mind. Then see how much you can apply that skill to other areas. That's the test of your insight. Some skills are universally applicable. Others are useful only for specific problems. You learn about your new skill by trying to apply it to everything and then seeing, "Well, it doesn't work here, it doesn't work here, but it *does* work here." As I said, many of the skills you learn in the process of meditation are things that you've already been able to do in other areas. It's simply a question of learning how to apply them right here, in the context of the mind's quest for true happiness, in this area where you can really watch things carefully as they happen in the present moment.

So we're here to explore possibilities in the mind. Remember the Buddha's own quest began with a desire that all of his friends told him was an impossibility: the desire for a true happiness that doesn't change. His friends all said, "Don't even bother. It's impossible. Nobody has ever attempted anything like this. All the great people of the past have satisfied themselves with the ordinary everyday pleasures." And Prince Siddhartha's response was, "In that case, they're not so great. They're not worthy of respect." He was determined to find if this was possible: a true happiness where there was no suffering at all, the total end of suffering. And he explored and explored and explored and found that it *was* possible.

We're now in a world where we've heard that that possibility is there. It's been attempted, and reliable people claim that it works, that they've found a true happiness. So we can follow their teachings. But it's interesting: In following their teachings, they never ask us to follow them simply by rote or accept them without proof. They ask us to explore as well, because it's only through exploration that you're going to learn these things for yourself. They teach us

how to explore our own minds. That's what the Buddha's instructions are all about. He says, "Try this, try that. Here's a range of useful tools. See what insights you gain into your own minds. Look for the workings of the mind that cause unnecessary suffering."

So as we practice, it's not an issue of being obedient or not. It's a question of looking into our own minds, using the tools the Buddha gave us to explore the possibilities that are here. That way we'll be able to prove for ourselves if it's really possible. Can you live without suffering? Can the mind function without causing suffering? Can you be more skillful in how you fashion your experience in the present moment? Can you get to the point where you don't fashion anything? Is that a possibility? The only way you can answer that question is to keep exploring on your own. It requires work and dedication, but the payoff is great even if you don't get all the way to full Awakening. You find that you do learn ways of causing less and less and less suffering for yourself all the time. That, in and of itself, is worth it. The insights you gain, if they're genuine, carry their own reward.

I've mentioned several times that Ajaan Fuang never certified whether you had attained a particular level of concentration or a particular level of insight. He had lots of reasons for doing this, but one is that if the insight really is genuine, it's its own reward. You don't need to be patted on the back. You know for yourself that there's less suffering. You see something in the mind that you didn't see before and as a result you've learned a new skill. You've unburdened the mind. It doesn't suffer in the way it used to. That's of great worth in and of itself.

So keep looking into the possibilities. Always be open to the idea that things you thought were impossible, burdens you thought could never be laid down — in fact they seemed such a permanent part of the mind that you didn't even realize that you've been carrying them around — *can* be laid down. Explore that possibility. That's what the meditation is all about.

Warrior Knowledge

October 13, 2000

There's a constant dialogue going on in the mind: "This is this." "No, it's that." "This should be this." "That should be that; you like this and you don't like that." All kinds of voices — and in many cases the voices are totally untrained. They're just things we've picked up from here or there, and we carry them around. This is the baggage in our mind.

The Buddha said that the mind can be at peace only when it's one, but for most of us there are two, three, four, five, six voices going at it, with all their preconceptions, saying, "You've got to do this, you've got to do that." And unless you examine them, they can force you to suffer in a lot of ways. We hold onto so many things, not so much because we like them but because we're afraid that if we don't hold onto them something even worse is going to happen. We're afraid that if we don't do things this way or that, we're going to get all screwed up. So we hold on and create suffering for ourselves.

This is why, as the mind begins to settle down, one of the big issues you've got to deal with is the range of different voices in the mind that get in the way. Some of them are random, others are more persistent, more pervasive, more persuasive, more in control. You've got to learn how to put a question mark next to them. If anything gets in the way of concentration, put a question mark next to it. "Do you really believe that? Is that kind of thinking really right? Is it really useful?"

That's the main issue: How useful is that kind of thinking? When you start asking this question, you begin to see how much you've been holding onto things you've never really examined in the past. You just accepted them because other people said they were true, or they sounded right, or maybe they worked once, and then you held onto them as a habit. So you have to make it a rule within yourself: An unexamined voice isn't worth listening to.

That's why the Buddha said that there's no jhana without discernment; no discernment without jhana; no solid concentration without understanding; no understanding without solid concentration. The two have to go together. In other

words you've got to have at least some understanding of the workings of the mind before you can really settle down. Otherwise you'll fall for all the old tricks the mind's been playing on itself, saying, "You've got to think about this, you've got to get involved in that, you can't neglect this, you've got to look out for that." You need to learn how to see through those voices.

That's what they are: just disembodied voices floating around there in the mind. Learn how to put a question mark next to them, saying, "I wonder if that's really true? Maybe I can look into it some other time." Then put the issue aside and go back to work, focusing on the breath. As the mind gets more and more quiet and still, you begin to see these voices more clearly, and other voices that have been hiding out of sight begin to come up to the surface.

This is how these two processes — the stilling and the understanding — help each other. The quieter you are, the more you can see; the more you can see, the more you're able to cut through the subtle disturbances that keep the mind from being quiet. This is why there's no such thing as a separate tranquility technique or a separate vipassana technique. Any technique you follow, anything you *will* the mind into focusing on or doing: That's a concentration technique. You can "do" concentration; you can't "do" insight. Insight is something that arises as the mind gets still, and often it's unexpected. You can't map it out saying, "First you're going to gain insight into dependent co-arising and then into not-self." These things vary from person to person — what you happen to notice and question as you're doing your work.

It's like the difference between an artisan and an artist. An artisan has a particular technique, a particular craft that he uses, and he may get very good at it, but unless he develops the curiosity that advances his art, he just stays as a craftsman. But if you begin to exercise your ingenuity — "Well, how about trying this? How about trying that?" questioning this, questioning that; trying this, trying that: That's when you become an artist. That's when the art becomes your own. And the same principle applies in the practice. Curiosity and ingenuity make all the difference — when you learn to question your old patterns and test new possibilities.

This is why it's so important to be able to come out to a quiet, secluded place like this where you can get out of your ordinary ruts, begin to air out the mind, and start questioning the attitudes that seem to work in your daily life. You begin to take them apart and realize that they don't actually work so well, that they create a lot of unnecessary suffering.

As the Buddha said, simply living as a human being involves pain. There's the pain of the body, the pain of having to be dependent on things. We have this body that needs sustenance, and in order to gain sustenance we have to work. We have to depend on the work of other people. It's a real burden for a wide range of people and other living beings — a burden that's part and parcel with birth, aging, illness, and death. As long as you're alive, this burden is unavoidable.

But there's also a lot of suffering that's totally unnecessary: the things we inflict on ourselves through our own lack of skill in managing our minds. That's something we can work on in the meditation, learning how to deal more skillfully with issues as they arise, recognizing which patterns of thought are skillful and don't lead to suffering, which ones are unskillful and do lead to suffering, learning how to stop acting, thinking, and speaking in unskillful ways. That's what our practice is all about. When we stop doing unskillful things, the unnecessary suffering we inflict on ourselves will stop. There may be feelings of pain in the body, but there's no suffering in the mind.

So the practice is a matter of developing skill. Ancient cultures made a distinction between two types of knowledge: scribe knowledge and warrior knowledge. Scribe knowledge is the knowledge that can be defined in words. Warrior knowledge is the knowledge that comes from acting, from developing a skill. And even though we need to depend to some extent on scribe knowledge as we meditate, the meditation itself develops warrior knowledge.

We learn the words in the texts so that we can get a basic idea of what the problem is and what needs to be done, but the actual knowledge we're working on comes from developing the mind. In Pali it's called *bhavanamaya-pañña*, the discernment that comes from developing. In other words, as you try to develop concentration in the mind, you begin to realize things about the mind you didn't know before. As you develop mindfulness, as you develop persistence — all these qualities that you work on cultivating — you begin to learn things about the mind that were previously hidden. Obscure. That's the kind of insight, the kind of discernment that's really going to make a difference.

So as you're meditating, think of yourself as a warrior doing battle with ignorance. You're working on a warrior's skill: the survival of the mind with as little suffering as possible. That's what you're working toward. But you have to understand what it means to be an intelligent warrior. People who aren't warriors have picked up a lot of strange ideas about what warriors do, thinking that you

have to attack everything as soon as it arises, that you can't give an inch to anyone at all. That's a dumb warrior, a warrior who's going to die young. An intelligent warrior takes on battles only when he realizes he can win them and that they're worth winning.

At the same time a good warrior uses whatever's at hand. We talked today about having to fall back on *buddho* as a "primary-school" meditation technique. Well, if that's what you need, don't be ashamed to use it. A good warrior isn't ashamed to use any weapon that works. Whatever weapons are needed for the battle at hand, those are the ones you've got to use. This is why a good meditator keeps lots of tools, lots of weapons on hand — because when the defilements come, they don't all come in one shape or form. They don't always attack from the same side. Sometimes the mind feels lazy and is very ingenious in thinking of reasons for letting up in the practice. Sometimes it turns on itself and starts browbeating itself for not working harder and harder. Well, that strictness, that sternness, can also be a defilement if it's not helpful for the meditation.

This is when it gets really tricky, for often the voices of defilement can disguise themselves as the voice of the Dhamma. You've got to watch out for that. When you're not quite sure whether what the mind is saying is true or false, skillful or unskillful, just go back to being an observer. Look at the thinking in the mind simply as a process of arising and passing away in which you don't have to get involved. At the very least you'll survive whatever's coming through the mind; oftentimes you'll have a chance to understand it. You'll begin to see that this goes with that, that goes with this, when you think in this way then this is going to happen, when you think in that way then that's going to happen. When you've seen these connections, then the next time that kind of thinking comes around, you're better armed, better prepared for it.

So as you meditate, you've got lots of techniques. You've got *buddho*, you've got the breath, you've got your ability to analyze things when analysis works, you've got your ability to stay still when it doesn't. In other words, as a meditator you've got to be skilled in lots of approaches, just as a warrior has to be skilled in lots of strategies. What this comes down to is that whatever works in clearing up the suffering of the mind, whatever keeps the mind from creating burdens for itself, whatever technique works: That qualifies as the Dhamma, whether or not it's in the texts, whether or not you heard it from the teacher.

After a while, as you look back on the things that work, you'll find that they fall into patterns, but don't be surprised if the patterns aren't the ones you would

have expected beforehand. After all, where do your expectations come from? They come from your past ignorance combined with your past knowledge, all mixed up together. So when all the things you've read in the books don't work, just sit down and look at the problem. Step out of it. Flip it over. Use your ingenuity to find some way around it. If your approach works in alleviating the unnecessary suffering the mind creates for itself, you've found a new side to the Dhamma.

As you stop creating suffering for yourself, you'll find it easier to be skillful and helpful with other people as well. This is why this is not a selfish practice. The principle of goodwill is not just an idle wish, saying, "May all living beings be happy," and then leaving it at that. It also means actually being kind to yourself, not creating the unnecessary suffering that you've been piling on yourself all the time. When you find that your mind is less piled-on like this, it's easier to feel sympathy for other people who are piling burdens on their minds, too. When you're unburdened, it's easier to help them in a genuine way. That's why the benefits of the practice go not only inward but outward as well.

Still, the real work has to be done right here inside, finding where those unnecessary burdens are — the burdensome ideas, the burdensome notions the mind piles on itself, saying that it has to react like this, has to think like that. Once you find them, figure out how to let them go. That's the kind of battle you want to take on, the kind that's really worth winning. And when you can win it, your victory is a gift not only to yourself, but also to everyone around you.

Go, Do Jhana

July 17, 2004

There are many passages in the Canon where the Buddha — after explaining the path of practice, or talking about the urgency of following the path — sends the monks back to meditate. “Look,” he says. “Over there are roots of trees, over there are empty dwellings. Meditate. Don’t regret later that you didn’t meditate, that you didn’t practice.” The word he uses for going to meditate is “to go do jhana” — *jhayati* is the verb in Pali. It’s a homonym with a verb for burning, as when a flame burns steadily. They have lots of different words for burning in Pali — words for raging fires, words for smoldering fires — but the verb for a steady burn, as in the flame of an oil lamp, is *jhayati*. And the same verb is used for doing jhana. As you practice concentration, you try to make the mind burn steadily, with a clean, clear flame. Flames that flicker up and down are hard to read by, but a steady flame is one you can read by clearly. That’s the quality you’re trying to develop so that you can read the mind.

How do you create that steady flame? Two qualities of mind are basic. One is directed thought; the other is evaluation. You direct your thoughts to a particular topic like the breath. Keep reminding yourself to stay with the breath. Then you evaluate it. How is the breath going? Where do you feel the breath? When the breath comes in, what are the sensations that let you know it’s coming in? When it goes out, what sensations let you know it’s going out? Are those sensations comfortable? If they are, let them be. If they’re not, you can change them. What this means is you can focus anywhere in the body where it’s clearly telling you, “Now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out.” And notice how you’re maintaining that focus. Is it a comfortable place to stay focused? Are the sensations themselves comfortable sensations? What can you do with the breath to change them if they’re not? If they’re comfortable can you make them even more comfortable? This is all part of evaluation. This is how you get started on jhana practice.

Some people classify this as a *samatha* or tranquility practice, but the Buddha himself said that you need two qualities to do jhana properly. One is *samatha*, or

tranquility. The other is vipassana, or insight. In other words, tranquility and insight together form the two sides of the practice we're doing, and the Buddha recommends that you get them balanced. So it's not the case that you just do tranquility practice and then you drop it to do insight practice. A lot of people think that way, though, and so the question often comes up, "How much tranquility do you need before you can do insight?" That's a question never addressed in the Canon because they didn't see things in those terms. They saw tranquility and insight as two sides of one practice. Both sides are essential. Sometimes you find that one side comes up before the other, sometimes they arise together, but ideally they foster each other. If you have one without the other, you have to strengthen the one that's lacking, so that you can bring things into balance.

The samatha side is closely related to directed thought. How do you steady your directed thought? How do you steady the mind? How do you get it to settle down, to gain confidence in its object? That's largely a question of making it comfortable, yet at the same time maintaining enough alertness and awareness so that you don't blur out. To make it comfortable you've got to get sensitive to what's going on right now. This is really important. When you're with the breath, try to be as directly *with* the sensations as you can and notice how good they feel. Is this something you can settle into? Once you've settled in, how do you stay there? What do you do to maintain it?

This is evaluation — and it's where the beginning of insight comes in, for if you don't have any insight you start drifting off. Concentration is not simply a matter of will power, of forcing yourself to stay in place. There has to be some understanding as well. You develop it by evaluating the breath, evaluating your focus, to see what needs to be adjusted so that the mind can settle down and stay there, stay there, stay there consistently, without wandering off.

As the mind gets steadier, you can then drop the evaluation and simply let the mind be one with the object. That's how it enters the higher levels of jhana. But that doesn't mean you're totally done with evaluation, simply that it gets more refined. You're still going to have to deal with disturbances as you try to make your concentration more solid and continuous, as you try to keep the mind centered at all times. You get the mind into a good solid state of concentration and then, when it's firmly there, step back to evaluate it in terms of the subtle disturbances still present within it. This is where your powers of evaluation take on the deeper questions of insight: How should fabrications — these

disturbances that come and go — be regarded? How should they be investigated? How should they be seen with insight? How should they be regarded as stressful? When a thought comes into the mind, can you look at it simply as an instance of stress, rather than getting involved in the content of the thought?

There are several steps here. First of all, see that the thought is inconstant. It comes and it goes. It's a disturbance. Second, see that this disturbance is stressful. Keep your analysis just at that level: stress arising, stress passing away. Don't get involved in what the thought is about. Just say, "Here comes some stress. Do I want to get involved in that? Well, no, it's stress." That makes it easier to stay away from it, easier to keep the mind focused, easier to keep you from getting involved. When you see that it's not self, you don't have to get involved in it. You don't have to identify with it. You don't have to take it on — which also means you don't have to push it away. If it's there, let it be in the background. The more quickly you catch sight of it simply as an instance of stress, the more easily you can tell yourself, "I don't have to go there." As you get more skilled at this, you hardly even give it time to form into a coherent thought.

We have a tendency that, once a thought arises, we want to peer into it: "What's this about?" And if it doesn't seem to make sense, "Well, how can we make sense out of this?" We get more and more involved in taking it on, making it an intelligible thought, an intelligent thought, making it a thought worth thinking. But if you see it simply as an instance of stress and catch it more and more quickly, you allow it to be a stupid thought and let it go. The next time around you allow it to be just a half-formed thought and you let it go. You allow yourself not to have to peer into and straighten out everything that comes into the mind. This makes it easier to stay focused.

As for the question of how to investigate these fabrications, investigate them as skillful or unskillful. It's not the case that all thoughts are useless. Some are useful, very useful, but they have their time and place. Thoughts related to the breath are useful for your purposes right now. Thoughts related to other things — what you did yesterday, what you're going to do tomorrow — are useless. They're unskillful at the moment. Because we're so used to thinking, so adept at thinking, it's skillful right now to focus on learning how to be adept at *not* thinking about anything except the breath. So think about the breath. After all, the breath itself is a fabrication, a fabrication you want to hold on to.

So it's not the case that when you see how things are stressful and inconstant, you let go of all of them right off the bat. You first have to focus on maintaining the ones that are skillful, and letting go of the unskillful ones. If you have trouble getting away from a particular type of unskillful thinking, you can learn to analyze it to see how it leads where you don't really want to go.

Like that chant we had on the body just now. That's useful for lust. When you find yourself focused on lust, remind yourself: What exactly is this object that you're getting so worked up about? What's in there? Is it something you really want? Do you really want to go where the lust will lead you? If you apply the perspective of that chant just now, you're more inclined to say, "Well, not really." And the lust subsides. So that kind of thinking is useful. When it has done its task, you can put it aside. Get back to the breath.

So the questions that give rise to insight are questions, one, dealing with ways of not identifying with your thoughts, and then, two, since you don't have to identify with them, what *do* you do with them? You see when they're useful and when they're not. They can lead you in directions you want to go or in directions you don't. You're learning to look at thoughts not as sources of content but as parts of a causal chain. They're important not so much for what they say as for what they do.

This way you understand that even though you may not want to identify with any fabrications, still there are the fabrications that form the path. Those are the ones you want to encourage, because they're skillful. Ultimately, they take you beyond fabrication. This is a part of insight. The fabrications that keep the mind still and steady, that keep the mind engaged in the pursuit of what's skillful, are the ones you want to encourage.

So this practice of steadying the mind, maintaining that still, steady flame, requires both tranquility and insight. And, of course, once the mind settles down, the insight gets more refined. The tranquility gets stronger.

In this way the practice of jhana depends both on tranquility and on insight, and it creates the conditions for more refined tranquility and more refined insight, step by step. They all go together. Understand them as different tendencies or qualities of mind, but do your best not to see them as radically separate. You don't have to worry about, "When do I do insight? When do I do concentration?" They all come together. The question then becomes: If you begin to notice an imbalance in the mind, how do you bring it back into balance? If you're thinking too much and it's snuffing out your concentration, drop the

thinking for a while. If your concentration is getting too dull, learn to probe it with a few questions. And in trying to find that balance, you develop sensitivity to the mind — the basis for discernment.

This is the whole purpose of jhana practice. It's not a matter of showing off: "Well, I've got the third jhana; you've only got the second." Or, "I jumped through all eight jhana hoops in eight days. How about you?" That's not the purpose. The purpose is to get the mind steady enough, long enough, so it can see. When it sees, it can let go. When it lets go, it's free. That's what this practice is all about. That's what the Buddha meant when he said, "Go, do jhana." It encompasses all of the aspects of developing the mind.

Three Levels of Concentration

April 14, 2005

Ajaan Suwat used to say that settling into concentration is like falling asleep — except that you don't go to sleep. And that's where it gets tricky. In other words, how do you bring the mind to stillness and yet stay awake?

It basically happens in three stages. You start with your ordinary, everyday level of concentration. It's called "momentary concentration": the kind that allows you to listen to things, to memorize things, to read a book and remember what you've read so that it all makes sense. That kind of concentration is something we all have, and it lasts for a moment, or it lasts for a series of moments. You might find yourself slipping off and coming back, slipping off, coming back, but at least there's enough continuity so that you can remember.

That's the kind of concentration you start out with when you focus on the breath, or focus on *buddho*, or whatever your meditation object is. You find the mind slipping off but you bring it back. It slips off and you bring it back. There's kind of a rhythm to it, like music: You play a musical phrase, and then you pause; another phrase, and then a pause. But there's enough continuity so that the phrases form a larger whole. The same holds true when you start trying to stay with the breath. You may stay with a couple breaths and wander off, say, maybe between the in-breath and the out-breath, or the out-breath and the in-breath, and then start up again. This is normal. The important point is that you keep coming back, coming back, coming back.

As you work with this kind of concentration, you begin to realize why there are pauses. This level of concentration can't withstand displeasure, boredom, or pain — anything negative or unpleasant. Even the slightest little bit of displeasure and it gets knocked off. The mind loses its focus because of that. This is why the way to move on from this stage of concentration to the next one is to learn how to work precisely with the sense discomfort. You don't have to start with major pains, just the slight discomfort you may sense in the breath. Maybe it's a little too long, too short, too shallow, too deep — whatever. You learn to adjust it, you learn to work with it. That gives you confidence. You don't have to

be afraid of these things. A little bit of discomfort comes up and you can deal with it. This allows your concentration to get more continuous.

This brings you to the next level, which is called “threshold,” “access,” or “neighborhood” concentration. It’s in the neighborhood of getting really settled down, but it’s not quite there yet. This is where the mind grows fairly peaceful, but at this stage it can easily lose its focus. As I said, with momentary concentration, the problem is that it can’t withstand displeasure. Well, the problem with access concentration is that it can’t withstand pleasure. It loses focus when it runs into real pleasure. This is the way the mind normally is. It’s so used to falling asleep when things get relaxed that it just lets go. People who tend to have visions will have visions in this state. People who don’t, still find that they drift off very easily. They fall into what Ajaan Lee called delusion-concentration: *moha-samadhi*. Things are quiet, pleasant, still, but you have no idea where you are.

So the important thing in this stage is to give the mind work to do in the pleasure. Just as with momentary concentration you focus directly on dealing with the problem — its weakness in the face of pain or displeasure — here the problem is the mind’s weakness in the face of pleasure, so you focus on the pleasure. This is why Ajaan Lee has you spread the breath throughout the body: both to give you work to do within the pleasure *and* to enlarge your frame of reference. Normally, as you get more settled down, and the breath gets softer, more refined, it gets harder and harder to keep track of. So you need to expand your frame of reference to include the whole body. *That* you can keep track of, even if the in-and-out movements of the breath grow still.

There are lots of ways of working with the breath in the body. One is to stay focused on the same spot you’re always focused on, and just broaden your sense of awareness — the range of your awareness — so that it encompasses the whole body. Then you allow the breath to adjust so that it feels good, as good as possible, throughout the whole body. Another way is to go through the body, section by section, working on the breath energy in each section until it feels pleasant, and then letting the pleasure in all the sections connect. This way you get used to working with your pleasure.

This is one of the distinctive features of the Buddha’s teachings. He doesn’t take pain or pleasure as an end in and of itself. Each of them has its uses. When pain comes, what do you *do* with it? When pleasure comes, what do you *do* with it? Instead of simply suffering from the pain or enjoying the pleasure, you learn

how to work with these things so that they can take the mind to a deeper level of concentration. What happens when you work with that sense of pleasure and broaden your awareness is that the mind gets so totally involved as a whole that it can't do anything else. It's as if you've nailed its hands and its feet down to the floor, so all it can do is just *be* there. Or you might make another comparison: The mind that slips off to the past or the future has to be a very small mind. It's almost as if it needed to go down a little tube to go to the future or to the past. But when the mind is large like this it can't fit down the tube. It's stuck. If it's going to go, it has to shrink.

So as you're sitting here with this broadened awareness — centered in one spot but filling the whole body — you're really fixed in the present moment. This is why this third level of concentration is called “fixed penetration.” And from that point on, all you have to do is maintain that state, learn to keep your balance there. The breath will go still — sometimes it even seems to stop. Just let it stop. You don't need the in-and-out breath anymore, for the brain is using less oxygen, and you're getting all the oxygen you need through your pores. Remember the gold woman in *Goldfinger*? Remember why she died? Because the gold paint had covered her pores, and she couldn't get the oxygen she needed through her skin. This shows that there's already a lot of oxygen coming through the skin. So when the breath stops coming in and out, don't worry. You've got all the oxygen you need. The body can be still, filled with awareness. And that's it. This is the state of concentration that doesn't get waylaid either by pleasure or by pain. It's the kind of concentration you want. You get here by letting go of other thoughts, but also by being very focused on the breath.

This is where it's different from falling asleep. When you fall asleep, things get still and then you just let go totally, let go of all your mindfulness, all your alertness, and move off into another stage of becoming, as the texts call it. Whatever little dream world happens to appear in the mind as we fall asleep, that's becoming in action, and it's usually in this state of threshold concentration.

So this is what you have to work past. Learn not to get carried off by the pleasure, the sense of ease. Tell yourself: There's work to be done. It requires skill. If you're not skillful, working with the pleasure can create pain and the mind won't want to settle down. But keep working at it again and again, and after a while you'll develop skill. You do your work, but you work in pleasure. You create an even more agreeable place to stay as you work with the sense of energy in the body in whatever way gives results. Ajaan Lee gives some

recommendations, but notice that in his Dhamma talks he talks about the breath energy in all kinds of ways. There's no one way of conceiving the breath that's going to work for everybody.

So explore and work things out on your own. After all, it is your body that you're settling into. You listen to the instructions to gain pointers, but you also have to use your own imagination, your own ingenuity, your own powers of observation to see exactly how the energy in the body is comfortable or not, where you can maximize the comfortable spots and let everything spread so that the comfort all connects. Then you learn how to stay there.

And don't think of the staying there as just waiting blankly until you're allowed to do insight practice. The skill of learning how to stay in concentration develops precisely the mental qualities you're going to need for insight — because you're going to get more and more sensitive to even the slightest fabrications of thought in the mind. You learn to see right through them and not get carried off into their little worlds. And that's precisely the skill you're going to need in order to see fabrication just as that — fabrication. It's like taking the old Zen story of the finger pointing at the moon and turning it around: You *don't* want to look at the moon; you want to look at the finger — because the finger is what's fooling you. It's pointing you *away* from what it's doing. You don't want to look where your thoughts are pointing your attention; you want to look at them simply as fabrications.

So all the important work in developing concentration and insight happens right here: learning how to deal first with pain and then with pleasure, so that the mind can settle down in a way that's still, solid, and very alert, no matter what.

Respect for Emptiness

November 15, 2003

Respect for concentration. It's interesting that of the factors of the path — virtue, concentration, and discernment — the Buddha singled out concentration as something worthy of respect. At one point he called it the heart of the path. And yet the reason he needs to remind us to respect it is because we tend to overlook it, to step on it. Those little moments of stillness in the mind: We tend to ignore them, we don't pay them much attention. We're so much more interested in running after *things*, getting the mind all stirred up, yet ignoring those little moments of stillness between what basically come down to moments of disturbance in the mind.

We see the disturbance as interesting and the stillness as boring, and so we keep running after whatever flashes in and looks interesting. But after we look at it for a while, we see that there's not much there. So we drop that, the mind goes still for a moment, and then we move to something else. Those little moments of stillness are pushed so far in the background that we hardly even see them — and yet these little moments of stillness are what the Buddha wants us to work with, to respect.

Without these little moments, for one thing, the mind would go crazy. It wouldn't have any rest at all. At the same time, if you're going to develop stronger concentration, you've got to start with these little moments. Start connecting them up. Resist the temptation to go running after any new flashy distraction that comes barging into the mind. Make up your mind that you're not going to fall for the hype. You're going to stay right here with the breath. The breath is not that colorful an object — at least on the surface. You find, though, as you get to know it, that the more you spend time with it, the more it has to offer, the more absorbing it gets. But to reach that state of absorption, you have to start out with small moments of concentration, of stillness. Pay attention to them, look after them.

To describe this process, Ajaan Fuang often used the Thai word *prakhawng*, which describes what you would do if a child was learning to walk and you were

standing behind it. You want it to learn how to walk on its own, but you don't want it to fall. So you're gently hovering around it to make sure it doesn't fall, while at the same time not preventing it from walking on its own. That's the kind of attitude you should have toward your concentration.

In the beginning you need to have faith that the concentration is going to be a good thing. The passages you've read in the texts are there to give you inspiration: "a sense of rapture permeating the body." The image they give is of a spring of water welling up, permeating a lake; or of lotuses saturated with water from the tip of their roots to the tip of their buds. Sounds good. Something you'd like to experience. The images are attractive for a reason. One: They're really precise descriptions of the levels of concentration. Two: They're designed to make you want to go there, to remind you that these little states of concentration that seem so unpromising on their own, if you stitch them together, develop a strength, develop a depth, provide a sense of intense gratification that they wouldn't if left on their own. When you take these lessons to heart and carry them through, you find that the sense of peace, space, and stillness in the mind becomes more and more attractive. You want to move into that sense of peace for good.

The Buddha calls this taking emptiness as your dwelling. Instead of focusing on the figures in the foreground, you focus on the still space around them. You realize that this space is an appealing space. It's quiet, undisturbed. "There's only this modicum of disturbance": the singleness of mind focused on the breath, or whatever your topic of meditation is. You let go of all other concerns. When you do that, you realize how much weight you've been carrying around, how many unnecessary burdens you've been creating for yourself. You come to appreciate how good it is to have this still space in the mind surrounding everything else. You want it to become more and more pervasive. It's so easy to lose, though, because you've still got that old habit of running after things you think are important or interesting, things you think have a lot of value, things you've got to look into, to look after all the time.

So the Buddha gives you tools — the three characteristics — for undoing those habits, to help you realize that those things aren't really worth all that much worry, worth all that much care. They're not worth burdening the mind. It's important to note, though, that he doesn't have you contemplate things radically in terms of the three characteristics until you've got this state of concentration and you appreciate it. Now, sometimes he does have you use the three

characteristics in a less radical way to help you get into a state of concentration, to help clear away the entanglements that keep the mind from settling down in the first place. But for the really radical analysis, he has you wait until concentration is solid.

Some people start analyzing things radically in terms of the three characteristics before they have sufficient skill in concentration, and it can get pretty depressing, pretty disorienting. It can short-circuit the practice. You manage a little bit of concentration and then you lose it, so you console yourself by saying that you've gained all the insight you need from concentration. You've seen that it's impermanent, so you don't have to do it anymore. And that short-circuits the path.

But if you contemplate the three characteristics in the context of a well-mastered state of concentration, it actually accomplishes something. It becomes liberating. You begin to realize that these disturbances in the mind that tend to wipe out the emptiness, create problems in the emptiness, destroy the emptiness, cut it up in little pieces, are not worth all that much care. They're not worth all that much worry or concern. You don't have to go flowing out after them. That's the point in the practice where the Buddha has you think about the three characteristics in a radical way, to see that the things that you've really worried about, the things that you've really held on to tight, are pretty empty, too. This is where their emptiness becomes a positive thing instead of being depressing or nihilistic. It means you don't have to burden yourself with them. You can live with them in such a way that they don't put any weight on the mind.

When the Buddha talks about emptiness in the Pali Canon, he does so in two major contexts. One is this sense of dwelling in emptiness as the mind gets still and the emptiness begins to surround things. That's the side of emptiness that's obviously positive. Then there are other passages where he talks about emptiness in the sense that things are empty of self or anything pertaining to self. In other words, they're not you, not yours. They don't belong to you. Out of context, that sounds kind of negative. The things you used to pin your hopes on are not really you or yours, they're not under your control. If you take this teaching out of context, it sounds like you're depriving yourself of something or that these things are negative.

Actually, the things in and of themselves are not the problem. The problem is our attachment to them, the attachment that keeps destroying our concentration, destroying our stillness of mind. When you see things as inconstant, stressful,

and empty of self from the perspective of trying to maintain this dwelling in emptiness, then the contemplation of their emptiness serves a positive purpose. It makes it easier not to get disturbed by them. The two different types of emptiness begin to connect. You can maintain this spacious sense of dwelling in emptiness and, at the same time, the things that used to bother you, the things that used to weigh you down, become empty, too: empty of self. Because they're empty, they don't disturb the emptiness of your awareness. You can live together. You can live with these things but not be weighed down by them. The emptiness of your mental dwelling isn't disturbed by the emptiness of the things that used to disturb it. When it's not disturbed, you can look into it more carefully, to the point where you see that even the emptiness of concentration is fabricated. It, too, is empty of anything worth taking as you or yours. When you see this, you lose the passion that keeps you fabricating it, and in that way the mind is released. That's when these two different meanings or the two different contexts for emptiness come together in a way that creates freedom for the mind.

This positive intent applies to of all the passages where the Buddha focuses on the negative side of things. There's a passage in the *Sutta Nipata* where he describes how, as a young man, he looked at the world with dismay. The human race as a whole seemed like fish fighting in a dwindling puddle of water. There's not enough water for them, so all the fish are struggling with each other. That's the way the world is. People are constantly struggling as if there weren't enough in the world to feed everybody, to clothe everybody, to give everybody shelter. It's a constant competition, and everywhere he looked he found that everything was laid claim to. There wasn't a spot in the world where you could simply be free. There wasn't a spot in the world where you wouldn't be squeezed out by somebody else. This gave him a strong sense of *samvega*, a strong sense of dismay. But then he realized that the problem was not in the world. It lay in the heart. There was an "arrow in the heart," as he called it. If you could pull that arrow out, then there would be no more problem.

His description of the world may sound pessimistic, but it's there for a positive purpose. If we didn't see the world as confining, that would indicate that our hearts are small. But our hearts are large. Our problem is that we're trying to use the world to fill up the heart and that's impossible. The world isn't large enough for the heart. The only thing that can fill the heart is the sense of emptiness — the peace, the lack of disturbance — that comes from concentration, from focusing the mind on a particular object, and even more so

from letting go of attachments. Our problem is that we're trying to fill up our lives with the wrong things. We're trying to fill them up with *things*, rather than filling them up with the space and peace that can come as we work with the concentration, as we develop discernment.

Another negative-seeming passage is the one where the Buddha talks about the body in terms of its 32 parts. You take the body apart, look at each piece, and realize that there's nothing there in the body that you'd want to get attached to. You've got lungs, you've got a liver, you've got intestines, and you've got the contents of your intestines — all the way down the list. Many people object to this contemplation, saying that this is a negative way of looking at the body, but the purpose of this contemplation is to free the mind. It leads to a sense of lightness; it helps you realize that you don't have to take such obsessive care of the body. You don't have to be so attached to it; you don't have to regard it as an end in and of itself. It's a useful tool and we need it in the practice, but when we make it an end in itself we burden the mind, we weigh it down. The purpose of this analysis is to free the mind, to give it a sense of lightness, to fill the mind up with the space of concentration.

So these ways of looking at the world that seem so negative actually serve a very positive purpose: to remind ourselves of the happiness that comes when we don't confine ourselves to narrow desires, narrow obsessions; when we can free the mind from the straitjackets it's imposed on itself; when we can pull out that arrow, the arrow of the craving based on the ignorant notion that somehow we're going to get satisfaction out of our body, satisfaction out of our possessions, satisfaction out of our relationships, satisfaction out of building a nice coherent philosophy, satisfaction out of the world. We look at these things in this way to see through them, to realize that our attachments, our clingings, are nothing but forms of confinement for the mind.

When we have concentration as a counterbalance, it's easy to follow through with this sort of analysis and not get depressed, for it opens the mind to stronger, more lasting, more solid, more spacious states of peace. So at whatever stage you are in the practice, remember that respect for concentration forms the basis for everything else: appreciation for the stillness in the mind, those little spaces that may not seem all that impressive in the beginning but can lead to true happiness if you take them seriously, if you treat them with respect.

This is another common theme throughout the Buddha's teachings: that little, impressive things in the mind, if you pay them attention, if you look after

them — if you, in Ajaan Fuang's word, *prakhawng* them — can more than repay the effort needed to develop them. The potential for happiness lies in little, unexpected things that may seem unremarkable but really show their true colors when you pay them respect. As in those fairy tales where there's a little ugly troll whom everybody despises: When a little child takes the time to show a little respect to the troll, the troll reveals his treasure of gold and gives it to the child. It's the same with these qualities of the mind. When you show them respect, they give you their gold.

The Mind's Immune System

August, 2002

We're here to look after the health of our minds because the mind has a tendency to fall prey to diseases. There's a passage in the *Udana* where the Buddha right after his Awakening surveys the world, and he sees everybody on fire with the fevers of passion, aversion, and delusion. So when we talk about the diseases of the mind here, we're not talking about the ones that would throw you into a mental institution. We're talking about the diseases everybody is born with. We come into the world carrying germs inside.

Or you might say that we're born with a low resistance to disease. The mind doesn't have its immune system up, and as a result it catches fire — catches these diseases — when germ-laden stimuli come in from the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body.

As you know, we live in a world full of germs, but they can take hold in the body only when our resistance is down. The same principle holds with the mind: There are all sorts of things out there that would spark passion, aversion, and delusion, but only when our resistance is down do these things actually take over the mind. There are times when you can look at something really beautiful and feel no passion at all. Events can be really bad and yet there's no aversion. That's a sign that your resistance is on a high level; your immune system is working.

So the cure the Buddha offers is a double one. As a stopgap measure he says to practice restraint of the senses so you don't take in too many germs from outside. If you notice that when you focus on certain details the mind gets worked up, don't focus on those details. Often when we hear "restraint of the senses," it sounds like we've got to put blinders on — we're not allowed to look, we're not allowed to listen, which would cause all sorts of repressed things to come boiling up out of frustration inside. That's the image we have. But that's not what the Buddha's talking about. He says to watch for the details. What are the little things that set you off? Oftentimes that's just what the problem is: the little details. When you focus on the details and not on the whole thing, the mind comes up with a lopsided or unbalanced response. So if something with beautiful

details is giving rise to passion, look at its repulsive details. That's why we chant that contemplation of the thirty-two parts of the body almost every morning — as an antidote, to give you some perspective.

As for people or situations that get you angry, look on the good side, look for the good details. Don't focus on the details that get you upset. As Ajaan Lee says, "If you look at things with only one eye, you see only one side of the situation." If you look at both sides, that helps get rid of delusion.

So that's the stopgap measure: restraint of the senses. If you're really diligent in practicing it, things get a lot easier in the meditation.

Our problem is that in the course of the day we leave our mind on a long leash and let it get involved in all kinds of stuff. Then when the time comes to meditate, it's like a dog on a long leash. You've got to pull here and unwrap it there because the dog's gotten the leash wound around a lamppost, wound around a bench, wound around bushes and all kinds of stuff. By the time you've unwound it, the meditation session is over.

At the same time, the mind hasn't just gotten wound around things. It's also picked up all kinds of germs, and you've got to sit here treating its illnesses. But if you really exercise restraint over the senses — if you notice when the mind is getting worked up in an unskillful direction *and you counter it immediately* — that's developing mindfulness and alertness right there. So you're strengthening your immune system at the same time you're keeping germs from coming in.

The enemies of our inner immune system are the mental qualities called, "*anusaya*" — one of those Pali terms that's really difficult to translate. Sometimes it's translated as "latent tendency," because literally "*saya*" means to "lie down;" and "*anu*" means to "be with" or "following." But if you look how the word is used in the texts, it's more like "obsession." In other words, your thoughts keep *lying down* with a particular object, a particular pattern. They're obsessed.

There are particular types of obsessions, and these are the things that cause trouble. For instance, when pain comes, the pain itself is not all that big an issue, but on its heels comes the obsession of resistance. You get obsessed with resisting the pain, and then you start looking for an escape. And because you see sensual pleasure as the only escape from pain, that's where you go looking. You want to find some sort of sensual pleasure to cover up the pain, get rid of the pain, push it away.

Then once the sensual pleasure comes, there's the obsession of passion. You get obsessed with passion for that pleasure. You want to keep it going to

counteract the pain, to protect you from the pain.

And as for delusion, that usually centers on feelings that are neither pleasant nor painful: neutral feelings. You don't pay much attention to them. You don't really see them, because you're out looking for the pleasure and trying to push away the pain. The neutral feelings seem unimportant, and so a lot of delusion comes into the mind right at that point. That's where the Buddha says the ignorance obsession tends to focus.

He said that these obsessions circle around the pain, the pleasure, the feeling of neither pleasure nor pain. They're the things that cause problems in your immune system.

Now, the mind's immune system doesn't work quite like the body's. To strengthen it requires understanding — understanding that there are alternatives to the ways you ordinarily react to pleasure or pain. The texts talk about three ways of doing this. In the *Culavedalla Sutta*, Visakha, a layman, asks his ex-wife, Dhammadinna — who's now a nun — some questions on the Dhamma. After she explains these three obsessions — resistance, passion, ignorance — he asks, "Is there passion obsession with every feeling of pleasure? Resistance obsession with every feeling of pain or disease? Ignorance obsession with every feeling of neither pleasure nor pain?" She answers, "No," and goes on to explain: "You can focus on the pleasure of the first jhana, and the passion obsession doesn't come into play there." It's a different kind of interest, a different kind of attachment. There is attachment to that state, but it's not quite the same as the obsession you have for sensual objects. It actually builds up your resistance to those obsessions.

As for the desire for Awakening, she says, "Even though it may be unpleasant to think about how far you have to go, or how much you want to be awakened and you're not awakened yet, it's still a *useful* unpleasant feeling." A lot of people say, "Don't let yourself have the desire for Awakening, because you're going to make yourself miserable. Just be content with where you are." That's not how the Buddha taught at all. He said, "If you don't have the desire to awaken, how are you going to awaken?" When you're shooting a gun, you can't hit higher than you aim. You've got to aim high. So the frustration of aiming at a goal, an Awakening, you haven't yet attained: That's a useful sense of dis-ease, a useful sense of "something's got to be done, something's not quite right yet." In the course of that useful dis-ease, though, there's no obsession of resistance, so that helps break this cycle of these obsessions.

As for the ignorance obsession that tends to hang around neutral feelings, you can cut through it with the fourth jhana, where the mind settles down to a state of neither pleasure nor pain — total equanimity. “Purity of equanimity and mindfulness,” it’s called. Total, full-body awareness, like a white cloth covering the body from head to toe. There’s no ignorance obsession there.

So these obsessions that circle around pleasure and pain can be cut when you realize that there are alternative ways of dealing with pleasure and pain, alternative pleasures and pains to focus on. When there’s pain in the body, you can still find a way of giving rise to jhana. You focus not on the pain but on the parts of the body that are still comfortable, at ease, and you maximize that sense of ease. This leads you either to the point where the physical pain goes away or to the point where, even if it’s still there, it doesn’t matter. You’ve got a better place to be, which at the same time doesn’t have the drawbacks of sensual pleasures. That sets you on the path to cutting those other obsessions as well.

So the work here is twofold, just as it is when you try to protect the body from disease. On the one hand, you don’t expose yourself to more germs than you need to, and then, on the other, you build up your resistance, strengthen your resistance, strengthen your immune system.

To do this you start with the practice of jhana, the practice of good solid concentration, so you can cut through those obsessions, so that you gain alternative ways of relating to pleasure and pain. As the Buddha said in his sutta on the two arrows, if there’s pain in the body it’s like being shot with one arrow. When these obsessions get involved with the pain, it’s like shooting yourself with another arrow — although for most of us it’s not a second arrow, it’s a third, fourth, fifth — whole flurries of arrows get shot there, right in the mind, over one little pain. It’s even worse with big pains. In other words, the germs get in and simply take over.

So you build up your resistance through the practice. Ultimately, when discernment finally breaks through to the ultimate level, you can go wherever you want. No germs can touch you because your immune system is totally in control. But until that point, you have to be careful, working both on the outer and on the inner level.

When you work on the two of them together, that’s when you get the best results. Your mind gains a better sense of what it means to be really healthy, to have real sense of wellbeing no matter what happens, because you know the basic principles of looking after the mind’s health.

After all, the Buddha said he was a doctor for the mind. This was the kind of medicine he practiced, not where he cures our diseases, but he tells us how to cure our own diseases — which is what we're doing right now.

Worlds

September 6, 2003

We all carry whole worlds in our heads, whole worlds in our bodies.

I once saw a cartoon of a meditator being taken over by her thoughts. In the first panel she's sitting very quietly. Then the word *think* appears in her head. Then another *think* gets added onto her neck, and then another one in her chest, and finally, by the end of the cartoon, the words *think think think think think* blot out her entire body.

That's the way it is with us: Our bodies are filled with thoughts. We ordinarily think of thoughts as filling the mind, but they also take place in the body as well. The mind is what does the thinking, but parts of the body get involved in the process. This is how we carry those whole worlds around. You sit here with your body, and all of the sudden it turns into someplace else. It's all happening right here in the mind and body in the present moment, but in the course of the process the body and mind get turned into another world and another time.

You can compare it to the control keys on computer keyboards. If you ordinarily push a P or a Q you get a P or a Q on the screen. But if you push the control button and then push the P or the Q, they're not P's and Q's anymore. You get something else. The machine prints or it quits. All of the sudden the key does something else, for it's in a different context.

The same with the mind and the body in the present moment: You press your inner control key and all of a sudden you've got another world. It's not just the body sitting here breathing. It's Thailand or Europe, New York or Texas. In addition to the worlds we intentionally carry around, there are also lots of unintentional ones that come blowing through our minds. Those come because of the force of our old actions. As those storms come blowing through, sometimes the best thing you can do is simply hold onto the breath. Just as you would batten down for a storm, you just lie low and try to hold tight to the breath for dear life as the winds blow through. You hang onto the breath as tenaciously as

you can. Even though it doesn't fill your awareness, it at least gives you a corner where you're still in the context of the present moment.

In the *Discourse on the Establishing of Mindfulness*, you're told at the first stage to subdue greed and distress with regard to the world: *vineyya loke abhijjha-domanassam*. In other words, you may not be able to stop these various worlds from happening in the present moment, but you can work at subduing any greed or distress with regard to them as they come through. In other words, try to be as equanimous as possible, as uninvolved as possible in the process. Stay with the breath as much as you consciously can.

As you keep this up, after a while the storms begin to calm down. Then, if you're holding onto the breath consistently enough, you can begin to see things a bit more precisely. You see more and more how much you're conspiring with those various worlds coming in. But the initial principle is that whatever conscious decisions you're making, make sure they're decisions to stay with the breath. At the very least, don't get involved in other things that come along, even if they're filling your body and mind. This helps establish a beachhead in the present. Without that beachhead you simply get blown around. Even though this standpoint may ultimately be a fabrication, it's a useful one.

In the beginning you hardly notice that it's a fabrication. You just notice that it's a place where you stand still, where you take your stance and try to stay as solid as possible, as uninvolved as possible, so that your frame of reference doesn't shift — so that you don't find yourself suddenly in Las Vegas or Pattaya. You're right here. Those other worlds are coming through, but they're coming through *right here*. And you do your best, even though you may get involved a little bit, to make sure you feel no greed or distress with regard to the worlds coming through. In other words, you don't get involved with any narratives that would pull you in even further. You don't let these things get you upset. Sometimes this requires just standing still with the breath. Other times it requires reflecting on those various worlds: What do they give you? What do they hold for you? How real are they?

There's a passage where Ven. Ratthapala is talking to a king who wants to know why Ven. Ratthapala ordained. After all, his family is wealthy, his parents are still alive, he himself is young and healthy. Why would anyone who's not obviously suffering want to ordain? Ven. Ratthapala says he considered that "All worlds are swept away; they don't endure." That's his way of expressing the principle of inconstancy and impermanence. "They offer no shelter; there's no

one in charge.” No one can protect you from the suffering of those worlds. That’s the principle of stress and pain. “The world has nothing of its own; one has to pass on, leaving everything behind.” That’s the principle of not-self: There’s nothing you can really hold onto in any of these worlds. No matter how much you grasp at them, they just slip right through your fingers like water. Finally, “All worlds are insufficient, insatiable, a slave to craving.” No matter how good they get, they’re still not good enough for the mind. Once the mind develops a sense of desire for these things, it’s never fulfilled.

The *Dhammapada* contains a verse where the Buddha says that even if it rained gold coins we still wouldn’t have enough for our sensual desires, because all the things they could buy keep slipping away, slipping away. They’re impermanent, unstable, stressful, not-self. They offer no real protection, nothing you can really hold onto. Reflecting on this makes it easier to let go of these worlds as they come roaring through. If you sense any temptation to get ensnared in a particular world, if it seems interesting or intriguing, just reflect on this: No matter how good it gets, it’s never good enough. At the same time, it can cause a lot of suffering, not only for you but also for the people around you. You sit here with a mind capable of creating these worlds, but they require a body as their staging ground. And just keeping this human body alive: Think of how much other people have to suffer so that you have enough food, shelter, clothing, and medicine to keep going. And then what do you do? You use this body to entertain yourself, as a staging ground for your private worlds. How selfish and thoughtless can you get?

So these worlds that you’re building: You’re building not only on your own suffering, but also on the suffering of others. When you think about this, it sets you wondering: Can you develop the skill where you don’t have to build these worlds and still be happy? Can you find a happiness that doesn’t depend on the body?

The first step, as I just said, is learning how not to get involved in the worlds coming through the mind. Try to establish this frame of reference right here, at the body in and of itself. Even though the breath might not fill all your awareness right from the very beginning, even though these various worlds may keep barging in, you at least lay claim to a corner of your awareness and *hold on*. The basic principle is that you don’t get involved with anything else but the breath. You just stay right here.

Then, as you stay here with more consistency, you find that this frame of reference begins to fill more of your awareness. This “in-and-of-itself” frame of reference becomes more and more predominant as you develop an interest in the breath. It’s not just a matter of in-and-out. There are all kinds of variations in the flow of breath energy coursing through the body. As you explore them, you find that you’re learning not only about the breath but also about the mind. You begin to see the mind a lot more clearly as you’re staying with the breath and you get more absorbed in this frame of reference: body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities in and of themselves, all present right here at the breath. This is what helps keep you anchored. More and more, this fills your awareness. When the body fills your awareness and your awareness fills the body without all those other worlds coming in, when you finally get a sense of seclusion where you’re not involved in those things: That’s when you can settle down in Right Concentration. This gives you a stronger and stronger frame of reference right here.

Then you look into the process where this frame of reference gets switched. What’s the control key that turns a simple P into a print command? What’s the switch in your frame of reference that turns the process of fabrication in the body and mind into another world? You have to be quick to catch these things as they happen. The more quickly you notice this process of fabrication — before it starts forming a world, when it’s just a little stirring in the mind — the better.

Here the first step is learning simply how to notice it and dissolve it away, notice it and dissolve it away. Make it your sport. As soon as there’s any stirring that could turn in to a world, as soon as you’re aware of its happening, just zap it. Breathe right through it. Release whatever tension there may be around it, in whatever part of the body it may show itself, because whenever a thought shows itself in the mind, there’s going to be a corresponding tension in the body. When you’re consistently with the breath, you can see this clearly. And you keep zapping that tension with the breath to dissolve it away, zapping it to dissolve it away.

It’s like shooting rubber ducks in an arcade. Nothing really gets harmed. They’re not real ducks that you’re shooting. Just try to get really good as a marksman. The Buddha compares this to someone who’s really good at firing arrows, who can pierce great masses, and can fire arrows in rapid succession. In other words, once you gain a sense of being established in the body in and of itself, or in feelings in and of themselves, you want to shoot down the process of

fabrication as quickly as you can. As soon as it switches from the “in-and-of-itself” to another frame of reference, shoot it down.

Gradually you get quicker and quicker and you begin to see more and more how you’ve been involved in the process. There are points where you make a decision: “Am I going to let what I’ve got here shift into another frame of reference?” And there’s that curiosity: “What’s this thought going to do? What’s that thought going to do?” You’re always hoping for something to provide satisfaction, to provide entertainment, but if you keep in mind the fact that these things never can provide enough satisfaction no matter how great a world they create, you can just shoot them down.

There’s the example that Ven. Ratthapala gave of the king who controls a really large, prosperous territory. Word comes that there’s another territory to the east that he could conquer and rule as well. So he sends troops to conquer it. Then he’s told of another territory to the west. If he wants, he could probably send over his army and defeat that one, too. So he goes over to the west and just keeps expanding, expanding his territory until he’s got everything — east, west, north, south — on this side of the ocean. Then someone tells him of another territory that he could conquer on the other side of the ocean, so he decides to go ahead and do that.

That’s the way it is with the mind: There’s never a sense of enough. These worlds we create never provide satisfaction. When you reflect on that, it’s easier to give yourself over to the process of shooting them down, shooting them down. Any distraction that comes up and could disturb your concentration, just shoot it down as soon as you realize it’s happening. The breath is very useful in this process. As your awareness begins to fill the body, you get more and more sensitive to obscure places in the body where thoughts can land on the body or take different sensations in the body as their basis. The more completely your frame of reference fills the body, the more quickly you can see these things.

You can shoot them down, shoot them down, and then you begin to see: What are the raw materials that these worlds are created from? Well, there’s not much: just a little stirring here, a stirring there, and *you* connect them up. *You* stitch them together. To what purpose, to what end? You begin to realize that there’s nothing there of any real satisfaction. The worlds you create offer no satisfaction; the things you create them from are all very ephemeral. They offer nothing really solid that you can hold onto. It’s like building a house out of frozen meat. It’s bound to melt and start stinking up the place.

Realizing this gets you more and more firmly established in your frames of reference in the present: the body in and of itself, feelings, mind, mental qualities, all in and of themselves. Before these things can turn into anything more elaborate, you keep them really cleaned out, cleared out, as uncomplicated as possible.

Ultimately your gaze will turn on the basic building blocks themselves. Even this present frame of reference: That's a kind of becoming, too. There's an element of fabrication, an element of creation in here as well. But before you start taking this apart, you've got to get it really solid as a basis for taking other, more obvious things apart.

Most people, when they practice, are in too much of a hurry. They get a little bit of concentration and they say, "Okay, the next step is discernment." So they abandon their concentration and destroy it before it's really had a chance to do its work. We like to figure things out too much in advance. After all, we think we're clever; it would take less energy, take less time if we could move on as fast as possible. But some things you just can't rush.

The analogy the Buddha gives is of a woman who's pregnant. She asks her husband to take a monkey and dye it so that when the child is born it will have a little monkey to play with. The husband wants to know what color to dye it, depending on whether it's a boy or a girl, so the wife tears open her womb right there — and of course that kills the child. Some things you can't rush. The same with training the mind: You've got to get it really solidly established, really centered here on the breath. Don't worry about the next step, where it's going to go.

When you settle down with the breath, you do need to remember that this is not the ultimate — it's just a temporary resting spot — but at the same time you need to try to make it as good and as comfortable as possible, as solid as possible. Only then can it provide you with a framework from which you can see other things that are subtle and refined. Try to inhabit this world as continuously as you can — the world of the present moment, the world where things are kept simple: body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, mind in and of itself, mental qualities in and of themselves, before they get turned into something else with the control key that transforms your frame of reference. Keep this frame of reference as consistent as possible so that you can see the other movements of the mind, understand how they happen, how things come about, how they arise, stay, how they pass away.

Try to keep this spot as solid as possible so you can see those other subtle movements in the mind. That, you find, will cut away a lot of the suffering that goes along with those things. Without this solid foundation you just get swept away. The world gets swept away — *you get swept away along with it*. The world offers no shelter — *you've lost your shelter here in the present moment*. These worlds have nothing of their own — *well, you have nothing of your own in the present moment, because you keep destroying it, abandoning your frame of reference, to go running after shadows*. These worlds are a slave to craving — *you're the slave*. So do your best to establish a good solid state right here in the present moment, at whatever level you can manage, whether it's simply the level of not getting involved in greed and sorrow for the worlds that come blowing through your mind, or the level of being more and more independent from them.

Ultimately you want to get to the point where you're totally independent of any world. *Anissato viharati na ca kinci loka upadiyati*, as they say in the *Satipatthana Sutta*. You dwell independent, not attached to anything in the world. That's the direction you want to go, where you're not attached to any world at all.

So, whether it's simply the level of withstanding the worlds that seem to be totally beyond your control, or you're getting more and more sovereign and independent: Whatever level you're at, do your best to stay as solid as possible, as uninvolved as possible. Don't get upset because you're not totally uninvolved. Work at whatever level you find yourself, because the work of the practice does build on your earlier, more faltering steps to make something more solid and secure. It's a path where you can make progress, even if it's just step by step.

A lot of people say, "I don't want that. I want sudden Awakening." Well, some things can happen suddenly, but no understanding, no skill comes with sudden things that happen haphazardly in the mind. We're working on a skill here, the skill of learning to stay centered, keeping this frame of reference, not shifting to others. Just that skill in and of itself can cut through a lot of suffering.

So as you meditate, try to keep your nose down. Try to keep as close to the ground as possible. As always, the people who stay close to the ground are the ones who don't get blown away. The people who keep their nose down get to sniff interesting things, get to find out interesting things that everybody else tends to overlook.

Contemplation of the Body

March 1, 2004

People have a lot of resistance to contemplating the body as a topic of meditation. Some of them complain they already have a negative body image so why focus on the negative side of the body? Others say that body contemplation is a way of fostering aversion to the body, which is an unhealthy mental state. Others say they're not all that attached to their bodies, so why should they have to focus on the body? Or they'll refer to that story where the Buddha recommended contemplation of the body to some monks and then went off into the forest for a couple of months. The monks got so disgusted with their bodies that they started committing suicide, while others hired assassins to kill themselves off. When the Buddha came out of the forest, he found the community of monks was a lot smaller than it had been before, so he called the remaining monks together and told them to practice breath meditation instead. Some people cite this as proof that contemplation of the body is an unhealthy practice.

However, the fact that people resist this meditation so much shows that it's important. It's threatening, for it gets right to the core of our attachment. There's nothing in the world we're attached to more than our own bodies. That's why people have so many excuses for not focusing right here.

If you don't focus right here, what's going to happen? You're going to maintain your deep attachment to the body. It's not going to go away on its own. Some people think they can short circuit the process of attachment by going straight to their sense of self, thinking that by cutting out the sense of self they won't have to work on contemplation of the body because the work they're doing goes deeper, straight to the root. But attachment is like a vine: You can't find the root until you take hold of the nearest branch and trace it back. You can't really get to the root of your attachment to self until you've looked at where your most blatant day-to-day, moment-to-moment attachment is: right here at the body. The least little thing happens to your body and you can't stand it. A little bit of hunger, a little bit of thirst, too much heat, too much cold sets you running off. A

little bit of illness and you go running for medicine. If that's not attachment, what is?

So it's important that we look right here. Otherwise we stay attached to the suffering the body is going to bring us. As we all know, it grows old, gets sick and then dies. If you don't think that's going to be suffering, then go spend some time with some very old people, some very sick people, with dying people. See how much they suffer. When I was back at my father's house two weeks ago, I helped every day with the daily ritual of turning him over so my step-mother could take off his diaper. While she was doing that, I got to see what an old body with bed sores looks like, how an old body functions and doesn't function, how much suffering it brings when it's helpless, not only for the person in the old body but also for the people taking care of him. I also saw what it's like to be old and not to have trained the mind. The mind at a time like that is totally out of control because as the body gets weaker, your energy falls. The thoughts that come barging into the mind can take total control if you haven't developed the ability to counter them.

Then there are all the indignities of aging. It's as if the human body is designed to undercut any sense of pride we might feel. Other people have to wipe you; other people have to turn you over; whatever sense of privacy you used to have about your body gets thrown out the window. You can't control your urinating, can't control your defecating. Everything goes out of control. And it's good to contemplate this, not to develop a sense of aversion but to look at the universality of this bodily condition and to develop a sense of *samvega*, seeing how much effort goes into maintaining the body and then where all that effort ends up. If that's where you're looking for happiness, you're looking in the wrong place. That's what this whole contemplation is about. If you don't learn how to give up your attachment now while you're still healthy and strong, it's going to get harder and harder as the body weakens, as the body grows old.

So we have to develop a sense of *pasada*, a sense of confidence in the contemplation of the body. There's no way you're going to get over your attachment to the body if you don't look at it very, very carefully. The reason we're attached is because we don't look carefully. This is what the contemplation of the 32 parts of the body is all about: contemplating the body in terms of the elements, for that's all it is. What have you got here? Just physical elements. Wind, or energy. Fire, warmth. Water, coolness. And earth, solidity. Do they belong to you? No, they're all part of the world. As the saying goes, "Ashes to

ashes, dust to dust.” As long as we’re alive, we take in the elements as we eat and we expel elements as we defecate, and then when we have to give the whole thing up, it all goes back into the elements as we die. So where are you going to find true happiness there? After all the effort that goes into the body, is the body true to you? Sometimes it does what you want but a lot of times it doesn’t. When it starts getting old and grows sick and dies, it doesn’t ask your permission. You’d think that after all the effort you put into it, it would show some gratitude but it can’t. That’s not its nature.

We’re the ones who’ve been animating this thing. One of the images in the Canon is of the body as a puppet. We pull the strings for a while and then they snap; the pieces break down. It’s good to develop a sense of dispassion and disenchantment for the body, to develop a sense of *samvega*, so that when it breaks down *we* don’t break down, too.

We chant the 32 parts of the body so often that the chant has become almost automatic. You can do it without even thinking about what you’re saying, so stop and focus on each of the 32 parts, one by one. Stop and visualize each one as you go down the list. Start with hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin, flesh. As you visualize each part, also try to have a sense of where exactly in your body the part is located. When you get to the skin, you realize you’ve got the whole body all surrounded right there. There’s skin all around you, on all sides. Flesh is all over the place, with the bones at the core. Go through the various parts until you hit one that really strikes you, really hits home. Remind yourself, “Oh yeah, there’s one of those in this body, too.” And it really hits you how incongruous it is. You have a liver, a gall bladder, a large intestine, 24 hours out of the day. You’ve been carrying this thing around with you all the time — “this thing” being whichever part gives you a sense of how odd or disgusting or unclean or peculiar this body is, whichever part hits you in any way that’s helpful for contemplating. Here you’ve been taking so much care of this, looking after it so much, and this is all you’ve got to show for all that effort.

We’re not bad-mouthing the body, we’re just looking at it for what it is. Ultimately we want to learn how to use it simply as a tool without attachment, but to counteract the attachment you’ve got to go very far in the other direction to counteract all the hype, all the slick advertising slogans you’ve used to sell yourself on the body: about how important it is, how essential it is, all the good things that come from looking after it very carefully, doing all the yoga, giving it

exercise, eating all the right foods. You can do those things and yet still it's going to age, grow ill, and die.

One of the meditation techniques Ajaan Fuang liked to teach when people developed a sense of light in the body was to have them visualize themselves within that light. Sometimes they didn't even have to will it. The image would appear on its own right there in the light. They could see themselves sitting right in front of themselves. Then he'd say, "Okay, think about what the body is going to look like five years from now, then ten years, fifteen, twenty, on up to when you die. What is it going to look like when you die? Then if you keep it around the second day after you die, the third day, fourth day, fifth day: What will it look like then? After seven days, cremate it. Watch the cremation flames. And then what's left? Just some ashes and bones, and then over time the bones themselves will ultimately turn to ash. You've got nothing but a pile of powder. Then it gets blown away." Then he'd have them run the film backwards, reassemble the whole thing until you got back to the present moment to reconnect with the fact that what you've got right here is inevitably headed in the direction you just saw.

The benefit of all this is that when there's the least little delusion about the body, this contemplation helps to cut right through it. Then the desire for an ideal body, any thought that, "Other people may get old but I'm going to do yoga, I'm going to eat right, and I'm not going to get old as fast as they do": You see how deluded and futile it is. This is not to encourage you *not* to take care of the body, but simply to watch out for any delusion that gets built up around it, so that when aging, illness, and death come you're more prepared.

Another reason to contemplate it is to ask yourself: Aging, illness, and death are coming — have you attained the state of mind that's going to be free from suffering when they arrive? If you haven't, how much time do you have? You don't know. So get to work right now. When the urge comes to cut short your meditation, remember this: How much more time will you have to meditate? Have you gotten to where you want to go? After all, this is the end of the story line for all of us. Aging, illness, and death: This is where it's all headed. You've got to be prepared. Otherwise you'll lie in bed hallucinating when you get old — seeing strange dogs in the corner and people committing suicide out in the yard — because the fact of your being old, the fact of your approaching death, is just too much for you to think about, too much for the mind to handle. The mind starts blocking things out. When it blocks things out in that way, it heads toward delusion. It tries to run away as much as it can from the unpleasant things, but

you can't run away from them. They're right there. You have yourself trapped. The only way to get out of this trap is to dig down into the mind and uproot your attachments. That's where your hope lies.

When the Buddha points out the negative side of things, it's never just to stop at the negative side. It's to point you toward the Deathless. It's to remind you as a warning: This is the way things are, so what are you going to do to stay happy in the face of how they are? Only the Deathless can give you a secure refuge at a time like that. We like to think that life will come to a nice point of closure where the loose ends get tied up, where everything gets settled, as at the end of a movie or a novel, but that's not what happens. Everything just unravels, falls apart. Things don't come back together and resolve themselves nicely. There's a huge dissonance at the end of life as things trail off every which way. That's how the body comes to an end.

The question then is: Will the mind go the same way as well? We have the choice. This is our opportunity — the practice — so we contemplate the unattractive side of the body to develop a sense of *samvega*, to encourage us to practice and dig deeper. As the Buddha said, mindfulness immersed in the body ultimately leads to the Deathless if you do it right. If you do it wrong and develop a sense of aversion like the monks in the story, then — as the Buddha advised them — go back to the breath. That will help dispel the aversion in the same way that the first rains of the rainy season dispel all the dust that has filled the air during the hot season.

But that doesn't mean you stop doing contemplation of the body. It simply means you have to learn how to do it skillfully, so that the sense of *samvega* is always there, inspiring a sense of *pasada* in whatever way will give you some release, provide the escape, so that — as the sutta says — you'll be happy even when ill, happy even when aging, happy even when you die. But because our attachment to the body is so strong, we need strong medicine to counteract it. Body contemplation is not something you do once every now and then. It's something you have to do repeatedly. You have to keep coming back to this theme because it's the only thing that will keep you sane, the only thing that will provide real release.

If you find yourself resisting this practice, look into that resistance to see exactly what it is. It's usually a disguise for your attachment. The body isn't the problem; the attachment is the problem, but to deal with the attachment you've got to focus on the object where the attachment holds on very tight. When you

really look at it, you see that the body's really not much, it's not worth much, and yet your attachment builds up so many narratives, so many desires around it.

So this is a topic of meditation you need to have close at hand at all times because these attachments come up in all kinds of ways at all times. You want to be ready for them, on top of them. As the body continues doing its thing — it wears down here, wears down there, this illness comes up, that illness comes up — you'll be prepared.

In Thailand they have the tradition of printing books at funerals, and in the beginning of each book there will usually be a little biography of the person to whom the merit is dedicated. A lot of the best Dhamma books in Thailand are the ones printed at funerals, so as you read these Dhamma books you can't help but look at some of the biographies. They all follow the same pattern. The person was doing well, had a happy life, wife, husband, children, whatever. Then after a while he or she started to develop a particular ailment, maybe a little bit of kidney problem, a liver problem, maybe a heart problem. At first it didn't seem too serious, the medicine took care of it, but after a while it became more and more chronic, more and more troublesome, ultimately to the point where doctors couldn't do anything. They just had to throw up their hands, and although they did their best, the person died.

And it's ironic: The human mind has the tendency to think, "Well, that's them. Somehow I'm different." But you're not different. Look at yourself; look at all the people around you. What disease will strike down the person next to you? What disease will strike down that person over there? What disease do they already have inside them that's ultimately going to do that? What disease is inside you? The potential is already there, doing its work.

One of the contemplations I'd frequently do in Bangkok, as I was riding a bus, would be to remind myself that "All the people in the bus have a funeral ahead of them. There's going to be a funeral for this person, a funeral for that person, a funeral for that person over there. It'll hit all of them. And me, too." And it's funny: You might think that this sort of thinking is pessimistic or sad, but it's not. It's liberating. It's a great equalizer. You don't get tied up in the particulars of liking this person or not liking that person, being worried about this or that issue in your life. You know it's all going to end in death. And that thought frees you to focus on things that really *are* important, like the whole issue of attachment.

Try to see this practice as liberating, because it is. If you appreciate that fact, you find you get more and more mileage out of it. If you have the right attitude toward contemplation of the body, it can take you far. It can provide a lot of freedom even in the midst of aging, illness, and death, in the midst of all the indignities and pains and problems of aging, illness, and death, for it helps point you in the right direction, to the part of the mind that is free.

The last time I saw Ajaan Suwat, shortly before his death, he mentioned that his brain was beginning to malfunction, that it was giving him all sorts of weird perceptions. But he added, “That thing I got through the meditation, though, that hasn’t changed; it’s still there,” which is why the suffering of the body didn’t weigh on his mind, why the weird perceptions produced by the brain didn’t deceive him. He showed that it’s possible not to suffer in the process of growing ill and dying. And when something like that is possible, you really want to aim all of your efforts in that direction. As one of the chants says, don’t be the sort of person who later regrets that you didn’t take advantage of the opportunity to practice when you were still healthy and strong.

Anger

August 28, 2003

The Buddha's basic teaching on insight is the four noble truths. We tend to lose sight of that fact, thinking that insight means seeing the inconstancy, stress, and not-selfness of things. It does in part, but that insight has to take place in a larger context, which is of the four noble truths. And these truths in turn come down to cause and effect, skillful and unskillful: the things you do that lead to suffering and the things you can do that lead to the end of suffering.

The *doing* there is important, because we shape our experience much more than we normally imagine, and insight lies in seeing precisely that fact: seeing what we're doing to shape our experience, even though we may think we're sitting here perfectly still doing nothing at all.

There's an undercurrent of *sankhara*, or fashioning, going on in the mind all the time, even now. Insight shows its usefulness in pointing out that we're doing this shaping, and also in showing us where we're doing it in unskillful ways so that we can learn to do it more skillfully. Essentially, insight consists of catching yourself creating trouble; catching yourself creating stress, creating unnecessary burdens for yourself; seeing what you're doing as you actually do it; realizing that you *chose* to do it.

Ajaan Fuang once said, "Insight comes down to seeing your own stupidity." You've been doing things that you don't have to do, that create suffering for you and the people around you. And even though these things cause suffering, you keep on doing them again and again and again. That's stupidity.

We don't like to think of ourselves as stupid but we are. When you finally develop the equanimity needed to admit your stupidity, when you can step back and learn how to unlearn all those stupid actions: That's where insight shows its benefits. It can teach you to fashion things in a new way, a better way, so that your participation in shaping your experience, your participation in the world around you, gets more and more skillful. If insight didn't help in these ways, it wouldn't really be worth much. There are lots of teachings about emptiness and inconstancy or impermanence that are wide of the mark. They may be interesting

to reflect on, to speculate about, but if they don't make any difference in what you're actually doing from moment to moment, they're pretty useless.

This is why the Buddha avoided many of the issues that everyone else in his time was worked up about. Is everything a oneness? A plurality? Is the body the same as the life force? Is the body different from the life force? Is the world eternal? Is it not eternal? Is it finite? Is it infinite? When people reach the end of the path do they exist, not exist, both, neither? These were the hot philosophical issues of the day, but the Buddha refused to get involved in them because they didn't make any difference in terms of this one issue: What are you doing that's skillful and unskillful? Can you learn to act more skillfully than you've been doing?

A lay follower of the Buddha was once approached by a person who asked just these questions: "What does your teacher teach? Does he teach that the world is finite or infinite?" And the lay follower said, "Well, no." — "Eternal, not eternal?" — "No, he doesn't address that issue either," and so on down the list. And the first person complained, "Well, your teacher doesn't seem to teach anything at all."

So the lay follower said, "That's not the case. He teaches what's skillful and what's unskillful." Remember that. That's the most basic issue the Buddha addresses and he addresses it in a lot of detail. If meditation were simply a matter of learning how to get very still in the present moment, how do you think all of those different Dhamma teachings would have developed? All of what they call the 84,000 different division of the Dhamma in the Canon came from someone who was really focused on the issue of skill and lack of skill, trying to develop more skillful ways of approaching everything in life.

This is how your daily practice intersects with your meditation practice: Just try to be more skillful in what you say, more skillful in what you do. Develop that habit of being very clear about what your intentions are, very clear about what your actions are, and about their results. When you develop that attitude in your external actions and then bring it into your meditation, you get more skillful in what you think. You start seeing things you didn't see before. At the same time, as you develop in your meditation, you get more sensitive to your external actions as well. So in this way your practice of sitting still with your eyes closed and your practice of walking around with your eyes open, out dealing with people in the world, become more of a whole. You're tackling the issue of skillfulness on all fronts.

Make this the thread connecting everything you do as you practice. This is the thread that turns daily life into a genuine “practice of daily life.” Your interaction with other people then actually does become part of your practice. The work you do becomes part of your practice. Everything you do and say and think can become part of your practice if you approach every activity with the question, “What’s skillful here? What’s not skillful here? What choices do I have?” Take advantage of the freedom that every moment offers to make the best choice possible.

When issues come up in daily life, try to approach them as a challenge in this way. When issues like lust, anger, or fear arise in the mind, take the opportunity to approach them skillfully. All too often we’re afraid of fear, angry about our anger, lustful for our lust. In other words, we approach these unskillful mental states in unskillful ways that simply compound the problem. So the issue lies in learning how not to be angry about your anger, how not to be lustful for your lust, how not to be afraid of your fear. That way you can deal with these issues in a more effective, more harmless way.

For example, anger. Frequently we’ve heard, and it’s constantly repeated, that the antidote for anger is *metta*, or goodwill. In the Canon, though, the Buddha actually offers a wide range of approaches for dealing with anger. In a few cases he advocates developing metta for people who are harming you, but more generally he cites all four Sublime Attitudes as antidotes to anger. In other words, the antidote includes metta but not just metta. You want to develop the other Sublime Attitudes, too. And the attitude the Buddha recommends most is equanimity: equanimity in the sense of stepping back from the situation and seeing it as part of a universal pattern, not just as something personal between you and the person you’re angry with.

One of the traditional ways to develop equanimity is to contemplate the principle of karma: that what you do is important. Particularly, in the situation in which you find yourself, what’s important is not so much what the other person is doing as what *you’re* doing. Focus on that. If you let yourself get worked up about what the other person is doing, how often he’s done it, and how he’s come back with it again and again and again and again: If you carry that thought around, you make it more and more difficult to deal with *your* response in the present moment. So, drop any thinking about what the other person has been doing and turn around to look at what you’ve been doing and are about to do.

To do this, it's useful to divide the anger into three parts: one, the object of the anger; two, the anger itself as a mental state; and three, the physical manifestations of the anger. When you can separate them out in this way, anger becomes a lot easier to deal with.

To separate the anger itself from the object of the anger, you step back and think in terms of equanimity. Here the Buddha recommends looking at the universality of your problem. In one sutta he divides up the reasons for being angry and sets them out in kind of a chart. One reason for being angry is that this person has done something harmful to me. Or this person has done something harmful to people I love, or this person has done something helpful to people I don't like at all. In each case you're supposed to reflect, "Well, what should I expect? It's the way of the world." That question — *What should I expect?* — asked with a cynical tone of voice, is meant to pull you back a little bit, to get you to see the situation in a larger context. Then you go on to: This person is doing something harmful to me, this person is doing something harmful to people I like, or this person is doing something helpful to people I don't like. In other words, you bring the whole set from the past into the present tense, and again the question is: *What should I expect?* The next set of three puts all three variables into the future: This person is going to do something harmful to me, and on down the line.

When you stop to think like that, the simple act of stepping back from the situation and putting it into a larger framework can provide you with some perspective. In other words, you reflect on the ways of the world. This is a world of friends and enemies, where any action is bound to displease *somebody*. This is the kind of world you were born into — and you were the one who wanted to be born here. This is the way things are everywhere in this world. A lot of wisdom lies just in being able to step back and remember that fact. Look at the situation in terms of a larger framework, so that your thoughts aren't focused with such narrow intensity on the person or the activity you don't like.

When they're narrowly focused like that, the huge blind spots around them make us lose our perspective — not only about what's happening but also about what we should be doing. Often what gets shunted off to the side when we're angry is the sense of shame and the sense of fear for the consequences of our actions. People can get extremely courageous in dumb ways when they're angry, because their fear of consequences gets shoved off to the side, like a poor relative or an unwanted child.

So the first step is to take that larger viewpoint, to see the situation in a larger framework, so as to eliminate the blind spots. Within that framework, your anger becomes something you obviously don't want to follow through with. You don't want it to influence your actions. If you know that you're the heir of your actions, you don't want to inherit any actions done with an unskillful state of mind. The function of equanimity is to remind you of that fact. That's when you can drop your focus on the object of the anger and turn to look at the anger itself in the mind.

Here the problem is complicated by the fact that anger is usually accompanied by a physical reaction. When a flash of anger bursts into the mind it really sets our bloodstream churning. All sorts of hormones come roaring out, our heart beats wildly, we breathe in a different way, and an oppressive sense of tension or discomfort develops in the body. Our immediate reaction is that we'd like to get that discomfort out of our system. But if we try to get it out of our system in the usual way, which is speaking or acting under the force of the anger, that just compounds the problem.

Also, the physical reaction confuses us. Sometimes we can actually think ourselves into a better perspective about the anger, but the bloodstream is still churning and it makes us think we must still be angry. That churning of the bloodstream can last a long time. After all, our bodies are built for the fight-or-flight response, and we normally need more than just a few seconds if we're going to fight, more than a few seconds if we're going to flee. In cases like that, those long-lasting hormones are useful.

But when you're trying to overcome the anger in the mind, the lastingness of those hormones is not helpful at all. So make sure to see the thoughts and the physical symptoms as two separate things. The mind itself may have calmed down somewhat from the anger, but the physical manifestations are still present, obstructing your view of the mind, so you want to deal with them. Breathe through the tension. Breathe in a way that gets your heartbeat back to normal. Breathe in a way that gets the level of tension in your body back to normal. You might want to think of the tension in your body as flowing out your feet, out your hands, all through the in-breath, all through the out-. Open up those energy channels so that you're not carrying the sense of oppression around. That makes the anger a lot easier to deal with, because you feel less burdened, less irritated, less constricted physically.

Then you can look at the mind in and of itself. What is this state of anger in and of itself? As I said, it's often a blinding of the mind, putting blinders on the sides of your mental eyes, so you can see only certain things and focus only on certain details. The state of being constricted mentally like this is really unpleasant. Just stepping back to look at it helps take off some of those blinders. You don't have to be afraid of the anger, or angry about the anger. Just ask: What is this state, to be angry? Taking a look at it begins to open things up inside.

But again, your looking has to come from the larger perspective that helps you see through the anger, helps you dis-identify with the anger. The anger may still be there in the mind, but you don't have to identify with it. You can see it as a separate mental event. That's important because you then realize that there are parts of the mind that really aren't angry, that aren't involved in the anger at all. The anger seemed to consume the mind, but that's just because it narrowed your perception of the mind's full range.

So as you open things up like this, you can help weaken the anger, weaken the hold of the anger on your mind. When you develop a larger perspective, you can step back and see what really should be done. "What's the most skillful thing to say here? What are my opportunities? What are the choices available to me?" If you have a broader viewpoint, *then* it's easier to see the choices than you could have when the blinders were on. *Then* you can see what really would be appropriate. You can see: If you were to say what you feel so much like saying, what would the results really be? As the Buddha points out, many of the things we want to do under the force of anger are precisely the things our enemies would like to see us do: destroying our good looks, destroying our property, destroying our friendships, doing things that will get us punished. Do you want to please your enemy that way?

If you look dispassionately at the actions you wanted to do and can see that the results wouldn't be good, remind yourself, "I don't want that. Maybe this is not the best time or place to say anything at all. Maybe I should wait for circumstances to change." Because you've breathed through the physical side of the anger, you find it a lot easier to delay your actions to a more appropriate time, because you don't feel the compulsion of bottled-up frustration. Or, if it so happens that something *should* be done right away, the fact that you've broadened your perspective helps you to see better alternatives: better things to do, better things to say right away.

So remember this as an appropriate antidote to the normal way of reacting to anger. Too often when we're angry about what someone has done, we're either angry at the person or we turn around and get angry at ourselves for the anger, neither of which really is very helpful. Instead, we should step back to see the actions of that other person in context: "After all, this is the way the world is." That helps you to react in a more skillful way.

When we talk about the limitations of the world, it sometimes seems very confining and depressing but it's not. Actually to think about these things is a very liberating teaching. There's no way you're going to make the world perfect, so you don't *have* to make the world perfect. That takes a huge burden off the mind right there. You simply think of what should be done right now in this particular set of circumstances, given the larger perspective, looking at the world as a whole, looking at human nature, looking at the whole human enterprise. You view your interaction with other people within the context of a much larger perspective. These are the ways of the world. Of course it's going to be imperfect. What did you expect, given the fact that the world is imperfect? Given the reality of the situation, what are you going to do right now to respond in the most skillful way?

This way you find that, of the lessons from the meditation, this quest for skillfulness is precisely the lesson that translates best into daily life as you deal with lust, anger, fear — as you deal with all of the imperfect situations in the world. You see that they're imperfect and yet you try to find a skillful response.

This quest for skillfulness requires that you use your imagination. That's what the larger perspective is for. It opens up more possibilities to your imagination so that your old habits don't form ruts that you can never get out of. You think of new ways of responding, unexpected ways of responding. This is where insight really opens up new possibilities in your life, where it shows its true worth.

The ability to see the movements of the mind minutely is an important insight only if it makes you more skillful in the way you act and speak and think. So keep that perspective in mind. Keep that quest for skillfulness in mind as well, so that your actions really do fall into the path that leads to the end of suffering and don't keep falling into the path that leads to more and more compounded suffering again and again and again.

This is where the meditation shows its true value in our lives, even if we don't get all the way to the ultimate skill of reaching the Deathless. The fact that

we've trained ourselves to be more and more skillful leads the mind in the direction of less and less suffering. It inclines the mind in that direction. If you don't make it all the way to the Deathless in this lifetime, your quest for skillfulness insures that your next lifetime will keep heading in that direction. You build up a momentum.

So do your best to head your mind in that direction, because otherwise this *samsara*, this wandering around that we keep doing, is pretty aimless. The image the Buddha gives is of throwing a stick up in the air. Sometimes it falls on this end, sometimes it falls on the other end, sometimes it falls flat on its side: all pretty random, aimless. Try to turn your life from a stick thrown up into the air into an arrow flying straight in a particular direction, toward more and more skillfulness. Ultimately, someday, whether in this lifetime or the next, that arrow will reach its target — but only if you focus on this issue of skillfulness right here and right now. *And keep it right here right now, every right here and right now.* That's what builds up the momentum. That's what gives direction and meaning to life.

The World Is Swept Away

September 24, 2003

Every now and then you read a piece taking the Buddha to task on the first of the three characteristics. The thrust of the piece usually is: “What’s wrong with change? Change is a good thing. If it weren’t for change, we wouldn’t have happiness. There would be no art in the world, no music, no literature. All the things that make life enjoyable,” they say, “come from change. So what’s wrong with it?”

You have to look at change in context. That’s what Ven. Ratthapala’s four Dhamma summaries — the comments he made to the King Koravya to explain why he ordained — are all about. They tie into both the teachings on inconstancy, stress, and not-self, and into the simple facts of aging, illness, and death.

The first of the summaries has to do with inconstancy: “The world is swept away; it does not endure.” This, on its own, may not be a bad thing. Certain things’ getting swept away would not be bad for the world. But then Ven. Ratthapala illustrates his point with aging. When King Koravya was young he was so strong he felt that he had the strength of two people. But now he’s 80 years old and, as he says, “I think I’ll put my foot one place and I end up putting it someplace else.” We don’t even have that much control when aging comes.

Change can be nice when it’s well handled, but, when you think of all the beautiful music in the world, think of all the lousy music, too. People actually make an effort to write lousy music. Not that they intend it to be lousy, but it’s very difficult to write good music, create good art, write great literature. If change were a good thing in and of itself, good literature would be easy to write, good paintings easy to paint. But these things are hard. It takes an awful lot of skill to make change happy. And even with people who are very skilled at it: What happens to them over time? They grow older. As they grow older all kinds of indignities come to them. The body can’t function, and when the body can’t function they can’t entertain people as they used to. They get less control over themselves, their bowel movements, their memory, their minds, less and less

control over their relationships. It's a pretty sad state of affairs. Think of the misery suffered by Beethoven, Brahms, and Mozart as they approached death. That kind of change is inevitable. It's built into the way things are.

If you think about it, you realize that the change we try to create through art, literature, music goes against the way things are. Works of art and literature have a nice beginning, they build up a little tension, but then it's nicely released at the end. There's a sense of completion, a sense of coming to a satisfying goal. But life isn't like that. At the end of life everything gets disjointed and simply falls to pieces.

That moves into the next Dhamma summary: "The world offers no shelter; there's no one in charge." Ratthapala illustrates this with the fact of illness. He asks the king, "Do you have a recurring illness?" And the king answers, "Yes, I have a wind illness" — which in those days meant sharp, shooting pains going through the body — and he adds that when he has an attack all his courtiers and relatives hang around saying, "Maybe he'll die now, maybe he'll die now." They might be saying this out of fear, or out of hope: Some of them might want him out of the way so that they can grab power.

So Ratthapala asks the king, "Can you ask those friends, courtiers, and relatives who are hanging around to please share out some of your pain?" The king replies, "No, of course not." Not even a king can ask other people to share out the pain that comes with illness. This illustrates the second of the three characteristics, the stress and suffering that come along with change — in other words, the natural change of the body. When you're in pain, you have to suffer it on your own.

Then the third characteristic, of not-self: "The world has nothing of its own; one has to pass on leaving everything behind." The king has lots of wealth all stored up, and of course, he has a strong sense that it's his own wealth. But when he dies he won't be able to take it with him. He's got to leave it behind. That's the ultimate not-self teaching. Even your body, your feelings, your perceptions, your thought constructs, your consciousness: You can't take those with you, either.

These first three Dhamma summaries provide an interesting point to reflect on — that the Buddha's teaching on the three characteristics may have come from the simple facts of aging, illness, and death. Aging — inconstancy; illness — stress and suffering; and death — not-self.

The fourth Dhamma summary shows why those three characteristics are so threatening: "The world is insufficient, insatiable, a slave to craving." There's

never enough. No matter what you create in this world, there's never a sense of true completion. Even the sense of the completion that comes at the end of a piece of nice music, the end of a good novel, a good book, is false. Aside from Awakening, there's never a point where all your problems in life are settled, where there's nothing more to do. There's always a lot more to do. As long as there's craving, there's still an underlying sense of dis-ease and discontent in life. You keep looking for other works of art, other music to create that sense of completion, but they just can't provide it.

Ratthapala illustrates this fourth summary by asking the king, "Even though you already reign over a very prosperous country here, suppose someone were to come to you and say, 'There's a country to the east with lot's of wealth, but, in terms of its military strength, it's weak enough that you could conquer it given the forces you have.' Would you conquer it?" The king says, "Of course." "Suppose someone were to come from the west with the same news?" "Well, I'd conquer the kingdom to the west." "...the north, the south?" "...I'd conquer the kingdoms to the north and south." It's unending. "What if someone were to come and say, 'There's a country on the other side of the ocean?'" Well, the king would send his forces there, too. It's not the case you satisfy desire and craving by giving in to your desires and cravings. You simply make them hungrier for more. It becomes more and more habitual that once there's a craving, once there's a desire, you've got to satisfy it.

And when you think of how things are inconstant, stressful, and not-self, and how you yourself are subject to aging, illness and death, there's no end to it all. There's never a point of satisfaction. Even death doesn't put an end to things. The Buddha says that we travel on through the craving. Just as wind can carry a flame from a burning house to another house and set the second house on fire, he says, craving carries us over from one lifetime to the next.

What's interesting is that the Buddha says all this inconstancy, stress and not-self is rooted in desire. And yet because of the desire we're never satisfied. It's through our lack of satisfaction that we want this and want that, and yet the things that we create in order to fill up that lack never really give satisfaction. So we desire more. We create more. The process keeps feeding on itself, but it can never make itself full. All that work, and yet it can't bring us to a point of completion. That's the ordinary way of the world.

No matter how good change gets, no matter how skilled you are at riding the waves of change, it's never enough. That's why the Buddha advises us to look

elsewhere for true happiness. And what he does is to tell us to take that craving and try to manage it wisely. In other words, that thirst of craving basically wants as much happiness as possible, as quickly as possible, and with as little effort as possible. But to develop discernment, he says, you take that desire for happiness and adjust it a bit: “What could we do to give rise to true happiness, long-lasting happiness, a happiness that wouldn’t change?” In this way you take your desire, you take the possibility of change, and you turn it into a path that leads beyond, that finally does lead to a point of completion, a point of total satisfaction, what many of the Thai ajaans call, “The Land of Enough.”

That’s what we’re doing as we’re practicing here. We’re trying to take that craving and turn it into something wise, use it wisely — this desire that the Buddha said lies at the root of all things, the root of all dhammas. “Dhammas” here means any phenomena of any kind, but it can also mean what we think of Dhamma with a capital “D” — the Dhamma that leads us out, the Dhamma of practice. There has to be a desire underlying the practice.

If you’re going to walk across the room, you’ve got to have the desire to get to the other side. The question is how to use that desire in a skillful way. Walking across the room is not a big issue, but the issue of desire in the practice is a lot more subtle, a lot more intricate. We want the desire that impels us along the path, but we don’t want it to be so overwhelming that it gets in the way. We need desire to be focused on this one issue: What can we do that gives rise to long-lasting happiness, and ultimately, a happiness that doesn’t give rise to change at all? That’s what we’re working on here. Wherever we may be in the practice right now, that’s the general direction we’re heading. That’s the question that underlies everything we do. But to make sure that the desire doesn’t overwhelm us, we have to refocus it on the practice, on the individual steps that will take us where we want to go.

So look at the particulars of what you’re doing, in terms of your thoughts, words, and deeds, not only while you’re sitting here meditating, but also in the whole course of the day. What habits do you have that get in the way of long-lasting happiness — your habits in terms of dealing with yourself, dealing with other people, how you manage the day, where you devote your time, the intensity in which you focus on what you’re doing. All of this is part of the practice. These are things you can look at. And this is important. All the things the Buddha teaches are things we can actually look at. He wasn’t a mystifier. He didn’t make anything into a big mystery. He said that everything you need to know is right in

front of your eyes. The problem is that you're looking past it. So look very carefully at your intentions, right here.

I was reading today a blurb for a book on Buddhist ethics in which the author was proposing that the precepts are too simple-minded because our actions have so many ramifications that morality should be seen as a big world of mystery. What the author is doing is to take the mystery and confusion the Buddha removed from our lives and put it back in. What does mystery do aside from providing a convenient hiding place for the defilements?

So do your best to clear away the mystery by looking right at what you're doing. If you look very carefully at your intentions, you can see whether they're skillful by the mental qualities that underlie them. Then you stay right there and act on that insight. Is there anger motivating your thoughts, words, and deeds? Is there greed? Delusion? If there are these things, don't act on them. Keep your focus right here.

This way the process of change in your life becomes something you can manage more and more skillfully. Don't lose sight of what's right here, because everything you need to know to attain true Awakening, to discover that happiness beyond change, is right here in your body and mind. The process of sitting right here with the mind on the breath, thinking about and evaluating the breath, perceiving and feeling the results: All the factors you're going to need to know are right here, and yet you tend to look past them.

So try to keep your focus right here. The irony of it all is that the more "right here" you are in your focus, the longer-term the happiness that comes from your actions. As you get more and more skillful at this one point, it has ramifications that go out in all directions. The process of change is something that's happening right here. Learn to master it right here. Instead of becoming the change that leads to more and more stress and suffering, to more separations, to a greater sense of dissatisfaction, you turn it around. You take that craving and you tame it by focusing it right here. The more "right here" you are, the longer the good results will last. You give up the guesswork and speculation, you focus on things you can really know right here, right now. That's why the Buddha's teachings are for everybody.

Think about it. Most of the great ajaans in Thailand came from peasant families. That was back in the days when the Thai government was very proud of what it was doing to Buddhism. It was straightening out Buddhism; it was restructuring everything, starting from the top down, for the sake of the nation-

state. But that didn't have nearly the effect, the long-term beneficial effect, that the actions of a few peasants' sons had out there in the boondocks, out there in the woods, focusing on things they could know for themselves right there in their own thoughts, words, and deeds. Those were the ones who had the biggest impact, the most long-term and deepest impact on keeping the Dhamma alive, not only in Thailand, but around the world.

So given the way the whole process of change and causality operates in this world, the more careful you are about what you do and say and think in the immediate present, the better the long-term results are going to be. Instead of trying to satisfy your desires for happiness within the world of change, you take that world of change and use it to attain the changeless. Look directly right here, right now, at every movement of craving so that you can take it apart: "Why is there craving for this thing that changes? What can be done to channel it properly? What can be done to put it to an end?" That's what the teaching on the three characteristics is about. That's why the Buddha keeps reminding us about aging, illness, and death — because otherwise we tend to get contented with this, that, and the other thing: "This seems to be okay, that seems to be okay, this is good enough in the practice." But that fourth summary reminds you that it's never enough until you get to the Deathless. Only then will there be a true sense of enough. That's where the craving finally disbands.

So this is why we keep chanting these passages again and again about aging, illness, death, and separation: "The world is swept away. It does not endure. It offers no shelter. There's no one in charge. It has nothing of its own. One has to pass on, leaving everything behind. The world is insufficient, insatiable, a slave to craving." It all sounds pretty negative, but it has a positive import: to remind us not to settle for less than the best. Instead of being depressing, these teachings are liberating. They remind us not to look in the wrong place, not to weigh ourselves down with expectations that can never lead to true happiness at all. Instead, they remind us to look in the right place, where ultimately all worlds disband and the happiness of the Deathless can be found.

So, even though the teachings may sound negative, they have a very positive aim.

Mature Strategies

July 29, 2004

Try to get comfortable. Sit with your back comfortably straight. If you're bending over, it's going to put a lot of pressure on your back. And be comfortable with your breath. Find the breath sensations in the body that feel comfortable and stick with them. Allow them to stay there, undisturbed. As that sense of comfort begins to grow, be careful not to get sucked into it too much. Try to maintain your mindfulness and your alertness so that the mind doesn't start drifting off. That's one of our problems: We get a little bit of pleasure, a little bit of comfort, and we let go, wallowing in the pleasure, forgetting where we are, forgetting what we're doing. As a result, the pleasure goes away because the causes for keeping it there get dropped. The mindfulness, the alertness, the ardency of your effort to stick with it weaken. And when they weaken, so does the pleasure.

So try to stay alert. As soon as there's a sense of pleasure, try to be aware of the whole body, letting the pleasure seep through the body, and keep that awareness going. You'll find that it's not as easy as it sounds because the mind has a habitual tendency to shrink. Keep reminding yourself: "Whole body breathing in, whole body breathing out." And the amount of mindfulness and alertness that are required to keep that whole body awareness going will keep you awake, keep you alert as long as you maintain them.

This is one very immediate, very visceral way of showing goodwill to yourself, providing yourself with a sense of pleasure and ease. When you think about it, just about everything we do is based on the pleasure principle, trying to maximize pleasure and minimize suffering. We come to the meditation because we've found that other ways, other strategies for pursuing the pleasure principle haven't worked or are not working to our satisfaction. This is why the Buddha points his teachings at the issue of suffering and the end of suffering. These are the big issues in our lives, and there's a lot of bewilderment surrounding them. As the Buddha said, our reaction to suffering is one, bewilderment, and two, a search for someone to show us a way out.

This is why the Buddha put so much emphasis on who you hang around with, who you associate with, who you look to for your advice, because they can set you on the right path to the end of suffering or they can set you on wrong paths winding in all kinds of directions. This is why you have to be very careful. We'd like to think that all paths lead up to the top of the same mountain, but I don't know any mountain in the world where that principle works. The path to the top of Palomar doesn't lead to the top of Everest. And there are a lot of paths on each mountain slope that lead away from the top of the mountain. Some lead you over a cliff. So we have to be very careful about which path we choose. The same is true with the old idea that all rivers lead to the ocean. They don't all lead to the ocean. Think of the rivers that end up in Great Basin. They just dry up. The water will evaporate and form clouds and maybe someday fall down in the catchment basin of another river that *will* flow to the ocean, but that can take a lot of time.

So you have to be careful about who you hang around with and what kind of strategies you employ for a lasting happiness. The Buddha said that this is the beginning of wisdom. When you find wise people, you ask them, "What can I do that will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" Then you reflect on their answers. You compare them to the strategies you've been pursuing and you see what's worth giving a try. Most of our strategies work to some extent. If they didn't work at all, we would have discarded them long ago. But the Buddha saw that a lot of our strategies don't work as well as they could.

For example, there's a habitual strategy to avoid even thinking about suffering. You do anything you can to put the thought of suffering out of your mind — the idea being that if you avoid thinking about it, pay it no attention, ignore it, it'll go away. And there may be a few cases in life where that works — where focusing on your pains makes them worse — yet there are so many cases where it works only for a while and then it breaks down. But because we're used to this approach, used to this strategy, we feel a lot of resistance to even listening to the Buddha's first noble truth. This is why there's so much misunderstanding about the first noble truth as well. People think that the Buddha says that life is suffering. Then they think, "That's not true. I don't believe that. There's plenty of joy in life." Actually, there's no place where the Buddha said that life is suffering. It's amazing how many people — even scholars and Dhamma teachers — believe that, but that's not what he said. He simply said that there is suffering in life. You can't argue with him there. And he points out all the obvious sufferings

we live with. Birth is suffering, all the pain that goes into being born and giving birth. Aging, illness, and death: These are all suffering. Being separated from what you like, having to live with what you don't like. Then he summarizes his definition of suffering with the five clinging aggregates.

This is where he starts getting technical, and where he starts attacking another one of our common strategies, which is our sense of self. This is another one of the Buddha's great insights — that our sense of self is an activity, a strategy for avoiding suffering, for maximizing happiness. We latch onto certain things and say, "This is me. This is what I have to watch out for. As long as I watch out for this, maximizing the happiness and wellbeing of this thing, that'll provide the happiness I want." This way of thinking is an activity, a strategy. It works to some extent, but then there are areas where it breaks down because the things we latch onto are all impermanent. No matter how much time we try to dress them up, fix them up, keep them going, they ultimately break down. Form, feeling, perception, thought constructs, even sensory consciousness: They all break down. But we're strongly addicted to this approach, to hanging onto them as ends in themselves.

Which is why, again, we spend so much time misinterpreting what the Buddha said. "The Buddha says there is no self," we think, "but he can't be right." We're not looking at what he's actually saying. He's saying your sense of self is a strategy — an attempt to maximize happiness and minimize suffering. To some extent it works, and he actually has you use your sense of self as part of the practice, teaching you to be self-reliant, to look after your true self-interest — in other words your long-term welfare and happiness. His teachings on generosity, virtue, and the development of goodwill — all the things that come under the category of merit — are skillful ways of employing your strategy of self.

Basically, he has you take your sense of self, your sense of a continuing identity not only in this lifetime but also even into other lifetimes, and shows how to work with it intelligently so that you're not causing harm to yourself, you're not causing harm to other people. You're creating the conditions for a relatively reliable happiness in this world and on into the next.

He also uses the development of goodwill — immeasurable goodwill, compassion, appreciation, and equanimity — to clean up one of the major problems we have in this sense of self: our sense of responsibility, knowing that in the past we've done things that are not all that good, and that the results will

come back to haunt us. He has us develop these sublime attitudes, these immeasurable states of mind, as means to allay our fear of the consequences of those unskillful actions. As he says, don't let yourself get tied up in remorse. Focus on the present moment, resolving not to make the same mistakes you made in the past, and at the same time develop an attitude of limitless goodwill, because within a mind like that, the impact of past bad actions gets weaker and weaker. The more limitless your goodwill, compassion, appreciation, and equanimity, the weaker the impact of past bad actions. So in all these cases — giving, virtue, the development of goodwill — he takes your sense of self and tries to get you to use it intelligently. That's a strategy for maximizing happiness.

Ultimately, though, self as a strategy can only go so far. This is where the not-self strategy comes in. Look at the various things you hold onto, this activity of creating a "me," or a "mine": Exactly what are you creating it out of? Look at the raw materials and you'll see that they can't possibly be you. They can't possibly provide true happiness in the ultimate sense because they're so unstable and inconstant. They're all stressful because they're all fabricated. They're made, they're intentional. And intentions are inconstant. When the cause is inconstant, how can the result be constant? This analysis, though, goes against the grain.

But hopefully, by the time we come to it, we've been practicing the Buddha's teachings — especially the ones on generosity, virtue, and goodwill — and our confidence in the Buddha's teachings has grown. Our standards for what counts as true happiness have become more refined. Particularly as we develop our powers of concentration and get used to a more and more refined sense of ease, a more expansive sense of ease, we grow more discriminating in our taste, in our appreciation for what true happiness can be. And there comes a point where we're willing to uncloud our minds and say, "Well, maybe the Buddha is right. Maybe if we let go of these things we won't be burdened by them." This is what the not-self strategy is all about: learning how to let go of all the makeshift things we cling to in order to find the greater happiness that comes from letting go.

So he takes us step by step, starting with our normal desire for true happiness. He says to focus on happiness, focus on what needs to be done for happiness, but also be aware of the limitations of how you've been looking for happiness. As you get more sensitive to those limitations, you can uncloud your mind to want something more refined. That's where he offers you more refined techniques, more refined strategies.

So in that sense, it's a seamless practice, but when we're immersed in the practice it doesn't seem seamless at all. Our minds go back and forth. We seem to advance for a while and then retreat, advance and retreat, go left, go right and all over the place because some of the Buddha's strategies go so strongly against our old habits. The mind tends to rebel. So we have to learn how to be patient with it. As with anyone overcoming addiction, there are going to be ups and downs. But if you're patient enough, sensitive enough, and rely on your powers of perseverance, they see you through. You become more mature in understanding your desire for happiness. After all, we really do want true happiness. It's not an artificially induced desire. It's something that already underlies all our action.

What we're doing is putting the mind in a position where it has a better and better chance of gaining that kind of maturity. It's finally willing to give the Buddha's approaches a try, to replace our old strategies — which have had some success, but not total success, but to which we're so attached — with new strategies that promise something more. Although those new strategies may initially seem counterintuitive, they make more and more sense as you get to know them. And they really do give results. The promised results. A happiness that's unconditioned — because that's the only kind of happiness that can last.

Conditions — where do conditions come from? Ultimately, they come from our intentions. And what are our intentions like? Well, you've seen your intentions — they go up and down, backwards and forwards. Even when you try to make them constant in concentration, you find that even the most refined states of concentration have their ups and downs. In this way the Buddha has you cornered. You let go of the grosser forms of happiness, the grosser strategies for happiness, and get used to more and more refined ones. And they finally take you to the point where there's no course left but to let go of strategies. All strategies. It's like painting yourself into a corner. The only way to get out of the corner is not to be anywhere. When you can manage that, you see that what the Buddha taught was right. He really knew what he was talking about. This is the way to true happiness.

Trust in Heedfulness

May 25, 2004

The Buddha's last words were to become consummate through heedfulness. Being consummate, of course, means developing the path to its fullness, so that it can take you all the way to release. And the way to do that, he said, is through being heedful. The Pali word is *appamadena*.

It's interesting, that word "heedful." It's not one we use very much in ordinary everyday language. And all the other words that could be used for translating *appamadena* — "by being vigilant," "by being non-complacent": These aren't words we use in everyday language, either. They're perfectly good words — we know their meaning — but in terms of our active vocabulary, they tend to disappear. We'd much rather hear the word "trust," "being trustful." We'd like to be able to trust in certain things: trust that our innate nature is wise, our innate nature is to be awakened, and that we can trust in our nature to take care of these things for us.

But that's not what the Buddha taught. He didn't say anything about innate nature at all. The only thing he assumed about people is that they want happiness but are ignorant in how to go about it. This is why he said that you have to be really careful; you have to be watchful; you can't be complacent. There are dangers to your happiness out there. And there are dangers in here as well. In fact, the dangers out there come from the dangers in here. If you're not careful, the dangers in here are going to take over and drown you. So you have to be heedful, you have to be watchful.

The Buddha once said that all skillful mental qualities are rooted in heedfulness and have heedfulness as their leader. It's because we're heedful of the dangers that we arouse the energy needed to develop skill in the mind. We see that we're suffering, that we're surrounded by suffering, and a lot of suffering lies ahead of us if we're not careful. It's through being careful, through being heedful, through not being complacent, that we can do something about it. That's the important message here: We can do something about this suffering.

Aging, illness, and death are lying in wait, and they're not pretty things. Sometimes you hear people saying that we shouldn't bad-mouth aging, illness, and death, that there's a beautiful side to them as well, like a lovely flower that's wilting. It has its own kind of beauty. But being a person isn't like looking at a flower. It's a miserable experience being an aging person, being an ill person, being a dying person. Look at all the indignities, all the suffering, all the pain and anguish that serve no purpose at all. They just load you down.

It doesn't seem to serve any purpose that we have to die with a lot of pain, or have our bodily functions leave us one, by one, by one, so that we're totally dependent on other people. It serves no purpose, but that's the way things are. Some people might say that trying to get out of this suffering is being aversive to life, but it's being realistic. And it's being true to our hearts. We don't want to go through all that needless suffering. And the Buddha says there's a way out. When there's a way out, that means that trying to find the way out is not being aversive; it's being intelligent. As with any danger in life, if you see a way out of the danger, you take the way to safety. Here, though, the safety is something we have to find in our own minds in the midst of the qualities that we can't trust within ourselves: our laziness, our complacency, our willingness to put up with second-best, our desire to turn the responsibility over to somebody else — either a great teacher, some divine being — or just hope that the way of the world will take care of us. But look at the way the world is.

I went to Alaska years back — one of the last real wildernesses remaining in this country — and was impressed by how implacable it was. The wilderness would not give one damn if I died. If I died nicely or if I died a miserable death, it wouldn't care. Being surrounded by all that indifference was a sobering experience. That's the way of nature. Animals die. Before they die, sometimes they go through a lot of pain and anguish and terror, all alone, with no one to sympathize, no one to comfort them, no one to help. Nature doesn't care about any of us at all.

So it's up to us to make the difference, to make sure that we're not going to suffer from those things, and that means we have to be very watchful, very heedful, because as I said, the danger comes from within.

We have this tendency to get sloppy. We're meditating and things get good for a while, and so we get careless. Inattentive. Complacent. These are precisely the qualities that are going to do us in. When things go well, we have to keep reminding ourselves that they could get worse, but they can also get better. How

do they get better? Well, for one thing, when you get a good state in concentration you try to maintain it. Do what you can to keep it going. This requires skill, knowing how to hold onto it not so tightly that you squeeze it to death and not so loosely that you lose it. Like holding a hummingbird in your hand: If you hold it too tightly, it'll die; if you hold it too loosely, it'll fly away. You have to watch and see precisely how much pressure is just right.

It's interesting: The Buddha never defines the term "heedfulness," or *appamada*, in the Canon. But he does give instructions on how to be heedful, how to develop heedfulness. Realizing that the problem comes from within, he says that the first place you've got to look is in your intentions. Before you sit down to meditate — before you do anything at all — he says, look at the quality of the intention. Is it going to be skillful or not? If it's not a skillful intention, don't act on it. If it is skillful, be clear about it. As when you're meditating: Sit down and remember that you have a purpose for being here. Remind yourself of that purpose every time you meditate. This is why we have the chanting in the evening before we meditate as a group. When you're meditating on your own, take the time to remind yourself, "Why am I meditating?"

There are a lot of dangers here in the mind. You've got to learn how to sidestep them, how to cut through them. So be clear about what you're doing. Don't just go through the motions because you've scheduled x number of periods to sit during the day and you're just putting in time. Be careful. Be diligent. Be scrupulous in what you're doing.

And scrupulous in checking for the results — that's the other side of heedfulness. When you do something that you think is going to work out well, look at the results while you're doing it and after it's done. Be honest about the results. What kind of results are you actually getting from the practice? What could you change to get better results? This principle applies all the way from initially getting used to the principle of karma, getting used to the principle of being a responsible person on the external level, and going all the way through into the very refined states of concentration. Even when the Buddha talks about emptiness, what he says follows the same pattern: Be clear about what you're doing. Once you can maintain a good state of concentration, the next step is to look at what's going on. In what way is this concentration empty of prior disturbances? In what way is there still disturbance in it? And where? If you look carefully enough, you find that the disturbance is related to something you're

doing: the way you're creating that state of oneness in the mind. The oneness itself is a disturbance; it's an intention based on a particular perception.

So what do you do? If you let go of the oneness, if you go back to having your mind scattered all over the place, that's not skillful. The skillful thing is to go forward to more subtle states of oneness, based on more subtle perceptions. In other words, when you see that the way you're focused on your object is causing stress, learn to focus in a way that's less stressful, that causes less disturbance to the mind.

You can pursue this principle all the way through the various levels of concentration, even to the objectless concentration of awareness, where you've let go of the oneness, where there's no specific perception at all — it's almost as if you're not intentionally meditating — but the mind is centered. It's simply that it doesn't have a particular theme or object for its center, not even a formless one. And even there, the Buddha says to watch it carefully. If you look at it really carefully — and this takes very subtle, very intent powers of observation — you begin to see even there there's an element of fabrication. Intention. It's willed. So you learn how to drop that, realizing that it wasn't the underlying principle of the nature of — the underlying awareness of — reality that you thought it was.

To see this requires that you be wary about what's going on. That's another translation of *appamada*: wariness. Not so wary that you're not willing to get into the concentration and work at developing it. Wariness here means that once you've done the work to get into concentration, you don't get complacent about it. You don't allow yourself to be deceived about it, to think that it's more than what it is. This is your protection in the practice, to make sure that you don't overestimate what you've got, you don't settle for second-best, you don't leave yourself open to the dangers out there and in here.

So what heedfulness comes down to is being very clear and very scrupulous about your intentions, about what you're doing, and the results that you're getting. If you see that the results are not up to par, ask yourself: What can you do to change what you're doing? Be honest about it. This principle of honesty is what underlies the whole principle of being heedful and non-complacent. The Buddha once said this was his one prerequisite for someone he would take on as a student: "Bring me someone who's honest," he said, "and no deceiver, and I'll teach that person the Dhamma."

So we have to learn to make ourselves trustworthy people, because no matter what promises you get from outside, the test is inside. This is another function of

being heedful: learning to test things, test yourself, test particular practices as they're recommended to you. When insights arise in your meditation, you can't be complacent, believing that everything that arises in a still, expansive mind has to be true. You've got to test all your insights. No matter how impressive the insight, the vision, whatever: Only when things pass the test can you have a really secure sense of what you can trust and what you can't.

We'd like to think that all the teachings out there are simply different ways of getting up to the top of the same mountain. You can choose whichever you like because all of them are guaranteed to work. But they're not. Just as all rivers don't flow into the ocean. Some of them — the Severn, the Humboldt — flow into the Great Basin and just disappear.

So how are we going to know what works? We have to test things. We have to put ourselves to the test, and keep reminding ourselves that no matter how good things get in the meditation, we have to be wary, we have to watch out, because the ability of the mind to deceive itself is so pervasive, so prevalent. The only way we can get beyond that self-deception is by being very scrupulous, very careful, very clear about what we're doing. It's a quality the Buddha called by different names: ardency, alertness, intentness. But it all comes down to being heedful. This is what sees us through. This is why the Buddha made heedfulness his last message, because this quality will get all the good results we want. He could have ended his teaching career with some nice platitudes about emptiness or nirvana or the Deathless. But there was no need for that. He said that if you work on this quality of non-complacency, *that's* what's going to get you there, and then you can know nirvana and the Deathless for yourself.

So heedfulness is the heart of the practice, the heart of the teaching. And it's aimed at giving our heart what it really wants. The heart doesn't want to be life-affirming; it wants to be happiness-affirming — affirming that there is a true happiness, that there is a Deathless happiness, something we can really trust. That's what we really want. So this quality of self-honesty — willing to test, test, test things over again because you're not complacent, because you're wary and heedful and vigilant — is what's going to see you through. It's what's going to deliver release.

Single-minded Determination

June 15, 2004

We're here for the sake of true happiness.

That's why the Buddha left his palace and went out into the wilderness. He wasn't satisfied with the happiness that comes in normal, everyday life. He wanted a happiness that was dependable, a happiness really worth all the effort that would go into it. All kinds of happiness require effort in one way or another. The question is, "Is the effort worth it?" In terms of fabricated things, conditioned things, many times the answer is No. In fact, if you make any conditioned thing an end in and of itself, the effort isn't worth it, for ultimately it will leave you high and dry.

Yet the Buddha realized that conditioned things have another side as well. Not only are they conditioned, they're also conditioning. In other words, as conditioned things they're dependent on other causes; they arise and fall in line with those causes' arising and falling away — sometimes immediately, sometimes over time. But then they themselves give rise to other things. The Buddha's major discovery was that even though certain things are conditioned — in other words the elements of the path are conditioned — they can lead to an opening to the Unconditioned. And this is what makes the path worthwhile, what gives hope to our lives.

In Thai there's a term for the state of mind where all you can see is the bad side of conditioned things: Everything passes away, passes away, passes away, and everything starts seeming hopeless, pointless. It's called narrow equanimity, small minded equanimity. In other words, you get disenchanted with everything, but the disenchantment doesn't lead to the opening to the Deathless. You stay stuck there on the disenchanted side. If you stay stuck there, it's easy to get hopeless, apathetic, depressed.

But the Buddha pointed out another side to conditioned things, too. A potential for true happiness lies here in the practice. We're fabricating conditioned things. Right View, Right Resolve, all the way down to Right Concentration: These are all conditioned things. They're the highest of all

conditioned things. But even though they're the highest, you don't stop there. They're a path. They open up to something even bigger.

So make sure that you look at life from both sides. In other words, you're focused on the drawbacks of taking conditioned things as your goal *so that you don't get complacent*. Sometimes it's easy: You get a nice, calm state in meditation, life around you seems pretty effortless, and it's very tempting — and this happens to many, many meditators — to say that this is fine enough right here. It's in cases like that that the Buddha points out all the drawbacks of conditioned things, all the drawbacks of conditioned happiness. Not only is a lot of effort wasted in creating that happiness, but sometimes in order to maintain it you also start doing things that go against the precepts, that go against the principles of morality, concentration, and discernment, so that your conditioned happiness causes suffering not only in passing away but also in leading to all kinds of bad things down the road. So you have to watch out. You can't be complacent.

On the other side, the Buddha emphasizes the fact that heedfulness really does pay off. If everything were negative, then no matter how heedful or careful you might be then there'd be no chance for any true happiness. But skillful action does pay off. That's why heedfulness is so important. If you're careful, if you're circumspect, it'll make a big difference.

So we have to ask ourselves, What kind of happiness are we going to pursue in our lives? And we have to be single-minded in the practice, because it's so easy to stray off in other directions. Some of the side roads are blatantly bad, and others are relatively good. With the good ones, it's easy to talk yourself into saying, "Well, this is a good thing to do. There's nothing wrong with doing this." In a general sense, yes, that may be right. But if it's second best, if it's not all the way to the Unconditioned, you can't let yourself stop there. You can't turn off the road there. You've got to be careful to stay on course.

The problem is that we come to the practice with many minds. We don't have any single-minded determination. Ajaan Mun in his last Dhamma talk referred to single-mindedness as being the essential element in the practice: the single-minded determination not to come back and let the defilements step all over you as before — the determination not to come back to suffering. But that determination is something that we have to develop over time. We don't come into the practice this way. We start out with two or three minds about the whole thing.

This is what training the mind is all about: getting the mind to gather around that single-minded purpose, that single-minded intention. This kind of training starts with the precepts. They show us exactly where our minds are many-minded. When you observe the precepts, you have to focus on your intentions all the time. As you get to know your intentions, you begin to realize that the mind is like a committee. Sometimes it's not just a committee — it's a whole crowd.

Even concentration is not the kind of single-mindedness we're talking about, but it's a basic prerequisite. It's part of the training that takes you there. We take one intention and run with it as far as we can in the face of the inevitable contrary intentions that counteract it. In the beginning, the intention to stay with the breath, to stay with the meditation, is bound to be weak, and it's easy to get knocked off course. But as you begin to feel at home here, at ease here, you grow more resistant to getting knocked off because you don't want to leave what you've got. This feels like the right place to be.

Then you can start taking on the more deep-rooted intentions that come your way. You take them apart to understand, "Why do they seem to have such force?" You overcome distraction, you overcome the defilements of the mind not by pushing them away and pretending they're not there, but by understanding them — and "understanding" means the ability to watch them from a good solid standpoint. That's what concentration is for. As things keep coming up, you realize, "*This* isn't really an intention I want to abide by, and *that's* not either." So you cut them away, cut them away, until you run into the really big defilements, the really important ones. Sometimes they'll knock you off base again, which is a sign that your concentration and insight need further development.

The path of practice is not a smooth straight line on a graph. It has its ups and downs. It has its drama. As you learn in any writing class, one of the basic principles of story construction is that a story has to have setbacks in order to be interesting, in order to be realistic. In the same way, the story of your practice of the Dhamma is bound to have setbacks — the difference being that you're not reading it, you're living it, and many times you'd rather not experience the interesting setbacks. But keep reminding yourself of why you're here. You're here for true happiness, genuine happiness, a happiness that's not going to let you down, a happiness that's going to be worth all the ups and downs that go into finding it.

When you look at all the other happinesses you gain from getting off the path, you see that they all let you down in one way or another. This realization

helps pull you back on the path, so that ultimately you can start cutting through the big distractions, the big defilements. But whether the defilements are big or small, they require a similar practice, a similar technique: You see where there's stress, you see what you're doing to cause that stress, and you see that you don't have to do that — you can stop, you can let it go. This is the basic pattern. It's simply that with stronger powers of concentration, stronger mindfulness, stronger alertness, you can cut through things that you couldn't cut through before.

Over time, that single-minded determination not to let yourself suffer gets stronger and stronger, plays a larger and larger role in the committee discussions until finally it's *the* voice, the unanimous voice in the mind. All the other voices have been eliminated. Either that or they've been converted. But even when there are still a few traitorous voices lurking in the background, remember that the important voice is this one, the one resolved not to stop short of genuine happiness. Try to strengthen that voice as much as you can, because that's the voice that saw the Buddha through. Look at all the setbacks he encountered in his practice: finding teachers and then realizing that they couldn't take him all the way; going as far as austerities could take him, and then realizing that that didn't go all the way either. And then he was stuck. He had tried all the alternatives that had been suggested in his culture, and they hadn't worked. But he was determined not to give up. That's what saw him through to Awakening. Whatever there is of that determination in you is what's going to give you the strength to pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and keep on going.

So make sure that that determination stays nurtured, for that's what'll see you through.

A New Framework

December 13, 2004

The Buddha once said that it's possible to abandon unskillful behavior and to develop skillful behavior. He also said that if this weren't possible, he wouldn't teach people to abandon unskillful behavior or to develop skillful behavior. It wouldn't make any sense. But because it is possible, that's why he taught these things.

This is why we're here meditating: There's the possibility of changing, of developing new habits. Most people, if you look around, don't work at developing new habits by the time they get to a certain age. They seem set in their ways. I remember once when I was in high school, I was talking to my girlfriend's mother. She was telling me how much she had learned from a book she had just read, and I was surprised. She was already way up in her 50s. I kept thinking to myself: How can somebody that old change? How can they learn anything new by reading a book?

And on average, it is pretty unlikely that people will change. But the question is: Do you want to stay average or not? Science deals in bell curves. Social science deals in bell curves, too. And all the time they're lopping off the far ends of the bell curves as statistically insignificant. That's what you do when you're trying to generalize.

But when you're leading your own life, where do you want to be on the bell curve? You want to be on the far good end. You want to break the curve if you can. So what are the qualities that help you break the curve, so that you can make a change and become skillful?

I was reading an article recently that talked about the difference between really good doctors and great doctors. The author was saying that when you see a great doctor in action, you see how focused he is, how aggressive he is in getting the patient to cooperate. Look for the difference between being in the 99.05 percentile, and the 99.5 percentile. You push for that extra little bit of difference, and it makes all the difference in the world when you calculate it out. It really

does accomplish something, especially when you're talking about people surviving.

You've got to look at your mind in the same way. You're working for the survival of your mind, so that it doesn't create problems and suffering for itself. If you're content to muddle along, nothing much is going to change. You have to aim high. You have to be focused. You have to be aggressive. The terms the Buddha uses, when he talks about how he gained awakening, come in a refrain that he repeats over and over again. He said, "This is what happens when someone is heedful, ardent, and resolute." In other words, you break the curve by developing those three qualities.

Being heedful means seeing the danger in careless behavior, sloppy behavior, and really treasuring the good qualities of your mind, realizing that these are things you have to protect: things like conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment. You have to be very alive to the difference that your choices make. This is where we push ourselves out of the bell curve: by being very careful about what we do.

Ardent: This is usually translated in terms of right effort. You recognize what's skillful, you recognize what's unskillful, and you do what you can, everything you can, to prevent unskillful states from taking over the mind, or if they're already there, learning how to get rid of them, let them go. On the other hand, you learn how to encourage skillful states, and maintain and develop them once they're there. How do you know what's skillful? You look at your own actions. It's this quality of alertness that makes the effort of your ardency right effort.

We were talking today about why we're not just automatons, why we're not totally determined from past conditioning. It's because we can look at what we do. This is what alertness, *sampajañña*, is all about: looking at your actions, seeing the results, realizing that there is a connection, and having the ingenuity to think of other ways of acting if you don't like the results you're getting.

You measure them in terms of the four noble truths: Are you causing suffering? Or are you not causing suffering? You're causing stress or you're not. These are things that anyone can notice, yet most people don't notice because they don't look very carefully. Or they don't make the connection between the fact that they're suffering and the actions they've done. It's so easy to blame somebody else, to blame outside conditions, to blame the past. People who sit around blaming and complaining are the ones who don't make any changes.

You need to realize: It's your actions that make all the difference. Even when outside conditions are bad, the question of whether you're suffering or not depends on how you're relating to those conditions. That determines whether you're suffering or not. That's the realization that enables you to change, spurs you to change.

There's a teaching on what's called transcendental dependent co-arising. It talks about how the conviction that there has to be a way out of suffering comes from the fact of suffering itself: seeing it, looking at it, deciding that you've had enough. Then from that conviction, the rest of the path grows.

This is where you have to be resolute. You have to focus on this issue above everything else: what you're doing, the results that come, and whether they're as good as you want them to be. This is where the heedfulness comes in again. It keeps forcing you to raise the bar.

It's this combination of qualities—heedful, ardent, alert, resolute—that makes all the difference. This is what allows us to change, allows us to put an end to suffering.

So value this quality of alertness. Try to be as sensitive as possible to what you're doing. All the Buddha's teachings aim this way. When you take the precepts, it's meant to make you more alert to what you're actually doing. The precepts are not vague ideals. They're specific promises you make to yourself. You're not going to kill; you're not going to steal; you're not going to engage in illicit sex. You're not going to engage in divisive speech, harsh speech, or idle chatter. You're not going to lie or take intoxicants. Then you have to keep watch over your actions to make sure that you keep your promises to yourself.

All too often, you hear the precepts played down. Some teachers say, well, they're not hard-and-fast rules, they're not commandments, they're just general guidelines, and they're for you to interpret as you like. These people are apologizing for the fact that there are precepts in the Buddha's teachings, trying to declaw them, take out their fangs. But the fangs and claws are not there to bite you. They're there to bite away at your unskillful habits. And why would you want to identify with your unskillful habits anyhow? It's when you set a specific promise for yourself and then try to keep it very meticulously: That's when you begin to see precisely what you're doing. You begin to see the movements of your mind a lot more clearly than if you hadn't made that promise.

The same principle applies to concentration. You make up your mind that you're going to stay with one object, one preoccupation: the breath. Once you

promise yourself that, then you try to stick with it. Heedful, ardent, and resolute. In other words, resolutely trying to stick with this one thing. Ardent in being really serious. Giving it your all.

The heedfulness is when you're very careful to notice even the slightest movement away from your chosen object—not being complacent about it, not being apathetic.

It may sound strict and unpleasant, but you know that when you're staying with one object, and the mind does settle down, developing a sense of familiarity with the object, it has a chance to really rest. So it's not just all pain and effort. It's effort in learning how to manage comfort. After all, you're developing skillful habits in the mind. And what is one of the rewards of skillful habits? A sense of ease. A sense of well-being. Rapture.

The more meticulous you are, the more heedful, ardent, and resolute, then the better the results you get from meditation.

Even more so when you're working on discernment: You want to be sensitive to even the slightest little bit of stress or strain the mind is causing itself in the way it focuses on things, in the way it deals with issues. You want to see the movements of the mind and be sensitive to the results you get.

The more concentrated you are, the more clearly you can see these things. You see more and more that this process you have of creating a sense of self and clinging to your I-making and my-making is what's causing trouble. Up to that point, your sense of "I" was something you wanted to develop. You wanted to develop a more skillful sense of "I." After all, your sense of self is a strategy for happiness. When you learn to look at it that way, you can easily change your strategies in line with what needs to be done. You've gained a greater and greater sense of how letting go of certain types of identification really does lighten the mind.

So this pursuit of the happiness and ease that come from skillful behavior: You take that as your foundation. Your sense of self, which used to be really solid, begins to get more... I wouldn't say amorphous, but you begin to see how arbitrary and easily changed it can be. There are skillful and unskillful ways of selfing. When you see selfing as an activity, it totally changes how you relate to everything else. The solid issues in your life are these qualities of being heedful, ardent, resolute, skillful. Your sense of self becomes more and more a tactic you employ relative to those pursuits. It used to be that your self was what was solid,

and these qualities would come and go. But now your frame of reference switches around.

Ultimately, you get so that your pursuit of being really skillful leads you to the point where you let go of any kind of identification at all.

This is why Ajaan Mun, in his last sermon, said that the one thing you don't let go of until the very last is your determination. You let go of your sense of self, you let go of any attitudes or ideas or habits you had that may have been habits for a long, long period of time, but as soon as you see that they're unskillful, and you're determined not to keep repeating your unskillful behavior, that's when you're freed from them. That's when you're freed from causality and conditioning.

So try to make these qualities the foundation of your approach, the foundation of your mental framework: the pursuit of skillfulness, being heedful in that pursuit, being ardent and resolute in that pursuit. Make that your constant. Allow other things in your life to become relative to that.

Over & Over Again

August 23, 2004

One of Ajaan Fuang's students once complained to him that she'd been meditating for many years and seemed to be doing the same thing over and over again. He told her, "That's the whole point. You're laying a foundation, and you want to make sure that the foundation is solid. Once the foundation is solid, then you can erect a building of any number of stories and it won't fall down. If your foundation is weak or unstable, then you can't build anything on it at all. The higher you try to go, the bigger the crash when things come falling down."

So keep to the basics. Keep it simple. When something new comes in the meditation, watch it for a while. Learn to be patient. Don't think about how many days you have here ahead of you, or how many years you've been meditating already. A lot of the important work comes from sitting with the meditation for a long period of time and just watching.

Don't be in too great a hurry to squeeze it on to something else. After all, your ideas of where it's supposed to go are often based on ignorance, so you're going to squeeze it off into a place you don't know, squeezing it through expectations that are ignorant, which is not a good way of going about it. You want to watch and watch again. And watch again.

An image Ajaan Lee likes to use is of going over a path again and again and again, back and forth, back and forth. The more you go over the path, he says, the more you see. Little things you missed the first couple of times, you begin to pick up as you go along. You get more familiar with the path. You learn to recognize what plants are growing on the side of the path, which ones are edible, which ones are not, which ones are medicine, which ones are food. The path gets worn smooth and, at the same time, you get really familiar with everything around the path. That's the kind of meditation we're doing.

So the breath comes in, the breath goes out. It's not like you've never seen the breath before, but in one way you have to act as if that's just the case: Look at it with new eyes all the time. But you're going over the same territory again and again and again. Don't count the number of times you've done it. Just keep

reminding yourself: If you haven't seen awakening yet, if you haven't seen the deathless yet, you haven't seen everything there is to see right here. So you look again, and you look again.

And you're willing to be patient. Heedfulness and ardency don't mean that you have to be in a rush. They mean that you do your work carefully. You have to be meticulous about it.

The mind has its seasons, just as plants have their seasons. Some things take a long time to grow and to ripen; other things ripen fast. You can't choose which qualities in your mind will be the fast ones and which will be slow. All you do is keep looking after the mind: tending to it, watering it, giving it fertilizer. If you treat it the right way, it'll grow without your having to squeeze it or pull it to make it grow faster. You make it grow faster by tending to it properly.

There may come a point where you're adding too much water, too much fertilizer, so you have to be sensitive to that, too. Otherwise, your plant will die. But the only way you can get a sense of "just right" is by being very observant and going over the same territory again and again and again.

So figure out ways to enjoy the process, so that it doesn't become tedious, so that it stays fresh. Then do it again and again and again.

Someday as you're walking down the path, you'll stumble over something valuable. It's there. It's simply a matter of being meticulous and ardent and sensitive to what's going on. Some people are quicker than others, but that's not the issue. This issue is simply a matter of being very watchful and patient.

Another analogy is of polishing wood. The grain is there in the wood, but you have to polish it—back and forth, back and forth, back and forth—before it begins to gleam. You don't create the grain. If you try to draw a grain on the wood, it doesn't look right. It's not the real thing. Only the back and forth, back and forth, back and forth of the polishing can bring the real thing out.

Glossary

Ajaan (Thai): Teacher; mentor.

Anatta: Not-self.

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*.

Buddho: A meditation word meaning “awake.”

Deva: Literally, “shining one.” An inhabitant of the terrestrial and heavenly realms higher than the human.

Dhamma: (1) Event; action. (2) A phenomenon in and of itself. (3) Mental quality. (4) Doctrine, teaching. (5) Nibbana (although there are passages in the Pali Canon describing nibbana as the abandoning of all dhammas). Sanskrit form: *dharma*.

Dhutanga: Ascetic practice. There are thirteen such practices listed in the Canon that monks—and lay people—can voluntarily take on to polish away their defilements around food, clothing, and shelter.

Hinayana: The “lesser” vehicle. A perjorative Mahayana term for any Buddhist tradition that extols the path to arahantship.

Jhana: Mental absorption. A state of strong concentration focused on a single sensation or mental notion. Sanskrit form: *dhyana*.

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

Khandha: Aggregate; heap; pile. The aggregates are the basic building blocks of describable experience, as well as the building blocks from which one’s sense of

“self” is constructed. There are five in all: physical form, feeling, perception, thought-fabrications, and consciousness. Sanskrit form: *skandha*.

Luang Pu (Thai): Venerable Grandfather. A term of respect for a very senior and elderly monk.

Metta: Goodwill; benevolence. See *brahma-vihara*.

Nibbana: Literally, the “unbinding” of the mind from passion, aversion, and delusion, and from the entire round of death and rebirth. As this term also denotes the extinguishing of a fire, it carries connotations of stilling, cooling, and peace. Sanskrit form: *nirvana*.

Pali: The name of the earliest extant canon of the Buddha’s teachings and, by extension, of the language in which it was composed.

Patimokkha: The basic code of the monastic discipline, containing 227 rules.

Samvega: A sense of dismay, terror, or urgency.

Sangha: On the conventional level, this term denotes the communities of Buddhist monks and nuns. On the ideal level, it denotes those followers of the Buddha, lay or ordained, who have attained at least their first taste of the deathless.

Sankhara: Fabrication; fashioning. The forces and factors that fashion things, the process of fashioning, and the fashioned things that result; all things conditioned, compounded, or concocted by nature, whether on the physical or the mental level. In some contexts this word is used as a blanket term for all five khandhas. As the fourth khandha, it refers specifically to the fashioning or forming of urges, thoughts, etc., within the mind.

Sutta: Discourse. Sanskrit form: *sutra*.

Vinaya: The monastic discipline.

Vipassana: Insight.

Wat (Thai): Monastery.

Table of Contents

Cover	1
Titlepage	2
Copyright	3
Introduction	4
Close to the Heart	6
The Sublime Attitudes	11
Basics	20
Start Out Small	28
A Small, Steady Flame	33
The Steadiness of Your Gaze	37
One Step at a Time	41
Generating Power	46
The Walls of Ignorance	51
Rites of Passage	58
Simplify	63
Culture Shock	68
A Load of Straw	73
For the Good of the World	77
A Meditative Life	80
Inner Voice Lessons	85
Breathing through Daily Life	90
Varieties of Mindfulness	95
Beyond Likes & Dislikes	101
Humility	105
Creativity & Play	110

Adolescent Practice	115
No Mistakes Are Fatal	120
A Light in the Darkness	125
The Knife of Discernment	129
The Treasure Hunt	133
Exploring Possibilities	137
Warrior Knowledge	143
Go, Do Jhana	148
Three Levels of Concentration	153
Respect for Emptiness	157
The Mind's Immune System	163
Worlds	168
Contemplation of the Body	175
Anger	182
The World Is Swept Away	190
Mature Strategies	196
Trust in Heedfulness	201
Single-minded Determination	206
A New Framework	210
Over & Over Again	215
Glossary	217